

The German tradition of the Shekel.

An additional proof of the absence of regular communications between Ashkenaz and Babylonia.

Another interesting example connected to our problem of the origin of the culture of Ashkenaz, is the German tradition of the Shekel.

We find in B. Bekhorot 50a an exceptional *geonic* interpolation stating that the five silver *sela'im*¹ of the redeeming of the firstborn represent the same weight of silver as twenty *matkal* or gold Arabic *dinars*² or $(28 + 0.5 + 1/12) = 28.5833$ silver Babylonian *dirham*.³ This passage, which represents the position of the *geonim*, reflects the confusion in Babylonia about the value of the Tyrian *dinar*. Its weight was always about 3.5 gr, but during the Talmudic and *geonic* period the tradition was forgotten and the weight of the Tyrian *dinar* was assimilated to the weight of the Sassanid *dinar*⁴ and later the Arabic gold *dinar* of 4.25gr.

Rava stated in B. Bekhorot 50a that the *shekel* of the Torah was worth 3.33 Tyrian *dinars* and was revalued from 20 *maah* to 24 *maah*, by 20 percent or 1/5 of the initial value, or 1/6 of the final value, thus to 4 Tyrian *dinars*.⁵ Rav Ashi shared the same opinion. The *geonim* considered that the *dinar* weighed 4,25 gr. The weight of the ancient *shekel* was thus for the *geonim* $3.33 * 4.25 = 14.15$ gr and after revaluation it weighed $4 * 4.25 = 17$ gr.⁶

The *geonim* were certainly⁷ in possession of exemplars of the *shekalim* struck during the revolt of Bar-Kokhba and weighing about 14.17 gr.⁸ Because of their inscriptions in Paleo-Hebrew script (*Ketav Ivri*) they certainly considered that these coins were going back to the period of the first Temple. The *geonic* tradition considering that the *sela*, the Talmudic *shekel* had been revalued by 20% and weighed about 17 gr. was thus making sense for them.

Let us now consider the German tradition. The first data about this tradition can be found in the commentaries of R. Gershom on B. Bekhorot and of Rashi. They understood also that the quotation in B. Bekhorot was a *geonic* interpolation but they did not understand that the *matkal* referred to the gold Arabic *dinar* of 4,25 gr. They identified it to another gold coin belonging to the German coinage (*zehouv*) weighing about 2.5 *esterling* or $2.5 * 1.41 = 3.53$ gr. Therefore they considered that the *sela* was weighing about 14.15 gr. It is thus by pure chance that the German Rabbis could confirm the true weigh of the Talmudic *sela*. Indeed the German Rabbis certainly knew also the *sela'im* struck during the revolt of Bar-Kokhba.⁹ But it resulted finally from the fact that the German units of weight and currency were derived from the Roman corresponding units, and were nearer to them than the Sassanid and the Arab units. They must also consider that this coin with inscriptions in Paleo-Hebrew script must go back to the first Temple. It appears that for the German Rabbis, the

¹ The *sela* is the denomination of the *shekel* during the period of the second Temple and the Talmudic period. The *zuz* is the Talmudic denomination of the *dinar*. $1 \text{ sela} = 4 \text{ zuz} = 4 \text{ dinars}$ and $5 \text{ sela'im} = 20 \text{ zuz} = 20 \text{ dinars}$.

² The Arabic *dinar* is a gold coin weighing 4.24 – 4.25 gr.

³ The *dirham* of the Babylonian *geonim* weighed 0.7 Arabic *dinars*, i.e. about 2.97 gr. The weight of the dirham depended on the period and of the land considered. The exact figure is then $20 * 10 / 7 = 28 + 0.5 + 1/14 = 28.5714$. Thus $1/14$ was replaced by $1/12$.

⁴ Of about 4 gr.

⁵ It is unclear why and on which basis, Rava made this statement. Rava lived in the first half of the 4th century until 352 C.E. and was still in contact with the Palestinian Amora'im. He must know the weight of the Tyrian *dinar* and the *shekel*. Apparently the weight of the Sassanid *dinar* must not have influenced him.

⁶ Ramban writes in *Hilkhot Bekhorot* that $1 \text{ sela} = 12 \text{ arigenz} = 12 \text{ esterling} = 12 * 1.41 = 17$ gr.

⁷ This was also certainly the case of Maimonides. See Maimonides' responsa, ed. Blau, vol 2 p 513 (responsum 268). He certainly knew these coins and their inscriptions.

⁸ They were generally overstruck Roman denarii.

⁹ Probably thanks to their early connections with Palestine. Indeed Rashi's statement that the *shekel* weights about a half of an ounce of Koln implies that he was in possession of an exemplar of a *shekel*.

old *shekel* and the Talmudic *sela* had exactly the same weight. This explains why Rashi gave the same estimation of weight for the *sela* in *B. Bekhorot* and for the *shekel* in his commentaries on Gen. and Ex. 21:32 and Ex. 25:39.

Rashi therefore did not take into consideration the opinion of Rava, shared by Rav Ashi, according which the Jewish coinage was revalued by 20%, probably after the coming back from the Babylonian exile.

This is the origin of the discussion about the weight of the shekel between the Babylonian, North African and Spanish Rabbis fixing its weight to about 17 gr. and the German Rabbis who fixed its weight to about 14 gr.

It is important to note that the two traditions remained completely independent the one from the other. Ramban¹⁰ was apparently the first to confront both traditions. Again because of his insufficient knowledge of the German coinage he did not grasp Rashi's commentary on Ex. 21:32 and wanted to ascribe him a *sela* weighing 15 *esterling*¹¹ probably because the Spanish *zehuvim* weighed 50% more than those of Rashi.

It is finally in a letter sent from Acre¹² that Ramban solved the conundrum, understood both traditions and agreed with Rashi's evaluation of the Talmudic *sela* of 10 *esterling* or about 14.15 gr instead of the weight of 12 *esterling* or about 17 gr adopted by the *geonim*.¹³ Nevertheless, this did not prevent the subsequent rabbis to rule¹⁴ according to the *geonic* opinion in different issues involving the weight of silver of the *sela*, mainly the amount of redeeming of the firstborns. But the German Rabbis remained faithful to their own tradition, contrary to the ruling of *Shulhan Arukh*.

The existence of these two parallel traditions shows that there were absolutely no contacts between these two worlds, the German and the Babylonian communities, except extremely rare queries sent to Babylonia. If a third Yeshiva of Bavel had emigrated to Germany during the first half of the tenth century, as championed by Professor Soloveitchik, then Rabbenu Gershom would have been aware of the weight of the *matkal*, he would have understood the meaning of the *geonic* interpolation in *B. Bekhorot* 50a and the independent German tradition would have been prevented from arising and developing independently.

¹⁰ Rabbi Moshe ben Nahman, Rabbi of Gerona (Gerona 1194 – Acre 1270).

¹¹ See Ramban's commentary on Ex. 30:13.

¹² Where he arrived during the year 1267. This letter does not refer to a specific verse of the Torah. In the edition of the commentary of Ramban on the Torah by Chavel the letter is printed at the end of the commentary as a postscript. In the *Humash Torat Hayyim* (Mossad ha-Rav Kook) it is printed as a complement to the commentary of Ex. 30:13. This is also the case in the scientific edition *Tossefot ha-Ramban lepeirusho la-Torah she-nikhtevu be-Erets Ysra'el*, Yossef Ofer and Yehonatan Jacobs, Eshkolot, Jerusalem 2013.

¹³ Apparently Ramban understood that the *shekel* that he saw in Acre was a coin going back, not earlier than the end of the second Temple. This coin must then be identified with the Talmudic *sela*. In fact there is an indication of the year of the revolt (1 to 4) on the coins but apparently the Samaritans who read the inscription to Ramban did not note it. According to Ofer and Jacobs (p. 341 around note 28) Ramban thought that the coin was going back to the first Temple. He could not imagine that the old script was used on later coinage. Why did he then conclude in favor of Rashi, against the opinion of Rava and Rav Ashi? Apparently Ramban, seems to favor a Talmudic *shekel* still weighing 10 *esterling*; the kings of the nations (Sassanid, Arab), after the Talmudic period revaluated the *zehuvim* of 3,5 gr by 20% to 4.25gr and this would be the origin of the *gaonic* mistaken *shekel* of 12 *esterling*. This would correspond to the historic reality but the reasoning of Ramban remains unclear.

¹⁴ Because of Maimonide's ruling.