

The Acquisition of the Samaritan Collection by Abraham Firkovich in Nablus in 1864 –An Additional Document

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Over the centuries many European travelers, orientalists and biblical scholars made active efforts to acquire Samaritan manuscripts, in Damascus and Nablus in particular. As far as we know, the first Western scholar to be successful in this was Guillaume Postel (1510-1581). As a rule, however, the most successful collectors were able to purchase no more than a few manuscripts or folios.¹

In April, 1864, during his last *grand tour* of the Near East (1863-1865), Abraham Firkovich (Eben Reshef, 1787-1874), the eminent Russian Karaite scholar and collector of manuscripts and antiquities,² visited the Samaritans in Nablus. As a result of this visit (partly because of previous indirect contacts made during his stay in Jerusalem) he was able to acquire, as well as other antiquities to the Imperial Public Library in St. Petersburg. Today the Samaritan collection of A.S. Firkovich, one of the treasures of this library, now known as the national Library of Russia in St. Petersburg, consists of 1,350 items.³

In our article “How did Abraham Firkovich acquire the great collection of Samaritan manuscripts in Nablus in 1864?”⁴ we discussed the copies of eleven letters written and sent by Abraham Firkovich⁵ and other documents, which enabled us to delineate the various methods employed by Firkovich and the Samaritan community- negotiations, the help of collaborators, vows, individual payments, political favors and disfavours, together with the alleged friendship of minority groups- in the process of acquiring these invaluable manuscripts.

In brief, we were able to conclude that after very negative first reactions on the part of the Samaritans, numerous texts and other articles were later brought to Jerusalem by Jacob al-Shelabi “from the High Priest” (‘Amram), and handed over to Firkovich. Jacob al-Shalabi was a Samaritan ‘from the High Priest’ (Amram), and handed over to Firkovich. Jacob al-Shelabi was a Samaritan “engaged in stealing from their sanctuary”. “I bought them at a high price,” writes Firkovich. During his stay in Nablus in the middle of April, 1864, Firkovich (with his

¹ Cf. the statement of the Samaritan High Priest ‘Amram in report No. 343, below; according to him two or three folios of the useless old writings (*habilot*) were often sold to visitors in search of antiquities; the visitors paid well and thus the *geniza* was not worthless for the Samaritans.

² On him and his activities, see V.L. Vihnovich, *Karaim Avraam Firkovich* (Sankt-Peterburg 1997), and Tapani Harvianinen, “Abraham Firkovich” (forthcoming in Karaite Judaism, *A Guide to the History and Literary Sources of Medieval and Modern Karaism*. General Editor: Meira Polliack, E.J. Brill 2003), and the notes there.

³ On the Collection, catalogues and other details, see *Samaritjanski dokumenty Gosudarstvennoj publichnoj biblioteki imeni M. E. Saltykova-Shchedrina- Katalog* (compiled by L. H. Vil’sker and V. V. Lebedev, Ministerstvo kul’tury RSFSR. Gosudarstvennaja ordena trudovogo krasnogo znamenija Publichnaja biblioteka im. M.E. Saltrykova-Shchedrina, Sankt-Peterburg 1992), and Haseeb Shehadah, “Diwuwah rishoni ‘al ‘osep kitbe hay-yad hash-shomroniyyim be-Sant-Petersburg” (*Proceedings of the Eleventh World Congress of Jewish Studies*, Division D. Volume I. The Hebrew Language, Jewish languages, Jerusalem 1994, pp. 61-64), also published in enlarged version in A.B. – *The Samaritan News- ‘Alef Bet- Hadshot hash-shomronim*, 591-594, Holon, 20.8. 1999, pp. 19-31.

⁴ The Article appeared in *Studia Orientalia* 73, 1994, pp. 167-192; it later reprinted in A.B. – *The Samaritan News- ‘Alef Bet- Hadshot hash-shomronim*, 633-636, Holon, 13.4.1995, pp. 158-180, and reviewed in Hebrew under the title “Pirqobis rakish ‘et kitbe-hay-yad be-kesef male’!!!”, pp. 8-12. See also Tapani Harvianen & Haseeb Shehadeh & Harry halen, “The Samaritan and Karaim Commitment to Minyan, Abraham Firkovich, and the Poor of Traka” (*Studia Orientalia*, 82, 1997, pp. 85-98), pp. 86-91.

⁵ The letters are housed in the Personal Archive of A. S. Firkovich in the National Library of Russia. Once again the staff of the Manuscript Department of the Library deserve our warmest thanks for their kind helpfulness in assisting us in our work in the Library. Further, we wish to express our gratitude to the Academy of Finland and the Finnish Cultural Foundation for their support of the Karaite studies.

grandson Samuel and David ha-Levi, the *paqid kolel* of the Jerusalem Karaites) purchased “a *geniza* treasure,” i.e. the texts kept in the *genizot* of the Samaritan congregation; in his letter no 608 (no. IX in our article, p. 179) Firkovich makes a clear distinction between (1) the *bet hag-geniza* from which Jacob al-Shelabi had stolen valuable objects for Firkovich, and which Firkovich later purchased “together with the Book of Chronicles” of the Samaritans,⁶ and (2) the *geniza* in the valley which “no hand had touched,” and in the acquisition of which he “did not take pity on the purse.” For the first *geniza*, writes Firkovich – in a private letter to his Karaite friend Abraham ha-Misri (Egyptian)- he paid a sum of 40,000 *groush*, which equaled 2,000 roubles in silver; as mentioned above, he “did not pity on the purse’ for the second *geniza*, either.

As for the payment, Firkovich had made a vow to donate 20,000 *groush* towards the restoration of the Samaritan synagogue in Nablus, including the building of a special room for women- finally, however, the sum was handed over to “four reliable (Samaritan) men for business” and a tithe of the supposed annual profit (4,000 *groush*) was required to be given to the Samaritan High Priest and his two deputies. In our article mentioned above, we concluded that we “have every reason to suppose that the vow was connected with the sale of the Samaritan *genizot*.” The difference between the two sums mentioned, i.e. 40,000 and 20,000 *groush*, together with the active role played by the Samaritan priests in the details of the sale, their willingness to help Firkovich in selecting useful manuscripts and to arrange them in Jerusalem, and other clues led us to conclude that the tithe on the annual profit of the vow of 20,000 *groush* “was not the only economic benefit Firkovich granted to these priests.”

In 2002 Ze’ev Elkin and Menshem Ben-Sasson published an article “‘Abraham Pirqobic u-genizot Qahir- be-‘iqbot ‘iyyun be-‘arkuyyono ha-‘isi” (‘Abraham Firkovich and the Cairo Genizas in the Light of His Personal Archive,’ *Pe’amim* 90, Ben-Zvi Intitute, Jerusalem, pp. 51-95, 192) in which they touch upon the acquisition of the of the manuscripts of the Samaritan Collection (p. 64). On the basis of document F. 946, No. 343 in the Personal Archive of Firkovich, Elkin promises (note 43) to show in a future publication that Firkovich purchased the contents of only one *geniza* in Nablus; according to him this document presents “a detailed and fascinating description of the whole circumstances of the acquisition of the Samaritan Collection.”

Since the provenance and history of the Samaritan Collection is a subject of widespread interest, even among scholars who do not read modern Hebrew, the text of document No. 343 (See Appendices I and II) is given below, together with an English translation of its final part pertinent to the acquisition, and a number of comments.

Document No. 343 is not a letter like those used as source material in our previous article; rather it seems to be a kind of brief report drawn up by Firkovich in 1864, shortly after the acquisition of the contents of a *geniza*, possibly in order for it to be employed later to provide a more extensive description of his findings and discoveries- this was unfortunately never written.

In the initial part of the document Firkovich- being, as he states, 76 year old⁷- described his hardships when searching for antiquities “in Syria and on the mountains of Israel” in the steps of the great and wealthy scholars who filled the treasure houses of great men and libraries with splendid items. These men had also examined the houses owned by Samaritans and poured out silver ten times; as a consequence the tithes of the majority of Samaritan compositions and the names of their authors are registered in the catalogues of the major libraries. After them it was very difficult to find any valuable item; however, the God of Abraham Firkovich’s father, who had been on

⁶ “The Book of Chronicles of the Samaritans” refers to *Kitab al-tarih* by Abu al-Fath al-Samiri. In our article we concluded that this *genzia* was located on Mount Gerizim; however, it seems possible that only the Samaritan sanctuary (*bet ham-miqdash*) was located on the Mountain and that Jacob al-Shelabi was also guilty of theft from there (letter no. 605, 11v-12r, letter no. II in our article, p. 173).

⁷ Abraham Firkovich was born on Elul 19, 5547 *anno mundi*, i.e. on Sunday, September 2, 1787 (new style), see Tapani Haravainen “The nedunya agreement drawn up for the parents of Abraham Firkovich in 1787” (*Mille anni sicut dies hesterna...Studia in honorem Kalle Kasemaa*. Ediderunt Marju Lepajoe & Andres Gross, Universitas Tartuensis. Facultas theological. Tartu Ulikooli kirjastus, Tartu 2003, pp. 272-280), p. 273 & note 5; cf. however, the contradictory dates referred to by Elkin and Ben-Sasson (2002. p. 54, not 7). The initial note of this document No. 343 verifies that Firkovich was 76 on Elul 19, 5623 (1863) – and still the same age in spring 5624/1864 when he wrote the report.

Firkovich's side in his early efforts, helped him to perform feats of valor in the land of Sikem- after the Christians, as Firkovich adds between the lines. By virtue of the pious Joseph, Joshua, Caleb, Eleazar, (Ithamar) and Phinehas, who were buried in the region of Sikem and whose graves Firkovich visited, Firkovich discovered the forgotten gleanings which he could not have hoped for. Before that the Lord had established him in favor with the mighty men in the Russian Empire, even in the eyes of the "King of Ishmael"⁸ and his pashas and governors; thus the minister of Russia was able to secure from the "King" a *firman* which placed all the pashas and governors under obligation to help open the closed gates of antiquities for Firkovich.⁹ Similarly, Firkovich was established by the Lord in favour with the leaders of "our brethren" the Rabbanites, the Karaites and even the Samaritans.

After these eloquent introductory remarks with reference to the past, Firkovich proceeds to describe the actions which finally led to his acquisition of the texts thrown into the *geniza* of the Samaritan synagogue:¹⁰

The LORD established me in grace and favour... also in the eyes of the sages and dignitaries of the congregations of our brethren the Rabbanites and Karaites, and even in the eyes of the Samaritans who, when receiving the good news [...] of my arrival, sent an envoy to Jerusalem to ask me on which day [...] (I should-TH) arrive, their priests, elders and noble people came out to welcome me on the road, and they took me to a beautiful residence which they had made ready for me in the house of Shelabi Jacob. They paid great honor to me as if to our father Abraham (peace be upon him!) as regards the table, seating (and) light. My dear grandson Reshef [= ribbi Shemuel Firkovich], and my respected friend ribbi Daqvid ha-Levi of Jerusalem, the Commissioner (may his light shine!), and I were their dinner guest... Every day the priests, elders and noblest men of the city would assemble to greet me and to discuss matters of the Torah and good manners. As for a number of matters which I had heard from them and which were contrary to the law and halakhah, I rebuked them, and they admitted my words in part and corrected the lapse when they saw that my mouth uttered truth (Prov. 8:7).

After the Sabbath I associated with them frequently. I wished to see their Sipre Torah and their books of wisdom, and they did not refuse to let me see them. Nevertheless, they told me that they had a ban of Joshua bin Nun not to sell any of their books. When I saw that it was so, I considered numerous plans as to how I might fulfil my desire to acquire precious articles from their treasures. And the LORD put a sword in my heart: When I saw their synagogue (bet kenistam) [an addition between the lines: when I saw the geniza room (bet hag-geniza) into which they throw (loose) folios?], a room of gloom and deep darkness and disarray (cf. Job 10:22), and its stone wall had begun to fall into ruin, I rebuked them and said; "How can you dwell in your paneled and expensive houses, while the house of God lies in ruins?" (cf. Haggai 1:4). They replied and said; "'This is not from rebellion or from breach of faith, but from our lack of capacity.'" I replied to them; "I give a sun of gleanings (cf. Lev. 19:9) in order to renew the house ('et hab-bayit, which obviously refers to the synagogue- TH) as it should be." (The last line of this column includes a completion of the text in the right margin, where the report continues:)

They rejoiced over this matter. When I saw that I had found favour in their eyes because of this, I said to them; "Just as I wish to make a donation to the House of the LORD in his honour (may He be blessed!), may you also grant my wish by giving me as a gift of thanksgiving some of your holy books which, for fear of the ban, you are not allowed to sell for money. This also will turn out to the honour of the Divine Name so that your good name (= reputation) might spread throughout the world, when I make them (= your books) well known in the communities of the sages of our generation, this generation of knowledge." They replied and said: "We cannot hand over any book

⁸ The expression refers to Sultan Abdul Aziz.

⁹ Cf. our conclusions in Havianen & Shehadeh 1994, p. 187.

¹⁰ On the Hebrew of Firkovich and its medieval features, see Haseeb Shehede, 'Iyyunim be-'ibrit shel 'Abraham Pirqobis' (*Mehqarim bal-lashon ha-'ibrit u-be-siprutah. Kenes Helshinqi. Didre hak-kenes ham-madda'l ha-'ahad-'asar be-'Erope, 'Unibersitat Helsingi, siwan 754-may 1994. Studies in Hebrew Language and Literature- Helsinki Congress. Proceedings of the 11th Hebrew Scientific European Congress, Helsinki University, May 1994. 'Arika: 'Abraham Ben-'Amittay, Berit 'ibrit 'olamit- Brit Ivrit Olamit, Yerushalayim- Jerusalem 757- 1997, pp. 79-90).*

from our possession, not even as a gift, because they are holy to us and we always read them. How could we hand (them) over from our possession and remain as if without bread to eat? ¹¹It would be a sin."

When I saw that there was no way of taking away the books which they read in holiness and purity, I said: "If so, give me the bundles which are thrown into the geniza, for you do not read them because they have already become disqualified." The High Priest said to me in secret: "If you give us, the priests of the LORD, such-and-such a sum apart from the sum which you want to give for restoration of the House of the LORD (continuation on the last line of the main column,) I shall try to satisfy your wish." Then I said: "How do you ask of me such-and-such a sum as if for precious stones or articles of gold and silver?" (Verso), In the uprightness of his heart he opened his whole heart and said: "Though they are not precious articles, they are various bundles. They have not been useful to any of us, although we sometimes enjoy great benefit from them. This happens when explorers travel through lands in search of our antiquities. We give them two or three folios, no more, and in exchange they are accustomed to weigh out gold for us. If the geniza leaves our possession, we shall never enjoy any more profit (from it)."

When I saw that he had opened his heart, I believe his words, for one can (easily) recognize the words of truth, for common sense reaches a similar conclusion. Firkovich has been an example (of this)! I said to him: "Yes, yes! I shall be careful to perform what has passed my lips (cf. Deut. 23:24). And moreover, I shall not disclose the confidential plan to any of your countrymen, for your honour in as beloved in my eyes as my own honour."

He immediately went to the elders and dignitaries of his community and persuaded them about this, and they consented to his words. (An additional note in the right margin:) We made a covenant, and I wrote it down, and we affixed our signatures, both I and they. (Main text:) And then on the very same day I bought boxes, took them to the synagogue and put the bundles in them.

When I came (scil. later again- TH) to the synagogue with my beloved grandson Reshef, and Jacob, the deputy (High) Priest, opened the house of geniza, I looked, and behold, there were folios from the geniza scattered on the ground. When I put my hand on the box and the baskets, I realized that they had already been emptied and selected and refilled lightly, not with difficulty as at first. I shouted and said: "Deceit, deceit, your honour Jacob the Priest!" He replied: "It is strange in my eyes also."

We went out to search the rooms by the synagogue square. My beloved grandson looked through a window, and behold, there were two large full baskets standing in the room of Pinhas the Priest. The room was locked, and I sent the High Priest's daughter, the bride of Pinhas, to fetch the key. We took the baskets and emptied (them) into the vessels,¹² and they became full as they were at first.

In the middle of all this, 'Amram the High Priest arrived and we told him (scil. what had happened- TH). He was ashamed because of the incident. Who knows? Perhaps the matter took place with his permission and at his command. In his presence we immediately filled the boxes and took them to our inn. And early in the morning we loaded them on the back of young asses and sent (them) to Jerusalem.

The report does not refer in detail to the contents of the acquisition nor to the later task of separating "the wheat from the chaff and unifying each thing in its quantity and quality" in Jerusalem (letter no. 607, 3r-3v, no. VII in our article, p. 177). Similarly, there is no reference to the *geniza* in the valley which "no hand had touched"; also the methods of payment and the role of the High Priest 'Amram, the deputy High Priest and Jacob al-Shelabi in the arrangement of the acquisitions (letter no 608, our no. IX, p. 179) are outside the scope of the report, which ends with the dispatch of the discoveries to Jerusalem. In the report Firkovich leaves the High Priest 'Amram in a tense mood, and his relationship with the deputy High Priest Pinhas does not bode well for co-operation in the future, either.

¹¹ The expression "as if without bread to eat" may provide a hint that the possibility of bargain should not be entirely ruled out; moreover, it may render reasonable the assumption that Hebrew was utilized in the communication between Firkovich and the Samaritan priests, at least to some extent.

¹² *hak-kelim*, 'vessels', refers to the boxes bought by Firkovich.

On the basis of these observations we may conclude that the report was written by Firkovich fairly soon after his return to Jerusalem on Nisan 11 (April 18, 1864), before he sent a more informative letter (No. 607, 3r-3v = no. VII) to his son-in-law Gabriel and Gabriel's wife Milkah on April 29; the letter refers to the "load for two strong young asses," the constant task of selection, and his loan of 40,000 *groush* for the purchase of the (Samaritan) treasure. In the report numerous corrections and additions written both between the lines and in the margins also speak in favour of its provisory nature as a *pro memoria* of the story of the great discovery and the joyful state of mind it produced in the indefatigable collector.

The report indicates, obviously on the basis of his former contacts (cf. letters I-IV in our article), that Firkovich met with a warm welcome from the Samaritan leaders upon his arrival in Nablus; his residence in the in the house of Jacob al-Shelabi also resulted from previous contacts in connection with the secret acquisition of the stolen Samaritan manuscripts. The aim of discussions concerning Karaite and Samaritan laws and *halakhah* may have been to tempt the Samaritans to join the Karaites.¹³ Although Firkovich was allowed to see the *Siphre Torah* and other compositions, the ban by Joshua bin Nun prevented the Samaritans from selling any of their books (cf. the annoyance expressed at the end of letter no 607, 1r-3r, written by Firkovich in Nablus; letter VI in our article, p. 177).

In the report Firkovich admits *expressis verbis* that his promise of a donation (*nedaba*) for the for the renovation of the gloomy synagogue of the Samaritans was one ("the Lord put a word in my heart") of his numerous plans to convince the Samaritans to offer him as a gift of thanksgiving some of their holy books and precious articles. Again the Samaritans refused, since otherwise they would have been left without the holy books which they were accustomed to read- as though without bread to eat. As a result of their reaction the "bundles" (*habilot*) thrown into the *geniza* (*dasht*) became the main object of Firkovich's interest. All of this indicates that the vow (*neder*) or donation (*nedaba*) was indeed closely connected with the sale of the Samaritan genizot- as we concluded in 1994 (p. 185).

Moreover, the report confirms our previous conclusion regarding the active participation of the Samaritan priests in the sale, and the special reward offered: Firkovich writes that the High Priest (i.e. 'Amram / 'Imran b. Salama b. Ghazal b. Ishaq b. Salama, 1809-1875, who had been involved in the earlier sale of manuscripts stolen by Jacob al-Shelabi) proposed to Firkovich in confidence that he should give the priests a certain sum in addition to the sum promised for the renovation of the synagogue; unfortunately the exact sum is not stated in the report. Other elders and dignitaries of his community were persuaded to agree. The plan was not revealed to the Samaritan laymen. An agreement was reached between the leaders and Firkovich, and was written down with their signatures and that of Firkovich; unfortunately this agreement has so far not been found in the Personal Archive of Firkovich or elsewhere.

Firkovich hurried to pack the contents of the *geniza* in order to have them transported to Jerusalem. Before that, however, some Samaritans, probably the same priests or leaders, attempted to rescue some of the texts, i.e. "two large full baskets," which presumably contained the most valuable manuscripts, by removing them from the boxes in which Firkovich had stored them. Nevertheless, Firkovich and his companions uncovered the ruse and returned the contents of the two baskets to their boxes. The baskets were found in the room of the deputy High Priest Pinhas, while Firkovich from requesting that these priests 'put the bundles in order for me' in Jerusalem in the middle of June the same year; in contrast, the event may have even prompted Firkovich to ask the priests to arrange the collection, because they felt guilty about it.

The Samaritan Collection in St. Petersburg contains a great number of fragments which are in disorder and represent very many different manuscripts. The description given by Firkovich above is conconant with these fragmentary parts of the Collection. On the other hand, the Collection contains complete and semi-complete Samaritan manuscripts. A number of them may represent the manuscripts stolen by Jacob al-Shalabi for Firkovich.

¹³ Cf. Harviainen & Shehadeh 1994, p. 171, 187; Harviainen & Shehadeh & Halen 1997, pp. 86-91.

However, 'no hand had touched what was in the *geniza* in the valley' in Nablus (see above). Thus this *geniza* is an evident candidate as another source of the better preserved parts of the Samaritan Collection of Firkovich.

Comments on this section from the Editor of theSamaritanUpdate.com

The two Appendixes with plates so described are not shown. Please see this original article in *Studia Orientalia* 97 Helsinki (2003): 49-63.

Also see the website of

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

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

This reference is not 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

There were 1350 Samaritan documents consist of 18,258 pages.

Also see:

How Did Abraham Firkovich Acquire the Great Collection of Samaritan Manuscripts in Nablus in 1864 by Tapani Harvianen & Haseeb Shehadeh 1994