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MONIEUX OR MUÑO?

I

Some fifty years ago, my attention was drawn to a medieval document of considerable historical importance, first published (but not translated) by Jacob Mann. The document, as I saw, merited closer attention not only because of the light it cast on Jewish proselytism and pogroms during the Middle Ages, but because Mann had visibly misread the key word in the text identifying the town where the document was prepared. Misreading the word as “ANYW,” Mann had implausibly identified the locality as Anjou (which, of course, is a *province*, not a town, in west-central France); but clearly the first letter of the word was an M (mem), not an A (aleph), and the resulting toponym was MNYW.¹

The document consisted, in effect, of a letter of recommendation composed by a highly literate Jew (whose style appeared to be characterized by occasional Gallicisms) of MNYW for a female proselyte who was in dire need of assistance. Bearing this letter the woman had ultimately ended up in Cairo, where the document was found some eight hundred years later in the genizah (or storage room) of the old synagogue of Fustat.

The story told in the letter was as follows: After converting to Judaism, the proselyte had fled from a “distant land” to the town of Narbonne, home of a major Jewish community in the Languedoc-Roussillon region of southern France. There, she had married one David of the prominent Todros family. (Remarkably, the proselyte herself is never once named in the letter.) When the couple had learned that her family was seeking her, they moved to MNYW. They lived there for six years, bearing three children (all of whom, unlike the proselyte, are named) — and then disaster struck, in the form of a pogrom. Various Jews, including David, were murdered in the synagogue; two of the women’s children were taken captive, and she was left with one child and no means of sustenance.

Seeking to ascertain what town could correspond to MNYW, I examined place-names in the region neighboring Narbonne, itself a major center of Jewish culture whose role in the development of Judæo-Provençal and Judæo-French is well known. I was thus led to identify the village of Monieux, in the Vaucluse near Carpentras, as the site of the Jewish community where the proselyte and David b. Todros had taken refuge. Several years later, an inhabitant of Monieux showed me a plot of land traditionally known as the local “cemetery of the Jews.”² The identification of MNYW as Monieux led me to suggest that the pogrom described in the letter was perpetrated by Crusaders on their way to cross the Alps in 1096; Monieux was, in fact, a fortified stronghold in the Nesque gorge, directly on the path towards one of the main crossings. As for the proselyte herself, I argued that she had originated in northern France, because if she

¹ Here and throughout, see my article “Monieux,” in *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society*, Vol. 113, No. 1 (Feb. 20, 1969), pp. 67-94, and the other works referred to therein.

² See my article “L’ancien cimetière aux Juifs de Monieux,” in *L’Arche* 265, April 1979, pp. 7-9.

had come from Spain she might have been expected (like a number of other known Spanish converts to Judaism) to have fled southward into more friendly Muslim territories rather than to Narbonne.

II

So far so good; but the further course of events was, it so turns out, to take a path that illustrates a theme I have developed at length in other contexts: conclusions that seem dictated by the evidence known at one point, may be cast into doubt by additional evidence that emerges at a later point. Indeed, it is incumbent upon the historian always to reexamine, with as open a mind as possible, his or her earlier conclusions in the light of new evidence. The human factors of an opposing nature that so often impede this basic requirement of a skeptical stance are one of the less fortunate realities of academic life, and have led to many a crisis in the advance of knowledge.

In this instance, it so happens that some thirty years after I had published my articles on this topic, the Israeli palaeographer Edna Engel published, first in Hebrew and then in English, an article discussing a *second* letter (T-S 12.532), palpably written in the same hand, at least a year after the first letter and which can be seen, despite the more fragmentary form in which it has survived, to describe a further tragic episode that the same proselyte must have endured during the months that followed the writing of the first letter. In interpreting the second letter, Engel benefited from the collaboration of Yosef Yahalom, who was able to attach to it an additional fragment (T-S NS 323.31).³ This letter constituted by the two fragments, discovered by Engel among the Cairo genizah documents at Cambridge University, was unknown to me or to Mann; if either of us had been aware of it when we examined the first letter, our conclusions may well have been different.

According to what can be gleaned from the fragmentary second letter, the proselyte, apparently accompanied by another man from Narbonne, went to the town of Najera in Spain, which is known to have been the home of a prosperous Jewish community. There, she was seized by Christians who prepared to burn her at the stake, presumably as punishment for her conversion. Local Jews, apparently with the financial assistance of the same man from Narbonne, succeeded in bribing her captors; she absconded from the town at night, apparently leaving the man from Narbonne in the lurch; he was, at any rate, unable to find her when he sought her out the next day to see if she could reimburse him. Approximately a year later, she reappeared, on the verge of giving birth to a fourth child, in the locality where the author of the two letters resided. The second letter is apparently addressed to individuals who are seeking to be compensated for the ransom they raised to save the woman from the stake.

The problem posed by the second letter arises directly from location of the persecution

³ See their contributions in J. Targarona Borrás and A. Sáenz-Badillos, eds., *Jewish Studies at the Turn of the Twentieth Century*, Vol. 1, Biblical, Rabbinical, and Medieval Studies (Brill, Leiden 1999). — If I am addressing this matter seventeen years after the publication of the Engel-Yahalom articles, this is because neither Engel nor Yahalom informed me of their publications; it is, rather, Professor Stefan Hertmans, a resident of Monieux, who first brought them to my attention several months ago. While the failure of Engel and Yahalom to send me off-prints or otherwise alert me to their important work can hardly be called collegial, perhaps Engel attempted unsuccessfully to contact me, because she refers to me as a “professor at Princeton University.”

that it describes: Najera, in Spain, is approximately 70 miles from Burgos; and there are several small locales whose names include forms of the word *Muño* in the vicinity of Burgos. Thus, Engel and Yahalom raise a solid question: if the proselyte came from northern France and her family was pursuing her, does it not make better sense to identify MNYW as *Muño*? The plausible interpretation of the linguistic eccentricities in the two letters as Castilian forms would tend to confirm this new, revised theory. To these two basic arguments of Engel-Yahalom, we can add that Burgos is also not far (albeit in another direction) from Motajudios, the well-known village founded by Jews fleeing a pogrom in 1035.⁴ Are the events at MNYW (first letter) and Najera (second letter) not simply characteristic of the violence periodically perpetrated against Jews in this region of Spain during medieval times?

As indicated, I find this revised theory to be entirely plausible.

At the same time, however, I fail to find it *conclusive*. For, while the new theory has the advantage of naturally flowing from the relative vicinity of Burgos, *Muño* and Najera, it has the disadvantage of ignoring the relative vicinity of Monieux and Narbonne. The trip from Narbonne to the tiny locale of *Muño* would have been arduous, on roads winding along approximately 450 miles of often arid and inhospitable terrain—300 miles farther than the scenic journey through the Provence, by way of Avignon and Carpentras, to Monieux.⁵

It follows that, since Monieux is so much closer to Narbonne and within its shared cultural radius, we should not rush to discount the possibility (1) that the unnamed proselyte and David b. Todros initially took refuge in that site, with its medieval population of around 2,000; (2) that after the pogrom struck there she made her way back to Narbonne despite the risk of being recognized there, and from there set out, accompanied by a relation of the Todros family, on the long journey to Najera where she may have hoped to begin a new life, and where that prominent family may well have had connections; and (3) that after barely escaping from the stake in Najera where she was recognized as a convert from Christianity, she again made her way back to Narbonne, and from there, a year later, to Monieux, where she hoped to find assistance in giving birth and in reimbursing her rescuers.

Ultimately, from there she could have set out on her final journey, boarding a ship in the port of Arles (approximately half way between Monieux and Narbonne, somewhat closer to Monieux) that would take her to Cairo, where she would have hoped to seek refuge from the prospect of punishment at the hands of Christians.

With respect to the somewhat idiosyncratic linguistic elements of the two letters, while it is certainly true — and a fact to be reckoned with — that Narbonne served as a prominent outpost on the geo-military route linking Italy and Spain, the Jewish cultural activity that took place there has long been associated with Judaeo-Provençal, and the Gallicisms interpreted by Yahalom as Hispanic forms, may well also be interpretable as reflecting the influence of the

⁴ Motajudios famously changed its name to Matajudios (Kill-Jews), and recently back to Motajudios after a public campaign accompanying the decision of the Spanish government to grant the right of return and citizenship to all Sephardic Jews.

⁵ By comparison, Khirbet Qumran, the Hasmonean fort located on the northern shore of the Dead Sea, lies some 15 miles from Jerusalem.

language spoken in southern France, which, just like Spanish, had evolved from Latin.⁶ Throughout medieval times, linguistic differences between the various Romance languages were far less marked than they are today.⁷ In this light, in the absence of a linguistic analysis of the two letters in consultation with an expert in medieval Provençal, Yahalom's arguments, while highly cogent, cannot be considered conclusive.

Contra the assertion of a conclusive demonstration that MNYW refers to Muño, I would thus suggest that we now have a situation where two opposing interpretations are possible. The identification of MNYW as Monieux was the logical conclusion in view of the evidence available in 1966; today, in view of new evidence, it can no longer be considered anything more than one, and perhaps the less likely, of two divergent explanations. Given, however, (1) the fragmentary nature of the second letter, (2) the lack of secure knowledge of where the proselyte came from, and (3) the relative geographical perplexities, it is simply impossible to definitively ascertain the truth in this regard — to do more than weigh degrees of likelihood. Historians, in short, will need to pick the narrative that seems more plausible to them: did the proselyte subsist for a year in the vicinity of Najera or Burgos before returning to Muño, or did she make her way back to Narbonne and from there to Monieux? That being said, it must be stated that in view of the second letter, there is no longer any solid historical proof that Crusaders took the route of the Nesque valley to cross the Alps and perpetrated a pogrom along the way in Monieux. This explanation for the pogrom at MNYW is reduced to no more than (at best) an uncertain hypothesis.

If, on the other hand, the identification of MNYW as Monieux is indeed ultimately to be discarded in view of linguistic evidence, it must be said that the error in this case was felicitous. On account of the local tradition of a “cemetery of the Jews,” Monieux (pending, to be sure, confirmation through excavations) now has a place on the map of the Jewish history of medieval France. Moreover, the method of reconstruction — the realization that a single character of the crucial toponym had been misread by Mann — would, during ensuing years, lead to the crucial recognition that the term RDWM, the medieval Hebrew form for Rodom or Rouen, the capital of Normandy, was present in a large number of important medieval manuscripts, where it had frequently been misread as RDWS, due to the similarity of the final M (mem sofit) and the S (samekh).

III

In view of this basic problem of conclusively identifying MNYW, a few other observations regarding the two letters and the relation between them are worth making (I append translations of both of them).

To begin with, there is a lingering question as to the date of composition of both letters.

⁶ For example, the word *camisa*, used in the second letter to describe what must have been the fabric in which the woman was to be covered at the stake, is exactly the same in medieval *langue d'oc* (cf. modern French *chemise*); the adverbial form *casi* which also appears in the second letter may simply reflect the medieval pronunciation of *quasi* in various romance languages, etc.

⁷ See, e.g., Dante's *De vulgari Eloquentia* (I.viii.5 and I.ix.2), which discussed examples of Provençal verse as if they were written in one of the three “vernaculars” of a single “language” spoken by the “Hispanic, the French, and the Italians”; as Dante put it, “some say *oc*, some say *si*, and others, indeed, say *oil*.”

Given the configuration of known details about the Todros family and the passing of the First Crusade through Provence in 1096, I had proposed dating the first letter to that year. That date, like Monieux itself, is now an uncertain hypothesis.

More importantly, it must be observed that if the letters do date from the eleventh century, we are confronted with rare documentary evidence of an early example of the Roman Catholic Church's policy to burn apostates at the stake — as well as of the possibility of bribing the priests who ordered such burnings. It is generally believed that burning had become the “usual punishment for heretics” by the “middle of the twelfth century,” and that it “was first decreed in positive law in the code of Pedro II, of Aragon, in 1197.”⁸ Thus, an early date for our two letters would accentuate their historical significance. As indicated, however, a later date cannot be excluded, particularly in view of the possibility that MNYW refers to Muño.

The relationship between the two letters is also somewhat murky. Yahalom provides a neat narrative, according to which the proselyte remarried in Najera, lived there for a year, and was then seized and nearly burned, after which she escaped and immediately returned to MNYW. But the second letter merely states that the “poor woman was nowhere to be found for almost a year to the day, when she arrived among us, pregnant, and gave birth to her second daughter,” suggesting that she was nowhere to be found for a year *after she escaped* from Najera. If so, it is unclear how she became pregnant again, whether in a connubial and/or romantic framework or as a reflection of desperate circumstances, i.e., through rape or prostitution.

In that respect, Yahalom's narrative would seem to rest on the supposition that the words “after her husband was killed” on the third line of the second letter refers to the murder of a *second* husband in Najera. But, while the letter is fragmentary, it does not appear to tell of a second husband or marriage, which would be a rather puzzling omission if she had remarried in Najera after living for six years and bearing three children with David b. Todros in MNYW.

Similarly, the fifth line begins with a partial quote, “Behold, your wife's relative [...]. Are these words sarcastically addressed to the supposedly murdered second husband? Or is the “wife” referred to a third party, and the “relative” our proselyte? The lines are too fragmentary and can be hypothetically reconstructed in different ways; e.g., “Behold, your wife's relative, this woman from Narbonne, is a Christian apostate,” or “Behold, your wife's relative says your wife is a Jew, but we will burn her, just as we burned you.”

Again, the fragmentary final lines of the second letter refer to a “Samuel bar Jacob the departed.” It is not clear if this is the name of the hypothesized second husband, or someone else. Perhaps the author is invoking names of various members of the community killed in the original pogrom.

The name “Justa” is the last word in the remaining text of the second letter; this was the name of the proselyte's daughter who was taken captive, but here too, we have no way of knowing if the author is invoking the daughter's memory or using the name in reference to

⁸ W.G. Sumner, *Folkways: A Study of Mores, Manners, Customs and Morals* (Boston, 1906), 247. An English deacon who converted to Judaism was burned at the stake in 1222. Later in the thirteenth century, Pope Clement IV banned Christians from converting to Judaism (*Turbato corde*, 1267), and several converts were thereafter notoriously burned alive. The elaborate *auto da fe* ceremony was practiced as early as 1242 in Paris, but was first introduced into Spain in 1481. Not until 1792 did the Church stop burning apostates.

someone else.

Further, no mention is made of the proselyte's "orphaned son" with whom she had been left after the massacre in the synagogue described in the first letter. If she had arrived with a young child in tow and about to give birth, one might have expected the author to mention as much.

The exact purpose of the second letter is not entirely clear. Since it appears to be addressed to one or more persons who are seeking financial compensation for the bribes paid to the priests, it must be assumed that the proselyte kept the letter on her, intending to give it to those persons, and then ended up in Cairo where both letters were deposited in the genizah of the synagogue at Fustat. Did she change her plans, and head to Cairo rather than to Narbonne?

Yahalom suggests that the second letter was naturally "tucked in" with the first one, but this raises the additional question of how the proselyte managed to hold on to the first letter after being seized by Christian authorities in Najera. Did she have time to leave the letter with her Jewish friends? Or did the priests merely threaten to seize her, and desist from their threats when bribed?

Some of these questions are almost enough to raise a doubt as to whether the same woman is the subject of the two narratives. And yet the common thread of Narbonne, and reference to the birth of a *second* daughter, seems to make the identity clear. No doubt the connection between the two letters would be clearer if the second one were not in such a fragmentary state. Ultimately, the historian of ancient and medieval times must always confront such gaps in knowledge. What is clear by now, however, is the danger that Christian converts to Judaism faced, and the price in human suffering that our proselyte paid for her act of faith and courage.

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Appendix:

The Two Letters in Translation

The first letter:

- 1 "To do righteousness and justice is more acceptable to the Lord than sacrifice" (Prov. 21.3).
And further: "Ye shall love the stranger, for strangers [were ye in the land of Egypt]."
(Deut. 10.19)
- 2 Repose and quietude, an abundance of peaceful tidings, knowledge, wisdom, and bounteous purity from the Creator of Spirits [to all those who tread]
- 3 in faultless paths; a good name for those who walk in perfection; light and happiness to make glad the soul[s; the granting of inheritances]

- 4 to all, through a third of the dust of the earth; and the building up of ruins, the foundation of spirits and the u[nitin]g of the inscribed happinesses. [To]
- 5 our people, the nobles of our nation, the mighty ones of our masses, the congregation of the sons of Israel who [reside] in all their places of settle[ment]
- 6 benefactors of nations, the tamarisk(s) of the hosts of Israel, supporters those in despair, offerers of benefits with goodly countenance, who “lift up [their bodies to the smiters]
- 7 and their cheeks to them who make bald,” (to) those “who have said to their soul, ‘Bow down that we may pass over’” (*cf.* Isaiah 51.23). All this has come upon them, yet they did not forget the Name of their Holy One [the Lord of Israel],
- 8 may He lift up his ensign to the peoples, (may) He gather in our dispersed ones and bring together our scattered ones to His holy habitation, and may He plant us upon the mountain of our inheritance, as it is written, “[For in My holy mountain etc.]
- 9 there shall they serve Me etc.” (Ezek. 20.40). From us, the congregation of MNYW, the “young of the flock” (Jer. 49.20), the oppressed and broken, who reside amidst d[ogs]
- 10 until we have been left, a few from many, “as a bea[con upon the top of] a mountain, and as an ensign upon the hillock” (Isaiah 30.17), “to the heat by day and the frost by night” (Jer. 36.30), h[enceforth may the Name of the Lord be]
- 11 blessed forever and unto all eternity. Yet despite [the badness of] our oppression and the might of our distress, we offer pleadings, entreating the countenance of [our] K[ing to hasten the tidings of]
- 12 gladness, to bind together our exiles and gather our dispersions together in the “Throne of glory on high from the beginning” (Jer. 17.12), as it is written,” And He will set up an ensign for [the nations, and will assemble the dispersed of Israel] (Isaiah 11.12).
- 13 We (hereby) inform our honorable lords of the matter of this widow the proselytess, whose husband was R. David, his soul rest in peace, of the members of the Narbonne community, [who was a member of the family of]
- 14 R. Todros, his memory be for a blessing, in Narbonne. He came here six years ago to the day because of the matter of his wife, this proselyte, who had been a [Christian and entered the Covenant of]

- 15 Holiness; she went forth from the house of her father, from great wealth and a distant land, and came on behalf of the Lord, and to take refuge under the wings of [the Shekinah. She left]
- 16 her brothers and the great ones of her family, and was living in Narbonne; and R. David, the deceased person just mentioned, married her and was with her more than s[ix months, when he heard]
- 17 that they were seeking her. So he fled to our place, until the Holy One decreed this persecution upon us, righteous is He and righteous [..... The husband was killed]
- 18 in the synagogue and the two children were taken captive—a boy named Jacob and a girl named Justa, she being three years old, [and all they owned was plundered].
- 19 The widow remained alive, weeping and crying because of her great degradation and poverty, there being no one to care for her; and there also remained alive unto her [a son of]
- 20 months. Thus was she left, in thirst and nakedness, lacking all provisions, and with no funds to pay for her (daily needs) and (those of) her orphaned son. So we have s[ought to turn to]
- 21 our lords, to inform them of her oppressed state and her sorrow. And now, O our lords, lift up your eyes to heaven and take pity upon her poverty, her g[reat degradation and]
- 22 her children who have been taken captive, and with regard to her husband who was slain. “Perhaps the Lord will be gracious” (Amos 5.15) so that she may redeem them. So accept her with friendly [countenance and treat]
- 23 her in the same goodly measure as you do every wayfarer and passerby [and you shall merit] for yourselves [life in the world to come, as it is said]
- 24 “Call and the Lord will answer, beseech and He will say, ‘Here am I (Isaiah 58.9). May the Holy One, blessed be He, answer all your re[quests....]
- 25 as it is said, “If I do not open unto you the windows of heaven and pour out upon you [a blessing, more than sufficiency” (Malachi 3.10)the Lord God]
- 26 has spoken. He in his mercifulness will double your reward and will surely lead you in joy to the place of His glory; [..... Blessed]

27 is the Lord in His lovingkindness. Amen, Se[lah.] (signed:) Joshua b. Obadiah, peace be with him;b....., p.b.w.h.;b.

28 Isaac, p.b.w.h.; Isaac b. [....., p.b.w.h.]

The second letter⁹:

1 [...]

2 you came to us, the men of [...] two [...]

3 her supposed relative [...] after her husband was killed [...]

4 to her in the town of Nájera [...] and he told us about the entire event¹⁰ [...]

5 to him, “Behold, your wife’s relative [...] all the Jews, and she remained in great fear and [they prepared for her (?)]

6 a shroud¹¹ of linen and searched about for her [...] to bring her into it and to burn her, and the men of Nájera stood up [...]

7 she might be exonerated, and they paid bribes to the priests [...] and to the sorcerers and to the leaders in the amount of thirty-five dinars of silver,

8 which is fifty dinars [...] holiday,¹² this Narbonnese man who went with her and who had thirty [...]

9 almost anyone¹³ (?) what he had designated(?) [...] in his hands [...] to the men of the community of Nájera, and they sent her away at midnight from their locale [...]

10 and so that when he sought her out on the morrow to inquire after her, whether she had anything else with which to raise the thirty dinars that he had taken

11 out of his own property for her redemption, the poor woman was nowhere to be found for almost a year to the day, when she arrived among us, pregnant, and gave birth to

⁹ This draft translation was prepared by my colleague, Professor Michael Wechsler of the Moody Bible Institute, on the basis of the reconstruction of Yosef Yahalom in *Sefunot*, new series, vol. 7 (22) (1999), pp. 30–31 and Plate 10. I am enormously grateful to Dr. Wechsler for his assistance in this regard. The footnotes are his.

¹⁰ מאורעה, apparently for מאורע, as in line 15 below (see Yahalom, p. 25).

¹¹ קמיסה (= Span. *camisa*; see Yahalom, p. 26).

¹² יום טוב, perhaps a name?

¹³ “nigh anyone”—קאסימי (= Span. *casi* + Heb. מי; see *ibid.*).

- 12 her second daughter. From that same money that was in our possession we did for her and for her daughters all that we could [...]
- 13 [...] from this Moses, and we demanded that she contribute from his assets for her redemption, and she answered and said, “Certainly [...]
- 14 thirty dinars with what [...] and she had one sheet (of fabric) and she gave it to him for the equivalent of one and a half gold coins, and so we were compensated [...]
- 15 this event, just as we did [...] at the time that she went through this tribulation, and they intended to burn her [...]
- 16 were it not for the mercies of (God in) heaven [...] until she had fully paid the thirty dinars [...]
- 17 in order that he(?) would not finish [...] Lift up your eyes to heaven¹⁴ and have pity on [...] and on
- 18 her suffering and on her poverty [...] and follow the custom of your ancient forefathers and mothers [...]
- 19 with their children to her, as it is written [...] and concerning Abraham it is written, *For I have known him, in order that he may charge (his sons, etc.)* (Gen 18:19);
- 20 and concerning Isaac it is written, *And Isaac sowed* (Gen 26:12); and it is written, *Sow to yourselves according to righteousness*, etc. (Hosea 10:12). Concerning Jacob it is written, *And when Jacob finished charging his sons* (Gen 49:33).
- 21 Hence there is no other charge but righteousness [...]. We are not (saying this) as admonishers, but as reminders [...]
- 22 [...] and may he show compassion and have mercy [...] and may this verse be fulfilled in you and in us: *And they who hope in the Lord shall renew their strength; they shall mount up*
- 23 *with wings as eagles; they shall run, and not grow weary* (Isaiah 40:31) [...] afterwards we were compensated by Moses bar Ish [...]
- 24 [...] these thirty-five dinars [...] and there remained for a short time eleven dinars of silver [...]
- 25 [...] Samuel bar Jacob the departed; David bar [...]
- 26 [...] the departed; Samuel bar Jacob the departed; Iusta [...]

¹⁴ Cf. Isaiah 51:6.