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Fragment of the Month: March 2012

Goitein and gish prose: T-S 13J24.22

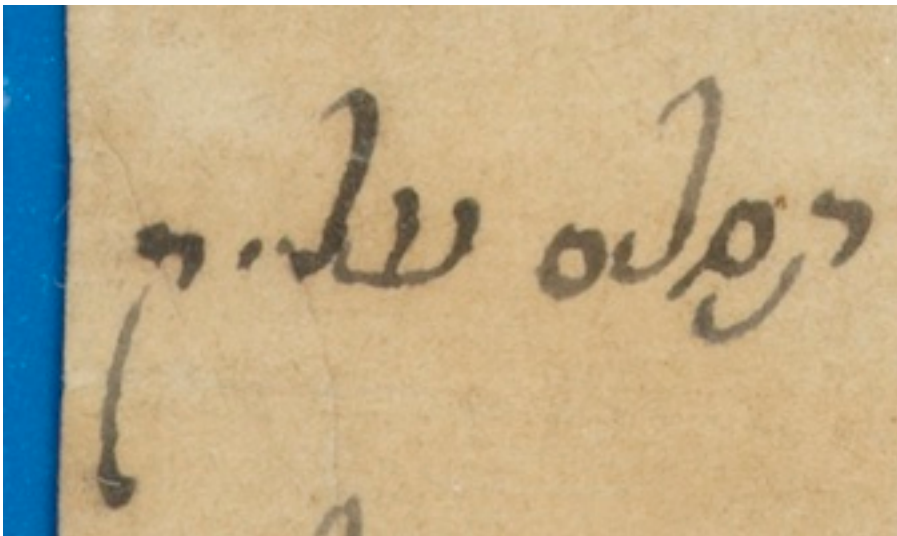
By Esther-Miriam Wagner

The field of Genizah Studies was revolutionised by the outstanding work of Shelomo Dov Goitein, who laid the modern foundations for the work on the 'documentary Genizah'. But there are disadvantages, too, of having such an eminent founding father: awed by the prolific and brilliant Goitein, subsequent scholarship has sometimes relied too unquestioningly on his work, with the result that misapprehensions have become fixed within the scholarly canon of the Genizah.

An example of just such a misapprehension concerns T-S 13J24.22. It is a family letter in which a father is asked by his daughter to come home quickly as the mother is about to give birth, and to bring with him various garments and sweets. The letter has elicited interest thanks to Goitein's analysis that it was written by a girl, who was originally a Spanish speaker, and that the addressee, her father, was in Mocha, Yemen. Obviously, this is an exciting interpretation as it would be an example of complex trade relations in the 16th century, and for the schooling of a foreign woman in writing Arabic. In the course of cataloguing this fragment, however, I felt that a linguistic re-examination casts doubt on Goitein's earlier assumptions.

Much of the evidence for the supposition that the girl was a foreigner and not a native speaker of Arabic comes from Goitein's linguistic analysis. He wrote: 'The specifically Semitic sounds of Arabic were impossible for the Spanish girl to pronounce, wherefore she mercilessly mixed up *k* and *q*, *t* and *ṭ*, *alif* and 'ayin, and was unable to discern between short and long vowels, so absolutely vital in Arabic.' (Goitein V, p. 222). Speaking from a linguist's point of view, this analysis is simplistic, as the writer seems to have no problems in mastering most of the other orthographical, morphological and syntactical difficulties that Arabic poses, demonstrating a good knowledge of Judaeo-Arabic writing style. Goitein even refers to the orthography of the letter as 'grotesque spelling', yet documents of the Late Judaeo-Arabic period commonly show many of these orthographic phenomena.

A confusion of *k* and *q* would indeed be unusual; there are, however, not really any convincing examples in the letter. Instead, Goitein may not have realised that all cases of final *ḳ* appear identical to *q* in this writer's hand. He probably assumed that the writer was spelling the 2 sing. suffixes with *ḳ* instead of *ḳ*, but a look at the plural pronoun *-kum*, which occurs throughout the text, makes it clear that the writer knew perfectly well how to write the suffixes, and there is not a single case where an initial or medial *k* appears to have been replaced by *q*, or any final *ḳ* that looks any different. So this feature can in fact only be interpreted as a misreading of the final *k*.

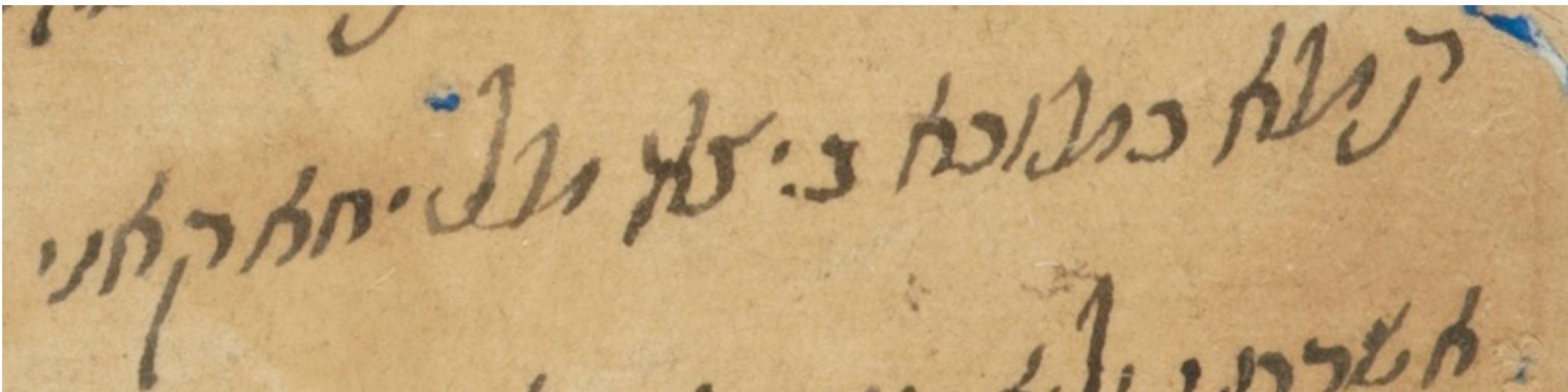


An example of the writer's final *kaf*

The spelling of *t* for *ṭ*, the so-called *taḥīm*, occurs commonly from the 15th century onwards. I could not find any examples of interchange of *alif* and 'ayin, but it is possible that Goitein interpreted אדמא in line 6 as עדמא, instead of reading it as a derivative of the root *adāma* 'to make lasting'. Similarly, the plene spelling of short and the non-plene spelling of long vowels is a phenomenon that occurs from the 11th century onwards, and becomes a regular feature in Late Judaeo-Arabic. More unusual forms similar to כתר (caused either by a phenomenon called *imāla* or by vowel harmony) occur commonly in comparable Late letters. One outstanding feature worth mentioning is the regular spelling of *wa-/wu-* by وا, as in אגול and אולדת *wuṣūl* 'arrival' and *waldati* 'my mother', mirroring the common dialectal phenomenon in which word-initial *wa-* and *wu-* become *u-*, resulting in *uṣul* and *uldati*. Again, colloquial forms such as this are part and parcel of late epistolary Judaeo-Arabic.

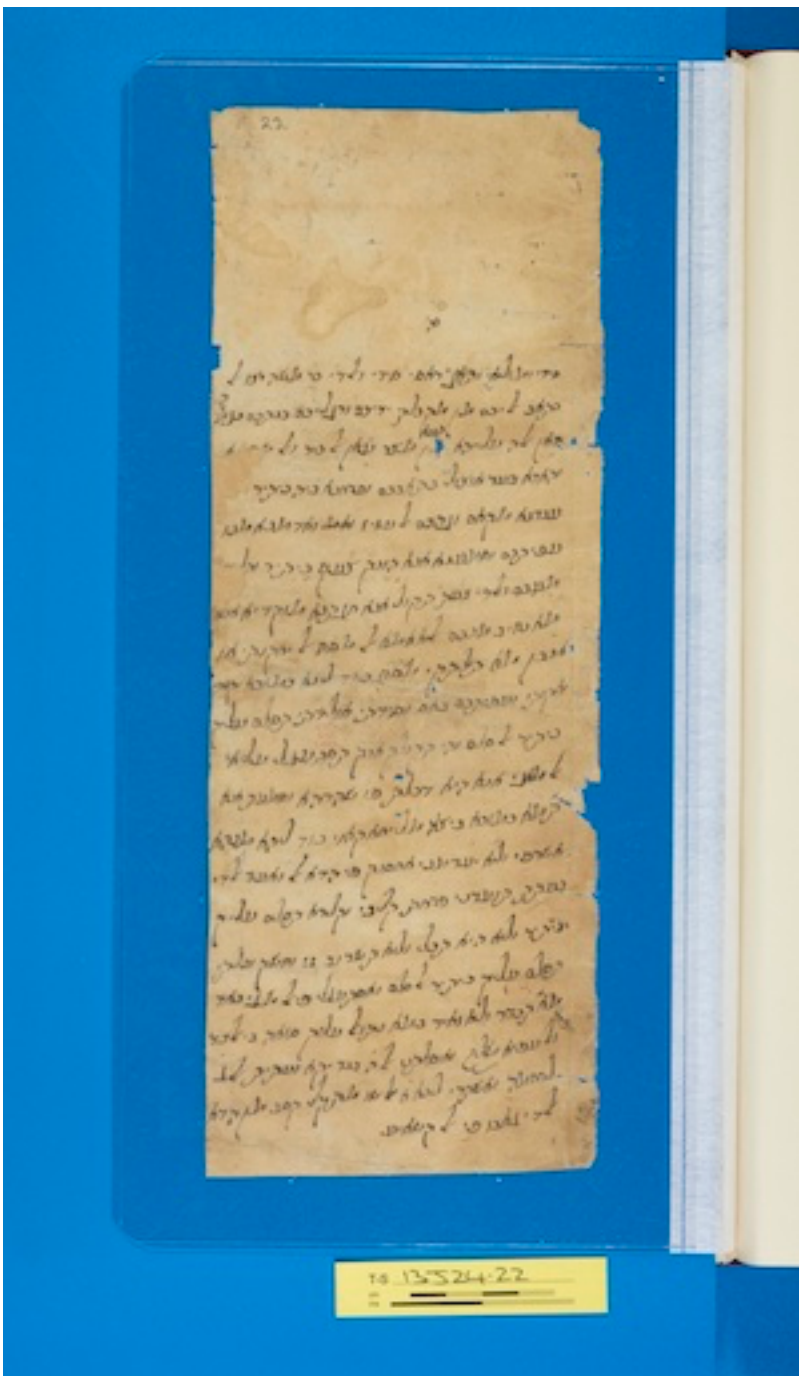
All in all, the letter is written in the same style as other contemporary documents, with no particularly exceptional forms. As most of the evidence for the assumption that the girl was a Spaniard is based on Goitein's linguistic analysis, which turns out to be rather unconvincing, it has to be asked why we cannot assume that she was indeed a native speaker of Arabic. In addition, we may even question her authorship, even more so as this letter is according to Goitein the only evidence of a 'girl serving as her mother's clerk'; we may in fact be dealing with a male scribe's hand, probably a male family member, writing for the daughter, as is usually the case in Classical Period letters. The fanciful writing of the final mem in שלום in line 20 may look girlish, but it is much more convincing as a trademark of a confident, skilled and frequent writer.

In addition, the location of the father in 'Mocha' is extremely doubtful. The phrases that purportedly mention the town Mocha are (a) כוד במוחא (lines 10–11) and (b) וסמעת אנא תמא במוחא ביצא מליחא קאי (b) (lines 13–14). In both instance it makes much sense to replace במוחא with כמוחא, not only because the shape of the first letter looks a lot more like *k*, but also because in both sentences a proper noun is needed before the following adjectives and adverbs. כמוחא is possibly a derived form of *kamkā*, which designates a silk garment. The phrases should thus be translated (a) 'take for us a ruby-red silk-garment' (much preferable to the syntactically and semantically awkward 'take for us in Mocha a ruby-red'), and (b) 'I heard that there is very nice white silk-garment there' (again preferable to 'I heard that there in Mocha there is very nice white'). This is in accordance with all the other requests of the letter for garments and sweets. This new interpretation is quite crucial, as it deletes all hints to the addressee's current residence and means that the addressee could have really been anywhere.



Goitein read the second word here as 'in Mocha'

Goitein's imagination was one of his great strengths as a historian, but occasionally his scholarship reflects prejudices typical of his own time, in this case linguistic ones. So, while T-S 13J24.22 is indeed a lovely family letter, it may tell us nothing at all about women's schooling or literacy, and also nothing about trade relations with Yemen.



The full letter, T-S 13J24.22

Bibliography

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Kraemer, J. L., 'Spanish Ladies from Cairo Genizah', in A. Meyuhass Genio (ed.), *Jews, Christians, and Muslims in the Mediterranean World after 1492* (London, 1992), pp. 237–266.

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