

The oldest traces of Semitic (Hebrew and Syriac) in early Rus': two inscriptions in the St. Sophia Cathedral in Novgorod

Древнейшие следы семитских языков на Руси:
древнееврейская и сирийская надписи из Новгородского
Софийского собора

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Abstract In the present article, we argue that two eleventh-century phrases inscribed many times on the walls of the St. Sophia Cathedral in Novgorod (*коуни рони* and *парехъ мари*) are of Semitic provenance. We will provide the linguistic arguments which support the claim of a Hebrew source for *коуни рони* and a Syriac one for *парехъ мари*. In addition, we offer a reconstruction of the historical pragmatic context in which the phrases can be situated. We will propose that the *коуни рони* inscriptions are a citation from the Book of Lamentations of the Hebrew Bible (verse 2:19) and that they can be connected with the seizure of Novgorod and the plundering of St. Sophia by Vseslav of Polotsk in the year 1066. They should be regarded as the oldest tangible proof of contact with Jews and Hebrew in Rus'. In the case of the *парехъ мари* inscriptions, we will put forward the hypothesis that the author was a certain Efrem, a local citizen, possibly a clergyman, who carried the nickname 'the Syrian', because he may have been a Syrian by descent.

Аннотация В статье обосновывается семитское происхождение двух надписей XI в., неоднократно встретившихся на стенах Новгородского Софийского собора: *коуни ро-*

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ни и *парехъ мари*. Приводятся лингвистические аргументы, доказывающие древнееврейский характер первого граффито и сирийский—второго. Реконструируется также историко-прагматический контекст обеих надписей. Надписи *коуни рони*, атрибутируемые как цитата из ветхозаветного Плача Иеремии (2:19), связываются с захватом Новгорода и разграблением Софийского собора в 1066 г. Всеславом Полоцким. В них можно видеть древнейшее осязаемое свидетельство славяно-еврейских контактов в Древней Руси. Автором надписи *парехъ мари* мог быть новгородский клирик Ефрем, носивший прозвище *Сирин* и, возможно, имевший сирийские корни.

1 Introduction

In this paper we will present two eleventh-century phrases that are inscribed many times on the walls of the St. Sophia Cathedral in Novgorod: *коуни рони* and *парехъ мари*. The first one has been known since 1978, when two instances were published by A. A. Medynceva without any further interpretation.¹ Since then, a plausible explanation for its provenance has not yet been provided, although the non-Slavic nature of the text seemed quite obvious.

In recent years, the epigraphic data in the St. Sophia Cathedral have been thoroughly re-examined by A. A. Gippius and S. M. Mikheev.² In the course of this work more than forty other cases of *коуни рони* were discovered. Another puzzling graffito—*парехъ мари*—was identified by comparing its two fragmented attestations. In the summer of 2011, both inscriptions were brought to the attention of J. Schaeken who, together with H. Gzella, proposed a possible Semitic provenance and a religious nature of these expressions.

In Sect. 2 below, we will first provide the linguistic arguments which support the hypothesis of a Hebrew source for *коуни рони* and a Syriac one for *парехъ мари*. Then, in Sect. 3, we will discuss the possible historical pragmatic context of both exclamations. In the case of *коуни рони*, A. A. Gippius put forward a most plausible hypothesis that the many attestations of this phrase—which is, in fact, the oldest direct proof of contact with Hebrew in early Rus’—should be connected with the seizure of Novgorod and the plundering of the St. Sophia Cathedral in the year 1066. As for *парехъ мари*, S. M. Mikheev was able to identify the handwriting of the two instances of this phrase with another inscription in the Cathedral, which reads ‘Efrem the Syrian’.

2 The inscriptions

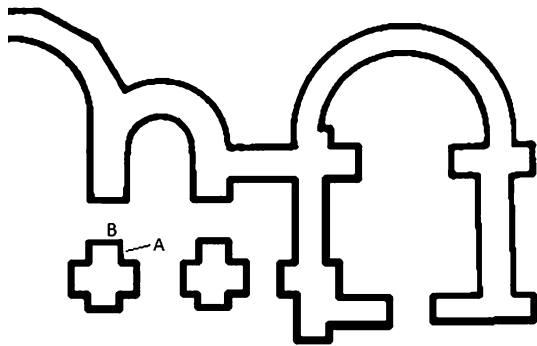
2.1 *Коуни рони*

The first inscription to be discussed is *коуни рони*. It is attested more than forty times on two adjacent compact surfaces, on the northern wall of the Diaconicon and on the western wall of the passageway from the altar to the Diaconicon (see walls A and B on the plan

¹Medynceva (1978, 71, No. 69–70): “Не ясно, что они означают. Возможно, разгадку их следует искать в карельском языке” ‘It is unclear what they mean. Possibly, the solution has to be sought in the Karelian language’ (see also the photographs and drawings on p. 236).

²For previous reports on the epigraphic research project in the St. Sophia Cathedral, which started in 2009, see Mikheev (2010a, 2010b); Gippius and Mikheev (2011). In the near vicinity of the two expressions under discussion, many other inscriptions appear. This broader archaeological and philological context will be discussed on another occasion.

Fig. 1 Plan of the south-eastern part of the St. Sophia Cathedral, indicating walls A and B where the inscriptions *коуни рони* and *парехъ мари* are located



in Fig. 1). Paleographic research has shown that most of the instances of *коуни рони* are inscribed in different hands. In some cases, the word is accompanied by a personal name, like, for instance, *коуни рони Хотѣнь Носъ* or *коуни рони До{д}брата* (<Добрѣта>).

Stratigraphically, the *коуни рони* inscriptions can be dated before the year 1109 (cf. Gippius and Mikheev 2011, 37f.). Thus, they belong to the oldest period of the St. Sophia Cathedral, which was built between 1045 and 1050. It should also be noted that in a number of cases the inscription was crossed out afterwards (see below, Sect. 3.1).

We propose that *коуни рони* is a Slavic adaptation of the Hebrew expression *qūmī ronnī* (קוּמִי רוּנִי) which occurs in the Hebrew Bible, verse 2:19 of the Book of Lamentations (*Kniga Plač Jeremii*). Hebrew *qūmī ronnī* consists of two verbal forms, both imperatives, feminine singular, of the unmarked stem. Its meaning is ‘Arise, cry out’: ‘Arise, cry out in the night, at the beginning of the watches! Pour out your heart like water before the presence of the Lord! Lift your hands to him for the lives of your children, who faint for hunger at the head of every street’.³ As is well known, the Book of Lamentations relates to the Babylonian conquest and mourns the destruction of the city of Jerusalem in the sixth century BC. More particularly, Chap. 2 describes the horrors of the siege, the sins of the nations and the wrath of God.⁴

According to the extensive French patristic online database *BiblindeX*,⁵ there are but very few references by Greek and Latin Church Fathers to verse 2:19 of Lamentations. The database provides us with only three names: Origen (Adamantius), Theodoret of Cyrhus, and St. Ambrose of Milan. This may point to a rather limited social environment in which the exclamation *qūmī ronnī* was known and used: among Jewish people, of course, and others who were in close contact with the Jewish community.⁶

The inscription *коуни рони* is written in three different ways: (a) *кюни рони* (approximately ten times), (b) *күни рони* (at least four times), and (c) *коүни рони* (more than fifteen times) (see Figs. 2a, 2b). In a number of cases the first vowel letter cannot be identified with certainty, including some of the instances where the inscription was crossed out. The variation in the spelling of the first syllable (*кю-*, *кү-*, *коү-*) can be explained by the realization of etymological /ū/ as [i] or, less frequently, as [ü] in the customary pronunciation of Hebrew in Ashkenazi communities in the Ukraine, Poland, Western Hungary, and other places, just as in Southern Eastern Yiddish (cf. Morag 1972, 1135, and, more extensively, Katz 1993,

³Biblical quotations in English are given in the New Revised Standard Version of 1989.

⁴For a modern historical-critical commentary, see, e.g., Salters (2010).

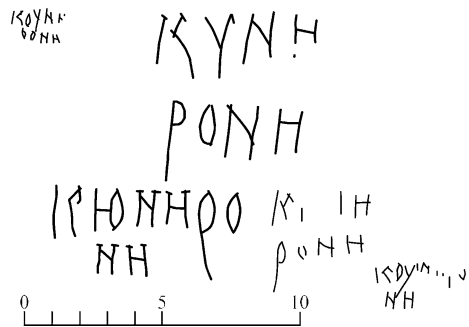
⁵<http://www.biblindeX.mom.fr>. Accessed 17 January 2012.

⁶Nowadays, the exclamation is very popular in Chassidic circles and has been put many times on music (see ‘Kumi Roni’ on YouTube).



Fig. 2a Photograph of attestations of *коуни рони* on wall A

Fig. 2b Drawings of attestations of *коуни рони* on wall A



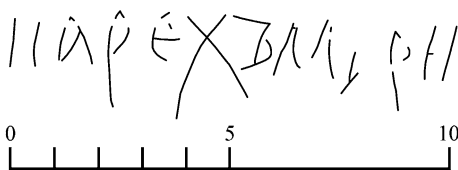
61–65). The Hebrew velar /q/, by contrast, which was originally pronounced as an unvoiced uvular plosive [q] (cf. Khan 1997, 89), was realized as [k] in Ashkenazi Hebrew (Morag 1972, 1133). In Slavic, *qū-/kū-* can be rendered either in an approximate way by means of the ‘foreign’ sequence *кю* or in the slavivized form *коу*. The third variant, *кү*, also reflects the foreign nature of the initial consonant-vowel combination by using the Slavic grapheme which was introduced to reflect Greek *υ*. In fact, the variation *кю-*, *кү-*, *коу-* for Hebrew *qū-/kū-* (according to Ashkenazi pronunciation) finds a perfect parallel in the rendition of Greek *κυ* in Old Slavic (see Diels 1963, 27ff., for examples from Old Church Slavonic, who attributes the use of these coexisting spellings to a pronunciation of Greek *υ* that vacillated between [i], [u], and perhaps also [ü]; see also Krivko 2004).

Hebrew *qūmī* is consistently written with the consonant letter *-н-* in *коуни рони*; there are no attestations which show the expected consonant *-м-*. However, the spelling *куми* is well attested elsewhere in Slavic because of its occurrence in the New Testament, where in Mark 5:41 we read: “He took her by the hand and said to her, ‘Talitha cum’, which means, ‘Little girl, get up!’”. In Old Church Slavonic, in the Codices Zographensis and Marianus,



Fig. 3a Photograph of *парехъ мари* on wall B

Fig. 3b Drawing of *парехъ мари* on wall B



the quote is translated as **ТАЛИТА КОУМЪ**, and in the Codex Suprasliensis as **ТАЛИ-ФА КОУМЪ** (cf. Sejtlin et al. 1994, s.v., 689).⁷

Since the phonetic value of Hebrew *m* thus does not prevent in any way its rendition in Slavic (Cyrillic) by *м*, there must be some other reason for the consistent writing of *н* instead of *м* on the walls of the St. Sophia Cathedral. Perhaps the scribes only knew the Hebrew expression *qūtmī ronni* by heart, without actually being able to understand Hebrew. They may have heard it and misinterpreted it by assimilating the *m* of *qūtmī* with the *n* of the following *ronni*.⁸ This tentative, hearer-based explanation is understandable in view of the phonetic nature of the two nasal consonants involved as well as the parallel syllabic structure of the two words.

2.2 *Парехъ мари*

In addition to our explanation of *коуни рони* as a biblical quotation of Hebrew provenance, we will now address another Cyrillic inscription, which in our opinion has a similar Semitic background: *парехъ мари*. It is found twice in the near vicinity of the *коуни рони* inscriptions (once on the northern wall of the Diaconicon and once on the western wall of the passageway from the altar to the Diaconicon; see Fig. 1) and must also be dated before 1109. The two attestations of *парехъ мари* are most probably written in the same hand, which does not seem to coincide with the hands which inscribed *коуни рони*. Although in both cases the text is partially damaged, a paleographic comparison between them leaves no doubt concerning the sequence of letters (see Figs. 3a, 3b and 4a, 4b).

⁷Note that **КОУМЪ** renders Greek *κούμ*, which is the expected form in Aramaic during the time of the New Testament; **КОУМЪ** corresponds with Greek *κούμι*, which is found in a number of manuscripts and which would, in all likelihood, be a correction in light of the corresponding Hebrew form (see Beyer 1984, 123).

⁸Cf. the spelling of the personal name Ἀνύντας in Hellenistic Greek instead of Ἀμόντας (Schwyzer 1953, 257). Typologically, nasal consonant harmony seems particularly common (Walker 2011, 1854–1861).



Fig. 4a Photograph of *napexъ mari* on wall A

Fig. 4b Drawing of *napexъ mari* on wall A



We propose that *napexъ mari* could be a Slavic adaptation of Classical Syriac /barreḵ mā̄r/ ‘Bless (imperative, masculine singular, factitive stem), O Lord’. We are dealing with a very popular liturgical formula which is used before and during prayers.⁹ Other Semitic languages can confidently be excluded as a source for *napexъ mari* in view of the fact that *mā̄r* ‘Lord’ is an Aramaic isogloss. Also, the liturgical expression /barreḵ mā̄r/ is widely spread in Syrian Christianity.¹⁰

As for the rendition of /barreḵ mā̄r/ by Cyrillic *napexъ mari*, we can observe that the Syriac expression was obviously perceived as two separate words. This explains the insertion of the *jer*-letter *ъ* at the end of the first word, which is in accordance with Slavic writing conventions in the period when this phrase was inscribed on the walls. The preceding velar is spirantized in Syriac after a vowel and pronounced as [x] (see, e.g., Daniels 1997, 135f.), hence spelled as *x* in the Cyrillic inscription.

The alternation between initial Syriac *b-* (i.e. a voiced bilabial stop; see Daniels 1997, 132) in /barreḵ/ and Slavic *p-* in *napexъ* has, of course, many typological phonetic parallels elsewhere and does not prevent us from identifying the Syriac form as the source of the Slavic

⁹For some references, see Payne Smith (1999[1879], s.v., col. 611).

¹⁰The corresponding Hebrew expression for ‘Bless, O Lord’ would be *bāreḵ ’Ādōnāy*. Note that, on the other hand, *коуни рони* can hardly be of Syriac origin, mainly because the Syriac version of the Book of Lamentations interprets verse 2:19 as an exclamation of joy and uses the Aramaic root *šbh* instead of the Hebrew one *rmn*, i.e. it has the normal Syriac verb for ‘to praise’.

one.¹¹ Word-initial devoicing of /b/ may be facilitated by a following voiceless obstruent, as is the case here.¹² It is obvious that both *n-* (instead of *б-*) and *-x-* (instead of *-к-*) in *парехъ* do not reflect the Syriac model in its usual written form; the writer of the two inscriptions must have noted them down in the way they were perceived by ear. With all due caution, one could possibly imagine that the devoicing of initial /b/, trivial though it is, may have been caused by a vernacular pronunciation of the Syriac phrase (for examples of a shift /b/ > /p/ in Neo-Aramaic, albeit in distinct environments, see Nöldeke 1868, 51, and cf. p. 400). As the linguistic background of the scribe is unclear, however, this remains speculation, and other explanations should not be excluded.

The identification of Syriac /mār/ with *мари*, by contrast, is less easy to account for and needs two comments. Firstly, in /mār/ the long (stressed) vowel *-ā-* would point to an East Syriac reflex of etymological */ā/. In West Syriac, the vowel was pronounced as [ō] (see Daniels 1997, 134f.). The distinction may at face value suggest that the origin of Slavic *мари* can be narrowed down to the Eastern variety of Syriac, which is traditionally the language of the Nestorian Church. However, this cannot be substantiated within our specific context, because in the Old Novgorodian dialect the vowel letter *-а-* in *мари* can reflect both foreign [a] as well as [o]; cf., e.g., in the birchbark corpus the spelling of personal names of Greek origin such as *Фнѣтанъ*, *Симанъ*, *Серафѣанъ*, and *Хаританна* (Zaliznjak 2004, 205).

Secondly, the final vowel letter *-и* in *мари* is unexpected. Although in Syriac /mār/ is written *mry* in the (usually unvocalized) consonantal text, the spelling of final *-y* for the first person singular possessive suffix /-ī/ is of a purely historical nature; in the eleventh century—the time of our inscription—it had not been pronounced for already many centuries (see Beyer 1984, 122–125). Against the background of our observations on /barre/ = *парехъ* (see above), *-и* in *мари* as a purely graphic analogy patterned after the historical spelling of /mār/ in Classical Syriac seems to be at odds with the evidence for an oral transmission of the phrase in question. Instead of *мари* we would expect a hearer-based rendition of /mār/ as **марѣ* or **марь*, including a final *jer*-letter in accordance with Slavic spelling conventions.

There are two possible explanations—admittedly, both of a speculative nature—for the occurrence of a final *-и* in *мари*. The first one is the simple assumption that the spelling *-и* was triggered by the final *-и* in the many occurrences of *коуни рони* in the near vicinity of *парехъ мари*. This hypothesis presupposes that *коуни рони* was inscribed first on the church walls, prior to the two instances of *парехъ мари*. The analogical spelling (*рони* ~ *мари*) may well have been prompted by the symmetrical structure of both expressions, each of them consisting of two words with two syllables.¹³

The second explanation is based on the assumption that *мари* reflects an unattested sub-standard pronunciation of the Syriac form, presumably influenced by a contemporary Ara-

¹¹To give one typological parallel from Slavic: a similar interchange occurs in the Old Slovene Freising Fragments, in particular in part II, which must have been written down by a German speaking scribe. In this part, we find *briplisaze* for *približase* as well as several instances of *b* instead of *p*, e.g., *botomu* for *potomu*; *izbovuedati* for *ispovēdati*; *gozgod* for *gospod* (see Kolarič 1968, 28f.). Interchanges between /b/ and /p/ are quite frequent in various Semitic languages as well, including, e.g., Ugaritic (many examples are discussed by Garr 1986) and early Aramaic (esp. the alternation between etymological /napš/ 'living power' and secondary /nabš/ in a number of inscriptions). Cf. also Bauer (1935) for related phenomena.

¹²Interestingly, all the evidence for devoicing in Ugaritic, an older sister-branch of Aramaic within the Northwest Semitic subgroup, involves by-forms that exhibit the shift /b/ > /p/ before (albeit immediately before) a voiceless obstruent (e.g., /nabku/ 'fountain' > /napku/, /tabkiyu/ 'she weeps' > /tapkiyu/, or /libš/ 'cloak' > /lipš/; see Garr 1986, 51f.).

¹³Words or expressions perceived as similar or contextually related tend to assimilate in many languages, e.g. French *grammaire*, patterned after *vocabulaire* (for scores of examples from Semitic and Indo-European, see Brockelmann 1927).

maic vernacular, in which a phonetic distinction is made between forms written with a possessive suffix /-ī/ and without. Thus, for instance, /mār/ means ‘Lord’ and /mārī/ ‘Lord-poss’. Such a phonetic distinction is common for Neo-Aramaic languages, but for standard Syriac it is of a purely graphical nature. The possibility that *мари* reflects a ‘vulgar’ Syriac pronunciation [mārī] is not inconceivable in view of the coexistence of Classical Syriac as a liturgical language and the forerunners of Neo-Aramaic varieties as idioms that were actually spoken in daily life. Although the respective language situation requires much more in-depth research, it is quite feasible to assume that Classical Syriac was often used by speakers of Aramaic vernaculars as a kind of lingua franca or restricted to liturgical contexts. Hence, one can entertain the possibility of a hybrid Syriac / vernacular Aramaic form.

3 The historical pragmatic context

The possible identification of *коуни рони* as a Slavic adaptation of a Hebrew biblical quotation (‘Arise, cry out’) and *парехъ мари* as a Slavic adaptation of a Syriac liturgical formula (‘Bless, O Lord’) forms the basis for the following reconstruction of the historical pragmatic context of the inscriptions. In both cases, it is important to stress their specific location in the St. Sophia Cathedral, i.e. the Diaconicon and the passageway from the altar to the Diaconicon. This part of the church was usually only accessible for the clergy, not the average churchgoer.

3.1 *Коуни рони*

The phrase *коуни рони* is written in the Cyrillic alphabet and in a hearer-oriented spelling. More in particular, the consistent long-distance assimilation of the consonant letters *-m- -n- > -n- -n-* in this expression points to writers with little or no active command of Hebrew. We might therefore be dealing with Slavs, probably Novgorodian clergymen, who must have had a special reason for inscribing many times one and the same phrase on the walls of the Cathedral. The fact that all *коуни рони* inscriptions are compactly distributed over a relatively small surface areas suggests that they were all written within a short period of time. It is also reasonable to assume that those who wrote the phrase on the walls, though not being able to reproduce it correctly, were still aware of its meaning and reference to the conquest of Jerusalem.¹⁴

On what kind of special occasion might verse 2:19 of the Book of Lamentations have been of topical interest in the history of Novgorod? Within the timeframe 1045–1109 there is only one major event in the history of the city which parallels the Babylonian conquest of Jerusalem, namely the seizure of Novgorod by Vseslav Brjačislavič of Polotsk. This tragedy is vividly reported in the First Novgorod Chronicle in the passage that deals with the year 1066: “Приде Всѣславъ и възя Новъгородъ, съ женами и съ дѣтми; и колоколы съима у святыя Софіе. О, велика бяше бѣда въ час тыи; и понекадила съима” (Nasonov 1950, 17).¹⁵ The chronicler specifically mentions the plundering of the St. Sophia Cathedral,

¹⁴Alternative interpretations which have been suggested in discussions with colleagues on the pragmatic context of *коуни рони*, like for instance its use as a magical expression initially placed on a Greek amulet, are of a speculative nature and require considerable more special pleading than the interpretation we propose in this section.

¹⁵‘Vseslav came and took Novgorod, with the women and children; and he took down the bells from St. Sophia—Oh great was the misery at that time!—and he took down the chandeliers’. In the *Povest’ vremnyx let*, Vseslav’s seizure of Novgorod is mentioned at the beginning of the entry 6575, i.e. the year 1067 (Šaxmatov 2001[1908], 155). It is most probable that the seizure took place in the winter of 1066/1067.

including the removal of its bells and chandeliers: 'Oh great was the misery at that time!' From the Hypatian Chronicle we learn that Vseslav took away more from the Cathedral than only its bells and chandeliers. In the year 1178, Mstislav Rostislavič ('The Brave') "поиде на Полтвскъ на зятя на своего на Всеслава, ходилъ бо бѣше дѣдъ его на Новѣгородъ и взялъ ер(у)с(ал)и(м)ь ц(е)рк(о)внныи и сосоуды слоужебнѣхъ . . . Мьстиславъ же все то хотя оправити Новгородскоую волость и обиду" (Šaxmatov 2001[1908], 608).¹⁶ Thus, "more than a century later the Novgorod Prince still wants to avenge this robbery" (Jakobson and Szeftel 1966, 341, fn. 111) and the stealing of the 'Church Jerusalem' and the 'liturgical vessels' are recalled. With the former a Eucharistic vessel is meant which is also known as the Zion or church tabernacle. Both types of precious tabernacles (the 'Small' and the 'Great') from medieval Novgorod have been preserved and are commented on in detail by I. A. Sterligova in the preface of the 1996 catalogue *Dekorativno-prikladnoe iskusstvo velikogo Novgoroda*.¹⁷ Sterligova stresses the liturgical symbolism of these Zions as images of Holy Jerusalem and the extraordinary significance of the theme of Jerusalem for the St. Sophia Cathedral in Novgorod: "Для Новгорода XI в., расположенного на краю православного мира, идея прямой, непосредственной связи с Иерусалимским храмом, была одной из важнейших" (1996, 36). Against this cultural-historical background it seems most plausible to connect the *коуни рони* inscriptions—originally referring to the Babylonian Siege of Jerusalem—with the dramatic events in Novgorod and, more particularly, in the St. Sophia Cathedral in the year 1066.

Of special interest for our discussion is the fact that, according to the Bible, Nebuchadnezzar II, after having captured Jerusalem for the first time (in 597 BC), took away the sacred vessels from Solomon's Temple and put them in his temple in Babylon. This event is recalled several times in the Bible (see, e.g., 2 Kings 24:13; 2 Chron. 36:7; Daniel 1:2; Jeremiah 28:3). Vseslav acted in a very similar way in Novgorod and may have been perceived by the local clergymen as the 'new Nebuchadnezzar', which makes the reference to the Fall of Jerusalem highly relevant.

At first sight it seems rather enigmatic how this allusion could have taken the shape of a citation from the Book of Lamentations of the Hebrew Bible on the walls of the St. Sophia Cathedral. In the Eastern Christian Church the text of Lamentations did not have any liturgical function; the earliest attestations of the Slavonic version only appear in the fifteenth century (cf., e.g., Thomson 1998, 850–865). However, in medieval Jewish communities, at least from the seventh century onwards, reading from the Book of Lamentations was an essential part of synagogal worship on *Tisha b'Ab*, a major fast day commemorating the destruction of the Temple. Descriptions of the pattern for this midnight service stress the specific liturgical role of verse 2:19 ("Arise, cry out in the night [...]") (see Brady 1999, 114f., 246; 2003, 110–114). Familiarity with this tradition thus seems to be the most plausible factor underlying the emergence of dozens of *коуни рони* inscriptions in the St. Sophia Cathedral.¹⁸

¹⁶ . . . went out against Polotsk, against his son-in-law Vseslav [Vasil'kovič], because his forefather had gone against Novgorod and taken the Church Jerusalem and the liturgical vessels . . . Mstislav still wanted to set right the Novgorodian power and insult'.

¹⁷ See also Medynceva (2000, 151–155, and photographs No. 79–85).

¹⁸ In this context, it is noteworthy to recall a passage from the Galicio-Volhynian Chronicle which relates the death of Prince Vladimir Vasil'kovič in the year 1289. Among various categories of city population mourning the deceased prince, the chronicler also mentions Jews: "и тако плакавшесе над нимъ все множество Володимерчевъ, моужи и жены и дѣти, [съ] Нѣмци, и Соурожыѣ, и Новгородци, и Жидове плак[ах]уся яки и во взятъе Иер(у)с(ал)и(м)оу, егда ведяхуть я во полонъ Вавилонскый" (Šaxmatov 2001[1908], 920): 'and thus he was mourned by the entire population of Volodimer', men and women and children, with the

How was the knowledge of this tradition transmitted in Novgorod? From whom did the *коуни рони* writers—at least the first one—learn the expression? Was it a baptized Jew? Or a Jewish merchant dwelling in Novgorod at the time that Vseslav seized the city? It is beyond the scope of this article to discuss the huge body of literature on the small and scattered pieces of evidence of the Jewish community in Rus' and the use and knowledge of Hebrew in that area. As S. Franklin concludes, after a brief rehearsal of the limited amount of data:

The intensity of Jewish settlement is unknown, and there may be no direct links between the various identifiable groups—Khazars, Radhanites, and later traders—but the evidence for a Jewish presence over several centuries, whether sporadically or continuously, is adequate. Hebrew was, presumably, a feature of the graphic environment for those who cared to look.

But did anybody look? and if so, how intently? The Rus came into contact with Jews and Hebrew from two quite separate sources: the real, and the abstract. The real Jews bringing real Hebrew were the Khazars and Radhanites and other merchants. The abstract Jews and the abstract Hebrew are images from Church Slavonic Christian writings: Hebrew as a sacred language, one of the three inscribed on Christ's Cross; Jews in sacred history. (Franklin 2002, 118)¹⁹

In the case of the *коуни рони* inscriptions, both the contact with the Jews and the contact with Hebrew seem to be involved. On the one hand, the association of the seizure of Novgorod by Vseslav in 1066 with the Fall of Jerusalem, which, according to our hypothesis, was the reason for writing the biblical expression on the walls of the St. Sophia Cathedral, may serve as an example of how 'abstract' knowledge of Jewish history participated in the formation of an early Rus' identity. On the other hand, the inscriptions must be regarded as the oldest tangible proof of direct contacts with Jews and Hebrew, as early as the mid-eleventh century.

As far as we know, there is only one other example from pre-Mongol times which seems to come close to the *коуни рони* case, i.e. a Hebrew word in Cyrillic which may point to a hearer-based orientation of the writer: the word *машиаакъ* for the Jewish messiah. It is attested twice in an early-thirteenth century manuscript from Novgorod (GPB Q.p.I.18; see the edition by Wątróbska 1986, 194), which includes a dialogue between a Christian and a Jew called "Addresses to a Jew on the Incarnation of the Son of God".²⁰ The use of the consonant letter *u* in *машиаакъ* is difficult to explain as part of a transcription from Greek (which had no /š/) *Μεσ(σ)ίας*. It rather suggests a direct rendering of the corresponding sound in the underlying Hebrew word *māšīaḥ*. In addition, the /a/ in the first syllable is distinctively Hebrew, the /e/ in Greek *Μεσ(σ)ίας* clearly resulting from Aramaic (Beyer 1984, 115f.). Pereswetoff-Morath rightfully concludes: "This is proof enough that the translator or a later editor / copyist knew (some) Hebrew or had had (some) live contact with Jews conversant

Germans and Surozhians and the Novgorodians, and the Jews were weeping as during the Fall of Jerusalem, when they were being led into Babylonian captivity'. Although this description should not be taken literally, the chronicler's application of knowledge of Jewish history to a major event in the history of Rus' deserves attention. Of course, the seizure of Novgorod and the plundering of the Cathedral was a far more salient and appropriate occasion for recalling the Fall of Jerusalem than the death of a prince.

¹⁹For a survey of historical evidence of Jewish presence in early Rus', see also, e.g., Birnbaum (1973), Čekin (1994), Pereswetoff-Morath (2002), Kulik (2008a, 2008b).

²⁰The word also occurs (in the same context) in fifteenth-century manuscripts of the *Paleja tolkovaja* (*Palaea interpretata*) (see Griščenko 2012). We would like to thank Alexander I. Grisichenko for drawing our attention to this source.

in Hebrew” (2002, 140). Alekseev already pointed out that the attestation *машиаакъ* must be regarded as a “факт прямого контакта между еврейской и славянской средою в древнюю эпоху” (1993a, 71; see also 1993b, 241). The *коуни рони* inscriptions, which can be dated some 150 years earlier than the instance of *машиаакъ*, provide new evidence for Alekseev’s statement.

Finally, it should be noted that quite a few instances of *коуни рони* have been crossed out. This gives rise to the assumption that a direct citation from the Hebrew Bible might have been considered by others to be inappropriate in an Orthodox church.²¹ It may be no coincidence that nearby the *коуни рони* inscriptions on the northern wall of the Diaconicon another inscription is carved which reads: *о г(оспод)и помилоуи хръстьянъ а еретик[ъ] прокльни* “O Lord, have mercy on the Christians and curse the heretics”.²²

3.2 *Парехъ мари*

Like in the case of *коуни рони*, the Cyrillic hearer-oriented spelling of *парехъ мари* also presupposes that the scribe used a Slavic idiom as his pragmatically dominant language; a Novgorodian citizen or at least someone who was integrated in local society. In fact, the Syriac provenance of *парехъ мари* can be directly related to another inscription in the St. Sophia Cathedral, namely *ѡфремъ суринъ*, consisting of the monogram *ѡфремъ* and the word *суринъ*.²³ The handwriting of this inscription is most probably the same as the two instances of *парехъ мари* (see Fig. 5).

Since all other monograms discovered so far in the Cathedral are autographs of the bearers of inscribed names,²⁴ it is unlikely that *ѡфремъ суринъ* refers to the famous theologian and liturgical poet St. Ephrem the Syrian. It is more plausible to assume that Efrem was a local citizen, probably a clergyman, who carried the epithet ‘the Syrian’, either as a nickname or because he was a Syrian by descent.²⁵ As for the first possibility, a parallel can be drawn with the Novgorodian church painter Olisej Grečín, who was of local provenance; he was called ‘the Greek’ merely because of his biographical ties with Byzantium (see Gippius 2005). The second possibility is also conceivable since the presence of Syrians in pre-Mongol Rus’ is well established; the most famous Syrian we know was Petr, the physician of Prince Svjatoslav Davydovič of Černigov, whose story is told in the Kievan Cave Patericon (see Ol’ševskaja and Travnikov 1999, 29ff., 132–134). This does not necessarily entail that Efrem was a native speaker of (Classical) Syriac, since various languages (including

²¹In this context, the story from the Kievan Cave Patericon about the monk Nikita should be borne in mind. Nikita fell into spiritual deception because of his preference for the Books of the Old Testament, which are called *книгы жидовскыя* (see Ol’ševskaja and Travnikov 1999, 36–38). Subsequently, Nikita was ordained Bishop of Novgorod and died in 1108 (First Novgorod Chronicle; see Nasonov 1950, 19).

²²See Medynceva (1978, 72–77, No. 73; photograph and drawing on p. 238).

²³The inscription, of which the location in the St. Sophia Cathedral is presently unknown, was published by Ščepkin (1902, 33, Table III: 15, No. XXXVIII; see also Medynceva 1978, 92, No. 138).

²⁴This type of graffiti is unparalleled in early Rus’ epigraphy and without doubt of Byzantine origin. The category has been considerably expanded by the recent finds in the Cathedral and now consists of ten inscriptions, six of which are located on the same surfaces as *коуни рони* and *парехъ мари*.

²⁵Such a profile would fit the Novgorodian Efrem, who wrote birchbark letter no. 605, dated stratigraphically between the late eleventh and the first decades of the twelfth century (see Zaliznjak 2004, 271–272). This Efrem must have been a monk considering the contents and language of the letter. Although the handwriting of birchbark letter no. 605 seems to resemble the one of the inscriptions *парехъ мари* and *ѡфремъ суринъ*(ъ), a paleographic verification—complicated by the fact that we are dealing with different writing surfaces—is too inconclusive to confidently identify both hands.











	ѡремъ сврин[ъ]	парехъ мари (wall B)	парехъ мари (wall A)
ѡ			
и			
м			
р			
ъ			
Monogram			

Fig. 5 Paleographic comparison between ѡремъ сврин[ъ] and парехъ мари

Aramaic vernaculars, Greek, and, after the spread of Islam, also Arabic) were spoken in the area that was frequently, though often imprecisely, referred to as ‘Syria’ in Antiquity and the Middle Ages, cf. Nöldeke (1871).

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