

How Did Abraham Firkovich Acquire The Great Collection of Samaritan Manuscripts in Nablus in 1864

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It goes without saying that research in Samaritanology is based on two primary sources: (1) Samaritan manuscripts which are located in more than seventy public libraries worldwide and (2) the contemporary Samaritan community numbering about 570 persons. Half of the Samaritans live near their sacred site, Mount Gerizim, in the vicinity of the West Bank city of Nablus, and the other half have since the middle of this century resided in Holon, near Tel Aviv. In addition, two secondary sources are available, viz. archaeological findings and non-Samaritan literature.

In spite of the fact that remarkable progress has been achieved in Samaritan studies, especially during the last few decades, we are still unable, for instance, to give an exact figure for the number of extant Samaritan manuscripts.¹ Yet it seems reasonable to assume that there are about three thousand manuscripts either complete or incomplete.² One of the main features of the Samaritan collection acquired by Abraham Firkovich in St. Petersburg is its fragmentary state. Samaritan items consisting of a single folio or of a few folios are a common phenomenon. It is clear how many Samaritan manuscripts are in the hands of the Samaritans today. However, an estimation of 150-200 manuscripts, the lion's share being modern copies of liturgies, would not be too far from the truth.³

The Acquisition of Samaritan Manuscripts

The transfer of Samaritan manuscripts from several Samaritan centers in the Middle East, such as Damascus, Gaza, Cairo and principally Nablus, to the West, has been carried out over the last four centuries. Guillaume Postel (1510-1581) was in 1537, as far as we know, the first European to acquire a Samaritan manuscript.⁴ Postel was followed by a long line of Western travellers and scholars who have attempted to acquire manuscripts either through the Samaritan centres or by correspondence with Samaritan priests. It suffices to mention the following sample names which are known in the history of Samaritan studies: Joseph Scaliger (1540-1609), Nicolaus Claude de Peiresc (1580-1637), Archbishop James Ussher (1581-1656), Pietro delle Valle (1586-1652), Edward Pococke (1604-1691), Job Ludolf (1624-1704), John Usgate, Henri Gregorie, Bishop of Blois (1750-1831), R. Huntington (1637-1701), Ulrich Jaspers Seetzen (1767-1811), Thomas Marshall (1621-1685), M. Corancoz, S. De Sacy (1758-1838), B.

¹ See A. D. Crown, *A Bibliography of the Samaritans* (ATLA Bibliography Series 32, 2nd ed., London 1993); Sergio Noja, "The Last Decade in Samaritan Studies" [A. D. Crown (ed), *The Samaritans*, J. C. B. Mohr (Paul Siebeck), Tübingen 1989, pp. 802-813]; R. Macuch, "The Importance of Samaritan tradition for the hermeneutics of the Pentateuch" [A. Tal & M. Florentin (eds.) *Proceedings of the First International Congress of the Societe d'Etudes Samaritaines, Tel Aviv, April 11-13. 1988* Tel Aviv University 1991, pp. 13-31].

² Cf. A. D. Crown ["The morphology of paper in Samaritan manuscripts: A diachronic profile". *Bulletin of the John Rylands Library of Manchester (BJRL)* 71:1, 1989, p. 71]: "The total corpus of Samaritan manuscripts is about 2,000- most of these are modern, and not all are dated"; *idem*, "Studies in Samaritan scribal practices and manuscript history: I Manuscript prices and values" (*BJRL* 65:2, 1983, p. 72): J. P. Rothschild, "Samaritan manuscripts: A guide to the collections and catalogues" (*The Samaritans*, ed. By A. D. Crown, 1989, pp. 771-794), this tentative and alphabetical list of libraries includes 2,580 manuscripts, the highest number -977 (!)- being in St. Petersburg; Binyamim Tsedaka, "The correlation between the state of the Samaritan manuscripts and the state of the Samaritan community: past and present" [J. P. Rothschild & G. D. Sixdenier (eds.) *Etudes samaritaines Pentateucque et Targum, exegese et philology, chroniques, Actes de la table ronde: "Les manuscrits samaritains. Problemes et methods"*, Paris 7-9 octobre 1985, Louvain Paris 1988, p. 291]: "Eventually, the sale of the Samaritan manuscripts to earn a little money depleted the libraries in Nablus and the thousands of manuscripts that they held were reduced to mere tens."

³ Cf. Haseeb Shehadeh, "Nablus collection of manuscripts", in Alan D. Crown, Reinhard Pummer, Abraham Tal (eds.), *A Companion to Samaritan Studies* (J.C. B. Mohr, Tübingen 1993), p. 164.

⁴ See J. G. Fraser, "A checklist of Samaritan manuscripts known to have entered Europe before A. D. 1700" (*Abr-Nahrain* XXI, 1982-83), pp. 16, 27. About G. Postel, see for instance W. J. Bouwsma, *Concordia mundi: The Career and Thought of Guillaume Postel* (Harvard 1957).

Kennicott (1718-1783), J. H. Petermann (1801-1876), J. Mills, J. Rosenberg, P. Kahle, J. A. A. Montgomery, W. E. Barton, E. K. Warren, M. Gaster.⁵ The intensive quests for Samaritan manuscripts made by these scholars and others that we have not mentioned have merely resulted in sporadic acquisitions.

In the light of Samaritan letters to Europe, it is safe to note that Samaritans were careful to send manuscripts, particularly of their version of the Torah, to their “imaginary brothers” in Europe. Two items of evidence are in order. In a letter dated 1672, Marhiv be Jacob tells of the visit of Robert Huntington to Nablus was sent to them by their brothers in England until he had shown his ability in writing in Samaritan script and made mention of Mount Gerizim. A complete copy of the Samaritan Hebrew Torah was given to Huntington for the sake of the “British Samaritans”, even though such a deed through the agency of an uncircumcised person is considered blasphemy by the Samaritans.⁶ The second piece of evidence is supplied by a letter sent by the High Priest Salama ben Ghazal (Tabya) to De Sacy in 1820. In this letter it is obvious that the Samaritans were very firm in their position not to send a copy of their Torah to their “fellow-worshipper in Paris’ without sufficient proof of their genuineness. First of all, they needed to receive a complete copy from them and a letter in Hebrew “loaded with verses and strong evidences from the Noble Hebrew Torah.” Without fulfillment of this condition, the Samaritans saw no justification for complying with the request, no matter how much money was offered. “Life in this world cannot be a substitute for the hereafter,” concludes the Priest.⁷

In view of the facts stated above, it is certainly surprising that Abraham Firkovich (Even Reshef, 1787-1874) managed to acquire a considerable number of Samaritan manuscripts during his short stay in Nablus in 1864.⁸ A. E. Harkavy (1835-1919), probably the first scholar to examine the collection in question, writes about Firkovich: “...the collector during his stay in Nablus and Egypt completely ransacked the Samaritan Genizoth (that is to say, the garrets and cellars of the synagogues whither their worn-out books were conveyed).⁹ In 1870 the Russian Minister of Public Worship purchased Firkovich’s Samaritan collection from him for 9,500 roubles. Since then the collection has been located in the Imperial Public Library in St. Petersburg, subsequently the Saltykov-Shchedrin Public State Library of Russia. Firkovich’s Samaritan collection consists of 1,350 manuscripts¹⁰ which comprise 18,258 sheets of parchment or paper. In addition, there are 28 scrolls of parchment as well as a number of inscriptions on stone, bronze and silk.¹¹

⁵ See Phillippe de Robert, “La naissance des etudes samaritaines en Europe aux XVI^e et XVII^e siecles”, and Mathias Delcor, “La correspondance des savants europeens, en quete de manuscits, avec les samaritains du XVI^e au XIX^e siecles” in J. P. Rothschild & G. D. Sixdenier (eds.) *Etudes samaritaines....*, pp. 15-26 and 27-43, respectively; S. De Sacy, “Correspondance des samaritains de Naplouse, pendant les annees 1808 et suiv, (*Notices et Extraits des manuscrits de la Bibliotheque du Roi et autres Bibliotheques* 12, 1831, pp. 1-235).

⁶ -----[Hebrew quote, See published article TSUE]---originally in Samaritan script, see De Sacy, *Correspondance.....*, pp. 169-170.

⁷ -----[Arabic quote, See published article TSUE]----- *ibid.* p. 132.

⁸ In 1864, the Samaritans numbered 130, see Johann Kranzle, *Reise nach Jerusalem* (Augsburg 1868), S. 269.

⁹ See “Appendix I. The collection of Samaritan MSS. at St. Petersburg” in: John W. Nutt, *Fragments of a Samaritan Targum* (London 1874; repr. Hildesheim 1980), p. 153. It might be worth observing that the afore-mentioned appendix is still the only survey of Firkovich’s Samaritan collection available to scholarly circles.

¹⁰ To be precise, 1341 manuscripts, since the following nine manuscripts included today in Firkovich’s Samaritan collection derive their origin from other sources: Sam I 22 and Sam A 12 (Archimandrite Antomin); Sam I 28: Sam II 14 and Sam II 15 (Tischendorf); Sam II 64 (Nikolshi); Sam VII 70, Sam IX 376 and Sam XIV 46 (new photo copies donated by Z. Shunner to the library in the 1970s).

¹¹ For details, see L. H. Vil’sker & V. V. Lebedev, Самаритянские документы Государственной Публичной библиотеки имени М. Е. [See original published article for Russian entries.]..... 1992), pp. 12-20), and Hasseb Shehadeh, “Din we-hesbon risoni ‘al ‘osef kitbe hay-yad has-somroniyyim be-Sant-Peterburg” (*A. B. Samaritan News*, 591-594, 20.8.1993, pp. 19-31). Cf. the two statements about Firkovich: “He collected many thousands (emphasis added) of Samaritan manuscripts and, in 1859-1860, visited the Community at Shechem” and “The Collection of Samaritan manuscripts put together by Abraham Firkovicz from manuscripts purchased and purloined from the Samaritans” [Phillippe de Robert and the editors, respectively, in Alan D. Crown, Reinhard Pummer, Abraham Tal (eds.), *A Companion to Samaritan Studies* (Turningen 1993), p. 95].

The current state of Samaritan studies does not enable us to draw even general conclusions concerning the importance of the Samaritan manuscripts in St. Petersburg. These manuscripts have become accessible to Western scholars only in the last few years and the task of evaluation will be a desideration for many years to come.¹²

In the following an attempt is made to present all the information available regarding the story of the acquisition of Samaritan manuscripts by Abraham Firkovich. Our material is mainly derived from Firkovich's letters kept in his personal archive in the Library mentioned above.¹³

Reports by Samaritans on Abraham Kirkovich

It seems that the Samaritans were not to eager to go into the topic of Firkovich's acquisition of their manuscripts. Some contradictory data are known to us. Paul Kahle, who met the High Priest Jacob ben Aaron the Levite (1838-1916) in Nablus in 1908, reports on the priest's reaction towards Firkovich: "He spoke with great indignation of the man and the way he treated the samaritan priests, taking great quantities of valuable MSS without paying an adequate price."¹⁴

The afore-mentioned priest was a very prolific scribe with a clear and fine handwriting, a distinguished chanter and an experienced bookseller since his youth. His grandson, the High Priest Jacob ben 'Uzzi ben Jacob (1899-1987), tells also that his grandfather copied more than two thousand (!) books in Hebrew and Arabic and sold most of them to Samaritans and others, became High Priest while he was young (in 1866!), and used to travel to different towns in Palestine in order to sell books.¹⁵

In another composition penned by the same priest, Ben 'Uzzi, we read that the great *dasht* (geniza) assembled by the High Priest 'Iman ben Salama ben Ghazal ben Ishaq ben Salama¹⁶ (1809-1875) was sold wholesale to a Jewish scholar named Rabbi Abraham. The sum paid for his collection of parchments was not more than one hundred dinars.¹⁷ The author adds that the Jewish Karaite Hakham came to the Samaritans, deceived them and bought all the *dasht* found in their synagogue, paying the lowest price. The Samaritans were obliged to sell the collection in order to pay their taxes to the Turks and thereby to avoid imprisonment or confiscation of their property. Moreover, this cunning Hakham tried to tempt the Samaritans to join the Jewish Karaites so that the two

¹² In his short preface to *The Samaritans* edited by A. D. Crown (1989), the president of the Society for Samaritan Studies, Professor Andre' Caquot concludes: "Nevertheless, everything may be called into question or improved on points of detail by the discovery of unpublished texts or manuscripts which may yet come to light, for hundreds of these still remain inaccessible to scholars of Samaritanology."....and in spite of all epochal progress in Samaritan studies in the last three decades we shall never be able to say the last word about many problems without access to the Leningrad collection" (*Proceedings of the First International Congress....* Tel Aviv 1991, p. 30). The group Sam X in Firkovich's Collection containing the largest extent number of Samaritan ketubboth in the world, which was catalogued and published by the late L. H. Vilsher and published in 1992, has served as the main part of Reinhard Pummer, *Samaritan Marriage Contracts and Deeds of Divorce* (Vol. I. Wiesbaden 1993).

¹³ Φ. 946, [See original published article for Russian entries.].....
The staff of the Manuscript Department of the national Library of Russia in St. Petersburg deserve our deepest thanks for their friendly helpfulness in assisting us with our work in the Library.

¹⁴ P. Kahle, *The Cairo Geniza*, 2nd ed. (Oxford 1959), p. 6. A positive attitude is expressed in a letter sent by this priest to Firkovich in April/May 1864, MS Sam. X, 94, published by B. Tsedaka in A. B. Samaritan News, 546-547 (12.10.1991), pp. 38-39. The priest begins his letter with a song of praise to Firkovich and expresses his willingness to co-operate with him; as an exchange of charity money (sedada), Jacob would be ready to send him parts of an old and small Torah in secret with David the Karaite.

¹⁵ See the handwritten book: Jacob ben 'Uzzi (Shafiq) ben Jacob: *Wasiyyati wa-tarikh hayari* (Nablus 1974), pp. 42-59. A photocopy of the book is at our disposal. In the book mentioned in note no. 17, the number of the books copied by Jacob ben Aaron is more than one thousand (!). p. 69.

¹⁶ Z. Ben Hayyim indicates (without mentioning his source) that this priest certainly assisted Firkovich in purchasing the Samaritan manuscripts found today in Leningard, see *The Literary and Oral Tradition of Hebrew and Aramaic Amongst the Samaritans*, Vol. I (The Academy of the Hebrew Language, Jerusalem 1957, in Hebrew, p. 200. 'Imran was a partner in a business in Jerusalem in the middle of the 19th century, see MS Sam. XIV 39 (national Library of Russia.) For Jacob ben Aaron, David ha-Levi and 'Imran ('Amram) ben Salama in the letters of Abraham Firkovich, see below, Letters II, V, IX and XI.

¹⁷ Jacob ben 'Uzzi, *Kitab al-Samiriyyin...* (Nablus 1960, p. 68; a copy of this handwritten book is found in Y. Ben Zvi's library in Jerusalem under the number 7036): -----[Original Arabic from article not shown here: Editor of theSamaritanUpdate.com.]

communities would believe in both Gerizim and Jerusalem. The Samaritans turned down this wicked proposal with strength and pride, expressed distaste for the man and hastened to expel him from their area.¹⁸

It is worthy of note that the same Jacob ben Aaron the Levite was the writer of the manuscript Sam. XIV 39 in the Firkovich Collection in St. Petersburg. This one-page manuscript (Hebrew and Arabic in Samaritan characters) consists of a Samaritan decision to fulfill the duty of holding a public prayer (with a *minyana*- ten adult males) in the morning and in the evening. The decision was taken in Nablus on 28 *dhu-l-higga* 1280 A.H.= 4 June 1864 A.D. in the presence of *Bash Hakkam 'Abram Firkosh* (sic!).¹⁹ Needless to say, this decision does not fall into line with the Torah. Therefore the agreement which carries the names of twelve Samaritan priests and dignitaries remained merely on paper.

In the Samaritan chronicles as the New Chronicle or Chronicle Adler (copied in 1900 by Murjan ben As'ad al-Danafi) a positive point of view concerning Firkovich is also presented. Here we note that Firkovich knew how to gain the sympathy of the Samaritans by daily participation in their prayers. He personally accepted the Samaritan version of the Pentateuch and intended to unite the Samaritans and the Karaites.²⁰

Letters written by Abraham Firkovich

According to the investigation made by Viktor Lebedev, Abraham Firkovich, during his long journey in the Near East, returned from Syria to Jerusalem on 22 December 1863.²¹ In March 1864 he met the famous traveler and book-collector Jacob Sappir, from whom he bought a number of Yemite books and manuscripts. According to Lededev, between the 3rd and 18th of April Firkovich, together with his grandson Samuel and a Karaite from Jerusalem. David ha-Levi, stayed in Nablus (Sikem), where he acquired the great collection of Samaritan manuscripts. Firkovich gives a short description of his findings in the letters which he sent to his son-in-law Gabriel ben Simeon Firkovich.²²

The letters received by Abraham Firkovich as well as the copies of letters sent by him kept in his Personal archive constitute an important source for the clarification of his activities as a leading personality among Karaite communities in Eastern Europe and the Near East, as a traveler and successful collector of antiquities, manuscripts and books- in total, his collections in the National Library of Russia contain approx. 15,000 items.²³

A number of letters written by Abraham Firkovich deal with his attempts to obtain Samaritan manuscripts. The most informative ones among them are nos. 605 and 607, which in fact include copies of several letters. In the following, we present parts of eleven different letters which shed light on the history of the Samaritan collection of Firkovich.

I On 25th Shevat 5624, i.e. 2 February 1864, Abraham Firkovich wrote in a letter in Jerusalem the following lines to his son-in-law, Gabriel ben Simeon Firkovich (letter no.605, 11r-11v):

And now, when the funds are coming into my hands, I wish to inform you, my dear son, that it is in my mind to travel to the city of Sikem to see the Samaritans. Perhaps I can also buy something there. And I have already sent my beloved friend Mr. Shabbetai Levi of Jerusalem to Sikem to see the people there- he is their companion- in order to investigate and examine and find out whether there is any hope of finding antiquities

¹⁸ -----[Original Arabic from article not shown here: Editor of theSamaritanUpdate.com.]

¹⁹ Cf. *A.B. Samaritan News*, 544-545 (7.10.1991), p.4, and 621-622 (4.10.1994), p. 47. The date (June 4) is incorrect, since Abraham Firkovich returned from Cairo to Jerusalem not earlier than June 6, see below Letter IX.

²⁰ A. Adler & M. Seligsohn, "Une nouvelle chronique samaritaine", *Revue des Etudes Juives* 46, 1903, p.143.

²¹ Travelling via Odessa and Istanbul Firkovich arrived at Jaffa on board the Russian steamer *Oleg* on 3 October 1863 and two days later he reached Jerusalem by camel caravan (letter no. 606, 5v-r in the Personal archive of Firkovich kept in the national Library of Russia, see below, note 23). From Jerusalem he travelled via Jaffa and Beirut to Aleppo, where he arrived on 11 November; in Aleppo Firkovich was able to obtain a great number of antiquities (idem V. V. Lebedev, [Russian text, not shown here ESU.] . Later Firkovich visited Alexandretta, ancient Antioch, where he also found interesting objects (דברי הפין), Alexandretta once again, Beirut and Damascus (letter no. 607, 4v).

²² Lebedev 1990, pp. 37-38: these short notes derive their origin from letters nos. 607 and 609 in the Personal archive of Firkovich.

²³ [See original published article for Russian entries.].....

there. If so, I shall certainly also go there, and from there I shall travel on to Haifa or Jaffa and from there to Alexandria in Egypt. However, if after his return Shabbetai of Jerusalem says that there is no hope left finding anything there, I shall travel with my wife and my grandson R. Samuel from here to Alexandria via Jaffa and from there to Cairo (לאלקהרא) to see our brethren the Karaites for Purim.

II A couple of weeks later, on the 10th of Adar Rishon²⁴ (17 February 1864), Abraham Firkovich complains to Gabriel Firkovich of not having sufficient money to pay his debts in Jerusalem; otherwise he would already be in Egypt. However, this delay seems to turn out well, because Shabbetai Levi has returned with good tidings from Nablus (letter 605, 11v-12r, Jerusalem, Plate 1):

In the above-mentioned letters²⁵ I informed you that I have sent Mr. Shabbetai Levi of Jerusalem to the city of Sikem to scout and investigate whether among the Samaritans there is hope of finding books, ancient manuscripts, and obtaining them from them with money. And if I am assured that there is and that I shall be able to acquire them, I shall travel there later on myself. He lingered there a fortnight and last Friday he returned with the good tidings that although the High Priest, 'Amram by name,²⁶ will not sell a single leaf- since they are holy in their eyes- he nevertheless found "Ahuzzath his friend,"²⁷ Jacob by name,²⁸ who engaged in stealing from their sanctuary (מביה המקרש שלהם). However, he already knows the value of the antiquities- he has experience, he has become rich with them, since in previous years he has stolen one book and brought it to Jerusalem to Mr. Yehezkel Serkez (צרכז, Circasse?) of Jerusalem for sale. However, he did not want to buy it. The local Protestant advised him, and he travelled to London and sold it there for a high price. Therefore at present he also requests a high price for a complete book of the Pentateuch written on leather in the holy language in Samaritan characters. In any case, I asked my beloved friend Rabbi David ha-Levi of Jerusalem, the General Commissioner (הפקיד הכולל)- may God preserve him-, and on Sunday this week he wrote to the above-mentioned Jacob that he would take that book together with whatever else he is able to acquire and bring them here, and, God willing, I shall buy them from him. With the help of God, David, Shabbetai and Simhah the Levites, his friends and companions, will agree upon a reasonable price, i.e. neither high nor low.

After this passage Firkovich proceeds to deal with plans by Lithuanian Karaites to move to the Crimea; this idea had not met with any objections from the governors in Vilna and Kovno (Kaunas).

III On Thursday, the 9th of Adar Sheni (17.3.1864, no. 605, 18r), Abraham Firkovich mentions in the copy of his letter to Gabriel Firkovich from Jerusalem that he has found interesting books (ספרי הפיץ) in the city, and also "from Sikem they have brought [something] and these became the property of Abraham; a list is to follow." He will travel "from here to Sikem and thence to Jaffa and from Jaffa to Egypt." Therefore he asks Gabriel to mail as much money as possible, since plenty of antiquities (קדמוניות) are to be found in Egypt, but the value of them is already known. He had earlier received 250 pounds sterling from Gabriel.

IV In a letter dated Sunday, the 19th of Adar Sheni (27.3.1864, no. 605, 21r) Firkovich mentions an official letter signed by the deputy of Sultan Abdul Aziz to be delivered by Firkovich to Pasha of Damascus. The letter was mailed to him by the Karaite Community in Constantinople, and Pasha was supposed to help him to meet with success in all of his efforts.²⁹ With the help of this *firman*, Firkovich was indeed allowed to visit the Temple Mount in Jerusalem

²⁴ The figure indicating the day is unclear in the copy (יויי ?).

²⁵ Obviously in Letter 1 on 2 February 1864, Abraham Firkovich writes at the beginning of Letter II (11v) that he has sent a reply to Gabriel's latest letter in two copies, one to St. Petersburg and the second one to Switzerland.

²⁶ *Alias* 'Imran ben Salama ben Ghazal ben Ishaq ben Salama, see above.-----.

²⁷ אחוזת מרעהו (Gen.26:26).

²⁸ This Jacob al-Shelabi (al-Danafi, b. 1829), a rich merchant and adventurer, was the first Samaritan to visit Europe (London) in the middle of the 19th century, where he sold Samaritan manuscripts. One of these was British Library OR 2688, the oldest extant Arabic translation by Abu Sa'id of the Pentateuch (13/4 A.D.); BL OR 1450 and BL OR 1446 were sold by al-Shelabi on 3 November 1877, Bodley MS Sam. E 8 (ff. 2, 3, 6) in 1861 and Bodley E. 10- a book of prayers- was granted by al-Shelabi, "the leader of the Samaritans in Nablus," to Lord F. Cunningham in remembrance of their encounter in Mount Charles in 1870. See E. T. Rogers (ed.), *Notices of the Modern Samaritans. Illustrated by Incidents in the Life of Jacob esh-Shelaby* (London 1855; repr. Of the 1862 edition, London, Kegan Paul International, 1989).

²⁹ כתב הפקידות השלוח לי מקה"ק קוסדינא בחתומת משנה למלך עבדול עזיז י"ל לתת אותו בידי לידי הפשא אשד בדמשק שיעזור לי בכל מה שיצטרך.

four times during the same month; with great pride and joy he describes the glorious company (officials of the Pasha, the Consul of Russia, Karaite commissioners from Hit) and the details of the area in several letters.³⁰

V Two days later, on Tuesday the 21st of Adar Shenit (29.3.1864, no. 605, 22r), Firkovich is able to report to Gabriel Firkovich that his plans to receive Samaritan manuscripts have materialized. The copy is written in a hasty cursive:

In my letter of the 25th of Shevat (i.e. 2.2.1864) I informed you, my son, that I had sent Mr. Shabbetai Levi of Jerusalem to the city of Sikem to scout and to investigate whether among the Samaritans there is hope of finding books, ancient complete or defective manuscripts which have been kept in *genizot*. And now I can inform you that Shabbetai succeeded in inciting Jacob al-Shelabi (who has visited London and sold there the Torah which Yehezkel Serez of Jerusalem did not want to buy, as I told you), and the afore-mentioned Jacob- totally in secret because of his fear- brought plenty of valuable articles from their High Priest: twenty-two pieces of quires and sheets of the Torah in various ancient versions and also pieces of Samaritan prayers and their rhymed hymns, twenty-two in number never before seen by the eye of a European scholar or of a Jewish or Karaite sage, neither known nor even heard of, and it is the Book of Chronicles of the Samaritans, which was copied secretly in my honour from a very old book of chronicles kept in their sanctuary. And my beloved friend David he-Hakham Levi of Jerusalem, the General Commissioner- may God preserve him- has already read it to the end, since it is written in Ishmaelite Arabic script. For all of them I gave thirty English pounds of gold, each of them 115 *groush* (גרשוות ונתתי) 115 בסך כל אי בסקי זהב אנגליס כל אי בסך 115 גרשוות ונתתי).³¹ This is a great discovery, but it is not correct in my eyes when I read that they deny all the miracles performed by the righteous prophets- peace be upon them- after Moses our Teacher- peace be upon him.”

VI The first letter letters of No. 607, 1r-3r, is addressed to ~~Gabriel ben Simeon Firkovich~~ Zadok Jerushalmi and Abraham ben Jehuda. Now both Abraham Firkovich and his grandson are in Nablus, in the congregation of the Samaritans (פה עיד שכם בקהל השומרונים), where the letter is dated Friday, the 1st of the month (לראש חדשים), i.e. 8.4.1864.³² At the beginning of the letter, Abraham Firkovich describes the fulfillment of his *neder* vow: after returning from Aleppo to Jerusalem, he has restored the Karaite temple (בית אלהינו) and the community centre in the city; it was hoped that numerous Karaites would immigrate to Jerusalem.

In Nablus, Abraham and Samuel Firkovich ascended Mount Gerizim, “to see their sanctuary (בית מקדשם) on it”, on Thursday the 30th³³ of Adar Shenit (i.e. 7.4.) which for the Samaritans was the 1st day of the New Year (א' לראש חדשים) and “a day of joy and rejoicing here in the city of Sikem.” On the mountain they saw the place of the ruined sanctuary where the Samaritans perform the Passover each year.

שיצטרך.

³⁰ E.G. letter 607: 5v (Cairo, the 15th of Elul, i.e. 16 September 1864): “among all the masses of the Rabbanites, till this very day no Jew has entered the site of the temple with the exception of the famous Sir Moses Monefiore.” As a consequence of his visit to “the courts of the Temple”, now each Karaite- in contrast with Jews- was allowed to enter the site, since in the *firman* granted by the Sultan there was written in particular: *hakham* Abraham Firkovich *qara'i*, and it is evident that the Karaites are not under the same legislation as the Rabbanites (שהקראים אינם תחת הזכרון אשר) (לרבנים ונודע; לרבנים זכון; from Russian 3aKOH).

³¹ 30 x 115 *groush* = 3450 *groush* = 172.50 roubles in 1864, approx. = 2,500 US\$ in 1993. One rouble in silver equals to 20 *groush* (piaster). To the Karaites in Hit (67 persons) Firkovich promised 25,000 *groush* for the migration to Jerusalem and to their two commissioners he gave 5,000 *groush* for traveling expenses on their way home, see Harianen 1991/2 (see above, note 30), pp. 181-182. Also this comparison indicates that in fact Firkovich did not “spare silver and gold”, when he paid the Samaritans for the manuscripts.

³² In contrast with the Jewish (and Samaritan) calendar, the Karaite Adar Shenit consisted of 30 days in 5624/ 1864; this fact must be borne in mind in conversion of the dates into the European ones.

³³ אבי אבישע (בד"ה אבישוע) בן פינחס בן אלעזר בן אהרן הכהן להם רצון יהוה וכבודו כתבתי ספר הקדש (חסר ויו) בפתח אהל מועד בהר גריזים בשנת שלשה עשר לממלכת בני ישראל ארץ כנען וגבולותיה סביב אודה את יהוה.

Note that ארץ גריזים is written as two separate words in contrast to the Samaritan tradition.

As to the discussion of this *tashqil* passage in the *Sefer Abisa'*, see Francisco Perez Castro, “Das Kryptogramm des >Sefer Abrischa'< (*Supplements to Vetus Testamentum*, Vol. VII, Leiden 1960, pp. 52-60; repr. In *Die Samaritaner*, hrsg. Von Ferdinand Dexinger und Reinhard Pummer, Wege der Forschung, Bd. 604, Darmstadt 1992, pp. 202-229); the “cryptogramme” was published by Vilmar in 1865 in a rather similar form.

After describing once again his visit to the site of the sanctuary in Jerusalem, Firkovich gives a short, enumerated report (אודיע... בראשי פרקים לבד) of what he has found and seen among the Samaritans in Nablus: (1) Their house of prayer in which the Ark of the Law stands by the eastern wall, since Mount Gerizim stands east of the city. (2) Three Books of Torah are kept in it; in the oldest of them there is a text composed in the final characters of verses and lines (אותיות סופי הפסוקי והשורות): "I, Abisa' ben Phinhas ben El'azar ben Aharon the priest- the favor of the LORD and his glory be on them- wrote this Holy Book at the entrance of the tent of meeting on Mount Gerizim in the thirteenth year of the dominion of the Children of Israel over the Land of Canaan with its boundaries all around. I praise the Lord." However, this Torah is written on parchment, which was invented in the city of Pergamon shortly before the time of Jesus, son of Mary. Therefore Firkovich cannot accept the date and he considers it to be approx. 2,000 years old;³⁴ in addition, the biblical chronology does not accord with that date. (3) Prayer-books (*siddurim*) for the whole year composed by their sages. (4) Books of the Pentateuch in numerous versions; some of them include one page of the *Miqra* and one page of Arabic translation, and one of them includes one page according to their version and one according to the version of the whole of Israel in order to visualize their differences.³⁵ (5) Commentaries on the Torah. (6) Book of precepts with arguments against the Rabbanites. (7) Books of astronomy and New Moons.³⁶ (8) Books of chronicles from the first Adam till the present day and a book on the genealogy of the priests. (9) Manuscripts on ancient parchment dealing with traditional wisdom (). "From all of these it becomes evident that there were also sages, writers and authors among them."

The letter ends in an annoyed tone: "Nevertheless, in spite of all my attempts to receive a complete object possessed by them, even with a great sum of silver and gold, I have not succeeded till this day, not a bit, but still there is hope, and I shall not spare silver and gold."³⁷

VII On Friday the 22nd of the first month, which is the 6th month of the Israelites in the year 5624, i.e. 29th April 1864, Abraham Firkovich, again in Jerusalem, addressed a letter to his son-in-law Gabriel Firkovich and Gabriel's wife Malkah, his beloved daughter (no. 607, 3r-3v). At last, Firkovich has received a great amount of Samaritan material and he is busy with the preliminary classification of his treasure (אוצר). Two days earlier he had composed a first report of his affairs for Gabriel but had not succeeded in dispatching it on the steamer. In order to avoid additional loss of time, which would prevent him performing his essential work, he is sending the previous letter together with this one. His main work, which will demand at least seven days, is caused:

by the great treasure, the *geniza* treasure which I bought at the Samaritan congregation (במקהלת השומרונים); with great effort I was able to cram it into four big boxes, a load for two strong young asses. The things are ancient, the minority of them on parchment- these are pieces of Books of Torah and pieces and bundles (חבילות) of the books of the Pentateuch on parchment- and the majority of them on very old paper- these are pieces and bundles of prayer *siddurim* for the whole year composed by their sages in the holy tongue, Arabic and Aramaic, and pieces and bundles of commentaries on the Torah, books of precepts and astronomic literature which, as a tradition, has been transmitted to them from Moses our Teacher according to their words, for which they find support in the verse "Thus Moses declared to the people of Israel the appointed feasts of the LORD",³⁸ and pieces and bundles of songs of singers, and pieces and bundles of their book of chronicles. All of the commentaries and chronicles are in the Arabic language and all of the other books in Samaritan letters and in the holy tongue. Nothing of this sort of luxury has yet appeared in Europe with exception of the book of the Pentateuch and some pieces and bundles of the Torah.- Ever since the day we returned from the city of Sikem, i.e. Monday, the 11th of Nisan (18.4), with the exception of the Sabbath and

³⁴ מסבה היותו נכתבת על קלף (פירגאמין) הפירגאמיגט המצאו במדינת פירגאם לא בזמן רחוק מאד לפני ישוע בן מרים לכן אני סובר שהוא כבן אלפים שנה .

³⁵ קצתם עמוד אי מקרא עמוד אי הרגום ערבי ועוד אי מהם עמוד לפי הגסס שבידם ועמוד אי הנסח שבידי כל ישראל כדי שיראה ההפרש בין שניהם .

³⁶ ספרים בתכונה והוצאת המולדות .

³⁷ אמגם בכל השתדלותי להוציא דבר שלם מתחת ידם אפילו בכסף וזהב סך רב לא הצלחתי עד היום אך קצה מן הקצת יאולם עדין יש הקיה וכסף וזהב לא אחשוב .

³⁸ Lev. 23:44 (Revised Standard Version).

the first and last days of the Feast of Unleavened Bread, I and my beloved grandson רש"ף (R. Samuel Firkovich) have been working at this job, separating the wheat from the chaff and unifying each thing in its kind with respect of its quantity and quality.

Furthermore, we learn from the letter that because of this work Firkovich had to postpone his voyage from Jaffa to Alexandria. In Alexandria he planned to send a message to his eldest son, Joseph Solomon, in order to receive 2,000 roubles in the currency he is able to find most rapidly, since in Jerusalem he has borrowed 40,000 *groush*³⁹ for the purchase of (Samaritan) treasure and a marvelous stone mentioned by him in an earlier letter.

VIII In a letter addressed to Abraham the Egyptian of Jerusalem on Sunday the 8th day li-sfirah (scil. *safirat ha-omer*), the 24th of Nisan (i.e. 1.5.1864), written mostly in the Karaim language,⁴⁰ Abraham Firkovich mentions his loan of 2,000 roubles and then proceeds to describe his efforts among the Samaritans in Sikem:

But even with a high price I have not succeeded until this day; nevertheless there is still hope, and I shall not spare silver and gold. Now we have news ... because with the mercy of the Lord- may his Name be blessed- I have bought from the Samaritans a great treasure, not before seen by the eye of a European sage, for 40,000 *groush* (שמרוגולר דן סטינאלמישים קירק ביג גרושא). This will annoy the learned collectors of this time.

IX In the middle of May, Abraham and Samuel Firkovich had left for Egypt where they were able to uncover a great number of valuable manuscripts in the *geniza* of the old Karaite *kenesa* in Cairo. After three weeks, on 6 June Abraham Firkovich returned to Jerusalem to his young wife Hannah. In Cairo, he left his grandson Samuel to clear the *geniza* of the Karaite synagogue, "which is very large, and he has no other help besides two *shammashim* of the community."⁴¹

In Jerusalem, Abraham Firkovich wrote a report on his achievements to Gabriel Firkovich; the letter occurs in three different versions in the copy collection of his letters (No. 608). The copies were written on Wednesday 3 Sivan, Friday 5 Sivan, and Thursday 11 Sivan in the year 5624, i.e. 8th, 10th, and 16th June 1864. Here follows a translation of the passage dealing with the Samaritans (paragraph *daleth*), the copy written on 11 Sivan:

Samaritans. Their Book of Chronicles is already copied (נדפס) in accordance with your words, but all of their books have not been copied, only those which were stolen from the *bet ha-geniza* by Jacob al-Shelabi through whom even I attained valuable objects before I bought the *geniza* together with the Book of Chronicles. However, what was in the *geniza* in the valley (בעמק) no hand had touched, and therefore I did not take pity on the purse (לא חסתי על הצרור)⁴² because I said: "There is hope that there will be found objects which have not been uncovered up till now." And indeed, I did find some; I saw, during my examination there, the bundles (חבילות) of the *geniza*, numerous bundles of treatises and *novellae* (וחדשים חבילות מהבורים)⁴³ on the Torah, sciences such as astronomy, and their wars with the Rabbanites concerning sentences, commands and customs. And why should I prolong the matter; let us wait, and we shall see what their end will be.

³⁹ 2,000 roubles in silver in 1864 equals approximately 30,000 US dollars in 1993.

⁴⁰ No. 607, 3v-4r. We are grateful to Mr. Harry Halen for fruitful collaboration in reading the letters written in Karaim Turkic.

⁴¹ No. 608, paragraph *beth*.

At the end of the summer Abraham and Hannah Firkovich again travelled to Egypt to see Samuel, who had continued working in the Karaite *kenesa*. On Tuesday, 18th of Tishri 5625 (18.10.1864, letter no. 610), Abraham Firkovich writes that the work in the *geniza* will be prolonged one more month and after it he has planned "from below the dust to uncover the *geniza* which is in the synagogue attributed to Ezra the Scribe." He already "opened it," spent three days at the site, cleaned the Karaite wall inscriptions and "seen that even there is hope of finding interesting things." The (Rabbanite) *hakhambasi* (in Cairo) has heard about the discoveries in the *geniza* "of our brethren *bene Miqra*" and that is why "there is a fire of desire burning in him to open their *genizat* too"; similarly the of *hakhambasi* of Alexandria, R. Nathanm, is willing to open the *genizot* in his city. Up to that time, however, Firkovich had not visited these persons.

⁴² The copy of 3 Sivan adds: "... to buy all of it at a high price (בדמים יקרים)." The copy of 5 Sivan reads: "and therefore I did not take pity on plenty of money (לא חסתי על הכסף הרב).

⁴³ The copy of 5 Sivan reads: "numerous bundles in 3 chests (ארגזים), numerous bundles and quires (קונטרסים) of treatises and *novella* (מהבורים וחדשים)."

A note:⁴⁴ Today, Jacob Shelabi mentioned above and the High Priest 'Amram with the deputy High Priest Pinhas came here to Jerusalem, and it is in my mind to ask them to put the bundles in order for me, properly sort by sort in their order, because there is no one else apart from them who can do it as they do.⁴⁵

X A short letter (no. 609, Plates 2 and 3) sent by Abraham Firkovich to Gabriel to Paris on Thursday, the 18th of Sivan⁴⁶ (23.6.1864), contains a list of the most important Samaritan manuscripts. "Our consul", Mr. Albert, was just leaving for Paris and he had promised to take the letter straight to Gabriel's residence in Paris. In order to avoid coming "before you today with empty hands," Firkovich had decided to write "in short the names or contents of the books and their authors that I found in the *geniza* in Sikem."⁴⁷ Since the consul was in a hurry to leave, the list could not be exhaustive. In his letter Firkovich enumerates 30 items:

1. A Commentary on the Torah by Abraham b. Josef b. Sakkuf (סכוף), 5 parts.
2. Precepts by Yefet Abu al-Hasan Suri (מצות ליפת אבו אלחסן סורי), 3 parts.
3. Songs and hymns (שירים וזמירות) resembling the Book of Psalms in Arabic, Aramaic and the holy tongue by two priests, (1) Marqeh (מרקה) and (2) 'Amram Dareh (עמרם דרה).
4. A Commentary on the Torah by the afore-mentioned high priest Marqeh in two parts.
5. The Book of the Tablets of the Heart in Divinity by Abraham haq-Qabasi (ספר על לוחות הלב באלהיות לאברהם הקבצי)
6. A Commentary on the parashah Bə-Huqqotay⁴⁸ by *sheikh* Ja'cob Nafis 'al (sic!) Din (פירוש על פי בחקותי לשיך יעקב נפיס על דין).
7. A Commentary on the verses "For I will proclaim the name of the LORD" etc.⁴⁹ and "The Rock, his work is perfect" etc.⁵⁰
8. A Collection of Memories and Traditions (ספר מאסף הזכרונות והשמועות) by the high priest Pinhas son of El'azar the high priest approx. 300 years earlier.
9. A Commentary on the year of remission of debts, the year of acquittal, appointed times and priests (יוסף עסקרי מכפר עסכור) by Josef 'Eskari mik-kafar 'Eshur (שמטה ויובל והמועדים והכהנים).
10. A Commentary on *The Matters of the Precepts* (דברי המצות) by the above-mentioned *hakham* Josef 'Eskeri.
11. A Commentary on the Torah by Abu Hagal (אל).⁵¹
12. An extensive *tafsir* of the Torah (תפסיר על התורה באריכות) by an anonymous ancient *hakham*.
13. An extensive *tafsir* of the Torah (תפסיר על התורה באריכות) by another ancient *hakham* who is also anonymous.
14. A grammar book by *hakham* Mattanah (Nathanael) the Egyptian [דקדוק] [להחכם מתנה (נתנאל) המצרי].⁵²
15. A Commentary on the Torah by *hakham* Hagal al-Matari (אלמאטארי האגי אל).
16. *The Book of Chronicles* by Abulfath (sic!) (ספר דברי הימים לאבולפטח).
17. An extensive commentary on the Torah by ancient elders (לזקנים הקדמונים).
18. A great number of works on wisdom penned by Arabs, not yet inspected by us

⁴⁴ The note is added in brackets at the end of the paragraph *daleth*.

⁴⁵ On the copy of 5 Sivan the note is replaced by the following text: "And today I wrote to Nablus that the deputy High Priest Jacob should come to put in order and in place the quires and bundles and to select the good and useful ones, and as for the rest, to throw them away so that I shall not be loaded to take idle objects to Petersburg (לפכ'), and I agreed to give him his salary; maybe he will come, as I asked, during the period mentioned above when I shall be staying here." In the preceding paragraph *gimel* of the same letter, Firkovich mentions that he has promised to stay a further three weeks in Jerusalem.

⁴⁶ The year in the date of the letter תרכ"ג (623, i.e. 1863) must be a mistake for תרכ"ד.

⁴⁷ כדי שלא אבוא היום בידיים ריקניות אמרתי לכתוב לך בקצור שמות או עניני ספרים ומהבריהם שמצאתי בגניזת שכם.

⁴⁸ Lev. 26:3-27:34.

⁴⁹ Deut. 32:3.

⁵⁰ Deut. 32:4.

⁵¹ Cf. Sam. III 29, 35 in Firkovich Collection.

⁵² Cf. Sam. V, 2, 3, 4 in the Firkovich Collection.

- (דברי חכמה הרבה חבורי הישמעאלים עדין לא נתבקרו).
19. A book on the birth of Moses- peace be upon him- by *hakham basi* of Damascus, Ishma'el b. Zahrah b. Abi 'Uzzi, 3 parts (סי על מולדו של משה רועה) (חלקים). (לישמעאל חכם באשי בדמשק בן זהרה בן אבי עזיג' חלקים).
 20. On the story of Balaam and Balak (על דבר בלעם עם בלק).
 21. Arguments of Karaites and Samaritans against the Rabbanites concerning the morrow after the Sabbath⁵³ (טענות הקראים והשומרונים על הרבנים במחרת השבת).
 22. Words of sages, a florilegium (דברי חכמים מליצות), 2 parts.
 23. Commentaries on texts of the Torah by the high priest Eli'azar (פירושים על) (דברי התורה אליעזר כהג').
 24. A Commentary on the verse "Hear, O Israel"⁵⁴ by Tobiya the high priest b. Yishaq the high priest b. Abraham the high priest (פירוש על פסוק שמע ישראל) (דברי התורה אליעזר כהג').⁵⁵
 25. Extensive rules of impurity and purity by ancient elders (פירוש על פסוק שמע ישראל) (לזקנים הקדמונים באריכות).
 26. Arguments (טענות) between Rabbanites and Samaritans.
 27. Commentaries on the Torah by *hakham Sadaqa*, a priest from Damascus, the son of Ithamar the high priest (לחכם צדקה הכהן הדמשקי מבני איתמר הכהג').
 28. Part of the Book of Joshua bin Nun in two parts (רפסם יהושע בן נון בשני) (חלקים).
 29. Commentaries on the Torah by Abraham *hakham* b. Nafs (!) al-Din (אברהם חכם בן נפס אלדין).
 30. And this is the most respected and valuable one, The Precepts by *hakham* Abraham b. Nafs al-Din mentioned above, since it is the only one in the world, and even among the Samaritans there exist only a small number of sheets of it. So they ask me to let them make a copy of it for themselves and to complement what is lacking in it on the basis of the sheets which have been preserved of it amongst them.⁵⁶ It is very large (?), 193 sheets and a half of *bogen*,⁵⁷ all of it is in Arabic. And beside these antiquities, I have many others, but time does not allow me to write them down, because the consul is in a hurry to set off on his journey. He will tell you good news about my health; may God grant him a happy journey.

After warm greetings sent also by the karaites residents in Jerusalem, Firkovich adds that, upon the arrival of Mr. Albert (in Paris), "we (i.e. Abraham and Hannah Firkovich) hurry to travel to Egypt to complete the work with the antiquities. Such are the words of your father Abraham in a hurry."⁵⁸

XI The last letter of Abraham Firkovich presented here was sent to the Samaritan community on 21 Sivan, i.e. 26 June 1864; the copy was written by an unknown person (no. 589). Translation:

In the Name of the Lord. Peace, peace, to the far and to the near, says the LORD.⁵⁹ Listen to me, you men of Sikem, who safeguard Mount Gerizim, that God may listen to you.⁶⁰ It is written in your Holy Torah: "You shall be careful to perform what has passed your lips, for you have voluntarily vowed to the LORD your God what you have

⁵³ Lev. 23:10-21 (waving of the sheaf).

⁵⁴ Deut. 5:1.

⁵⁵ For Tobiya read Tabya, high priest in 1752-1787.

⁵⁶ והוא הנכבד והיקר סי מצות לחכם אברהם בן נפס אלדין הנל' כי הוא יחיר בעולם ואפילו בשומרונים לא נמצא כי אם קצה דפים ממנו ומבקשים איהי לתת להם להעדיקו לעצמם ילמלאה אה אשר נחסר בו מן הדפים שנשארו ממנו אצלם.

⁵⁷ Firkovich makes frequent use of the German term *bogen*, 'quire', in his labels and remarks on manuscripts and descriptions of them.

⁵⁸ ואנחנו בהניע האדון אלבערט לא נחאהר פה כלל כי אנחנו נחפזים לנסוע למצרים להשלים גם מלאכה הקדמוניו כד' אביכם אברהם בהפזה.

⁵⁹ Isa. 57:19 (RSV).

⁶⁰ Cf. Judg. 9:7 (RSV).

promised with your mouth.”⁶¹ The mighty One, God, knows and he is witness and you, all the Samaritans, are also witnesses, that when I saw your synagogue, it had no form but it had the comeliness⁶² of the shadow of the death and it had no comely arrangements and it lacked also a synagogue for the women as is found in all of the synagogues of the Karaite and Rabbanite Israelites, and your women were like beasts without a prayer and supplication to the LORD God. Therefore I vowed a vow to the LORD to donate to the building and repair of the old synagogue and the purchase of a house, which is adjacent to it and which Jacob, the deputy, showed me, in order to enlarge the Holy House and to open a door on the side of the afore-mentioned house so that through it one can come straight in front of the veil of the screen to bow down to the LORD in the entrance, and to build on the left side of the court a special room for women so that they can come there to bow² down and to pour out their concerns to the LORD in Arabic.

And I have fulfilled what passed my lips and I have handed over the money of my vow, twenty thousand *groush*, to your official in total and I have received my promissory note in my hand; may it be acceptable to the will of the LORD. That money is sacred to the LORD, it shall go into the treasury of the LORD.⁶³

Therefore, you my beloved friends, the Samaritan community, allies of Abram, you who tremble at his word,⁶⁴ may Sikem wrestle to fulfil my vow, you and I, to begin the task of the sanctuary⁶⁵ in the name of God, as you vowed with your mouth and agreed to do with an upright heart.

You know that one must not allow the *massa* to become sour or the *miswa* to become sour by postponement⁶⁶- and you are forbidden to change and alter my vow, for the LORD has said: “And every man’s holy things shall be his”;⁶⁷ i.e. they are under the authority of the person who sanctifies them and not under that of others.

And it is written: “He shall not substitute anything for it or exchange it, and if he makes any exchange for it, then both it and that for which it is exchanged shall be holy, and it cannot be redeemed.”⁶⁸ Indeed, I heard that you decided with one accord to give the whole sum mentioned above to the hands of four reliable men for business (purposes) so that each year they would give four thousand standard *groush* as the profit. And when the sum imparted for the holy enterprise is collected, you will commence the enterprise, and the sum of 20,000 *groush* will remain completed for ever.⁶⁹ Behold, how good and pleasant the matter is, when the fund will be eternal (הקרן קיימת), and also the holy enterprise will not pass away, it will only be delayed for a time. Therefore I also agree with your decision, however, on condition that one tithe of the profit of 4,000- four hundred *groush*- each year will go to the three priests, servants of the sanctuary, because they have a right to the tithe. It shall be done in accordance with the Torah, and the LORD will forgive you that you have not fulfilled your agreement to commence the enterprise immediately, when the sum mentioned above arrived in your hands; it has been ready and destined in a deposit for two months already in the hands of my friend David Levi, the faithful commissioner.

These are the words of a servant of Israel, I, Abraham ben Samuel ben Samuel Firkovich, here in the holy city of Jerusalem on 21 Sivan in the year 4624 *anno mundi*.

Summary

On the basis of the previous data, we can obtain a fairly complete picture of the process which rendered Abraham Firkovich the owner of the largest collection of Samaritan manuscripts.

⁶¹ Deut. 23:24 (RSV, Deut. 23:23).

⁶² Cf. Isa. 53:2 (RSV).

⁶³ Cf. Josh. 6:19 (RSV).

⁶⁴ Cf. Isa. 66:5 (RSV).

⁶⁵ Cf. Ex. 36:4 (RSV).

⁶⁶ Yalkut Exodus 201 (a rabbinical statement!).

⁶⁷ Num. 5:10 (RSV).

⁶⁸ The statement is a shortened version of Lev. 27:10, where the words “and it cannot be redeemed” (cf. Lev. 27:20) have been attached as a conclusion.

⁶⁹ אמנם אני שמעתי כי נועצתם לב אחד לתת את כל הסך הנ"ל לידי ארבעה אנשים נאמנים למשא ומתן שיהנו השבחה בכל שנה ושנה ארבעה אלפים נ"ו סאנ . ובהקבץ סך מורכש למלאכת הקדש תתחילו לעשותה והסך . . . גרוי יהיה בשלמותו לעולם .

After his arrival in Jerusalem from Syria on 22 December 1863, Firkovich initiated attempts to find out whether he could discover and obtain books and manuscripts from the Samaritans in Nablus. On 2 February 1864 he informs his son-in-law Gabriel that he has sent a Karaite from Jerusalem, Shabbetai Levi, to Nablus to investigate “whether there is any hope of finding antiquities there.” In fact he plans to travel to Egypt to spend Purim with the Karaites in Cairo; only the lack of money prevents his journey. The plan indicates that Firkovich had no special intention of acquiring Samaritan manuscripts and he was not aware of the richness and value of the Samaritan archives in Nablus, either (Letter I).

When Shabbetai Levi returned after a stay of a fortnight in Nablus, he had good news to tell to Firkovich. Despite the fact that, in accordance with the traditional reluctance of Samaritans to sell their books, the High Priest ‘Amram (‘Imran ben Salama) did not want to sell “a single leaf,” Firkovich’s agent was able to find in Nablus Jacob al-Shelabi, a Samaritan “who is engaged in stealing from their sanctuary.” Jacob had sold a complete copy of the Samaritan Pentateuch in London and thus he was aware of the value of antiquities (Letters II and V).

On 17 and 29 March Firkovich writes to Gabriel that he has acquired texts from Nablus. These were brought to him in secret by Jacob al-Shelabi from the *geniza* on Mount Gerizim; the High Priest was also involved in this action. The acquisition consisted of twenty-two items which contained parts of the Torah in various versions, Samaritan prayers and hymns and a copy of the Book of Chronicles of the Samaritans. For this collection Firkovich paid 30 English pounds of gold, in total 3450 *groush*. However, the theological differences between the Karaites and Samaritans were a disappointment to Firkovich, who obviously wished to unite these minorities (Letters III, V and IX, and statements by the Samaritans).

A firman signed by the deputy of the Sultan Abdul Aziz helped Firkovich to establish good contacts with the Turkish administration and the diplomatic corps in Jerusalem; thus he received the privilege of visiting the Temple Mount in Jerusalem. Contacts with these distinguished persons, as well as with the Pasha of Damascus, were likely to help Firkovich to be successful in all of his efforts (Letter IV, 27.3.1864).

In a letter dated 8 April from Nablus, Firkovich reports to Gabriel that he and his grandson Samuel Firkovich have ascended Mount Gerizim on the festival day of the Samaritan (and Rabbanite) New Year on 7 April. In Nablus he has visited the house of prayer of the Samaritans, where three Books of the Torah are kept in the Ark of the Law. In the oldest of them, there is a *tashqil* in which Abisa’ ben Pinhas ben El’azar ben Aharon the Priest maintains he has written the Holy Book in the 13th year of the kingdom of the Israelites in the Land of Canaan. Firkovich copies the *tashqil*, although he considers the Book to be no more than 2,000 years old. In addition to the Books of Torah, he has seen prayer-books, various versions of the Pentateuch, commentaries on the Torah, halakhic and astronomical books, chronicles and ancient manuscripts. However, all of his attempts to buy “a complete object possessed by them, even with a great sum of silver and gold” have been in vain, but he will “not spare silver and gold” (Letter VI).

In a letter of 29 April, Firkovich is able to write that on 18 April he returned from Nablus to Jerusalem with a great treasure of the *geniza* which he had bought at the Samaritan Congregation. The treasure consists of four big boxes, “a load for two strong young asses”; at the moment he is preparing a preliminary classification of the material. For the collection Firkovich paid 40,000 *groush*, which equals 2,000 roubles in silver; he borrowed this sum in Jerusalem. The treasure includes parts of the Torah and its commentaries, prayer-books in Hebrew, Arabic and Aramaic, halakhic and wisdom literature, songs and chronicles; besides commentaries and chronicles written in Arabic, other texts are in Hebrew written in Samaritan letters. Other collectors of manuscripts will envy him because of his findings (Letters VII and VIII).

On the basis of the three slightly different letter copies dated 8, 10 and 16 June 1864 (Letter IX), we learn that Firkovich bought the *geniza* located on Mount Gerizim from which Jacob al-Shelabi had stolen manuscripts for him. In contrast to this *geniza*, the other one in the valley, obviously in Haret al-Yasmine in the city of Nablus, was completely untouched, full of “bundles” (“numerous bundles in 3 chests”) of Samaritan literature. Firkovich, not taking pity on his purse, also bought this *geniza*. This seems to be the reason why Harkavy mentions in the plural the Samaritan Genizoth “ransacked” by Firkovich (see above.....).

Abraham Firkovich was not fluent in Arabic,⁷⁰ and his knowledge of Samaritan writings probably was even more restricted. He needed help in sorting the material and putting it in order. Therefore, on 10 June, he asked the deputy High Priest Jacob to come to Jerusalem. Instead of him, Jacob al-Shelabi, the High Priest 'Amram and the deputy High Priest Pinhas came six days later to the city where Firkovich asked them to help him (Letter IX).

Obviously, the Samaritan priests were able to fulfill the task rapidly, since on 23 June, Firkovich could send to his son-in-law Gabriel in Paris a preliminary list of those books and their authors which "I found in the *geniza* in Sikem." In the list Firkovich describes thirty items that he bought and brought four big boxes of Samaritan manuscripts from Nablus, and the Samaritan collection in the national Library of Russia in St. Petersburg consists of 1,350 manuscripts as well as other antiquities.

Firkovich was able to acquire the manuscripts during a short stay in Nablus. However, payment was a more complicated matter. Firkovich had made a vow to donate 20,000 *groush* towards the repair of the Samaritan synagogue in Nablus and the building of a special room in it for women; in the restoration of the Karaite sanctuary in Jerusalem he also paid special attention to the possibility of women and old people participating in the synagogue service.⁷¹ We have every reason to suppose that the vow was connected with the sale of the Samaritan *genizot*. Before handing it over, the donation was entrusted to Firkovich's friend and agent, David Levi, for two months. However, when the sum was handed over to an (unnamed) official of the community, instead of beginning the repair, "the men of Sikem" decided with one accord to give these 20,000 *groush* to "four reliable men for business," which was expected to yield 4,000 *groush*, i.e. 20% as the annual profit. According to this plan of the Samaritans, the profit would constitute an eternal fund of 20,000 *groush*, and the renovation of the synagogue would be postponed till the fund was collected. Although Firkovich considered his payment of 20,000 *groush*, his "holy things", still to remain under his authority, he assented to the plan on the condition that a tithe of the annual profit, i.e. 400 *groush*, be given each year to the three Samaritan priests.⁷² This agreement was signed by Firkovich on 26 June 1864 (Letter XI).

Besides the rich information provided by these letters of Firkovich, there remain a number of open questions in the story of the acquisition of the Samaritan collections.

At present, we know that Jacob al-Shelabi was responsible for the acquisition of 22 Samaritan manuscripts which he stole from the *geniza* of the Samaritans on Mount Gerizim. In comparison with the final number of items sold by the Samaritan congregation (מקהלת השומרונים), these texts constitute a small minority. The main part, "a load for two strong young asses", derives its origin from another *geniza*, which was obviously located in the city of Nablus. In his letter to the "men of Sikem: on 26 June (Letter XI), Firkovich mentions 20,000 *groush* as the sum of his donation for the renovation of the Samaritan synagogue. However, in his private letters (VII and VIII) Firkovich writes that he bought the collection from the Samaritans for 40,000 *groush*; in the private letters Firkovich scarcely had any need to exaggerate the sum- which he had borrowed- and thus this figure gains in reliability.

The difference in sums arouses curiosity. One solution may be derived from the following facts: (1) the involvement of the High Priest 'Amram in the first business of Jacob al-Shelabi with Firkovich (Letter V), (2) the willingness of the Samaritan priests to put the manuscripts in order in Jerusalem (Letter V), (3) the care of the tithe, 400 *groush* each year to be given to these priests, stipulated by Firkovich (Letter XI), (4) the promise of the deputy High Priest Jacob ben Aaron to send Firkovich parts of a Torah in secret with David ha-Levi (see above, note 14) as well as (5) the dismetrically opposite statements by the Samaritans later in Nablus concerning the policy of Firkovich and the price paid by him for the manuscripts. On this basis it seems probable that either the decision to sell the

⁷⁰ In his letter from Cairo to Gabriel Firkovich on 20 September 1864 (No. 610), Abraham Firkovich writes that he studies Arabic for one hour every day with R. Moshe ha-Levi, who, however, is a bad teacher knowing only "the holy language of Arabic"; Arabic is a fatiguing vast language, like pyramids (פיראמידען), and as on the top of a pyramid, "my heart will be happy when I master the wonderful Arabic language, and after a month I shall look for an Ishmaelite teacher for me."

⁷¹ No. 607, 1r, a letter to Gabriel Firkovich from Nablus on 8 April, Letter VI in this article. This repair was also based on a *neder* vow made by Firkovich.

⁷² The names of these priests do not occur in the letter, but it is certain that they are 'Amram, Pinhas and Jacob mentioned above in Letter IX.

genizot and other antiquities nor the division of the profit took place on a notably democratic basis; we do not know who the persons were to whom the wording *מקהלת השומרונים* refers. It would not be the first time that the leaders of a community were in a position to gain extra profit.

Firkovich writes that he paid the Samaritan congregation 40,000 *groush*, i.e. 2,000 roubles in silver, and Jacob al-Shelabi 30 English pounds in gold. Six years later he sold his Samaritan collection to the Imperial Public Library in St. Petersburg for 9,500 roubles. These sums equal approximately 32,500 and 140,000 US\$ in 1993.

Unfortunately, in these letters Abraham Firkovich does not tell how he was able to persuade the Samaritans to sell him such a quantity of manuscripts, when the majority of his predecessors were scarcely able to acquire a single text. From his letter, however, we may discover cultural, economic, commercial, political and religious aspects to his activities. Surprisingly, the only hint of bargaining occurs in Firkovich's second letter in which he hopes that his agents "will agree upon a reasonable price, i.e. neither high nor low" (above).

A cultural explanation may be found in the fragmentary state of the manuscripts in St. Petersburg: it is probable that they were obsolete material which was concealed in a *geniza*. In fact, Firkovich says that he bought a *geniza* treasure from the Samaritan congregation and this statement is corroborated by the Samaritan High Priest Jacob ben 'Uzzi ben Jacob (above). Previously Firkovich had complained that all of his attempts to buy a complete object had been in vain. It is probable that the Samaritans were more inclined to sell the contents of a *geniza* than to deal in complete manuscripts.

The payment was also arranged in a pious manner which appealed to all parties involved in the sale. It was agreed that, as a *neder* donation, the Samaritan community was to receive 20,000 *groush* for the renovation of its synagogue and the building of a special room for the women in it. However, Firkovich agreed to the suggestion of the Samaritans that the repair work would be postponed, while four reliable men among them would do business with "his" donation for the benefit of the community members. Nevertheless, a tithe of the annual profit should be given to the High Priest and his two deputies; on the basis of other hints, we may assume that this was not the only economic benefit Firkovich granted to these priests. The sale of the obsolete *geniza* manuscripts was a profitable one for the Samaritan priests, for each member of the tiny community (130 person!), for Abraham Firkovich and for the Karaites in Jerusalem.

In Jerusalem Abraham Kirkovich had reinforced and displayed his excellent connections with the Turkish and Russian authorities. The *firman* of Sultan Abdul Aziz had opened the Temple Mount in Jerusalem for him to visit, which declared to everyone that the Karaites enjoyed official favour to a greater extent than did the Rabbanite Jews. The Samaritan leaders had every reason to believe that Firkovich was a person invested with political power whose friendship or disfavor would affect the future of themselves and their community.

An additional factor in the success of Firkovich's efforts may be found in Samaritan reports; this may be connected with the afore-mentioned reputation of Firkovich as a favorite of the administration. Firkovich is said to have endeavored to unite the Samaritans and the Karaites. Although "this wicked proposal" was turned down by the Samaritans, their attitude perhaps became negative only after Firkovich's return to Russia; according to the deputy High Priest Jacob ben Aaron, the decision to hold a public prayer with a minyan every morning and evening was taken in the presence of Abraham Firkovich (above). During the discussion held in Nablus two minorities met with one another, and in everything he attempted Abraham Firkovich was an impressive man with a splendid talent for convincing people.

Comments on this section from the Editor of theSamaritanUpdate.com

The four plates so described are not shown, please see original article in *Studia Orientalia* 73 (1994): 167-192. <http://www.worldcat.org/title/studia-orientalia-vol-73/oclc/489758324> Please make a note that there is a correction from the published article, which we have shown here on page 6 under letter VI.

This reference is #2132 located in ***A Bibliography of the Samaritans, Third Edition, Revised, Expanded, and Annotated***, by Alan David Crown and Reinhard Pummer, ATLA Bibliography, No. 51, **The Scarecrow Press, Inc.** Lanham, Maryland, Toronto, Oxford. 2005

See original article for accuracy!!!!

Also see the website of

[Suomen Itämainen Seura — Finnish Oriental Society](http://www.tiedekirja.fi/)

<http://www.tiedekirja.fi/>

This is also the link to the National Library of Russia <http://www.nlr.ru/eng/>