

Fragment of the Month: May 2021

- Cambridge University Library
- Collections
- Collections & departments
- Taylor-Schechter Genizah Research Unit
- Fragment of the month
- FOTM 2021**
 - > Fragment of the Month: September 2021
 - > Fragment of the Month: August 2021
 - > Fragment of the Month: July 2021
 - > Fragment of the Month: June 2021
 - > Fragment of the Month: May 2021
 - > Fragment of the Month: April 2021
 - > Fragment of the Month: March 2021
 - > Fragment of the Month: February 2021
 - > Fragment of the Month: January 2021
- FOTM 2020**
- FOTM 2019**
- FOTM 2018**
- FOTM 2017**
- Fragment of the Month: December 2016**
- Fragment of the Month: November 2016**
- Fragment of the Month: October 2016**
- Fragment of the Month: September 2016**
- Fragment of the Month: August 2016**
- Fragment of the Month: June 2016**
- Fragment of the Month: May 2016**
- Fragment of the Month: April 2016**
- Fragment of the Month: January 2016**
- Fragment of the Month: September 2015**
- Fragment of the Month: August 2015**
- Fragment of the Month: June 2015**
- Fragment of the Month: April 2015**
- Fragment of the Month: March 2015**
- Fragment of the Month: February 2015**
- Fragment of the Month: January 2015**
- Fragment of the Month: December 2014**
- Fragment of the Month: November 2014**
- Fragment of the Month: October 2014**
- Fragment of the Month: September 2014**
- Fragment of the Month: May 2014**
- Addendum to November 2011's Fragment of the Month**
- FRAGMENT OF THE MONTH ARCHIVE**

Bilingualism in Genizah Arabic poetry: T-S NS 108.60¹

Mohamed A. H. Ahmed & Benjamin Outhwaite

There is evidence of a shared interest in poetry between Arabic-speaking Jews and Muslims from the 7th century onwards, which has continued down through the ages until modern times. Arabized Jews began to compose poetry in Arabic in the pre-Islamic period, and some Jewish poets of Arabia are fixtures of the Arabic tradition, such as the 6th-c. al-Samaw al ibn 'Adiyā' (Bauer 2012). The emergence of secular Hebrew poetry in Andalusia, with its adoption of Arabic verse forms, was a direct consequence of exposure to Arabo-Islamic poetry. The poetic language and models were acquired, as Raymond P. Scheindlin points out, not just by passively absorbing them, but deliberately through 'concentrated study':

'they eventually synthesized [the Arabic literary tradition] with their Jewish literary heritage, creating almost overnight a new Hebrew literature that derived many of its concerns, principles, images and even rhythms from Arabic' (Scheindlin 1986: 5)

In addition to adapting Hebrew poetry to the forms and patterns of Arabic verse, some Jewish poets also wrote their poetry in the Arabic language. In some cases this went hand-in-hand with conversion to Islam, such as Ibrāhīm ibn Saḥī al-Isrā'īl from Seville (d. 1259). But it was not necessarily so: Judah al-Harizi (ca. 1166–1225), a leading Jewish poet, translator and travel writer from Toledo, not only translated Arabic poetry and rhymed prose – such as the *maqāmāt* of al-Hariri of Basra – and composed his own Hebrew *maqāmāt* (the *Tahkemoni*), but also wrote poems in Arabic, and even produced bilingual works in the two languages.

Remnants of this Arabized world can be found in the dozens of fragments with medieval Arabic poetry written in Hebrew script (Judaean-Arabic), from both known and unknown authors, found in the Cairo Genizah. These represent a significant body of poetic material that adds further evidence of the intertwined nature of Arabic language and culture in the Judaean-Islamic heritage of a multicultural and multilingual society.

The fragment T-S NS 108.60 gives us a good example in linguistic and graphic form of this intertwining of Arabic and Hebrew, and their respective scripts, in one medieval poetic manuscript. The methods employed in the texts include translation, changing language (code-switching) and swapping between scripts (script-switching), evidence of the interest these fragments hold for the study of bilingualism in the medieval Judaean-Arabic milieu.

T-S NS 108.60 is a paper bifolium, containing poetry in different scripts. The Hebrew script in the fragment is the product of two different hands (f. 1r is in a different hand to the rest), but, based on the ink, the pen-strokes, and the layout of the pages, one scribe wrote both the Arabic and Hebrew script of ff. 1v–2v.

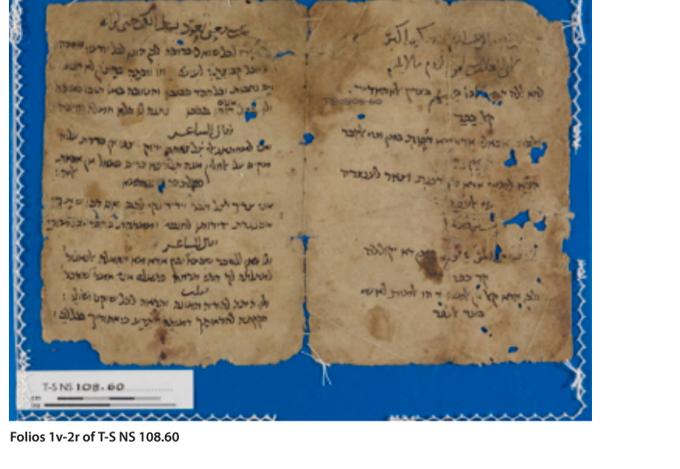
The fragment T-S NS 108.60 contains a number of excerpts of Arabic poems belonging to iconic Arab poets of the Middle Ages: the Fāḥimīd poet Abū al- Alā' al-Ma'rri (973–1057 CE); the Abbāsīd poets Abū Tammām (803–845 CE), Abū al- Atāhiya (747–826 CE), and Ibrāhīm ibn Abbās al-Sūlī (792–857 CE). It appears to be a page from a personal anthology, perhaps a poetic commonplace book. Literary anthologising was a popular genre in the Arabic-reading culture of the Middle East, often in the service of adab, as an aid to literary refinement (Orfali 2012: 29–32). Aspiring Jewish poets or literati probably did not have the same access to collections of literary models as their Islamic neighbours, and certainly not in Hebrew script, and consequently might be expected to have gathered collections such as these for their own use, assembling them according to theme or style.

The front of the bifolium, ff. 1r and 2v, contains religious Hebrew poetry. Folio 1r contains the end of a poem, rhyming in -hev (הַב) and concluding with *את אנו יקרב אשר אנה*, Psalms 47:5. Folio 2v contains a complete *piyyut*, in a different hand, prefaced with *בשם אנו*, and a Judaean-Arabic rubric, *פי מעני אלוה אל תדיני*, 'On the theme of "My God, do not judge me"'. It appears to be inspired by the famous *piyyut* of Isaac ibn Mar Saul, *אלוהי אל תדיני קמולי*, 'My God, do not judge me according to my sin', a *baqqasa* recited in the morning service of Yom Kippur. Like that one, this poem has a monorhyme, -vi (בִּי), and begins and ends on the same hemistich, *אלוהי אג עוני יענו ב*. Isaac ibn Mar Saul was a popular Andalusian poet of the late 10th–11th c., whose work reflected the transition from old-style *piyyut* to the newer themes and forms derived from Arabic (Alfonso 2010).



Folios 1r and 2v of T-S NS 108.60

The internal folios, ff. 1v–2r, are written in the same hand as the Hebrew *piyyut* on f. 2v, yet contain poetry of an altogether different character. Graphically, they are quite distinct from the previous folio, as the scribe switches script frequently into Arabic. Indeed, he begins with a heading in Arabic script, a Muslim approbation of an extended *basmala* ('In the name of Allah, the Merciful and Compassionate, He be great'), which introduces the title and authorship of the poem, also written in Arabic script². Thereafter, the scribe employs Hebrew script for the poem itself. Surprisingly, however, he switches back into Arabic almost immediately in the first verse (line 3) with *לחא אללה קומא*, 'if you bring them', before reverting to Hebrew script again. Whether it's a lapse, or for graphic reasons, or to effect the change into Judaean-Arabic more gradually, or even to better present the phonology of the Arabic phrase is, at this distance in time, difficult to ascertain.



Folios 1v-2r of T-S NS 108.60

T-S NS 108.60, f. 1v:

Translation	Arabic	Hebrew Script	Line
In the name of Allah, the Merciful and Compassionate, He be great.	بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ يَكُونُ أَكْبَرُ		1
"Luzūm mā lā yalzmu", written by Abū al- Alā' ibn Sulaymān	لأبي العلاء بن سليمان لُزُومٌ مَا لَا يَلْزُمُ		2
God curse a people that when you bring them words of truth,	لحأ الله قوما إذا جئتهم بصدق الأحاديث	לחא אללה קומא אג-חא-י-הם בדצק אלאחדית	3
they say "Unbeliever"	(قلو كفر)	קאלו [א]ן כפר :	4

Code switching can be generally defined as the alternation between two languages in the same conversation.³ In this manuscript, we can see frequent code switching between Arabic/Judaean-Arabic and Hebrew. In some cases, this is straight translation, or, as here, taking inspiration from the Arabic for a line of poetry in Hebrew. Beginning with what is probably a hemistich from the Abbāsīd poet Abū Tammām (803–845 AD), in Arabic in Arabic script, the scribe follows it with a Hebrew stanza. One can view this as intersentential code switching, or the act of switching between sentences and clauses or 'at a sentence boundary' (Thomason 2001: 132).

T-S NS 108.60 (f. 2r):

Translation	Arabic	Hebrew	Line
He said while singing: 'He used to extend his hand [give alms] even if' ⁴	وقال يغني تمؤد بسط الكف حتى لو انه		12
His hand would extend to all who asked and so he was plundered by all who knew him. ⁵		[היתה?] ידו דל שואל פרסה לק הוא לכל יודעיו משה	13

Further down the same page, we have more script switching, as the scribe gives the Arabic poetry in Hebrew script, retaining Arabic script only for the rubrics. For example, under the Arabic rubric *وقال الشاعر*, 'The poet said', he gives two lines from the Abbāsīd poet Ibrāhīm ibn Abbās al-Sūlī (792–857 CE) in Hebrew script, beginning *ولو كان للشكر سجعاً* (for *ولو كان للشكر* (for 'if gratitude were a figure', Occasional Arabic vocalisation is used to mark grammatical forms, such as the tanwin on the indefinite noun, 'a figure, body, person'. This is followed by a loose translation inspired by the Arabic into Hebrew poetry, under a rubric 'I said' – i.e., a reply to the original poet. Again, the rubric is in Arabic script, despite this introducing a Hebrew verse: *ولو היה לוהיה תנוה וקרא לכל שוקט ויהי*, 'And had my gratitude a form that could be shown to anyone quiet and peaceful'. The rubrics *وقال الشاعر* and *אני* reveal this to be a poetic dialogue between the Hebrew poet and the poetry of Ibrāhīm ibn Abbās al-Sūlī.

T-S NS 108.60 (f. 2r):

Translation	Arabic	Hebrew Script	Line
The poet said:	وقال الشاعر		12
If gratitude were a figure who could be seen by an onlooker	(ولو كان للشكر شخصاً بين اذا ما تأمله الناظر)	ולו כאן ללשכר שגעא יבין אואז מא תאמלה אלאנאטר	13
I would have copied it so that you might see it and know that I am a grateful person.	(لمشأته لك حتى ترأه فتعلم أني أمر شاكراً)	למתלתה לך חתי תראה פתעלם אני אמרה שאכר	14
I said:	قلت		15
And had my gratitude a form that could be shown to anyone quiet and peaceful [at repose]		ולו היתה לוהדיה תמונה וקראה לכל שוקט ושוקט	16

Unlike the Hebrew religious poetry on the reverse of the fragment, the poems on this side of the bifolium operate in an Arabic cultural sphere. The poetic dialogue is a playful response to classical Arabic poetry, albeit transcribed into Hebrew script, and the use of Arabic script rubrics clearly signal the cultural domain in which the literary activity is going on. You can contrast the use of a Judaean-Arabic rubric on the reverse (*פי מעני אלוה אל תדיני*), with the switch to Arabic-script rubrics on this side of the bifolium, just as you can contrast the religious poetry of the Hebrew cultural realm with the secular verses on this side. Similarly, you can contrast the Arabic-script *basmala* before al-Ma'arri's poem with the Hebrew equivalent, *בשם אנו*, 'in the name of the Merciful', before the *piyyut*. The scribe does not fully adhere to this schema, as the second rubric on f. 2r is in Judaean-Arabic, and *אני* [I] is used, 'And I said to both these ...'. The best explanation for this is that it is a lapse, and it should have been in Arabic script, *הפנת לי מענהא*, 'and I said (replied) to both these themes', or that the writer is simply inconsistent. Such lapses and inconsistencies are common in pre-modern texts produced for personal use.

To conclude, this fragment, one of hundreds containing Arabic poetry in the Cairo Genizah, is an excellent example of the multivalent nature of written language in an Arabic-speaking world, and of the inventive and fruitful synthesis of Arabic and Hebrew literature. Probably a personal poetic anthology, it also shows the extent of Jewish literary consumption, which in this case encompasses a number of major poets from four centuries of the Islamic-Arabic literary canon. Furthermore, through the use of code- and script-switching, the scribe-owner of this fragment constructs an informative image of the cultural currents that underlie his work and encodes a snapshot of his aesthetic world.

Bibliography

- Abū Tammām, Ḥabīb Ibn Aus & Azzām, Muhammad Abdu (1987), *Diwān Abū Tammām*. Al-Ma'arri, Abu I'-Ala, Geert Jan van Gelder, Matthew Reynolds, and Gregor Schoeler, *The Epic of Farbu'ness: Veoltes Van One and Two* (New York, NY New York University Press: 2016).
- Alfonso, E. (2010) 'Ibn Mar Saul, Isaac bar Levi', in Norman A. Stillman (ed.), *Encyclopedia of Jews in the Islamic World*. Consulted online on 30 April 2021.
- Bauer, Th. (2012) "al-Samaw al b. 'Adiyā", in P. Bearman, Th. Bianquis, C.E. Bosworth, E. van Donzel, W.P. Heinrichs (eds), *Encyclopaedia of Islam, Second Edition*. Consulted online on 26 April 2021.
- Orfali, B. (2012), 'A Sketch Map of Arabic Poetry Anthologies up to the Fall of Baghdad', *Journal of Arabic Literature* 43, 29–59.
- Poplack, Sh. (1980), 'Sometimes I'll start a sentence in Spanish y termino en español: toward a typology of code-switching', *Linguistics* 18, 581–618.
- Scheindlin, R. (1986), *Wine, Women, & Death: Medieval Hebrew Poems on the Good Life*.
- Thomason, S. (2001), *Language Contact*. Edinburgh University Press.

Footnotes

- This paper is part of the project 'Arabic Poetry in the Cairo Genizah', which has received funding from the European Research Council (ERC) under the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme. Grant agreement No. 851411.
- The poem in the fragment belongs to Luzūmiyyāt al-Ma'arri, one of the most popular Diwāns belonging to al-Ma'arri. The term Luzūmiyyāt is a common one-consonant style, in which al-Ma'arri observes double-consonant, instead of the common one-consonant, rhyme. For more on the poet and his works, see *Al-Ma'arri, Abu I'-Ala, Geert Jan van Gelder, Matthew Reynolds, and Gregor Schoeler, The Epistle of Farbu'ness: Veoltes Van One and Two* (New York, NY New York University Press: 2016).
- Poplack's early research suggested defining code switching as 'the alternation of two languages within a single discourse, sentence or constituent' (Poplack 1980: 583).
- In his *Diwān*, Abū Tammām's line reads (1987: iii 29): *تمؤد بسط الكف حتى لو أنه شاكراً لشيء* (Pocock 1980: 583).
- Like the Arabic *يسط*, 'to stretch, extend [a hand]', which can have the meaning of 'giving liberally', Hebrew *פרס* is also used of giving alms or charity, e.g., Proverbs 31:20 *פרסה ליני*, 'she extends a hand to the poor'.

If you enjoyed this Fragment of the Month, you can find others here.

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

The manuscripts in this article are part of the Cairo Genizah Collection in Cambridge University Library. To see more items from this collection visit: <https://cudl.lib.cam.ac.uk/collections/genizah/>

Contact us
Cambridge University Library, West Road, Cambridge CB3 9DR, UK
Email: library@lib.cam.ac.uk
Tel: +44 (0) 1223 333000
Fax: +44 (0) 1223 333160

Privacy Policy
Diversifying Collections and Practices
Diversifying Collections and Practices

Social Media
Library blogs
Instagram
Twitter
Facebook
YouTube

Join us
Job opportunities

UNIVERSITY OF CAMBRIDGE
© 2021 University of Cambridge
University A-Z
Contact the University
Accessibility
Freedom of information
Terms and conditions

Study at Cambridge
Undergraduate
Postgraduate
International students
Continuing education
Executive and professional education
Courses in education

About the University
How the University and Colleges work
Visiting the University
News
Events
Jobs
Giving to Cambridge

Research at Cambridge
News
Features
Discussion
Spotlight on...
About research at Cambridge