

**University of Aberdeen**  
**Special Libraries and Archives**

## **The Judaica Collections**



*The Aberdeen Codex of the Hebrew Bible (Naples, 1493-94.) Illumination at the beginning of Isaiah (AUL MS 23. Fol. 186v.)*

## **An Information Document**

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The University of Aberdeen, formed in 1860 by the amalgamation of the fifteenth-century King's College and the sixteenth-century Marischal College, has a rich collection of Judaica. This reflects the University's continuous commitment to the study of Hebrew and Rabbinic literature, and the collection, scholarship and publication in connection with these studies. It also reflects a wider interest and sympathy which can be traced from the early-seventeenth century acquisition of the glorious Codex of the Hebrew Bible, which remains one of the University's greatest treasures, to the twentieth-century activities of the Hays of Seton.

### CONTEMPORARY CONNECTIONS

Among the collections which are constantly accruing to the University library is Professor Wernham's compendious collection of the works of the philosopher Spinoza, and the library and papers of David Daube (1909–1999), internationally renowned scholar of Roman and Biblical Law, and Chair of Jurisprudence at the University from 1951–55. His extensive library consists primarily of twentieth-century texts, but also includes such treasures as *A Compendious...History of...the Latter Tymes of the Iewes Commune Weale* (London, 1561), attributed to Joseph Ben Gurion.

The University also holds extensive papers deposited by the distinguished local scholar, Malcolm Hay of Seaton (1881–1962), and his wife, the violinist Alice Ivy Wigmore (d. 1982). The Hays, themselves devout Catholics, were deeply sympathetic to the Zionist cause. Their historical and polemical writings on anti-Semitism and the history of the Jews in Europe include a collection of papers relating to Palestine and Syria (compiled c. 1933) and to Palestinian affairs from 1948–55. Mrs Hay's papers include the material assembled for her biography of her son-in-law, Orde Wingate, the pioneering commando leader who was one of the most unorthodox but effective military leaders of World War Two.

### THE BIESENTHAL COLLECTION

The most significant of our Hebrew holdings — in the sense of combining quality with sheer quantity — is the Biesenthal collection, acquired from Dr Biesenthal in Leipzig in the 1870s, and permanently deposited in Historic Collections in 1968.

This is undoubtedly one of the most complete collections of Rabbinic literature in Britain. Half of its 2,140 volumes are in Hebrew, and represent what was described by the Aberdeen University Review as 'a comprehensive selection of all that was published in Hebrew practically from the invention of printing to the time of the sale of Dr Biesenthal's library'.

In addition to the Hebrew volumes there are volumes in Yiddish (including one Yiddish Bible, printed in Cyrillic, dating from 1687) and other works in Dutch, Spanish, English and German.



*Bible with Rabbinic commentary (Basle, 1618): vignette at head of Genesis (Bies f 8A)*

The collection includes thirty-seven Hebrew books printed in the sixteenth century and twice as many from the seventeenth. The oldest Hebrew volume is an edition of Moses ben Nahman's *Commentary on the Pentateuch*, printed at Pesaro in 1513, only thirty-eight years after the first dated printed Hebrew book.



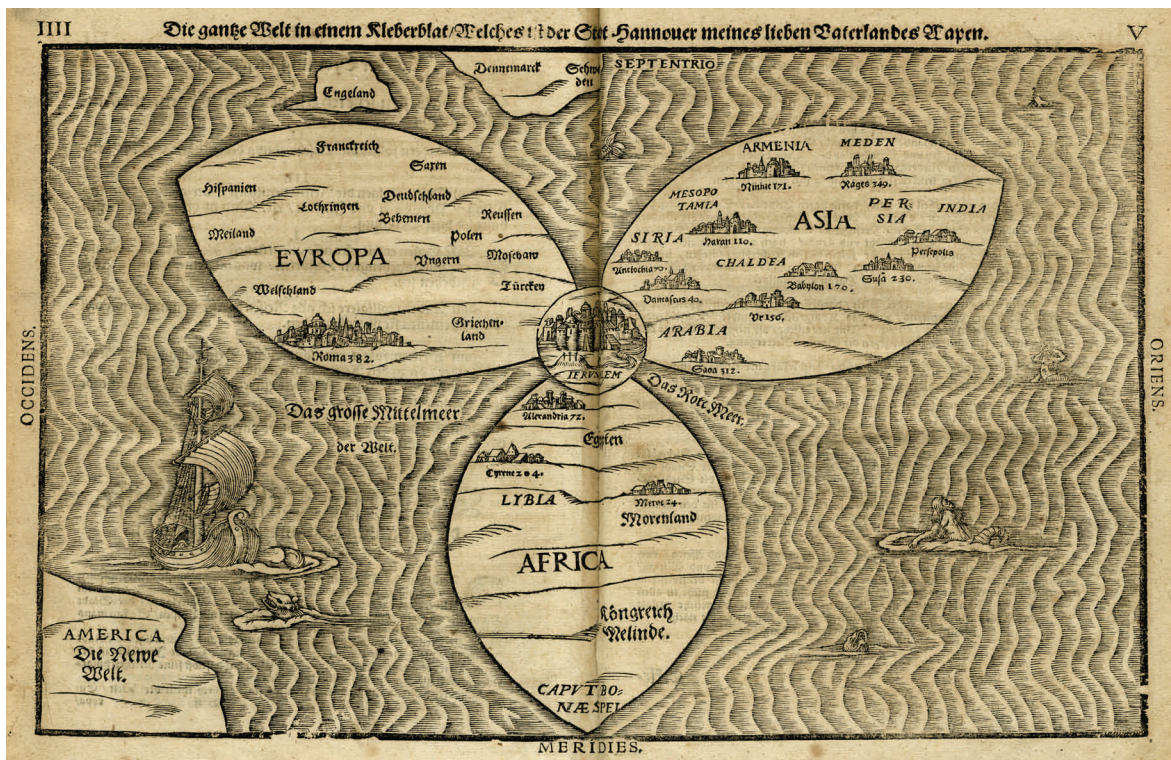
The major European centres of Jewish culture are represented in this collection, each with its own distinctive architectural woodcut to frame the title pages — Venice, Amsterdam, Leiden, Altdorf, and Basle. It includes a sumptuous Yiddish Bible from Amsterdam ('translated from Hebrew into the language of Ashkenaz') with an excellent engraved frontispiece with its date given as 5447, and also a fine prayer book printed at Venice in 1568. The Zohar and other Cabbalistic works are well represented, and the collection also includes bilingual editions and polyglot dictionaries, studies of ancient geography, and studies of Jewish antiquities.

The Collection includes a fine Bible with Rabbinic commentary printed at Basle in 1618, and also from Basle, printed in 1620, is Buxtorf's Commentary on the Massoretic pointing, defending its antiquity. The liberal presses of the Netherlands also contribute Judaic histories, including one printed at Leiden in 1641, and the superb scholarly edition of Josephus printed there in 1712.

### THE STUDY AND TEACHING OF HEBREW AT THE COLLEGES OF ABERDEEN

Many of the earliest books in the collections of Aberdeen relate to the study of Jewish antiquities and geography. One of the most beautiful of these is a Leipzig *Itinerarium Sacrae Scripturae* of 1585 which places Jerusalem as the heart of a three-petalled flower, with each petal constituting a continent and offshore islands lying, as does Britain, remote in the seas.

Furthering the established Calvinist tradition of studying sacred scripture in its original languages, the Foundation Charter of Marischal College (1593) called for a teacher of both Hebrew and Syriac who was 'appropriately instructed in the sacred texts, suitable to opening the mysteries of the faith and the hidden treasures of the Divine Word'. This individual was not merely to lecture with reference to Hebrew and Syriac texts, but would also instruct in Hebrew grammar. However, there soon seemed to be some difficulty with appointing a suitable teacher. An apparent lapse in the regular teaching of Hebrew in Marischal



*Itinerarium Sacrae Scripturae* (Leipzig, 1585): World map in the form of a three-leaved clover, with Jerusalem at the centre (pi f 91:22 Bue)



College is reflected in a 1631 letter from the preacher and missionary Patrick Copland, writing 'from my house in Paget's Towne in Summer Islands' [Bermuda] criticising the authorities of Marischal College for their failure to acknowledge his gift of two thousand marks 'for the ... Divinitie and Hebrew reader in your schooles'. The letter threatens to withhold further donations until he is satisfied that the courses are being taught. The manuscript letter itself is an exquisite object, written on paper decoratively bordered with Chinese characters, birds, and scrolls.

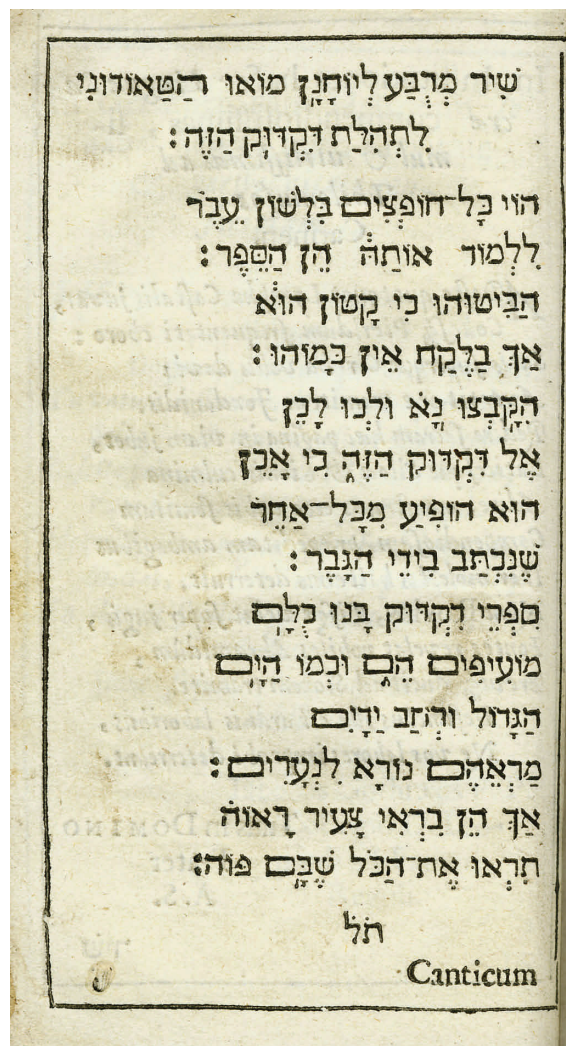
Perhaps as a result of Copland's intervention, a much more active attitude to the teaching of Hebrew in Aberdeen is shown shortly thereafter. The Town Council made a positive commitment to the further support of Hebrew studies in 1642, declaring it 'meit and expedient that ane Ebro lesson be teachit weiklie in the colledge of this burgh till Lambmes [Lammas] nixt.' A teacher had evidently come forward, for he is named: 'Mr Johne Row ane of the tounes ministers'.

John Row was Minister of St Nicholas, the main town Church, a position he held alongside his teaching post at Marischal. A man of energy and achievement, he had already published a Hebrew grammar in 1634. Less than a year after his election as Hebrew teacher, 'the counsell considering the paines takin be Mr John Row in teaching the Hebrew tongue and for setting furth ane Hebrew Dictionar and dedicating the same to the counsell' rewarded him with four hundred merks in Scots money. In 1644, the 'Dictionar', by then a full-fledged Hebrew Primer, was printed in Glasgow, but was, of course, used in Aberdeen where Row continued to teach from it as the Civil War continued. A fervent supporter of the Covenant, he became Principal of the obstinately Royalist King's College during the Interregnum, a post which he lost together with his other employment in the Restoration.

Row's Primer, *Hebraeae Linguae Institutiones*, includes a rarity — a Hebrew poem composed

in Northern Scotland, entitled *A square song for John Mowu [Row] the Taodunite in praise of this grammar*:

*Ho, all those who delight in the tongue of Eber,  
to learn it: Behold the book!  
Look at it, for it is small, but in teaching there is  
none like it.  
Gather now and come therefore to this gram-  
mar, for surely  
It shines more than any other because it was  
written at the hands of the man.  
The books of grammar among us, all of them  
are brilliant, and like the sea, which is great and  
broad.  
Their appearance is fearful for young men.  
But behold with a little look, surely you will see  
that everything that is in them is here.  
[trans. P.J. Williams]*



John Row's *Hebraeae Linguae Institutiones* (Glasgow, 1644): Hebrew poem of commendation (pi 4924 Row h 1, sig A11b)



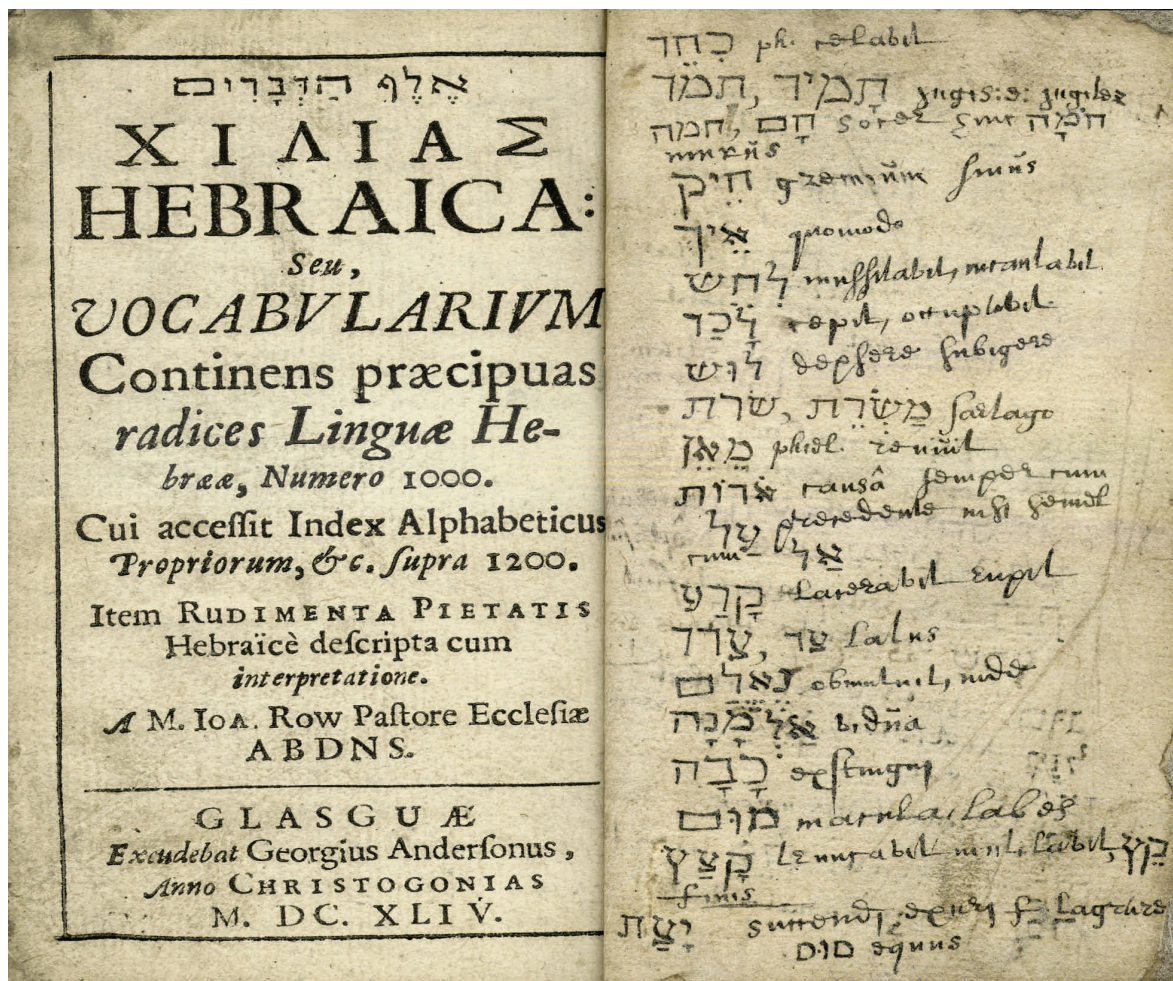
One of the copies held by the University illustrates the process of learning Hebrew in early-modern Aberdeen, with careful student notes and tentative first attempts at Hebrew letters.

The University's tradition of *ad hoc* teaching in Hebrew and related tongues was formalised into an actual Chair of Oriental Languages in 1727, founded by the Rev. Gilbert Ramsay of Barbados. The first holder was Professor James Donaldson (cathederated 1732), who was followed by his son, and then, in 1794, by the active and energetic James Kidd:

*By the rules of the Church of Scotland, students in Divinity are required to apply to the study of the Hebrew Language; but this class, having formerly been taught in a very superficial manner, was for many years almost neglected ... The class for Hebrew now meets twice a day for five days in the*

*week, during the period of the session of divinity. The professor teaches the elements of the language; after which he proceeds to read the Old Testament with the students, and then delivers lectures on textual criticism, Jewish antiquities, and other subjects connected with the study of the Hebrew scriptures. He also teaches and gives lectures on the principles of the Arabic and Persian languages, which are chiefly calculated for young men who intend to prosecute their fortunes in the East Indies; and to those, they are attended with considerable benefit.*

Rather than being an original scholar in the Oriental languages, Professor Kidd was a highly effective teacher and preacher (perhaps what was required in the circumstances). He is also remembered for his practical charity: in his *Glimpses of Golden Days in Aberdeen* (Aberdeen: Aberdeen Free Press, 1870), William Buchanan speaks of his buying rolls for



Page of student notes on Hebrew from Row's Hebraeae Linguae Institutiones

ragged boys, but first tearing them in two lest they try to re-sell them.

### **THE LONDON POLYGLOT (1657)**

Since Professor Kidd's time, the Chair of Oriental Languages has continued to flourish within the context of Divinity. Among the treasures which have accrued to it is a copy of Bishop Brian Walton's *magnum opus*, his SS. *Biblia Polyglotta*, printed at Oxford in 1657. Polyglot Bibles were a major enterprise of Renaissance biblical scholarship. They combined authoritative texts in the earliest biblical languages with large amounts of supporting material, making them stupendous works both of scholarship and of the printer's art.

The first great Polyglot was that of Aires Montanus, printed at Antwerp in the Spanish Netherlands in 1569; the second was the Paris Polyglot of 1645. The size and scope of these projects gave them both nationalist and confessional significance — thus, Bishop Walton was not merely the London Polyglot, but the first Protestant Polyglot.

The context for its production was the great interest in oriental languages in England at this time, witnessed by Edmund Castell's *Lexicon Heptaglotton*, John Selden's work on Hebrew Law, and Edward Pococke's work on Syriac and Arabic. Thus, the London Polyglot not only follows the advances made in the Paris volume, but also brings this form of printing to its peak.



Bishop Brian Walton's SS. *Biblia Polyglotta* (Oxford 1657). Large engraved plate of the Holy of Holies (Sb f 22:4 Wal 1)

The introductory matter includes a survey of all known history, archaeology and linguistics, and is representative of the establishment of the comparative method of establishing earlier and later forms of script, which developed in the eighteenth century into the science of palaeography.

Among the most interesting features of the London Polyglot is the large engraved plate of the Holy of Holies. At the top left is a picture of the High Priest, with the Tetragrammaton (the four letters of the name of God) on his turban. This illustrates the cutting-edge research which went into the London Polyglot; these are written in the ancient form of the Hebrew letters that had only very recently been discovered in the Samaritan text of the Pentateuch, a copy of which had been brought back to Oxford from the Holy Land in 1636 by Edward Pococke.

### **JAMES FRASER'S TRAVELS**

It was as a result of John Row's teachings that James Fraser (1634–1709), later Episcopalian Minister of Kirkhill near Inverness, travelled through Europe to meet as many Jewish communities as possible. In the late 1660s, Fraser wrote out a fair copy of the travel diaries which he had kept during his extensive tour of Britain and western Europe in the years 1657–1660, which he called his *Triennial Travels*. The three manuscript volumes have never been transcribed or studied at any length. His travels included a lengthy sojourn in Rome, where he made considerable efforts to seek out the Jewish community and attend their synagogue. He reports as follows:

*There Liturgy is very Methodicall, consisting of Prayers, Psalmes, Hymns, lessones, Replies, taken all out of the laws and prophets.*

*As to their worship & service: I was an eye witnesse of it. The men <convocat> confusedly into the synagogue, and wash their hands as they enter. [They] have on their bodies Mantles of embroidered Linnen & fringed round about with knots according to the Number of the commandments. Those are their Phylacteries and serve them as local memories of the law. They*



burn Lampes continually in the church to God's honour. They never kneele in their Synagogues, nor never discover their heads. All the demonstration of Reverence they show is sometimes standing up straight and their gestur of adoration is bowing forward with their bodies to the east. Each has his Bible in his hand, the pure Hebrew text without points. This he reads in a chaunting tone winding up their voice gradually from the lowest Register to the highest that his voice can extend to the one or change to the other, and thus they would up and down, passing to one another. If you offer to read upon their bookes they <re>ach them tow you with a Congé and a Smile, and if they find yow can read but a word in Hebrew, they clap your shoulder. The women never mix with men, in the synagogue they count that abomination, but in time of service the women yong & old are in an upper roome or gallery faced with grates so that you see them not, but they may see you thorough these grates. There Alter is of Ebene [ebony] polisht smooth wood.

It was clear that Row had made a competent Hebrew scholar out of Fraser, as he was able to read aloud a Torah scroll with confidence (though presumably without the 'up and down' of Hebraic chant). The remark about 'the pure Hebrew text without points' relates to a contemporary controversy: were the 'points' (vowel-markers) printed in Hebrew Bibles and other Hebrew works part of the pristine text conveyed by the Almighty via Moses, or a merely human interpolation made for the convenience of readers?

### THE ABERDEEN CODEx OF THE HEBREW BIBLE

Another Hebrew treasure has been held by the University for centuries. Among the manuscripts which Thomas Reid gave to Aberdeen is a priceless illuminated codex of the Hebrew Bible, dated to the winter of 1493–94. The codex was written in exile by Isaac ben David Balsani, a Sephardic scribe whose name indicates that his family originated from Valencia, Spain. At the time, he was working for a patron of one of the oldest and most honoured Jewish families of Spain, Joseph Albelia, who had also been ex-

pelled from the country by the Royal edict of 1492.

This codex was particularly admired for its 'exquisite penmanship' by the great English lexicographer Dr Samuel Johnson when he visited Aberdeen in August 1773 in the course of his tour of the Highlands.



Aberdeen Codex of the Hebrew Bible, table of variants between Ben Asher and Ben Naphtali (AUL MS 23. Fol. 5v)

The work almost certainly originates from Naples, in the brief period of peace enjoyed by the Jewish community before the French invasion in February 1495. The Aberdeen Codex offers a glimpse of the kinds of works which would have been created for enlightened Jewish patrons of the high Renaissance had circumstances offered extended periods of peace for the Sephardic communities of southern Europe. The text would appear to offer a few glosses, perhaps even interpolations at the ends of books — the words 'be strong' added to the end of II Kings seem almost as if addressed

to the patron of the manuscript himself. The colophon which the scribe added to his work certainly expresses hopes for his patron's future — 'may the Almighty make him worthy to study it, he and his sons and his sons' sons.' But, even before the last small corrections were made to this glorious manuscript, it was abandoned, presumably as a result of the invasion of the Kingdom of Naples by Charles VIII.

The rich illuminations which frame the tables of variants which precede the biblical text are the work of professional illuminators and show a cosmopolitan range of artistic influences. There are two complimentary styles: one looks to mediaeval painting as exemplified in the stately dance of heraldic animals, including two rampant lions of Judah, and exemplified in scrollwork borders with animals amongst their foliage. The other style of illumination looks to the newest renaissance rediscoveries of classical antiquity as shown by the highly sophisticated architectural fantasies, illusionistic animals, and landscapes glimpsed through the colonnades framing the tables opening the codex.

The history implied by a manuscript — and manuscripts of this quality inevitably tell their own story — sometimes can be almost as moving as the beauty of the work itself.

### SCROLLS OF THE BOOK OF ESTHER

By contrast, one of the library's most interesting Hebrew holdings is a relatively recent acquisition — a text of the Book of Esther. After being acquired by the Aberdeenshire polymath William McCombie Alexander (1880–1959), the scientist, historian, Gaelic philologist and mountaineer then gifted the manuscript to the University. The text is recorded on two leather scrolls wound around wooden batons, probably of eastern Sephardic origin. The extreme stylistic conservatism of copies of Torah texts for synagogue use makes it difficult to date these accurately, although the pair are definitely twins, showing common distinctive features including

a listing of the sons of Haman who are hanged (Esther 9:7–9) on a separate, spaced column.

The University is indeed extremely fortunate to have such a number of significant works in its Collections.



*Manuscript scrolls of the Book of Esther, showing the names of the sons of Haman, Esther 9:7-9 (AUL MS 1004)*