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Fragment of the Month: April 2012

A Judaeo-Arabic grammar of Classical Arabic: T-S Ar.31.254 and T-S 24.31

By [Nadia Vidro](#)

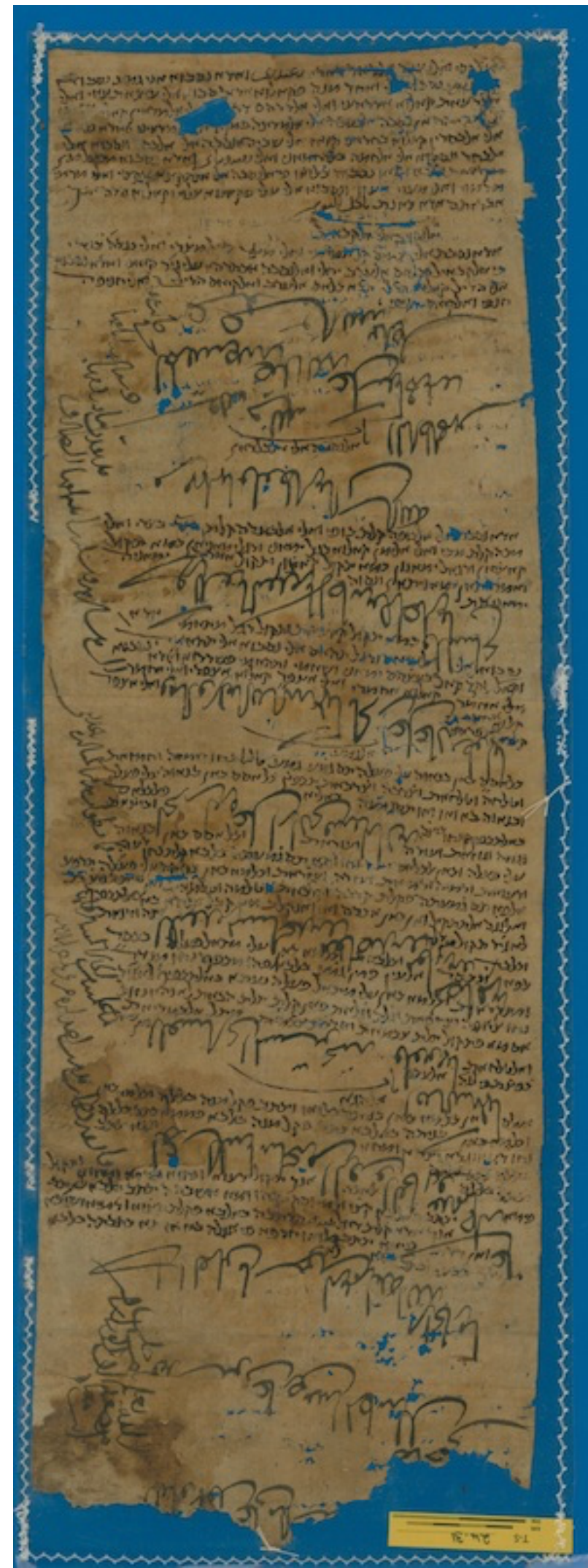
Medieval Jews in Islamic lands spoke and wrote Arabic. The majority of literary texts in Judaeo-Arabic are in more or less strict accord with the grammatical rules and stylistic requirements of Classical Arabic. Yet did Jews study Arabic grammar as a discipline? Although Jewish grammarians were clearly familiar with works on Arabic grammar and borrowed concepts, terminology and entire book passages from Muslim linguists, knowledge of Arabic grammatical theory does not seem to have been widespread. Indeed, in the introduction to his main work *Kitāb al-Luma'*, Yona ibn Janāḥ complained that Jews 'conversant and skilled' in Arabic grammar were few. Moreover, book lists discovered in the Cairo Genizah do not mention grammars of Arabic. Previously, only one Judaeo-Arabic grammar of Classical Arabic was identified, in the II Firkovitch Collection in the National Library of Russia in St Petersburg.

Recently, two new fragments of a Judaeo-Arabic grammar of Classical Arabic have come to light in the Taylor-Schechter Collection. The fragments are T-S Ar.31.254 and T-S 24.31. They belong together and are part of a rotulus, a long narrow strip of paper with writing parallel to its short side. The rotulus (incomplete in its present state) bears three texts. Originally it held a Fatimid chancery document, written in large Arabic characters. Chancery documents were written on only one side of the paper and laid out with wide spaces between the lines, which made them very attractive for recycling as writing paper for other texts. Our document includes two such secondary texts. Firstly, at the top of both recto and verso of T-S Ar.31.254 two passages from a grammar of Classical Arabic have been copied in smaller Arabic characters. Secondly, a text in Hebrew characters is copied on the blank side and between the lines of the original Fatimid document.



T-S Ar.31.254, showing the Classical Arabic grammar in Arabic characters at the top of the leaf

The text in Hebrew letters is a Judaeo-Arabic grammar of Classical Arabic. The grammar is divided into short chapters dealing primarily with basic matters of syntax and morphology, such as case endings in verbs and nouns, formation of the plural, or the gender and number of a verb in different syntactic positions. Each chapter summarises the subject matter in one or two sentences and provides a large number of examples. The topics discussed and the style of presentation suggest that the grammar was composed for pedagogical purposes and was intended for beginning students.



T-S 24.31, showing the grammar in Judaeo-Arabic, written between the lines of the Fatimid document

The tiny corpus of identified Arabic grammars in Judaeo-Arabic poses a number of questions. Are the grammars independent compositions, adaptations of a single Muslim grammar, or compilations of Muslim grammars? Whether independent compositions or adaptations, were the grammars produced by Jews or by Arabs and then copied in Hebrew characters by Jews? The grammar discovered by N. Basal in the II Firkovitch Collection is an adaptation of *al-Luma' fi al-'Arabiyya* by Abū al-Faḥḥ Uthmān ibn Jinnī, an important 10th-century Muslim grammarian, but it also uses other grammars of Classical Arabic. The sources of the grammar from the T-S Collection remain to be studied, but it is already clear that the work bears traces of influence of the Kufan school of Arabic grammar. It is as yet impossible to say whether its author was a Jew or a Muslim. However, it seems likely that our grammar was initially produced in Arabic characters and later transcribed into Hebrew script. Indeed, odd words in Arabic script occur here and there in the Judaeo-Arabic text. Moreover, the spelling is classical rather than Middle Arabic. Thus, 3rd person plural verbs are consistently spelled with a final *alef*, e.g. אלאף ('they said') instead of אלא, which is more common in Judaeo-Arabic.

I intend to study and publish the fragments in the near future.

Bibliography

Basal, N., 'A medieval Jewish grammar of classical Arabic : the attribute in a Judeo-Arabic adaption of Ibn Ġinnī's "Al-luma"', *Zeitschrift für Arabische Linguistik* 47 (2007), pp. 60–79.

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Contact us: genizah@lib.cam.ac.uk

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Contact us

Cambridge University Library, West Road,
Cambridge CB3 9DR, UK

Email: library@lib.cam.ac.uk
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