

# A seal of Solomon son of Azariah, “son of the exilarch of all Israel”

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## Abstract

Publication of a seal of rock crystal in London (British Museum), with an inscription in Aramaic and Hebrew naming the bearer, one Solomon b. Azariah, as grandson (or perhaps son) of an exilarch. An identification of the bearer as Solomon, son of the Jewish exilarch Azariah b. Solomon (c. 975) and grandson of the exilarch Solomon b. Josiah (c. 951–3), is considered, as is the alternative possibility that the grandfather was the exilarch Solomon b. Hisdai (c. 730–58).

**Keywords:** Exilarch, Judaism, Seal, Solomon b. Azariah, Solomon b. Josiah, Azariah b. Solomon, Solomon b. Hisdai

## Introduction

The outlines of the history of the exilarchate of Babylon, a fixture of the religious and civic life of the eastern Jewish diaspora in Late Antiquity and the Middle Ages, have been well documented (Gil 1995, 2004: 83–116, 433–47; Neusner and Bashan 2007; Herman 2012; Franklin 2012: 4–6, 41–51). Despite the biblical origins imputed to the office, reflected for example in the medieval *Seder Olam Zuta*, it lacks secure attestation until the Sasanian period, when the power and prestige of the exilarchs flowered as they mediated between the Jewish minority and the Persian state. The potency of the exilarchate declined under Islam, however, in favour of the geonim.<sup>1</sup> The succession was in principle hereditary and ran by direct filial descent, based on the claim of continuity in the royal house of David. The dating and order of individual exilarchs is not without problems: for the Islamic period, it has been sketched by Goode (1940) on the combined basis of historiography and Geniza documents, and revised by Gil (1995: 48–65; 2004: 83–116) with the help of additional sources, a total of ten genealogical lists, resulting in a tentative stemma of exilarchs from the seventh to eleventh centuries. Complications in the succession itself arose in the case of childlessness or minor heirs. Such were the circumstances that brought in an exilarch from a collateral branch after the deaths of David b. Zachai (in office 917–40) and of his son Judah after a tenure of only seven months, the premature demise of Judah’s son Hezekiah at the age of 12, and the execution for blasphemy of an anonymous relative from Nisibis. After a vacancy, the office passed to the nephew of David b. Zachai, Solomon b.

1 For the shift in pre-eminence see Brody 1998: 67–82; and further on the geonim, Rustow 2008: 1–12.



Figure 1. British Museum, Middle East Department, inv. OA +15769 (line-drawing, mirrored version, by the author)

Josiah b. Zachai (in office *c.* 951–3), from whom a collateral branch of the line arose, as Solomon was succeeded by his son Azariah (*c.* 975). The office then reverted decisively to the main branch with Hezekiah II b. David b. Hezekiah, descendent of David b. Zachai (*c.* 1000–60). Around that time the remaining scions of the collateral line, the three sons of Azariah b. Solomon, left Baghdad for points west and joined other major Jewish communities as prominent members. Jacob Mann has argued more specifically that these men set themselves up as *nesiim*, but the evidence is tenuous: his arguments are outlined but not followed in detail here.

A sidelight on the history of this collateral house, and on claims to exilarchic lineage among leaders in Jewish communities more broadly, may be shed by an artefact in London whose identification has not yet been established. It is the purpose of this article to bring this object to wider attention. It is a spherical stamp seal of rock crystal, held in the British Museum (Figure 1).<sup>2</sup> The seal is inscribed in Aramaic and Hebrew, in mirrored writing on the flat bottom face, which would have left an impression in the normal writing direction when stamped upon clay or wax. The text (edited in full at the end of this introduction) might complement our sources for the otherwise poorly known figure of Azariah b. Solomon, and for his progeny, as the outer register suggests that the seal may have belonged to his son, Solomon, who styles himself son of an Azariah who was, or was son to, an “exilarch of all Israel”. In the latter case the name of the grandfather, omitted perhaps for reasons of space,<sup>3</sup> will in all probability have been the namesake of his grandson, Solomon. It is possible that the grandfather

2 For colour images see the online catalogue entry: [https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/W\\_OA-15769](https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/W_OA-15769).

3 For an analogous genealogy citing the same exilarch as grandson of an exilarch in a Geniza document see n. 4 below; for filiation solely by a father’s prestigious title see also the seal of the gaon Nehemiah, n. 12 below.

had a different name, but the omission of his name is more readily explained if he and his grandson were homonymous. In the former case no grandfather is named, and the bearer, albeit in somewhat convoluted fashion, calls himself both son of Azariah and son of an exilarch, apparently to emphasize his father Azariah's office. In either case, the plural form used in the title, literally "head of the exiled communities" (ראש גלויות), contrasts with the singular in the more common ריש גלותא (occasionally ראש). This particularity corresponds to the titu- lature of Azariah's grandfather Josiah given in a poorly preserved letter of Azariah's from the Cairo Geniza: "Azariah, exilarch (ראש גלויות כל ישראל), son of Solomon, son of Josiah, exilarch (ראש גלויות כל ישראל)", and it may therefore represent a style adopted by the family, perhaps to indicate supremacy over the Palestinian patriarchate ("head of (all) the exiled communities") or simply to stress the long line of ancestral holders of this office in the bearer's family.<sup>4</sup>

According to Mann's hypothesis (1927: 21, 26–32), the three sons of Azariah b. Solomon struck out in different directions after the installation of a repre- sentative of the primary house in the exilarchate in their stead and founded succes- sions of nesiim in their own right. The best known is Daniel, who settled first in Fustat, then rose to the office of gaon and nasi in Palestine (1051–62). His son David's dispute with Evyatar b. Elijah in connection with the same office was the subject of the latter's eponymous *Megilla* (see recently Rustow 2008: 324–38). A second son of Azariah, Zachai, is supposed by Mann to have settled in Mosul on the basis of an identification of his lineage in the genealogical lists of later nesiim of that city.<sup>5</sup>

A third son, Solomon, our knowledge of whose existence hangs on a slender thread,<sup>6</sup> is proposed to have gone to Aleppo and founded a line of nesiim lasting until the fifteenth century, on the basis of a genealogy of Joseph b. Zedekiah, nasi of Aleppo, dated to 1471. Information on the earlier history of the nesiim of Aleppo is sparse.<sup>7</sup> Judah al-Harizi, on his visit to the city in 1217, tells of two sons of R. Nissim, Azariah and Samuel, with exilarchic associations (גלה לראש הגולה), among whom Azariah is called "the great prince" (השר הגדול). A relation to Azariah, father of the Solomon of the London seal, would be tempting, but the lineage of the Aleppan brothers is traced back to an academy-president Abraham without any mention of the exilarchic collateral house (*Taḥkhemoni* 46, ed. Kaminka 1899: 363).

- 4 Geniza letter: cited in Gil 1997: I 109 (cf. Gil 1995: 61; I owe this reference to an anonymous reviewer; Gil's reading of the original document is translated but not reproduced in Gil 2004: 112). Ancestral holders of the office: the Aramaic prayer *Yeḳūm pīrḳān* preserved in the Ashkenazi rite includes a blessing for the exilarchs as "heads of the exiled communities" (רישי גלויות).
- 5 For doubts that Zachai himself settled there: Gil 1991: 302–3; 2004: 112 n. 82. For the twelfth-century genealogy attesting Zachai in MS Halper (ex-Dropsie) 462 see now Franklin 2012: 34–6, 185–7.
- 6 The genealogy of a signatory to a writ of excommunication dated to 1376, discussed by Mann (1927); and the genealogy of the Yedidiah ha-Nasi b. Jesse cited in the Talmud commentary *Miktab herem*, ed. Coronel 1864: 110a (cf. Mann 1927 and Gil 2004: 99, list 8).
- 7 As are sources for the Jewish community at Aleppo in general: see Sauvaget 1941: 204–7; Goitein 1967–88: I 17, 20; Gil 1992: 188–9 n. 66; Zenner 2000: 192 n. 4; E. Ashtor et al. 2007.

Damascus is also considered by Mann as a candidate for the new home of Solomon b. Azariah, again on the basis of later genealogical lists. While both Benjamin of Tudela and Petahia of Regensburg are silent on a nasi for Aleppo,<sup>8</sup> an exilarch Hisdai is known to have presided at Damascus *c.* 1114/15 (Mann 1920–22: I, 171–8, II, 208 no. 1: ראש גליות כל ישראל), and Petahia, who visited *c.* 1170–80, mentions an anonymous nasi and the building of a synagogue by a R. Eliezer b. Azariah (chapters 20 and 23, ed. Grünhut 1905: 28\*, 35\*), with whom some family connection to the Solomon b. Azariah of the London seal is conceivable. Samuel, son of Daniel b. Azariah and nephew of this Solomon, was in fact chief judge at Damascus in 1084 (Mann 1920–2: I 184–5).

Mann further speculates that Solomon, as well as Zachai, may have proclaimed themselves exilarchs in their new homes.<sup>9</sup> There is no positive evidence that Daniel son of Azariah was exilarch, but his titlature suggestively expanded to “nasi of the exiled community of all Israel” (נשיא גליות כל ישראל) (Gil 1995: 64 n. 110; 2004: 112). As mentioned, the Solomon of the London seal styled himself at some remove from high office, as either grandson or perhaps son of an exilarch – the order of the titlature in the latter case gives pause, as the most emphatic position for that title would have been following its bearer’s name directly.<sup>10</sup>

A final twist in the fortunes of the collateral house may belong to the next generation. An Azariah b. Solomon, possibly the son of the Solomon b. Azariah of the London seal, could be identified as a successful contestant against David, son of Hezekiah II of the primary house, for the exilarchate at Baghdad *c.* 1068 (Gil 1995: 64–5; 2004: 434). If the identification were accepted, perhaps the Solomon of the London seal remained in Mesopotamia all along. At least his son Azariah would have returned there for a chance at the office once it became vacant.

On the most natural reading, the text of the London seal omits a title for Azariah himself. This curious disposition might suggest that Solomon regarded his own father’s claim to the exilarchate as tenuous, or otherwise less worthy of mention. Two alternative explanations, however, should also be considered. Another Solomon is attested in the succession of exilarchs centuries earlier, namely Solomon b. Hisdai (in office *c.* 730–57), who was succeeded by his son Isaac (in office *c.* 760: Goode 1940: 156–7; Gil 1995: 50–1; 2004: 100). The name Azariah is not otherwise known in this family, which makes the first hypothesis regarding Solomon b. Azariah b. Solomon more attractive, but it is conceivable that an Azariah was another son of this earlier exilarch Solomon, passed over for the office in favour of Isaac. The linguistic disposition of the inscription on the London seal, a combination of Aramaic for the name and titlature and Hebrew for the motto, could easily be reconciled with this

8 The brief report of Petahia is concerned solely with the etymology of the city’s name. Benjamin is somewhat more detailed, telling of a large community with some named leaders: Adler 1907: 32.

9 For attestations of exilarchs outside Babylonia see further Poznański 1914: 111–25.

10 A Geniza attestation of Azariah b. Solomon gives his title directly following his name, then his filiation: see above, n. 4. See also Cohen (1980: 198 n. 67) for a court record in a Geniza document in which titlature is given for Solomon’s nephew David, with a separate title for each member of the lineage except for Azariah: “David the nasi son of Daniel the nasi and gaon son of Azariah son of the exilarch”, i.e. Solomon.

earlier period, though Babylonian Aramaic continued in use through the eleventh century, and the physical features of the seal are distinct from the bulk of surviving Sasanian seals (see further below). That neither Solomon nor his father Azariah are definitively identified as exilarch, however, leads to another possibility, in conjunction with the frequency of the respective names in the exilarchic lists, that an as yet unknown branch of the family descending from an anonymous exilarch may be attested here. The seal would then lend further support to Franklin's identification of the cultural prestige attached to the office of exilarch and the lineage claimed by its holders, even well beyond the direct line of succession (Franklin 2012: 43–51, 70–88). It is in any case all the more unfortunate that the provenance of the London seal is unrecorded. Aleppo and Damascus, as well as Baghdad and Babylon, hold claims to the residence of its owner. The latter, wherever he may have lived, participated in one of the diaspora's most prestigious institutions, even if only indirectly through the perpetuation of its memory and communal pride in its traditions.

### **The seal (British Museum, Middle East Department, inv. OA +15769)**

A roughly spherical globe of rock crystal with flattened face, of a maximum diameter of 3.5 cm side-to-side and 2.9 cm top-to-bottom. The face, which has received the inscription, measures 3.0 cm in diameter with a letter-height of 0.3–0.4 cm. The sides, decorated with four simple geometric hashes, show two smoothed pads, and at the top there is an oval protrusion with a rough surface suggesting breakage, perhaps originally a grip. The text, in mirrored writing indicating use as a stamp-seal, is disposed in two registers, an outer, around which is a hatched and double-piped border, and an inner, before another dotted and double-piped border and above and beneath a stylized hand with open palm. No provenance is recorded.<sup>11</sup>

The use of seals by Jews, common in the post-biblical period, was initially restricted under Islam to the exilarchs (Avigad 2007), but it apparently extended to the geonim by a later date. Petahia of Regensburg reports that a gaon furnished him with a letter of introduction and safe conduct bearing his seal (כתב והותמון), which was duly accepted along his journey (chapters 12–13, 15, ed. Grünhut 1905: 12\*–20\*). The archaeological record has not so far yielded secure sigillographic attestations of exilarchs or their descendants, but at least one surviving seal can be attributed to a historical leader of a Jewish community. The seal of a known nasi of the Karaite community of Fustat, Semah b. Asah (first half of the eleventh century), can be identified in a dome-shaped carnelian stone with inscriptions in two concentric rings, thought to have been worn on a necklace.<sup>12</sup> The letterforms are broadly comparable to those of the London seal, but the

11 The object was provisionally catalogued as an amulet. An adhesive label affixed to the side bears the numeral 2 in modern ink, and another on the top, 1.

12 For the seal, now in a private collection (Alon Shvut), see the catalogue entry by E. Eisenberg in Boehm and Holcomb (eds) 2016: 93 no. 35 with translation; the bearer's name and title in the inner register can be read צמה בן אסה הנשי from the accompanying photograph. For the nasi see Franklin 2012: 203 no. 90. The title nasi is used for the

material, form, and decoration of the seals are not otherwise a close match: the Fustat seal lacks a device, while its motto, an expression of hope for the re-building of Jerusalem, is in the outer rather than inner register, and both of its texts are in Hebrew, while the London seal mixes Hebrew and Aramaic (see further below). A letter of the gaon Nehemiah ha-Kohen b. Kohen Sedeq of 960 from the Cairo Geniza bears an impression of the gaon's seal, which consists of two lines of plain text in Hebrew on a circular field.<sup>13</sup> A carnelian seal with motifs of lulav, etrog, and incense shovel, now in the Hecht Collection (University of Haifa), has been alleged to belong to the exilarch Huna b. Nathan, but doubts remain both on the attribution and on whether the man was ever exilarch (Beer 1983: 435–40; Shaked 1981: 65–8; 1995: 242 no. 9; Herman 2012: 328–9 with n. 119). The device of a lion emphasized the Davidic lineage, claimed also by the exilarchs, of the gaon Hai b. Sherira (939–1038) as described by Ibn Daud on sealed documents promulgated by this gaon (*Sefer ha-Qabbalah* 6, ed. Cohen 2010: 43–4, lines 127–9; trans. p. 59).

In this context a tradition about the sealing-motif of the exilarchs may be noted: the *Seder Olam Zuta* mentions the symbol of a fly and provides an etiology, namely divine punishment for R. Pahda, claimant to the title of exilarch who bought his appointment from the Persian authorities, by means of a fly that flew into his nose, allowing Mar Zuta to take up his rightful place. In a later version into which the exilarch Bustanai is inserted, the device is a mosquito and derives from Bustanai's fortitude in enduring the attacks of that insect during an audience with the caliph (Gil 2004: 52–3, 58–67; Herman 2012: 284–5). The folkloric character of the episode casts doubt on the accuracy of the particular choice of image, but the legend nevertheless illustrates the expectation that members of the exilarchic lineage would distinguish themselves with such a symbol.

More broadly, no fewer than 25 seals of the Sasanian period belonging to Jews can be identified, primarily on the basis of the use of the Hebrew square script (Shaked 1995: 241–5). Devices include human and animal figures (bear, bird of prey, lion, mouflon, scorpion, ram), celestial bodies (star, crescent), and sacred articles (lulav, etrog, and incense shovel), while the texts are kept short and tend to give the bearer's name only, with the standard filiation being Aramaic.<sup>14</sup> The use of rock crystal and the spherical form of the London seal are unparalleled in this group. The form and material and the motif of the open hand, however, are known among Sasanian seals in general,<sup>15</sup> and some degree of continuity between the Sasanian and Islamic periods is

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bearer (or his father) of a seal of unknown provenance from the post-Sasanian East (הימן הנשיא): Shaked 1995: 251 no. 35.

- 13 Cambridge, University Library Ms. Mosseri VIII 479: בתמיהה גאון בן גאון, see Lewin 1921: 133–4; re-printed after collation with a microfilm facsimile by Gil 1997: II 53–4 no. 14, who reports that the sealing is now illegible.
- 14 Of the Hebrew filiation there is only one certain instance in Shaked's catalogue (1995: 241 no. 3; perhaps also 245 no. 24).
- 15 Dome shape: Bivar 1969: 23; Gyselen 1993: 176–80. Use of rock crystal: Gyselen 1993: 32. Open hand surmounted or circumscribed by Pahlavi inscriptions: Henning von der Osten 1934: 78 no. 610; Bivar 1969: 67–9; Gyselen 2007: 83 no. 10.F.2 and 96 no.



probable (Porter 2011: 2–3). Many Sasanian seals are inscribed, some with names, others with the addition of pious formulae and mottos. While the unique London seal is not closely comparable to any of them, a parallel of particular interest is a bulla with the impression of a seal bearing a Pahlavi inscription, a name and the motto "Increase!" circumscribing a hand (Gyselen 2007: 318 no. 6). The open hand was also a popular amuletic device under Islam in the form of the hamsa, which might also have motivated its selection here. The motto on the British Museum seal is in Hebrew, in contrast to the Aramaic filiation and titlature. Its phrasing, "His hand is strong", which corresponds to the device of the hand on the seal, adapts Psalm 89:14 with the substitution of the third- for the second-person pronoun, in both cases referring to God. This feature, unknown in surviving Jewish seals from the Sasanian period, is better paralleled in post-Sasanian instances from the East, including borrowings from Psalm 16:5 and Deuteronomy 18:2,<sup>16</sup> though the pious formulae on non-Jewish Sasanian seals mentioned above may also have provided a precedent.

The lettering, carefully executed with moderate serifs, is comparable to the eastern Hebrew square script bookhands of the eighth to tenth centuries (Birnbaum 1971: 231; Yardeni 1997: 210–19). While Sasanian seals of the spherical form were commonly bored through for suspension, the London seal may instead have been furnished with some metal attachment including in turn a suspension-loop. A parallel in this regard is a rock-crystal prism in a silver setting with suspension loop and inscription in mirrored writing on a flattened face from early Byzantine Egypt, now in New York (Figures 2 and 3).<sup>17</sup>

outer register  
 שלמה בר עזריה בר ראש גלואתא דכל ישראל  
 ŠLMH BR 'ZRYH BR R'Š GLW'T' D-KL YŠR'L  
 Solomon son of Azariyah, son of the exilarch<sup>18</sup> of all Israel  
 inner register  
 תעו  
 (*figure of a hand*)  
 ידו  
 T'Z  
 YDW  
 His hand is strong

10.8–9; for the hand see further Brunner 1978: 121–2. On Sasanian seals in general: Ritter 2012: 99–114.

16 Shaked 1995: 251 nos 35 (Ps. 16:5) and 36 (Deut. 18:2), along with two other post-Sasanian seals catalogued there.

17 New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art, accession no. 08.202.28: alongside the device of a gammadion cross, the abbreviated name and title Ἀνα(στασ)ίου ἐπ(ισκόπου), "(Seal) of Anastasius, bishop".

18 The plural form ראש גלואתא given here contrasts with the ריש גלותא (occasionally ראש) standard in Rabbinic sources and may be a style characteristic of Solomon's family: see the introduction.



Figure 2. New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art, accession no. 08.202.28 (image in the public domain)



Figure 3. New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art, accession no. 08.202.28 (detail of face; mirrored version produced by the author)



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