Nineteenth-Century Mercantile Correspondence in the Rylands Genizah Collection

1. Introduction

The John Rylands Library’s Genizah Collection shares one particular feature with other Genizah collections, such as the Alliance Israélite Universelle Collections (AIU) and the Mosseri Collection currently housed in Cambridge, that sets them apart from the Taylor-Schechter Genizah Collections in Cambridge: there is a wealth of material from the eighteenth and nineteenth century. Letters written in a mercantile context seem especially to be in overabundance: a quick survey of the materials on the Manchester websites reveals the bounty of Late Judaeo-Arabic1 (i.e., from the seventeenth to nineteenth century) epistolary material that is available. This phenomenon was already pointed out by Khan who stated that the Manchester collection contains ‘conspicuously large proportion of this late corpus in relation to the overall size of these collections’.2

1 We are using the term Judaeo-Arabic in this article to designate Arabic written in Hebrew script, as suggested by Khan: G. Khan, ‘Judaeo-Arabic’, Encyclopedia of Arabic Language and Linguistics II (2007), 526–536.

In comparison, the Manchester Rylands Cairo Genizah Collection appears to be lacking in an area where the Taylor-Schechter Collections contain a vast number of sources – letters and documents pertaining to medieval trade correspondence. Moshe Gil\textsuperscript{3} published four volumes of 11\textsuperscript{th}-century mercantile letters containing more than a thousand letters, and there are still hundreds more surviving exemplars that are not contained in those volumes. Yet, the volumes feature only two examples from the Manchester collection, which, considering that Manchester holds about a thirtieth of the entire Genizah material, shows that medieval documents are rather underrepresented; this is further corroborated by cursory research on the online Rylands Genizah Catalogue.

This is particularly interesting as the deposition history of the Genizah is patchy, and material is not evenly distributed throughout its period of use. At particular times, much larger amounts of material was deposited than at other times. If we look only at documents, which have the advantage that they are clearly datable, we can see that the bulk of the material comes from the tenth to thirteenth century (with particular deposition spikes in the eleventh and twelfth century), much fewer fragments from the fourteenth to seventeenth century, and then again a few more documents preserved from the seventeenth/eighteenth to nineteenth century.

Why the Manchester and other collections have a larger proportion of later material is still unclear. Some of the fragments may have been taken from the top of the Genizah chamber in the early stages when the chamber was being emptied and thus only contained its latest deposits. Material from other archives or Genizot may have become mingled with the Ben Ezra Genizah sources, although there are many links that prove the connections between the late mercantile correspondence of the Manchester and other Genizah Collections. To mention

\textsuperscript{3} M. Gil, \textit{In the Kingdom of Ishmael} (4 vols, Jerusalem 1997) [in Hebrew].
just a few examples: Some letters have the same recipients, such as Rylands Genizah Collection L 192, AIU VIII 134 and T-S 10J13.29; The sender of Rylands Genizah Collection L 205, David b. Na‘īm, is the recipient of CUL Or. 1080.4.40 and AIU VIII 124; Rylands Genizah Collection A 701 and T-S 10J13.27 are sent to the same addressee, and so were Rylands Genizah Collection A 803 and CUL Or. 1080.4.48. This shows that many of the letters came from the same network of merchants and probably the same personal archives, which were eventually deposited into the Genizah and other places.

2. The Genizah of the Early Modern period

When we look at particular languages used in the Genizah, the material concerned is usually concentrated in particular time periods: Coptic comes only from the beginning of the Genizah, Ladino appears in later material. When we view Judaeo-Arabic, the bulk of material comes from the eleventh to thirteenth century, and fewer sources from the fourteenth to seventeenth century, but then we find another surge of Judaeo-Arabic letters again towards the end of the eighteenth/beginning of the nineteenth century. This sudden re-emergence and perhaps re-appreciation of Judaeo-Arabic can perhaps be put in a wider context of the codification of vernacular languages. In the seventeenth century in the Ottoman Empire, various ethnic groups suddenly start writing their languages down. We also see the emergence of vernacular written languages, such as renewed forms of Aramaic and Armenian, as well as the vernacularisation of other written languages, including Turkish and other languages. Prejudices prohibiting the codification of spoken dialects appear to dissolve
at the time, probably with one or more languages setting precedents for others. The late surge of Judaeo-Arabic material is perhaps a consequence of that.⁴

Because the bulk of the Genizah material comes from the medieval period, the large majority of Genizah scholars work on materials emanating from the tenth to thirteenth centuries. The founding father of the field, Shelomo Goitein, focused on medieval studies, and until recently the large majority of scholars focused mainly on materials that were already part of Goitein’s oeuvre. The later material was often paid little attention and even treated with less respect. This sort of neglect is not unique to Genizah studies: in many disciplines, less attention has been traditionally paid to the study of later periods, as is a common lament of Coptic Studies within Egyptology, or Ottoman Arabic Studies within Arabistics, where post-medieval sources were traditionally viewed as corrupted.

As a consequence of this lack of study, little comparative material has been made available, and very often material from the Early Modern period is described uniformly as ‘seventeenth century’ in older catalogues, articles or books. A good example is Goitein’s edition of the narrative ‘Townsman and fellah’, which he describes as a seventeenth-century text.⁵ When, however, the handwriting of the manuscript he worked on is compared, for example, to the late period mercantile letters in the Manchester Collections, it becomes clear that the text is much more likely from the eighteenth or nineteenth century. In the Genizah catalogues by

⁴ A discussion about this was for example raised by Geoffrey Khan at the ‘Ottoman Arabic’ conference at the University of Cambridge in April 2016, and has been examined in other oral presentations, such as Alessandro Mengozzi’s talk ‘Why is there no Middle Syriac?’ at the AIMA V conference in Strasbourg in March 2017. A discussion of this topic will feature as a chapter in the forthcoming Handbook and Reader of Ottoman Arabic, edited by Esther-Miriam Wagner.

Hurwitz on the former Westminster College Collection (now Lewis-Gibson Collection within Cambridge University Library), and to a degree also in the catalogue on the Mosseri Collection, any description of a Judaeo-Arabic text which includes a vague dating of ‘seventeenth century’ has to be treated with caution, as it is a general label often used from any vaguely post-fifteenth century fragments, and in a few cases has been applied to manuscripts that can clearly be dated to the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

3. Linguistic phenomena in the letters

The language employed in the mercantile correspondence from the Cairo Genizah presents immensely valuable material for research on Arabic language history, dialectology, and sociolinguistics. Letters in general are of particular interest for linguistic studies as they can be precisely dated, are typically of single authorship, and do not undergo further processes of copying and editing, something that makes work on literary texts more difficult. In a historical linguistics context, they thus present some of the ‘purest’ and most reliable sources for research on historical linguistics.

In the Judaeo-Arabic letters of the Early Modern period extant in the Genizah, there is also a proximity to the vernacular found in few other Arabic sources, which makes them particularly useful sources from a linguistic point of view. This closeness to the spoken language may be due in large part to the fact that the letters were written by traders. Traders are special as they write in particular circumstances – typically they compose their

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7 Mosseri Collection, *Catalogue of the Jacques Mosseri Collection* (Jerusalem1990) [in Hebrew].
correspondence in down-to-earth tone and very quickly, with no time to think about fanciful phrases or compose a letter with great stylistic care. They have to produce many duplicate copies to be sent in different ships to ensure safe arrival. A particularly useful sociolinguistic trigger for the employment of non-literary phrases is anger, which we frequently encounter in our writers’ disappointment about missed business opportunities and lack of proper book keeping.

This very specific form of literacy found in the context of business writing has been coined ‘pragmatic literacy’ by Parkes. This pragmatic literacy is a result of the circumstances of education and the purpose of the correspondence. Other aspects associated with traders include mobility, contact with people from faraway lands, and with other social groups in the country (such as members of other religions). These open linguistic networks mean progressive language forms and linguistic levelling. These factors when taken together make traders’ writings very worthy subjects of linguistic study.

The unusual linguistic phenomena found in Late Judaeo-Arabic and in particular in mercantile letters have been extensively described in series of articles by Geoffrey Khan.

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9 The role of the Middle Class, and in particular traders, in the course of emergence of vernacular languages has been explored in an edited book by Wagner, Beinhoff and Outhwaite: E. M. Wagner, B. Beinhoff and B. Outhwaite (eds.), Merchants of innovation. The languages of traders (Berlin 2017).

with the last article focussing on a fragment (Rylands Genizah Collection L 192) from the Manchester Rylands Genizah Collection. Further discussions of particular Late Judaeo-Arabic features can be found in recent publications by E.-M. Wagner. Typical features identified by these studies are also present in the letters below, including, for example: the shortening of long final [a] and subsequent spelling with ṣ; reflections of the raising of [a] vowels and other dialectal vocalisms; taḵḏīm (velarisation) and tarqīq (de-velarisation) of consonants; non-standard personal pronouns and suffixes; the common occurrence of bi-imperfect forms; t-infix in numerals 11-19; inclusion of vernacular vocabulary, such as halbatt ‘probably, necessarily’ or bitā’ ‘belonging to’.

One of the most intriguing features about the letters is the mixing of high standard literary forms with vernacular forms, which creates a unique register, as described by Wagner. For example, instead of using vernacular equivalents from speech, the traders employ a number of distinctly literary forms, such as the Classical Arabic relative pronoun ‘allagī (‘äldi) and the negation particle lam. The particle lam is in prescriptive Arabic grammar regulated by a strict set of rules: it can only negate past actions and must be followed by a certain mood (the

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11 Khan, ‘Judaeo-Arabic Document from Ottoman Egypt’.


13 Wagner, ‘Challenges of Multiglossia’.
apocopate). In the late letters at hand, however, it becomes the main negation.\footnote{This penchant for *lam* seems to be part of a larger trend within Arabic writing traditions, including Christian and Muslim works. For Christian mercantile letters from the 18th century, cf. E.-M. Wagner and M. Ahmed, ‘From Tuscany to Egypt: 18th-c. Arabic letters in the Prize Paper Collections’. *Journal of Semitic Studies* 62/2 (2017), 396–398.} In contrast to these high literary forms, the authors also employ a number of colloquial forms, such as the *bi*-imperfect, dialectal pronominal suffixes, and expressions and sayings from the vernacular language. Wagner argues that this gives the mercantile letters the ‘authenticity and intimacy necessary to reduce the distance that the act of letter writing inevitably engenders’\footnote{Wagner, ‘Challenges of Multiglossia’, 274.}, which in an economy based in trust is a crucial socio-linguistic feature.

4. Editions of letters from Manchester

The letters presented in the following were written between some of the more well-known traders of the mercantile network that left their correspondence to posterity in the Cairo Genizah. They deal with trading, which as we know from other correspondence mainly involved goods such as coffee, spices and textiles as well as currency exchange, but also with personal matters and inquiries about the wellbeing of family members, as in Rylands Genizah Collection L 205, written in the crisis year 1824.\footnote{In 1824, Egypt was rocked by rural revolts and peasant rebellions.} Much of the letters are filled with asking for and relaying prices for goods and with the rates for exchanging money. They provide valuable insights into Mediterranean and Middle Eastern trade in the 1820s, and make
reference to historical circumstances. They thus contribute to our understanding of ‘history from below’, i.e., how ordinary citizens experienced life in the past.

The texts are not as easy a read as many medieval Genizah letters. The handwriting is very different from medieval Judaeo-Arabic and often more ambiguous. They contain interesting (read: difficult to decipher) vernacular phonological and morphological phenomena, and there are a number of unusual abbreviations both of Arabic and Hebrew words and phrases. Often the content is vague; the writers and addressees frequently exchanged post, and knew exactly what they are talking about without the need to describe all details, leading to the omission of information vital to the understanding of a letter. They can thus be difficult to follow, which may have served a purpose – we know from other mercantile post that traders are often secretive or deliberately ambiguous about certain matters, probably to protect trade secrets in case a letter falls into the wrong hands.

Yet, some of the difficulties are now increasingly alleviated by comparison with increasing research on other contemporary letter collections such as Arabic Prize Papers, sent by Christian merchants between Italy and Egypt in the eighteenth century,¹⁷ and the correspondence of Levant traders in Egypt extant in the Gotha Research Library (editions of these letters are currently being prepared by Boris Liebrenz).

Three letters from the Manchester Collections are edited in the following. All letters have been transcribed in Hebrew script. To enable comparison with other contemporary texts and to allow access to Arabists not familiar with the Hebrew script, we have also transcoded the

¹⁷ Cf. Wagner and Ahmed, ‘From Tuscany to Egypt’.
letters into Arabic. This follows to some degree the methodology used by Diem\(^{18}\) (see also the description on page 4), although we separated the article in the Arabic script if separated in the Hebrew script, too, as not all Judaeo-Arabic texts show this phenomenon. A translation is provided following the transcription, with a short commentary to each letter.

As comprehensive linguistic descriptions of the nineteenth-century mercantile correspondence have been provided by Khan,\(^ {19}\) which cover most of the features found in the letters below, we will focus in our commentaries on phenomena particular to the specific letters, with additional explanations to help in the understanding of the letters.

### 4.1. Rylands Genizah Collection A 803

#### 4.1.1. Transcription

1. בֵּאָה
2. בָּיוֹם יַחְתָּלָה שָנָה שְׁנֵי שְׁשָׁר
3. כָּה אַל פֶּי עַקְּבְּ יַעֲבִי נָר וּיָאֵר אֲבוֹרָה
4. אָהֶו'ַ מֵבָּנָה מִי מְדַוָּל עָלֶיהוּ מְנַּרְפָּאָה בָּאָרַי בְּאֵת אֲתָמְשָּל בְּשָׁמָאָאוּ מִנְּטָפָתָא אֶלֶף יִשָּׁשָּלְיֶר מְרָפָתָא וּבְאַרְּיָא
5. עָלָה יַעֲבִי נַלְעָרָה בָּיְתָא אַבָּכָה עָלֶיהוּ מְנַּרְפָּאָה בְּאֹלָמ אֶלֶף יִשָּׁשָּלְיֶר מְרָפָתָא וּבְאַרְּיָא
6. כָּאַן אַרְגַּדַּי חַפַּדְיָא דַּהֵרַשׁ עָלֶיהוּ מִן הָאֶדָאָא בְּאָלֶף יִשָּׁשָּלְיֶר מְלָאָא זָה אֲבָל מִי יִצָּרַדָה מַי הַלִּי אֲלֵי שָׁמָאָא שָׁבְרַכַּוַּו אֲלֵי בָּרְכָה
7. פָּרֶק הַפֶּדַי דַּהֵרַשׁ עָלֶיהוּ מַי הָאֶדָאָא בְּאָלֶף יִשָּׁשָּלְיֶר מְלָאָא זָה אֲבָל מַי הַלִּי אֲלֵי שָׁמָאָא שָׁבְרַכַּו אֲלֵי בָּרְכָה
8. עָלֶיהוּ מְרָפָתָא מַי הָאֶדָאָא בְּאָלֶף יִשָּׁשָּלְיֶר מְלָאָא זָה אֲבָל מַי הַלִּי אֲלֵי שָׁמָאָא שָׁבְרַכַּו אֲלֵי בָּרְכָה

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4.1.2. Arabic transcription

1. بِعَنْه

2. بِعْمَةٍ ٢٨ لَهَا رَبُّ شَغْث٥۴۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸
With the help of God. (2) On the 28th Sivan of the Year 5585 of Creation (= 1825 CE). (3) To our beloved, the master Jacob Yabets, may God protect and preserve him, enlightened by God. (4) After inquiring about his health, and after (extending) many greetings to you, we let you know that yesterday, Mr Joseph Ayllon came to our area, and he informed us (5) about the punishment of your brother, dead because of (our) sins. God, may his name be blessed, knows that (this) was difficult to bear for us because (6) he was a pious and saintly man as all people depicted him. Yet, there is nothing we can do. God, his name be blessed, may give you patience. It is for you (7) and his children to fill his place. Then we also inform you that previously we wrote to you and informed you that Mr Bogush asked (8) about you and we told him that you are traveling to see your children. Yesterday he asked about you whether you came (back) or not. We said to him: Next (9) Friday he will come in good health. We tell you just as anyone other than us would tell you on our behalf. Do not blame it on us. You should know (10) this. With the help of God, (there will be an) answer to (this) letter. You should come to our area according to what you told the agent (11) and the supervisor. I have nothing to add except the best of greetings. The young man (12) Nissim Sabbāḥ, (13) a good Sefardi.

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21 For the Ladino spelling of the name, see: https://he.wikipedia.org/wiki/%D7%A9%D7%9C%D7%9E%D7%94_%D7%90%D7%90%D7%99%D7%9C%D7%99%D7%95%D7%9F.


23 Literal: This should be to your honourable knowledge.
4.1.4. Commentary

The code-switching between Hebrew and Arabic in this letter differs markedly from what can be observed in medieval letters. In fact, code-switching of temporal adverbs, such as *etmol* ‘yesterday’, is not normally found in medieval Judaeo-Arabic letters but a much more common occurrence in Yiddish and Ladino letters.²⁴ Medieval mercantile letters in particular avoid code-switching,²⁵ whereas the Early Modern traders frequently switch into Hebrew. Similarly words such as *nifṭar* ‘deceased’ are not normally used in Classical Judaeo-Arabic code-switches, whereas it is a commonly used loanword in Yiddish. It could be argued that the change in style and also frequency of mercantile code-switching observed between medieval Judaeo-Arabic and Early Modern Judaeo Arabic, in particular in the letter at hand, was influenced by language patterns from Yiddish and Ladino through traders from European and Asia Minor.

Line 1

בע''ה – בעזרת השם ‘in the name of God’

Line 2

לח – לחודש ‘in the month’

Line 3

אה – אהובנו ‘our beloved’


²⁵ Cf. Wagner and Connolly, ‘Code-Switching In Judaeo-Arabic’.
may God protect and preserve him’

‘After inquiring about your (lit. his) health’

Classical Judaeo-Arabic جآ, Classical Arabic جآ ‘he came’

difficult to bear’.

The vocalisation here may reflect what Rosenbaum’s describes as preference of u over Standard dialect i in Modern Jewish Egyptian Arabic, which would point out the speaker’s Jewish heritage and minority status to any listener.

The pointing in this letter and the other letters below is somewhat random. Some of the going back to Classical Arabic ج have dots underneath, as here, others do not, for example ‘he will come’ in line 9. Yet, also Classical Arabic غ may receive the dot, as in ‘others than us’, also in line 9. The same irregularity can be found in various letters regarding the pointing on ْك to distinguish between [k] and [b] on the one hand, and [k] and [k] on the other.

The use of this Aramaic form again is somewhat unusual for Judaeo-Arabic letters. Yet it is commonly used in Yiddish, as mentioned by Khan.

‘its (the letter’s) time, i.e. today’


The dialectal term *walla + lā* ‘or not’.

The double spelling of ו here as well as the double spelling of י in ‘he will come’ in line 9 are not consistent throughout the letter, and may show a preference of double spelling if ו is followed by short [u], and י by [i].

### 4.2. Rylands Genizah Collection L 205

#### 4.2.1. Transcription

1. ...סומע עשת 6 תודיש פורי ש’ קפד
2. ...ואל ויהי יוק ומכם כמעה משא נני יִצָ' הוֹר
3. ...אתושי בעם דמים אלשהוק אלא משההדרי נור והמביסי אל טעמיモノ ואלפרפש א
4. ...צווי באפאיך יארפאלאו ליכם גומלת מק’ בעה יליבס בשתפלע תעלום
5. ...ותקרוהם אנהו ביל ותרצוי אלא גווחת צורתא לאלן אל שאמאל אל כאמפי גילא
6. ...נטל זרו צו רצוי יתלב מק’ שחי לאו הרמה פרורא ואל נמיי טישו’ ידליאל
7. ...טלבל צלויא א’למעד יזעילו מזריזו וואל בתיה כל חאודך באסמך והتدخلא
8. ...עלוים גור動作 הטענניא עלא אבלכלأل גנס🏻 מטמטנה שב אללאכה הב
9. ...גאבר טוביאיבו ומפאלה גננה טייטיב נבר ודליאל אל ביבי הבכי והל
10. ...בוקח פיה גנסו באב וארוקית אל דניאกา פי כל כים מסמטאה איתרי לא טמאא
11. ...פי כלת נן קלבנא עיליס מק’ אלא מס PhpStormי אלריבידרנם מטרפש פא כמא
12. ...תפועה טענניא יהילו והזרכה להנניאו גורנה צול טבי לו מויי לא ראי פירפרפש
13. ...גנין דאול סאבקיו הא’ר ליבס עטיא’ כים’ גאלא אלא ראסטאניiação עיליס טמנה
14. ...א텦זרכו פא כלאו מף ת nuova’ להנניאו מוב אלאלכה בעהלאמקו יריוציאולת הלע
17. התחבלו על פי המכתבים והבלד"ש אלא להגון דרבתון והולא ביתו והרבם

18.ㄡסרוריאו האברך ישראל והקהל אלא אל המקורר וסאמרו בקשב קבלל אל אומנינו

19.עליהם ו"דם אלא אברךcha האברך 살יחה דהוה ובריות דר"שם אלא יזדו

20.מעלא יהונתן דיבוטון ואהל ביתו ואברהם

22.אטורטיל ואברהם ישראל ותקול אלא אל המדוכרים יפתכרונא בכטין ולאגל אל אטמאנייה

23.מעלא משה כייאס ובנו יאודה כייאס ואהל ביתום ו"דם אלא יאודה אנריקא

25.כוהין ואהל ביתו ו"דם אלא אברהם שחאתיה

26.spiritואוריינן דהוה ואהל ביתו ו"דם אלא רחמים חסאן ואהל ביתו

27.וו"דם אלא נסים בראילי וגמעתו ותערפנא וצאעית איש והי"ו

28.םו ו"דם אלא משה גווילי ואהל ביתו ו"דם אלא דוד בוטון ד"ם

29.מעלא משה חסאן מן אומו ואוכתו ואבנו ומן ענדנה גמיע טייבין בכיר יבלגוכם

30.ורחל וכאמיל בית אל סי' גמיע טייבין בכיר יבלגוכם ו"דם

31.מרת כאלי מכת רחלה באן בנתהא

32.4.2.2. Arabic transcription

1.ת"ש אל אברך ידך ובנו והמכה כמוה פשה李某 ו"דם

2.אוהדך עד מרניד השכונ אל משיחית נור ויהורום אל סעיד הזני תירקוקיא

3.עזיין בן سابיך ארבאלא ליוכמ גומל מגל ב"ולו להודק מ"תנ וטלחיוו עליכם

4.ערכו והוו וזוה נינו ותורъемו אלי מתורא שבורע נגל עמל אזניא הנקלי

5.וعلا המהן גים אל ערצלJNI בו יתקורו ביטר ותלגו שמל ואלה אל ס"ד דני

6.ואהל פיות גלים עדין יאדו ותעטמנו עליכם לא סמעה

7. سمאות רפיה נטלוב מנ"ה ש"ה לא יבריהים פרירתו ולא גים ד"ה向きי
تبلغ سلامي علا الس
10. عليهوم وآبائه تطمئنا علا ال بلد لان ننسم سمعات ان شا الله تكون
11. اخبر طبيبيه وان ساترا عننا طبيبين بخير وكذالك ال بلد طبيبيه بخير ولم
12. بقاه في جنس سوء ابدن وراقيت ال دوني فب كله كون مستمأين غايبين ال طمان
13. في كله نحن قلنا علىكم من ال سمعات الذي بيخبرونا من طرفكم في ان كان
14. تعمرو تعملوا حبيله وتحضرو لعنذنا صورعه علا بين ما بروق ال حال في طرفكم
15. وغير ذلك سابق تا "حرر ليكم زئب" خطين لاجل ال اطمانيه عليكم وطماني
16. خاطركوم في كله من فضلمنا لم تنسونا من بالكم وتخالو مك" متصليه ولم
17. تبخلوا علا مكتانيه وتبتغ 4 "لا rútانتو درياتو واهل بيتو وأبراهيم
18. أزورتفل وآبراهيم شيرال وقول الا المدكوريين ينكرننا بخطين لأجلك لاطمانيه
19. عليهوم و4 "لا تشت" هوين واوينو وليلت هابريا واهل بيتو و4 "لا تشت" هوين واوينو
20. واهل بيتو و4 "لا تشت" هوين واوينو واهل بيتو و4 "لا تشت" هوين واوينو
21. واهل بيتو وعرفنا عنكم فعين موقم و4 "لا تشت" هوين واوينو واهل بيتو
22. واهل بيتو وعرفنا عنكم فين موقم و4 "لا تشت" هوين واوينو واهل بيتو
23. بيتهوم جميع و4 "لا تشت" هوين واوينو واهل بيتو و4 "لا تشت" هوين واوينو
24. أبودا واوينو وعمو و4 "لا تشت" هوين واوينو جميع الموحين جميع وتبلغ 3 "لا تشت
25. لشت لهالم من اووم واوينو واهل بيتو و4 "لا تشت" هوين واوينو جميع الموحين جميع وتبلغ
26. واهل بيتو و4 "لا تشت" هوين واوينو جميع الموحين جميع وتبلغ
27. مرت خالي مكتا رتال بن فستوتا واهل بيتو و4 "لا تشت" هوين واوينو جميع الموحين جميع وتبلغ
28. ولسعا قافلين في بولاق واما في بعد من ال ناس ففتح جموعت تا
29. واهل بيتو و4 "لا تشت" هوين واوينو جميع الموحين جميع وتبلغ
30. زود داليل
31. 5 "لا
Today, Friday 15 of the month Sivan of the year 184 (= 5584 of Creation = 1824 CE). (To) our beloved, my brother. (To) the hands of the dear, sage and wise Mr Moshe b. Na‘īm, may God protect and preserve him. (3) After inquiring about his health, (we express) the intensity of our longing to witness the light of your happy face, we let you know, oh (4) dear one that previously we sent to you all the letters, with the help of God (they arrived) to your hands safely. You should put your attentions to them (5) and read them, and you will be happy. You should return an answer quickly in order to reassure everyone about you (6) and about (our) beloved, all who live in your area. Give my greetings to Mr Daniel (7) and to his family all of them one by one, every single one by his name. You should reassure us about them because we heard (8) bad rumours. We ask God, blessed be his name, that he does not show neither them nor any of their relations (?) hardship. Also, (9) give my greetings to Mr Isaiah Muṣrī and his family everyone by his name, reassure us (10) about them. Also, reassure us about the town because we keep on hearing rumours. If God wills there (11) will be good news. And if you ask about us, we are doing very well. Also the town is doing very well.  May there (12) be nothing bad ever (happening) to it. The world (here) is pleasant in its entirety, be assured to the utmost (13) extent. We worry about you because of rumours which they have been telling us about your area. So if (14) you can find a way, come to us quickly until the situation in your area has calmed down. (15) Also, previously the leader (?) wrote to you a few lines in order to reassure you. Calm (16) your minds.  Please, don’t forget us in your thoughts. Keep the letters coming, (17) do not only rely on our letters (alone). Give best regards to Jonathan Di Boton and his family, and Abraham (18) Atortil and Abraham Israel, tell all those mentioned to remember to write in order to reassure (us) (19) about them. Greetings to Khayyās and to his son Judah Khayyās and to their families. Greetings to Judah Enrique (20) and his family. Greetings to Abraham Shaḥatiyya Kohen and his family. And Greetings to Raḥamim Ḥasan and his family. (21) Greetings to Nissim Bara’ili and his wife.
Inform us whether she has given birth to (a boy or a girl). Greetings to Shu‘a Israel (22) and his family. You should let us know about you, where you are staying. Greetings to Abraham Lineado, and his brother and their (23) families, all (of them). Greetings to Moshe Jawili and his family. Greetings to David Boton and greetings to (24) Abraham Suares and his father and paternal uncle. Greetings to all the beloved, all (of them). Give greetings to (25) Moshe Ḥasan from his mother and sister and his son. Everyone from here is very well and sends you (26) greetings. Rachel and the family of my master are all very well and send you greeting. You should let (27) the wife of my maternal uncle know about a letter from Rachel (telling us) that her daughter Lona and her children are very well. They are sending her greetings. (28) Right now (everything) is closed in Būlāq, but some people opened this Friday. (29) You need (to send) an extensive reply to reassure us about your (situation), quickly right away.


4.2.4. Commentary

This letter comes from within the mercantile network, and was sent between writers that feature prominently in the extant Late Judaeo-Arabic business correspondence in the Genizah Collections, but here the writer is more concerned with personal matters.28 An emergency situation prompted a lot of worry and fear for the addressees, who obviously are situated in an unsafe area, probably connected to the rural revolts and peasant rebellions in Egypt in 1824.29

28 The authors of this article are currently working with Professor Geoffrey Khan on an edition of about fifty Late Judaeo-Arabic letters. This forthcoming volume will contain at least eight letters sent within the Na‘īm family.

Throughout the letter, there are particular end-of-line jottings to adjust the end of slightly shorter lines.

Line 2

אל أخي – The article is here given to a noun already determined by a pronominal suffix, with a code-switch between the Arabic article and the Hebrew noun. This violates grammatical prescriptions for most varieties of Arabic, but there are other similar examples in our corpus. For example, T-S 10J16.30/line 9, and also lines 7-8, has ‘אל סידי אל מכדומי’, ‘the addressed master’. The [i]-ending in both cases seems to be more of an affectation expressing deference, rather than a proper pronominal suffix. Another possibility is to interpret the as Hebrew ‘to’, but this would leave the ‘our beloved’ stranded in the beginning of the sentence.

וכל "יהיו" – Normally, the first part צו by itself is ישמרה צורו ויחיהו’, ‘may God protect and preserve him’, and the second part "יהיו" means the same thing, only with the verbs inverted.

Line 5

وترוצו ‘you should return’. The root here is r-d-d ‘return’, with taḵīm of the [d] and plene spelling of the vowel.

Line 8

‘עיש – From the context, these must be an abbreviation indicating family, friend and loved ones. We hope to be able to clarify this through further work on the Late Judaeo-Arabic corpus.

Line 12

מסתמאין This has to be a tarqīq of a derived stem of the root tm‘n ‘reassure’.
We interpreted this as an abbreviation for Hebrew 'crown (of our heads)', which is similar to the dialectal Arabic تاج راسنا, designating a 'leader' but the reading is not certain; the syntax of the sentence is then a little unusual, with the subject of the verb harara 'he sent' following the object ליכם 'to you'. On the other hand, with a verb like harara we would expect a person of rank to be the agent.

We read this as an abbreviation for maktûb letter, as the same writer uses 'תכל' for makâtîb 'letters', but this is not a certain reading.

4.3. Rylands Genizah Collection A 701

4.3.1. Transcription

1. בעה ימ 22 רחמים שמת 1877

2. הה אל מת הח נעל

3. מעשהו בעדו מתי אל פלאים עליכם מחית אל

4. אשרו אתכם אלה כשכמים כאו מצותכם צוחב

5. עבד אל נאיבה אלarez פי חתירוהו אן כלפו

6. לחר מחלליו לחרཕ הממסה העשור פי רוחנה

7. לחר שהול launcher אל היוסמכ או לא נאיבתי פי כלל

8. ליחלב עליה שאר וכלף זכרת נוכם וקרדנה עליה

9. נת אל צעדי וכלף חולות ומצלמים פי לוחם
4.3.2. Arabic transcription

1. ב”תשתיו יום 22 זרימת שנה 1872
2. אד אלא והמשה ק’ חותמים היו
3. אתחילה:بعد מزيد السلام عليكم وكرمة ال
4. אחوات البيكم لا يخفكم بان وصلنا مكتوبكم صوحيت
5. عبد النبيه الخراط وفي بتعرفونا ان نخلسو
6. لهو من اللالملا kémخم وعشرين جروش وفي روحنا
7. لهو وقولنا لهو ان يرفعهم الال نبيه او قال
8. لنا لم عليه شاي وكل صارت عنكم وعقدنا عليه
9. مح’ الصعيدي وخلفو ثلاثه موصلمين في لازيم
10. תשלחו عبد النبيه الخراط في أوجرت في...
11. אל اذا نتشلوم بقال خير وשלום
12. תשלחו עבד אל נאתי אל.CurrentRow לא
13. הצעיר
14. רהמתי
15. אבויד
16. ס"ת
4.3.3. **Translation**

(1) With the help of God. 22\textsuperscript{nd} Elul of the year 187 (+ 5400 = 5587 of the Era of Creation) = 1827CE. (2) Many greetings to my master Moses b. Na‘īm, may God preserve and protect him. (3) After inquiring about his health, (we convey) many greetings to you as well as the magnitude (4) of longing for you. It should not be hidden from you that your letters arrived to us with (5) ‘Abd al-Nabīh the turner. You kept telling us that we should settle a bill (6) to him owed by Hilālī Lifa of twenty five piasters. We went (7) to him (Hilālī) and we said to him that he should give the (money) to ‘Abd al-Nabīh and he told (8) us that he does not owe anything, but all was owed by you. We met up (9) with Muḥammad al-Ṣa‘īdī about this, and with another three Muslims. It is necessary (10) for you to quickly pay ‘Abd al-Nabīh the turner his fee because (11) the aforementioned does not owe him anything. (But) this man needs to receive his fee. (12) We do not have anything (else to say) to prolong (this letter) to you except with all the best and greetings. (13) The ‘young man’ (14) Raḥamīm (15) Abzardī\textsuperscript{30} (16) Good Sefardi.

4.3.4. **Commentary**

Line 2

-Colaoh ‘may God preserve and protect him’

Line 5

\textsuperscript{30} We would like thank our esteemed colleague Dr Dotan Arad for this reading.
In the first example, an contraction of *wa-fīhī* ‘and in it’ would be possible, but the second example indicates that this combination of *wa-* and colloquially spelt *fa-* is what the writer uses as a composite connective.

There is *tarqīq* of the [ṣ] here, the root is *k-l-ṣ* ‘to release, buy up, settle a bill’

Spelling for the connective *fa-*.

‘not on him’ A nice example of nominal lam, typical for the mercantile correspondence but also for Ottoman Arabic more generally.

The first letter is difficult to read, but from the context, the root ‘-*q-d* ‘meet up’ would make sense.

From the context, a demonstrative is needed, although the noun following (*rajul* ‘man’) does not have an article, as is required in prescriptive grammar with preceding demonstratives. As *rajul* ‘man’ starts with a sun-letter, this may be a case assimilation of the article. The spelling is unusual, as the demonstrative is usually spelt *dā*.

5. Conclusions

The Late Judaeo-Arabic mercantile letters from the Rylands Genizah Collection present an immensely rich linguistic source, which afford us unprecedented insights into Arabic language history. The language used in the letters allows us to explore the pragmatic literacy of traders, and to approach the vernacular spoken at the time. The documents also open up hitherto unexplored avenues of historical and economic research in early nineteenth-century
Egypt and in the Mediterranean Jewish mercantile networks of the early modern period. Why the Rylands Genizah Collection, along with the Mosseri and AIU Genizah Collections contains a higher percentage of Early Modern material than other Genizah Collections still needs to be explored, but we hope that our contribution will draw attention to this part of the Collection and invite further study.

6. References


M. Gil, *In the Kingdom of Ishmael* (4 vols, Jerusalem 1997) [in Hebrew].


Mosseri Collection, *Catalogue of the Jacques Mosseri Collection* (Jerusalem 1990) [in Hebrew].


