

Jaspar Griffith and his name in Hebrew Characters

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We do not know whether anybody has ever before discussed the spelling of the name, however, the following remarks came to mind seeing this interesting relic of classical, Hebrew, learning.

On the 5th page (fol. 3r)¹ of the Black Book of Carmarthen, now accessible through the beautiful internet pages of the National Library of Wales published under the name Drych Digidol - Digital Mirror², Jasper Griffith wrote his name in Hebrew characters. This has been noted, of course, by many people, cf. e.g. J. Gwenogfryn Evans in his description of the manuscript.³ In the published photograph this looks like the figure below.

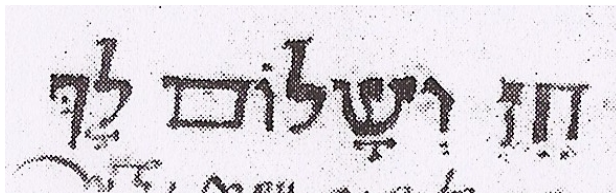


At first we were inclined to read: יִשְׁפָּר גְּרִיפִיץ, supposing the left half of the concluding letter ץ (= ם) to be invisible behind the upstanding part of the preceding folio. However, when looking at the photographic representation of the same page in the edition of Gwenogvryn Evans,⁴ it is clear that the letter following ם is a ך and that another sign is to be found after it. Below we present



a highly brightened image of this signature.

This last consonant is best explained as -d (ד). For a moment, we have supposed that the black dot to the right were not a part of the sign as written by Jasper Griffith, and that the sign meant was -n (ן). For a normal concluding -n (ן) the sign is very short, but we have another example of Jasper Griffith' Hebrew



1 <http://digidol.llgc.org.uk/METS/DUC0002/physical?div=24&subdiv=0&locale=cy&mode=reference>.

2 <http://www.llgc.org.uk/index.php?id=251&L=1>.

3 J. Gwenogfryn Ewnas, RMWL I/2, p. 297.

4 J. Gwenogvryn Ewnas, *Llyfr Du Caerfyrddin Black Book of Carmarthen*, 1906.

writing, published by Richard Ovenden,⁵ reading חַן וְשָׁלוֹם לְךָ, where the concluding -n (ן) in the first word is also shortened, and even looks rather like a z (ז). This reading we then thought to combine with J. Gwenogfryn Evans's remark ad Peniarth 53⁶: *This MS. belonged at one time to Jaspas Griffith. See foot-note to p. 47 and Willis's Bangor, p. 149. "Broughton, Jaspas Gruffins" occurs on p. 19.* However, the two times Jaspas Griffith wrote his name in two other manuscripts, both also kept in the National library, he clearly wrote a -d (ד) at the end of his name. In the MS Peniarth 44⁷ we read יִשְׁפָּר גְּרוּפִיד and in NLW 5266⁸ יִשְׁפָּר גְּרוּפִיד. In this last case we are not quite sure about the pointing of פ, which, however, does not affect the argument.⁹ The argument is also not affected by the occurrence¹⁰ of his first name יִשְׁפָּר on the title page of a printed book from his collection. The dot in the letter פ is very marked, while half of the first letter and its accompanying vowel are lost, as the result, probably, of the rebinding of the work.



The reading just given yields, in transcription, *yāspār gərufid*, which basically points to a pronunciation */yaspar grufid/*.

One may be a bit pedantic and point to the fact that the correct reading according to the rules for Classical Hebrew would be */yospār grufid/*, the vowel sign below the first and third character being realised as /ō/ (short o) in closed, unaccented syllables and as /ā/ (long a) elsewhere. As Classical Hebrew punctuation can also indicate a short /a/, with another vowel sign, one may ask why Jaspas did not use this sign. The solution may be looked for in the way these vowels sounded in Jaspas's ears, the first one being nearer to /a/, the second one perhaps more like /æ/. Whatever is the correct reason, one may be sure that Jaspas learned Hebrew with the Sephardic pronunciation, as the vowel

5 Richard Ovenden, 'Jaspas Gryffyth and his books', *The British Library Journal*, 20 (1994), 107–139; Dr. Maredudd ap Huw, Manuscripts Librarian, NLW, (e-mail Febr. 2011), mentioned this article to me; for the letter from which we took the three Hebrew words, see p. 110; this article also pointed out the existence of Jaspas Griffith's name in Hebrew characters in other books and manuscripts he once owned.

6 O.c. note 3, p. 403.

7 Cf. J. Gwenogfryn Evans's note sub Peniarth 44, o.c. note 3, p. 378; he wrote his name in Hebrew characters in this manuscript on p. 7.

8 J. Gwenogfryn Evans also noted this occurrence of the signature of Jaspas Griffith (viz. in his edition of the Bruts from the Red Book), *whose name, written in Hebrew characters, is found at the foot of folio 3 of the Dingestow MS* (i.e. NLW MS 5266).

9 The sign stands for /p/ with dot, and for /f/ without.

10 The name is to be found on the title page of John Bale, *Illustrium Maioris Britanniae Scriptorum*, preserved in the National Library of Scotland, shelfmark H.26.d.19, as pointed out by R. Ovenden, o.c. note 5, p. 129; photograph courtesy National Library of Scotland.

he uses is always pronounced /o/ in the Ashkenazic tradition.

Another pedantic observation is to be made about the “vowel” indicated below the second sign of the first word and the first sign of the second word. This sign too has two functions in Classical Hebrew writing, the one being the indication of the vowel /ə/, the other one the indication of the absence of a vowel. With his family name Jaspār ran into difficulties, as in Classical Hebrew basically no word can begin with more than one consonant and this sign following the first consonant of a word always stands for /ə/.

One of the more important problems in this representation of the name Jaspār Griffith, as it is written by Evans, is the vowel following the *r* in the family name. The Hebrew sign ם, when dotted, stands for the long vowel /ū/. Considering the use of the vowel sign /ā/, it is not improbable that Jaspār was not interested in vowel length. However, why use /u/, where a sign for /i/ was at hand as is shown by the next syllable. Is it possible that in the pronunciation of his family name Jaspār heard distinctive sounds in the two syllables, which he wanted to express, therefore using a sign for a back vowel, further back than needed, but for him at least better than using the sign that indicated a sound further to the front than he wanted. Is this the case, then the name written in Hebrew should rather be rendered by Jaspār Gruffydd than anything else.

Study of the following Hebrew notes by Jaspār Gruffydd may influence the preceding remarks:

London British Library Cotton MS Vespasian E xi

According to Ovenden, p. 130, a Hebrew motto on the rear flyleaf, f. 133v, of the MS

London Westminster Abbey Library MS Latin 201

According to Ovenden, p. 130, a Hebrew motto on f 242v of this MS.