

**THE FIRKOVICH ODESSA COLLECTION:  
THE HISTORY OF ITS ACQUISITION AND RESEARCH,  
PRESENT CONDITION AND HISTORICAL VALUE**

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The Odessa Collection is a complex of Old Hebrew manuscripts, not very numerous, discovered by Abraham Firkovich (1787–1874) in the course of his expeditions to the Crimea and the Caucasus in 1839–40. Some additional discoveries were made by him in the following years, until 1852. Firkovich transferred these manuscripts to the Odessa Society of History and Antiquities, where they were kept till 1863, when on the orders of Alexander II they were taken to the Imperial Public Library, the National Library of Russia of today. There they were added to the main part of the so-called First Firkovich Collection, which the Library had acquired a year before.<sup>1</sup>

The main aim of the expedition of 1839 was to find as much information as possible about the history of the Karaites. On January 31 (February 12) the Governor of Tavria, M. M. Muromtsev, wrote a letter to the Karaite Spiritual Consistory where, on behalf of the Governor-General of the Novorossiysk region, M. S. Vorontsov, he put the following questions: the origin of the Karaites, the time when they settled in the Crimea, the time of and reasons for their separation from the Rabbanites and the differences between these two branches of Judaism, historical documents confirming the antiquity of their faith. Only written sources, namely, manuscripts that had been kept for centuries among the Crimean Jews and epitaphs, could answer these questions. Thus, a special expedition was organised.

It was Abraham Firkovich who led the expedition. He was appointed by the *hakham* of Eupatoria Simha Babovich. At that time Firkovich was already in his fifties. Being a respectable *hazzan* of the Karaite community of Eupatoria, he had become well-known as an instructor of the youth, a self-made scholar, a book-

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<sup>1</sup> The article is based on a paper read at the Seventh Scandinavian Congress of Jewish Studies, Järvenpää, Finland, May 14, 2000.

collector and author of several published works. He possessed such personal qualities as energy, will power and self-confidence.

The expedition was financed by the Karaite community, and its activities were based on the open letter of credence issued by Governor Muromtsev at Firkovich's request. Firkovich visited Chufut-Kale, Mangup, Karasubazar, Eski Kirim (Old Crimea) and Theodosia. Everywhere he searched cemeteries and synagogues both of the Karaites and Rabbanites. Leaving aside the epigraphic material<sup>2</sup> I will deal only with the manuscripts found during this journey.

The "Book of the Latter Prophets" written in 916 was found below the wooden floor of the new Karaite synagogue in Chufut-Kale. It is considered to be the most important find made by the expedition. In his memoirs, *Abne zikkaron*, Firkovich pays much attention to it. He writes:

"When I examined it, I had a look, and behold, oh God! I saw superior marks on top of the characters in the words, strange figures before my eyes, vowel forms and also accent signs." (Firkovich 1872: 14)<sup>3</sup>

This is how he discovered the Babylonian system of pointing (Plate 4a). The copy of the "Latter Prophets" is remarkable not only for its date and pointing, but also because of its brown leather book-coatings, which have survived; later they were used in the conservation of the binding in the Library. The stamp of the coatings allows it to be classified as belonging to the Byzantine type of the 15th century. Thus, surprisingly, a Hebrew manuscript is enclosed in a "Christian" binding (Plate 4b).

After Chufut-Kale Firkovich travelled to Mangup and then to Karasubazar (Belogorsk of today), inhabited, among others, by Krymchaks (Crimean Rabbanites). Here, in the wall of the Krymchak synagogue he found a *geniza*. The Krymchaks believed that the *geniza* was not to be disturbed, otherwise it might cause an epidemic. Then Firkovich contacted the authorities and in their presence he himself took an axe and started crushing the wall. These are his own words: "And behold, the entire *geniza* was full of fragments and bundles of various books as much as the load of some carts". And later: "... I searched among the fragments and bundles as far as possible and of the useful objects I chopped those which in my eyes seemed to be the most valuable, those with a connection to the question proposed to us."<sup>4</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Paper copies in relief of grave inscriptions, one hundred in number, are also kept in the National Library of Russia as a part of the First Firkovich collection. These inscriptions are published in *Abne zikkaron*, see Firkovich 1872.

<sup>3</sup> English translations from this book were kindly made by Prof. Tapani Harviainen.

<sup>4</sup> Firkovich 1872: 16–17. Further on, Firkovich describes six scroll fragments which he took with him, as well as twelve fragments and codices. He writes on their account: "I put these twelve items in a sack under police seal, gave a report to Governor, and when he returned

All in all, Firkovich discovered thirty manuscripts in the Karasubazar *geniza*; seven items were taken from Chufut-Kale and five from Theodosia.

On May 13, 1840, Firkovich left these manuscripts in Simferopol in the house of Vladislav Knjazhevich, brother of the president of the newly founded Odessa Society of History and Antiquities. The manuscripts were to be kept there during Firkovich's trip to the Caucasus.<sup>5</sup> Earlier he had given the Society copies of the inscriptions of the manuscripts and tombstones found by him. Members of the Society showed great interest in them and expressed their desire to see the originals. Vladislav Knjazhevich transferred the manuscripts to Dmitri Knjazhevich. And, on Firkovich's return from the Caucasus, he wrote him a letter informing him that the Society had not yet finished its work in respect of "scholarly exploitation" of the manuscripts. After the death of Dmitri Knjazhevich they were transferred to the Museum of the Society.<sup>6</sup>

The Derbent Torah scroll and Madjalis document discovered in the Caucasus in 1840 were also donated by Firkovich to the Odessa Society.<sup>7</sup> Thus the bulk of the Odessa Collection was formed, and the active study of this material began immediately.

The collection aroused lively interest among the public, especially the question of the authenticity of the find. The Society asked Bezalel Stern, headmaster of the Odessa Jewish gymnasium, to follow the route of Firkovich's expedition in the Crimea. It took him two months to complete the journey, during which time he found thirteen more manuscripts. We find a report on this trip together with a survey of the collection in the first volume of the Society's "Papers":

The anonymous author<sup>8</sup> of this report was probably the person who wrote the article "Jews-Karaites" in the "Magazine of the Ministry of Internal Affairs".<sup>9</sup> On the basis of Firkovich's and Stern's discoveries he comes to the following conclusion: "Now it turns out to be an indisputable historical truth that the modern Crimean Karaites ... are direct descendants of a separate branch of the Jews who separated from their brothers in ancient times, before the era of the Babylonian exile, and penetrated into the territories of contemporary Russia from the depths of Central Asia. They adopted the Tatar language after crossing the Caucasus ... but the special character of their religious

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from Kaffa, he took them and carried them to his home in Akmajid." Twelve more manuscripts were left by Firkovich in the synagogue, being put into another sack. This sack was also later taken by Governor Muromtsev.

<sup>5</sup> See Firkovich 1872: 40.

<sup>6</sup> See Firkovich 1863: 5.

<sup>7</sup> See Harviainen, this volume.

<sup>8</sup> He may be N. I. Nadezhdin, a member of the Odessa Society and from 1843 the editor of the *Magazine of the Ministry of Internal Affairs*; the assumption is based on textual parallels and linguistic similarities.

<sup>9</sup> *Zhurnal Ministerstva vnutrennih del* 1: 263–284.

and national development which is alien and therefore hostile to Rabbinism, was obviously brought by them from Persia ... They avoided the distortion of their faith by the Talmud." (*Zapiski Odesskogo obshestva istorii i drevnostej*, Odessa 1844, vol. 1, pp. 640–647. See also Vihnovich 1997: 93–117.)

The "historical superiority" of the Karaites over the Rabbanites, which by now was proven by documents, had political consequences. The Karaites were granted more and more civil rights until they were recognised as being equal with the majority of the Russian population. It seems that after these publications Firkovich had no reason to feel sorry that he had to "store" his finds in the Odessa Society.

In 1845 Pinner's catalogue of this collection was published in Odessa; the collection was divided into three sections: A. Torah scrolls; B. Codices of the Bible; C. Manuscripts of the Talmud and Rabbanite works. The description of the most remarkable manuscript in the Odessa Collection, the Bible of 1009 or 1010, also called the Codex Petropolitanus, Codex Leningradensis or Cairo Bible, was published as an appendix (Nachtrag) to the catalogue.

This codex is the earliest extant Bible, which is complete and dated. It was copied in Cairo, and in 1489 it was donated to the Karaite synagogue of Damascus with "a curse on whoever steals it, sells it, or exchanges it". The text of the Bible was used by Kittel and Kahle for their edition of *Biblia Hebraica*. The Bible "contains a very accurate Masoretic text based on an earlier manuscript believed to be in the tradition of Moses b. Aaron b. Asher".<sup>10</sup> One of the book-covers survived. It is made of wooden panel coated by leather with blind stamping, the design of which resembles that of the 15th-century Arabic book-covers from North Africa. There are several metal plates, which could have belonged to the original binding (Plate 4c). At the end of the codex there are sixteen illuminated pages (Plate 5a).<sup>11</sup> But Firkovich writes almost nothing about this remarkable monument of writing and book art. We know that in March 1840, Firkovich brought the Bible together with other finds from Eupatoria to Simferopol and left them for a while in the Governor's archives; but later, in May, he, probably, did not leave it with Vladislav Knjazhevich, and it did not enter the Odessa Society at that time.

We may explain this situation by the reason that Firkovich found this Bible before his official expedition; he could have found it, for example, in the Karasubazar synagogue (not in its *geniza*). In 1838 he saw there two manuscripts of the

<sup>10</sup> Narkiss 1992: 44. See also Kahle 1959: 140.

<sup>11</sup> See Ginzburg & Stasof 1886, Plates vii–viii; *The Leningrad Codex: A Facsimile Edition*, 1998; Beck & Sanders 1997.

9th–10th centuries<sup>12</sup> but was unable to acquire them; at the same time he would have been able to acquire an 11th-century Bible in exchange for a printed book. (Firkovich 1872: 5.)

We may also give another explanation. The Institute for Oriental Studies (St. Petersburg branch) possesses a complete Bible (D 67) copied in 1280–81 in Damascus. In 1407 this Bible was donated to the Karaite synagogue of that city. A document dated 1832 is glued to its binding. Two Karaites of Damascus had to sell the property of the community of Damascus (buildings), and then they (by themselves) could go away from this town. Books and all valuable items were to be brought to the Crimea. In the list of the properties only one “Book of 24” is mentioned, and this may refer to the codex of the Institute.<sup>13</sup> But it may be that the Karaite community in Damascus had two complete Bibles and both of them were brought to *hakham* Simha Babovich, but at different times. The Bible of 1010 might have been transferred earlier than the Bible of 1280–81. And it could take place in the period between autumn 1830 – spring 1831 when Babovich together with Firkovich lived in the Holy Land. However, Firkovich writes in Eupatoria:

... I took all the books and ancient volumes which I had found and also the very valuable book of 24 [volumes] which was written in 4770 [1010] in Egypt/Cairo and which was brought from Damascus – and this happened on the orders of R. Simha Babovich, the Head of the Sages of blessed memory. In the evening I went from Gozlev [Eupatoria] and came to Akmejid [Simferopol]. (Firkovich 1872: 32.)

It is quite possible that the transfer of the Bible of 1010 to the Odessa Society in 1845 was a sign of gratitude on the part of the Karaite community and personally of its head Simha Babovich, for the above-mentioned publications of the Society which supported the Karaites.

Until 1852 Firkovich continued to contribute to the collection of the Odessa Society with manuscripts discovered in the Crimea, although there were no longer unique items to be found among them. When the collection entered the Public Library in St. Petersburg, it was supplied with an inventory list in Russian prepared by Dr. A. I. Goldenblum<sup>14</sup> consisting of such unprofessional descriptions as: “A bundle not bound, parchment folios – 2” or “Parchment leaves not numbered, wrapped in paper, 1 bundle” or “Turkish scroll”. This list numbers 93 items, one scroll (A 4) having been stolen while still in the keeping of the Odessa Society. In the published Annual Report of the Imperial Public Library of 1863 92 MSS and “several documents and letters of modern times” are mentioned.

<sup>12</sup> One of them, the “Latter Prophets” with an inscription from 947, is now kept in the Institute for Oriental Studies (St. Petersburg branch), call number D 62.

<sup>13</sup> See Jakerson 1994: 520–538.

<sup>14</sup> F. 946, Personal Archive of A. S. Firkovich, No. 917.

Today we have 87 items from the Odessa Collection, 36 of them kept in section "A", 15 in section "B", 11 in section "C" of the Odessa Collection and 25 in the section "Biblical manuscripts" of the First Firkovich Collection (Bibl. 85, 112, 132, 133, 139, 148, 150–153a, 155–157a, 160, 162–170). One codex (B 12) was not found when the collection was checked about fifty years ago. The last stock-check established the absence of six codices and fragments of the Bible (Bibl. 147, 149, 154, 158, 159, 161) and a fragment of a scroll dated 1363 (A 35). In addition 79 folios from the Pentateuch with Targum Onqelos (B 2) could not be found.

Thus, all in all, we identified 95 Hebrew manuscripts of the former collection of the Odessa Society. As for "documents and letters", I have some arguments to suppose that they are Crimean-Tatar and Turkish, designated by the Latin letters A–O, R–T and kept in the section "Turkic documents" of the First Firkovich Collection. In the same section a "Turkish scroll" mentioned in Goldenblum's inventory list is preserved. This is a genealogy of Turkish sultans till Selim I. If my supposition that they were owned by the Odessa Society is correct, it makes a total of 113 manuscripts that had been brought from Odessa to the Library in 1863.

Immediately after the Odessa Collection was introduced into the Library, conservation of the manuscripts was initiated and scholars began to study them. In 1876 the Library published a photo-lithographed edition of the "Latter Prophets" (entitled "Codex Babylonicus Petropolitanus"). This edition was prepared by the German scholar Herman Strack. Together with Abraham Harkavy, Strack published a catalogue of Biblical manuscripts, which includes descriptions of scrolls, codices and fragments in both the First Collection proper and the Odessa Collection.<sup>15</sup>

It should be mentioned that the Harkavy-Strack catalogue, being a work of high scholarly quality, is full of accusations of forgery.<sup>16</sup> In his book *Altjüdische Denkmäler aus der Krim, mitgetheilt von Abraham Firkowitsch (1839–1872)* (St. Pétersbourg 1875), Harkavy was especially critical of three items in the Odessa Collection, considering them to have been produced by Firkovich himself. They are: the inscription of the Derbent Torah,<sup>17</sup> the Madjalis document and the

<sup>15</sup> Harkavy & Strack 1875. Codices and fragments which were acquired by the Odessa Society in 1852 were not described in the Harkavy-Strack catalogue. Later they were attached to the section "Biblical manuscripts" in the First Firkovich Collection.

<sup>16</sup> The special commission of the Russian Academy of Sciences, which sat for one year before the First collection was purchased, called the authenticity of some inscriptions into question. See *Zapiski Imperatorskoi Akademii nauk* 15: 258–260 (the commission estimated the collection at "twenty, at least twenty-five thousand rubles in silver").

<sup>17</sup> Academician A. A. Kunik (1876: 9) paid attention to the glossy ink in which the Derbent inscription is written.

inscription dated 957 in a decorated Masora fragment (Plate 5b). Harkavy never saw the Madjalis document itself and, calling to witness the keeper of the Manuscript Department and deputy director of the Library, A. Th. Bychkov,<sup>18</sup> he stated that the document was not kept in the library. He implied that it was withdrawn by Firkovich, who was afraid of being denounced for the forgery. However, the Madjalis document is mentioned in Goldenblum's inventory list as "a scroll on stick" (it looks like "Magelat Esther"), but it is not mentioned in Pinner's "Prospectus ...". Thus for a long time the manuscript remained unidentified and was kept with the "Hebrew new series" collection. In 1939 the Madjalis document was described by A. Ja. Borisov in his card catalogue of the "new series" under number 91. In 1997 the document took its place in the "Odessa Collection" with the call number C 10.

As for the inscription of the Derbent Torah and the Madjalis document, they undoubtedly require a comprehensive study. As for the illumination of the Masora fragment, we can date it rather confidently to the 10th – early 11th century, based on a comparison with other illuminated manuscripts in the National Library of Russia, especially with the Pentateuch of 929 in the Second Firkovich Collection and the Bible of 1010, both originating from Cairo. This dating does not contradict the date of the inscription, 957.

In his monograph Harkavy attacked not only Firkovich but also his mentor, Professor Daniel Chwolson of St. Petersburg University, who according to him could not recognise the forgeries and who based his scholarly theories on them.<sup>19</sup> As a consequence of these polemics, Firkovich has long had a doubtful reputation which, however, does not prevent scholars all over the world from carrying out research based on his famous collection.

Even if we do not pay attention to the manuscripts of doubtful origin or with suspect inscriptions, if we are to believe Harkavy, the Odessa Collection, although not numerous, is still the most important part of the enormous Firkovich collections. It contains such ancient manuscripts as the fragment of a Torah scroll written on dark-brown leather which can be dated to the 7th–9th centuries (Plate 5c). Two invaluable codices have exact dates – the "Prophets" of 916 and the Bible of 1010. Both of them have retained parts of their bindings, and the Bible has outstanding illumination. These manuscripts come from the East. Of the Western-European Hebrew codices three, dating from the 14th–15th centuries,

<sup>18</sup> Academician Afanasij Bychkov worked in the Library from 1844 as keeper and head of the Manuscript Department, in 1882–99 as director. See *Sotrudniki Rossijskoj natsional'noj biblioteki – dejateli nauki i kul'tury*, I: 115–123; on Abraham Harkavy, see pp. 149–153.

<sup>19</sup> Harkavy's attack was so violent that Chwolson was forced to change his position to some extent. Chwolson (1884) defended his scholarly reputation, but did not consider it necessary to protect Firkovich's honour. Harkavy did not play any further part in the discussion.



are decorated. The *Mishne Torah* by Moses Maimonides has two colourful headings, probably produced in Italy (Plate 6a). The Pentateuch with Targum Onqelos (France or Germany, 14th century) has a heading in ink (Plate 6b). Also, catchwords and a heading in the Commentary on the Bible by Rashi or Yarkhi are written in ink. Two European codices of the 14th century preserve their bindings produced in the European tradition.

When and how were these manuscripts brought to the Crimea? This is another real question to be answered, which indicates that the study of the Odessa Collection, its origin, historical and cultural significance is an ongoing process.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> The article is based on a paper read at the Seventh Scandinavian Congress of Jewish Studies, Järvenpää, Finland, May 14, 2000. The expanded Russian version is to be published in *Vostochnyj sbornik* ('Oriental collection') 6, 2002.



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