'Go to the house of the English': 19th-century Genizah merchants

By Esther-Miriam Wagner

The Cairo Genizah did not see a steady influx of material during its history. For documents in particular the greatest number were discarded into the Ben Ezra synagogue during the medieval period, from the 10th-13th centuries. Very little material was deposited during the 14th-17th centuries, but then there was another surge of letters and legal documents in the 18th and 19th centuries. Among these is a significant amount of letters written by Jewish traders in Judaeo-Arabic.

Because they come from such a late period, these Judaeo-Arabic letters have so far been largely neglected by Genizah scholars, who are on the whole more interested in medieval Egypt. The only available editions of any Late Judaeo-Arabic correspondence are two letters published by Geoffrey Khan (1991 and 2006). The Genizah Collections however contain hundreds of letters, and Geoffrey and I are currently working on an edition of dozens of such mercantile letters, hopefully to be published in 2016.

The letters provide great insights into the Jewish mercantile networks of the late 18th and early 19th centuries, and they are a true treasure trove for Arabists. The reason why traders' correspondence is so interesting for linguists is that traders often form a community of writers that is very clearly distinguished from other groups, such as the scribes who pen official correspondence. Traders often do not follow the conservative standards of the chanceries but act as trendsetters for new language forms. This includes for example using many more colloquialisms and bilingual forms than their scribal colleagues would dare to. One of the reasons for this is that traders from all periods encounter particular circumstances in the act of writing, as they typically have to react quickly to business matters and compose a large number of letters. In our Genizah correspondence this is explicitly stated: ‘Forgive the haste, the messenger is
waiting.’; ‘I will make this short so that the letter can leave with the next ship’, ‘please excuse my hand and the bad writing because I am in haste’. This leads to very immediate acts of writing and usually to texts that are not as formulaically restricted as other documents, but altogether more naturalistic. They are also in wider contact with people from other parts of the world, speakers of different languages and dialects, and are thus much more exposed to language contact and levelling. In addition, traders have the desire, and the self-confidence as a distinct and often important social group to develop their own registers, not only in speech but also in writing.

The letter featured here is one of the many Late-Judaeo-Arabic commercial letters that we intend to include in our forthcoming edition. It is a fragment from the Lewis-Gibson Collection (formerly the Westminster Collection, now jointly owned by the Bodleian and Cambridge University Library) with the classmark L-G Misc. 24. A mercantile letter, mainly concerned with business instructions concerning consignments of money, it was sent in 1825 CE by a certain Pinto Vasuvares (although the exact representation of the name is not entirely clear) to Elijah Saʿd and Jacob Šalom, all known merchants from our letter corpus.

Within our corpus there is an astonishing range of linguistic variety among the letters. Some are written in an extremely colloquial style, and the writers betray little familiarity with Classical Judaeo-Arabic or Arabic writing conventions. Others are written in a very classical style. When the writers use colloquial forms, this does not necessarily betray poor education on the part of the writers; colloquial forms are also used to express intimacy with the addressee of a letter. Within the spectrum from very colloquial to very classical, the letter under investigation here leans more towards the side of colloquial letters.
Very obvious features are the plene spelling of vowels, double spelling of the ֶוָֽו waw and yod as well as dialectal vocalism, such as אֵשׁ ‘I bought’ (l. 20) and ‘first’ (l. 23). There is generally variation in the vowels, for example תְּקָדְמוּ (l.18) and נָקַדְמוּ (l. 23). Final short and long /a/ may be written with ā and ŏ, such as יָעָל ‘she’ (l. 18) or אִיתָקַצְּרָה ‘it was made up’ (l. 24), or we find the ending -t outside of the construct state, such as in אַל חוֹאָל (l. 9). The demonstrative element āḏā may be spelled with ḫ in אֶזֶר ‘this’ (l. 14), although the Classical Judaeo-Arabic spelling of /ḏ/ with ָד is retained in the Classical form דְּאֶלְךָ ‘that’ (l. 4), but we also find colloquial di in דְּיָלֵכְנָו ‘these lines’ (l. 3). Similarly, the Classical Arabic connective īḏā is spelled ָז. Hybrid pronoun forms show a mixture between Classical Arabic naḥnu and dialectal iḥna in (l. 15). Colloquial bi-imperfect forms occur frequently, such as בְּנַסְתַּאֵר גנָא ‘we hope’ (l. 5). The negation particles may merge with the negated verb in the spelling, for example in מַעֲרִיסָּה ‘we do not know’ (l. 15), and the negation particle lam has become a main negator, as we know from many other Late Judaeo-Arabic documents.

In addition to the spelling, morphology and syntax, the lexicon of the late letters can be difficult to understand as some words are only ever used in this particular traders’ register, and do not appear in dictionaries, for example חוכם, which appears to indicate ‘concerning’. Hebrew words, such as אֵשׁ ‘yesterday’ and יָיִן ‘today’ are used as well as coded expression and abbreviations, such as 'וֹי.
This passage in ll. 8-9 deserves mention because it connects to the final resting place of the largest part of the Genizah:

‘go to the traveller who supports us in this money order, we talked with him that he should ask them (to come) to the House of the English’

English and French traders are frequently mentioned in the letters, in addition to military skirmishes between the two countries.

Beyond providing an important glimpse into a complicated and compelling linguistic milieu, we hope that our work on the Late Judaeo-Arabic traders letters will open up new vistas in the field of Ottoman economic and social history, and add attention to the remarkable historical resource that the Genizah presents throughout the ages.

Bibliography:


Contact us: genizah@lib.cam.ac.uk
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