

**THE EPIGRAPH OF THE DERBENT TORAH  
AND THE MADJALIS SCROLL DISCOVERED  
BY ABRAHAM FIRKOVICH IN 1840**

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Abraham Firkovich (1787–1874), the eminent Russian Karaite scholar and collector of manuscripts, books and antiquities, did not travel solely in the Near East. Several of his previous journeys of exploration were directed to the Crimea and Caucasus in the years 1839–52.<sup>1</sup>

**THE DERBENT TORAH**

In 1840 Abraham Firkovich, *alias* Even-Reshef, visited Dagestan, in particular the city of Derbent and the village of Madjalis. In the former city he discovered and purchased the so-called Derbent Torah, a complete Torah scroll. At the end of the scroll he found a colophon – which more fittingly should be called an epigraph – written in Hebrew, outlining the history of the Jews living in the Crimea and Caucasus. The epigraph is dated “in the fifth year of the government of our lord Chosdori, the Persian, in the 1300th year of our exile” which *may* refer to the year AD 604. The Derbent Torah is kept in the National Library of Russia in St. Petersburg.<sup>2</sup>

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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. – For the permission to publish these texts and for invaluable information concerning the Firkovich collections, I am most grateful to Mrs. Ludmila Buchina, the Head of the Manuscript Department of the National Library of Russia in St. Petersburg, and to Mrs. Olga Vasilyeva, the Curator of the Oriental Collection of the Manuscript Department, as well as to the personnel of the Department in general. In gratitude I acknowledge also the support provided by the Finnish Cultural Foundation for my research in the Library. – On Firkovich’s activities, see Vihnovich 1997 and Harviainen 1999.

<sup>2</sup> Call number First Firkovich Collection, Evr. A 1.

The Derbent Torah is a leather scroll containing the entire Torah; it is described in detail by Pinner and by Harkavy and Strack.<sup>3</sup> Its height measures 64–65.5 cm, and that of the columns 51.5–57.5 cm., while the breadth of the columns is 10–13 cm. At the end of the scroll its height is 64 cm and the average breadth of Torah columns 10 cm. The epigraph is written in similar ink as the preceding Torah text after the final column and it measures 42.5 x 6–6.5 cm. (See Plates 1–3.)

Material description of the Derbent Torah by Olga Vasilyeva: Middle-brown leather, probably made from deer's skin. At the upper and lower edges some skins are of a darker shade (due to moisture?). The leather is soft, outside glossy, inside suède. At the end there are some holes. The ink is black; it seems that the glossy effect is due to the glossy parchment.

In *The Hebrew Scripts* by S. Birnbaum<sup>4</sup> the "Parsic Square" of the *Tiqqun sopherim* No. 205 offers the closest counterpart of the handwriting style of the Derbent Torah as far as both the general impression, the use of thickened horizontal strokes and numerous details are concerned; No. 205, the earliest example of the Parsic Square was written in Ispahan, Persia, in 1571. 'Aleph, beth, nun, resh, shin and the final *šade* are very similar in both texts and the same is true concerning the peculiar shapes of *taw* and the final *mem* mentioned by Birnbaum as the characteristic features. However, *pe* and *gimel* have different shapes.

In addition to the traditional characters added with *tagin*, i.e. *shin*, 'ayin, *šet*, *nun*, *zayin*, *gimel* and *šade* (cf. Talmud Babli, Men. 29b), three *tagin* occur on the top of the final *kaph* and *šade* and in certain cases two *tagin* on the top of any character. Since No. 205 in Birnbaum is not a Torah scroll, *tagin* are not used in it.

In the handwriting of the epigraph some characters ('aleph, lamed, etc.) have various, more or less cursive shapes. No exact counterpart is found in Birnbaum; nevertheless, No. 201 ("Kurdic Mashait", 1416 C.E.) offers parallel cases (esp. the cursive 'aleph), similarly Nos. 277 and 278 ("Syro-Sephardic Mashait" and "Egypto-Sephardic Cursive"). Karaite handwritings known to me deviate clearly from that of the epigraph.

## THE MADJALIS SCROLL

In the wall of the synagogue of Madjalis Firkovich found a longer version of the same text with additional explanations concerning its copying in 1513. At the beginning of *both* documents a number of words are vocalized with the compli-

<sup>3</sup> Pinner 1845: 5–7; Harkavy & Strack 1875: 175–181.

<sup>4</sup> I am very grateful to Mr. Pedro Gonçalves for this palaeographical comparison.

cated Babylonian pointing. Both texts were published and discussed not long after their discovery.<sup>5</sup>

The story related in these texts sounds fabulous in several respects, and it has been claimed that it is a forgery. In particular, this was the opinion of Abraham/Albert Harkavy and H. L. Strack. In 1875 in the *Catalog der hebräischen Bibelhandschriften der Kaiserlichen Öffentlichen Bibliothek in St. Petersburg* they wrote: “Ein starker Grund für die Annahme einer Fälschung liegt auch schon in dem Verschwinden der angeblichen Simchah-Urkunde ...”<sup>6</sup> – the *Simchah-Urkunde* refers to the Madjalis document; in *Altjüdische Denkmäler* (1876) this view is expressed by Harkavy in very harsh terms – and providing details which carry a degree of conviction.<sup>7</sup>

Harkavy was the head of the Jewish Department in the Imperial Public Library, i.e. the National Library of Russia of today, in St. Petersburg. Nevertheless, he maintained that he had never seen the Madjalis Scroll itself. Calling to

<sup>5</sup> *Zion*, I, pp. 138–142; Pinner 1845: 5–7; Pinsker 1860: xlii; Chwolson 1865: 54–68, 123–124; Harkavy & Strack 1875: 175–181; Harkavy 1876: 1–91.

<sup>6</sup> Harkavy & Strack 1875: 181.

<sup>7</sup> A few quotations from *Altjüdische Denkmäler* revealing the very bitter attitude adopted by Harkavy (1876: vi–vii):

“Zunächst muss ich erklären, dass der polemische Ton, der in dieser Abhandlung, was ich gern gestehe, oft scharf ausgefallen ist, durch die Eigenschaft der zu untersuchenden Materialien und die Art, wie man ihre Echtheit vertheidigt hatte, bedingt war. Einerseits musste ich mehr als zwei Jahre wie in einer Gespenstenwelt, wo es von Phantomen, Gaukelspielen und Zaubergestalten wimmelt, mich bewegen. Andererseits nimmt der Vertheidiger der Wahrhaftigkeit aller dieser fingirten und hervorgezauberten Documente mit seinem incommensurablen Standpunkte eine ganz eigenthümliche Stellung in der Wissenschaft ein, und kommt es bei ihm oft vor, dass er den Gegner gegen Windmühlen zu kämpfen veranlasst. Dies alles könnte auch einen Geduldigeren als mich aus der Fassung bringen und veranlassen der Erbitterung durch ironische oder scharf polemische Ausdrücken Luft zu machen. Möglicherweise war die aus einer Bekanntschaft mit Firkowitsch' Thätigkeit gewonnene Ueberzeugung, dass jene Thätigkeit die Herabsetzung meiner Glaubengenossen bezweckte und ihnen viel Schaden verursachte – ein Verfahren, das leider noch jetzt unter den Karäern und anderen Judenfeinden in unserem Vaterlande oft Nachahmung findet! – diese Ueberzeugung, sage ich, war vielleicht unvermerkt nicht ohne Einfluss auf meine Ausdrucksweise, um so mehr, da Hr. Chwolson jene Thätigkeit quasi-patriotisch zu idealisieren und zu sublimieren suchte. Jedoch bin ich mir bewusst, nicht geflissentlich ‘das Bild mit allzu starken’ Farben bestrichen zu haben.”

“... Zum Schluss noch ein Wort über A. Firkowitsch. ... Nach einer kurzen Zeit aber, wo aller Streit über die krim'schen Alterthümer hoffentlich ganz aufhören wird, wird man nicht umhin können, den Urheber des Streites milder zu beurtheilen. Denn im Grunde genommen entspringen doch alle seine Correcturen der Geschichte, ebenso wie sein gewaltiger Hass gegen die Rabbaniten, einem falsch verstandenen Patriotismus für die karäische Secte. Bei orientalischen Secten aber ist das Fälschen und Unterschieben von Documenten zur Verherrlichung ihrer Partei ganz in der Ordnung, und speciell die Karäer übten sich schon darin seit ihrem Entstehen, wie dies bereits in den ältesten Quellen bezeugt wird (vgl. ...). Man darf also Firkowitsch' Verfahren nicht nach unseren gewöhnlichen Begriffen von Moral und literarischer Ehrlichkeit schätzen.”

witness A. Th. Bychkov, the keeper of the Manuscript Department and vice-director of the Library, he stated in the *Catalog* that the document was not kept in the Library. Harkavy implied that the Madjalis Scroll was withdrawn by Firkovich himself since he was afraid of being denounced for forgery.<sup>8</sup>

However, the Scroll is mentioned in Goldenblum's inventory list<sup>9</sup> as "a scroll on stick". Nevertheless, it was not identified for many years, although in 1939 it was described by A. Ya. Borisov in his card catalogue of the New Series under number 91. In 1991 the Scroll was reported to be "recently rediscovered by V. V. Lebedev" in the same Public Library.<sup>10</sup>

In 1997 the Madjalis Scroll took its place in the "Odessa Collection" with the call number *First Firkovich Collection C-10* (formerly Evr. IV, New Series N 91). The scroll is rolled around a wooden stick; it measures 55 x 15 cm., while the size of the textual area is 49.5 x 11 cm. (See *Fig. 1-2*.)

Material description of the Madjalis Scroll by Olga Vasilyeva: The parchment is yellowish, stained (or with spots inside the skin, or both?), thick, rough, with unusual structure, made from the skin of an unidentified animal (not cow, goat, or sheep), greasy (therefore in some parts the ink is not glued and the three stamp imprints are quite invisible), some small holes. Perhaps the skin was prepared unskilfully in a place with no tradition of parchment production, or the craftsman did not have any good animal skin at his disposal. The ink is black (not ferro-gallic), with a glossy effect, unevenly distributed.

## DISCOVERIES AND ACQUISITIONS

In his memoirs, entitled *Abne zikkaron*,<sup>11</sup> Abraham Firkovich offers an exciting description of the discovery of the two scrolls. Unfortunately, *Abne zikkaron* has never been translated into any other language, something it really deserves.

The most central passages of his report are presented below; those between quotation marks are translated by me.

On his extensive travels in the Crimea and Caucasus in 1839–40<sup>12</sup> Abraham Firkovich spent a longer time, viz. June 27 – October 19, 1840, old style, in

<sup>8</sup> Harkavy & Strack (1875: 65): "Ich überlasse es Herrn Chwolson, in der genannten öffentlichen Bibliothek, das Document, welches nach der Versicherung des Hrn. Adjunct-Directors, A. Th. Bytschkow, weder in der Bibliothek aufbewahrt wird, noch da gewesen ist, aufzusuchen".

<sup>9</sup> F.946, Personal Archive of A. S. Firkovich, No. 917, National Library of Russia, St. Petersburg.

<sup>10</sup> Vihnovich 1991: 16.

<sup>11</sup> Vil'na 1872.

<sup>12</sup> Brief descriptions of this journey can be read in Firkovich 1863 and Vihnovich 1997: 104–107. Parts of Firkovich's report of the discovery of the Derbent Torah and the Madjalis

Derbent (Para. 88–108, pp. 51–68) where, among other things, he arranged a large-scale excavation of the hill of Tauriz Topası at the Gate of Kuba.<sup>13</sup> In his opinion, the local Jews were of Persian origin – they still spoke Persian (which refers to Judaeo-Tat).

On Wednesday, the 12th of Elul, August 28, 1840, old style, when Rabbi Eliahu was in a good mind, Firkovich was allowed to enter the synagogue of Derbent in order to search for ancient colophons (*rešimot*) in copies of the Sepher Torah. The beadle finally realized that an old text at the end of a Torah was a source of delight to Firkovich because of its great age and, as a consequence, he “took out from a shut cross-piece window (*me-ḥalon šqwf ’aṭum*) a very old Sepher Torah which was in a box (*tiq*) similar to the boxes of Siphre Torah found among the Crimean Karaites; the box, too, was very old.<sup>14</sup> He took it and laid it in front of us, and we opened [it] and looked at it, and, behold, it was [written] on completely unprocessed hides of deer or ram (*‘al ‘orot ha-šeba’im ’o ha-’ayalim*). We examined a number of instances in the *parašiyot* of the Torah, and when we saw exceptional (*meḥullafim*) *tagin* and strange characters (*’otiyot mešunnot*), I requested that the beadle take it to the house of the rabbi.”

Together they opened the scroll and found exceptional (*meḥullafim*) *tagin* and strange characters in certain passages for which no adequate explanation could be found. “And at the end of the sheet of hide (*yeri’a*) after the *Parašat Berakha* [i.e. at the end of Deuteronomy, T. H.] we found a very ancient colophon (*rešima*); the script was so dim that even after great difficulty we could read only a few passages. However, after cleaning the characters from the dirt we could read the colophon from beginning to end. Immediately we copied the colophon from it in the house of the rabbi, strictly sign by sign and word by word. And we asked the beadle to return the Sepher to its place” (pp. 60–61).

A month and a half later, on Sabbath, the 27th of Tishri, a group of elders came to Firkovich from *Manḡelis* (*m’ng’lyš*) – this (also *m’ng’lyš*) is how he used to spell the name of the village in Hebrew characters; on modern maps the place is called Madjalis, deriving its origin most probably from Arabic-Persian *maḡlis* and its plural *maḡālis*. The elders desired to see the colophon, which was copied from

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Scroll appear in Harkavy’s German translation in his *Altjüdische Denkmäler* (1876, pp. 8–9, 52–53).

It is worth mentioning that, as during all of his journeys, Firkovich had obtained open letters of credence granted by Russian high civil servants and officers; these documents lent him a high degree of authority among the various communities which he visited.

13 In his book Firkovich gives an extensive list of the findings which on the basis of their material are classified into five groups; the list and his conclusions occur in Para. 118, pp. 85–88.

14 The wooden box covered with brown leather and metal clasps (Firkovich calls it *’aron*, see below) is also kept in the National Library of Russia in St. Petersburg.

the end of the Sepher Torah in the house of Rabbi Eliyahu. After reading the text they said, "A large number of antiquities were found in our synagogue in the village of Yahud Kat (*yhw d kt*).<sup>15</sup> But our enemies stole our best property and they compelled us to move our lodgings from there to the village of Maṅgelis. And at the moment when our synagogue was under construction, Rabbi Ḥanukka ben Ḥayyim concealed (*gānaz*) the remaining remnants in the wall of the synagogue." Firkovich's landlord, R. Isaac *ha-melammed*, also heard their story, discussed with them in their native language, i.e. Persian (Tat), and declared that they were reliable men and their story was trustworthy (Para. 107, p. 67).

As a consequence of this story Firkovich rode on horseback to Madjalis a week later.<sup>16</sup> The Jewish population of the village were Rabbanites. Nevertheless, on the basis of their customs and habits Firkovich was soon convinced that the community had a Karaite background – he habitually searched for vestiges of a Karaite past among the Jews in these areas through which he deemed the Karaite faith to have reached the forefathers of Karaims.

When, as usual, Firkovich inquired about ancient books, the old *rav* Ḥanukka b. Ḥayyim told him that indeed during the construction of the local synagogue he had concealed (*gānaz*) a number of items written on parchment in the southern wall. At the synagogue he showed two alternative places, since he could not remember the exact spot (Para. 109, pp. 68–69).

On Saturday evening, October 19, Firkovich actively participated in the election of a new administrative body of the congregation and took care to write a new agreement concerning its duties. The agreement included an interesting historical introduction, a promise of obedience to Abraham Firkovich with a commitment to show him all ancient writings and books, to retain ancient "Sephardic" customs of the community as against the fashionable Ashkenazi novelties, and to establish a compulsory school system for boys between the ages of 7 and 13 etc.; at the end of the document there is a long list of the signatories<sup>17</sup> (Para. 110, pp. 69–74).

The day after the Sabbath, October 20, R. Ḥanukka b. Ḥayyim was called to the synagogue by the congregation to indicate once more the places where he had concealed the parchments: if he were to show the same spots again, it would mean that his words were true, and permission to search and to demolish the wall would

<sup>15</sup> *Dzhuud-Gatt* or *Derey-Gatt* ('Jewish Mountain Pass') at the river of Ullu-Chay located in the same Kaitagskiy *rajon* of which Madjalis is the capital city (Semjonov 1992: 10).

<sup>16</sup> Friday, 4th Heshvan, i.e. 18th October, 1840.

<sup>17</sup> The name of Abraham b. Israel, a leading person (*ha-Našī*) in the congregation, is often spelled with *waw*, i.e. *'brwm*, which is an indication of the local pronunciation of *qameš* as an [o] vowel, cf. similar Persian and Dagestanian reading traditions in Idelsohn 1913: 543, 721, 545.

be granted to Firkovich. Ḥanukka did indicate the same spots, and Firkovich was allowed to search in the wall:

“They brought an axe, and I took it in my hand and made a hole in the first place which R. Ḥanukka had shown, but nothing was found in it. Then Abiya b. Ephraim [a member of the congregation, T. H.] took the axe from my hand and made a hole in the wall in the second place which the *rav* had shown, and nothing was found in it either.” (Para. 111, p. 74.)

Firkovich and the congregation wished to stop the desecration of the synagogue at this level. However, “Abiya b. Ephraim did not obey them. He bowed down low and loosened yet one more stone, the size of three quarters of a cubit, took out the dry mud, clay and the smooth stones which were below them, and there he found a book scroll, a rolled folio (*megillat sefer gillayon megolal*). He opened it in front of them, and, because it was rolled, they thought that it was a Scroll of Esther (*sefer megillat Ester*) or an amulet or something similar. R. Isaac gave it to me in my hand. I took it and from the side of writing I cleaned off the mould with which it was moulded. On it there were many pale white bright (?) spots (*baharot baharot kahot lebanot*), and I cleaned off the fine dust which was stuck on it and I read it in front of them. And I looked at it, and saw that it was a copy of the colophon (*patšegen ha-rešima*) which was found at the end of the Sepher Torah which was found in the synagogue of the Holy Congregation of Derbend, with a small supplement, an explanation of the places by the first copyist. I was delighted as the finder of a great booty for two reasons: first, because my toil in the demolishing of the wall of the synagogue in two places was not in vain and vanity ... And the second reason was that I saw that in this scroll there were found still other reports in addition to the report at the end of the aforementioned Sepher Torah, as well as a supplement, an explanation of the matters which were inscribed in it. ... Then we returned with *Mar Abram ha-Naši* to his house, had lunch ... and I began to prepare a copy of the scroll for *Mar Abram ha-Naši* in haste in the darkness of the house following his advice, so that they would give me the original, which was to be brought to our holy congregations and be shown to them and thence be brought to the Society of History and Antiquities in Odessa, where it would be kept in the treasure of antiquities among the ancient items – as I had persuaded *Mar Abram ha-Naši* to do; and he agreed with my words on condition that I make a copy for them in square letters so that it would be easy for them to read it and that as a testimony I was to sign my name to it.” (Para. 111, pp. 74–75.)

To the rebellious members of the community in Madjalis<sup>18</sup> Firkovich declared that the fact that the people of Madjalis gave permission to search in the

<sup>18</sup> A long description of these matters on pp. 75–78; Firkovich maintains that he was considered to have engaged in espionage on behalf of Russia and thus he was in mortal danger.

wall of the synagogue and that they were sending the scroll to the place which is suitable for it, i.e. Odessa, indicated their loyalty to the Russian Empire. On the basis of this scroll and the colophon in the Sepher Torah of Derbent, it would be manifest that the Jews of Madjalis were a part of the Samaritan exile and of that of the First Temple, when they went to Persia; thence they came to Media after the relocation of a number of Israelites and from Median cities to the Crimea. Therefore they still spoke Persian. Since it would be generally known that they did not derive their origin from the exile of the Second Temple, the Christians and the Russian Empire would love them, since their forefathers were not connected with the struggles and conflicts of the Second Temple and their eyes did not see [them]. They would be granted similar peace and security as the Karaims enjoyed in the Crimea, Poland and Lithuania where the Karaims were not conscripted and did not pay the conscription tax; other occupational and autonomous favours would also be granted to them (pp. 77–78).

After this debate Firkovich was able to return to the house of Abram ha-Naši, where in a great hurry he made a copy of the scroll without any exactness, signed his name to it and gave it to Abram ha-Naši, telling him eloquently that the copy was made in a hurry, and that he was absent-minded and tired because of the quarrel. It was meant to be temporary so that the mob could not say that Firkovich had lied and that contrary to the agreement he had not left any copy of the scroll in Madjalis. After his safe return to Derbent and a moment of rest there, Firkovich swore that he would make an exact copy sign by sign and word by word in square characters, to collate it with R. Eliyahu and to translate it into the language of Ishmael (i.e. Arabic, the language of culture in Dagestan! T. H.). In addition, he promised to copy his Russian translation of the colophon found at the end of the Sepher Torah in Derbent. He would send both texts to R. Abram with tradesmen who came from Madjalis to Derbent; for his part R. Abram should then return the unreliable earlier copy (Para. 112, p. 78).

On October 25, at the request of Firkovich, the local “šar Ğemau Beg<sup>19</sup> ordered his scribe ‘Abd Rashid to write in his name a certificate (*ketab ‘edut*) of the story of the discovery in brief and in their language, describing how and by whom the scroll was found in the synagogue. He signed the report in the presence of the *platz mayor* (military town mayor) and the translator and set his seal to it and to the scroll, at its beginning and end, in order to corroborate the testimony (*le-yeter še’et ha-‘edut*).”<sup>20</sup> However, because of the political and military instability he had

<sup>19</sup> ġ<sup>’</sup>*mwb bæg*; my spelling follows that of Firkovich in Russian in *Severnaya pchela*, see note 26 below.

<sup>20</sup> The seal imprints are still visible in the scroll and in the picture enclosed in this article.



a few days earlier rejected Firkovich's request to go to search for antiquities in Yahud Kat<sup>21</sup> under the protection of a number of soldiers.

Thus the scroll remained in the hands of Firkovich. *Abne zikkaron* contains no explanation of how the Sepher Torah of Derbent, kept from 1863 on in the National Library of Russia,<sup>22</sup> passed from the congregation into the possession of Firkovich. However, knowing the policy of Firkovich in similar situations the following events were surely not without significance:

On the 15th of Heshvan, October 29, Firkovich was back in Derbent, where the scroll was read by the leaders of the congregation (Para. 116, p. 82). A letter sent by the congregation in Madjalis concerning the discovery of the scroll in the wall of the synagogue was read out with Persian translation to the congregation; the most educated pupils of R. Isaac came to read the scroll with him, and R. Isaac, having already familiarized himself with the text, explained to them the difficult passages (Para. 119, p. 89). The archaeological and other findings were also reported to General [Karp Karpovich] Fezi, who asked Firkovich to prepare a list of them<sup>23</sup> (Para. 117, pp. 83–84).

On 6th Kislev Firkovich organized a petition in the name of the Jewish community of Derbent and all Dagestan to Czar Nicholas the First. In it they applied for (1) the concentration of Jews in larger villages and cities where they would be free of their former "Tatar" masters, and (2) the appointment of R. Eliyahu b. Mishael (supported by Firkovich) as the leader of all Jews in Dagestan.<sup>24</sup> Neither this text nor other agreements prepared during this time on Firkovich's initiative in Derbent and Madjalis make mention of the share which Firkovich would receive as recompense for his efforts – in a number of similar acts (Hit, the Samaritans, the Karaites in Jerusalem) Firkovich's share consisted of manuscripts!<sup>25</sup>

In this sense it is interesting to read the next paragraphs (end of Para. 123 and 124, p. 91), which in Firkovich's book immediately follow the text of the petition: "On Friday, 16th Kislev, November 29 [1840], I took the Sepher Torah which I had found in the synagogue of the Holy Congregation of Derbend and the book-scroll which I had found in Mangelis in the wall of the synagogue, and with R. Isaac and R. Eliyahu and our landlord R. Isaac *ha-melammed* I went to the commandant Prince Butskiev. And both of them testified before him of the discovery of the Sepher Torah there and of the book-scroll (*megillat sefer*) which

<sup>21</sup> See note 15 above.

<sup>22</sup> Harkavy & Strack 1875, No. A 1, pp. 174–181.

<sup>23</sup> The list compiled by him appears on Para. 118, pp. 85–88.

<sup>24</sup> The complete text of the petition is to be found on pp. 103–104; the agreements also include long name lists of the local Jewish congregations.

<sup>25</sup> Cf. Harviainen 1999, note 1.

was found in Maṅgelis. The *platz mayor* Kondratev was present and he said, 'I know exactly about the discovery of this book-scroll, because I was at the house of Ğemau Beg, the master of the village, and he himself gave Firkovich a certificate of its discovery.' And he [Butskiev] gave me a certificate of the court of the commandant with the signature of both of them [i.e. Butskiev and Kondratev, T. H.] and the imperial seal." Three days later, on Monday, December 2, "we loaded our goods and the above-mentioned Books of Torah and the book-scroll in a coach and went to the local customs station, and they gave us an official certificate lest the customs station in Kizilyar place any hindrance in our way, because we had already paid the toll for everything in the customs station in Derbend." (Para. 123, p. 91.)

However, in his response to Mr. K. Gauzner in the journal *Severnaya Pchela* ('Northern Bee') in 1863 (no. 137, p. 549) Firkovich wrote more openly that

the rabbin Ilia Mizrachi and other respected elders of the community [of Derbent] finally convinced the local Jews [i.e. the Jewish congregation] to hand over [the Torah] by my hand to the Society of History and Antiquities in Odessa in honour of its head, the reigning Czar, who at that time was the Crown Prince. I had no other possibility to acquire the manuscript and thus to rescue it from unavoidable disaster.<sup>26</sup>

Firkovich's craving for manuscripts was inextinguishable throughout his life.

## BABYLONIAN VOCALIZATIONS

The next day, i.e. Tuesday, the 20th of Kislev, 3rd of December, 1840, old style, Firkovich left Derbent for Qal'a (*Kala*). The purpose of this trip was to give the master of the village of Madjalis, *šar* Ğemau Beg, a copy of the Madjalis scroll "which I had copied sign by sign, word by word together with the points which are found on the first lines, indeed the book-scroll itself and also the translation into the language of Lezgi [i.e. the local Turkic, T. H.] as I had assigned to the congregation of Maṅgelis."

Here I call attention to the mention of "the points which are found on the first lines", i.e. the Babylonian vocalization signs, which do not appear in any published version of the text of the scroll, although they can still be seen in the document. In Qal'a Firkovich met with Ğemau Beg, who promised to pass on the copy to Abram ha-Naši in Madjalis<sup>27</sup> (Para. 125, p. 94).

<sup>26</sup> Firkovich 1863. For this reference, too, I am very grateful to Ms. Olga Vasilyeva.

<sup>27</sup> In this context there is an important word list of the "Lezgi" and Chechen languages which Firkovich compiled in Qal'a the night before; Mr. Kari Valtonen (Institute for Asian and African Studies at the University of Helsinki) is preparing a detailed linguistic study of this material.

As for the (complicated) Babylonian pointing, one year earlier Firkovich himself had discovered in the synagogue of Chufut Kale the first text of this type known in Europe; it is the famous Codex Babylonicus Petropolitanus of the Latter Prophets. He describes his find in the following words: "I became afraid of the view, and I was also very shocked by the terrible sight of their forms [i.e. pointing signs, T. H.], because I said, 'Perhaps my eyes see strange things like the eyes of a drunkard because of a bodily ailment which has affected the light of my eyes as a result of the great toil and stress produced by the study of the living among the dead'" (Para. 33, p. 14).

In 1840 no scholarly study of the Babylonian pointing was available, and it is very interesting to note that Firkovich did not use the pointing as proof of the age or the provenance of the documents. Today we know that the Babylonian pointing was employed in the areas of modern Iraq and Iran. Iran may also be the most probable place of origin of the Derbent Torah.<sup>28</sup> The palaeographical comparison points in this direction (see the chapter The Derbent Torah above), and Iran is the main country with which the Mountain Jews of Dagestan maintained uninterrupted contact.

## HOME

In possession of the Sepher Torah of Derbent and the Madjalis Scroll, as well as a great number of other antiquities, Firkovich directed his steps from Dagestan to the Crimea the following day, i.e. December 4, 1840.

In Aleksandrov (south-east of Stavropol) on the 3rd of Shevat [January 14, 1841] Firkovich met with the local community of the Subbotniks<sup>29</sup> whose customs and practices (the customs of slaughter taught by a Karaite *ribbi* in the Crimea, of lighting no light on the Sabbath, of staying at home during the whole Sabbath reading the Bible aloud, of reciting prayers in Slavonic, "mezuzot" etc.) he describes extensively (Para. 129–130, pp. 96–99). To them Firkovich showed the Derbent Torah; instead of the Torah itself the Subbotniks kissed its case (*'aron*, cf. note 14 above) in deep awe (pp. 96, 99).

Similarly, on February 4 the Karaite congregation in Kaffa "rejoiced seeing the ancient Sepher Torah with the marvellous colophon at its end" (Para. 132, p. 101). In Simferopol on February 12 Firkovich took "the Sepher Torah which I had found in Derbend and the book-scroll which I had found in Manğelis and the

<sup>28</sup> According to Harkavy (1877: 88, note 1), Firkovich wrote in his "eigenhändige Epigraphensammlung" that the Derbent Torah was recently brought by the Damascene Mr. Mordechai Yerushalmi from Persia to Derbent; the destiny of this collection is not known to me.

<sup>29</sup> Their leaders were Matvei Matveyevich and Stepan Andreyevich.

certificates and I went to the house of the Governor Matvei Matveyevich Vorontsov,<sup>30</sup> who was delighted to see them (Para. 132, p. 101). Similarly, General Vladislav Maksimovich Kniazhevich and his wife admired the exceptional, untreated quality of the hides of the Derbent Torah after “having a look at it from beginning till end” as well as the scroll, “when I read to them in Russian the incident of the three men sent by the ruler of Rus two years before they [i.e. Russians] accepted the Christian faith” (Para. 132, pp. 101–102).

On Thursday, 3rd Adar, February 13, 1841, Firkovich arrived at his home in Eupatoria. Here, too, his friends asked him immediately to show them the marvelous finds, the Derbent Torah and the Madjalis Scroll. Firkovich took them from the couch, “and seeing them all, the people rejoiced and wondered greatly and exceedingly” (Last Para. of Book 133, p. 102).

### THE TEXTS IN THE DERBENT TORAH AND THE MADJALIS SCROLL

In this article I display photos (see Plates 1a, 2a, 3a; *Fig.* 1–2) and transcriptions of both texts as well as my English translation of the longer version, i.e. the Hebrew text of the Madjalis Scroll. Both texts contain a rather large number of passages which have faded, as one can see in the photographs. In the transcriptions the passages which have totally faded occur in square brackets in the textual form in which they appear in the earlier publications, while braces surround passages where I have been able to identify the characters so some extent. The underlining is identical with that of the document and it indicates the passages which are lacking in the Derbent Torah. In the translation the indentations are intended to render the complicated syntax more comprehensible; they have no counterpart in the original text.

With the exception of the additions in the Madjalis Scroll the contents shared by the two versions are almost identical. Nevertheless, there are two deviations:<sup>31</sup>

#### Derbent

line 22–23: yrw-šlm

48: [wbswlkt wb'wn kt šbnw]

#### Madjalis

line 34: yrwšlym

46: wbswl kt 'bryt šbnw wb'wn kt

<sup>30</sup> Obviously the name is a mixture of the names of the governor general Mihail Semenovich Vorontsov and the civil governor Matvei Matveyevich Muromtsev.

<sup>31</sup> Cf. Harkavy 1876: 55, note 1.

## TEXTS IN HEBREW

## EPIGRAPH IN THE DERBENT TORAH

National Library of Russia, St. Petersburg, I Firkovich Collection, Evr. A 1.  
 Hight of the Scroll 64 cm, breadth of a column of the Torah text in average 10 cm.  
 Colophon 42.5 x 6.5 / 6 cm

- |    |                                |    |                            |
|----|--------------------------------|----|----------------------------|
| 33 | הטא להם חסד בהחלצם             | 1  | אני יהודה בן משה הנקדן     |
| 34 | למלחמה {חושים} עם בני          | 2  | מזרחי בן יהודה הגבור       |
| 35 | מדי היותם קרובים לארץ          | 3  | איש נפתלי ממשפחת           |
| 36 | השיטים {להלחם} עם תלמירא       | 4  | השלמי {אשר גלתה עם}        |
| 37 | המלכה לנקום דם אביו} ממנה      | 5  | הגולה אשר גלתה עם}         |
| 38 | ובהתגברם על חיילותיה           | 6  | הושע המלך {ישראל עם}       |
| 39 | {תפשוה בחיים} ויביאוה          | 7  | שבטי שמעון ודן וקצת        |
| 40 | {לפני כמביס מלכם ויהרגה}       | 8  | משפחות שאר {ש}בטי          |
| 41 | {בדם אביו ויכבוש את} ארצה      | 9  | ישראל {אשר} הגלה הצר       |
| 42 | {ויבקשו ממנו ויתנה} לאחזה      | 10 | שלמנאסר משומרון ובנותיה    |
| 43 | {להם וישם בה נציבים} וישובו    | 11 | לחלח היא בחלח וחבור היא    |
| 44 | {בשלום ויקחו ישר}אל ומדי       | 12 | חבול והרא היא היראת        |
| 45 | {השבים ממלחמה נשיהם וטפם}      | 13 | וגוזן היא גוצבא {מדי}נות   |
| 46 | {ורכושם ויתישבו שם} בכורשון    | 14 | גלות בני ראובן וגד וח{צי}  |
| 47 | {שהציב אביו כורש לו שם} יד     | 15 | מנשה שגלם פלנאסר           |
| 48 | {ושם ובסולכת ובאון כת שבנו}    | 16 | והושיבם שם ומשם נפצו       |
| 49 | {ויקראום כרים ובסלע היהודים}   | 17 | על פני כל ארץ המזרח עד     |
| 50 | {אשר בצרו ובעיר ספרד על}       | 18 | סינים ' בשובי משוטט        |
| 51 | {ים השיטים ששטים ומשיטים}      | 19 | בארץ גלותם ומהתהלך         |
| 52 | {מקניהם לעיר מטר}כה היונית     | 20 | בגרות כרים המדינה          |
| 53 | {עיר מגורי אבי בין גלות טיטוס} | 21 | במושבות זרע משפחות         |
| 54 | {ובבואי לעיר מולדתי פה ש}ומכי  | 22 | ישראל ויהודה גלות ירו/     |
| 55 | {עיר מלכות דריוש המדי שירון}   | 23 | שלם שיצאו {לעזרת אחיהם}    |
| 56 | {בשנה חמישית למלכות}האדון      | 24 | מעריהם במלחמת שומרון       |
| 57 | {כוסדורי הפרסי} {אלף} {ושלוש}  | 25 | וגדליה בן המלך אחז {בראש}ם |
| 58 | {מאות לגלותנו} {הגהתי} זה ספר  | 26 | ללא הועיל כי מלאה סאתם     |
| 59 | התורה למר מרדכי {ה}בר          | 27 | {ותפ}שם חיים שלמנאסר       |
| 60 | {בן שמעון שקבל} חברות יצו      | 28 | קודם לכדו את שומרון        |
| 61 | {יזכה להגות בו הוא וזרעו עד}   | 29 | וישלחם לפנים גולה ל{ערי}   |
| 62 | {עולם סימן} טוב אמן            | 30 | מדי לה{רחיקם מעל אחיהם}    |
|    |                                | 31 | ויהיו שם עד ימי כמביס      |
|    |                                | 32 | בן כורש המלך עה והוא       |



## MADJALIS SCROLL

National Library of Russia, St. Petersburg, I Firkovich Collection C-10 (formerly Eyr. IV, New Series N 91). Size of the Scroll 55 x 15 cm; size of the the textual area 49.5 x 11.5 cm.

## Round stamp

- 1 אני ישועה בן אליה מבעלי מקרא מכפר מגגליס בבואי לכפר
- 2 טג בסר הקרובה לעיר דרבנד מצאתי בידי מ יוסף בן בכשי
- 3 נוסח מסעות מ יהודה בן משה מז[רחי] שהעתיקו מ אברהם
- 4 בן שמחה הספרדי מסוף ספר {תורה} [ישן בעיר חאמ]דן/
- 5 והעתיקתי לני { בשנת חמשת אלפים {ומאתים {ושבעים וש}לושה}
- 6 לבריאה ביום שלישי לחדש סיון ערב חג השבועת/

## Vacat

- 7 אנכי שלומי אמוני ישראל אברהם בן מ שמחה מעיר
- 8 ספרד במלכות אחינו גרי הצדק כזריים/בשנת אלף
- 9 ושש מאות ושתים ושמונים לגלותנו היא שנת ארבעת
- 10 אלפים ושבע מאות וששה וארבעים ליצירה לפי המנין
- 11 שמונים אחינו היהודים בעיר מטרכה/בבוא שלוחני נ[ש]י[א] ראש
- 12 משך מעיר ציוב לאדוננו דויד הנשיא הכורי בדבר הדת
- 13 לחקירה. שולחתי בשליחות ממנו לארץ פרס ומדי לקנות
- 14 ספרי תורות ונביאים וכתובים קדומים לקהלות כזר/
- 15 ובעילם היא איספחן שמעת[י] {שיש} בשושן היא חאמדן
- 16 ספר תורה קדמון ובבואי שם הראוה לי [אחינו בני] {ישראל}
- 17 בקהל הגדול ובסופו כתוב ספור מסעות כ יהודה המגיה
- 18 והודיעוני שאביו משה כ הנקדן היה הבודה הראשון
- 19 נקודות ושעמים להקל ל{ת}למיד{י}ם למידת קריאת
- 20 המקרא בהם/ובקשי מהם שימכרוה וימאנו למכרו לי/
- 21 והעתיקתי הספור לי מלה במלה כי יקרו לי דברי המגיה מאד/
- 22 והוספתי בו באור לדבריו הסתומים הידועים לי באמת/
- 23 {זכותו תגן עלי} {ויחזירני} {ה לביתי בחיים ובשלום}אמן.

## Vacat

- 24 אני יהודה בן משה הנקדן מזרחי בן יהודה הגבור איש
- 25 נפתלי ממשפחת השלמי {אשר גלתה עם} הגולה אשר
- 26 גלתה {עם הגולה אשר} הגלתה עם הושע המלך ישראל
- 27 עם שבטי שמעון ודן וקצת משפחות שאר שבטי ישראל
- 28 אשר הגלה הצר שלמנאסר משומרון ובנותיה לחלה היא
- 29 בחלה וחבור היא חבול והרא {היא} היראת וגזון היא

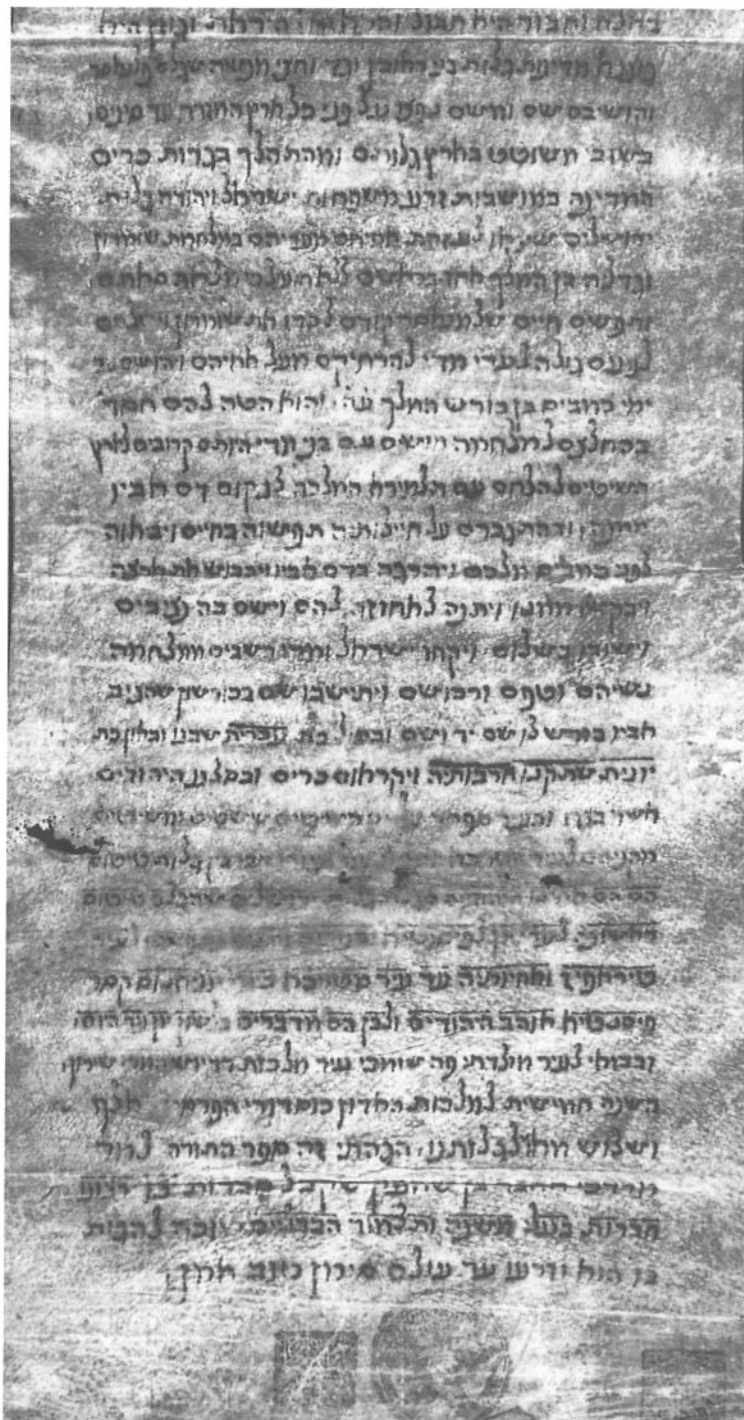


Fig. 2



- 30 גוצבא מדינות גלות בני ראובן וגד וחצי מנשה שגלם פלנאסר  
 31 והושיבם שם ומשם נפצו על פני כל ארץ המזר{ח} עד סינים/  
 32 בשובי משוטט בארץ גלותם ומהתהלך בגרות כרים  
 33 המדינה במושבות זרע משפחות ישראל ויהודה גלות  
 34 ירושלים שיצאו לעזרת אחיהם מעריהם במלחמת שומרון  
 35 וגדליה בן המלך אחז בראשם ללא הועיל כי מלאה סאתם  
 36 ותפשם חיים שלמנאסר קודם לכדו את שומרון {ויש}לחם  
 37 לפנים גולה לערי מדי להרחיקם מעל אחיהם ויהיו שם עד  
 38 ימי כמביס בן כורש המלך עה/והוא הטה להם חסד  
 39 בהחלצם למלחמה חושים עם בני מדי היותם קרובים לארץ  
 40 השיטים להלחם עם תלמירא המלכה לנקום דם אביו  
 41 ממנה/ובהתגברם על חיילותיה תפשוה בחיים ויביאוה  
 42 לפני כמביס מלכם ויהרגה בדם אביו ויכבוש את ארצה  
 43 ויבקשו ממנו ויתנה לאחוז{ה} להם וישם בה נציבים  
 44 וישובו בשלום ויקחו ישראל ומדי השבים ממלחמה  
 45 נשיהם וטפם ורכושם ויתישבו שם בכורשון שהציב  
 46 אביו כורש לו שם יד ושם ובסול כת עברית שבנו ובאון כת  
 47 יונית שתקנו חרבותיה ויקראום כרים ובסלע היהודים  
 48 {אשר בצרו ובעיר ספרד על ים השיטים ששטים ומשיטים}  
 49 {מקניהם לעיר [מטר]כה} היונית עיר מגורי אבי] בין גלות טיטוס  
 50 הם הם {אחינו} {היהודים} {סגלת גלות} {ירושלים שהגלם טיטוס}  
 51 ראשונה לערי יון לפיסנטיא ובנותיה {ומשם נתפשטו לעיר}  
 52 טיראפיז ואחיותיה עד עיר מטרכא {בימי יוליאנוס קסר  
 53 פיסנטיא אוהב היהודים ולכן הם מדברים בלשון יון עד היום/  
 54 ובבואי לעיר מולדתי פה שומכי עיר מלכות דרוש המדי שירון/  
 55 בשנה חמישית למלכות האדון כוסדורי הפרס{י} אלף  
 56 ושלוש מאו לגלותנו/הגהתי זה ספר התורה למר  
 57 מרדכי החבר בן שמעון שקבל חברות יצו רצונו  
 58 חברות בעלי משנה ותלמוד הבבליים/יזכה להגות  
 59 בו הוא וזרעו עד עולם סימן טוב אמך.

Square	Round	Square
stamp	stamp	stamp

### Translation of the Madjalis Scroll<sup>32</sup>

I, Isaiah, son of Elijah, from Ba'ale Miqra ['adherents of the Bible', i.e. Karaites] from the village of Maṅgelis, when I came to the village of Tag-Basar, near the city of Derbend, I found in the hands of *Mar* Joseph, son of Bachshi (*bkšy*), an account of the journeys of *Mar* Jehuda, son of Moshe, Mizraḥi ['the Oriental'] which *Mar* Abraham, son of Simha, ha-Sapharadi [i.e. from Kertch?] had copied from the end of an old Sepher Torah in the city of Hamadan. And I copied [it] for myself in the year 5273 after the creation, on Tuesday / the 3rd / the 6th<sup>33</sup> of the month of Sivan, the eve of the Feast of Shavuoth:

I, one of those who are peaceable and faithful in Israel,<sup>34</sup> Abraham, son of *Mar* Simha, from the city of Sapharad [i.e. Kertch?], in the kingdom of our brethren, the pious proselytes, the Khazars (*kzryym*), in the year 1682 after our exile, i.e. in the year 4746 after the creation according to the chronology which our brethren the Jews apply in the city of Matarchah,

when the emissaries of the Chief Prince of Meshech<sup>35</sup> came from the city of Šiyob<sup>36</sup> to our lord David, the Khazarian Prince, for an examination of religious matters,

I was sent by him [i.e. the Khazarian Prince David] on a mission to the land of Persia and Media to purchase ancient Books of the Torah, Prophets and Writings for the congregations of Khazaria.

In Elam, i.e. Ispahan, I heard that in Shushan, i.e. Hamadan, there is an ancient Sepher Torah, and when I went there, our brethren the Israelites showed it to me in the great congregation. At its end there is written the story of the journeys of the venerable Jehuda the Proof-reader. They [i.e. the Jews of Hamadan] told me that his father Moshe, the venerable ha-Naqdan [i.e. the Vocalizer], was the first

<sup>32</sup> A number of earlier identifications of place-names (Pinner 1860; Harkavy & Strack 1875; Harkavy 1876) are offered after the names in brackets with a question mark.

<sup>33</sup> As one can see in the photo, the first *šin* has a hook belonging to the letter *lamed* in the left corner. Firkovich (1872: 83) considers that this is a case of haplography, where the original text referred to Friday (*be-yôm šiššī*), the 3rd day of the month of Sivan. Chwolson (1865: 56, note 1) believes that the date must be emended by adding *he*, i.e. number 5, after *šelšī*; thus the date would be Tuesday, the 5th day of the month of Sivan.

<sup>34</sup> An adaptation of 2 Sam. 20:19.

<sup>35</sup> For *nešī' roš mešek we-tubal* (as well as Gog and Magog), cf. Ezek. 38:2– and 39:1. As a rule this expression has been interpreted as a reference to Russia and Moscow, cf. Harkavy 1876: 62–64.

<sup>36</sup> According to Harkavy (1876: 64), Šiyob with a reference to Kiev derives its origin from a manuscript of *Patšegen ketab ha-dat* by Kaleb Afendopolo.

to invent the vowel and accent signs (*nequdot u-ṭe'amim*) in order to make it easier for students to learn how to read the Bible.

I begged them to sell it to me, but they refused to sell it to me. And I copied the story for myself word by word, because the words of the Proof-reader were invaluable for me. I added an explanation of his obscure words which indeed were known to me. May his [i.e. Jehuda ha-Naqdan's] merit protect me, and may the Lord return me to my home alive and in peace! Amen!

I, Jehuda, son of Moshe ha-Naqdan [i.e. the Vocalizer], Mizraḥi ['the Oriental'], son of Jehuda ha-Gibbor [i.e. the Mighty], of the tribe of Naphtali, from the clan of Shillem<sup>37</sup>

which [family] went into exile with the exiled people who went into exile with the exiled people<sup>38</sup>

who went into exile with Hoshea, King of Israel, together with the tribes of Simeon and Dan and some other clans of the other tribes of Israel,

whom the enemy Shalmaneser<sup>39</sup> carried into exile from Samaria and its villages to Ḥalaḥ

– that is Baḥlaḥ –

and to Ḥabor

– that is Ḥabul –

and to Hara<sup>40</sup>

– that is Herat –

and to Gozan

– that is Goṣna –

to the provinces of exile of Reuben, Gad and the half-tribe of Manasseh

whom Pilneser carried into exile and settled

there;

thence they dispersed to all of the land of the East as far as Sinim (i.e. China)<sup>41</sup> —

when I returned from roving about in the land of their exile and from wandering in the lodging-places<sup>42</sup> of the province of the Carians (*krym*),<sup>43</sup> in the settlements of the offspring of the clans of Israel and Judah, the exiled people of Jerusalem,

<sup>37</sup> Cf. Gen. 46:24; Num. 26:49; 1 Chron. 7:13.

<sup>38</sup> A case of dittography.

<sup>39</sup> 2 Kings 17:1–6; 18:11.

<sup>40</sup> Mentioned only in 1 Chron. 5:26.

<sup>41</sup> Cf. *me-'ereṣ sinim*, Isa. 49:12.

<sup>42</sup> Jer. 41:17.

who had gone out from their cities to help their brethren in the war of Samaria, when Gedaliah, son of King Ahaz, was leading them, unsuccessfully, because their [sin] burden was fulfilled; Shalmaneser captured them alive, before he seized Samaria, and he sent them far away into exile, to the cities of Media, in order to keep them apart from their brethren; there they were until the days of Cambyses, son of King Cyrus – peace be upon him; he treated them with kindness, when they in haste equipped themselves for war together with the Medes – because they lived near the land of the Scythians (*šyṭym*) – against Queen Thalmira

in order to take revenge on her for the blood of his [i.e. Cambyses'] father; and when they [i.e. the Medes and the Jews] had overpowered her female soldiers<sup>44</sup>, they captured her alive and brought her before their King Cambyses, and he killed her for the blood of his father and occupied her country;

they [i.e. the Median and Jewish soldiers] asked him, and he gave it [i.e. her country] to them for a possession and stationed there military posts, and they returned in peace; the Israelites and Medes, when returning from the war, took their wives, children and old people and their property and they settled there in Kherson (*Kwršwn*),

where his [i.e. Cambyses'] father Cyrus had erected a monument to himself

and in the Hebrew Sol-chat (*swl kt*), which they built, and in the Greek On-chat (*ʿwn kt*), the ruins of which they repaired, and which (cities) they called the Crimea (*krym*), and in Sela' ha-Yehudim [i.e. Chufut Kale, 'Jewish Rock/Castle'] which they fortified and in the city of Sapharad [*sprd*, i.e. Kertch?] on the Sea of the Scythians (*šyṭym*) –

who sail (*šṭym*) and carry their cattle / trade in sailing-ships (*mšyṭym*) – to the Greek city of Matarcha [Taman?], the dwelling-place of my father among the people exiled by Titus;

they are our brethren, Jews, extraordinary people exiled from Jerusalem, whom Titus carried into exile first to the Greek cities, to Byzantine and its daughter-cities;

and in the days of Julian, Emperor of Byzantine, the lover of the Jews, they spread thence to the city of Tiraphiz [Trapezunt?] and her sister-

<sup>43</sup> Cf. Babylonian *Karsa*, Old Persian *Karkā*, south-west of Asia Minor, see HAL, *sub kārī*. In this context, *krym* cannot refer to the Crimea, as it does later in line 47 of the same text, where the new settlements of the Jewish soldiers receive the name of the old country.

<sup>44</sup> Two *yods*; thus hardly '*ihre Schaaren/Truppen*' ('her troops') as interpreted by Chwolson (1865) and Harkavy (1876).

cities until the city of Matarcha; therefore they speak the Greek language to this very day;

and when I came to the city of my birth, here in Shomchi [i.e. Shemaha near Baku?], the imperial city of Shirwan of Darius the Mede, in the fifth year of the government of Lord Chosdori, the Persian, in the 1300th year of our exile, I proof-read this Sepher Torah for *Mar Mordechai he-Haber*, son of Simeon, who had accepted the status of being a *haber* – may God protect him and may His will preserve him – the status of being a *haber* of the Babylonian adherents of the Mishnah and Talmud. May he and his offspring attain the merit of studying it for ever! Under a fortunate sign! Amen!

\* \* \*

As mentioned above, Harkavy maintained that the Madjalis Scroll had never been kept in the Imperial Public Library in St. Petersburg, and its disappearance is one of his arguments against the epigraph of the Derbent Torah.

Besides the absence of the Madjalis Scroll and his deep personal antipathy towards Firkovich, the main arguments of Harkavy against the authenticity of the epigraph in the Derbent Torah consist of an examination of the geographical and ethnographic names (Herat, Land/Sea of the Scythians, Sela' ha-Yehudim, Solchat, On-chat, *krym*, Sepharad/Sephord, Shirwan) as well as personal names (Talmira, Kambis/Cambyses, Gedaliah son of King Ahaz, Chosdori, Moshe ha-Naqdan and his father Jehuda ha-Gibbor) found in the text.<sup>45</sup> According to him, the Tatars (and Turkic peoples in general) had settled in the Crimea not earlier than the 13th century AD and thus all the Turkic names previous to that period are forgeries; Arabic forms of names (as Herat) are impossible in 604, a number of names (Scythians - *šytym*, Talmira, Chosdori; Moshe ha-Naqdan and his father Jehuda ha-Gibbor) are adaptations from mediaeval Jewish chronicles or late Karaim traditions;<sup>46</sup> in addition, there are differences between copies of the Madjalis Scroll, which was not kept and had never been in the Imperial Public Library, and thus, for instance, it was impossible to verify the nature of the differences or of the ink.<sup>47</sup> The abbreviations used in the texts are also too recent.<sup>48</sup>

In 1839 Firkovich was sent to search for material which would indicate how long the Karaites / Karaims had been living in the Crimea or in other areas of the Russian Empire. Naturally, it was important for him and his community to find as

<sup>45</sup> Harkavy 1876: 29–45.

<sup>46</sup> Harkavy 1876: 29–45.

<sup>47</sup> Harkavy 1876: 65–67.

<sup>48</sup> Harkavy 1876: 47–48, 67.

historic roots as possible; these questions and the replies to them were an integral part of the attempts of the Karaims to attain a more autonomous position in comparison with the Rabbanite Jews.<sup>49</sup>

It is evident that the texts dealt with in this article were very welcome for the purposes of Firkovich and his supporters. In a surprising way they granted the Crimean Karaims an apparent history which extended to the years of the Persian king Cambyses (530–522 BC), on the one hand, and those of Julian the Apostate (361–363 AD), on the other. This need combined with the questionable names and other details referred to above renders Harkavy's claims of forgery easily admissible; for him the inscriptions of the tombstones in Chufut-Kale described by Firkovich offered additional material for these suspicions.<sup>50</sup>

However, we may ask whether a fake produced for such purposes should not lend itself more easily and clearly to an unambiguous interpretation. Why were e.g. Pilneser, the apocryphal Gedaliah, son of King Ahaz (of Israel), Queen Thalmira, her Amazon soldiers and their fate, brotherhood-in-arms of the Medes and exiled Jews or the "etymology" of the name of the Scythians (root *šyʔ*) necessary in documents intended to convince the Russian authorities of the exceptional ethno-religious and independent characteristics of the Karaites in Eastern Europe? The collecting activities of Firkovich have been described by Harkavi and by numerous others following him as parts of a comprehensive, well-organized and progressive intrigue which was aimed at the displacement of the Rabbanite Jews. Following this line of reasoning every item in the huge Firkovich Collections is suspect. Nevertheless, to my knowledge there is no single case of forgery which can be confirmed as being produced by Firkovich himself – a number of questionable corrections in colophons etc. may have been made equally well by sellers of antiquities in order to increase the prices paid by Firkovich.<sup>51</sup>

In this vein a third option may be put forward, viz. the text might be understood as part of the local folklore, as an explanation of "who we Jews are here in Dagestan and the Crimea, and how we came to be here". In this case a great number of the dates, names and suspicious events could be styled as parts of a national saga where the historical ideology of past greatness, real or imaginary, is central, while the details enjoy a merely secondary role.

Even the first description of the text published in 1840 in the journal *Zion* prompted a desire for further studies of this very exceptional document. At

<sup>49</sup> Cf. Miller 1993, Part One, especially pp. 43–48.

<sup>50</sup> Harkavy 1876 (zweiter Theil): 97–228, 251–288. However, one hundred relief squeeze copies of these tombstones in the Crimean graveyards were rediscovered in the National Library of Russia in St. Petersburg in November 2000, cf. Vasilyeva, this volume.

<sup>51</sup> Cf. Harviainen 1991: 179–180, 187 (notes 5–6); Beit-Arié 1998: 89–91.

present, 160 years later, I wish to confirm this need on a renewed basis and to issue an invitation and challenge to any who are interested to investigate the subject further.

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