

Dan Shapira

## ***Et tout le reste est littérature*, or: Abraham Firkowicz, the Writer with a Chisel**

**Abstract:** Abraham Firkowicz (1787–1874) was a Karaite educator, communal leader, autobiographer, traveller, translator and political lobbyist, a man remembered best as the person who assembled the three greatest collections of Jewish books and manuscripts in the world. All of them are named after him: the First Firkowicz Collection, the Samaritan Firkowicz Collection (these two were bought by the Russian Imperial Library while the collector was still alive), and the Second Firkowicz Collection (bought by the Russian Imperial Library after his death). He is also remembered for the book he wrote about Jewish tombstone inscriptions from the Crimea. In fact, he was accused of forging the texts he obtained from the tombstone inscriptions and the manuscripts he had collected. This essay is an inquiry into the epoch in which Firkowicz lived. It provides parallels to contemporary activities undertaken by possible forgers such as Sulukadzev, Moses Shapira, and Dom Pedro II of Brazil and his circle, and claims that most of all, Firkowicz was ‘a writer with a chisel’.

Jews leapt into the Early Modern Period straight from Late Antiquity; there was no such thing as a Jewish ‘Middle Ages’ in the European sense. If we do not count such Proto-Yiddish translations as the chivalric *Dukus Horant* and *Kinig Artus Hof*, for example, there was no proper medieval Jewish literature, which is why the writer Shmuel Yosef Agnon tried to fill the gap and created a pseudo-medieval Hebrew corpus in the twentieth century. This was a modern-day continuation of a Western tradition of producing a series of outbursts of literary activity in Eastern Europe, especially in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, some of which were intended to create a suitable past for a newly formed sense of nationalism, others being literary exercises. Prosper Mérimée (1803–1870), a French author and a noted archaeologist, is now best remembered for his *Carmen* and his role in the discovery of *The Lady and the Unicorn* tapestries (despite him also being a qualified Russianist and the first French translator of Alexander Pushkin as of 1848). In 1827, he published a French translation of folk ballads composed in ‘Illyrian’ (what we now call ‘Serbo-Croatian’) by one Hyacinthe Maglanowich, under the title *La Guzla, ou Choix de Poésies Illyriques recueillies dans la Dalmatie, la Croatie et l’Herzégowine*, but it was actually a literary hoax, or, as they called it back then, ‘a literary mystifica-

tion'. Hyacinthe Maglanowich never existed and the poetry ascribed to him by Mérimée was simply composed by Mérimée, himself, in French. Nevertheless, Alexander Pushkin translated these 'Illyrian' ballads into Russian as 'the Songs of the Western Slavs' (1833), believing they were pieces of real folklore. In fact, almost all the young Eastern European literatures (with the exception of the Poles) were in pursue to enlarge quickly their literary corpus and to make it look older as it was. The long shadow of *Ossian* (1760–1765) – presumably a collection of Scottish Gaelic epic poems of old possibly translated into English by James Macpherson (1736–1791) – was hovering over these developments. Owing to the lack of opportunity for political advocacy, the clashing narratives of Poles, Lithuanians, Ukrainians and many other nationalities were expressing themselves through language and literature. The Latin West hardly knew the notion of defining one's identity or ethnicity through language, but in the East, this became the norm, which is why Eastern Europeans are said to be 'literature-centric' – their literatures are their *patriae*. 'Kde domov můj?' ('Where is my home?'), asks the Czech national song written in 1834. If you lack a home, though, you can always invent one. So it all began, it seems, where Germanic met Slavic – in Bohemia. By then, Prague was one of the most important centres of the nascent – and much belated – Jewish *Aufklärung*, the *Haskalah*, and the *Wissenschaft des Judenthums* (and some of the most prominent participants in both intellectual movements took part in the *Affair Firkowicz*). In 1818, two medieval Czech texts – *The Manuscript of the Queen's Court* and *The Judgement of Libusse* – were made available by Václav Hanka (1791–1861), a Slavist. Although they were immediately recognised as forgeries by many people, it took around eighty years to prove that the texts were not genuine. Taking Hanka's lead, one of the men from the Prague *Haskalah*, Marcus Fischer (1788–1858), 'found' the so-called *Ramschak Chronicle*, a history of the Bohemian Jews from the thirteenth century up to his own times.<sup>1</sup>

After Alexander I, the Russian Czar and Grand Duke of Finland (as of 1809) had told his Swedish-speaking Finnish audience that '*mon désir est que vous soyez Finnois*', Finland's intellectuals began to explore the folklore traditions and the native language of their country, and by 1835–1836, Elias Lönnrot (1802–1884) had published the first version of the Finnish-Karelian *Kalevala*,

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<sup>1</sup> See Cermanová 2017. Unfortunately, we cannot go into the complicated problems concerning the discovery of the Old Russian *Slovo o polku Igoreve* here (i.e. *The Tale of Igor's Campaign*, *The Lay of the Host of Igor*). This was found in the late eighteenth century and immediately became the subject of suspicion. A Czech connection existed here, too; compare Keenan 2003. See Jagič 1910, 133–134, 248–251, 304.

the so-called Old Kalevala.<sup>2</sup> It is still questionable how much of the text reflects genuine folklore traditions and how these can be discerned from Lönnrot's own contribution or editing. Nevertheless, the *Kalevala* became the most important part of the Finnish linguistic strife and is the backbone of Finnish identity.

Like the Eastern European 'national literatures', Modern Hebrew literature still did not exist in the first half of the eighteenth century; to remind you, Avraham Mapu (1808–1867) published the first printed novel in Hebrew in 1853 (*Ahavat Zion*, The Love of Zion) and the second one, '*Ayit Tzavua*' (Hypocrite/Coloured Eagle), in 1858.<sup>3</sup> Joseph Perl (1773–1839) in Ternopol/Ternopil, Galicia, published satirical epistolary novels in Hebrew from 1819 onwards up to the 1830s, such as *The Book of a Revealer of Sublime Secrets*. These were really pieces of mind-blowing 'post-Post-Modernism' (before any Modernism came into being).<sup>4</sup> There is actually more than one link binding Joseph Perl and Agnon together, possibly including Agnon's pseudonym as a tribute to Perl.<sup>5</sup> A couple of pages of satire penned by Perl, reminding one of the best pages of Eco's *Baudolino*, sent Firkowicz on a scandalous journey to the Caspian Sea in 1840 (Firkowicz took Perl's satire to be real history and went to the Caspian Sea and the Caucasus to see the 'truth' for himself).

Who exactly was this Firkowicz, though? A 'medieval' character to a large extent, he was a Jewish Karaite educator, translator and religious dignitary. He was also a lobbyist, collector of books and manuscripts, an editor, publisher, businessman and a forger of historical artefacts.<sup>6</sup> An amateur archaeologist and traveller, he was, above all, a writer who created his own Tolkienesque universe, who populated it with tribes, men and histories of his own creation using just his pen and chisel. Firkowicz was a novelist who took the literature of the past as his topic, like Sir Walter Scott, who enjoyed huge popularity at the time, but with the difference that there was no Hebrew literature yet (at least, the literature Firkowicz could understand, since as we have alluded to above, he

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2 Kalevala, taikka Wanhoja Karjalan Runoja Suomen Kansan muinosista ajoista.

3 Mapu worked on his first novel for around twenty years, so one could actually date the beginning of modern Hebrew literature quite early, in the 1830s. This is merely playing with words, though. In the same year, 1858, Mapu complained to Firkowicz about the Russian Censorship Office, which had banned his novel (it was published later, in 1869), and asked for Firkowicz' assistance in dealing with the censors (Russian National Library, Manuscript Department [hereafter RNL OR], f. 946, op. 1, no. 715).

4 See Meir 2013 and other works by Jonatan Meir, for instance.

5 Compare Sinkoff 2003.

6 Shapira 2015.

was unable to grasp the fact that Joseph Perl's satire was just fiction).<sup>7</sup> Hebrew did not have the genre of the historical novel, of course. So Firkowicz worked on his own plots and his literary heroes.

Born in 1787 in Łuck (Lutsk or Lutzk in Volhynia) in a tiny Turkic-speaking community of Jewish religious dissidents, the Karaites, a subject of Rzeczpospolita (the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth), by the age of six Avraham Firkowicz had witnessed how the Russian Empire had entered his town with the Second Partition of Poland. At the time of his death in 1874, he had outlived everyone he had known as a mature man. By the end of his life, he was completely alone, surrounded by the dead, as it were – his friends and, mostly, enemies – and by those ghostly ancient dead 'from the Year of Salvation of Israel' (a hint at Jesus' birth) with whom he had populated the Jewish cemetery of Çufut-Qal'eh in the Crimea, within walking distance of his home, packed with the manuscripts that nowadays constitute the biggest collections of Jewish manuscripts in the world.<sup>8</sup>

In between, Firkowicz lived through the first Russian-Jewish century: from the Partitions of Poland via the emergence of the *Wissenschaft des Judenthums* and the Jewish Reform Movement, secularisation and emergence of new nationalisms, the surge of both the specific Russian-Jewish civilisation and the Hebrew and Yiddish literatures, and beginnings of the Leftist Terrorism in Russia. He died only a few years before the Pogroms of 1881–1882, which prompted the massive Jewish emigration to America, the surge of the first Pales-tinophile (or proto-Zionist) organisations, and the *Auto-Emancipation* (1882) written by Leon Pinsker, the son of his friend and colleague, Šimḥah Pinsker.

While Firkowicz was growing up, the question of whether Jews deserved the rights of a human and a citizen was being debated in many parts of Europe. It was generally felt that certain characteristic features of the Jewish religion (i.e. the Rabbanite version of Judaism) were still preventing civil rights from being granted to the Jews and that they, the Jews, ought to work towards meeting the requirements. This is why the men of the Jewish *Aufklärung* and *Haskalah* sought a suitable past in their search for the 'original', 'uncorrupted' form of Judaism, which would serve as common ground for Jews and Gentiles. Many men in the *maskilic* and Reformist movements imagined they would find it in

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7 Just imagine: you are fifty years old, you read Swift for the first time, it blows your mind and you go to Blefuscu or Lilliput to see things for yourself.

8 The First Firkowicz Collection, the Samaritan Collection of Firkowicz and the Second Firkowicz Collection, all of which are kept in St Petersburg now



the history of Karaism. This tendency found its expression in the correspondence between Mordechai (Isaak Markus) Jost (1793–1860) and the Crimean Karaite tycoon Šimḥah Babowicz (1788/1790?–1855); Firkowicz played a direct role in this as Babowicz's secretary.<sup>9</sup> Similar contacts with the Crimean Karaites, including Firkowicz, were maintained in the 1830s by Bešalel Stern; born in Austrian Galicia, he became the leading Russian *maskil* close to the authorities and was appointed to supervise the famous Odessa Jewish Seminary founded in 1826.<sup>10</sup> This was the benevolent cultural and social climate that surrounded Firkowicz in the 1820s–1830s.

In 1822, Scottish missionaries were given a free hand to work in Southern Russia and two societies were established there under the patronage of Czar Alexander I: The Russian Biblical Society and The Society of Israeli Christians. Both were headed by Prince Golitsyn, whose wife was deeply influenced by Barbara-Juliana Krüdener, a mystic who was close to Alexander I and had convinced him to create the *Holy Alliance*. She was also a strong believer in the idea that all Russians and Europeans originally came from the Israelite Lost Tribes.<sup>11</sup> The Golitsyns owned an estate in Qarasubazar (now Belogorsk) in the Crimea, the town of Babowicz, and Firkowicz first met Krüdener there, probably in 1823. In parallel, at the turn of the nineteenth century, Anglo-Israelism – an inner-Anglican, sect-like movement – arose in England. Anglo-Israelism went hand-in-hand with conversionist efforts, which were spurred on in 1809 by the foundation of the London Society for Promoting Christianity among the Jews. To achieve this end, the Philo-Judaeon Society was established in 1826. Besides the conversionist effort, Anglo-Israelism was closely connected with the search for the ancient fatherland of the Israelite ancestors of the English, the Goths, which was supposed to be in Southern Russia (roughly, what is now Southern Ukraine).

In the mid-1820s, Southern Russia and the Crimea briefly became a Mecca for English and Scottish missionaries, most of whom were believers in Anglo-

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<sup>9</sup> This correspondence was translated into Crimean Turkic a few years later and published in Gözleve; see Walfish 2003; Shapira 2003b.

<sup>10</sup> At the Europeanised city of Odessa, Galician Jews, mostly from Brody and Tarnopol, formed an important circle of *maskilim*, some of whom were also associated with the Reform Movement. See Zipperstein 1985 and Bartal 2011.

<sup>11</sup> Cf. Ley 1994 and Grečanaja 1998. Krüdener herself was deeply influenced by the German mysticist H. Jung-Stilling, who claimed that all the Europeans are, in fact, of Israelite origin and that the Messiah should be looked for in Russia. His commentary on the Apocalypse of John, translated into Russian as *Pobednaja povest' xristianskoj very*, was published in 1815 and had a great impact on the growing of Judaising Russian sects (cf. Lvov 2004, esp. 72, n. 39).

Israelism, i.e. in a connection between the Samaritan Exile, the transfer of the Jews to Scythia (Southern Russia and the Crimea), and their association with the Goths, later to become the British.<sup>12</sup> The title of a book by one of these missionaries, full of valuable information, including some details about the Karaites and their texts, speaks for itself: E. Henderson, *Biblical Researches and Travels in Russia*, London, 1826.<sup>13</sup> The Anglo-Israelite ideas were also propagated by Dr Moses Margoliouth (1819–1871), a Polish Jew who became an Anglican minister near London, in his *History of the Jews in Great Britain* (1846). Margoliouth claimed the authenticity of some forged Hebrew inscriptions from England and Spain that were allegedly very old. Firkowicz was involved with some of these missionaries, who gave him printed Hebrew Bibles bound together with a Hebrew translation of the New Testament<sup>14</sup> to be distributed among Jews. Firkowicz bartered these printed copies for ancient Jewish manuscripts deemed by their owners to be sacred documents, but of no value any longer as no-one really needed them any more.<sup>15</sup> Jews tore off the Hebrew New Testament and kept the printed Old Testament. Apparently, Firkowicz also shared some of the missionaries' views (he held the *maskilim* of Brody and the Scottish missionaries in high esteem even decades later),<sup>16</sup> and in a text written by him in Russian,<sup>17</sup> he claimed he 'recognised' remnants of Slavic words in Hebrew texts he had allegedly found 'in the Khazar city of Mangup' in the Crimea – evidence of the

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**12** Sharon Turner's *History of the Anglo-Saxons*, which was first published in 1805, was essential to early Anglo-Israelist propaganda. The movement was formally established after Brothers had published his *Correct Account of the Invasion of England by the Saxons, Showing the English Nation to be Descendants of the Ten Lost Tribes* (1822), and in 1845, J. Wilson gave the movement its present form with his *Our Israelitish Origin*. Cf. Godbey 1930.

**13** Henderson noted that Karaite Rabbis were acquainted with the Talmud and the New Testament, and he saw a copy of the New Testament on the shelf of the Karaite Rabbi of Luck c. 1821 (the Rabbi was also acquainted with its contents); see Henderson 1826, 320, 330. Was it Firkowicz, by any chance? Henderson and Patterson actively distributed New Testaments among the Rabbanites and Karaites of Luck in the 1820s. According to their reports, the Karaites were particularly enthusiastic about being given them (cf. Kizilov 2003, 70, 243, n. 820).

**14** See the previous note about Henderson's remark about the acquaintance of the Karaite Rabbis with the NT.

**15** To allude to Hoffman/Cole 2011. Jewish holy books or fragments of them no more in use (old, torn, etc.) are put in a *genizah*, a kind of grave for books; it is a sort of Limbo: the books are not thrown away really, but they are still dispensed with. Such *genizoth* (pl.) became sources for many manuscript collections in modern times; the Firkowicz Collection in St Petersburg and the Cairo Geniza are the best examples.

**16** See Shapira 2007, 326–327.

**17** See Vernadsky Ukrainian National Library, Jewish MSS OPI 1210.

common ancestry of Jews and the inhabitants of Southern Russia (Ukraine). This short text is interesting as it reveals Firkowicz's interest in Sarmatism, which was characteristic of Polish *Szlachta*'s ideas, and it argued that the population of what had been Poland had non-Slavic origins.<sup>18</sup> He also stated that the present inhabitants of Southern Russia have more in common physically with the Semites than with the Japhetides, so the Malorossians (Ukrainians) should be Semitic.<sup>19</sup>

In the autumn of 1839, Firkowicz began his excavations in the Crimea, mostly at the Jewish cemetery of Çufut-Qal'eh ('Jewtown'), a Jewish Karaite suburb of Bâkhçe-Sarây, the former capital of the Crimean Tatar Khans of the Girây dynasty, unearthing hidden parts of the tombstone inscriptions.

One of the tomb inscriptions he found read 'Isaac Sangaru P"G' (צחק סנגרו' פ"ג). The tomb inscription was meant to be that of the Jewish scholar (*ḥaber*), the collocutor with the Khazar king in the *Book of the Kuzari*, written by Rabbi Judah Halevi (c. 1075–1141). According to the book (which is a series of theological and philosophical dialogues), this *ḥaber* had the king converted to the true religion of Judaism.

In the Hebrew literature that followed the *Book of the Kuzari*, the anonymous *ḥaber* was identified with a person by the name of R. Isaac Sangari, about whom nothing else was known. One of the first people to use this name was Nachmanides (1194–1270) in about 1263.<sup>20</sup>

At that time, the sources available to Firkowicz on the Khazars would have been the following: the *Book of the Kuzari* (as it seems from the list of books possessed by Firkowicz in the 1830s, he owned a Venice edition of the work); the short version of the epistle sent by Joseph, the king of the Khazars, to Ḥasday Ibn Shaprut, as published in Constantinople by 'Aqrish around 1577;

<sup>18</sup> Cf. Shapira 2009 as well.

<sup>19</sup> A fragment written by Joseph Perl (a parody, a satire, we remember) and dealing with the Khazars was published in a Russian translation in a publication by Moscow University in 1846 as if it were a real historical work (Gartenštejn 1847). In the note on p. 3 of this publication, Gartenštejn speculates whether the source of the 'Malorossian' (Ukrainian) word *каранець* ('bedside lamp') is connected to the title of the Khazar ruler, Kagan. Firkowicz was familiar with this publication and went a few steps further.

<sup>20</sup> Jellinek 1872; cf. Dunlop 1954, 122. Sangari was also mentioned by Shem-Tov ibn Shem Tov in 1430; see Dunlop, *ibid.* Quite strangely, R. Isaac ben Samuel of Acre (1250–1340) confused this R. Isaac Sangari with R. Isaac of SRNYGWB (Čermihiv in Ukraine), who was active in Norman England; cf. Abrams 1997, 335, 338–339. I cannot prove my hunch yet, but I believe that this tradition was known to Firkowicz somehow and added something to his own confusion.

and the information from the Russian chronicles on the Khazars that was widely discussed in the Russian newspapers of the 1830s. In his book, *Massah u-Meribah* (1838), Firkowicz still considered the *haber* from Judah Halevi's *Book of the Kuzari* as a Rabbanite Jew and an enemy of Karaism.<sup>21</sup> In 1838, Firkowicz did not yet know the Jewish scholar by his name or anything about his Karaism. Firkowicz's theological approach to this *haber* changed between 1838 and the end of 1839, and on 15 September 1848, Firkowicz would write the following in a Russian report that he delivered to the Society for the Study of the Antiquities of Odessa:<sup>22</sup>

This book [the *Book of the Kuzari*] was edited [!] in 740 by Isaac Sangari, under the title 'A Dissertation [*dissertaciju*] with [!] the King of the Khazars on the Foundation of a Pure Biblical Religion'. The book found its way to one of the Talmudists by the name of Yuda Levi [!] some 400 years later,<sup>23</sup> and he [i.e. Judah Halevy] reworked it for his own needs. However, at the time of Sangari, that sect [*etago sektarstva*, i.e. Rabbanite Judaism] did not exist yet in Taurida [i.e. the Crimea and New Russia/South Russia].<sup>24</sup>

The *Book of Kuzari* connects the conversion of the king to Judaism with a place called Warsân, or Warshân.<sup>25</sup> This spelling is similar in Hebrew to Krsân (erroneously written as Hurâsân in some of the versions of the *Book of the Kuzari*), and this name, in turn, is close to Koršun,<sup>26</sup> the former Russian name for ancient Chersones (Aqyar, Sevastopol). Although he was familiar with these forms, Firkowicz was inconsistent in the way he spelt them.<sup>27</sup> He derived the ancient

<sup>21</sup> On p. 136, quoted by Harkavy 1876, p. 205, n. 2.

<sup>22</sup> The translation and remarks in square brackets are mine. The abbreviated report on the activities of A. Firkowicz over ten years, written in Alupka (in the Crimea), comprises 25 pages (12+13 pages): RNL OR, f. 946, op. 1 no. 32.

<sup>23</sup> Judah Halevy says in his book that the dispute described by him took place 400 years ago; since he died c. 1141, the dispute must have taken place c. 740.

<sup>24</sup> He also mentions a number of scrolls of the Pentateuch (*svertkov*) that the king of the Khazars donated to the synagogue of Sulkhat.

<sup>25</sup> See Shapira 2005 on this name.

<sup>26</sup> One should also note that in Firkowicz's mother tongue (a Turkic-Qıpçaq language, 'Karaim') in the Lutsk dialect, the difference between *s* and *š* was eroded; see Shapira 2002, 479–480 and n. 14.

<sup>27</sup> In his letter from 1839 to his patron, Šimḥah Babowicz, cited by Deinard 1878, 28: 'for the Lord put into the heart of the king of the Khazars that he should go to the forests of *Chersones* (*krswn*)' and he found there in a cave Israelites who preserve the Sabbath in secret in the year four thousand and five hundred, and made a *korespondencje* with those people, and he, with the men of his army became circumcised and accepted upon themselves the religion of Israel [...].’ Also see Deinard 1878, 35. The allusions to the *Book of the Kuzari* are obvious.

Russian name for the city, that is, Koršun, from the name of the ancient Persian king, Cyrus (Kóresh in Hebrew), who was later to acquire a place for himself in Firkowicz's theories about the appearance of the Karaites in the Crimea. According to him, Cyrus gave the Karaites the Crimea and they named the city of Chersones/Koršun after the king. At the same time, according to the Russian chronicle known as the Chronicle of Nestor, or *Povest' vremennyx let*, the Prince of Kiev, Volodymir/Vladimir, was converted to Christianity<sup>28</sup> in Chersones. Firkowicz was aware of a Karaite 'tradition' connecting Volodymir (which Firkowicz spelt in this Ukrainian form) to Isaac Sangari. In the introduction to his book, *Aḥnei Zikkaron* ('Monument Stones'),<sup>29</sup> Firkowicz quotes a 'tradition' by Eliahu Yefet, one of the leaders of the community of Çufut-Qal'eh, saying that Sangari was buried in Chersones.<sup>30</sup> Whatever the case, Firkowicz was determined to search for Sangari's tomb in Chersones, but the area had been declared a closed military zone with access prohibited to Jews due to the works in the naval port. If he could not have it found in Chersones, why not try another place? He looked for the tomb in Mangup in the Crimea, but in vain.

However, if one is determined enough to find something, then it will be found eventually. Ultimately, in the autumn of 1839, Firkowicz discovered the tomb in the ancient section of the cemetery of Çufut-Qal'eh. The information on his quest is based entirely on what he himself related years later, both in his book, *Aḥnei Zikkaron*, and in reports and letters kept in his personal archive in St Petersburg. For the time being, though, there is no reason to doubt Firkowicz's early efforts to locate the tomb of 'the converter of the Khazars' outside Çufut-Qal'eh.

In Firkowicz' opinion, the fact that the gravestone of 'Isaac Sangaru P"G' was found in the Karaite cemetery proved that this *ḥaber* was a Karaite and therefore that the Khazars who were converted became Karaites rather than Rabbanites.

It is noteworthy that in his will, Firkowicz asked to be interred next to 'the tomb' of this *ḥaber*,<sup>31</sup> but his request was not granted; when he died in 1874 (on Sunday, 22 Sivan 5634), he was buried alongside his beloved wife, Ḥannah, close to the entrance of Çufut-Qal'eh Cemetery and in a Rabbanite manner, facing eastwards. Yet when his book, *Aḥnei Zikkaron*, was published in 1872, the

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<sup>28</sup> This was actually his second conversion; this one was to the Byzantine Christian faith, as he had been converted to the Roman variety previously by German monks and priests.

<sup>29</sup> Wilna 1872, 6–7.

<sup>30</sup> Cf. Firkowicz's letter to Shelomoh Beim quoted in Harkavi 1876, 266–267.

<sup>31</sup> RNL OR, f. 946, op. 1, no. 490.

area close to the tombstone of the *haber* was considered an honourable place to be buried (we have a large tomb inscription of an important lady buried next to this *haber* in 1873, mentioning the *haber*'s tomb).

In his reports about his discoveries, which he sent to the *maskils* of Europe, Firkowicz first insisted that the inscription on the tomb of this *haber* read YṢḤQ SNGRW P"Ḡ, i.e. something like *Sangaro*, not *Sangari*. Western scholars recognised quite quickly that this form was the result of a misprint in Johannes Buxtorf's Basle edition of the *Book of Kuzari* published in 1660. In addition, compare the title of Buxtorf's Basle edition of 1660: **לִּבְרוּךְ** *Liber Cosri* [...] *habitam ante nongentos annos, inter Regem Cosareorum & R. Isaacum Sangarum Judæum* [...] (the emphasis is mine). It is possible that Firkowicz *also* interpreted the Latin case ending as an indication of a u originally.

When the misprint was spotted, Firkowicz claimed that the name was actually the date of the scholar's death. The name of the deceased was, indeed, SNGRY, he agreed, but on the tombstone the reading was SNGRW (which could mean something like 'his/His defender' in Hebrew<sup>32</sup>), and the year of death of Isaac Sangaro was 767 CE: YṢḤQ = 208 + SNGRY = 323, in total 531; the difference between the letter *yod* and the letter *waw* is 4, thus making 527, which corresponds to 767 CE.<sup>33</sup> Scholars have already noted the strangeness of such a method of dating. It did not stop there, though: Firkowicz seems to have filled the lower part of the letter *waw* (י) to make it look like the letter *yod* (י'). The further history of this inscription is like an intricate detective story and is too long to be repeated here, unfortunately; see my earlier discussions of it.<sup>34</sup>

Firkowicz himself was openly accused of forgery by eyewitnesses while he was still alive.<sup>35</sup> Were his deeds unusual, though? Not necessarily, I would argue. In the late eighteenth to early nineteenth century, Alexander Sulakadzev (d. 1832), a Russian aristocrat of Georgian extraction, was known for both his impressive collection of antiquities and for his insolent forgeries, for instance. Sulakadzev's private *Museum* contained such bizarre objects as the stone on which the Moscow Prince Dmitrij Donskoj had rested after the battle against Mamai, the Golden Horde pretender on Kulikovo Polje (1380); the helmet of Dobrynja Nikitič, a fictional hero in Russian *byliny*, or epic folk songs; the Greek *Nomokanon*, which had survived the burning of the Alexandrine Library; and

<sup>32</sup> The Hebrew word is derived from Greek συνήγορος, meaning 'interlocutor'. Firkowicz did not know that, of course, but what a sense of the language he had!

<sup>33</sup> Beginning of the fifth Jewish millennium.

<sup>34</sup> See Shapira 2002–2003; Shapira 2003c; Shapira 2004a.

<sup>35</sup> See Dinker 1869–1870, 129 and Grigorovič 1874 for more details.

various other *exotica* as well. However, Sulakadzev did collect some genuine manuscripts, too, aside from indulging in forgeries. One of his genuine manuscripts is the *sinodik* of Ivan IV from Valaam Monastery, kept now in Kuopio, Finland. Nevertheless, Sulakadzev made many additions to the *sinodik*, with one of the interpolations indicating that he was a relative of the poet Deržavin.<sup>36</sup> In a way, Sulakadzev tried to create the pre-Christian Slavic epos by his own hand and rewrite – and occasionally correct – its history.

In 1840, a Slavic idol was found in the River Zbruč, dividing Austrian Galicia from the Russian Empire (the river is a day-long journey from Firkowicz' home, Łuck). This idol was used as an artefact explaining the Slavic pagan religion for almost two centuries and is still kept in Cracow's Archaeological Museum. However, it is now regarded as an exercise in historical fiction by the Polish romantic poet Tymon Zaborowski (1799–1828);<sup>37</sup> money and politics were not involved in forging this idol, though, just the love of a young woman and the past.

In contrast to this, a lucrative industry did actually exist in the Crimea and Odessa in the 1850s–1870s while Firkowicz was still alive, forging Hellenistic coins and inscriptions and Scythian objects, such as the tiara of a Scythian king made by a Jewish forger from Odessa and sold to the Louvre.

Now we shall make a brief digression to the Americas, after which we shall return to Europe and the Middle East. Among other things, Dom Pedro II (1825–1891), the second and last Emperor of Brazil, was a prominent Hebraist renowned for his Portuguese and French translations of Classical Hebrew poetry. The Emperor's well-known philo-Semitism made Jewish things fancy in Brazil.<sup>38</sup> In 1872 (and then in 1876), Dom Pedro II visited the Land of Israel. While he was in the Orient, a broken stone tablet was found in the tropical rainforest in Paraíba State in Brazil. The stone contains what was claimed to be a Phoenician inscription, telling of the arrival of the Sidonian Canaanites, who had embarked from Ezion-Geber to the Red Sea in the nineteenth year of King Hiram, and who sailed around Africa in ten ships for two years, travelling to 'New Island' or 'Iron Island'. Now, the word for 'new' and 'iron' used in the

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<sup>36</sup> On Sulakadzev's manuscripts, see Pypin 1898, 1–22; Speranskij 1956, 44–46, 62–74, 90–101; Mazon 1940, 76, 77, 162, 217; Lotman 1962; Smirnov 1979; Kozlov 1999. On the falsification of historical documents in Russia in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, see Kozlov 1996; a student of the 'Firkowicz Problem' will find a great deal of corresponding points there. Also cf. Kozlov 2001, where the forger's mind is explored; similarities to Firkowicz' ways are not only astonishing, but also quite amusing.

<sup>37</sup> Komar/Khamaiko 2011.

<sup>38</sup> For more on Dom Pedro II, see Williams 1937; Barman 1999; Da Costa 2000.

inscription is derived from the Semitic root  $\text{HDD}$ . The forger, with a forger's twist, implied that another word was hidden under this word, namely Brazil, presumably derived from Hebrew *barzel*, meaning 'iron'.

In fact, Brazil owes its name to a very hard variety of tree, but the idea of a mythical island called Hy-Brasil (which sounds similar to the Hebrew for 'Island of Iron') is much older: it appeared somewhere in the Atlantic on European maps drawn by Angelino Dilcert (1325), by Andrea Bianco (1436) and on the 'Catalan Chart' (1480), long before Brazil was discovered.<sup>39</sup>

Don Pedro and his adviser, the head of the National Museum, and a Hebraist, Ladislaus Netto, turned to Ernest Renan for guidance. In a letter to Dom Pedro written on 6 September 1873, the latter declared that the text found in Paraíba was a forgery. Meanwhile, one Francisco Pinto allegedly found over 20 caves along the Amazon deep in the Brazilian jungle in 1872 and discovered about 250 Phoenician-like inscriptions on the rocks. He acquainted Netto with his findings. In 1874, the Halle Professor Konstantin Schlottmann wrote rather favourably on the authenticity of the Paraíba text while attacking Clermont-Ganneau for his criticism of Moses Wilhelm Shapira's *Moabítica*<sup>40</sup> (cf. below). Gossip named the alleged forger of the Paraíba text Dom Pedro himself, his secretary Ferdinand Koch or Ladislau Netto, all of whom were Hebraists.

Amidst all the gossip, Dom Pedro went to the Third Congress of Orientalists in 1876, which was organised by St Petersburg University. Daniel Chwolson made an important presentation there about the longer version of the 'Reply of the Khazar king Joseph to the Letter by Ḥasday Ibn Shaphrut', the version Abraham Harkavy had discovered in Firkowicz' papers in 1874.

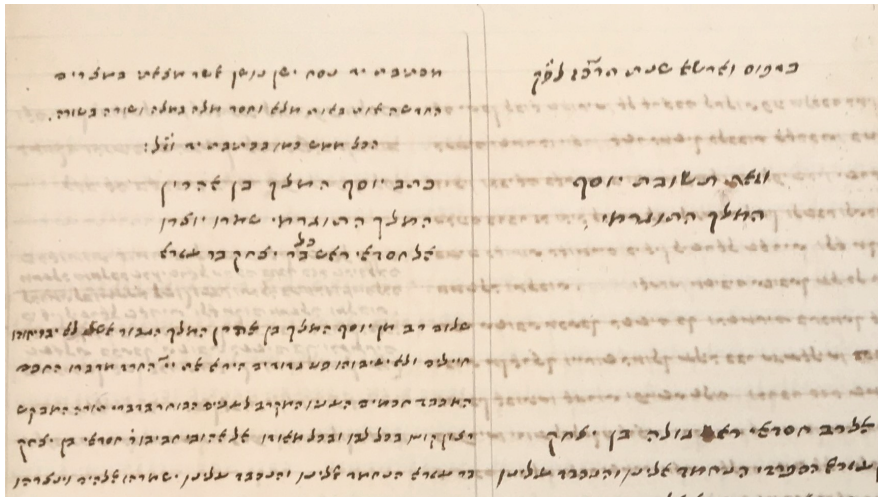
I personally found the text of the longer version with Firkowicz' notes in August 2018, along with a remark about the long version from New Cairo (which Firkowicz had visited in 1863/1864) (see Fig. 1). Another version of the same text by Firkowicz is kept in Kiev.

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<sup>39</sup> Obviously, one should compare the account of the Necho expedition and those of the Bible: 'And King Solomon made a navy of ships in Ezion-geber, which is beside Eloth, on the shore of the Red Sea, in the land of Edom. And Hiram sent in the navy his servants, shipmen that had knowledge of the sea, with the servants of Solomon. And they came to Ophir, and fetched from thence gold, four hundred and twenty talents, and brought it to King Solomon' (I Kings 9:26–28; cf. II Chronicles 2:2–12, 13–18; II Chronicles 8, beginning verse 8:17–18: 'Then went Solomon to Ezion-geber, and to Eloth, at the sea side in the land of Edom. And Hiram sent him by the hands of his servants ships, and servants that had knowledge of the sea; and they went with the servants of Solomon to Ophir, and took thence four hundred and fifty talents of gold, and brought them to King Solomon'; cf. II Chron. 9:20, 22, 27).

<sup>40</sup> Schlottmann 1874.





**Fig. 1:** Firkowicz' collation of the short and longer versions of the 'Reply of the Khazar king Joseph to the Letter by Ḥasday Ibn Shaphrut'.

On 6 September 1876, Dom Pedro II went to the Imperial Public Library in order to examine the Hebrew and Samaritan scrolls and manuscripts in the Firkowicz Collections and spent two hours there with Abraham Harkavy (whose name the Emperor misspelt as 'Garkavine' in his diary), talking about the dates of Hebrew manuscripts in Firkowicz' collections (while demonstrating his understanding of the details of the debate surrounding the ancient history of the Crimean Jews) and discussing the newly found Moabite inscription of King Mesha'.<sup>41</sup>

During his stay in St Petersburg, Dom Pedro II met Ephraim Deinard, Firkowicz' former secretary and now a critic of the old man's ways, and heard about Firkowicz' misdeeds from him. The Emperor then left for the Crimea: on 7–9 September 1876, Dom Pedro II visited Kyiv, where he strolled along the main street, Khreshchatyk, then came to Podol/Podil, known for its large Jewish population. After that he proceeded to the Crimea, where he visited Çufut-Qal'eh and its cemetery. He spent several minutes at Firkowicz' tomb apparently.

<sup>41</sup> The Mesha' Inscription was found in 1868 and acquired for the Louvre in 1870. In 1871, the Temple Stele was found in Jerusalem. Both of them have inspired numerous forgeries since then.

On 4 December 1876, the Emperor was in Jerusalem and one of the first things he did before going to any holy place was to go the shop run by ‘the famous Safira, whose face does not show the truth, and who looks like a Schliemann without any fanaticism to me – a bit serious’.<sup>42</sup> This ‘Safira’ was, of course, Moses Wilhelm Shapira (1830–1884), a baptised Jew born in Kamienets-Podolsk. He came to the Holy Land in the footsteps of his very observant father, a pupil of the Vilna Gaon (1720–1797), in 1856, at the age of 25. In Jerusalem, however, ‘Moyshe Schapiro’ converted to Anglicanism, lived in Christ Church near the Jaffa Gate, and in 1861 he set up a shop in Christian Quarter Road for the Christian pilgrim tourists. The place, which is now under different management, still sells books.

Moses Wilhelm Shapira became one of the leading dealers on the antiquities market. His case is a very complicated one, but it is nonetheless important in the context of forgeries of historical and religious Jewish documents. Although we know that Shapira was engaged in different acts of petty forgery, such as producing souvenirs said to be authentic Moabite statuettes for tourists (and selling them to the British Museum as well), it was only after the Qumran Scrolls were unearthed that scholars realised the Palaeo-Hebrew ‘Leathers of Moab’, which contained a different text of Deuteronomy, might well be genuine. Shapira suggested that the British Museum should buy them from him, but it was rejected by it as a forgery.<sup>43</sup> We know for certain that there was *some* contact between Shapira and Firkowicz in 1864, but no specific importance can be attributed to this; Firkowicz visited Shapira’s antique shop in Jerusalem and possibly acquired something there, but that is all. We should bear in mind that Shapira was purely a businessman and never pretended to be a scholar, unlike Firkowicz. His alleged forgeries appealed to religious feelings and were not presumed to be of any particular ‘historical’ value.<sup>44</sup>

As Joseph Perl suggested in 1838, Firkowicz went to the Caucasus and the Caspian Sea in 1840 to look for Khazar remnants. He encountered the Iranian-speaking ‘Mountain Jews’ there, whom he described in a way similar to how

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<sup>42</sup> Faingold 1999, 143: ‘[...] do célebre Safira, cuja fisionomia não denota veracidade, e parece-me um Schliemann sem fanatismo, pouco sério’.

<sup>43</sup> See Clermont-Ganneau 1885; Rabinowicz 1956; Goshen-Gottstein 1956; Mansoor 1958; for the whole episode, see Deuel 1965, chapter 20; Allegro 1965; Heide 2012.

<sup>44</sup> It is even possible that the sensational discoveries of the mid-nineteenth century, including the ‘Derbend and Mejelis Documents’, actually inspired forgers. According to Clermont-Ganneau, Shapira’s leathers were the lower parts of the Torah scrolls (just like some of Firkowicz’ forgeries; cf. Shapira 2004b).

medieval Jewish travellers and adventurers imagined the valiant members of the Lost Tribes. This is how the myth of the 'Mountain Jews' as a 'militant Israel' was born.<sup>45</sup> Following Firkowicz' descriptions in search of an alternative to Jewish misery and deprivation, Eastern European Jews became fascinated with the Mountain Jews, who were said to have exotic biblical names and be ignorant of the Talmud, which is exactly what some of the *maskilim* and Reformists wanted Jews to become.

While at Derbend on the Caspian Sea in 1841, Firkowicz acquired a huge leather Torah scroll written in a Persian post-Mongol hand (now MS Evr I A 1 at the Russian National Library in St Petersburg). This Torah scroll was sold or given to Firkowicz because it was no longer wanted: brought to the area from Iran in the early nineteenth century by an Iranian Jew by the name of Dimašqi ('of Damascus'), who tried to sell it there, the scroll was found to be improper in terms of Jewish law.<sup>46</sup> Nobody needed it, but it was impossible to throw it away since it was a sacred object, however 'improper' it might be. It was on the last folio of this manuscript that Firkowicz 'found' the so-called 'Derbend Document', a lengthy marginal note of sensational historical character. The contents of this 'document', which seems to have been written by Firkowicz himself, relate to Hebrews of the Judaeon Kingdom who came to the help of their Israeli brethren in Samaria and were taken with them to Media (in Hebrew *Maday*) in Assyrian captivity. There they learnt the Median language. Media was known to the Jews from the Bible, where it appears together with Persia. The Crimean Karaites called the Crimean Tatars 'Maday', i.e. Medes (but the actual meaning was 'ruffians, idiots'). The language spoken in the nineteenth century in ancient Media, which is now Iranian Azerbaijan, was Turkic, which is very close to a variety of Crimean Tatar. This explains why the author of the 'document' thought that the 'Median' learnt by Judaeans in their captivity was a kind of Azeri.

Cambyzes subsequently gave the Crimea to these Judaeans as a gift and they taught the local inhabitants their 'Median'. This is why the Crimean Tatars, or 'Madays', speak what they speak. The Khazars also appear on the scene in this 'document': Prince Volodymir (the Saint) asks the Karaite prince David of the Crimea to send him rabbis to teach him the true religion (this motif is appar-

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<sup>45</sup> Cf. Shapira 2006a.

<sup>46</sup> As appears in a note in a thick notebook written by Firkowicz himself, on an unknown date. The notebook was read thoroughly by Harkavy, as is evident from his handwritten notes, and compared to the text of the printed *Introduction of Abney Zikkaron* published by A. Firkowicz in Hebrew in Vilnius in 1872.

ently taken from the Russian Primary Chronicle, albeit with a wrong date, as was common in the 1840s).<sup>47</sup>

This concoction became one of the cornerstones of Firkowicz' theories, together with the tombstone inscriptions from the Crimea, where Firkowicz 'found' graves of the people mentioned in this text and forged colophons and marginalia supposedly written by the people buried in Çufut-Qal'eh and Mangup on old biblical manuscripts he actually collected in various places in the 1840s.<sup>48</sup>

Firkowicz published his book *Abnei Zikkaron* ('The Stones of Remembrance') in Vilnius in 1872, almost thirty-three years after he had begun to study tombstone inscriptions. The book is a collection of Hebrew inscriptions from the Crimea with an extensive introduction, which is actually his autobiography from 1830 till 1848. Even the title of the book was plagiarised – from *Abnei Zikkaron*, Prague, 1841, by Samuel David Luzzatto (1800–1865), in which tomb inscriptions from the cemetery of Toledo were published. In Firkowicz' version, there are 564 inscriptions from the Çufut-Qal'eh cemetery. Having compared the drafts of the book with the printed book, I can say that Firkowicz was aware of far more inscriptions than those he published; apparently, he was forced to reduce the volume of the book. Around four hundred of the inscriptions published still exist in the cemetery. Dozens have been lost since then, and a few never actually existed, it seems, but were merely created by Firkowicz 'on paper'.<sup>49</sup> In quite a few of the cases, he created duplicates of the same inscription, publishing them twice and ascribing them to different dates, with gaps of hundreds of years.

Of all those inscriptions that were published, about a third of them (around 160) have a date formed from a Hebrew biblical verse (a chronogram). Almost all of the tombstone inscriptions that still exist now were published by Firkowicz. These inscriptions are characterised by the fact that counting the date depends on the purely arbitrary choice of the word whose letters are to be

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<sup>47</sup> The chronology of the earlier part of the Russian Primary Chronicle (see Chadwick 1946; Cross/Sherbowitz-Wentzor 1953) is all wrong; this fact was established by scholars as late as the early twentieth century.

<sup>48</sup> For more on Firkowicz, see Shapira 2008, 1–81 and Shapira 2003a; on Firkowicz in the Caucasus, see Shapira 2006a; on the 'Derbend Document' and its 'twin', see Shapira 2007 (or Shapira 2006b for a shorter version). On other documents forged by Firkowicz, see Shapira 2004b.

<sup>49</sup> From the period between 1607 and 1698, only fifteen inscribed tombstones are missing, while from the period between the years 262 and 1178 CE (dated thus according to Firkowicz, of course), 86 inscribed tombstones are missing.

counted to make the date since Hebrew letters are also used as digits. This creates considerable leeway for ‘forgery’. As for the ‘normal’ Hebrew dates, they look like  $\text{ט"תשע"ט}/\text{TŠ}^{\text{‘T}}$ , or  $\text{ט"התשע"ט}/\text{HTŠ}^{\text{‘T}}$ , which stand for [20]18/9 and 2018/9 CE respectively. In the second example, H/ה can be omitted since we know which Hebrew millennium we are in: H/ה, when appearing as the first letter in the date, stands for 5,000, while D/ד in the same position stands for 4,000 (so changing H/ה to D/ד, we get to the previous millennium and can make a date look 1,000 years older).

T/ת stands for 400; Š/ש stands for 300; R/ר stands for 200, and Q/ק for 100. For instance, HŠLG/השלג means 5000 (H) + 300 (Š) + 30 (L) + 3 (G), that is, 5333 = 1572/3 CE. However, the Hebrew letters H/ה and T/ת are sometimes very similar in writing, and in many cases, Firkowicz changed H to T, thus gaining 600 more years than the real date: T cannot count for thousands, unlike H; if H is not the first digit of the date, the reader should assume that the thousands are simply implied, not indicated; HŠLG/השלג changed to TŠLG/תשלג becomes 400+300+30+3, thus 733, and it is up to the reader to decide which millennium is meant.

Here is another example: HT means 5400 (= 1639/40 CE), where H stands for the thousands; 1839/40 was the Jewish year of HTR (5600); the changed date TT would be equal to 800, and without the thousand unit it would belong to the former Jewish millennium, 1039/40 CE. Dates beginning with HQ belong to the years after 1339/40; dates beginning with HR belong to the years after 1439/40; dates beginning with HŠ belong to the years after 1539/40. Another confusing point is that the first H can sometimes be understood as the Hebrew definite article and not as a digit.

Among the existing tomb inscriptions published by Firkowicz and dated by the usual way of substituting Hebrew letters for dates, 124 have a date beginning in HT (5400 or 400), 33 beginning in TT (800), two beginning in HR (5200 or 200), 12 beginning in TR (600), 19 in HŠ (5300 or 300), 46 beginning in TŠ (700), 81 beginning in TQ (500), and one (and possibly two more) beginning in HQ (5100 or 100). Using this technique, Firkowicz changed the dates of the deaths of dozens of Crimean Jews from the seventeenth/eighteenth to the seventh/twelfth centuries, which supported his fancies about Karaite history on the Crimean peninsula.

In several cases, Firkowicz published inscriptions changing the names of the deceased or parts of the dates, adding or skipping words or even whole

lines;<sup>50</sup> only in a couple of cases did he (or his associates) create a completely new inscription (the inscriptions that were forged are very short, sometimes just a word without the date).

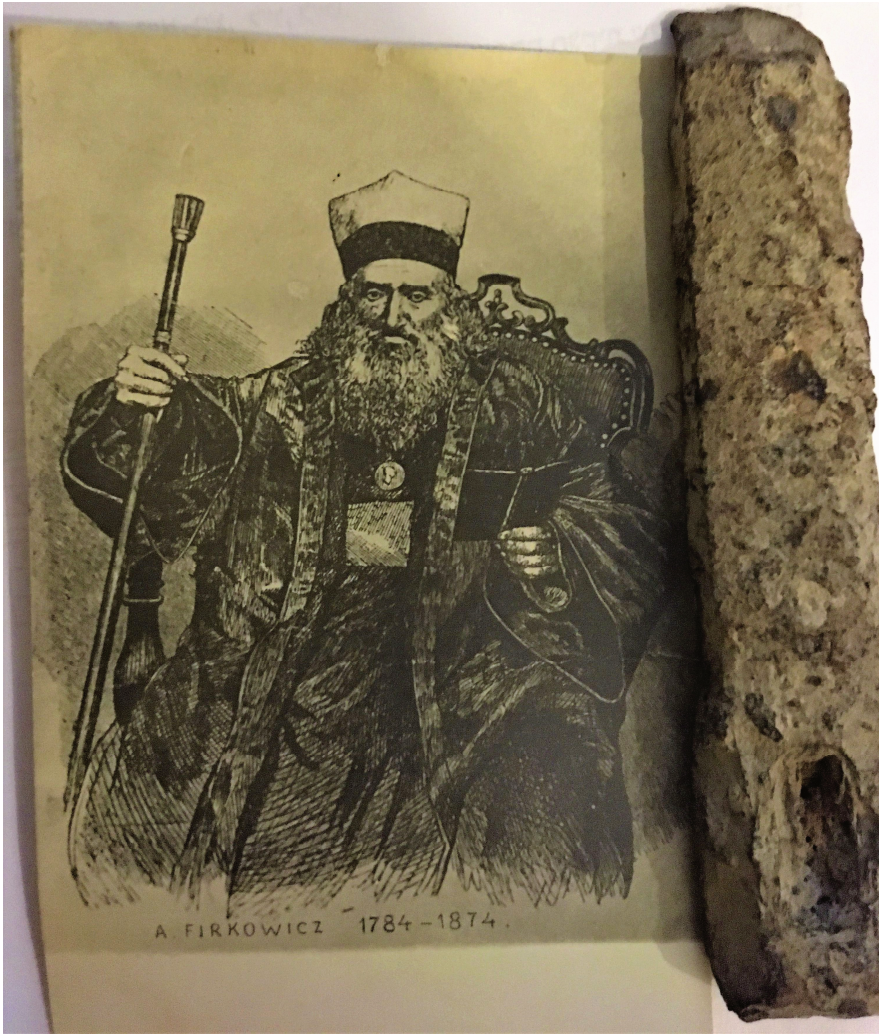
Firkowicz created criss-cross connections between the persons whose tomb inscriptions he had changed and forged, supplying them with new biographies, ascribing them books they had never written and in many cases forging their signatures on biblical scrolls as well as texts they had supposedly written. His forgeries were politically motivated in most cases, but sometimes he simply seemed to enjoy creating such inscriptions with his chisel (*‘Meißelfreude’*, one could say [Fig. 2]).

Abraham Firkowicz could possibly be considered a writer of fantasy literature working with real objects at a time when modern secular Hebrew literature did not even exist (aside from Perl, the post-modernist), let alone have any kind of genres. A Jewish Tolkien with a chisel before there was any modern Jewish literature at all, willing to be buried next to his literary hero in a Jurassic Park of his own making – what a role!

So who is the greater post-modernist? Perl, who, no doubt choking with laughter, sent Firkowicz to look for Khazar farmers near the Caspian Sea, or Firkowicz, who envisaged he would be buried among his literary heroes one day?

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<sup>50</sup> This type of forgery is especially attested in the case of the ‘Yerushalmi family’, which Firkowicz invented completely; see Shapira 2008, 218–232; compare Shapira 2004a.



**Fig. 2:** A picture of Abraham Firkowicz next to his (?) chisel found near a tomb at Çufut-Qal'eh (courtesy of Dr. Mikhail Kizilov).

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