

The Arabic Fragments in the Cambridge Genizah Collections

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The Genizah collections in the Cambridge University Library constitute about two thirds of the entire contents of the Cairo Genizah¹. The vast majority of the manuscript fragments are written in Hebrew characters. This is not surprising since the Hebrew script was the crucial feature of the manuscripts which caused them to be deposited in the Genizah. The language of well over half of them, however, is Judaeo-Arabic² rather than Hebrew. Indeed, in certain categories of manuscript Judaeo-Arabic is the norm and Hebrew the exception. This applies especially to documentary material and scientific or philosophical works.

In addition to the many Judaeo-Arabic manuscripts, the Cambridge Genizah collections also contain a fair number of Arabic fragments which are written in Arabic script³. Several of these contain a text in Hebrew characters on the reverse side. A large proportion of them, however, are penned wholly in Arabic script. It has been calculated that there are approximately 7,000 fragments of this last category in the Cambridge Genizah collections, which would constitute 5% of the estimated total of 140,000. The majority of these are to be found under the classmarks T-S Ar. 19, 38-42, NS 297, 305-6, 327, 340, AS 176-184.

The presence of these Arabic fragments in the Genizah is somewhat problematic. The best explanation seems to be that they were kept originally in a family archive or library together with Hebrew writings and that when the collection was discarded it was disposed of *in toto* into the Genizah without any trouble being taken to sift out those which did not contain Hebrew script⁴.

Like the majority of the Genizah papers, the Arabic fragments in Arabic script were mostly written in the High Middle Ages (11th-13th century). They are of a very varied content, including documents, works of the philosophical sciences, religious texts, literature, and popular lore.

1.0. DOCUMENTS

1.1. *Legal documents*

In mediaeval Egypt, any member of a minority group was free to apply to a Muslim *qādī*. This entailed

several disadvantages such as the payment of a fee, which was not necessary in the denominational courts. Many Jews, nevertheless, had reason to make application to a Muslim court for litigation or for the concluding of contracts. The main motivation for a Jew to bring a lawsuit before the Muslim authorities was to seek more favourable terms after he had lost in a Jewish court. In other words, the Muslim judiciary served as a kind of court of appeal. Contracts, on the other hand, were made before government courts for different reasons. The legality of a contract was safeguarded if it was written by a Muslim notary and co-signed by professional *'udūl*, or adjuncts of a *qādī*. It would serve the party concerned as an instrument of proof should litigation at a government court ensue. In the case of the transfer of urban property, it was very common for Jews to conclude a contract before a government court, since conveyancing was taxed and had to be certified by a Muslim authority. The foregoing remarks refer to cases in which both parties were Jewish. With regard to settlements between a Jew and a Muslim or a Christian, it was normal for them to be made before a Muslim court. Only very rarely were they made before the Jewish authorities⁵.

The Genizah has preserved many legal documents which were written by Muslim notaries for contracts or settlements between two Jewish parties or between a Jew and a Muslim or a Christian. The most frequently found type of court record of a settlement between two litigants is the *'iqrār*, or 'acknowledgment'. This is a formal declaration by one party which usually acknowledges a debt in money or corn, or the receipt of a debt which is owed. One may also find records of testimonies which were delivered earlier in the procedure before a settlement was reached. There are also numerous fragments of deeds of sale or of lease. The existence of these in such large numbers is to be explained by the aforementioned obligation for conveyancing of immobile property to be certified by a Muslim authority. They are of particular value to the historian of material culture since they often describe in great detail the layout and architectural features of the property.

In addition to acknowledgments and deeds of sale or lease, which constitute the bulk of the legal documents

which have been preserved, the Genizah also contains other kinds of record from the pen of Muslim notaries, e.g. deeds of gift, deeds of loan, bills of divorce, and powers of attorney. Although, as was mentioned above, the majority of these documents come from the High Middle Ages, there are a few which date from the late Mamlūk and Ottoman periods.

The Jews would sometimes apply to Muslim jurists-consults (*fuqahā'*) for a legal opinion (*fatwā*). Several of these applications have survived in the Genizah. They sometimes concern purely religious matters such as, for instance, innovations in the synagogue service⁶.

1.2. Documents addressed to the Chancery

Documents of this category include petitions and reports which were sent by members of the Jewish community during the Fāṭimid and Ayyūbid periods to the Chancery for the attention of the caliph, the vizier, or some other high dignitary. In some cases we have only the preliminary draft or a copy of the document. Yet there are also a considerable number of completed petitions and reports which were sent to and dealt with by the offices of the Chancery.

The petitions were sent by people with grievances who were seeking redress or sometimes by government officials who required authorization for their actions. After the petition had been considered it was returned to the sender with the caliphal rescript written on the back. If, however, the ordinance of the caliph was of considerable length, it was written on a separate sheet. Many of the petitions which have been found in the Genizah confirm the descriptions in the literary sources of the clerical procedure which was followed when they were dealt with by the Chancery. According to al-Maqrīzī (*Khiṭaṭ*, Būlāq, 1853, i, 402 = ii, 208) and al-Qalqashandī (*Ṣubḥ al-ʿAshā*, Cairo, 1913-19, iii, 491), for instance, the petitions were endorsed by two secretaries, known as the secretary of the thin pen and the secretary of the thick pen respectively, and were finally authorized by the signature of the caliph. These three kinds of endorsement are actually found on some of the Genizah petitions⁷. The reports, on the other hand, were not returned to the sender. They probably found their way into the Genizah among the papers of one of the many Jews who held government office within the Chancery.

1.3. Documents emanating from the Chancery

The Genizah contains several copies of decrees which were issued in the form of a separate document in response to petitions⁸. Another form of document which is represented is the letter of appointment. The extant fragments relate to the installation of religious leaders of the minority groups. There are also several fragments of correspondence from the Chancery. These are mainly found on the verso of texts which

were written in Hebrew characters. As with the reports, it is likely that they were originally in the possession of Jewish officials in the Chancery. Another possibility is that they were Fāṭimid documents which had been scrapped and sold as writing material by the incoming Ayyūbid administration.

1.4. Letters

Several of the documents which are written in Arabic script are letters. These relate both to business matters and to private affairs. As far as can be determined, most of the correspondence is between Jews. Many members of the Jewish community learned Arabic calligraphy, so it would not be surprising if some of them used Arabic script in their correspondence⁹. Some of the letters may have been written by Karaites. Members of this sect preferred as a rule to use Arabic script when writing Arabic and sometimes even when writing Hebrew (v. infra)¹⁰. The Karaite origin of at least one letter would seem to be confirmed by the inclusion of a Hebrew Biblical quotation which is transcribed into Arabic characters in a manner which is identical to the transcription practices of the Karaite Hebrew Bible texts in Arabic script¹¹.

1.5. Accounts and Lists

Among the documents are also to be found a number of business accounts and lists of residents for administrative purposes such as the levying of taxes or the granting of benefits to the poor. Many more instances of these types of document have been found in the Judaeo-Arabic portions of the Genizah. The business accounts in Arabic script might have been written by educated Jewish traders. Several of the lists, on the other hand, could originally have been records which were made by Muslim administrators.

2.0 DISCIPLINES OF EDUCATION OUTSIDE THE JEWISH TRADITION

The education which was received by the majority of Jews in mediaeval Egypt was principally based on Jewish tradition. Non-traditional education, the prerogative of a small minority, was broadly divided into two major disciplines: Arabic language and literature, which was studied by Jews who were training for government service, and science-philosophy, which was studied mainly by those who were preparing for the medical profession¹².

The Genizah has preserved a fragment in Arabic script which contains the first part of a classification schema of the disciplines of linguistic and scientific learning¹³. It is essentially a summary of al-Fārābī's *ʿIṣṣā l-ʿulūm* with a few innovations. After an initial enumeration of the various methods of learning, the subjects of instruction are arranged as follows:

I

1. History
2. Proverbs
3. 'Adab
4. Rhetoric
5. Poetry

II

1. The principles of writing
2. The principles of reading
3. The principles of rhetoric
4. The principles of poetry
5. Lexicography (al-lughā)
6. Grammar (an-naḥw)

III Logic

At this point the fragment breaks off, yet we may assume that the lost portion contained the remaining branches of al-Fārābī's classification, viz. mathematics, the natural, the metaphysical and the political sciences, and theology. In some places the wording of the text has a pedagogical air; this especially applies to the first division where 'selections from the well-known authors' are prescribed for the various subjects. What we probably have, therefore, is an outline of the curriculum followed by those members of the Jewish community who undertook non-traditional education. In all likelihood, a large proportion of the books used by students of these disciplines were in Arabic script, particularly those relating to Arabic language and literature. Fragments of such books have survived in the Genizah and the range of subjects which are represented corresponds quite neatly with those enumerated in the curriculum fragment.

2.1. *Arabic language and literature*

There are fragments of works belonging to all the five subjects of the first division of the curriculum, viz. history, proverbs, 'adab, rhetoric, and poetry. The poetical texts are more numerous than the rest. They include several leaves from the *Diwān* of Ṭarafa¹⁴, poems by al-Mutanabbī¹⁵, and, true to the loyalist spirit of the Jewish community in mediaeval Egypt, fragments of a compendium of poems written in eulogy of Saladin¹⁶. Also preserved are several small snippets of anonymous ghazals and of other genres of poetry which were roughly jotted down in notebooks or on scraps of paper¹⁷.

Numerous fragments are also extant which correspond to the disciplines which are enumerated in the second division of the curriculum, e.g. exercises in Arabic calligraphy¹⁸ or epistolary style¹⁹ (in both cases the pupil has copied a model which was provided by the teacher), works on Arabic poetics²⁰, and fragments from works on Arabic grammar²¹.

Philosophy is well represented. The fragments of this category are mainly from works of the Baghdad Peripatetics or commentaries written by them on the Ar-

istotelian corpus. They also include Arabic translations of Greek commentaries on Aristotle²² and of various pseudo-Aristotelian works²³, and fragments of biographies of the philosophers²⁴.

There are several leaves from mathematical texts, most of them Arabic translations of Greek works²⁵, and from the closely allied disciplines of music²⁶ and astronomy²⁷. Finally, the last discipline in al-Fārābī's classification, theology, is represented by a few fragments of kalām texts²⁸.

3.0. MEDICAL TEXTS

A substantial number of the fragments in Arabic script are leaves from medical works. These found their way into the Genizah from the libraries of Jewish physicians²⁹. The majority of the texts relate to materia medica (description of drugs and treatment) and therapeutics (preparation of drugs and treatment). Also found are works of symptomology, especially ophthalmology and fevers, and a few works on surgical procedures such as phlebotomy and lancing. A great many of the texts are Arabic translations of the works of Hippocrates (especially the Aphorisms) and of Galen, or commentaries on these works³⁰. Among the most frequently occurring works of the Arabic mediaeval writers are the *Tadhkirat al-Kaḥḥālīn* of 'Alī ibn 'Īsā³¹, the *Qānūn* of Ibn Sīnā³², and the *Jāmi'* of Ibn al-Baitār³³.

4.0 MUSLIM LITERATURE

The Genizah contains numerous Arabic fragments of purely Muslim content. Several leaves of Qur'ān are preserved, including those of a tenth century copy written in Kufic script³⁴ and of one which opens with the *fātiḥa* and continues with the remaining sūras in reverse order, starting with sūra 114!³⁵ Of particular interest are a number of Muslim prayers and religious poems. These include a Fātimid prayer which extols God, the prophet, the wife of the prophet, the mother of Ḥasan and Ḥusein (i.e. Fātima), and the subsequent 'imāms³⁶. Also to be found are a number of fragments of ḥadīth or fiqh literature³⁷, and of Islamic mystical works³⁸. The existence of the mystical texts may be interpreted as a reflection of the fact that many of the Jewish pietists in mediaeval Egypt had sympathies for Sūfism and absorbed a great deal of its thought³⁹.

5.0 POPULAR LORE AND LITERATURE

The Genizah shows us that certain elements of the mediaeval Jewish community attempted to solve problems through various occult practices⁴⁰. Several fragments relating to these are written in Arabic script.

They include astrology texts, most of which are genethliological handbooks, horoscopes, or almanacs⁴¹, also geomancy manuals⁴², and various types of magical charms. Many of the charms belong to the field of paramedicine and frequently employ Qur'ānic verses in their formulation⁴³. One should include in this category the mediaeval Arabic block prints which are preserved in the Genizah. These are generally long strips of paper which contain extracts from the Qur'ān. No doubt they were originally rolled up and kept in some kind of amulet which was worn on the body⁴⁴.

The numerous fragments of Arabic fables and popular tales reflect the wide readership which this genre of literature enjoyed in the mediaeval Jewish communities of Arab lands. They include *Kalīla wa Dimna*, the Alexander Romance, and many others⁴⁵.

Finally there are several leaves of what appear to be mediaeval scrapbooks. These contain all manner of items which attracted the interest of the writer and which he hastily jotted down for future reference. Very often they are snippets of poetry (v. supra). Of especial interest is one leaf which contains a description of games together with several illustrations⁴⁶.

6.0 ARABIC BIBLE AND JEWISH LITURGICAL FRAGMENTS

The majority of Arabic translations of the Old Testament which are in the Genizah are written in Hebrew script. Only a few, both Sa'adiah's version and those of others, are in Arabic script⁴⁷. There is at least one Arabic Jewish liturgical fragment which is in Arabic script⁴⁸. This is apparently a rhyming *seliha* prayer.

As was previously mentioned, the Karaite sect had a predilection for Arabic script, even in their religious writings. This extended to transcribing Hebrew Bible texts and liturgical texts into Arabic characters. Although the Cairo Genizah was situated in a Rabbanite synagogue, it nevertheless contains several fragments which emanate from the Karaite community. These include several Hebrew texts in Arabic transcription. Some of the Bible texts of this type also contain an Arabic commentary⁴⁹.

While the Arabic fragments in the Genizah may be considered to be qualitatively representative of the Arabic written material which circulated in the mediaeval Jewish community of Egypt, their quantitative proportion vis-à-vis the documents in Hebrew script very likely does not correspond to that which originally obtained. This is because, as was explained above, fragments in Arabic characters found their way into the Genizah by accident and not by design. In addition to studying the surviving fragments themselves, we may ascertain what kind of Arabic literature was in the possession of members of the Jewish community

through references in many Genizah documents, especially in booklists or inventories of belongings⁵⁰. It should also be noted that several Muslim works and a large number of Arabic texts of science, philosophy, and popular lore were transcribed into Hebrew characters for the convenience of Jewish readers who were more at home in the Hebrew script. Even a leaf from the Qur'ān in Hebrew characters has been found⁵¹.

The Genizah is a rich source for many areas of Arabic studies, but so far the Arabic papers have remained generally neglected. The reasons for this probably include the fact that they constitute a relatively small proportion of the total collection, and also that many of them are difficult to decipher. Perhaps one of the major reasons, however, is the lack of awareness of their existence on the part of many Arabists. It has been the aim of this paper to go some way towards rectifying this situation⁵².

NOTES

¹ For the story of the discovery of the Cairo Genizah and of the acquisition of its contents by the Cambridge University Library cf. S. C. REIF, *A Guide to the Taylor-Schechter Genizah Collection*, Cambridge University Library, 1973 (reprinted 1979) and Goitein, S. D., *A Mediterranean Society*, vol. I, Berkeley, California, 1967, pp. 1-6.

The Cambridge Genizah collections include the Taylor-Schechter collection (by far the largest, donated to the University by Charles Taylor and Solomon Schechter in 1898: fragments in this collection carry the classmark T-S), a number of fragments which were acquired separately (these were assigned classmarks in the Or. 1080-1081 and the Add. series), and the private collection of I. Abrahams (classified in the Or. series).

² Containing a mixture of Classical and Middle Arabic elements in various proportions.

³ Some of these are in pure Classical Arabic (e.g. the literary texts) others contain various admixtures of Middle Arabic features.

⁴ Cf. GOITEIN, *ibid.*, p. 14.

⁵ Cf. GOITEIN, *ibid.*, p. 398ff., and *A Mediterranean Society*, vol. IV, p. 39ff.

⁶ T-S Ar. 41.105.

⁷ A good example is T-S Ar. 51.107, which was published by S. M. Stern, 'Three Petitions of the Fāṭimid Period', *Oriens* 15 (1962), pp. 172-209. For a petition to al-Mustansir see the illustration of T-S Ar. 42.158. I am grateful to the Syndics of Cambridge University Library for granting me permission to publish photographs of fragments in the Taylor-Schechter collection.

⁸ Most of these only survive in fragments. As far as I am aware, the only manuscript to contain the complete text of a decree is T-S Ar. 40.37. An edition of this text together with a historical and diplomatic analysis is to be published in a forthcoming issue of *BSOAS*. Note also that the writer is editing the most important of the Arabic documents in the form of a corpus.

⁹ Cf. GOITEIN, *Med. Soc.* vol. II, p. 346.

¹⁰ For the predilection of the Karaites for Arabic script cf. BLAU, J., *The Emergence and Linguistic Background of Judaeo-Arabic*, Jerusalem, 1981 (second edition), pp. 38-44, 226; id., 'R. Nissim's Book of Comfort and the Problem of Script in Judaeo-Arabic Manuscripts', *JQR N.S.* 67 (1976), pp. 185-194, and Ben-Shammai, H., 'Hebrew in Arabic Script — Qirqisānī's view' in Brunswick, S. R. (ed.), *Studies in Judaica, Karaitica and Islamica. Presented to L. Nemoy*, Ramat-Gan, 1982, pp. 115-126.

¹¹ T-S Ar. 38.118.

¹² Cf. GOITEIN, *Med. Soc.* vol. II, p. 172.

¹³ T-S Ar. 42.124. See illustration.

¹⁴ T-S Ar. 42.14.

¹⁵ T-S AS 184.196.

¹⁶ T-S Ar. 41.86.

¹⁷ E.g. T-S Ar. 40.38, Ar. 40.204, Ar. 42.27, Ar. 42.34, Ar. 42.91, Ar. 42.155.

¹⁸ T-S Ar. 42.3.

¹⁹ T-S Ar. 42.78.

²⁰ E.g. T-S Ar. 42.8 and Ar. 42.82.

²¹ E.g. T-S Ar. 41.74. NS 305.57.

²² E.g. T-S Ar. 41.20 (Alexander of Aphrodisias' commentary on Aristotle's *Physica*).

²³ E.g. T-S Ar. 40.143 (Excerpts from Pseudo-Aristotle's *Theology* by Alexander of Aphrodisias); Ar. 41.41 (Pseudo-Aristotle's *De Plantis*, paraphrased by Nicolaus of Damascus — a leaf from the binding of this work bears the signature of Moses Maimonides, which indicates that it was his own copy).

²⁴ E.g. T-S Ar. 42.15, a fragment of the biography of Aristotle which is contained in al-Mubashshir ibn Fātik's *Mukhtār al-Hikam* (the text diverges slightly from that which was published by Badawi, Madrid, 1958).

²⁵ E.g. T-S Ar. 38.72 (The *Arithmetica* of Diophantus), Ar. 42.114 (Euclid).

²⁶ E.g. T-S Ar. 41.23.

²⁷ E.g. T-S Ar. 40.156.

²⁸ E.g. T-S Ar. 42.36.

²⁹ A catalogue of all the medical fragments in the Cambridge Genizah collections, both in Arabic and in Hebrew script, is being prepared by Dr. P. Johnstone and Dr. H. Isaacs. I am indebted to their work for several of the following references.

³⁰ Hippocrates, *Aphorisms*: — e.g. T-S Ar. 39.203, Ar. 39.227, Ar. 40.108, Ar. 40.109, Ar. 40.131, Ar. 41.3, Ar. 42.9, Ar. 42.10; *Taqdimat al-ma'rifa*: — T-S Ar. 40.19; Galen, *Ayyām al-buhrān*: — T-S Ar. 40.123; *Kitāb al-'aghdhiya*: — T-S Ar. 41.7.

³¹ E.g. T-S Ar. 38.104, Ar. 40.41, Ar. 40.61, Ar. 40.69, Ar. 40.145, Ar. 40.172, Ar. 40.193, Ar. 42.26, Ar. 42.39, Ar. 42.144.

³² E.g. T-S Ar. 40.146, Ar. 40.169, Ar. 42.175.

³³ E.g. T-S Ar. 39.51, Ar. 41.130, Ar. 41.133, Ar. 41.138.

³⁴ T-S Ar. 40.177 (sūra 2/172-184, 236-248).

³⁵ T-S Ar. 41.84. A possible explanation for this unusual feature is that this text was originally the possession of practitioners of Jewish magic. Other Genizah texts show that extracts from the Qur'ān were often included in Jewish amulets and charms (see S. Shaked, 'On Jewish Magical Literature in Islamic Lands', *Pe'amim* 15 (1983), pp. 15-28 (in Hebrew)). Perhaps the Qur'ānic text was considered to have greater magical power if it was written backwards.

³⁶ T-S Ar. 42.191; cf. also T-S Ar. 40.95 (a poetic eulogy of the prophet), and Ar. 42.83 (a prayer which addresses God by his 'beautiful names').

³⁷ E.g. T-S Ar. 40.27 (Hadīth); Ar. 42.2 (gnomic sayings of the *tābi'ūn*); Ar. 42.17 (*fiqh*).

³⁸ E.g. T-S Ar. 41.1 (collection of sayings of the Sufi masters and exchange of letters between al-Nūrī and Junaid).

³⁹ Cf. P. FENTON, *The Treatise of the Pool*, London, 1981.

⁴⁰ Cf. S. SHAKED, *ibid.*

⁴¹ Genethliological handbooks: — e.g. T-S Ar. 38.105, Ar. 38.107, Ar. 40.165, Ar. 40.166, Ar. 40.182, Ar. 42.125. Many of the horoscopes and almanacs have been published by Goldstein and Pingree (*Journal of Near Eastern Studies*, 36 (1977), pp. 113-144; *ibid.* 38, pp. 153-175, 231-256).

⁴² E.g. T-S Ar. 40.134.

⁴³ E.g. T-S Ar. 40.140, Ar. 42.46.

⁴⁴ E.g. T-S Ar. 38.135, Ar. 41.102. For references in the Genizah papers to amulets which contained a script with a magic formula, cf. Goitein, *Med. Soc.* vol. IV, p. 218.

⁴⁵ *Kalīla wa Dimna*: — T-S Ar. 40.9, Ar. 51.60 (illustrated); Alexander Romance: — T-S Ar. 50.204.

⁴⁶ T-S Ar. 42.138.

⁴⁷ E.g. T-S Ar. 40.20, Ar. 41.122, Ar. 42.41, Ar. 42.148.

⁴⁸ T-S Ar. 42.48.

⁴⁹ E.g. T-S Ar. 41.132, Ar. 42.72, Ar. 52.172, Ar. 52.242.

⁵⁰ E.g. ENA 1822, 46, an inventory of a coppersmith's personal belongings (translated by Goitein in *Med. Soc.* vol. IV, p. 339), which includes 'a book of poetry in Arabic characters'.

⁵¹ T-S Ar. 51.62. The reverse of this leaf contains a section from a handbook for the telling of fortunes through examination of facial features. This strongly suggests that the Qur'ānic text also emanated from popular occult circles. For the use of verses from the Qur'ān in magical charms v. supra p. 59.

⁵² Mention has not been made of the numerous late (17th-19th century) Arabic manuscript fragments which are mingled with the mediaeval fragments in several of the binders of the Or. 1080 - Or. 1081 series (especially Or. 1080.14, Or. 1081.1-2). These are largely theological and 'adab texts. They have been omitted from the foregoing survey since there is considerable doubt as to whether they came from the Genizah.