CHAPTER 2

Immigrant Scribes’ Handwriting in Northern Italy from the Late Thirteenth to the Mid-Sixteenth Century: Sephardi and Ashkenazi Attitudes toward the Italian Script

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Northern Italian Jewish society in the late-medieval and Renaissance periods was made up of three main groups: native Italian Jews, the Ashkenazim (immigrants mainly from Germany and France), and the Sephardim (mainly from Spain, Portugal, and Provence). The immigrants came to Italy in several waves: German Jews came in a slow stream starting at the end of the thirteenth century; Jews from France arrived in the late fourteenth century; and there was an influx of Sephardi refugees towards the end of the fifteenth century.

Among the Ashkenazi and Sephardi immigrants were many scribes who, along with the Italian scribes, determined the features of the Hebrew script used in Italy during this period.1 According to Malachi Beit-Arié’s widely accepted paleographical theory, an immigrant scribe normally retains the handwriting acquired in his homeland.2 At the same time, immigrant scribes’ distinctive hands show evidence of the gradual influence of the local script, through its use either sporadically or, less frequently, throughout an entire manuscript.

In addressing the script of immigrant scribes—both Ashkenazi and Sephardi—in northern Italy, I focus on two aspects: (1) the gradual adjustment of the scribes to their new environment, as a group and as individuals; and (2) mutual influence between immigrant scripts and the local Italian one.

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2 Ibid., 46–48.
In the early thirteenth century, the migration of Italian Jews from southern to northern Italy had the effect of making Rome an important Jewish community. Most of the known Italian Hebrew manuscripts from the last third of the thirteenth century, which manifest various script modes and styles, were copied in Rome. Among them we find the earliest evidence of an Ashkenazi immigrant scribe in Italy—a manuscript copied by Shemaria ben Jacob ha-Kohen, dated to the mid-thirteenth century.

Shemaria’s handwriting (fig. 2.1) represents a phase of semi-cursive script that reflects the Ashkenazi style of his homeland (shown in fig. 2.2). Both examples are characteristic of the fully formed semi-cursive script that had emerged during the first decades of the thirteenth century. Unlike the first appearances of the semi-cursive, this script is more developed calligraphically and shows the influence of Latin Gothic, with its shading and the droplet-like shapes of the vertical lines.

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4 All images in this chapter have been purchased by the Hebrew Palaeography Project.
5 On the development of the Ashkenazi script, see Edna Engel and Malachi Beit-Arié, Specimens of Mediaeval Hebrew Scripts, vol. 3, Ashkenazic Script (Jerusalem: The Israel Academy of Sciences and Humanities, forthcoming).