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FRAGMENT OF THE MONTH ARCHIVE

Fragment of the Month: September 2021

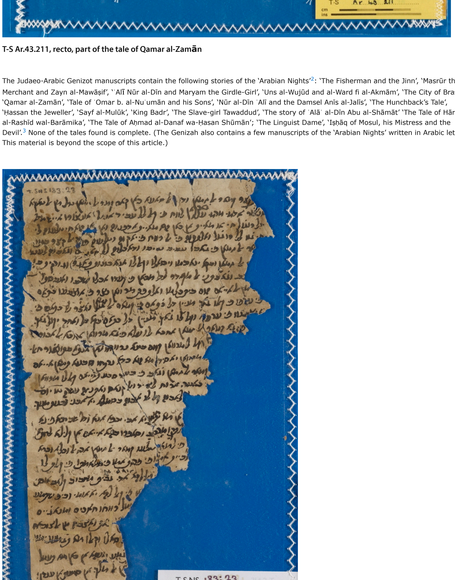
The Judaeo-Arabic manuscripts of the 'Arabian Nights' found in the Cairo Genizot: T-S NS 183.18+23+35+37+38

Rachel Hasson

The first discovery of the title - *Alf Layla wa-Layla* - written in Judaeo-Arabic was by S.D. Goitein. It is a twelfth-century Genizah document in which an anonymous Jewish bookseller wrote that he had sold a manuscript of *Alf Layla wa-Layla*.[1] The earliest Genizah manuscript that contains passages from the 'Arabian Nights' in Judaeo-Arabic script is dated to the thirteenth century, and the latest Genizah text of the 'Arabian Nights' written in Judaeo-Arabic can be ascribed to the eighteenth century. After scanning a substantial part of the Genizah collections, forty items of the 'Arabian Nights' were located, of which twenty-one are from the Firkovitch collection (a Genizah collection that originated in the Karaite synagogue in Egypt, Dār Simha) and the rest are from the so-called Genizah (the manuscripts kept in the Rabbanite Ibn Ezra synagogue in Fustat).

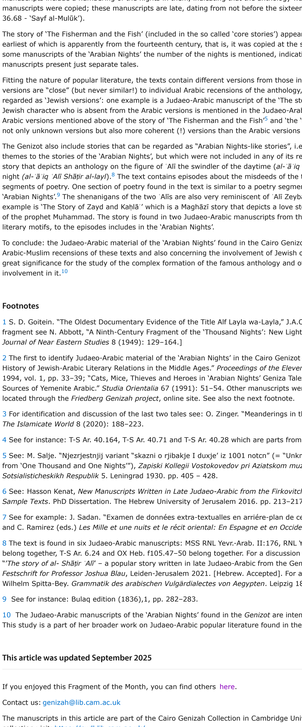
The traditional transmission of the authentic Arabic manuscripts of the anthology begins with the Syrian manuscript that was the basis for the French translation by Antoine Gland (= 'Gland's MS'). This is the earliest Arabic manuscript found to date (from the 14th or 15th centuries), and it includes only 282 nights, what is commonly referred to as the 'core stories' of the corpus. This is in fact the only manuscript that has so far won a completely faithful edition of the original. None of the other Arabic editions of 'A Thousand and One Nights' correlate to the manuscripts that underlie them, the editors adding different stories that they collected in different ways or alternatively omitting parts of the manuscripts.

The first source of the Arabic anthology was probably the Persian collection 'Hazār afsāna' (= 'A Thousand Stories'), but it is known that many other cultures also contributed to the final configuration of the Arabic 'Thousand and One Nights' versions, among them: Indian, Baghdadi and Cairene. 'A Thousand and One Nights' in Arabic was a variable corpus that grew during the Middle Ages and the early modern period. Some of the 'Thousand and One Nights' stories have roots in ancient Arabic literature (geographical, historical, etc.), others circulated (being delivered orally or copied) in the Middle Ages in popular editions unrelated to the title 'Thousand and One Nights', and at some point were adapted by editors and collectors and included in their recension of the famous anthology. For this reason, any discussion of the anthology should be done with sufficient caution, taking into account this background.



T-S Ar.43.211, recto, part of the tale of Qamar al-Zamān

The Judaeo-Arabic Genizot manuscripts contain the following stories of the 'Arabian Nights'[2]: 'The Fisherman and the Jinn', 'Masrūr the Merchant and Zayn al-Mawāṣif', ' Alī Nūr al-Dīn and Maryam the Girdle-Girl', 'Uns al-Wujūd and al-Ward fī al-Akmām', 'The City of Brass', 'Qamar al-Zamān', 'Tale of `Omar b. al-Nu`umān and his Sons', 'Nūr al-Dīn `Alī and the Damsel Anis al-Jalis', 'The Hunchback's Tale', 'Hassan the Jeweller', 'Sayf al-Mulūk', 'King Badr', 'The Slave-girl Tawaddud', 'The story of `Alā` al-Dīn Abu al-Shāmāt' 'The Tale of Hārūn al-Rashīd wal-Barāmika', 'The Tale of Ahmad al-Danaf wa-Hasan Shūmān'; 'The Linguist Dame', 'Tajāḍ of Mosul, his Mistress and the Devil'.[3] None of the tales found is complete. (The Genizah also contains a few manuscripts of the 'Arabian Nights' written in Arabic letters.[4] This material is beyond the scope of this article.)



T-S NS 183.23, recto, another manuscript of the tale of Qamar al-Zamān

As the majority of the manuscripts are fragmentary, we cannot determine if the stories were parts from a large number of copies of the entire anthology or whether the tales were copied independently, i.e. were copied separately from the whole anthology and stood as individual tales. The majority of the manuscripts include only a few papers and lack numbering of the nights (like T-S Ar. 43.211 or T-S NS 183.18+23+35+37+38 – 'The tale of Qamar al-Zamān'), which make the conclusions in this matter only a speculation. However, a few manuscripts include a numbering of the nights in them, indicating that the anthology was formed as a collection of tales at the time the manuscripts were copied; these manuscripts are late, dating from not before the sixteenth-seventeenth century (for example: T-S Ar. 36.68 - 'Sayf al-Mulūk').

The story of 'The Fisherman and the Fish' (included in the so called 'core stories') appears in the greatest number of manuscripts (6). The earliest of which is apparently from the fourteenth century, that is, it was copied at the same time or even earlier than Galland's MS. In some manuscripts of the 'Arabian Nights' the number of the nights is mentioned, indicating that the anthology was copied entirely. Other manuscripts present just separate tales.

Fitting the nature of popular literature, the texts contain different versions from those included in the Arabic printed editions. While some versions are "close" (but never similar!) to individual Arabic recensions of the anthology, others are unique. Some of the versions can be regarded as 'Jewish versions': one example is a Judaeo-Arabic manuscript of the 'The story of `Alā` al-Dīn Abu al-Shāmāt' in which a Jewish character who is absent from the Arabic versions is mentioned in the Judaeo-Arabic version in a very positive way. Both Judaeo-Arabic versions mentioned above of the story of 'The Fisherman and the Fish'[5] and 'the 'The story of `Alā` al-Dīn Abu al-Shāmāt'[6] depict not only unknown versions but also more coherent (!) versions than the Arabic versions known to date.

The Genizot also include stories that can be regarded as "Arabian Nights-like stories", i.e. stories that assimilate in their literary style and themes to the stories of the 'Arabian Nights', but which were not included in any of its recensions,[7] for instance a charming and unknown story that depicts an anthology on the figure of `Alī the swindler of the daytime (*al- ā`iq `Alī Shāṭir al-nahār*) and `Alī the swindler of the night (*al- ā`iq `Alī Shāṭir al-layl*).[8] The text contains episodes about the misdeeds of the two swindlers, is told by *al-rāwī* and contains segments of poetry. One section of poetry found in the text is similar to a poetry segment found in 'The Story of Jānshāh' from the 'Arabian Nights'.[9] The shenanigans of the two `Alīs are also very reminiscent of `Alī Zeybaq's episodes from the 'Arabian Nights'. Another example is 'The Story of Zayd and Kahlā ' which is a Maghāzī story that depicts a love story between Zayd and his lover Kahlā` at the time of the prophet Muhammad. The story is found in two Judaeo-Arabic manuscripts from the *Genizot* and very similar, in terms of style and literary motifs, to the episodes includes in the 'Arabian Nights'.

To conclude: the Judaeo-Arabic material of the 'Arabian Nights' found in the Cairo Genizot raises important questions concerning both the Arabic-Muslim recensions of these texts and also concerning the involvement of Jewish circulation of the adapted tales. The material is of great significance for the study of the complex formation of the famous anthology and of real interest for understanding Jewish involvement in it.[10]

Footnotes

1 S. D. Goitein. "The Oldest Documentary Evidence of the Title Alf Layla wa-Layla," J.A.O.S. 78 (1958): 301–302. [For the earliest Arabic fragment see N. Abbott, "A Ninth-Century Fragment of the 'Thousand Nights': New Lights on the Early History of the *Arabian Nights*." *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 8 (1949): 129–164.]

2 The first to identify Judaeo-Arabic material of the 'Arabian Nights' in the Cairo Genizot was Victor Lebedev. See: "New Material on the History of Jewish-Arabic Literary Relations in the Middle Ages." *Proceedings of the Eleventh World Congress of Jewish Studies*. Jerusalem 1994, vol. 1, pp. 33–39; "Cats, Mice, Thieves and Heroes in 'Arabian Nights' Geniza Tales." *Genizah Fragments* 24 (1992): 2; "Unsearched Sources of Yemenite Arabic." *Studia Orientalia* 67 (1991): 51–54. Other manuscripts were identified by the current author and can be located through the *Friedberg Genizah project*, online site. See also the next footnote.

3 For identification and discussion of the last two tales see: O. Zinger. "Meanderings in the Arabic Literary Genizot." *Intellectual History of The Islamicate World* 8 (2020): 188–223.

4 See for instance: T-S Ar. 40.164, T-S Ar. 40.71 and T-S Ar. 40.28 which are parts from the same copy of the tale مزون الرشيد والبرامكة.

5 See: M. Salje. "Njezrjestnji variant "skazni o rjibakje I duxje' iz 1001 notcn" (= "Unknown version of 'The Fisherman and the Genie' from 'One Thousand and One Nights'"), *Zapiski Kollegii Vostokovedov pri Aziatskom muzee Akademii nauk Souza Sovetskikh Sotsialisticheskikh Respublik* 5. Leningrad 1930. pp. 405 – 428.

6 See: Hasson Kenat, *New Manuscripts Written in Late Judaeo-Arabic from the Firkovitch Collection – Description, Classification and Sample Texts*. PhD Dissertation. The Hebrew University of Jerusalem 2016. pp. 213–217.

7 See for example: J. Sadan. "Examen de données extra-textuelles en arrière-plan de certains contes des *Mille et une nuits*" in A. Chraibi and C. Ramirez (eds.) *Les Mille et une nuits et le récit oriental: En Espagne et en Occident*. Paris 2009. pp. 75-92.

8 The text is found in six Judaeo-Arabic manuscripts: MSS RNL Yevr.-Arab. II:176, RNL Yevr.-Arab. II:270, T-S Ar. 6.23 and ENA 3476.4 belong together, T-S Ar. 6.24 and OX Heb. f105.47–50 belong together. For a discussion and critical edition of the text see: R. Hasson. ""*The story of al- Shāṭir `Alī*" – a popular story written in late Judaeo-Arabic from the Genizah." In M. Frenkel and P. Lieberman (eds.), *Festschrift for Professor Joshua Blau*, Leiden-Jerusalem 2021. [Hebrew. Accepted]. For a different Egyptian version of the story see: Wilhelm Spitta-Bey. *Grammatik des arabischen Vulgärdialectes von Aegypten*. Leipzig 1880, pp. 456–461.

9 See for instance: Bulaq edition (1836),1, pp. 282–283.

10 The Judaeo-Arabic manuscripts of the 'Arabian Nights' found in the *Genizot* are intended to be published by the author of this article. This study is a part of her broader work on Judaeo-Arabic popular literature found in the Genizot during the last twenty years.

This article was updated September 2025

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