"Balancing on an intricate edge between facts and fiction, this thoughtfully edited volume offers an excellent selection of 'real' and 'imaginary' biographies of individuals, from slaves to kings, who populated the eastern half of Europe in the centuries before and after the first Millennium. The expert authors provide a refreshing and instructive read to students of history and to anyone who has roots in this region or wishes to broaden her mental horizon.”
Katalin Szende, Central European University, Budapest

Portraits of Medieval Eastern Europe provides imagined biographies of twenty different figures from all walks of life living in Eastern Europe from 900 to 1400. Moving beyond the usual boundaries of speculative history, the book presents innovative and creative interpretations of the people, places, and events of medieval Eastern Europe and provides an insight into medieval life from Scandinavia to Byzantium.

Each chapter explores a different figure and together they present snapshots of life across a wide range of different social backgrounds. Among the figures are both imagined and historical characters, including the Byzantine Princess Anna Porphyrogenita, a Jewish traveler, a slave, the Mongol general Sübedei, a woman from Novgorod, and a Rus’ pilgrim. A range of different narrative styles are also used throughout the book, from omniscient third-person narrators to diary entries, letters, and travel accounts.

By using primary sources to construct the lives of, and give a voice to, the types of people who existed within medieval European history, Portraits of Medieval Eastern Europe provides a highly accessible introduction to the period. Accompanied by a new and interactive companion website, it is the perfect teaching aid to support and excite students of medieval Eastern Europe.

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MEDIEVAL HISTORY/EASTERN EUROPE
PORTRAITS OF MEDIEVAL EASTERN EUROPE, 900–1400

Edited by Donald Ostrowski and Christian Raffensperger
Yitshak ben Sirota is an imagined Jew (composite historical figure) of eleventh-century Eastern Europe. His own travels and the stories he hears from others cover Rus', Poland, Byzantium, and Western Europe. Yitshak’s imagined autobiographical account corresponds closely with extant documentary evidence and provides information and perspective on the contemporary interactions of men and women, Jews and Christians, masters and slaves, and other groups. In high and late medieval Hebrew literature the Biblical term “Canaan” designated the Slavic lands just as “Ashkenaz” (denoted the German lands). Yitshak employs this and other contemporary terminology, and his “Canaanites” are therefore Slavs. More specifically, by “Greek Canaan” he means the East Slavic territories where the population followed the Greek (Orthodox Christian) rite.

Like many medieval itineraries and other writings, Yitshak’s tale intermingles a record of events and peregrinations with assorted explanations and interjections. As a human narrator, Yitshak necessarily speaks from his own perspective and with imperfect knowledge. His notions of relevance and significance may sometimes differ from those of a modern reader. However, his portrayals are based on real stories and are consistent with actual historical possibility. The glossary and endnotes are supplied by a later editor, perhaps the same individual who translated the text from the original Hebrew. They are intended to provide a guide for readers who may not grasp all of Yitshak’s idioms and allusions or who wish to consult extant historical documents in order to verify the essential aspects of his story. The abbreviation “R.” means “Rabbi.”

I do not know the land of my birth. I have been told that my ancestors went down from the true land of Canaan, a place very distant from here. To reach it you must travel many days beyond the great city of Qostantina [Constantinople]. There the Holy One of Yisrael [Israel] spoke in days long past to our fathers Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, as is written in the Torah of Moses. There also King David ruled from Yerushalayim [Jerusalem], the Holy and chosen city. For this reason Jews and Christians and other peoples go up every year to Yerushalayim in great numbers from all the countries of the Greek Land [Byzantium] and many far corners of the world. Our rabbis say that all our people shall return to that place—may it be His will that the Redeemer come to Zion speedily and soon in our days, amen! In these days we sojourn in another land of Canaan, among the tribes of Gentiles who call themselves in their own language Polanim [Poles] and Rusim [people of Rus'] and other such names. Many of my fellow Jews of this exile no longer speak our own ancient tongue but converse only in the language of Canaan.

My father died during war, and my mother perished while giving birth to my younger brother Yosef. I heard these things, and did not see them with my own eyes, for I was very small. We grew up in the care of relatives in the region of Priznob (this is the name I remember hearing). I do not know where this land may be, but a certain man once told me that it is the very same city that the Canaanites call Petemys or Premysl [now Przemyśl in Poland]. If that is so, then the news that has just reached us is so urgent that I must depart at once, as I shall explain. But first I must tell the story of my childhood. Our relatives cared for us until a time of crisis arose in their land. When bandits broke through, they slaughtered many people and burned the houses. All of us were killed or carried off into slavery—may the Almighty see our distress and rescue us! I and my brother were thrown into a field with our hands bound together. We would have died there, but the Almighty had mercy on us. The man of Canaan called Matviy, a seller of grain to my uncle Shmuel, saw us and his heart took pity upon us. As my uncle was carried away, he begged Matviy to rescue us two boys, promising to repay him well upon his return.

Whether this Canaanite believed that my uncle would escape or be ransomed, or whether he rescued us of kindness or due to his past relations with my family, I cannot say. I awoke in strange surroundings, in a hut with a warm fire and unknown people and images of idolatry on the walls.

We stayed many days in the house of the Canaanite, until I had nearly forgotten my own family. One day I went out to the fields with Matviy, but my brother did not come with us. Woe upon woe befell us! Marauders came again and struck the farmer and his fellow men of Canaan and me too with their spears and poles, I saw blood flowing into the plowed earth. One of the raiders lifted me up from the ground and threw me across his horse. I have never seen my brother or that Canaanite man who rescued us or any of my relatives again, even from that time until this very day.

1. Yitshak ben Sirota, was taken as a slave to the great city of Qostantina, which lies at the mouth of the Two Great Seas [the Mediterranean/Aegan/Marmara and the Black]. A Christian servant of the emperor bought me for ten nomismata, the usual price at the central market. So many women and children were sold that I could not count them all, for this city has a large trade and great profit in the sale of human beings from all the nations of the world. I served my master for three years. He was not an evil man. He beat me once or twice, but not like the other masters—as is well known, many slaves today are ailments and killed by their lords. I worked in his household and did not starve. However, my master forced me to bow down with him before images of idolatry, which is strictly forbidden to all Jews. May God forgive me, even as the prophet Elisha absolved Naaman the Syrian for the same sin [2 Kings 5]!
I thought often of my brother and my relatives and wondered if they were alive, 
slaves like me, or dead. I hoped that if my brother had been brought here I might 
find him. One day when I had been sent to the market I saw the slaves being sold 
as usual and began to cry, thinking of my family. Hardly realizing what I was doing, 
I whispered one of the prayers I still remembered from the home of my relatives: 
Barukh atah Adonai shomea tefillah [Blessed are You, Lord, who hears prayer]. 3 It so 
happened that a Jewish slave trader was standing near me, bidding or selling, and 
heard my words. This man asked me who I was and where I came from. When 
he heard that I had been captured in the land of Greek Canaan, he asked after my 
master and sent an emissary back with me to the household, having instructed him 
carefully beforehand. The agent of this slave trader presented a gift to my master and 
made a speech with many fine words. He then offered to buy me for a high price. 
My master was loathe to part with me, but in the end he pressed his lead seal onto 
the bill of sale that had been prepared in advance on the paper of the Arabs, and I 
was exchanged for fourteen nomismata.

FIGURE 18.1 “Yitshak rejoins his people.” Illustration by Sonya Dimand.
The Jewish trader who bought me acted not out of charity but rather from a shrewd calculation: knowing that our communities of the exile show care to all fellow Jews in distress whenever they can, he wanted to sell me for a high ransom. Yet he made me swear that I had not been converted to Christianity, otherwise he might lose his investment. We joined a great caravan of Jewish merchants, some of whom were headed for the eastern lands called Hanhut [India] and Sine [China], by way of The Gate [Derbent]. They carried with them fur and caviar and other valuable goods from the land of Canaan and many other lands besides. Other merchants traveled in the opposite direction, passing by Qandia [Crete] and Tisili [Swabia] and going across the desert as far as Varegian [Ouanga] and beyond. But my master set me apart from his other slaves, and we set our course by the western road along the sea. One Sabbath we camped in a valley near Christopolis [now Kavala in northern Greece]. These men arranged all the carriages and equipment in a circle and called it an eruv according to the Jewish law. I heard Hebrew prayers again for the first time in many years, and I did not understand them all. These traders who travel to and fro across the world from East to West follow the traditions of our ancestors, but some say they create their own halakimah and do not consult the rabbis. I saw with my own eyes that they did whatever seemed good to them but also observed some rituals strictly. Their men had intercourse with any of the slave women they chose, but they made them immune for purity just like Jewish women. Some women immersed while clothed, and this was permitted if their garments were loose.

After fifteen days we arrived in Salonica [Thessaloniki, Salonica], which is a city where many Jews live, as well as Greeks and Canaanites and other peoples. The Jews of this place have much strife among themselves, for part of them adhere to the law of the rabbis while another part are Karaites, whom the rabbis call heretics. The holiday of Shavuot [Pentecost or the Feast of Weeks] was approaching, and a great disension arose among the Jews of the city about the proper date of the festival. The Karaites sent their agents out to convince all the Jews to observe the festival according to their calculations, while the rabbis denounced them in the synagogues with much vehemence, holding to their own calendar. The rabbis and heads of the synagogues read letters from the great academies of Babylonia [the Abbasid caliphate] proving the error of the heretics, but the latter had their own book of interpretations from Babylonia that they said was older. They also denounced the rabbis to the Christians, accusing them of many crimes, and because of this a heavy fine was levied against the Jewish community. At one of these meetings some elders from the land of Rusia [Rus'] in Canaan, from the city of Qiw [Kiev], were present. They raised a collection for me and purchased my freedom from the Jewish slave trader for twenty silver coins. Praise be to the exalted King!

When the merchants of Qiw returned to their own city, I went with them, and thus I came again to the land of Canaan. We drove our carts through the Jewish Gates, and I saw wooden churches and a synagogue along the banks of the river called Slavuta [Dnieper]. The people of this land wear boots of leather and felt, which can be obtained from excellent craftsmen. They are descended from Tiras son of Yafeh mentioned in the book of Genesis, or some say Ashkenaz son of Gomer the brother of Tiras. The king of the Rusim at this time was Larseal, the one they call great in wisdom. In those days monks began to live in the Caves [the Kievian Pecherskii Monastery], and they soon became a great company.

I have lived in this city from then until now, for I was blessed to find a position in the house of bar Kybr.[12] The clan of this elder is descended from the tribe of the Khazars who previously ruled over a great territory extending from this land of Qiw to the Jurjan [Caspian] sea in the east. In our days those who believe in Muhammad's laws dwell there on the river Ilit [Volga] and beyond. I learned to arrange the affairs of a trading house, and they taught me the writing of our tongue and that of the Canaanites. The elder bar Kybr called me Sirota, the orphan, and all knew me by this name. When the cantrip asked me to read a section of the weekly parnah in the community gathering, he called me up to the binah (whether by intention or misunderstanding) as Yishak ben Sirota. It has been my name ever since, though some call me Ayziq, which is another way to pronounce the same name.

The Christians of Rusia are very pious according to their own faith, although many of the people are completely ignorant of the traditions decreed by the councils of their lawmakers. They have many strange beliefs and others that are completely in accord with the Law of Moses and the Prophets. Many of our people do not know this, but they honor the same writings as we do and even read the words of the Holy Torah rendered into their own tongue. But they call this the Old Law, and change many meanings by substituting a New Law. Some of their preachers accuse us of horrible crimes and incite the unlearned against us. One of their monks, Feodosi by name, came several times at night to provoke us, shouting that all Jews are accursed and deserving of eternal punishment. Some of the people spit as we pass and deride us. Nonetheless, a few of their scholars respect our learning, and they even have books in the language of Scavonia—which is to say, the speech of Canaan—that contain some words of Hebrew writing. I heard that they were written by Jewish translators in the kingdom of Bulgaria, in the southern lands. When I met the priest called Luka, he would ask me questions about these words of our tongue. He wrote down the meanings I told him in a little scroll, and added new ones from our conversations. However, it is dangerous for Christian scholars to show too much interest in our books. One monk studied the writings of the Hebrew Bible well and did not hide it, and so they called him possessed by an evil spirit.

In those days the Christians did not attack us with violence and plunder and burn our property. This was before the calamity that arose after the monk Evstratii of the Caves was taken captive by Cumanians. Word reached Qiw that he had been taken across Qedar [the Pontic steppe in Ukraine] and sold to a Jew in Cherson [Chersonesos Taurica, Korsun]. Now this Evstratii loved to abstain from food and drink; such was his special custom already in Qiw. The Christians said that he told all the slaves of the Jew to fast likewise until they all died. He did this in order to cause the Jew to suffer the loss of a great sum of money that he had paid for these slaves. This story circulated and spread, and soon men with bitterness of spirit proclaimed that the Jew had crucified Evstratii by sewing him to a cross just like Christ. A mob gathered and committed violence against all Jews they found in
The streets. They stole and destroyed our property too, and we narrowly escaped with our lives. The rioters beat and killed Christians as well; they were like wild animals who know not what they do.  

The loss suffered by the house of bar Kybr at this time was substantial. Our elder decided to raise money from his associates and send fifteen of his men on a trading journey to the western lands. He concluded agreements for the delayed purchase of clothing and merchandise, which our rabbis have permitted, judging that such arrangements do not violate the prohibition against taking interest from a brother Yisrael. We set out in the spring and passed through many countries, Volin [Volhynia] and Polonia [Poland] and Bohemia and Ashkenaz [the German lands] and Tsarfat [France]. In all these lands Jews live in exile. I regret only that I never saw the great kingdom of Safarad [Spain and Portugal], which is ruled by the servants of Muhammad, for the Jews of this land have acquired great fame through their learning and poetry.  

Now Russia is a great kingdom and a land of forests where animals of fur called sable and marten and others are plentiful. But the lands to the west are not so, and their inhabitants desire these goods. The Christians of these lands follow a different law than those of Russia, and are very adamant on this point, though I did not comprehend their quarrels clearly. But know that they despise the Christians of Greece and those of Russia, which are of the same law, as well as all pagans, Muslims, and Jews.  

I have time to tell of only a few of our adventures. In the city of Praga [Prague], which lies beyond Qaranto [Kraków], we heard the mournful poetry of Menachem bar Maklir and the story of how he had to forbid the Jews of that place from baking their food together in the same oven with the forbidden meat of Gentiles. In Regenshurp [Regensburg] we tasted wine with little strength, so that one did not dilute it like the wine of Russia, which is extremely intoxicating and dangerous to drink without dilution (we have been accustomed to add three parts of water to every part of wine). Moreover, they use bigger cups than we do. The people of this country prefer large goblets, and the local Jews have adopted this custom also—though of course they do not drink wine made by Gentile hands. In Russia the Christians will not drink our wine either, nor our mead and beer, for their elders have made a law forbidding it. Now if any Jew drink the beer of Russia, he is suspected of wanting to convert, for the Christians use beer in their rituals. But the Russim suspect us so much that even water touched by a Jew they must first purify.  

The Gentiles of Ashkenaz were not so strict in this regard. Yet they have the same harsh rules punishing any of their communities who might go to our Unleavened bread at Pesach [Passover] or venture to pray with us at any time.  

In the land of Tsarfat, in a country with many vineyards called Shampan [Champagne], we met a young rabbi who questioned us at length regarding the dress of women in the lands of Canaan. This was a certain R. Yosef ben Shimon, who was composing his own commentary on the book of Isaiah. He argued forcefully that some of the words of the prophet referred to the kind of cloak worn by women in our land. R. Yosef said that necklaces of beautiful and expensive beads—like those fashionable and coveted by the women of Canaan—had also been mentioned by the prophet of ancient days.  

One youth of our company doubted that the prophet Isaiah had known so well the fashions of our own land of Canaan, but the elders bid him keep silent.  

We returned home more than a year later, arriving before the Day of Atonement. I took the share of profits assigned to me and did not argue, though quarrels broke out among some of the company regarding the distribution of goods. In those days Zimri abducted Reuven’s slave girl, who was also his concubine. He hid for some days with Gentiles and then fled to Bihem. Slaves are very plentiful here, for so many of the people sell their sons and daughters. This is how their land came to be called Canaan, for Canaan was the slave of Shem, as is written: A slave of slaves he shall be to his brothers [Genesis 9:25–26].  

Though the people of the land are forbidden from selling slaves to Jews, few of them follow this ruling, and there are many ways to circumvent the law. Shimon, then, took money from Reuven and pursued Zimri; however, he did not find him. Reuven, however, claimed that Shimon had acted on his own accord, stealing money from him and writing a false power of attorney. The judges said they had never heard of such a case of perfidy as this whole affair.  

The journeys of my soul in this land of Canaan have not attuned to the measure of the years of the sojourning of my fathers in that land of Canaan. Why do I write, when no one can live without seeing both good and evil? Did not the Preacher say: A time to weep, and a time to laugh [Ecclesiastes 3:4]? Now that I am growing old, I have heard the most remarkable news of my life. Not ten days have passed since a man arrived with a letter to be read out in all the communities of the lands of the East, by the authority of the great sage Rabbi Yehudah ben Meir the Kohan of Magenta [Mainz]. As he read the notice, I felt my heart quiver and quake. I seemed to hear the story of an orphan brought up by relatives, entrusted to the care of a Gentile, captured in Premush (so it was written, for I checked with my own eyes), sold into slavery, and spied by a woman in Qostanta. The authors of this letter sought to find that young child from the days of the turmoil, who might yet live. This orphan, they said, had a brother who was spared and later took a wife in the land of Prague, which is Bihem. That brother died, and now the Law prescribes that his widow must marry her husband’s brother or obtain the release of chalitish. Else they must prove that the brother has died.  

I must go and marry her or renounce her! If indeed I am the one whom they seek. Yet who can doubt it? I will live in this faith. My brother lives—rather, he did live—he had a wife—and I may yet see my relatives in this age, to mourn with them and laugh with them.  

And today due to our sins we are in the year one thousand and fifty and six, since the destruction of the Temple. I, Shlomo called Sirota, copied this writing of my grandfather Yishak of Russia (may the memory of the righteous be for a blessing), who recorded the journeys of his soul in the land of Canaan for a memory and a remembrance. He did not write all his travels; for I was told that in later days he sailed even to the very edge of the world, to Danmarka [Denmark]. When I copied out this writing, I altered only some difficult words that are not understood in our days here in the Land of the Isle [England]. The One who makes shalom in the heavens, he will make shalom for Yisrael and for the whole world, amen!  

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Glossary

bimah – A platform and lectern in a Jewish synagogue from which the Torah, blessings, and other texts are read publicly.

chalitshah – Rabbinic release from the obligation of levirat marriage (marriage of a widow to her late husband's brother if they had no children). The ancient custom for preserving a family line is prescribed in Deuteronomy 25:5–10 (cf. Genesis 38, Ruth 4). The Biblical text speaks of brothers "dwelling together," but medieval rabbis applied the principle of levirate marriage more broadly, with the result that Jewish widows could not legally marry in the absence of chalitshah and/or definitive proof of the death of their brothers-in-law.

eruv – A special boundary created for religious reasons, within which certain actions are considered permissible on Shabbat.

halakhah – Rabbinic Jewish law. The term literally means the "way of walking," i.e., the correct lifestyle.

kohen – A descendant of the line of Biblical Aaron (often translated as "priest"). This position had great significance in the days of the Temple and has continued to carry some liturgical and symbolic importance through medieval and modern times.

parashah – A division of the Torah (Pentateuch) usually consisting of a few chapters read aloud in the synagogue on Shabbat.

Shabbat – The Jewish Sabbath; the seventh day of the week and a day of rest (on which work is forbidden). The Shabbat begins on Friday evening and lasts until Saturday evening.

shalom – Holistic goodness and completeness. Often translated as "peace.

Torah – The Pentateuch (Five Books of Moses). The term literally means "instruction" and can also be used in broader senses; e.g., Jewish religious teaching generally.

Notes

1 Most of the relevant sources have recently been collected and prepared for publication (in the original languages and English translation) in: Alexander Kulik, Jew in Old Rus': A Documentary History [in process]. Citations below of Kulik section numbers refer to this compilation (for which I served as general editor). For the term “ [. . . ]” see Kulik [II: 5.1.1.1].

2 The eleventh-century Persian poet and traveler Nasir ibn Khusrav reported: "From all the lands of the Greeks, too, and from other countries, the Christians and Jews come up to Jerusalem in great numbers in order to make their visitation of the Church and the Synagogue is there" (Joshua Starr, The Jews in the Byzantine Empire, 641-1204 [New York: Franklin, 1939], 197 [No. 142]).

3 This frequently attested innovation derives from Isaiah 59:20 and subsequent religious poetry. It expressed widespread Messianic expectations, including a return of Jews to the Land of Israel.

4 This story of the orphan brothers, including several details that follow below, was recorded in the works of R. Yehudah ben Meir ha-Kohen of Manz (first half of the eleventh century) and preserved in later quotations by R. Eliyahu ben Yehiel le-Voh (late twelfth to early thirteenth century) and R. Yitzhak ben Moshe of Vienna (first half of the thirteenth century). These texts mention the city of "Primut," which has been speculatively equated with Przemysl, called Peremoshl in Russian. (Kulik II: 5.1.1; cf. Starr, Jews, 192-194 [No. 136]).

5 This is a line from the traditional Amidah prayer.

6 Appeals for mutual aid among scattered Jewish communities were common during the Middle Ages (see, for example, Kulik II: 5.1.1). In fact, though this might seem to contradict some of his other purportions (see later in the story text), Huguenin Feodosii of the Kiev Caves Monastery (mid-eleventh century; or else a later pseudo-Feodosii) also instructed Christians to help Jews in need: "Be merciful with charity not only to those of your own faith, but also to [those of] other [faiths]. If you see [someone] naked or hungry or [sick] in winter or gripped by distress, even if this is a Jew, or Saracen, or even a Volgoi Balgar, or heretic, or from Latin, or [someone] from among all the pagans — show mercy to everyone and deliver them from distress, as you are able, and you will not be deprived of your reward from God" (Kulik II: 5.1.2).

7 In his travelogue (ca. 1175), R. Petachiyah ben Yosef of Regensburg reported meeting non-Rabbinic Jews in the Pontic steppe (or possibly Crimea) who had never seen or heard of the Talmud and had their own unique customs (Kulik II: 5.9). According to his vita, the ninth-century Slavic missionary Cyril (Constantinian) studied Hebrew with non-Rabbinic Jews in Chersonesus Taurica (see Starr, Jews, 122 [No. 55]).

8 According to Rabbinic law, women must immerse before menstruation before engaging in sex with their husbands (see Leviticus 15:19-24, 18:19, 20:18; Talmudic tractate Nidah). R. Eliezer ben Yoel ha-Levi of Bore (late twelfth to early thirteenth century) ruled that the same laws of purification applied also to non-Jewish female slaves treated as concubines by Jewish men; i.e., these women also had to immerse for purification (Kulik II: 5.2.7).

9 R. Eliezer ben Nathan of Manz (early to mid-twelfth century) judged that women could lawfully immerse while clothed if wearing "loose clothing . . . similar to the clothing still worn by the women of the land of Canaan [i.e., the Slavic territories]" (Kulik II: 5.2.4.1).

10 As Yisrael states, this city was home to multiple ethnicities and languages. The famous Slavic missionaries Cyril (Constantinian) and Methodius (nineth century), who seem to have invented the Slavic alphabet and literature, hailed originally from Thessalonikion.

11 This festival occurs seven weeks after Passover, i.e., in May or June. The proper method for calculating the date of Shavuot has been controversial since ancient times and formed one of the bitterest points of contention between Karaite and Rabbinic Jews through the medieval period.

12 The Jewish Gates of Kiev are mentioned in the Kievian Chronicle (ca. 1200) under the years 6654 and 6655 from the Creation of the world (i.e., ca. 1146 and 1151); Kulik II: 1.2.2, II: 1.2.3).

13 In commenting on Genesis 10:3, R. Sdaiah ben Yosef ibn Fayanumi of Sura (first half of the tenth century) claimed that the Slavs descended from Ashkenaz (Kulik II: 1.A.1.2). In commenting on 1 Chronicles 1:1-5; the Book of Josippon (mid-twelfth century) named Tibet as the source of the Slavs (Kulik II: 4.1). R. Yitzhak ben Cherevog (mid-twelfth century) followed the second of these interpretations (Kulik II: 4.6.2.1). The Rus' Primary Chronicle (early twelfth century) agreed that the Rus' people descended from Biblical Yahweh (the progenitor of both Tibet and Ashkenaz), but without providing further details about the lineage (see M. Czarni and Ogierd Sherbowit-Wetrous, trans., The Russian Primary Chronicle: Latinized Text [Cambridge, MA: Medieval Academy of America, 1933], 52).

14 Grand Prince Ivanov I (the Wise of Kiev ruled 1016-1054. Meloha ("king") is the normal Hebrew word for a ruler of this type (including khanaghs).

15 The name attested in the Kievian Letter, a tenth-century Hebrew document that is said to indicate a contemporary Jewish (and Kazan) presence in Kiev (Kulik II: 5.1.2).

16 In the synagogue readers are generally called up to the lectern according to a traditional Hebrew name form (X, Y). Sinota is possibly one of the names attested in the thirteenth century Kievian Letter (Kulik II: 5.1.2). According to R. Eliezer ben Yitzhak of Prague (second half of the twelfth century), the Jewish communities of Poland, Rus', and Hungary had relatively little religious learning but still selected and paid knowledgeable men to serve as canons and teachers (Kulik II: 5.1.1.1).
A thirteenth-century seal matrix from the Grodno region bears an inscription in Hebrew letters reading “Vinhah Ayel[el]” — i.e., the Hebrew and local versions of the name Isaac (Kulik §II.8.3).

18 R. Eliezer ben Nathan of Mainz (early to mid-twelfth century) ruled that Jews could rent houses to the “lax” Christians of the German lands — but not to the “pious” Christians of Rus’ and Greece, since the latter would put images of idolatry on the walls and gates of the property (Kulik §II.5.6.5). Most historians believe that the common people of Rus’ continued to practice forms of paganism long after the official adoption of Christianity (c. 988).

19 The stories of the monks Feodosii and Nikita (second half of the eleventh century) — the latter of whom purportedly had misadventures related to “Jewish books” — are recorded in the Kievan Caves Paterikon (Kulik §II.2.1.4; Muriel Heppell, trans., The Paterikon of the Kievan Caves Monastery [Cambridge, MA: Ukrainian Research Institute of Harvard University, 1989], 73, 142–145).

20 This story about Bostati the Faster comes from the Kievan Caves Paterikon and apparently dates from the late eleventh century (Kulik §II.2.1.2; Heppell, Paterikon, 123–125).

21 Such a riot against Jews and others is recorded in the Rus’ Primary Chronicle (early twelfth century) under the year 1021 (the Creation of the world (i.e., 1113), although the motivation may have been different than described by Yishak (Kulik §II.1.1.2).

22 R. Eliezer ben Nathan of Mainz (early to mid-twelfth century) made a ruling to this effect with explicit reference to commercial travel to Rus’ (Kulik §II.5.6.1). Although the Biblical prohibition against taking interest from a fellow citizen of Israel is found in Exodus 22:22–27, Leviticus 25:35–38, and Deuteronomy 23:19–20; 20:21; cf. Ezekiel 18:5–18, where the practice is categorized together with very severe sins.

23 The Jews of the Iberian peninsula experienced a “Golden Age” under Muslim rule in the tenth and eleventh centuries.

24 In his commentary on the prophet Isaiah, R. Yosef ben Shimon Kara of Troyes (late eleventh to early twelfth century) interpreted obscure Hebrew words in the Biblical text with reference to the dress and ornaments worn by women in the Slavic territories (Kulik §II.2.3). Three known manuscripts of his composition refer to the Slavic necklace beads as “red and green” or “green and red,” and this is how most people interpret his saying. However, five other manuscripts of the work switch the order of the two Hebrew letters, thus reading, “expensive” (נְעִלָיִם) instead of “green” (נְעָלָיִם). Moreover, the East Slavic word for “beautiful” (крась) came to mean “red” at least by the fifteenth century and possibly earlier (Ila Chernykh, Istoriya etnologicheskoi slovar svyazannogo russkogo yazyka [Moscow: Russkii izdak, 2001], 1.441). As a result, today we cannot know whether R. Yosef intended to speak of “red and green” beads or “beautiful and expensive” ones, as linguistic confusion may have affected the transmission of either or both accounts (his and Yishak’s), or perhaps even their original conversation. Note that medieval Rabinic literature includes numerous Slavic linguistic glosses, generally described as words of the “language of Canaan” (see Kulik §II.13).

25 The Jewish Day of Atonement (Yom Kippur) occurs on 10 Tishrei according to the Hebrew calendar, a date that can fall in either September or October. See Leviticus 16.

26 The same explanation appears in the travelsogue (1173) of R. Binyamin ben Yonah of Tudela (Kulik §II.7.1). Jews from Rus’ are attracted in England in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries — including a “Yisra de Russie” (Kulik §II.6). Our Yishak’s descendant may therefore be counted among these immigrants or their progeny. R. Meir ben Barukh of Rothenburg (second half of the thirteenth century) uses the term “the Land of the Isle” in a responsum concerning the conditions under which a wife must follow her husband to a “different land.” The same text also mentions the land of Canaan (i.e., the Slavic territories), France, and the German lands (Kulik §II.2.11). Note that copies of medieval manuscripts frequently modified their texts both intentionally and unintentionally.

28 This closing invocation derives from the last line of the traditional Kaddish prayer.