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THE STRUCTURE OF KARAITE GRAVESTONE INSCRIPTIONS FROM ÇUFUT-QAL'EH AND METHODOLOGY OF HEBREW EPIGRAPHY[*]

The study of Hebrew inscriptions from Çufut-Qal'eh is a central topic of Hebrew epigraphy in Russia. For a long time, the central controversial question was whether Jews or Karaites could live in the Crimean castle cities, such as Çufut-Qal'eh and Mangup, before the Tatar invasion of the 1230s. The almost two-century long study of the inscriptions included the analysis of chronological systems, naming patterns, lexical content, comparison with historical sources, archival data, statistical, topographical and architectural analysis, as well as many other approaches. Studying the structure of the inscriptions and viewing Hebrew epitaphs as a literary genre can provide additional insights on the attitudes towards life and death reflected in these inscriptions.

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СТРУКТУРА КАРАИМСКИХ НАДГРОБНЫХ НАДПИСЕЙ ИЗ ЧУФУТ-КАЛЕ И МЕТОДОЛОГИИ ЕВРЕЙСКОЙ ЭПИГРАФИКИ

Изучение надписей на иврите из Чуфут-Кале стало одной из центральной тем еврейской эпиграфики в России в XIX и XX вв. Долгое время центральным спорным вопросом был вопрос о том, могли ли евреи или караимы жить в крымских городах-крепостях, таких как Чуфут-Кале и Мангуп до татарского завоевания 1230-х годов. Почти двухвековое изучение надписей включало анализ хронологических систем, ономастики, лексического содержания, сравнение с историческими источниками, архивными данными, статистический, топографический и архитектурный анализ памятников, а также многие другие подходы. Изучение структуры надписей и рассмотрение эпитафий на иврите как литературного жанра может дать дополнительную информацию об отношении к жизни и смерти, отраженном в этих надписях.

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1. Introduction

The study of Karaite Hebrew inscriptions from the Crimea, particularly from the mountain castle city of Çufut-Qal'eh ("Jewish Castle" in Turkic), was a central topic of Hebrew studies in Russia for more than 180 years[1]. The castle is located at the southeastern outskirts of Bakhchisaray on a plateau at an elevation of more than 500 m above sea level. The Karaite community emerged in the castle, which was then called Qirq-Yer, in the middle of the fourteenth century. A Jewish (likely, Karaite) community in Qirk-Yer was mentioned for the first time in 1459, in Khan Haci Geray's yarlığ. After moving the capital of the Crimean Khanate to nearby Bāhçesarāy (Bakhchisaray), Çufut-Qal'eh was populated mostly by Karaites (Shapira 2003; Kizilov 2003), hence its new name. In the eighteenth century, the Karaite population constituted 1200 people (Pallas 1999); however, after the conquest of the Crimea by the Russian Empire in 1783, the inhabitants of the castle started to leave, and by the end of the nineteenth century the castle remained almost empty.

The old Karaite cemetery is located at the so-called Jehoshaphat Valley about 0.5 km south-east of Çufut-Qal'eh. The cemetery has up to seven thousand gravestones, with about half of them bearing epitaphs, mostly in Hebrew. The oldest currently identifiable fragment of a tombstone dates back to 1364, while the most recent burials are from the mid-20th century.

The first systematic studies of the Çufut-Qal'eh cemetery were conducted by A. Firkovicz starting in 1839. However, consequent criticism by A. Kunik, D. Chwolson, A. Harkavy, and G. Strack showed that the oldest inscriptions published by Firkovicz were not authentic. The argument, which quickly became a heated personal and somewhat ideological controversy, lasted for several decades and involved central figures in Jewish and Hebrew studies in Russia, such as Abraham Harkavy and David Chwolson (Nosonovsky et al. 2020). Harkavy, perhaps the most prominent expert on the matter, insisted that there is no indication of Jewish or Karaite presence in the castle cities of the Crimea until the Tatar invasion of the peninsula in the 1230s, while Chwolson attempted to defend his earlier opinion that inscriptions can be dated to at least the eighth century CE. The argument involved various aspects of the history of the region, which were tied to the aspirations of emerging national movements, both Jewish and Karaite/Karaim.

The matter had not been resolved until the 2000s, when a thorough and systematic study of the cemetery was conducted by a team led by A. Fedorchuk and D. Shapira with the participation of many prominent experts in Hebrew epigraphy producing a complete catalogue of the cemetery.

Besides their central role in the Hebrew studies in Russia during the 19th and 20th centuries, the studies of the Çufut-Qal'eh inscriptions provided important material for both Hebrew epigraphy in general and for the study of Hebrew epitaphs as a genre (Nosonovsky 2008, Nosonovsky et al. 2020). Epigraphy is supposed to be an auxiliary discipline, which is meant to present the monuments to historians and philologists. However, it turns out to be very instructive to scrutinize how placing inscriptions in different contexts affects their interpretation, including such formal parameters as dating and authenticity. Moreover, viewing epitaphs in proper literary contexts allows better understanding of what is behind the inscriptions as a cultural phenomenon: what epitaphs tell us about cultural attitudes towards life and death and why the genre of the epitaph flourishes in certain environments. In this article, we will address three aspects of the Çufut-Qal'eh inscriptions:

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[1] Also spelled Chufut-Kale (Чуфут-Кале) now in the Bakhchisaray district of the Crimea. The East European Karaites (Karaim) including Crimean Karaites constitute a small Turkic ethnic group, whose language of religious activity was predominantly Hebrew until the 20th century. Karaites as a confessional group are related to the Jewish Karaite sect that separated from mainstream Judaism in the beginning of the eighth century CE in Baghdad. The first reliable mention of the Karaites in the Crimea was in 1278 when 'Aharon ben Yoseph ha-Rofe' reported about a dispute between the Karaites and Rabbinical Jews in Şulġāt (Nosonovsky et al. 2020).

methodological aspects related to their research in various cultural contexts, the structure of the epitaph, and the semantics of the inscriptions.

2. Approaches towards authenticity analysis of the inscriptions

The ancient necropolis of the Jehoshaphat Valley was studied since the 1830s. One of the earliest publications was the book by P. Keppen 1837[2], where he stated that "according to the Karaite Rabbi Mordecai Sultansky[3]," the inscriptions dated to 5009 (i.e., 1248/9 CE) and 5013 (1252/3 CE) were found at the Çufut-Qalʻeh cemetery and a 5034 (1273/4 CE) inscription was presumably found in Mangup (Keppen 1837: 29).

The famous Karaite scholar and archaeologist Abraham Firkovicz (1787—1874) started his archeological studies in the Crimea in 1839 (Firkovicz 1872; Yakerson, 2008). Firkovicz claimed that the oldest discovered gravestone was dated to 640 CE, moreover, he claimed that he found an epitaph of a legendary figure, Yitzhak Sangari, who according to a legend, converted a Khazar Kagan to Judaism in the eighth century (Shapira 2003). These claims were met with skepticism by many scholars. In 1841, a Prague Rabbi Solomon Rapoport (1790—1867) suggested that the Sangari inscription was likely a forgery (Rapoport 1841). According to Firkovicz, the date of this inscription was encoded by a chronogram, so that the sum of the numerical values of all letters in the name "Yitzhak Sangari" marked the year 4531 from the Creation of the world, which corresponds to 770/1 CE. Rapoport noted that the era "from the Creation" was uncommon in the early Middle Ages, when most Jewish communities used the Seleucids Era or local eras, furthermore, the very use of chronograms was uncommon at that time.

Following this argument, the Odessa Historical Society sent a director of the Odessa Jewish school, Betzalel Stern (1798—1853), to the Crimea in 1842 in order to check the authenticity of Firkovicz's materials. Stern "confirmed" the authenticity of Firkovicz's findings and, in addition, claimed that he himself discovered six additional inscriptions dated 598—1509 CE, as well as a gravestone of Yitzhak Sangari's wife. Firkovicz continued his field studies in Çufut-Qalʻeh and Mangup through the 1840s and 1850s[4], although the war in Crimea interrupted them. After the end of the Crimean War in 1856, Firkovicz offered to sell his collection to the Imperial Public Library in St. Petersburg. In 1862, the library acquired about 1500 manuscripts, 754 copies (prints) of tombstones and 10 cut tombstones from the Jehoshaphat Valley (Yakerson 2008: 30—37).

The tombstone cuts were on display at the Asian Museum in St. Petersburg and they caused a new outbreak of controversy. The Turkologist A. Kunik (1814—1899) expressed doubts about the authenticity of the presented epigraphic materials noting that the Turkic name Tokhtamysh in one of the epitaphs could not have appeared in the Crimea at such an early time as the seventh century CE. Thus, Kunik raised onomastic arguments for the authenticity of the epigraphic material, which was uncommon in the nineteenth century Hebrew studies (Kunik 1864; 1876). In addition, Kunik brought paleographic arguments when he claimed that two lines of the allegedly 625 CE inscriptions were carved by a different instrument than the rest of the text.

In 1864—1865, a Frankfurt Rabbi Abraham Geiger (1810—1874) continued the polemic against the early dating of tombstones. He noted that the language of the inscriptions was "too elaborated" (Geiger 1864) As Geiger turned to the analysis of the style of the epitaphs, he paid

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[2] Keppen lived and worked in the Crimea since 1827. In 1833, he secured funding and published a vast study of this material (the book was approved by the Russian Empire censorship already in October 1836 (Keppen 1837).

[3] Mordecai Sultansky (1785—1878) is a Karaite scholar, born in Łuck, who was a teacher of A. Firkovicz (Акhiezer 2011).

[4] Thus, in 1847 he divided the cemetery into sections (the stone poles marking the sections are still found at the cemetery) and copied 703 inscriptions (which by his estimates constituted about 1/10 of all stones), OR RNB. F. 946. Op. 1. No. 32. L. 6.

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attention to the abundance of biblical quotes and elaborated poetic formulas in the tombstone inscriptions (Geiger 1864; Neubauer 1864) . While these elements are often common in medieval Jewish literature, in the Talmudic era, memorial blessing formulas were generally very simple. Geiger referred to the classical work by Leopold Zunz (Zunz 1845) on the blessing formulas in Hebrew epitaphs.

Soon after that Daniel Chwolson published his habilitation dissertation "Eighteen Jewish gravestone inscriptions from the Crimea" (Chwolson 1865), which was based heavily on Firkovicz's findings. Chwolson was trying to refute the arguments of Kunik, Rapoport, and Geiger by bringing various arguments. For example, he stated that the complexity of the chronology used by Firkovicz testifies to the authenticity of the inscriptions: "Forgers who are trying to make their monuments appear as old as possible use accurate and clear chronology" (Chwolson 1865: 8). He further "refuted" Kunik's arguments by attempting to give a paleographic analysis of inscriptions (Chwolson 1865: 27) and similarly he "refuted" Rapoport by citing evidence in favor of the authenticity of Yitzhak Sangari's epitaph (Chwolson 1865: 55—65), and Geiger's arguments by claiming that when Zunz's monograph was published, the early use of the blessing formulas was not known.

Unfortunately, Chwolson's arguments of that period were often weak, and his opinions have not been confirmed by consequent discoveries. Thus, neither the chronological systems suggested by Firkovicz nor the early use of blessing formulas have been confirmed by any new findings, and, of course, Sangari remained a mythological figure. However, Chwolson put his scientific reputation at stake, which made the academic debate about the authenticity of the inscriptions much more heated and personal than one could expect.

Firkovicz's monograph on the Çufut-Qalʻeh inscriptions called ’*Aḇne Zikkaron* ("Memorial Stones") was published in 1872. This was the first systematic study of the cemetery. Firkovicz claimed that in addition to the standard era from the Creation, Karaites in Çufut-Qalʻeh used two other chronological systems: the era from the Expulsion of Samaria and a local Creation Era different from the standard one by 151 years. These bizarre statements have not been confirmed by any consequent investigations.

In 1874, after Firkovicz's death, Hebraists Harkavy and Strack were sent to Çufut-Qalʻeh to evaluate the second collection of Firkovicz. Strack's article appeared in 1876 and argued with Chwolson's dissertation. Strack highlighted the main methods used to forge the dates:

"(1) changing д to г (makes it 1000 years older) (2) change д to ъ (600 years older) (3) change ш to ч (older by 100 years)" (Strack 1876: 4).

In addition, Firkovich made many gravestones appear older by 151 years using the supposed Crimean Era. Strack used the inventory method, paying attention to the monuments No. 2 and No. 3 which, in his opinion, were completely invented. There was no original stone either in St. Petersburg or in Çufut-Qalʻeh, there was no print on paper, and, finally, there was no text in the manuscript (Strack 1876: 8). Strack was also the first who analyzed the architectural form of the monuments to identify forgeries. He noted that "niches, on the cutting of which the forger didn't spend any efforts, are substantial proof that at least most of the text contained in them is genuine; and, conversely, the absence of such depressions should increase our suspicions." Therefore, Strack brought a new argument regarding the forgery of the Yitzhak Sangari stone: the absence of a niche.

Following the article by Strack, an article by Harkavy appeared (Harkavy 1877). The article compared the findings of Firkovicz with historical realities, revealing a lot of inconsistencies, which made findings unreliable. Almost at the same time, Harkavy published an extensive and detailed book in German, where he analyzes both historical context of the inscriptions and their vocabulary and styles and scripts (Harkavy 1876). While having much more limited resources than Chwolson and less fieldwork experience, Harkavy was brilliantly well versed in Hebrew literary sources

making conclusive arguments that Jewish or Karaite communities could not exist in medieval pre-Tatar mountain Crimea, i.e., before the 1230s.

Chwolson, whose academic reputation was questioned, organized two expeditions to Crimea. In 1882 he published a monograph in German (a revised Russian translation appeared in 1884), in which he, while being defensive, attacked Harkavy. Chwolson (1882; 1884) admitted mistakes in his previous work, but claimed that these were unavoidable since there was virtually no comparative paleographic material. In addition to paleographic arguments, he also used anothe new argument: checking the authenticity of the dating of the epitaph through the correspondence of the day of the week and the day of the month to the Jewish calendar.

This approach was later actively used by Kokizov, who analyzed 44 gravestone inscriptions, which had an indication of the date and day of the week, and in all cases, except three, found a complete coincidence with the dates indicated by A. Firkovicz (Kokizov 1910).

Chwolson admitted that many of the inscriptions were forgeries, but he insisted that the oldest inscriptions still belonged to the 7th century CE. Chwolson's arguments were weak in many cases, but the question was quite complicated. Chwolson considered the newly discovered inscriptions (unknown at the time of publication of Harkavy's book) from other places such as Feodosia, Kerch, Partenit (on the southern coast of Crimea), claiming that those belonged to the pre-Tatar period, as well as from places outside the Crimea, such as Mtskheta in Georgia, Italy and others. While Harkavy used a wide range of Hebrew, European, and Oriental historical sources, Chwolson tried to build his arguments using paleographic data, attempting (for the first time in Hebraic studies) to create a system of dating Jewish monuments based on the type of the script, which would support his opinion.

Interestingly, the Chwolson-Harkavy argument has never been conclusively resolved by the scholarly community. Harkavy never responded to Chwolson's criticism and never returned to this topic in the next 40 years of his life (he died in 1919). Various Russian publications on the history of the Jews, which appeared at the end of the 19th century or in the early 20th century, often relied on the dates supplied by Chwolson's book, being unaware about Harkavy's criticism. The inscriptions published by Chwolson from Çufut-Qal'eh, Partenit, and Feodosia were reprinted in many publications[5].

After the Russian revolution in 1917, the topic had not been investigated thoroughly until the very end of the 20th century. In the 1950s — 1960s, a Karaim historian David Gumush conducted some studies at the cemetery, and, in particular, he translated Firkovicz's '*Abne Zikkaron* into Russian (although the translation has not been published) (Dashkevich 1999: 165).

Some field studies were conducted by M. Elizarova in 1977/78 and by E. Meshcherskaya and A. Khosroev in 1983. M. Choref evaluated presumably the oldest monuments without inscriptions,

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[5] These editions include *Regests and Inscriptions* and the Russian *Jewish Encyclopedia*. Both editions report about an inscription from 909 from Feodosia. The same is reported by the English-language *Jewish Encyclopedia* and the modern *Encyclopedia Judaica* (including the second, revised edition of 2007). The latter, in addition to Chwolson and *Regests and Inscriptions* refers to the book of the rabbi from Feodosia I. Farfel *The Old Synagogue in Feodosia* (1912). Interestingly, Farfel says that he sent the manuscript of his book to Harkavy, who was unable to answer, but said that he "approved" the book (Farfel 1912; 1917). In the journal *Evrejskaya Starina* ("Jewish Antiquities"), a discussion of Crimean Jewish monuments took place in 1910—1914. It happened as if Harkavy's work did not exist. Even Dubnov carefully wrote that only the inscriptions from Çufut-Qal'eh, "which belong to the Tatar period *and partly to the two preceding centuries*", could be considered reliable (thus he did not rule out the possibility of pre-Tatar inscriptions) (Dubnov 1914: 20). Moreover, at the beginning of the twentieth century, Jewish graffiti was found in Tepe-Kermen (a couple of kilometers from Çufut-Qal'eh), and a discussion erupted on whether it could be from the 1st century CE, as Hebraist David Maggid believed (Maggid 1914), or in the 7th — 9th centuries, as another leading Hebraist, Kokovtsov believed (Gidalevich 1914). An outside observer could get the impression that the dispute between Chwolson and Harkavy was successfully resolved in favor of Chwolson. Moreover, no protests from Harkavy himself followed (in his article about Çufut-Qal'eh in the Russian *Jewish Encyclopedia*, he did not change his opinion even 40 years later). For more detailed discussion of all these circumstances see (Nosonovsky et al. 2020).

dated the ornament to the thirteenth century, referring it to the early Tatar period. Unfortunately, the materials of this expedition were not published, and the fieldwork at the cemetery did not last for a long time. Photographer I. Lipunov prepared an album of ornaments and forms, which was published in 2017 with comments by M.B. Kizilov (Lipunov, Kizilov 2017). This album is interesting from various points of view, in particular, it is the first attempt to analyze the semantics of patterns.

Georgian epigraphist Nissan Babalikashvili conducted field studies in Çufut-Qalʻeh in 1984. His materials were published posthumously (Babalikashvili 1987). Babalikashvili claimed that he found several epitaphs not published by Firkovicz or Chwolson, dated to the tenth and eleventh centuries. However, later research revealed that these epitaphs are also forgeries.

Natalya Kashovskaya studied the Çufut-Qalʻeh and Mangup cemeteries since the early 1980s. The statistical method proposed by Kashovskaya (1995) consisted in the correlating of epitaphs from the ʼAvne Zikkaron by their date and location, which gave an idea of how many graves of a particular period were found at a particular section of the cemetery. It became obvious that the topographic picture was not taken into account by the author of ʼAvne Zikkaron, as the presumed monuments "of the ninth — twelfth centuries" were scattered throughout the burial ground rather than concentrated in certain sectors. Kashovskaya also applied a number of other methods in Çufut-Qalʻeh such as the analysis of architectural forms of tombstones, begun by Khosroev and Meshcherskaya. She prepared a typological classification table of ornaments and architectural forms of tombstones. In addition, she returned to the practice of copying tombstones on paper by the method of printing.

In the 1990s, Artyom Fedorchuk joined the research of the necropolis. His first major finding was the discovery of drafts of the book ʼAvne Zikkaron from the late 1840s in Firkovicz's personal archive. By comparing the drafts with the published book, and later with the monuments in the cemetery, Fedorchuk (2006; 2008) was able to trace the forging of the inscriptions. In particular, the drafts have preserved many altered epitaphs that were not included in the final version of Firkovicz's book; however, they were discovered at different times by Chwolson, Babalikashvili, and Kashovskaya (1995).

Since 1997, Fedorchuk has led more than ten epigraphic expeditions to Çufut-Qalʻeh in which several major Israeli Hebraists participated including Dan Shapira, Michael Ezer, Golda. Akhiezer and Shlomo Kolyakov. A complete topographic map of the necropolis was prepared in 2002—2004 by Ivan Yurchenko, who by that time had already published a catalog of the Karaite cemetery in Galich (Yurchenko 2000). A collective monograph on the monuments of the Karaite cemetery of Çufut-Qalʻeh was published in 2008 (Shapira 2008).

Specific methods for documenting a huge necropolis were developed during these expeditions ranging from marking gravestones to methods of photographing poorly extant inscriptions; however, a detailed description of these methods is beyond the scope of our review. In 2007, an electronic catalog was created allowing statistical analysis of the epitaphs and also opening the way for other studies, which had been extremely difficult until then, such as the studies of the genealogy and family ties of the Çufut-Qalʻeh community, and analysis of epitaphs as a literature genre. Each of about 3500 monuments with epitaphs was plotted on an interactive map of the necropolis, which makes it possible to take into account the topographic position of the stone. The creation of a modern, complete electronic catalog made one more research method evident, namely the comparison of two cemetery catalogs created 150 years apart, which is in line with the Digital Humanities trends in Hebrew Epigraphy (Saar 2016).

The results of the expedition are published in the form of two selected catalogs (Shapira 2008; Fedorchuk, Shapira 2011). The epitaphs were arranged and presented following roughly the same order as in ʼAvne Zikkaron comparing the actual inscriptions at the cemetery with the epitaphs in the book. The comparison showed that more than 150 tombstones mentioned in the book are missing

from the cemetery; most likely, they were lost during the twentieth century. The oldest currently extant inscription dates to 1364 CE.

Thus we see that during the almost two centuries of research of the Çufut-Qal'eh inscriptions, besides "internal" epigraph approaches (i.e., deciphering and presentation of the inscriptions), various methods which placed the text in various historical and literary contexts have been used. The methods included, at first, the study of chronograms and chronological systems, onomastics, lexical analysis, comparison with historical sources, and later extended to systematic cataloguing of the inscriptions, comparison with archive data, statistical, topographical and architectural analysis of the monuments, as summarized in Fig. 1.

		1841 Rapaport	1862 Kunik	1865 Geiger	1866 Chwolson	1872 Firkowitz	1876 Strack	1877 Harkavy	1882 Chwolson	1960-80 Gumush	1980s Khosroev, Mesherskaya	1990s Kashovskaya	1998-2000 Fedorchuk
1840—1917	Chronograms and dating analysis	■					■	■					■
	Chronology and Eras	■					■		■				
	Historical context and place names		■		■					■			
	Paleography		■					■					
	Lexical analysis			■				■					
	Selected cataloguing					■							
	Comparing Firkowitz's and Chwolson' publications with existing monuments						■					■	■
	Analysis of monuments shape and morphology						■		■		■	■	
	Comparing day of the week with the calendar												■
1950-80	Translation of *'Avne Zikkaron*									■			■
	Paleographic analysis										■		
Modern researchers	Statistical analysis												
	Genealogy											■	■
	Complete cataloguing of the necropolis												■
	Critical study of Firkowitz's archive												■

Fig. 1. Table summarizing various methods of critical analysis of the gravestones.

3. Structure of the inscriptions

Analysis of the inscriptions structure is a valuable tool to investigate Hebrew epitaphs from various places including Eastern Europe. Structural elements of an epitaph are related to its function. The epitaph commemorates the deceased, places him or her into a certain formal "frame of reference" (including name, date, and place), lists their virtues and allows some connection between the deceased and the survivors. The epitaphs of Çufut-Qal'eh, like most Hebrew epitaphs worldwide, consist of four parts: an opening formula, information regarding the deceased (name, characteristics, circumstances of death, etc.), date, and the closing formula. In this section we will discuss those parts based on the Çufut-Qal'eh inscriptions dated 1364—1650.

3.1. The opening formula

The opening formula such as "here lies" or "this is the gravestone" is present in many Hebrew epitaphs. At first glance, it seems like the formula conveys no other message except for indicating

to the reader that what he sees is a tombstone. For example, most Eastern European Hebrew epitaphs have the opening phrase. Here lies (פה נקבר\נטמן "is buried/covered here"), which can be found since the late seventeenth century[6]. It was later abbreviated to פנ, and finally became an element of carved decorations.

The formula "Here lies" in not common in Çufut-Qalʻeh. Instead, variations of several Biblical verses are used for the introductory formula. In Çufut-Qalʻeh, the most common variants of the opening phrases are as follows: מצבת קבורת ("a tombstone on the grave"[7]); הציון הלז ("this [memorial] sign"[8]); האבן אשר שם מראשתו ("the stone that he had put for his pillows"[9]).

Interestingly, these three quotations were the ones mentioned by Zunz as Biblical verses related to gravestones and hence are used in the epitaphs (Zunz 1845: 360—367). Most often we find variants or paraphrases, such as: זה האבן ("the stone"), זאת המצבה ("this tombstone"), הציון הזה ("this sign"). Beside simple formulas, composite ones are also used, demonstrating an attempt to combine several Biblical events. For example, the phrase זאת המצבה אשר שמתי על ("the stela, which I had put here…") consists of the fragments of two Biblical verses, Genesis 35:20 and Genesis 28:18. The same applies to the following phrases: וזה האבן על קבורת ("and this is the stone on the grave") זה אבן הזאת אשר שמתי מצבה על קבר ("This is the same stone which I had put on the grave").

Another type is formed by adding author's words to the quotations. For example, הציון הזה לסימן היה על קבר ("this sign *will be a mark* on the grave"); as we can notice, there is an author's remark between the fragments. Here is another example of an author's insertion: אני האבן הנצבת לאות ולסימן על קבר ("*I am* the stone, put *as a symbol and mark* on the grave"), where the author also modified the Biblical verse.

Despite the diversity of introductory formulas in Çufut-Qalʻeh epitaphs, both simple and composite ones in the period under review were formed on the basis of the above-mentioned three-four verses.

There is an interesting epitaph of a person, whose "childhood was spent in Constantinople, and the death occurred in Çufut-Qalʻeh": אבן שלמה זו מחוצבת להיות מצויינת קבורתו ("This stone made ready is carved to sign his grave"[10]) referencing to 1 Kings 6:7. The same formula is repeated, although not precisely, in his sister's epitaph: אבן שלמה זאת מצוינת להיות מסומנת קבורת ("This stone made ready is a sign which marks the grave").

3.2. Information about the deceased

This is the most informative part of the epitaph, which may include the name, patronymic, family status of the deceased, as well as circumstances of death, expression of sorrow, and listing various virtues of the dead. We shall not provide a detailed description of the structure; only the four most informative units have been considered for this research: names, toponyms, epithets, and circumstances of death with expressions of sorrow.

3.2.1. Names. Women's tombstones of the period contain more Turkic names than Jewish (Biblical)[11] ones (Nosonovsky 2007), for example, the first name from the earliest headstone from 1364 is מנוש ("Manevish\Manush"). Other female names ביכצה ("Bickeche")[12], סולטן ("Sultan"),

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[6] For the oldest epitaphs from East Europe see (Fishel, Nosonovsky 2017: 74) and (Nosonovsky 1999).
[7] Genesis 35:20.
[8] 2 Kings 23:.17
[9] Genesis 28:18.
[10] 1 Kings 6:7.
[11] Names borrowings from the "neighbors" is common in various communities worldwide, it results from the absence of ritual role of a woman, and thus, the absence of female names in liturgy (e.g. women, unlike men, were not called to read the Torah).
[12] From Turkic "a little lady" or "a pleasant lady".

ממוק ("Mamuk"), **עלטנקז** ("Altynkyz")[13]. Beside Turkic names, a name of Greek origin was found, **פורוסוני (**"Furusuny"[14]) and an unusual name (origin is unclear) **כלי** ("Keli" or "Kali"). There is also a Persian name **ערזו** ("Arzu")[15].

Male Biblical names, such as **משה** ("Moshe"), **יוסף** ("Yosef"), **שלמו** ("Shlomo"), comprise a vast majority. Names of non-Jewish origin — like **שחו** ("Shehu")[16] or **סלימן (**"Suleyman") — are quite rare. Noteworthy is the usage of male Turkic nicknames, such as **כוטש**("Kutash"), **פשה** ("Pasha"),**בבה שך** ("Baba Shakh"), **מוסבה** ("Musba"); yet classical indications of belonging to the high priests family line **כהן** ("Kohen") or **לוי** ("Levite") remained:**יצחק כהן בן יוסף בבא כהן** (**"**Yitzhak Kohen son of Yosef Baba Kohen"). Fig. 2 shows gravestones of two sisters, Tokhter and Sarah, daughters of Moshe ha-Levy, who died on the same day, Sunday, 3rd of Elul of 5367 (26 August 1607 CE). Only one monument was modified by Firkowitz and appears with modification in *'Avne Zikkaron* No. 89 erroneously dated there by 898 CE. An analysis of unusual names in epitaphs can tell a lot about emergence of the Çufut-Qal'eh community, its cultural continuity and changes in the composition throughout the ages; though the aspect is beyond the scope of this study.
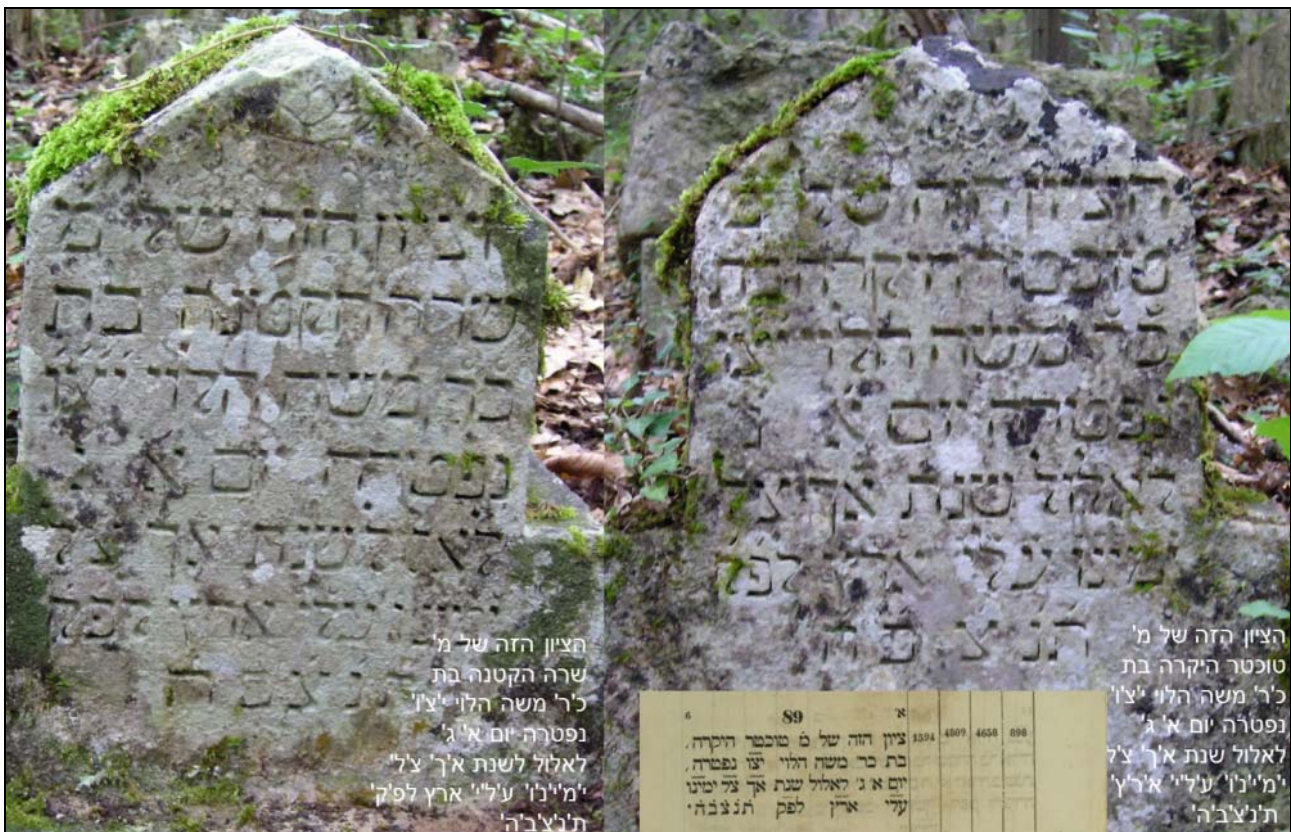
Fig. 2. Tokhter and Sarah, daughters of Moshe ha-Levy who died on the 3rd of Elul of 5367 (26 August 1607 CE). One monument appears with modification in *'Avne Zikkaron*.

3.2.2. Toponymics. Below are examples of usage of place names, which define the circle of intercommunity relations. Between the late fifteenth century and seventeeth century, the natives of the following cities were mentioned: Yosef son of Shemuel **ממדינת לוצכה** ("from the city of Łuck"

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[13] From Turkic «red gold» or «a golden girl».

[14] The Russian known variant of this name is Yefrosiniia.

[15] Persian origin: «a desired one».

[16] Etymology of the name Shehu is unclear. No corresponding name can be found in Turkic languages; D. Chwolson suggested that it is to be derived from the Jewish root **שחה** («to swim») (Chwolson 1865: 183).

approximately[17], in 1485); Khana, the daughter of Yakov **מגרושי מנכרמן** ("of the exiles from Mankerman" 1509[18]); in 1599, Shemuel Shats[19], the son of Daniel **הבא מק'ק' טרוק** ("who came from the holy community[20] of Troky"[21], 1599); Mordechai, the son of Eliyahu **מקהל מנגופ** "from Mangup community, who had been beaten and wounded by the oppressors, them having intervened **לעיר כוזלוב** ("in the town Kozlov"[22]), came here[23] for treatment and died in the year 1607"; Yosef son of Eliyahu **מעיר קירים** ("from the town Kirim"[24], 1607) ; Yehuda, the son of Yosef: **היתה ילידתו בקוסדנטין עתה בעיר קלעא פטירתו** ("his childhood was spent in Kusdantin[25], now in the town of Qalʻeh[26] came his death", 1640).

Such a broad geography may indicate the importance of the Çufut-Qalʻeh community and its diverse contacts and migration trails.

3.2.3. Epithets and virtues. This part of the epitaph may be the most extensive, and may include multiple credits, poems and quotations, while it may also name only one quality of the deceased, or be absent completely. Typical male epithets, such as: **נער** ("young"), **יקר** ("dear"), **זקן** ("respected"), **נכבד** ("esteemed"), **נדיב** ("generous"), **חשוב** ("important"), **נאמן** ("devoted"), **משכיל** ("enlightened") often neighbor with the epithet, characteristic of Çufut-Qalʻeh necropolis, first used in 1652 — **ירושלמי** ("Yerushalmi"[27]). The epithet **משכיל** ("enlightened"), although the latter is not unique for this necropolis. The female tombstones bear the following characteristics: **יפהפיה** ("beautiful"), **פורייה** ("teeming"), **בתולה נערה** ("young virgin"[28]), **ברה מפנינים** ("brightest of the pearls") etc.; these epithets can be found on other Jewish cemeteries as well. Noteworthy is the usage of the phrase **ילד שעשועים** ("pleasant naughty child "[29]), which I have not met in children's epitaphs of other regions.

For the description of good qualities of the deceased, various Biblical verses were often used, as well as the metaphors developed by the authors of the inscriptions. Here are some of them:

כחבצלת השרון to the charming boy ("like a lily of the valley"[30]);
חנה ברה כלבנה[31]**יונתי מ'** (to "my dove" [32] Chana, "fair as the moon"[33]);
המשכיל והיקר מזהב וכסף ("enlightened and more dear than gold and silver");
איש חיל רב פעלים ("valiant man who had done many acts"[34]) ;
היקר בן בחורים שעזב כל הבנים ואת אשת נעורים ("dearest of the men, he who left all his sons and the beloved woman");

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[17] The date on the tombstone is hardly legible, so the dating is based on the adjacent stone, with the similar shape of letters, it probably belonging to his wife. This is one of the earliest evidences of Karaites presence in Lutsk.

[18] Turkic name of Kiev. During the exile of Jews from Lithuania, to which Mankerman belonged (year 1495), there took place the cases of Jews' resettlement to the Crimea.

[19] **שליח ציבור- ש'ץ'** ("Agent of the community") — the one who leads a prayer. Here it can be used as a by-name.

[20] **ק' ק** abbreviation comes from **קהלה קדושה** («a holy community»).

[21] Trok, Troky, also Trakaj — a city in Lithuania, which used to have a large Karaite community in the Middle Ages.

22 Gözleve, Kozlov, Giozliov — Turkic name of modern Yevpatoria.

23 In Çufut-Qalʻeh.

24 Modern town Staryi Krym and its surroundings. Kirim (from Turkic — embankment, wall, ditch) — a town in eastern Crimea, also was called Solkhat (Ṣulġāt), Eski-Kyrym, Levkopol'.

25 Constantinople, modern Istanbul.

26 Çufut-Qalʻeh.

27 A person, who has made a pilgrimage to the Holy Land.

28 Esther 2:3.

[29] Jeremiah 31:20.

[30] Song of Solomon 2:1.

[31] The abbreviation of the word **מרת** ("mistress") is used as a polite reference to a woman before a name.

[32] Song of Solomon 6:9.

[33] Song of Solomon 6:10.

[34] 2 Samuel 23:20.

על איש יפה תואר פרי צדיק פרח כמו תמר בקומתו ("goodly man"[35], "fruit of the righteous"[36], "flourishing like a palm tree in bloom"[37]).

In the last example, we see how the fragments of various poems and the author's retelling are combined together in a talented way, which confirms the assumption about the high educational level of the Çufut-Qal'eh community members.

3.2.4. Circumstances of death and expressions of sorrow. This part of the epitaph, being the most dramatic and emotional, is often very informative. Here you can learn about epidemics, wars, pogroms and other misfortunes, which the community faced. This information should be taken into account in statistical and demographic studies of the Çufut-Qal'eh fortress in one or another historical period. In addition, this section can demonstrate the literary talent of the epitaph's author. Below there are pointed out several excerpts, being most interesting for both historical and literary research.

We shall start from the list of sad events.

נרצח בשברון על ידי קצף וחרון ("murdered and crippled by fury and anger");

שעזבה אלוף נעוריה בבכיה כל פריה ורביה ("she who bereaved her friend of young years, and caused lamentation of the nearest and dearest");

בן יחיד היה לאמו ושכלה ("he was the only son of his mother, and she was deprived of him");

עשתה אמה שכולה עלובה עצובה ("brought sorrow to her bereaved mother and left her childless");

הציון הזה \ של היקר שלמה לוי\ מהבחורים בן יחיד נשאר\ לאהרן לוי ז'ל' מהנפטרים\ גז בפגעי הזמן מן\ המקרים ביום ו' נחנק\ בים כוזלוב במי' מרים\ והובא פה ונקבר בקבר\ אביו ואחיו היקרים יום ב'\ י'ח' לסיון הניח לאמו מס-\ פד תמרורים

("This monument \ to the dear Shelomo Levi; \ who remained the only son of all boys \ of 'Aharon Levi, of blessed memory,38 who died, \ and he vanished in the miseries of time because \ of an accident. On Friday he drowned \ in the sea of Kozlov, in the bitter waters; \ and he was brought here, and buried in the grave \ of his father and his dear brothers. On Monday \ the 18th of Sivan he rested, leaving his mother\ with the grief and sorrow");

ונפטר על פי הגוזר במגפת הדבר

("and died in accordance with the verdict during the epidemic of plague"). Interestingly, this is the only tombstone dating back to year 1626.

Below is an example of the expression of mourning in a poetic form with a single through rhyme, an author's composition:

מרי ושמן מור במר נפשי: תבכה בדבר פי לעם אפרים:

על אב לבב יכאב והיה ילאב: מיום אשר נסתם באר המים:

יום נאסף אז נאסף שמחה: וגיל וגולת פז טהור עינים:

("bitter as myrrh oil is my soul's sorrow; \ the nation of Ephraim will lament over my words; \ the heart will ache for my father \ since the day when the well was drained \

on his death day the joy also perished,\ and happiness, and the stream of sheer gold (pouring) from the eyes").

Below is an example of a poetic epitaph, with a single rhyme. It includes the standard abbreviations framing the name: polite address and good wishes to the deceased.

וזאת המצבה אשר הוצבה\על ראש בעל חכמה ושיבה\זקן ונשוא פנים וראש ישיבה\המרביץ תורה בדורו ברוח נדיבה\המעמיד תלמידי' רבי' בנפש רחבה\הוא כ'ה'ר' יעקב חזן נפשו ת' בטובה\ב'כ'ר' משה הנכבד ת'נ'צ'ב'ה'\נאסף אל\עמיו בנשיקה ואהבה\יום ד' על פי [הגוזר] לאנוש צבא\בר"ח זיו <u>אלה</u>ים שוכן ערבה\שנת

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[35] Genesis 39:6.

[36] Proverbs 11:30.

[37] Paraphrase of Psalms 92:12.

[38] The **ז'ל'** abbreviation means **זכרנו לברכה** («of blessed memory») cf. Proverbs 10:7, and is normally used after the patronymic of the deceased, to indicate that his father had died as well.

'השעב ליצירת שמי' והרבה\שו'ב'ב'ע' ר'צ'ו'ן' לפ'ק' הלך למנוחה ושובה\אַלהי ישראל ילינהו במלונה תשובה\ככתו'
והמשכילי' י'ז'כ'ה'ו'ה'כ' לעו' ועד\לעתיד הבא

("And here is the stone, set\ as pillow of the wise and gray-haired man \ honored and prominent, head of the yeshiva \ who generously taught the Torah to his generation; \ he set many students on their legs, with big heart; \ he is an honorable person[39] named Yaʻqov Khazan[40], may his soul dwell at ease[41]; \ he is the son of an honorable person, highly considered Moshe, may his soul be bound in the bundle of life. \ Was gathered unto his people[42] in favour and love \ on Wednesday, in compliance with the order of the [Sabaoth] army, \ on the first day of the month of Ziv[43] of the Most High aloft; \ year 5372 (1612) upon creation of the heaven and many other, \ satisfied with favour[44] through minor count[45]. Rested in peace and returned to Him, \ God of Israel let him send to Kingdom of repentance, \ as written: "the wise shall shine as the brightness of the firmament; and they that turn many to righteousness as the stars for ever and ever"[46] \ for the future to come").

3.3. Date of death

Date is present in almost every epitaph and therefore it is a very important element of the inscription. The practical value of indicating the date of death is that future generations should have the opportunity to pray for the deceased on the day of his death. As a rule, the date is recorded on the tombstone in full, and includes the day of the week, the date of the month and the year of death. However, sometimes partially recorded dates occur, when there is no day of the week, or the tombstone bears only the year. All numbers are written by means of Hebrew alphabet letters, and the years are written by the chronology of **ליצירה** ("since the creation of the world"). The date is preceded by the word **נפטר** ("died") or an idiom to replace it, for example: **נאסף אל עמיו** ("was gathered unto his people"), **היתה פטירתו** ("passed away"). Here is an example of how an ordinary date is written: **נפטרה יום ג' י'א' טבת שנת ה'ש'ז' ליצירה** ("died on Tuesday the 11th of Tevet of the year 5307 [=14 December 1546 CE] since the creation"). This method of dating is used for most of the Çufut-Qalʻeh necropolis epitaphs, as well as in most Jewish communities around the world to this day.

Chronograms use Biblical verses or other phrases with some letters emphasized so that the combined numerical values of these letters forms the year. First let us consider simple chronograms, consisting of one or two words. They can be of two kinds. The first is formed by changing the standard sequence of letters in the year designation. For example, the letters **ה'ר'צ'** do not bear any semantical meaning, and instead you can write **צ'ר'ה'** ("misfortune"), while the sum of the numeric values of the letters remains the same — in this case, it corresponds to the year 5295 (1534/5 CE). Another option is to find a word, the numerical value of which corresponds to the date needed — **ש'ו'ב'ה** ("come back").

A more complex type of chronogram employ Biblical verses to encode the year. The difficulty in deciphering such chronograms is that for calculation it is necessary to add either all the letters of the quotation, or, in some cases, the letters selected in some way, or only the first word, or,

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[39] The abbreviation **כ'ה'ר** stands for **כבוד הרב רבי** ("a respected person") and is used before the masculine name, as a formula of politeness.

[40] **חזן** («the one who leads the prayer»).

[41] Psalms 25:13.

[42] Genesis 49:29.

[43] *Ziv* is a poetic Biblical name of the month *Yiyyar*.

[44] Deuteronomy 33:23.

[45] The abbreviation **ל'פ'ק** means **לפרת קטן** ("by the Minor Era", i.e., without indicating the millennium).

[46] Daniel 12:3.

conversely, only the last one. For example, in this case only the first word must be calculated[47]: **י'ק'ר'ה** היא מפנינים ("<u>more precious</u> is she [the wisdom] than rubies"[48]).

Usage of a chronogram brings out an enhanced emotional content, for example:

a) informs about the virtues of the deceased:

ט'ו'ב' ש'ם' מ'ש'מ'ן ט'ו'ב' ("<u>A good name</u> is better than a precious ointment"[49]);

b) tells about the hope for the Messiah to come, and thus, for the dead to return to life, and become closer to God:

- '**ר'ו'ח' ה ל'ב'ש'ה'** ("the Spirit of the LORD <u>came upon</u>"[50]); הוא **ש'א'ו'ל' לה'** ("he was lent to the LORD"[51]);

- מקימי **מ'ע'פ'ר'** ("raises up <u>out of the dust</u>"[52];

- **ה'ק'י'צ'ו' ו'ר'נ'נ'ו' ש'ו'כ'נ'י' ע'פ'ר'** ("awake and sing, ye that dwell in dust "[53]);

- **ב'ש'א'ו'ל' מ'י** י'ו'ד'ה ל'ד' ("<u>in the grave who</u> shall give thee thanks"[55]) **ה'ו'ש'י'ע'ה' נא** ("<u>save</u> now"[54]). Fig. 3 shows the gravestone of Shehu son of Barukh Levy 17th Elul 5389 (5th September 1629 CE) with the chronogram based on Ps. 6:5 (No. 55 in *'Avne Zikkaron* erroneously dated there by 704 CE). Comparing with nearby gravestones of Shehu's children allows establishing the date[56].

Fig. 3. Shehu son of Barukh Levy 16th Elul 5389 (1629).

c) equates the deceased to a Biblical character or reminds of a suitable story from the Bible:

- **כי גוע אהרן** ("<u>and mourned for Aaron</u>"[57]) — on the grave of Aaron, son of Shmuel;

- **גם האיש מ'ש'ה' ג'ד'ו'ל' מאד** ("Moreover the man Moses was very great"[58]) — on the grave of Moshe, son of Eliyahu;

- **ו'י'א'ה'ב' ש'ל'מ'ה' א'ת' ה'** ("And Solomon loved the LORD"[59]) — on the grave of Shlomo, son of Shmuel;

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[47] Here and below, the letters in the words necessary for counting the date have been underlined.
[48] Proverbs 3:15.
[49] Ecclesiastes 7:1.
[50] Judges 6:34.
[51] 1 Samuel 1:28.
[52] Psalms 113:7.
[53] Isaiah 26:19.
[54] Psalms 118:25.
[55] Psalms 6:5.
[56] Erroneously dated earlier by 1579 CE (Fedorchuk and Shapira 2011:37).
[57] Numbers 20:29.
[58] Exodus 11:3.

- **הביט נא ה'ש'מ'י'מ'ה'** ("look now <u>toward heaven</u>"[60]) — to Abraham, son of Berach;

d) reminds of the impermanence of life:

- **א'נ'ו'ש' כחציר ימיו** ("<u>As for man</u>, his days are as grass"[61]);
- **ו'י'ב'ר'ח' כ'צ'ל'** ("<u>fleeth also as a shadow</u>"[62]);

e) implies the inability to influence the evil which befell:

- **ל'א' י'ע'ר'כ'נ'ה' זהב** ("<u>the exchange of it shall not be</u> for gold"[63]);
- **לא יועיל ה'ו'ן' ב'י'ו'ם' ע'ב'ר'ה'** ("<u>Riches</u> will not help <u>in the day of wrath</u>"[64]) — to young Akbika[65], who died of plague.

These examples show us that even a formal element, such the year of death, gives an opportunity to once again express respect for the deceased and demonstrate the author's scholarship.

The most difficult task in documenting an epitaph is often finding its date. Besides the disagreement of day of the week and date[66] of the month[67], which is not uncommon in medieval inscriptions, many epitaphs involve corrections[68] and additions[69]. Some texts have survived to this day in the form of the copies made by Firkovicz and Chwolson[70].

3.4. Closing blessing formula

The closing blessing formula (called by some scholars "a eulogy") is usually an abbreviation of a Biblical verse. The most widespread eulogy is **ת'נ'צ'ב'ה'** (תהי נפשו\ה צרורה בצרור החיים) ("may his/her soul be bound in the bundle of life"). Besides it, the following phrases are common: **נ'ב'ת'** (נפשו\ה בטוב תלין) ("His/her soul shall dwell at ease"[71]), **נ'ב'ע'** (נוחו בגן עדן) ("his rest in the Garden of Eden"); several times we can see: **י'ע'מ'ש'** (ינוח על משכבו שלום) ("he shall rest in his bed"[72]). The final example was probably combined of two quotations: the first part, "may the dew go up", is from Exodus 16:14, and the second part, "over his bed", — from the abovementioned Isaiah 57:2 **ה\בת הטל על משכבות'ש'ה'ע'מ'** (תעל שכ) ("may the dew go up over his/her bed").

Closing formulas can be written in the form of an abbreviation or in full. Some phrases are never abbreviated, for example והיתה מנוחתו כבוד ("may he rest in glory"). For a field researcher, the presence of a closing formula is an indication that the epitaph text is full and complete. The popularity of a particular closing formula is associated with a certain time period, which is an additional argument in the case of disputable dating.

The analysis of naming patterns shows the specifics of using non-Jewish names in the region (Nosonovsky 2007), while toponyms indicate major routs of populations migration, showing that migration between Eastern Europe Karaite communities was quite common (Lutsk, Kiev, Trakai, and Constantinople).

The epitaphs indicate a high level of scholarship of their authors, and, consequently, of the whole community. This is confirmed by the use of the genre of elegies, and rhymed poetic epitaphs as well as by the proficiency in using Biblical material.

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[59] 1 Kings 3:3.
[60] Genesis 15:5.
[61] Psalms 103:15.
[62] Job 14:1—2.
[63] Job 28:17.
[64] Proverbs 11:4.
[65] From Turkic «a white lady».
[66] This is associated with the absence of a permanent calendar, plus the Karaites had a tradition to define the beginning of the month directly by observing the moon
[67] Such discrepancy does not allow us to check the alleged date, while this check is particularly important during the calculation of chronograms and the years which end with letters, spelled similarly (ה\ח,ו\ז).
[68] Change from letter ה to ת is the most widespread of them.
[69] In particular, addition of symbols (dots) above the letters in a chronogram.
[70] Location of the originals is unknown.
[71] Psalms 25:13.
[72] Isaiah 57:2.

4. Semantic aspects of the epitaph

Let us now turn to the content of the inscriptions. A tradition of Hebrew epitaphs had formed by the end of the first millennium. While not stipulated by the religion in detail, the contents of the epitaphs reflected certain traditional values and ideas (Nosonovsky 2009; 2017). The relatively rigid structure is associated with the functional objectives of the epitaph and the gravestone in general. *First*, the gravestone marks the burial spot. According to some sages, it is easier to contact the soul of the deceased at the site of the grave. This function of the gravestone is reflected in the first element of the epitaph, the introductory formula. The *second* function is related to the notion of the epitaph as a prayer, which is why numerous blessings are present in epitaphs. A prayer epitaph must testify for the merits of the deceased and promote an acquittal by the Heavenly Court. Moreover, the epitaph links the soul of the deceased to the other souls placing them in context. This is why the name and date are sometimes ciphered in Biblical verses thus highlighting the similarities between the death of a particular person with the Biblical character bearing the same name. The unity of place, date, and name provides for the unification of three "coordinates": space, time, and individuality.

The genre of the Hebrew epitaph, unfortunately rarely becomes a focus of literary studies. However, understanding this genre can provide important insights on the attitudes towards life and death, mundane and sacred both in the canonical religion and in folk religious practices[73]. Poetic Hebrew epitaphs are often compared to the genre of קינה *kina* ("lamentation" or "elegy") in the traditional genre system of medieval Hebrew poetry, which, in turn is parallel to the elegy (*riṯa*) in the Arabic *qaṣīdah*, known since pre-Islamic times. At the same time, the Hebrew genre is related to the Book of Lamentations and to Hebrew liturgical poetry. Unlike in Arabic medieval poetry, the Hebrew *qina* (as well as many texts in other genres) was often formed as a combination of biblical quotes and expressions in the so-called "mosaic style".

Another relevant genre of early modern Hebrew literature is מליצה *melitza* (a term, which can be translated either as "praise" or "rhetoric"). Colorful laudations consisting of biblical and Talmudic expressions are found, for example, in prefaces and approbations to Hebrew books. Sometimes the epitaph itself would be referred to as מליצה *melitza* , which is interpreted as a guardian angel, implying that the epitaph is playing the part of a guardian angel (המליץ, *ha-melitz*) testifying before God and the heavenly court.

An interesting question is whether the epitaphs should be treated as folk texts and whether they have authors. The question of who is the implied author and implied reader of Jewish epitaphs may seem naïve at first glance. Of course, epitaphs are usually written by the relatives of the deceased (or on their order) with the objective to keep memory of the person and remind about him or her to those who visit the cemetery. However, a more detailed analysis using such narratological concepts as "implied author", "narrator", and "implied reader" reveals a number of paradoxes. With rare exceptions, the traditional epitaphs are impersonal, that is, the figure of the narrator is missing from it. The text itself is almost never written on behalf of the deceased, and only occasionally on behalf of bereaved relatives.

Moreover, the implied reader, as a rule, is also absent from the Hebrew epitaphs. This is a significant difference with ancient Latin and Christian epitaphs, which are often addressed to passers-by or accidental readers, reminding them of life's futility and encouraging them to repent. Even if a Hebrew epitaph is addressed to a human reader, it hardly ever contains a didactic motif. Instead, the assumption is that a passer-by might say a prayer in memory of the deceased.

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[73] About the genre of Hebrew epitaph see (Wodziński 1998: 23; Reiner 2011: 263—295; Nosonovsky 2017: 97—102).

Apparently, an important objective of the traditional Hebrew epitaph is mystical. The text should help the deceased's soul to find its rest in heaven by joining other souls. Stating the virtues of the deceased serves this goal, rather than impressing passers-by. Once in heaven, the soul is brought to the Heavenly Court, where virtues and behavior towards people and God are judged. The connection between the dead and the survivors works two ways. It is not only praising the merits of a deceased which can help him/her in the heavenly court, but also listing the virtues of the deceased can protect the living, as judgment is also imposed on them every day. This idea is expressed by the formula זכותו יגן עלינו "his merit will protect us".

An additional technical argument that the epitaphs are not addressed to an earthly implied reader, is the use of complex chronograms and abbreviations, which do not simplify, but complicate the establishment of the date for the reader. A chronogram relates the date of the death to the sacred texts, but it does not make it more convenient for a reader to figure out the date.

The question of the authorship of epitaphs is ambiguous. Often they were compiled to order by semi-professional authors who used already existing material, combined fragments of previous epitaphs adjusting them to a specific situation. There are also cases, when epitaphs had specific authors. Despite this, the epitaphs possess features of folk texts: they do not have any canonical text or distinct authorship: in the modified form one inscription can be used many times on different tombstones. At the same time, from the point of view of their plot and structure, inscriptions are very similar to each other, representing an infinite variation of the same plot ("Someone, who was a righteous person, was buried here after dying on such a day, may his/her soul be bound in the bundle of life"). Therefore, all the inscriptions are, in a sense, a variation of the same generic epitaph.

Biblical quotes are common in epitaphs, and they are usually meant to emphasize the similarity of a particular death to an archetypal situation described in the Bible. Verses are often quoted about a character with the same name as the late person. However, the citation is often indirect: what is cited is not the Bible *per se*, but various later texts, which cite the Bible. Thus, the blessing formula **תהי נפשו\ה צרורה בצרור החיים** "May his/her soul be bound in the Bundle of Life" is based on the Biblical verse "but the soul of my lord shall be bound in the bundle of life with the Lord thy God" (1 Samuel 25:29), where the matter is not death, but quite the opposite, protection of a living person. This quote appears in epitaphs because it is featured in the common prayer *Yizkor*, which in turn is based on an interpretation of the צרור החיים "Bundle of Life" in Rabbinic literature.

5. Conclusions

The study of Hebrew inscriptions from Çufut-Qal'eh, which started in the 1830s and is continuing today, became one of the central topics of Jewish studies and Hebrew epigraphy in Russia. It involved many arguments and controversies on the authenticity of some old inscriptions and their dates. The central question of this controversy is whether Jews and / or Karaites could live in the Crimean castle cities, such as Çufut-Qal'eh and Mangup during the Middle Ages prior to the Tatar invasion of the Crimea in the 1230s. The accepted answer for this question today is negative, since there is no reliable evidence of any Jewish presence in mountain Crimea during the Khazar or Gothic periods.

The almost two-century long study of the inscriptions and their authenticity placed them into different contexts including the analysis of chronological systems, naming patterns, lexical content, comparison with historical sources, archival data, statistical, topographical and architectural analysis, as well as many other approaches. Studying the structure of the inscriptions and viewing Hebrew epitaphs as a literary genre can provide additional insights on the attitudes towards life and death reflected in these inscriptions.

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