Jews lived in medieval England for over 200 years. Shortly after 1066, Jewish communities from Rouen settled in London, and by the late 12th century had established colonies throughout the realm, from Chichester in the south, Lincoln in the north, Canterbury in the east, to Hereford in the west. During those years, Jews consistently would find the question of habitation — of home, shelter, and security — to be highly fraught. Concern over safety inspired most Jews to live near castles, where they hoped to receive the protection of the crown in the event of hostilities on the part of the Christian majority. Such was the case in 1144, when Jews in Norwich who were wrongly accused of killing a local boy were sheltered in the castle until a royal edict secured their safety. Jewish homes were the object of attack some 45 years later, during massacres that began in London during the coronation of Richard I, spread elsewhere on the island, and culminated the tragic failure of Clifford’s Tower to protect hundreds of Jews in York. In 1290 all members of England’s Anglo-Jewry found themselves forced from their homes during the first state-sponsored exile of Jews in European history.

At the same time that medieval England’s Jewish population — like so many Jews elsewhere in Europe — faced considerable challenges when it came to establishing a secure home, members of that same community played a crucial role in erecting buildings for the Christian majority. The 12th century marks a pivotal period in the history of English architecture, an era distinguished by the building of soaring stone churches and massive abbeys. Such construction projects were expensive ventures that depended on capital for their completion. And in a Christian society that banned its members from banking, Jews performed the vital task of financing those edifices for which Anglo-Norman England is famous.
One personality who exemplifies this paradox is Aaron of Lincoln (c.1125–1186), the greatest financier in England during the 12th century. Aaron lent funds to nearly all the great abbeys and monasteries involved in constructing gothic buildings during the century, a fact about which he even joked. Historian of St. Alban’s abbey Matthew Paris records how the banker would come to “the house of St. Alban” (Domum Sancti Albani) and brag to the monks “that it was he who made the window for our Saint Alban and that from his own money he had prepared a home for the homeless saint” ("Jactitabat se feretrum Beato Albano nostro fecisse, et ipsi, dehospitato, hospitium de pecunia sua praeparasse.") (Thomas Walsingham, Deeds of the Abbots of St. Alban, ed. Riley, 193–4).

Aaron’s jest refers to the great stained-glass window in the transept of St. Alban’s Cathedral and, more importantly, the large chest that Abbot Simon (1167–83) created to contain Alban’s relics. The elaborately ornamented chest is no longer extant, but we do have a drawing of it, which Matthew Paris used to illustrate his Life of St. Alban (c. 1230–40), above. This elaborately ornamented domus, or home, for the remains of Alban vivifies on a small scale the larger-scale contributions made by Aaron to Christian “homes” (e.g. cathedrals and abbeys) throughout England.

Ironically, the most vulnerable inhabitants of medieval England provided magnificent shelters for their Christian oppressors. Equally ironic, Christians depended for their building
projects on support provided by their perceived “enemy.” The longstanding conception of the Jew as the great “other” situated within Christianity appears in a new light in the presence of Jewish capital in the bricks and mortar of the gothic cathedral.

Throughout the medieval period, Christian thinkers promoted the idea that Christianity had supplanted Judaism by associating Jews with a debased materiality and Christians with an exalted spirituality. Jews, according to this offensive rhetoric of supersession, are essentially carnal and literal-minded, base and earthly, whereas Christians have risen to a higher, spiritual mode of being and thinking thanks to their heavenly salvation by Christ. The architectural dimensions of that rhetoric typically entailed the replacement of the literal buildings and cities of the Old Testament (such as the temple in Jerusalem) with their spiritual counterparts (such as the “temple” of the faithful’s heart). The English historian Bede offers a version of this thinking when he contrast the open and empty tomb of the resurrected Christ with contemporary Jews who, “like a tomb still closed by a stone,” are blind to the Christian message. In Bede’s anti-Semitic formulation, the figure of the Jew as tomb speaks to an inherent carnality—a miring in earthly materialism and earthly buildings—that renders him closed to Christian spiritual truths.

To return to Aaron of Lincoln’s joke about a homeless Alban while encountering the monks of St. Alban’s abbey: the financier’s reference to “his own money” before the monks recalls the stereotype of the materialistic Jew that informs Christian rhetorics of supersession. But Aaron also links that materialism to a Christian church and its dead occupant. Itself a tomb closed with a stone, the shrine of St. Alban provides a fascinating counter to claims like that of Bede. While it may be the case that Christ no longer needs a built environment (hence his empty tomb), Christians—dead and living—certainly did. Indeed, the first good deed performed by Alban was the provision of hospitality to a fugitive priest who arrived at Alban’s home during the time of the Diocletian persecutions. Far from something Christianity had transcended, literal buildings were requisite for Christian existence. And, by the 12th century, Christians sought to build increasingly grand houses of worship dependent upon capital supplied by Jews.

Arguably the most important factor in the 1290 expulsion was the conflict in gentile English culture over the practice of usury, which Christians had long identified as a sin and which the English state had outlawed in 1275. By the time Christians forcibly ejected them from England in 1290, Jews had been thoroughly demonized as harmful usurers. But another story emerges in Alban’s shrine as well as in the cathedrals and abbeys produced during the time Jews lived in England. Those buildings serve as stone monuments to both Christian culture and Jewish business practice, and to the architectural magnificence they made possible.