

Hebrew Scripts in Medieval Catalonia

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The Hebrew script written in Catalonia is not only the story of a unique Catalan script but also reflects the story of the Sefardic script, the script used by the Jews in the Iberian peninsula.

Already in the 11th century, when Catalonia was part of the Crown of Aragon, this Cātalan script could be discerned. This old script, inspired by that written in the Ashkenazic countries, was probably used also by the Jews in Provence, with whom Catalonia conducted a close social and cultural relationship.

At the end of the 11th century the Catalan 'Ashkenazic' script had gradually transformed into the Sefardic type which was used in Andalusia as of the 10th century. Nevertheless, traces of the Ashkenazic character, demonstrated in the conservative square script written in Catalonia until the 14th century, prove the continuity of this early type.

Palaeography

Palaeography classifies the different types of Hebrew scripts on the basis of an understanding of the traditional art of writing in the Middle-Ages. The medieval scribe, who learnt to write from his father or his teacher, passed it on to his son or student, thereby developing in the course of time a stereotypic manner of writing.

The main types of medieval Hebrew scripts are: The Ashkenazic script – written in Western Europe; The Italian script; The Oriental script used in the Near East, and the Sefardic script – used in the Iberian Peninsula, North Africa and Sicily. Immigrant scribes, however, continued to use their homeland script also in their new locality. For example, Sefardic scribes, who emigrated from the Spanish areas to towns in Northern Italy, continued to use their Sefardic writing also in their new locality.¹

The main classification of scripts is based on regional criteria. However, in order to understand the evolutionary process of the script, we must add to this regional classification also a graphical classification.

The graphical classification divides the scripts in the middle ages according to three main modes: the square mode, semi-cursive mode, and cursive mode, and to two sub modes – semi-square and proto cursive.

Square script² – In the square script letters are made by straight horizontals and vertical lines, keeping a squarish pattern.

Semi-square script (Fig. 1)³ – The semi-square is the first sub mode to indicate the evolution of the letters. The semi-square sub mode demonstrates how the letters evolved from the square to the non-square modes. One can see that the letters lack the pattern of the square but do not yet display the distinctive features of the non square.

Proto-cursive⁴ – The second sub-mode - the proto-cursive - reveals a closer affinity to the semi-cursive and cursive modes.

The two sub modes may be described as linking the square script with the semi-cursive and cursive scripts. Presumably transitional, they were employed in scripts of the tenth and eleventh centuries, combining a morphological mixture of the square and the subsequently semi-cursive and cursive scripts.

Semi-cursive script⁵ – The semi-cursive letters change the straight appearance of the square. They develop curved and inclined lines, modifying the square pattern into a more flexible form.

Cursive script⁶ – Cursive writing developed through a reduction of calamus strokes that minimizes the time in which the hand is raised from the page. The texture of the script is relatively dense and many of its letters

are frequently joined together, either by ligatures, in which two or more parts of several letters make a new form, or by connecting a part of a letter to that of the letter ahead.

Resources

The earliest dated writing material from Catalonia are burial inscriptions found in Barcelona, Gerona, Tarragona, Tortosa etc.⁷ Five of them are prior to the 11th century. The two earliest ones – Tarragona and Tortosa⁸ were inscribed by the ancient square script used by Jews all over the world prior to the 10th century. There are more than 20 extant dated manuscripts written in Catalonia between the end of the 12th century and the expulsion from the Iberian Peninsula.⁹

The Barcelona deeds are the most important documents for the subject of the present article as they may shed light on the Catalan script's evolution. They were written from the first third of the 11th century onwards, mostly in Barcelona but also in Leon and Navara and are preserved in the Corona d'aragon archivo. The earliest of them are bilingual deeds in Latin and Hebrew.¹⁰ The later deeds, written in Hebrew, deal with the purchase and sale of land, vineyards, real estate, or other property.¹¹

Script

In the following I shall introduce the gradual developmental process of the script written in Catalonia, based on the Barcelona deeds and on a few manuscripts. This presentation establishes a classification of the script into four modes: proto-cursive, cursive, semi-cursive and square.

1 The proto-cursive mode

The earliest script of the deeds written in Barcelona demonstrates the proto-cursive sub-mode.

As a sub mode this script shares the same characteristics common to other sub-modes of the Hebrew Scripts during the end of the 10th century and the beginning of the 11th.

This script is also a sub type, which is a hybrid of Ashkenazic and Sefardic elements, combining the Ashkenazic features with those of a Sefardic character.

¹ See M. BEIT-ARIE. *Hebrew Codicology; Tentative Typology of Technical Practices in Hebrew Dated Medieval Manuscripts*. Jerusalem, 1981, pp. 104-109.

² See Fig. 10.

³ Ms. Cambridge, University Library T-S 16.100 and T-S 12.532, Sefardic script of the 11th century.

⁴ See Fig. 6

⁵ See Fig. 9.

⁶ See Fig. 7.

⁷ See F. CANTERA; J. M. MILLAS. *Las inscripciones hebraicas de España*. Madrid, 1956.

⁸ See H. BEINART. "Shetei Ketovot 'Shalom al Yisrael' miSefarad". In: *Erez-Israel*. 1987, n. 8, pp. 298-304.

⁹ All of them are recorded in the computerized database of the Hebrew Palaeography Project of the Israeli National and Science Academy, and the Jewish National Library in Jerusalem.

¹⁰ See F. BAER. *Die Juden in christlichen spanien*. Berlin, 1929

¹¹ See J. MILLAS I VALLICROSA. *Documents hebraics de jueus catalans*. Barcelona, 1927.

Ashkenazic features - the first phase of the proto-cursive sub type.¹²

Fig. 2a –A Barcelona deed written in 1034¹³ - shows the earliest example of a dated 'Ashkenazic' proto-cursive script. Fig 2b is a deed written in England in 1182.¹⁴ Despite the 150-year gap, a comparison between the two deeds demonstrates the features of the early Ashkenazic script. In both examples one can notice the angularity of the letters, (see the top of the *mem*, or the angular base of the *shin*) and the letter's proportions. The lines in both examples are delicate and emphasize the distinction between vertical and horizontal.

Sefardic features - the second phase of the proto-cursive as a sub type.

During the last decades of the 11th century there is an obvious shift of the Catalan-Ashkenazic script towards the accomplishment of the Sefardic characteristics.

A deed written in 1080 (Fig. 3a)¹⁵ and the Sefardic handwriting of a Spanish immigrant in Egypt (Fig. 3b)¹⁶ demonstrate the adoption of the Sefardic features by the Catalan script. The lines of the Sefardic letters are wider and more regular than those of the Ashkenazic ones, and the distinct morphology of the letters also endows the script with the Sefardic character. See the *alef* with its long left leg, the inclined leg of the *tav*, or the long base of the *ayin*.

The transference from the Ashkenazic script to the Sefardic script is gradual and the fulfillment of the Sefardic character may exist until the last decades of the 12th century. A deed written in 1092 (Fig. 4)¹⁷ reflects both trends. Lines are still delicate and a little 'shady' like those of the Ashkenazic but, the *alef* and the long inclined bases are similar to the Sefardic. Yet, two deeds written in Barcelona at the end of the 11th century and the beginning of the 12th, convey the Ashkenazic character existing at the beginning of the 12th century: Fig. 5a - Hebrew deed written in Catalonia in 1096,¹⁸ and Fig. 5b - Hebrew deed written in Barcelona in

1112.¹⁹ The Ashkenazic character in both deeds is manifested in the morphology of the letters as well as in the whole texture.

2 The cursive mode

As in other regional types of script, the development of the Sefardi script, emanating from the Catalan –Ashkenazic script, occur simultaneously with the shift from the proto-cursive mode to the cursive mode. Deeds written in Catalonia at the last decades of the 12 century can demonstrate this modification, approving that the first evidence of a genuine Sefardic script in Barcelona is written in the cursive mode.

In a Hebrew deed written in 1164/5 (Fig. 6)²⁰ the script loses its Ashkenazic character. Changing its mode as well, it becomes the cursive Andalusian script. See the *alef* – typically to cursive Sefardic *alef*, the cursive *he* and the cursive *kof*.

At the beginning of the 13th century there is a fully cursive script. In a deed written in 1202 (Fig. 7),²¹ most letters display the cursive morphology. Small spaces between letters and between words emphasize the cursiveness of the texture.

3 The semi-cursive mode

It seems reasonable to assume that the cursive Sefardic script preceded the semi-cursive, although the morphology of the latter is closer to the square.

Examining more than 15 Barcelona documents written between 1164 to 1269 confirms this hypothesis, indicating that the older ones in this group are written in a script closer to the cursive, while the latter are closer to the semi-cursive.

A comparison between the script of the deed written in 1202 (Fig. 7) and a deed written 15 years later, in 1218 (Fig. 8)²² shows that the morphology of the letters in the latter is closer to the semi-cursive.

See for example the *alef* – instead of the single pen stroke in which the cursive *alef* is produced, the *alef* here is made by three pen strokes. See also the serifs which decorate the horizontal lines.

A deed written in 1258²³ clearly illustrates that the scribe of this document wished to use the semi cursive mode. There are wider spaces between

¹² M. Beit-Arié was the first to find the Ashkenazic features in the script of the early deeds, and their gradual disappearance in the later ones. See M. BEIT-ARIÉ. "Hebrew script in Spain: Development, Offshoots and Vicissitudes". In: H. BEINART (ed.). *Moreshet Sepharad: The Sephardi Legacy*. I, Jerusalem, 1992, pp. 286-288.

¹³ Ms. Barcelona, Archivo Capitular de la S.I. Catedral, Mit. Esc arm. 3 n. 1504.

¹⁴ See H. LOEWE. *Stars and Jewish charters preserved in the British Museum*. London: Colchester and Eton, 1932, V. II no. 1201 PL. XVII.

¹⁵ Ms. Barcelona, Archivo Capitular de la S.I. Catedral, Mit. Esc arm. 2 n. 478.

¹⁶ Ms. Oxford, Bodleian Library, Heb. d. 42 f. 42-47. The scribe is Josef Ibn Avitur who left Spain in 976 and continued to use his homeland script in Egypt.

¹⁷ Ms. Barcelona, Arxiu de la Corona d'Aragó, Perg. Berenguer II, 78, Barcelona 1092

¹⁸ See J. MILLAS I VALLICROSA, *ibid.* PL II p. 39

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, PL. XXXI p. 103.

²⁰ See J. MILLAS I VALLICROSA, *ibid.*, PL. III p. 41.

²¹ MILLAS, PL. VII, p. 49.

²² MILLAS, PL. XII p. 59.

²³ MILLAS, PL. XIV, p. 63.

letters and words and the shape of the letters is the shape of the semi-cursive.

The first fully shaped semi-cursive was written in 1252 in Gerona (Fig. 9).²⁴ It is a calligraphic script in which the scribe pays attention to each letter and to the composition of the whole text.

4 The square mode

Contrary to the cursive mode and the semi-cursive, the square script written in Catalonia is like all square scripts, conservative and preserves some of the ancient features. This factor enables us to distinguish between the Square Catalan and the Square written in the south of Spain.

Clues to an ancient square script in Catalonia are found in the early inscriptions of Taragonna and Tortosa. A comparison of them to contemporary Oriental inscriptions shows the clear distinction between the two regional types. However, there is not enough material to confirm this hypothesis.

The first distinct evidence of the Catalan square script are the witnesses' signatures of the Barcelona documents²⁵ Despite the individual features which influence the script of these signatures, they demonstrate the same Catalan character subsequently noticed in manuscripts. The first calligraphic square script found in Catalonia was written in Gerona, in 1184 (Fig. 10).²⁶ Both, the early signatures and the calligraphic script, show the preservation of some early Ashkenazic features and confirm the differentiation between the Catalan square script and the square script written in Andalusia.

I would like to introduce the difference between the square script written in Catalonia (Fig. 11a)²⁷ and what I call the 'Toledan Style' (Fig 11b).²⁸ Contrary to the Ashkenazic influence on the Catalan style we can possibly notice the traces of the Orient in the Toledan style.

Letters of the Toledan style are planned to be as square as possible. This design is manifested by several features: erect length lines; straight base lines; and the weight of letters which creates a regularity in the thickness of both horizontal and vertical lines. The Catalan letters exhibit a different weight and another proportions, emphasizing the height of the vertical lines by turning the letters into rectangular proportion.

The morphology of the typical *alef* is most suitable for demonstrating the difference between the styles and indicating its origin (Fig. 12).

Comparing four schematic types of *alef*, attests the affinity of the Catalan letter to the Ashkenazic, and marks the resemblance of the Toledan letter with the Oriental one.

In the Oriental *alef* the middle component (designated as no. 1) is formed by two strokes. The left leg (signed as no. 2) joins the middle stroke near its center. In the Toledan *alef* the two strokes of the middle component become a single one, made as a straight line, but the left leg still joins the middle component at about its center.

The Ashkenazic *alef* differs from the Oriental one in respect of the same feature. Like the Toledan and the Oriental *alef*, both Catalan and Ashkenazic letters have a heavy turning stroke at the base of the left leg. In contrast to the Catalan and the Ashkenazic *alef*, both long lines meet at the top coming down in a straight vertical line.²⁹

There are probably several genres of Catalan square script, as well as the Provencal script. The following illustration (Fig.13a and Fig.13b) will compare Catalan writing with Provencal writing, both made by the same genre of script, by two different scribes. While demonstrating the similarity between the Catalan script and the Provencal script, these two examples suggest a correlation between style and text. Both Ms. are of Maimonides Mishne Tora, but one was written in Narbonne in 1282³⁰ and the other one in Gerona in 1305-6.³¹

Summary

The Hebrew script of the Barcelona documents, affirmed by dated manuscripts and dated inscriptions, reflect the evolutionary process of the Hebrew script written in Catalonia throughout the Middle-Ages. This process could be attested by social and historical circumstances.

There is no extant dated evidence from the 11th century in Provence, but according to more recent specimens one can notice the correlation between the Provencal script and the Ashkenazic script on the one hand, and the Sefardic on the other. This combination of Ashkenazic features with Sefardic ones is also the core of the Catalan script, presenting a mixture of east and west. Except for a short period,

Catalonia, and Barcelona in particular, were under Christian rule. The European orientation of the Catalan script can partly be understood by the

²⁴ MILLAS, PL. XXXII p.105.

²⁵ See Fig. 2a or Fig. 3

²⁶ Ms. Hamburg, Staats-und Universitätsbibliothek Cod. Hebr. 19.

²⁷ Ms. Parma, Bib. Palatina 3214, Barcelona? 1277/8.

²⁸ Ms. London, British Library Or. 2201, Toledo 1300.

²⁹ The lettering of the Hebrew inscriptions may also exhibit the same distinction between the Catalan and the Toledan style. See for example CANTERA; MILLAS *ibid.*, inscription no. 71 – Toledo 1349, pp. 119-122, and no. 170 – Gerona 1371, pp. 240-24.

³⁰ Ms. Amsterdam, Sem. Ets-Haim (47) A 1-2

³¹ Ms. Vatican, Bib. Vaticana Ebr. 173.

good relationships between Jews and the Carolingian rulers which increased the Jews possibilities of serving their rulers.

It seems logical to assume that the Latin script used by the Carolingian scribes influenced the Hebrew script used by Jewish officials. The Western orientation of the script (as manifested in the Catalan language too) is firmly established in the affiliation of the Catalan Jews to the French environment.

While the 'Ashkenazic' type of script was dominant in the north of Spain, the Jews in the south used quite another script – the script which is known to us as the Sefardic type.

Since the end of the 11th century, from the beginning of the Reconquista, there is a gradual, but rapid, shift of the 'Ashkenazic' type in Catalonia towards the Sefardic type. The Sefardic script originated in the Maghreb during the 9-10th centuries. It was inspired by the Oriental script, most probably brought to the Maghreb by the many Jewish immigrants from Babylonia. At the end of the 11th century, presumably due to the cultural changes caused by the Reconquista, the 'Ashkenazic' type became a proper Sefardic script.

Prof. M. Beit-Arié discusses this issue in his article.³² Beit-Arié comes to the conclusion that in a paradoxical way the Jews under the Christian conquerors adopted the Hebrew script previously used under the Muslim ruler, thus confirming the latter's cultural superiority. However, considering the intensive impact of the whole Arabic culture which influenced the North, this is not a paradox at all. The massive emigration of educated Jews from the south to the north, and the familiarity of the northern Jews with the Arabic language (employed by the rulers to increase their connections with the conquered society), accelerated the dominance of the Andalusian script.

Beit-Arié states that the Reconquista which unified all the Jewish communities under the same political and religious authorities, also integrated the Hebrew script, and consequently, a new type of script was created, characterized mostly by features of the Andalusian Hebrew writing.

Nevertheless, in respect to the square script, this is not the complete truth. The clear distinction between the Catalan square script and the Toledan style must lead to the assumption that some of the 'Ashkenazic' features affected the Catalan script at least until the 14th century, retaining its uniqueness while keeping its integral role within the evolutionary process of the medieval Hebrew scripts.

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Fig. 1 - Ms. Cambridge, University Library T-S 16.100 and T 12.532. Semi-square script, Sefardic script of the 11th Century.

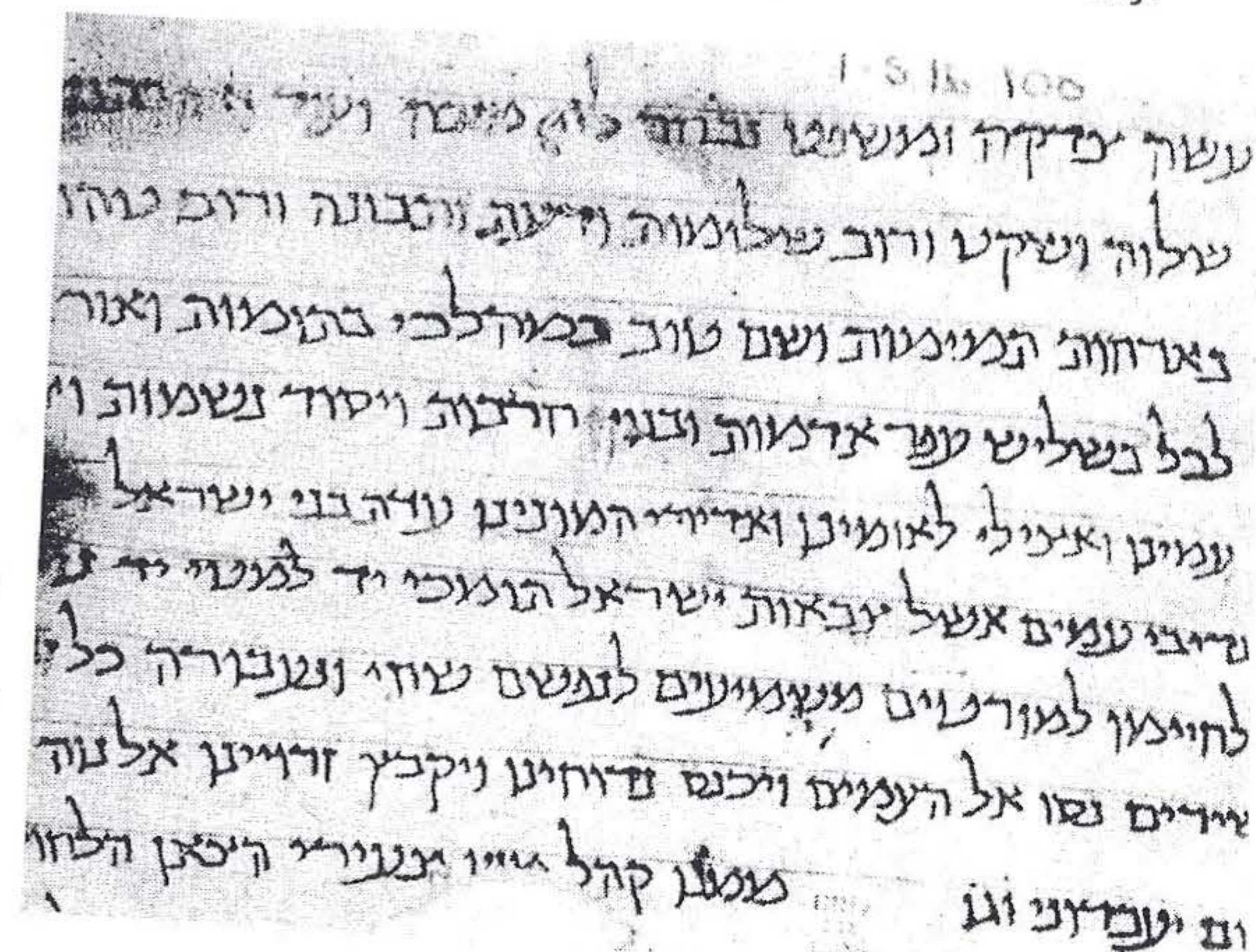
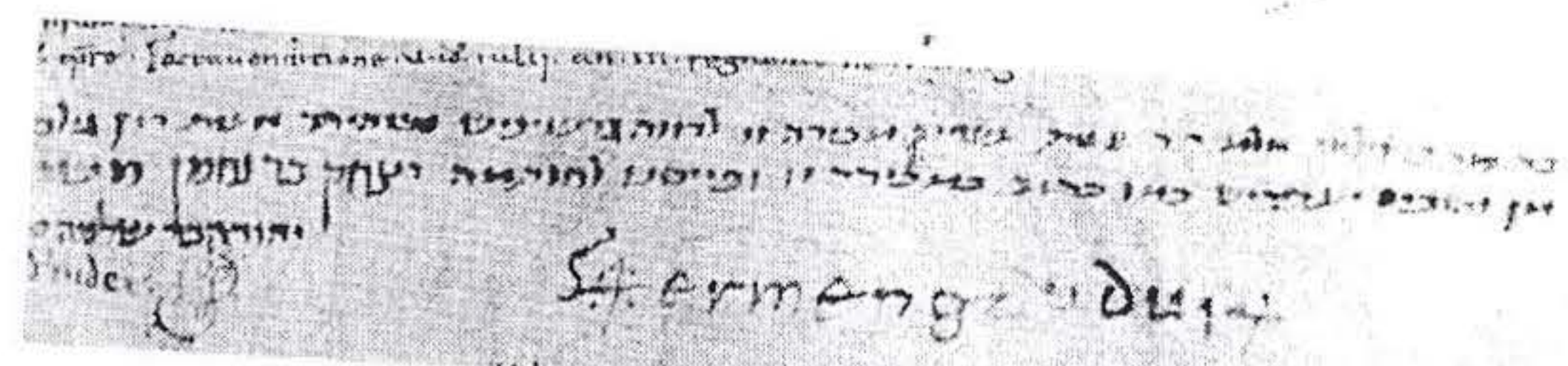


Fig. 2 - Early Ashkenazic proto-cursive script

a - Ms. Barcelona, Archivo Capitulare de la S.I. Catedral, Mit. Esc arm. 3 n. 1504. Barcelona 1034



³² Cf. Beit-Arié, Hebrew script, *ibid.*, pp. 287-288.

Fig. 4 – Ms. Barcelona, Arxiu de la Corona d'Aragó, Perg. Berenguer II, 78, Sefardic and Ashkenazic features, Barcelona 1092

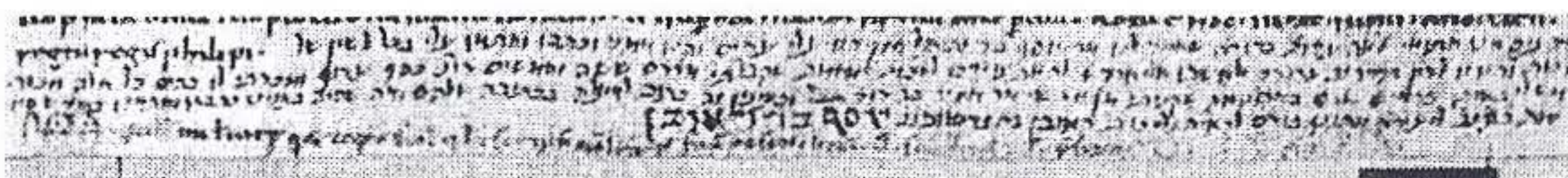


Fig. 5 - Ashkenazic features at the end of the 11th century and the beginning of the 12th century

a - J. Millàs i Vallicrosa, *Documents hebraics de Jueus catalans*, Barcelona 1927, PL II p. 39, Catalonia 1096



b - J. Millàs i Vallicrosa, *Documents hebraics de Jueus catalans* Barcelona 1927, PL. XXXI p. 103. Barcelona 1112

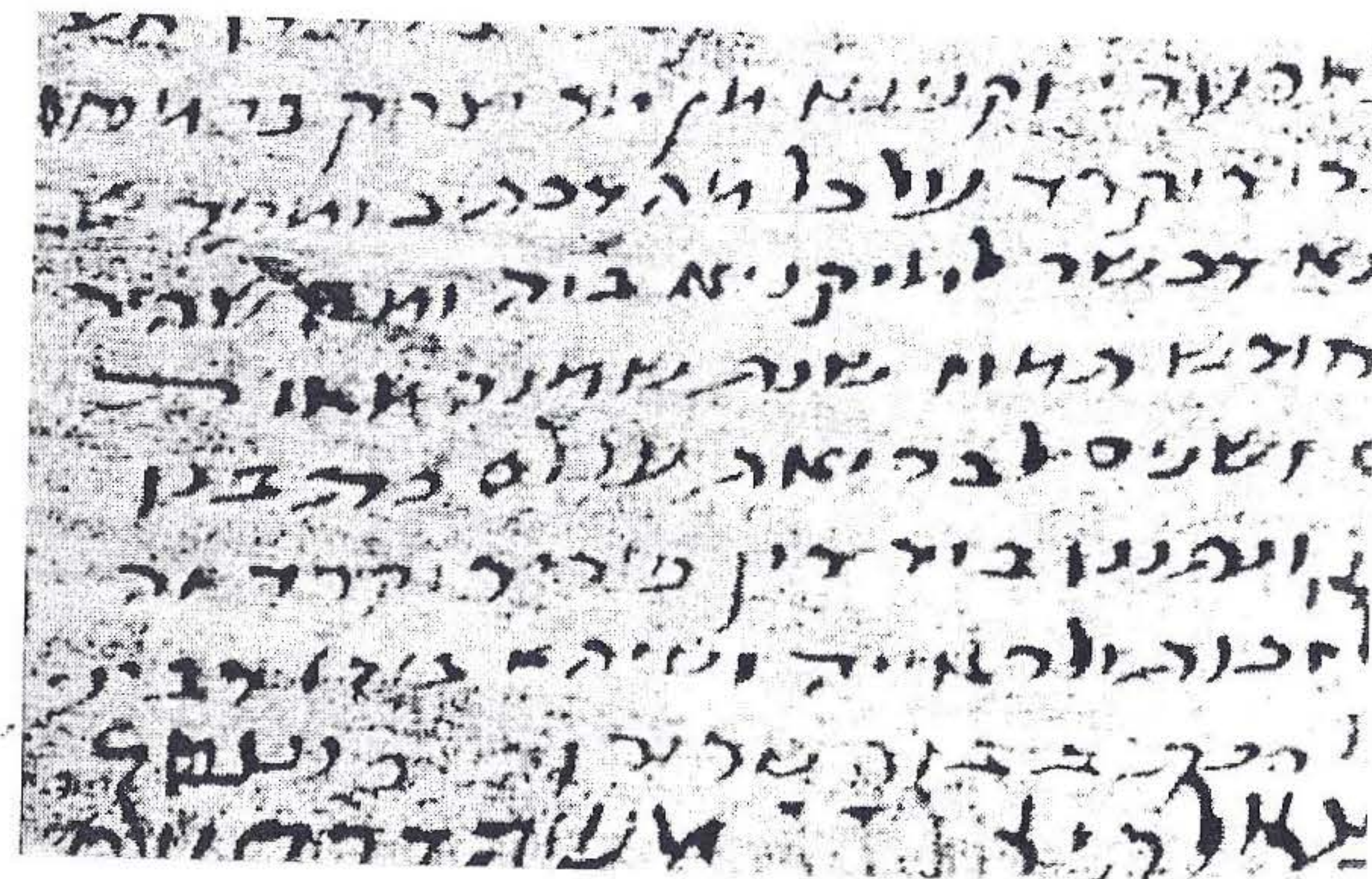


Fig. 6 - J. Millàs i Vallicrosa, *Documents hebraics de Jueus catalans*, Barcelona 1927, PL. III p. 41. First cursive script, Barcelona 1164/5

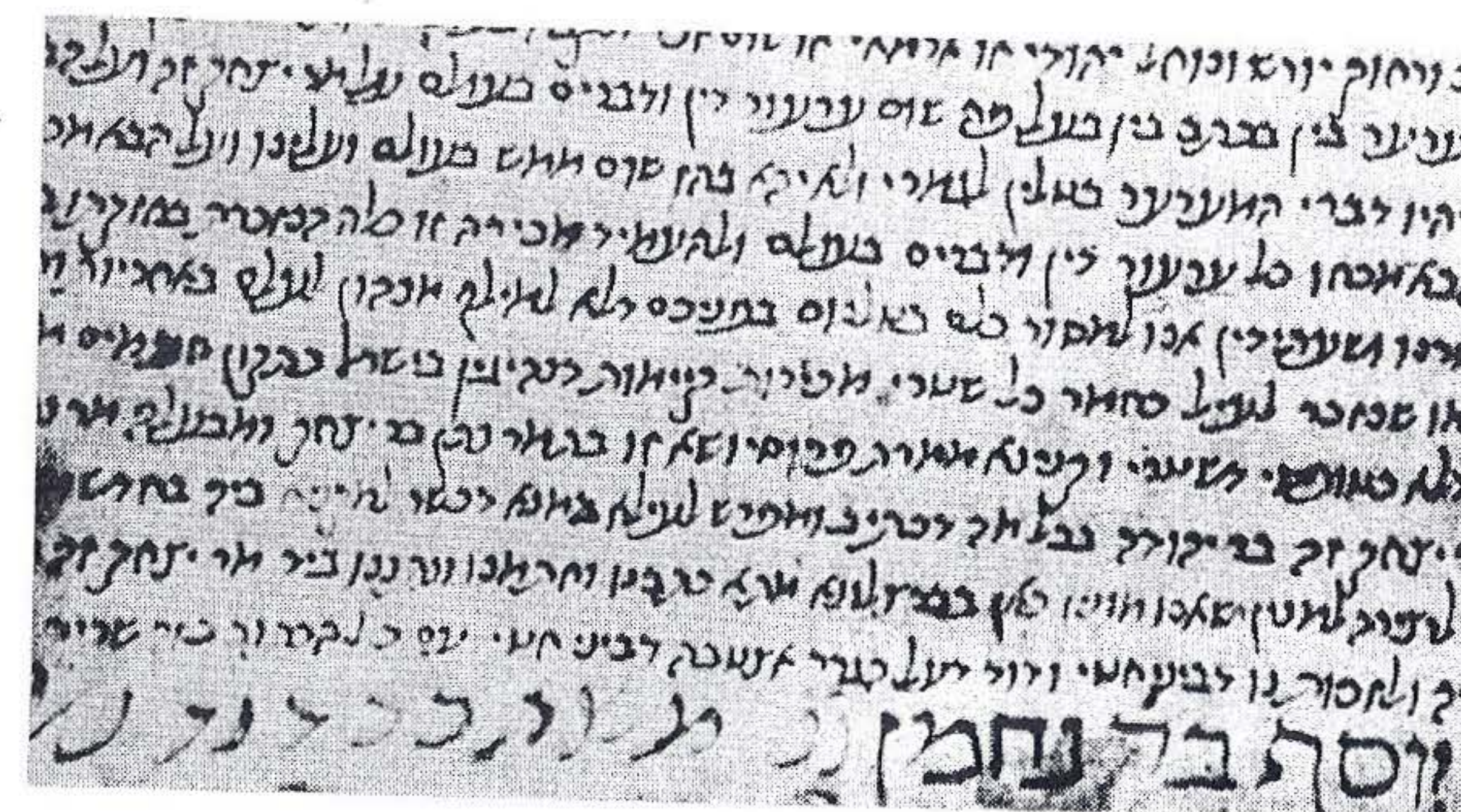


Fig. 7 - J. Millàs i Vallicrosa, *Documents hebraics de Jueus catalans*, Barcelona 1927, PL. VII, p. 49. A fully cursive script, Barcelona 1202

[illegible]

Fig. 8 – J. Millàs i Vallicrosa, *Documents hebraïes de Jues catalan*, Barcelona 1927, PL. XII, p. 59. The development of the semi-cursive, Barcelona 1218

[illegible]

Fig. 9 - J. Millàs i Vallicrosa, Documents hebraïes de Jues catalan, Barcelona 1927, PL. XXXII p.105. First fully shaped semi cursive script, Gerona 1252

[illegible]

Fig. 10 – Ms. Hamburg, Staats-und Universitätsbibliothek Cod.
Hebr. 19. Square script, Gerona 1184

פניהם כיתלמידה נפטר ערבו
 להיבא א"י וחנן שניהם לבור
 יאבעל חכיתלמחלי א"י לעור משום חשדות אשתו
 אמרביהודה אמ' שמואל אמה ביתה שלחין אני
 אמות לתוכה ואמה מיכן ואמה מיכן לאנפיה אבסה ביתה הקילון אני מו
 אחת לתוכה וחני אמה מיכן וחני אמה מיכן לאנפיה ואותן אנפיה מי
 אמ' שמואל בעל השרה זורען ואמ' רב נחמן אמ' שקול בעל השרה טטע
 וכל שקן טטען ומאן דאמ' טטען אבל זורען מיחללי ואמ' רביהודה
 המיס שכלו אנפיה מתקנה מאותה שרה כידוע שלא כול אנפיה לאת
 מתקין לה רב פפא וליסא ליה מיך אשפלוה לארעך לא אמ' רב פפא
 עליז בעל השרה
 ושלו לאהג' עו' לנקוט
מתני

Fig. 11 - Square script written in Catalonia and in Toledo.

a - Ms. Parma, Bib. Palatina 3214, Barcelona? 1277/8

<p>נבאים לכם ים עין החזיק אתכם מעל אדמתכם וחרחת אתכם ואברתם והוציאם יבא את צמחם על מלך גבר והוציאם וחרחתו על אדמתו נאם יהוה ועברה והוציאם וחרחתו על מלך יהודה וחרחתו הוציאם וחרחתו על</p>	<p>עבא את אליו ישראל בה ונאמר אל אדמתכם אנכי עשיתי את הארץ את הארץ ואת הארץ אשר על פני הארץ גבר והוציאם וחרחתו על אדמתו נאם יהוה ועברה והוציאם וחרחתו על מלך יהודה וחרחתו הוציאם וחרחתו על</p>	<p>עבא את אליו ישראל בה ונאמר אל אדמתכם אנכי עשיתי את הארץ את הארץ ואת הארץ אשר על פני הארץ גבר והוציאם וחרחתו על אדמתו נאם יהוה ועברה והוציאם וחרחתו על מלך יהודה וחרחתו הוציאם וחרחתו על</p>
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b - Ms. London, British Library Or. 2201, Toledo 1300

<p>והיה הנס מקול הפחד יפול אל הפחד והיה על המדבר ילכו בפחד כי ארבות מפרחם נפתחו וירעשו סוס הארץ רעה התרעה הארץ פור התפוררה ארץ מוט התמוטטה ארץ נענעה ארץ כשבור והתעוררה במרעה ובכר על הפשעה</p>	<p>תבוק הארץ והפחדתו כי יהוה רבר את הדבר הזה אברה נבדל הארץ אמלה נבדל הארץ אמלה הארץ והארץ חנפה תחת ישיבה ביערות חלפה הקפרות יעלה על כן אלה אברה ארץ ואשמו ישיבה על כן חרש שביארן</p>	<p>מזה עור ידו וטהר על הסחר ממלכות יהוה וזה אל כנען לישמד מי ענה ויאמר לא חסיפי עוד לעל הזה מעשקה בתולת צידון כתיים קומי עבד גס שם לא ינוח לך חן ארץ כשדים וההשם לא היה אשוריה לינים הקומות חשו עורו ארמניה</p>
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Fig. 12 - The schematic alef

ORIENT	TOLEDO	CATALONIA	ASHKENAZ

Fig. 13 - Catalan and Provençal writings.

a - Ms. Vatican, Bib. Vaticana Ebr. 173. Gerona 1305-6

סוכים קין וכל שני ימים יקראו
בהם אם יעשו רוח הן להם חלקם
לכך שזה כאבק רבית הוא וכל
יתומים לא נוח " פרק חמישי
תושב לחין כחן וכלחן
שלא תשיך לאחיו נשך
לשאר העולם מותר " ומצות יעשה להשיך לגוי שנ לגברי תשיך
וכפי השכונת לכו שח היא מצות יעשה וזה הוא דין תורה אסח חכמים
טיהרה ישראל מלוח את הגוי ברבית קצונה לא ככר ח' גוייה שמא ילכו
כמעשה כרב ישיבת עכו " למיכר מותר ללות כן גוי ברבית שחרי
הוא ברח מלפניו ואינו רביל אלו " ותלמיד חכם שאינו חושש בו

b - Ms. Amsterdam, Sem. Ets-Haim (47) A 1-2. Narbonne 1282

היום וטלית זו קרבן אם לא תשוק היום ועבר היום ולא נקצצו ולא נשדפה
 חרזה הקדש ויפדו כשאר ההקדשות ואחר כך יהנה כהן אכל
 אם אפ' הדי הנביעות האו קרבן עד שיקצצו כיון שנקצצו אין צריכין
 פריזן אטחנן כהן מיד כ"א בשפראן המקריש אבל אם פראן אחר
 הדי או יוצאין לחולין אע"פ שעדיין לא נקצצו ויהיו מותרין אף להקדש

פרק חמישי

אחד המקדש לכתב חבית דבר הראוי
 לחזק הנזק כגון אבן או קורה או המקריש לכתב חבית דבר הראוי למזכר
 כגון כבשים ותורים או המקריש למזכר דבר הראוי לכתב חבית כגון
 אבן או קורה או המקריש לזה ולזה דברים שאינן ראויין לא לזה ולא
 לזה כגון המקריש תרנגולין וחומץ וציור או קרקע אפ' הקדש אשפה