

Historical Annotations in Three Manuscripts from Natan ben Sa'adyah Ha-Kohen Šul'el's Library

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The *nagid* Natan ben Sa'adyah Ha-Kohen Šul'el was born in Tlemcen to a family of North African origin, and subsequently emigrated to Jerusalem and Egypt, where he was appointed *nagid* in 1484. As a learned man and religious leader, he was a lover of books, some of which he copied himself, and some of which he acquired and later sold or bequeathed. His personal story has been successfully outlined, but the story of his books is mostly unknown to date. Two manuscripts from El Escorial Library and one from the Bibliothèque nationale de France show enough evidence in order to be considered as part of Natan Šul'el's library—he copied one, probably commissioned the second one (which later became part of David ibn Avi Zimrah's library), and he bought the third book from a widow. All three codices ended up their wanderings in Western libraries. In this paper I focus on issues related to the production and history of these three books by paying particular attention to their historical annotations, thus exploring Natan Šul'el's facets as patron, scribe, reader, and book collector in the social and cultural context of the late fifteenth-century Eastern Mediterranean.

A valuable, yet little explored, source of documentation for the study of medieval and early modern Jewish cultural history is provided by the thousands of historical notes written in the flyleaves and margins of Hebrew manuscripts.¹ This evidence has been traditionally neglected,² for Hebrew manuscripts have been the object of textual and codicological studies, rather than a source for cultural history. And yet historical annotations in Hebrew manuscripts are comparable to a documentary archive for the study of Jewish social and cultural history in general, and manuscript use and intellectual history in particular.

The codicological study of medieval codices emerged in the 1950s in the context of manuscript cataloguing,³ and led to the establishment of the foundations of modern cataloguing with the launching of the *Comité international de paléographie* and its main project, the cataloguing of Latin manuscripts

- 1 By historical annotations I mean all texts written in the manuscript from the moment of its production mentioning people, places and/or events related to its history—colophons, deeds of sale, records of inheritances, lists of family births and deaths, notes of ownership, and personal or private notes.
- 2 With the exception of colophons in Hebrew manuscripts, which have been given greater attention as historical sources than the rest of historical annotations. See Riegler 1995.
- 3 See Masai 1950 and 1956.

worldwide.⁴ Following this example, the *Comité de paléographie hébraïque* was also established, leading to the publication, in three volumes, of the first true catalogue of Hebrew manuscripts with a codicological approach—*Manuscrits médiévaux en caractères hébraïques portant des indications de date jusqu'à 1540*.⁵ This catalogue also provided, for the first time in the study of Hebrew manuscripts, a historical analysis of the codices from the moment of their copy by reading historical annotations. Even if these were not transcribed—the codicological analysis was at that time the main concern of the authors—the basic information provided by these annotations was mentioned and contextualised so as to understand the ‘afterlives’ of the manuscripts after they were produced.⁶

The case-study I shall now deal with has to do precisely with this historical approach. I shall be dealing here with the reading of the historical annotations and their interpretation in three manuscripts from the library of the *nagid* Natan ben Sa'adyah Ha-Kohen Šul'el (b. 1437, d. 1502).⁷

We know some details of Šul'el's life thanks to the *responsa*, to other writings of his contemporaries, to the documentation of the Jerusalem Islamic Court, and to some fragments of letters and documents from the Cairo Genizah.⁸ We know that he was born in 1437, probably in Tlemcen (Algeria), and that in around 1471 he emigrated to Jerusalem; also that some ten years later, after some conflicts with the leaders of the community in Jerusalem, he settled in Cairo, and from 1484 was *nagid* of the Jewish community of Egypt, until his death in 1502.⁹ He was not succeeded in office by any of his children, of which he had as many as eight, but it was his nephew Yişhak who inherited his position and, as we shall see, some of his books. Yişhak occupied this position intermittently, combining it with his profession as a merchant, until 1517, when he emigrated to Jerusalem after the Ottoman conquest of the former Mamluk Sultanate of Egypt. Yişhak's only recorded son, Avraham, was orphaned as a child, and had at least four different tutors, who had been chosen by Yişhak before his death.¹⁰

One of the fragments from the Cairo Genizah analysed by Abraham David contains a letter sent from Jerusalem to Natan Šul'el by Šelomoh ben

4 Maniaci 2002, 163.

5 Sirat and Beit-Arié 1972; Beit-Arié and Sirat 1979; Sirat, Beit-Arié and Glatzer 1986.

6 For a history of catalogues of Hebrew manuscripts and their methodological approaches, see Del Barco 2014.

7 The title *nagid* was granted to the religious leader of the Jewish community in Egypt during the Mamluk period.

8 On the sources, see David 1988, 374–414.

9 *Ibid.* 375–376.

10 *Ibid.* 377–383.

R. Ḥalfata.¹¹ Although the letter is undated, David argues that it must have been written at the end of 1481 or in early 1482, once Natan Šul'el had already settled in Egypt. According to David, this was so far the only known source in which Natan Šul'el's name is mentioned with his patronymic—'Our master and Rabbi, R. Natan, son of our honoured Rabbi R. Sa'adyah—may He rest in Eden—Ha-Kohen Šul'el'. The express mention of Natan Šul'el's father, Rabbi Sa'adyah Ha-Kohen Šul'el leads David, moreover, to assume that this is the same Rabbi Sa'adyah Šul'el documented in other sources who was Rabbi in Tlemcen during the first half of the fifteenth century.¹²

When dealing with the tutors of the orphan Avraham, the son of R. Yiṣḥaq Šul'el, David transcribes a deed of purchase testifying that David ibn Avi Zimrah (b. 1479, d. 1573, also known as Radbaz) bought the manuscript, in which that same deed of purchase is found, by the intermediary of one of Avraham's tutors, David ben Šošan.¹³ The manuscript contains different exegetical works, and the mentioned deed of purchase is found in f. 132v (Fig. 1, last two lines, in smaller script):¹⁴

קניתי אותו ע"י החכם השלם כה"ר דוד בן יצחק רופוס היתום בנו של הנגיד כה"ר יצחק שולאל
 ב"ע אני דוד בן אבי זמרה

I bought it (the book) by (the intermediary of) the fulfilled sage, our honoured Rabbi David ben Šošan—may the Merciful protect him and bless him—tutor of the orphan who is the son of the *nagid* our honoured Rabbi Yiṣḥaq Šul'el—may he rest in Eden. I, David ibn Avi Zimrah.

The purchase of the manuscript was undoubtedly completed after the death of Yiṣḥaq Šul'el in 1524, which we know by the use of the abbreviation ע"י 'may he rest in Eden' after his name. Although it is not mentioned, the transaction no doubt took place in Cairo where, among his other occupations, Avi Zimrah was the *dayyan* (Jewish religious judge) and head of a *yešivah* (rabbinic academy).

David ibn Avi Zimrah, besides studying at the *bet-din* (rabbinical court) of Yiṣḥaq Šul'el in Cairo while the latter was *nagid* in Egypt, succeeded him as head of the Jewish community in that country after the Ottoman conquest in 1517, although not with the same title of *nagid* that both Natan Šul'el and his nephew Yiṣḥaq had held.¹⁵ His library, famous in his time, was indeed

11 Fragment in New York, The Jewish Theological Seminary of America, ENA 2740.2, see David 1988, 397–398.

12 David 1988, 383–384.

13 The manuscript is MS San Lorenzo de El Escorial, Real Biblioteca, G-I-15. Described in Llamas 1941, 24–26, and Del Barco 2003, 172–173, no. 26.

14 Also transcribed in David 1988, 382 n. 56.

15 See Zimmels 2007.

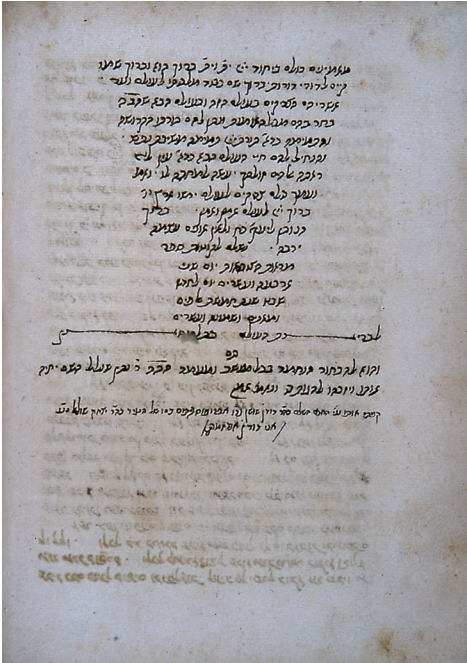


Fig. 1. MS San Lorenzo de El Escorial, Real Biblioteca, G-I-15, f. 132v (courtesy of Patrimonio Nacional, Ministerio de la Presidencia, Gobierno de España).

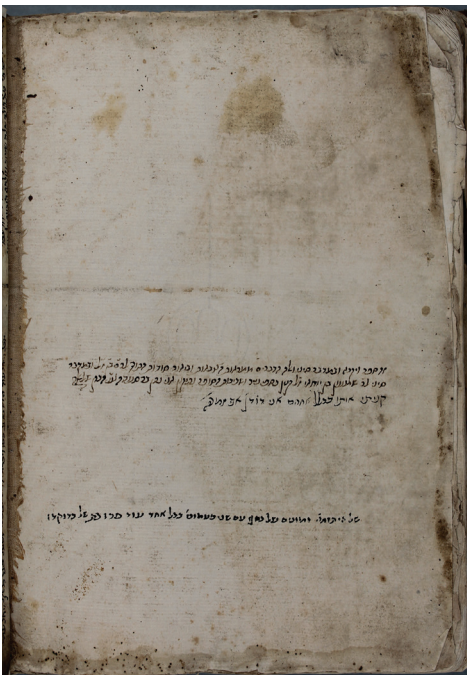


Fig. 2. MS San Lorenzo de El Escorial, Real Biblioteca, G-I-15, f. 263v (courtesy of Patrimonio Nacional, Ministerio de la Presidencia, Gobierno de España).

enriched with the manuscript just mentioned. This is indicated not only in the deed we have just read, but in another one at the end of the same manuscript, on f. 263v, which reads (Fig. 2, third line):

קניתי אותו בדלל אחרים אני דוד ן' אבי זמרה

I bought it (this book) together with others (or 'for the profit of others'), I, David ibn Avi Zimrah.

Concerning Natan Šul'el himself, there are other references mentioning him that appear in this and in another manuscript, also from El Escorial Library. Together with these two manuscripts, we shall look at another one from the Bibliothèque nationale de France also related to Natan Šul'el.

On f. 132v from MS San Lorenzo de El Escorial, Real Biblioteca, G-I-15, where we read the deed of purchase by David ibn Avi Zimrah, we also find a colophon copied immediately after the completion of one of the commentaries included in the book. The colophon reads (Fig. 1, lines 9 [last word]–17):

ברוך הנותן ליעף כח ולאין אונים עצמה ירבה נשלם לקוטות ספר מראות הצובאות יום שני ארבעה ועשרים יום לחדש שבט שנת חמשת אלפים ומאתים ושמונה ועשרים לבריאת העולם בתלמסאן תם

Blessed be the One who *gives power to the faint, and to them that have no might he increases strength* (Isaiah 40:29). (The copy) of these selections from *Sefer mar'ot ha-sov'ot* was completed on Monday, the twenty-fourth of the month of Ševat, (in) the year five thousand two hundred and twenty-eight from the creation of the world (=18 January 1468) in Tlemcen. Finished.

Immediately after, the same scribe added (lines 18–19):

והוא להבחור הנחמד בכל מושב ומעמד הה' כ' ר' נתן שולל השם יחיה אותו ויזכהו להגות בו ונאמ' אמן

It (belongs) to the pleasant man in every location and state, the fulfilled Rabbi R. Natan Šul'el—may God give him life and the merit to meditate on it, and say amen.

These annotations by the scribe attest the presence of Natan Šul'el in Tlemcen in that year of 1468; indeed, we know that he did not settle in Jerusalem until early 1471. From these annotations it is also clear that the manuscript was copied for Natan Šul'el, to whom we must therefore attribute the selection of the works and the patronage of the manuscript. For further confirmation, on the end flyleaf of the same codex (f. 263v), we find, before David ibn Avi Zimrah's previously mentioned note, an annotation written by Natan Šul'el himself, which reads (Fig. 2, lines 1–2):

זה ספר ויקרא ובמדבר סיני ואלה הדברים ממראות הצובאות וביאור סודות התורה לר' ב' ן' ז' ל' ובמדבר סיני לר' שמעון בן יוחאי ז' ל' קנין כספי נייר ושכירות הסופר ותיקון אני נתן ב' ר' סעדיה נ' ע' הכהן שלא

This book (containing the books of) Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy from (*Sefer*) *mar'ot ha-sov'ot* and *Be'ur sodot ha-Torah* by Nahmanides—may his memory be blessed—and (the *Zohar* for the book of) Numbers by Šim'on ben Yoḥay—may his memory be blessed—is my acquisition (paid with) my money, (including) the paper, the scribe's salary, and the revision. I, Natan, son of R. Sa'adyah—may he rest in Eden—Ha-Kohen Šul'el.

This annotation makes it clear that the making of the manuscript has been paid for by Natan Šul'el, including the paper as well as the scribe's salary and the revisions. In this note we also find the mention that Natan Šul'el makes of himself, in the phrase 'אני נתן ב'ר' סעדיה נ' ע' הכהן שלא אל I Natan, son of R. Sa'adyah—may he rest in Eden—Ha-Kohen Šul'el'. This specific reference to his patronymic is thus not only a further reference to the name of his father, in addition to that from the Cairo Genizah fragment dated 1481 or 1482 and studied by David; this is also the earliest of the two.

Although this is a note written by Natan Šul'el himself while he was still in Tlemcen, this is not the earliest surviving text in his own handwriting. Manuscript Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France, Hébreu 110 contains the Targum of Psalms, Job, and Proverbs, and the Five *Megillot* (Scrolls),¹⁶ as well as the alternate version of the Targum (Aramaic paraphrase), or Targum *šeni*, of the book of Esther.¹⁷ On f. 139v of this manuscript, the colophon states:

סליק תרגו' ירוש' ממגלת אסתר ובו נשלם הספר אשר בו תרגו' רות ותרגו' תהלים ותרגו' איוב ותרגו' משלי ותרגו' שיר השירים ותרגו' קהלת ותרגו' איכה ותרגו' מגלה ותרגו' אחר ירוש' למגלה ובכאן נשלמו הכל השבחה לאל וההודאה לשמו וכתבתים לעצמי אני הקטן שבסופרים נתן הכהן ב'ר' סעדיה נ' ע' הכהן שלא אל השם יזכני לקרות בספר הזה ובוולתו אני זורעי וכן יהי רצון ונאמר אמן והיתה השלמתו בחדש כסלו שנת רי"ז בתלמסאן מתא תם ונשלם תהלה לאל בורא עולם
End of Targum *šeni* of the scroll of Esther, and with it this book has been finished, which contains the Targums of Ruth, Psalms, Job, Proverbs, Song of Songs, Ecclesiastes, Lamentations, Esther, and Targum *šeni* of Esther. Now it is all finished—may God be praised and thank His name. I have written them (these books) for myself, I, the tiniest of the scribes, Natan Ha-Kohen, son of R. Sa'adyah—may he rest in Eden—Ha-Kohen Šul'el. May God give me the merit to read this book and its partner (book), to me and my descendants, so be (God's) wish, and say amen. It has been completed in the month of *Kislev* of the year (5)217 (= October/November 1456) in the city of Tlemcen. Finished and terminated—praise to God creator of the universe.

We therefore know that the codex was copied in its entirety by Natan Šul'el himself and was completed in October/November 1456, when he was nineteen years old, in Tlemcen. This colophon also attests, for the third time—along with the Cairo Genizah fragment and MS San Lorenzo de El Escorial, Real Biblioteca, G-I-15—the name of his father, Sa'adyah, since Natan Šul'el refers to himself as 'אני נתן ב'ר' סעדיה נ' ע' הכהן שלא אל I Natan Ha-Kohen, son of R. Sa'adyah—may he rest in Eden—Ha-Kohen Šul'el.' Moreover, this manuscript constitutes Natan Šul'el's earliest surviving written work so far known to us.

16 Song of Songs, Ruth, Lamentations, Ecclesiastes and Esther.

17 Manuscript described in Zotenberg et al. 1866, 11–12, no. 110, and in Sirat and Beit-Arié 1972, I, 108, Hébr. 110. See also references in Merino 1987 and Taradach and Ferrer 1998, 22.

The Paris manuscript is thus an example of Natan Šul'el's facet as a scribe, something that he seems to have learned in his youth. The aforementioned MS San Lorenzo de El Escorial, Real Biblioteca, G-I-15 tells us about Natan Šul'el's activity as a patron while still in Tlemcen, just before leaving that city for Jerusalem. Another manuscript, also from El Escorial Library, records a third facet of Natan in relation to the books that made up his library—that of collector of manuscripts coming from other libraries.

MS San Lorenzo de El Escorial, Real Biblioteca, G-II-6, contains Raši's commentary to the Five *Megillot*, and David Kimḥi's commentary on Chronicles.¹⁸ The codex is composed of quaternions of parchment, and the text is copied in a semi-cursive Sephardic script. Without a colophon, the copy of this manuscript cannot be dated very accurately. After it was copied, a later owner of the codex had written on the recto of f. 1, originally blank, a reference to the contents of the manuscript, as well as other texts. In this reference, he mentioned David Kimḥi's commentary on Proverbs, now missing from the manuscript.¹⁹

Of greater interest to us is the deed of sale appearing on f. 81r, at the end of the commentary on Chronicles. Here a witness by the name of Šelomoh ben R. Mošeh Sefardi certifies the sale of the manuscript to R. Natan Šul'el. The deed reads (Fig. 3):

אנו עדים התומי מטה יודעים שמכרה אסטיטה אלמנת ר' משה בוזורידה זה הספר בסך ידוע על יד סירסור להר' נתן כהן שלא יצ' וקבלה המעות משלם וזה היה בחדש סיון שנת הרל' ג' ליצירה בירושל' תו' שלמה ב' ר' משה נ' ע' ספרדי

We, witnesses signing below, recognize that Aştiṭah, R. Mošeh Bozoridah's widow, sold this book for the agreed amount, by intermediation, to R. Natan Kohen Šul'el—may his Rock and Saviour keep him (safe). She received the whole amount in the month of Siyan of the year 5233 (= June 1473) in Jerusalem—may it be rebuilt and maintained. Šelomoh, son of Mošeh—may he rest in Eden—Sefardi.

As explicitly mentioned, this transaction took place during Natan Šul'el's stay in Jerusalem, two years after his arrival in the Holy City, for we know that he arrived in Jerusalem in 1471 and did not leave for Egypt until some ten years later.

From the previous deeds and annotations in the manuscripts discussed here we can conclude that Natan Šul'el's library was enriched by books in which he performed different functions, related to the production, patronage

18 Described in Llamas 1941, 27–28, and Del Barco 2003, 195–196, no. 40.

19 This commentary must have been detached from the codex at an early stage, since a Latin annotation on the contents added after the arrival of the manuscript in El Escorial warns about the lack of this particular element in the book. The manuscript arrived in El Escorial in 1599, coming from Benito Arias Montano's library. See De Andrés 1970, 33.

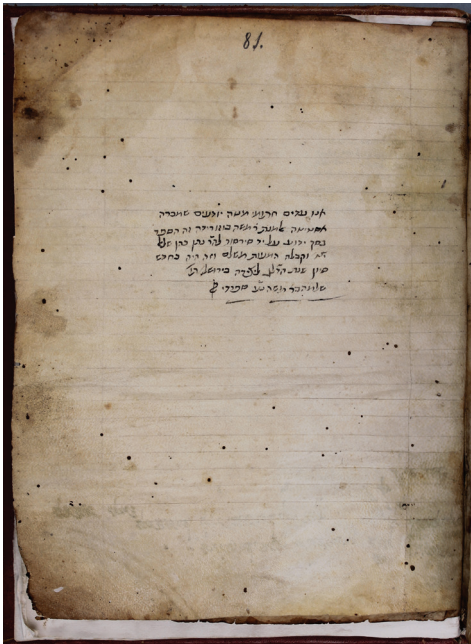


Fig. 3. MS San Lorenzo de El Escorial, Real Biblioteca, G-II-6, f. 81r (courtesy of Patrimonio Nacional, Ministerio de la Presidencia, Gobierno de España).

and acquisition of manuscripts. First, probably in his youth, as evidenced by MS Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France, Hébr. 110, he worked as scribe making copies of books for himself. Second, once his income permitted it, he patronized the copying of manuscripts that interested him, as we have seen in MS San Lorenzo de El Escorial, Real Biblioteca, G-I-15. Finally, the codex we have just seen (MS San Lorenzo de El Escorial, Real Biblioteca, G-II-6) attests to the purchase of books by Natan Šul'el, who thanks to their acquisition could form what we assume was a rich library. As we saw at the beginning, some of his books passed to his successor in office as *nagid* of Egypt, his nephew Yišḥaq Šul'el, and eventually some of them were bought by David ibn Avi Zimrah, as MS San Lorenzo de El Escorial, Real Biblioteca, G-I-15.

One question yet to be answered is how the two manuscripts now in El Escorial got there from Egypt in the sixteenth century. Natan Šul'el's books, like most Hebrew books in El Escorial, arrived there in the last quarter of the sixteenth century.²⁰ The books do not provide us with any documentation about how they could get from Egypt to Spain. It seems that they must have

20 MS San Lorenzo de El Escorial, Real Biblioteca, G-I-15 arrived in El Escorial in 1599 (see previous note), while G-II-6 arrived in 1576, bequeathed by Diego Hurtado de Mendoza (b. 1503, d. 1575) along with his entire library, according to De Andrés 1970, 17–19.

gone through Italy, since most of the of Hebrew books and manuscripts for El Escorial Library were acquired either in Italy or in the Spanish Netherlands by Benito Arias Montano (b. 1527, d. 1598). However, for the moment, in the absence of more specific data and other documentation, we only dare to speculate about the arrival of these books in El Escorial.

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