**Late Judaeo-Arabic Manuscripts of Popular Literature**

**from the Firkovitch Collection**

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More than one thousand and two hundred Judaeo-Arabic manuscripts of popular literature identified in the central genizah collections. The Firkovitch collection, an assortment of manuscripts taken from the Karaite synagogue of Dar Simha in Cairo, is the most important collection for studying the popular literature written in Judaeo-Arabic found in the Genizah, as the collection itself bears six hundred and sixty manuscripts which include more than one hundred and forty different titles of popular stories and poems.

We divide this corpus into two categories, according to the texts’ affinity to Jewish tradition:

1. Texts with an affinity to Jewish communal tradition. To this category belong texts that appear to have had a ceremonial role in the period in which they were copied, as well as didactic or social roles within the Jewish community. This category includes stories about biblical figures, like “The tale of Joseph” that was read at Passover, the popular “Tale of Esther” that retold the contents of the Scroll of Esther, as well as tales from the midrash, *piyyutim* in praise of God, lamentations like “The tale of Hannah and her seven sons” which was recited on Tisha B’Av, exhortatory rebuke poems, wine poems and moral poems.

These texts are characterized by the integration of Hebrew words, as well as biblical verses and sentences from the midrash. The texts often contain explanations about the festivals with which they are associated or interpretations of biblical verses. In addition, some of the stories reflect close inter-cultural relations between Jews and the surrounding Muslim society, and even some Quranic material has penetrated the texts.

1. Texts that have no affinity to Jewish communal tradition. To this category belong texts of definite Muslim origin, such as stories from the *1001 Nights* and “The tale of Zayd and Kaḥlā”. This category also includes texts that were composed or adapted by Jews, but have no affinity to Judaism, like the poems of the Karaite poet Ibn Mi‘mār, debate poems like “The tale of the Cairene and the countryman”. In addition, we have texts about animals and humorous verse.

These texts are characterized by affinity to the local Arab Muslim culture, especially Egyptian culture. Many texts refer to specific places in Cairo; others developed from close contact with Egyptian social discourse.

The texts in both categories have many characteristics in common: most of the stories and verses in the corpus are anonymous, that is, the name of the author is not mentioned and they are told from the mouth of an unnamed storyteller, *al-rāwī* (= ‘the narrator’) or *al-ʿulamāʾ* (= ‘the teachers). In terms of style, some of the texts are written in rhymed prose, and in many of them the repetition of specific formulas is prominent. The texts also reflect well-known folkloric motifs. Many texts exist in more than one version; the poems, in particular, are multi-versional in which the order of the verses changes from one transmission to another. Altogether, the common characteristics show that the texts have many features typical of orally transmitted literature. It may be assumed that most of the texts were part of the storytellers’ repertoire, told in coffeehouses or on street corners, especially in Egypt in the period in which they were copied.

While parallels to texts included in the first category can be found also in print editions, the vast majority of the texts included in the second category are rarities that have neither other textual testimonia in Judaeo-Arabic, in manuscript or in print, nor parallels in Arabic script. Most texts are from a page to two leaves in length, and complete texts are very few.

The texts are written in late Judaeo-Arabic; an paleographical examination of each manuscript proves that the majority the texts were copied from the fifteenth to the nineteenth centuries. As is usual in Middle Arabic, they combine characteristics of Classical Arabic together with vulgar traits of the spoken vernaculars. The late Judaeo-Arabic reflected in our texts is unique in the relatively large number of vulgar linguistic elements.