



Fragment of the Month: December 2017

T-S Ar. 51.86a: Shi'ite and Karaite – a Fatimid melange

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Although the extant Genizah sources are written in a large number of languages, such as Hebrew, Arabic, Aramaic, Spanish and Greek, most manuscripts were penned in Hebrew script. With primary education based on the liturgical language Hebrew and, with the main educational aim of being able to read the Bible, Hebrew script was at the heart of Jewish linguistic identity and community literacy.

Yet, the Genizah also contains thousands of fragments partially or wholly written in Arabic script. These include documents, Arabic fragments of the Bible, Qur'ān, and New Testament, as well as liturgical, scientific, medical, magical, and philosophical works, with more than ten thousands fragments in Arabic script.[2]

How representative this is of the actual circulation of Arabic material within the medieval Jewish community of Egypt can only be speculated, as manuscripts in Arabic script, according to popular thought, would not normally require deposit in a Genizah. Many of the Arabic script fragments contain some Hebrew script in the marginalia, between the lines or on one side of the page, which explains why they ended up in the Genizah. There are, however, also a number of fragments which contain only Arabic script, and debate continues as to why these ended up in the Genizah.

Writing in Arabic was probably part of a higher education, with a lower percentage of the population being able to write in Arabic script than in Hebrew script. Yet, the Rabbanite Jews' preference for Hebrew script may not be as clear cut as it is traditionally made out to be. For example, the large corpus of mercantile letters published by Gil (1997) could create the impression that

Judaeo-Arabic was the *only* form of communication between 11th-century Genizah merchants. Yet we know from mercantile correspondence that Jewish traders wrote to each other in Arabic script too, as we find the request that future correspondence 'should only be in Hebrew script [...] because I cannot read the Arabic (script)' (לא יכון אלא בכט עבראני ... לאני מא אקרא אלערבי) from those less linguistically versatile (T-S NS 323.13; also see Goitein 1971, 179). Although the trader in question here could not read Arabic script, a request like this shows it was not at all unknown to write in Arabic script.

A penchant for Arabic script is usually assigned to medieval Karaite Jews, who may have been motivated by sectarian opposition to the Rabbanites (Khan 1993, 141). Many of the Arabic script texts in the Genizah have been accredited to Karaite authorship, with some select sources going to the extreme of writing Hebrew texts in Arabic script.

Sometimes the Arabic script in the fragments is secondary: enclosed within a larger text in Hebrew script, or preserved only as marginalia or jottings on the back of other texts. In some cases, Hebrew texts are written around the Arabic, obviously re-using paper that had previously served a different purpose.

This is clearly the case with the Arabic text preserved in T-S Ar. 51.86a. The class mark consists of four bifolia of Arabic text which have been re-used for writing a Hebrew text.



The original Arabic is part of a Shi'ite text, containing works about two famous Islamic characters: Fāṭima bint Muḥammad, the daughter of the prophet Muḥammad, and her husband 'Alī ibn Abī Ṭālib, a cousin of the prophet Muḥammad and 'the third Muslim'. Both hold a particular place in Shia Islam.

The text concerning Fāṭima is the so-called *Sermon of Fadak*, which can be found on various folios of the fragment in the following order: P4, 2r; P4, 2v; P3, 1r; P3, 1v; P1, 2r. The sermon deals with Fāṭima trying to reclaim property

belonging to her after the death of her father. It includes obvious *Shī'ī* terminology, such as the use of the phrase *فاطمة صلى الله عليها* *Fāṭima ṣallā Allāhu 'alayhā* 'Fāṭima, peace be upon her' in the P1, 1v. The story features in a large number of Shi'ite works; for example, it can be found in the *al-Taḍkira al-Ḥamdūniyya*, a book in 10 volumes written by Ibn Ḥamdūn (1102–1167), who came also from a Shi'ite background (see volume 6, pages 256–259 in the Beirut 1996 edition).

The remainder of the manuscript is concerned with 'Alī ibn Abī Ṭālib. The text quotes a Ḥadīṭ about 'Alī (P2, 2v) that recounts similarities between 'Alī and Jesus: just as Jewish people hated Jesus, people will hate 'Alī. And as Christians loved Jesus, people will love 'Alī and consider him divine.

The fragment repeatedly quotes the Qur'an. For instance, Sūra 11:114 is quoted in P1, 1v, Sūra 9:128 in P2, 1v, and Sūra 14:9 in P3, 2v. In P4, 1v there is a verse from Sūra 43:41, which then receives a Shi'ite exegetical treatment.

Following the Arabic text, the order of the folios in the fragment is therefore:

1. P2, 1r+v
2. P4, 2r+v
3. P3, 1r+v
4. P1, 2r+v
5. P1, 1r+v
6. P3, 2r+v
7. P4, 1r+v
8. P2, 2r+v

The Hebrew text surrounding the Arabic appears to be liturgy for a high holy day, most likely Karaite, and perhaps for Yom Kippur.[3] The fragment thus appears to contain a Karaite composition and an Arabic text, the latter obviously originally composed by someone with profound knowledge of Shi'ite theology. A copy of this text then emerges in a Karaite context in the Fatimid period, and is re-used for a Karaite to write up a liturgical draft.

At particular periods, Karaites in the Fatimid Empire were, more prominently than their Rabbanite counterparts, a pillar of the administration, with a number of viziers and leading courtiers of Karaite faith. That Karaites would be interested in the intellectual writings of their Shia Fatimid overlords would not be surprising. Also, more so than Rabbanites, Karaites seem to have taken an intellectual interest in theology beyond Judaism itself. In the case of T-S Ar.51.86a,

unfortunately, we cannot establish whether the original Arabic text was copied for intellectual study by the person who then re-used it, or whether it was taken from a different place purely for the purpose of re-using its paper.

The choice of hadīṭ in the Shi'ite text is interesting, since it compares 'Alī to Jesus, evoking similarities between Christians and Shi'ites, both numerical minorities in the Fatimid Empire. The fragments at the classmark T-S Ar. 51.86a thus reveal a particular melange of the Fatimid pluralistic society: a manuscript combining Karaite and Shi'ite texts, with a dash of Christianity.

[1] We would like to thank Drs Dotan Arad and Ben Outhwaite for their comments on the drafts.

[2] A search on the Friedberg Genizah pages for Arabic script in Genizah fragments shows up a list of 11,658 fragments.

[3] This tentative identification was provided by our colleague Dotan Arad.

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