

## Karaite chronography of the 16<sup>th</sup>–19<sup>th</sup> centuries from the Crimea and the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth

**Golda Akhiezer**

Ariel University

### **Abstract**

This article focuses on a genre of Karaite historical writing of the Crimea and Poland-Lithuania – the chronography of which has never been researched by scholars. The object of this study is to analyze the main characteristics of this chronography. This genre existed in the Crimea in the 16<sup>th</sup>-19<sup>th</sup> centuries and supposedly emerged due to the influence of both Tatar chronicles and Rabbanite historiography. The scanty number of Polish-Lithuanian chronicles from the 17<sup>th</sup> century on were supposedly affected by Polish chronicles and by Crimean Karaite chronicles. This genre includes a diversity of writings with different characteristics. In order to define them as historical writings I sorted them and divided them into sub-genres. This division, as well as the authors' purpose in their writings, help us to define whether a certain text is associated with the historical writing and to come to some conclusions about the author's views concerning history, his self-identification and his mentality in general.

### **Keywords**

Chronography, Avraham ben Yoshiyahu, Azaria ben Eliya, Crimea, Troki

This article focuses on a specific genre of Karaite historical writing – chronography, which has never been systematically researched by scholars before the opening up of the archives in the former Soviet Union and Eastern Europe.<sup>1</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> The only lengthy Hebrew chronicle which was published in Hebrew was *Iggeret Teshuat Israel* by YaSHaR Lucki from the 19<sup>th</sup> century. See: MILLER 1993. This important edition does not include a treatment of the genre.

I have found dozens of Hebrew manuscripts, mainly from the Crimea and also from Poland-Lithuania, which contain descriptions of events (both historical and from the everyday life of a person or a community), travel accounts, personal memoirs and so on.<sup>2</sup> This genre is thought to have emerged in the Crimea in the 16<sup>th</sup> century. My aim is to give a brief analysis of the particular features of chronography and its sub-genres, and specific cultural and social conditions which contributed to its development in the Crimea and Poland-Lithuania.

This genre of chronography is not homogeneous. It includes a diversity of writings with different characteristics, and sometimes it is not clear which of these texts are related to the historical writing. In order to define them as historical writings I divided them into sub-genres, such as the depiction of historical events according to the dates, lists of rulers, personal memoirs, pilgrim itineraries, and so on. This division, as well as the author's purpose and the structure of the text, could be helpful in classifying a certain text as associated with the historical writing.

Most of these interesting and important texts were created in the Crimean Karaite communities, which existed in this region at least from the 13<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>3</sup> The major Karaite settlements in the Crimea were the coastal cities, Keffe and Gözleve, located in the mountainous areas of the Crimea – Sulkhat, Mangup, and Chufut-Qaleh. This last was the most important Karaite cultural center in the 17<sup>th</sup>-18<sup>th</sup> centuries, until the Russian invasion. From 1475 most of the Crimean peninsula became a vassal state of the empire, the Tatar Khanate of Crimea.<sup>4</sup> The Jewish population of the Crimea, as of other Muslim countries, was of protected status (*dhimmi*), paying the *jizya* tax. In the 16<sup>th</sup>-17<sup>th</sup> centuries, the Crimean Karaites underwent a Turkification process. They used Turkish names and an

---

<sup>2</sup> The manuscripts of all these texts are preserved in all the Firkovich collections of the Russian National Library of St. Petersburg, the Institute of Oriental Studies of the Russian Academy of Sciences, St. Petersburg, the Ukrainian National Library of Kiev, and the Jewish Theological Seminary. I am preparing most of these chronicles for publication in a special edition in the original.

<sup>3</sup> אהרן בן יוסף 1835: דף י"ד, ע"ב.  
See also: ANKORY 1959: 60, n. 12.

<sup>4</sup> On the history of the Karaite Crimean communities, see two articles: SHAPIRA 2003: 709-729, and AKHIEZER 2003: 729-759.

ethnolect of the Crimean Tatar language, which is in the Turkic group of languages; a considerable number of community members found employment in the court of the khans; their folklore from this period – legends, proverbs, parables, riddles, and songs – were borrowed from Tatar and Ottoman tradition. At the same time, the Crimean Karaite communities established a system of traditional Jewish education (houses of study – *batei midrash*) and their scholars (who were to a large extent a product of Byzantine Karaite scholarship)<sup>5</sup> created their own significant literature in the Tatar and especially the Hebrew language on halakha, exegesis, and liturgy and dealt with some secular studies (astronomy, mathematics, etc.); they copied hundreds of Karaite (especially of the Byzantine and also Ottoman periods) and Rabbanite books which they used for their studies.<sup>6</sup>

The Crimean Karaites maintained connections with Karaite communities in the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, which first appear in the 14<sup>th</sup> century in Troki.<sup>7</sup> The Lithuanian and Polish Karaites also used a Turkic language, but one that belonged to a subgroup of Qipchaq languages. In the 16<sup>th</sup>-17<sup>th</sup> centuries, Troki was a spiritual center for Eastern European Karaites and produced a number of outstanding scholars. Karaite settlements also existed in Volhynia and Galicia. In addition, Eastern European Karaite scholars, along with the considerable role of Hebrew literature in the abovementioned traditional genres, composed chronicles, but unfortunately, unlike in the Crimea, few such materials survived due to frequent wars, conflagrations, and other calamities which struck this region.

### The examples of chronographical writings

The chronographical writings from the Crimea depict events according to the dates within a period from some days to some years. They deal with wars and

---

<sup>5</sup> On the intellectual contacts between Crimean and Byzantine (and later – Ottoman) communities and the dominance of Byzantine scholarship, see: AKHIEZER 2011.

<sup>6</sup> On Karaite literature and education in the Crimea, see: AKHIEZER 2003: 740-745.

<sup>7</sup> On the beginning of Karaite settlement in Troki, see:  
אחיעזר ושפירא 2002.

palace coups in the Crimean khanate, plagues, natural disasters, miracles, and so on. One of the most detailed chronicles belongs to Azaria ben Eliya of Chufut-Qaleh, one of the Karaite community leaders of the 18<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>8</sup> It covers the period of the Russian invasion of the Crimea, the civil war, political affairs, and the inter-ethnic relations between Karaites, Tatars, Armenians, and Rabbanite Jews (Krymchaks). The text includes a large number of dialogues, more often imaginary ones, but generally most of the author's data coincide with the findings of historians.<sup>9</sup> Azaria expresses his own attitude toward the events. The unique information in this chronicle concerns the developments involving the Karaite community during the war. He gives a very vivid and dramatic picture of this period, unlike many other authors of chronographical texts who build them on dry and brief descriptions of events according to their dates.

Several factors contributed to the development of chronography in the Crimea. One was the impact of Rabbanite historical literature (such as the books of Eliyahu Kapsali, Moshe Almosnino, and others), which mainly was brought to the Crimea from Constantinople by Karaites and Rabbanites. The relations between these two communities in the Crimea were quite close and friendly. According to one 18<sup>th</sup>-century chronicle, Rabbanite children studied at the Karaite school in Chufut-Qaleh and apparently the two communities exchanged books.<sup>10</sup> The Krymchaks practiced the same genre of historical writing. The most important Krymchak chronicle was *Devar Sfataim*, written by the community leader, David ben Eliezer Lekhno (d. 1735). A considerable part of his book is a historical account of the Crimean khanate; a few chapters deal with Jewish communities.

Another factor was the impact of Tatar chronicles, which appeared in the 16<sup>th</sup> century in Khan's court.<sup>11</sup> Karaite writers, some of whom were "court Jews," were familiar with Tatar chronicles and obviously borrowed some information from them. That is why most of the Hebrew chronicles specify the

---

<sup>8</sup> See its publication:

אחיעזר 2011.

<sup>9</sup> See the evaluation of the historical accuracy of Azaria: *ibid.*, 309-315.

<sup>10</sup> אחיעזר 2008 נספח ב.

<sup>11</sup> AKHIEZER 2003: 737-738.

Muslim dates in addition to or instead of the Hebrew ones. In addition, the Crimean Karaites had been in much closer contact with the local population than their Eastern European brethren. They spent time in bathhouses where they exchanged news and stories in the Tatar language, and they committed some of these to writing, therefore the same folklore motifs appear in Tatar, Karaite, and Krymchak writings. These motifs, which were common in oral tradition, were written down (mostly in the 19<sup>th</sup> century) in special Karaite collections of different texts called *mejuma*. Some *mejuma* materials are similar to those that appeared in Tatar (and Krymchak) collections called *jonkas* and contain topoi typical of Tatar and Ottoman oral and literary traditions.

### **Lists of rulers**

Another type of Karaite historical writings are the lists of rulers, both Crimean khans and Ottoman sultans including the Muslim and/ or Hebrew dates of their reign. These lists were written in Hebrew or Tatar from the 17<sup>th</sup> century on. There are tens of such manuscripts in different Karaite archives and their purpose is not quite clear. Presumably, authors used the dates of a ruler's reign to specify the exact time span of events which they described in chronicles. Such a practice also existed in other cultures from ancient periods. It is not quite clear, though, to what extent this phenomenon reflects a perception of the category of "historical time."

### **Biographies and exemplary stories**

The biography genre comprises exemplary stories whose purpose was to provide a model of ideal behavior for the readers (or listeners). Such is a story about Shemuel ben Abraham Agha, the head of the Karaite community of Chufut-Qaleh in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the "court Jew" who was counselor to the Crimean khan Qirim-Giray. Shemuel rejected the khan's suggestion that he converts to Islam. He justified his refusal by asserting that one who betrays his ancestors' religion would also betray his master. The khan, who fired and humiliated him, thereafter became convinced of his loyalty and brought him back to the court, raising him above all his ministers.

Another exemplary story (from the 18<sup>th</sup> century), demonstrating the obligation to observe the Torah's commandments and to perform good deeds, is about a pious man who saved one soul from Israel (that is, redeemed a captive) when his own life was in danger. This deed enabled him to refute false charges and to save his own life. Unlike the story about Shemuel Agha, this one has no historical context.

### **Travel accounts**

There are a number of travel itineraries of Crimean Karaites from the 17<sup>th</sup>-18<sup>th</sup> centuries who made pilgrimages to the Land of Israel and visited other countries of the Middle East.<sup>12</sup> Most of these accounts were published. The authors narrate their trips according to the dates, describing the holy places and the life of Karaite communities in Jerusalem, Hebron, and Cairo. The authors do not offer any justification for writing their accounts, and they probably did not regard it as necessary. The pilgrimage to the Land of Israel had special importance for Crimean Karaites and was a quite common phenomenon in their communities. The pilgrims who returned from Jerusalem attached to their names the word "Yerushalmi" or "Yeru," which passed from father to son and grandson. The pilgrimage was an important historical event in the life of a family and the whole community, and was worthy of perpetuation.

### **Personal memories and impressions**

There was no biography genre before the 19<sup>th</sup> century, but many Karaite as well as Rabbanite texts deal with personal memories incorporated into different compositions (on halakha, exegesis, etc.). These insertions were written in free spaces, in the margins of different texts, or in drafts of some documents. Apparently, the authors saved the paper or parchment which was quite expensive

---

<sup>12</sup> Some of them were published by Haim Yona Gurland and by Abraham Yaari and Abraham Karp:

גורלנד (תרכ"ו); יערי 1996: 221-267; 305-323; 459-478; קארפ תשל"ו: 479-497.

and was used only for writing or copying of “important” treatises on *halakha*, prayers, exegesis, and so on, while historical and other secular writings were regarded as *bitul Torah*, i.e., as not associated with Torah studies. Most of these texts disappeared because they were not considered so important.

This sub-genre deals with family events, such as the death of family members or the birth of children (one example is the mention of an author’s son’s birth with a detailed account of astrological data); there are at least two texts where authors describe their learning process and curriculum at school and *beit ha-midrash*. These texts also include descriptions of dreams, which sometimes reflect important realities of Karaite community life; historical events, such as a story about the execution by hanging of two Crimean Karaites who were accused of espionage through deceitful denunciation by Armenians;<sup>13</sup> and the story of the sinking of a ship with a group of *Hasidim*, pilgrims from Poland to Jerusalem. In this story the author gives his reason for this disaster: the *Hasidim* had gone astray in their belief that the messiah had already arrived because of the policy of the evil Russian Empire, which aspired to occupy all the world and suppress all the nations.<sup>14</sup>

The scant number of Polish-Lithuanian chronicles, of which the earliest belong to the 17<sup>th</sup> century, makes their analysis more complicated. Most of them, however, belong to the same sub-genres as the Crimean chronicles. The most important writings are those of the Karaite intellectual, writer, and physician Avraham ben Yoshiyahu, who lived in Troki in the 17<sup>th</sup> century. He provides in his chronicles and in the margins of his books some news about the Karaite community and his own family, and a bit of autobiographical data; he mentions the expulsion of Jews from Lithuania in 1495, the blood libel against some Karaite, and the foundation of Troki by Gediminas. This last information he borrowed from the Polish historian Maciej Strykowski.<sup>15</sup> There are also a number of manuscripts dealing with the Cossack massacres, and they

---

<sup>13</sup> This text was published in:

אחיעזר 2011: 377.

<sup>14</sup> אחיעזר 2008: 120.

<sup>15</sup> STRYKOWSKI 1985.

contain the names of the victims. The Eastern European historical writings were supposedly influenced by Polish and Crimean Karaite chronicles.

### **The distinction between historical and non-historical writings**

The division of chronographical writings into the abovementioned sub-genres is quite approximate and does not exhaust all kinds of writings which are close to chronography. There are no strict borders between sub-genres, and one text may be eclectic and combine features of different genres. Nevertheless, this division can be helpful in revealing some characteristics of the text. These include the intention of author, which may be expressed in his remarks or judgments about the events; the structure of the text; and the use of the sources (if there are any at all). The author's intention (stemming from his interest in historical events, whatever the context of his country or his family) is of crucial importance when classifying the text as pertaining to the historical writing. Sometimes the topic of the text, which appears close to the historical writing, can mislead the reader. For example, the abovementioned MS about the birth of the author's son appears to be an event of family history. However, it has nothing to do with any historical writing but has a purely astrological purpose, presenting astrological data and dealing with the features of planets.

A similar conclusion pertains to the lists of Karaite victims slaughtered during the Cossack massacres. These manuscripts contain some important details about the geographic extent of the massacres and the building of a synagogue. One of these MSS describes an interesting custom: stretching a rope over all the cemetery where the victims of pogroms are buried and using this rope as wick for candles for commemoration of the souls.<sup>16</sup> These manuscripts are called "Memory Books," sometimes appear as a part of *Pinkas*. Apart from some historical details, the main purpose of these writings is commemoration of the souls in prayer, while conducting a fast and everything associated with it.

---

<sup>16</sup> Such a custom was also common in the Rabbanite communities of Eastern Europe. See: WEISLER 1998: 133-138. See also: אחיעזר ודבורקין 2004: 234, הערה 49.



### The particular features of chronographical writings

One methodological aspect, important for the research of these writings, concerns the impact of their text structure on their meaning: about 10-20% of their text consists of interposed biblical quotations. This phenomenon is also relevant to any other Hebrew texts, both Karaite and Rabbanite. In chronicles, however, these quotations have a more significant influence on the text's meaning. For instance, an 18<sup>th</sup>-century Karaite letter from Chufut-Qaleh<sup>17</sup> provides a description of the war events which is completely built on the words of prophets: *"Our children were dashed to pieces; they have ripped up the women with child...behold, they were all dead corpses, and none shall gather them."*<sup>18</sup> The question is whether these are metaphors, means of literary expression, whose purpose is to strengthen the reader's feeling of catastrophe, whereas the facts perceived by the author are of secondary importance? Or is the author talking about the concrete events which really occurred? In any case, we can see that real historical events perceived by the author take the form of the historical-theological paradigm; the author tries to adapt the reality to the biblical paradigm as much as possible. Jacob Neusner defines such an approach to history as the "paradigmatic model of thinking." According to him, this approach contradicts historical thinking, and it:

"...identif[ies] a happening not by its consequence ('historical') but by its conformity to the appropriate paradigm.... Great empires do not make history; they fit a pattern. What they do does not designate an event, it merely provides a datum for classification within the pattern."<sup>19</sup>

Neusner maintains that the paradigmatic mode of thinking prevented Jewish scholars from developing historical thought.<sup>20</sup>

<sup>17</sup> MANN 1935: 458.

<sup>18</sup> "רטשו עוללינו והריותינו בקעו בלי חמלה ונהי פגרים מתים ברחובות העיר ואין מאסף..." Based on: Isa 13:16; Am 1:13; 2 Kings 8:12; Isa 37:36.

<sup>19</sup> NEUSNER 1998: 160-1.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid. 166.

It is important to stress that there is another explanation for this style of writing that uses interposed biblical quotations. This phenomenon could stem from cultural-linguistic reality, which was an intrinsic part of traditional Jewish life: the writing of the texts in Hebrew, which was not a mother tongue of the authors, undoubtedly influenced the structure, contents, and meaning of their texts. Instead of describing the events in a vivid spoken language, the author incorporated the readymade biblical constructions which he drew from his memory, according to the appropriate plot. Therefore, the systematic research of chronicles requires making a comparison between Hebrew texts of this genre and some few chronicles written in a spoken, Tatar language.

This style of writing also had great didactical importance. It imparted some value to the historical writing, or at least justified it to some extent. Its value stemmed from the perception that every event or process contains inner meaning rooted in the divine laws. These laws, which were manifested in the regularity of human behavior and in current events, were already introduced and explained in the Torah. This approach represents the general traditional Jewish attitude toward history, according to which there is nothing new in our world; all current events just reiterate the plots described in the Torah.

The chronography genre is the most open one and free of any rules or canons (unlike Tatar or other court chronicles, which were written by order of monarchs and subjected to strict rules). The chronicles were composed as part of the authors' need for free self-expression, and they contain unique information both about the historical events and the mentality of Karaite authors.

---

### *Bibliography*

- AKHIEZER, Golda. 2011. Karaism in Byzantium. In: Robert Bonfil, Oded Irshai, Guy G. Stroumsa, and Rina Talgam (eds.). *Jews in Byzantium: Dialectics of Minority and Majority Cultures*. Leiden & Boston: Brill Academic Publisher, 723- 761.
- AKHIEZER, Golda. 2003. The History of the Crimean Karaites During the 16<sup>th</sup>-18<sup>th</sup> Centuries. In: Meira Polliack (ed.). *Karaite Judaism, a Guide to Its History and Literary Sources*, Leiden & Boston: Brill Academic Publisher, 729-759.

- ANKORY, Zvi. 1959. *Karaites in Byzantium: The Formative Years, 970-1100*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- MANN, Jacob. 1935. *Texts and Studies in Jewish History and Literature*, vol. II. Cincinnati: Hebrew Union College Press.
- MILLER, Phillip E. 1993. *Karaite Separatism in Nineteenth-Century Russia*. Cincinnati: Hebrew Union College Press.
- NEUSNER, Jacob. 1998. Why no History in Rabbinic Judaism? Yerushalmi's Zakhor Revisited. *The Annual of Rabbinic Judaism: Ancient, Medieval and Modern* 1, 153-174.
- SHAPIRA, Dan. 2003. Beginnings of the Karaite Communities of the Crimea Prior to the Sixteenth Century. In: Meira Polliack (ed.). *Karaite Judaism, a Guide to Its History and Literary Sources*. Leiden & Boston: Brill Academic Publisher, 709-729.
- STRYJKOWSKI, Maciej. 1985. *Kronika polska, litewska, żmódzka i wszystkiej Rusi*, 2 t. Warszawa: Wydawn. Artystyczne i Filmowe.
- WEISLER, Chava. 1998. *Voices of the Matriarchs*. Boston: Beacon Press.
- אהרן בן יוסף, ספר המבחר. 1835. גולווא, (פירוש על ספר שמות).  
 אחיעזר גולדה. 2011. המאורעות שהתרחשו בקרים בתקופת מלכותו של שאהין גראי ח'אן:  
 כרוניקה היסטורית מן המאה הי"ח מאת הקראי ר' עזריה בן אליה, קבץ על-יד 20 (30), 281-385.  
 אחיעזר גולדה. 2008. מגמות ותהליכים בהתפתחות תודעתם ההיסטורית של הקראים במזרח  
 אירופה במאות הי"ז-הי"ט. חיבור לשם קבלת תואר דוקטור לפילוסופיה. ירושלים: האוניברסיטה  
 העברית.  
 אחיעזר גולדה, דבורקין איליה. 2004. כתובות המצבות מבתי העלמין הקראיים בליטא. פעמים 98-99,  
 225-260.  
 אחיעזר גולדה ושפירא דן. 2002. קראים בליטא ובווהלין-גליציה עד המאה הי"ח, פעמים 89, 19-60.  
 גורלנד, חיים יונה. תרכ"ו. גנזי ישראל בס"ט פטרבורג. ס"ט פטרבורג, 1-45.  
 יערי אברהם. 1996. מסעות ארץ ישראל, תל-אביב: מודן.  
 קארפ אברהם. תשל"ו. ספר 'דרך הקדש' מאת נחמו בן שלמה מעיר קלעה. קבץ על-יד, סדרה  
 חדשה, ספר ח (יח), 479-497.

**Golda Akhiezer** (PhD) is a lecturer in the Israel Heritage Department at Ariel University (Israel), and a researcher and academic secretary at the university's Institute for Research of Jewish Communities of the Caucasus and Central Asia. She has published more than fifty research papers, and her areas of research interest include: the history of Eastern European Jewry, Karaism, Jewish historiography and historical thought, the Haskalah, and Jewish communities of the former USSR.