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THE HOME OF THE HEBREW SCRIBE OF MS PARMA de ROSSI 1105

Manuscript Parma de Rossi 1105 (=MS 2429) of the Bibliotheca Palatina is one of many, at Parma and elsewhere, preserving the Hebrew translation by Judah ibn Tibbon of Judah Halevi's renowned apologetic work entitled *Sefer ha-Kuzari*. Its special interest resides not in the copy itself — which to the best of my knowledge contains no significant textual variations — but rather in the place and time in which it was copied.

The beginning of the colophon of this MS, found on page 144 verso, may be translated as follows:

I the youngster (*haša ʿir*) Judah b. Solomon of the house of ʾWRGYR have written for myself this Sefer Hakuzar which the sage Judah Halevi composed, (it being translated) from Arabic into Hebrew. I completed it here in the *Migdōl* (=tower or fortress) of LʾŠMYTʾMYS, of the region of VNYŠY.”

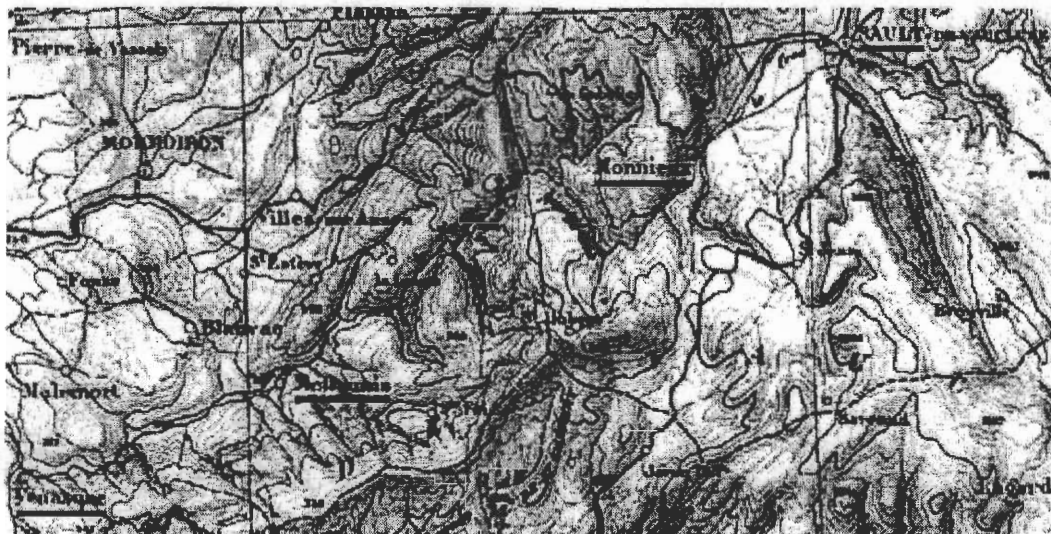
The Hebrew dating given by Judah in the continuation of the colophon for completion of his task translates into the summer of A.D. 1521. As students of Hebrew colophons well know, the only inference one may legitimately draw from the Hebrew expression *haša ʿir* by which Judah designates himself is that he was not yet old, and probably not even middle-aged, at the time he copied down this text.

The editors of the recent Parma catalogue do well in recognizing (p. 338) that the “region” (Heb. *maḥoz*) of VNYŠY is an appropriate Hebrew designation for the Comtat or Comté **Venaissin**, roughly equivalent to that area of Provence popularly known as the Vaucluse. However, they refrain from suggesting the name of the town in which the copying took place. The Vaucluse is studded with small towns and villages, and the smallest of them do not appear on many contemporary maps of France or even of Provence alone.

The key to identifying the toponym LʾŠMYTʾMYS lies in recognizing that the first three consonants of this term, viz. LʾŠ, is readily transcribable as *las*, which in Provençal is the normal spelling of the plural feminine definite article. (See for example M. Raynouard, *Grammaire Romane* [Paris, 1816], p. 14; in French, the only designation for both the masculine and feminine plural definite article is, of course, *les*.)

The designation MYTʾMYS answers, consonant by consonant, to the small town of **Méthamis**, which is referred to in nineteenth and twentieth century French maps in that way, i.e., without the definite article, but which in maps of the eighteenth century and beforehand was designated as *Les Méthamis* — the precise French equivalent of Provençal *Las Metamis*. (Cf. e.g. the map entitled *La Provence*, by Guillaume Delisle, a reproduction of which appears in G. Reverdy, *Atlas historique des routes de France* [Paris 1986], p. 74.) Méthamis is a characteristic perched *bourgade* situated in the hilly country to the east of

Venasque, with which it formed a *seigneurie* in former times under the control of the House of Thésan-Venasque. It is 17 km by road east of Carpentras, and overlooks the profound gorge of the Nesque river (“les gorges de la Nesque”) as the latter winds its way some 22 km eastward to the outskirts of the walled Vacluse village of **Monieux**. There the gorge comes to its end, the road leveling out onto the plain of Sault as it heads further eastward towards the Mont Genève pass leading over the Alps.



The area of Vacluse including (from SW to NE) Venasque, Méthamis, Monieux (“Monnieux”) and Sault. Detail from “Carte de France à 1/200,000,” Service géographique de l’Armée (France), anno 1925, sheet no. 67.

Judah b. Solomon’s family name — viz., *bet* (=“house of”) ’RGYYR — throws interesting light on the reason behind Judah’s residency in the small country town of Métamis. The transcription of this name offered in the recent catalogue — i.e., “Orger” (p. 338)— would require only one *yod* (=Y) rather than the two in the original Hebrew form, and in itself conveys no meaning in Old French or Provençal. The proper transcription is clearly *Orgier*, a Provençal term that has been reasonably construed to mean a *grain-merchant*. (Cf. E. Levy, *Provenzalisches Supplement-Wörterbuch*, fünfter Band [Leipzig 1907], p. 518, and sources there cited.) It may, however, more specifically mean a *barley-merchant*, in consonance with the common meaning in French of the word *orge*, i.e., barley. At all events, the House of Orgier was apparently an old Jewish grain-merchant family whose members may have had their seat at Métamis for centuries.

Why this may have been so becomes evident from the description of Méthamis given by L’abbé Expilly in his *Dictionnaire géographique, historique et politique des Gaules et de la France* (IV [Amsterdam 1766], p. 706). He states that *les Methamis* (for which he gives the Latin equivalent *Methamiae*) is a *bourg* in the Comté-Venaissin having 160 households (literally *feux*, hearths), and being situated near the right bank of the Nesque, between St. Lambert, Javon, Blauvac and Venasque. He adds that it is surrounded by a wall, that the above-mentioned *seigneurie* was one of the most ancient and illustrious of the region, and, most surprisingly, that at Méthamis “they harvest the best wheat that it is

possible to find" (*On y recueille du meilleur bled-froment qu'il soit possible de trouver*). This attractive agricultural characteristic of the farmlands near Méthamis apparently encouraged Jews as well as others to settle there long before Judah b. Solomon availed himself in 1521 of the opportunity, while residing in the same place, to transcribe a copy of Judah Halevi's *Kuzari* for his own use.

In the course of several earlier articles concerning the town at the *eastern* end of the Nesque gorge — i.e., Monieux (see references below) — I have described the ancient walls surrounding this place as well as the St.-André chapel, the ruins of the so-called *Chateau des Seigneurs*, and the adjacent Roman-style tower situated on a peak overlooking the town. From the top of the tower, even in its degraded condition, there are excellent views both eastward towards the Mt. Genève pass and westward far into the gorge. As I have also indicated in the same publications, the castle and tower were apparently constructed as necessary elements in the strategic defense of the region, and particularly in defense of the road through the gorge that linked together that region's eastern and western parts. (See attached illustrations.)

If, however, enemy forces had ever breached the Monieux defenses, they could have marched westward unimpeded by way of the road trailing, high above, along the gorge until they had reached the approximate area of Méthamis, where the terrain allows further defensive measures.

In this respect it must be noted that the complete name of the town recorded by Judah in his Hebrew colophon is not simply Las Metamis but rather "*the Tower* (Heb. *migdōl*) *of Las Metamis*" — signifying the presence at or near this town either of a tower *per se* or, more likely, of a defensive complex, that is, a castle or fortress similar to the one at Monieux. In discussing the medieval Jewish community inhabiting the (much larger) Provençal town of Tarascon (on the Rhone, facing Beaucaire), H. Gross indicates (*Gallia Judaica* [Paris, 1897], p. 248) that "there formerly existed a fortress at Tarascon, for which reason the name of this city in Hebrew is sometimes *migdal Tarascon*" — i.e., the tower of Tarascon.

It is well known that a fortress was built at Tarascon during the 14th century, and Gross cites, as the one Hebrew source for the toponym Tarascon preceded by *migdal*, the Hebrew chronicle *Shebet yehudah* of Joseph ibn Verga, who wrote this book at least 150 years after the fortress in question was constructed. Since, however, the form *Migdōl Tarascon* appears as early as 1284 (cf. this expression in the colophon of MS Parma-de Rossi 256=MS 3239, written in that year), there must have been a tower or fortress at the site long before the 14th century.

Gross cites several other towns in the south of France bearing the designation *migdal*, e.g. *Migdal Yarhi* (the Tower of Lunel) and *Migdal Narbonah* (according to him, the Chateau Narbonais at Toulouse), and states (op. cit., p. 277) that the term *migdal* "is often applied in Hebrew to fortified towns", and that "these same cities are in Latin termed "castrum" or "castellum." In Italy, the town of Castelfranco (i.e., Castel Franco) was in Hebrew apparently known by the equivalent *Migdal Horin*, the latter term meaning "freedom" or "free ones" (MS Parma-de Rossi 20=3104, colophon). In 1392, the Spanish town of Falset was in Hebrew termed *Migdal Falset*. The Hebrew term was thus used not only in the Provence, and it evidently served as a metonymy for French *chateau* and

forteresse, and for the equivalents of those terms in other Romance languages, for such structures would normally have possessed towers as their most prominent feature. The traveller Benjamin of Tudela (middle of the 12th century) moreover states in his *Itinerary* that a part of the Jewish community of Marseilles lived in a *migdal* above the city (ed. Adler, Hebrew section, p. 5) — which, in view of the fact that a community can hardly be thought of as living in a tower, the editor and translator of the *Itinerary* reasonably enough translates (*ibid.*, English section, p. 5) as “castle”. In northern France, however, the characteristic Hebrew term employed to designate a castle or fortress was the Biblical *kerak* (cf. above s.v. Parma-de Rossi 11, with reference to Chateauroux).

With respect to the erection of a stronghold at Méthamis — which must have taken place approximately at that (uncertain) time in the history of Roman Provence when the defensive complex at Monieux was introduced — it may be pointed out that the position of this town near the western opening of the Nesque gorge virtually required a defensive effort. See, for example, the description of the territory and the road through it in *Les Guides Bleu: Provence, Côte d'Azur* (Librairie Hachette, Paris 1964), pp. 198-199: “[La route] s’élève a travers des mamelons couverts d’oliviers, de chênes verts, de maquis, franchit le ravin de l’Ermitage, puis contourne un éperon d’où l’on a, à dr[oit], une belle vue sur l’issue des gorges de la Nesque que commande le village perché de Méthamis; elle vient enfin déboucher en corniche au-dessus de la gorge sauvage, tapissé de maquis, bordée de falaises calcaires criblées de grottes, où coule, quand elle a de l’eau, la Nesque” (My italics.)

In summary it may be said that insofar as the term *migdal* or *migdōl* in old Hebrew texts of the south of France characteristically designated — particularly when preceding the names of towns — fortresses endowed with towers, it may be reasonably inferred that the expression *Migdōl Las Metamis* in the Provençal manuscript copied by Judah implies that Méthamis once possessed, precisely as Monieux, a fortress of this type. Its purposes clearly included the protection of the western opening of the Nesque gorge. No evidence exists, however, to indicate that the Jewish inhabitants of Méthamis ever suffered the same fate at the hands of Crusaders as had those living at Monieux in 1096

N.B. For information on Monieux, cf. the following articles on this subject and the bibliographic information contained in them:

N. Golb, “New Light on the Persecution of French Jews at the Time of the First Crusade”, in *Proceedings of the American Academy for Jewish Research* XXXIV (1966), pp. 1-63.

Idem, “Le toponyme hébraïque MNYW et son identification avec Monieux (Vaucluse),” in *Revue internationale d’Onomastique* XX (1968), pp. 241-254.

Idem, “Monieux,” in *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Soci-*