

AN UNKNOWN POEM BY AVICENNA

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Over a period of time, a number of private collections has been acquired by the Oriental Collection of the Library of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences, either through purchase or by donation. By far the most important and interesting of these is the Kaufmann Collection,¹ brought together with excellent taste by David Kaufmann.² Following both his and his wife's untimely death, his mother-in-law donated it to the Library of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences in 1905. In addition to numerous excellent and highly valuable Hebrew manuscripts and printed books, the Kaufmann Collection contains about six hundred manuscripts and manuscript fragments from the Ezra Synagogue in Old Cairo, and this latter part of the Collection is usually referred to as the Kaufmann Geniza.³

Aḥmad ibn Ṭulūn, who ruled Egypt from 868 until 884, ordered Michael, the Coptic Patriarch, to pay a contribution of 20,000 dinars to the military expenses of the state. In order to be able to raise such an enormous amount of money, the Patriarch was forced to sell off immovable properties owned by the church: mortmains (*waqf*), for example, and a landed estate in Ethiopian possession; this is also why the Church of Saint Michael in Fuṣṭāṭ, which according to contemporary descriptions, stood in the vicinity of the Mu^callaqa Church, passed into Jewish hands. This took place in 882. The church was soon transformed into a synagogue and has been in use ever since under the name of the Ezra Synagogue.⁴ Modern visitors to the synagogue are shown the traditional site in its vicinity where Pharaoh's daughter found the child Moses in the reeds on the bank of the Nile.

It was from the geniza of this synagogue (this is the name of the room where impaired scrolls, and writings containing the name of God, are stored until they can be buried to ensure they are not defiled) that perhaps the most important manuscript find of the last few centuries came to light:

towards the end of the last century, about 250,000 manuscripts and manuscript fragments passed from here into various collections around the world. Roughly half of this material is kept at Cambridge, while the rest is scattered all over the world in libraries from Cairo to Leningrad and from New York to Strasbourg. ⁵ David Kaufmann acquired about 600 items. ⁶

The importance of the documents found in the geniza can hardly be over-estimated: in addition to important writings pertaining to the Old Testament and the history of Judaism, they contain, amongst other things, private letters, bills, contracts, book-lists, poems, and works dealing with grammar, philosophy, medicine and mathematics, as well as amulets. The earliest known example of Jewish musical notation was discovered in the geniza material, too. The language of the manuscripts is mainly Hebrew. However, numerous writings in Aramaic, Syriac, Coptic and Greek are to be found among them, and a large number of documents is in Arabic but written in Hebrew characters; these latter texts are extremely important, not only in terms of their content, but also as regards research into the history of the Arabic language. ⁷ It is not clear according to what principles the material in the Cairo geniza was brought together: some think that these writings were flung haphazardly into the geniza and it was merely by chance that the entire material was not destroyed. Others, however, think that the geniza was, in fact, nothing less than the archives of an important commercial and cultural centre where documents regarded as important were kept. In any case, were in not for the arid climate of Egypt, the geniza material would certainly not have come down to us, but would have long since disintegrated.

Not long ago, when I examined the material of the Kaufmann Geniza, Ms. 205 fell into my hands; its envelope contained a mackle bearing the following remark, in Goldziher's characteristic handwriting: "Poems by Ibn Sīnā, Šihāb al-Suhrawardī and others (in Jewish characters)". The material upon which the manuscript is written is paper, its size is 13.5 x 17.5 cm, and it is paginated in pencil: 205 a-d. Obviously, the person paginating the manuscript must have been ignorant of Hebrew, because he paginated it upside down and in the wrong direction. Generally speaking, the manuscript is in good condition. The text is written in ink, which has become brown in the course of time, and the paper itself has acquired a brownish hue. The manuscript shows traces of three former folds one vertical and two horizontal, along which the text is

slightly damaged.

On page 3 of the manuscript is a poem by Šihāb al-Dīn al-Suhrawardī in fine, quadratic writing and on the last page there is a poem of 5 lines by Avicenna in the same writing. There are short poems and doxologies in a different hand on pages 1 and 2, as well as below the poem by Avicenna on page 4. This quadratic script is smaller in size, less beautiful, rather careless and written in a different ink. While the poems by Suhrawardī and Avicenna are in one column, these latter short poems and doxologies are arranged in two. On page 3 below the poem by Suhrawardī in the left corner there is a remark of four lines in a third script. I could not find any connection between the various parts of the manuscript. One could add that, in view of the condition of the present folding line, it seems probable that the present state is secondary; originally the manuscript may have been folded in just the opposite way and then the poem by Suhrawardi may have been on page 1 and the one by Avicenna on page 2.

In all probability, our manuscript dates from the second half of the 12th century. This can be deduced by the fact that the style of the fine quadratic writing in which the poems by both Suhrawardī and Avicenna are written is completely identical to the type of writing in which the autographed letter by Maimonides is written which has been published by Scheiber under signature No. 123a. * The two writings evidently come from different people, but the shape of nearly every letter is identical. Consequently, we may state with great probability that they come from the same period. The two other writings in our manuscript are later than the first, because it is clear that they were used to fill the empty space left after the first two poems by Suhrawardī and Avicenna were finished.

The Avicenna poem in question is written in a fine, quadratic Hebrew script. It gives the Arabic text in a true, literal transliteration. However, in view of the fact that the phonemic system of Arabic is richer in consonants than that of Hebrew, it also employs letters with diacritical marks:

(e. g., ض - ڤ ; ظ - ڤ)

Diacritical marks, however, are not always used, and consequently the text was meant for people with absolute command of the language. (Contemporary Arabic manuscripts frequently omit diacritical marks.) The coupling of sounds and letters of identical origin and pronunciation serves as basis for transliteration (e. g., ب - ڤ ; د - ڤ). Should, however, origin and actual pronunciation differ greatly, then the latter will overrule the former (e. g., خ - ڤ ; غ - ڤ). *Hamza* is never indicated but its carrier appears in each case. One ligature appears in two varieties: ڤ and ڤ for

לך . Hebrew vowel punctuation is not employed, whereas *ḍamma* appears at the end of each line in order to indicate the vowel of the rhyme. In one case, the nunation ending *-in* is indicated by two *kasras*, and, in another, the similar ending *-an* is indicated by two *fathas* and an *ālef*, respectively, whereas in two other cases the latter is indicated by *alefs* only. In one case *madda* appears: אהא for אהא. *Šadda* is met with, too, while *tā' marbūṭa* invariably appears as ה without diacritical marks.

The poem is in *kāmīl* metre. Each verse consists of two hemistichs. Each hemistich comprises three feet, with the exception of the third verse, the first hemistich of which consists of two feet only; this lack, however, is balanced effectively by the *parallelismus membrorum*. Various irregularities occur in the feet: *iḍmār*, *ḥabn*, *qat^c*, *tarfīl*. In two places the *kasra* of the genitive is replaced by *ḍamma* under the constraint of the rhyme.

Here is the text of the poem in Hebrew script:

ללשיך אריים אבו עלי בן סינא
רצי אלה ענה

אָהָאָ עלי גסד מעפר פי אתרי
פי קבצה ארכאן אנת אסיר
לנאר תאכד גוהא ותרי אהוי
ימתץ מנך לטאפה אתאתיר
ואלארין תאכד קסמהא
ולמא יאכד קסמה ויגור
ולקד עדלת ען ארפאק וערו
וסרו בליל ולדליל כביר
פלאן ערפת אן קסטא כאמסא
אבצרת מן דלף אטלאם אי לנור

A number of poems in Arabic and Persian are in circulation under the name of Avicenna.⁹ Most scholars share the opinion that at least some, if not all of them, are apocryphal¹⁰, whereas others maintain that even "some of the famous quatrains of ^CUmar Khayyām are really his; and were introduced into the collection of ^CUmar by anthologists."¹¹

The above poem does not appear in editions of Avicenna's poetry.¹² It seems difficult to exclude Avicenna's authorship, but it seems just as impossible to prove it beyond doubt. In our opinion, nothing in this poem is inconsistent with Avicenna's ideas as they are known to us: the four elements – well-known from antique and mediaeval medicine – constitute the centre of the poem; they were dealt with extensively by Avicenna in his Canon and elsewhere,¹³ a fact that seems to support Avicenna's authorship. In any case, our playful poem, which is pervaded by a feeling of sadness about the ephemeral nature of human life, and by a touch of mysticism, comes from a person in whose system of ideas this scientific concept played a central role. This person may well have been Avicenna.

NOTES

1. Max Weisz, *Katalog der hebräischen Handschriften und Bücher in der Bibliothek des Prof. Dr. D. Kaufmann*. Frankfurt am Main 1906.
2. F. Rosenthal, "David Kaufmann. Biographie", *Gedenkbuch zur Erinnerung an David Kaufmann*, ed. Dr. M. Brann, Dr. F. Rosenthal. Breslau, 1900, pp. i-lvi.
3. Samuel Löwinger, Alexander Scheiber, Stephen Hahn, "Fragments of the Cairo Genizah in Hungary," *Genizah Publications in Memory of Prof. Dr. David Kaufmann*. ed. Samuel Löwinger, Alexander Scheiber. Budapest, 1949, pp. viii-xv.; M. S. Löwinger, "Report on the Hebrew Mss in Hungary with special regard to the Hungarian fragments of the Cairo Genizah," *Actes di XXI^e Congrès International des Orientalistes Paris 23-31 Juillet 1948; Paris, 1949, pp. 117-123.*
4. Paul E. Kahle, *The Cairo Geniza*, London 1947, pp. 1-35.
5. Shaul Shaked, *A Tentative Bibliography of Geniza Documents*, Paris – The Hague 1964, pp. 23-24.; Kahle, *op. cit.*, pp. 1-35.

6. Weisz, *op. cit.*, XVII. Genizah-Stücke, Nos A 592–594, pp. 183–184.
7. Joshua Blau, "Das frühe Neuarabisch in mittelarabischen Texten" and "Arabische Handschriften in hebräischer Schrift", *Grundriss der Arabischen Philologie. Band I: Sprachwissenschaft.* ed. Wolfdietrich Fischer, Wiesbaden, 1982, pp. 96–109, 303–305.
8. Alexander Scheiber, "Ein unbekannter Brief M' ses Maimunis und ein Lobgedicht zu Ehren Abraham Maimunis", *Acta Orient. Hung.* xviii 1965, pp. 359–371 (= *Geniza Studies.* Hildesheim 1981, pp. 195–207).
9. Karl Brockelmann, *Geschichte der arabischen Litteratur.* Leiden 1937–1949, G I p. 458, S I p. 828.; Georges C. Anawati, *Essai de Bibliographie Avicennienne,* Le Caire, 1950, pp. 121–122 (No. 50); Yahya Mahdavi, *Bibliographie d'Ibn Sina.* Tehran 1954, p. 39 (No. 29). Cf. also Edward G. Browne, *A Literary History of Persia.* London 1906–1924, vol. II, pp. 108–111.; Ahmad Hamed el-Sarraf, "L'oeuvre littéraire arabe et persane d'Avicenne", *Millénaire d'Avicenne, Congrès de Bagdad 20–28 Mars 1952,* Le Caire, 1952, pp. 98–104.
10. Father Anawati's letter cited in Henri Jahier, Abdelkader Noureddine, *Anthologie de textes poétiques attribués à Avicenne,* Alger 1960, p. 8.
11. Soheil M. Afnan, *Avicenna, His Life and His Works,* London 1958, pp. 82, 244.
12. H. Éthé, *Avicenna als persischer Lyriker in Nachrichten von der K. Gesellschaft der Wissenschaften und der Georg-Augusts-Universität aus dem Jahre 1875.* Göttingen 1875, pp. 555–567.; Ibn Abī Uṣaybi^ca, *Kitāb 'uyūn al-anbā' fī ṭabaqāt al-aṭibbā'.* Ed. Imr al-Qays ibn al-Ṭahhān = August Müller. Cairo 1882, vol. II, pp. 2–20.; Ibn Sīnā, *Mantīq al-maṣriḳiyyīn wa-l-qaṣīda al-muzdawīḡa fī l-manṭiq.* Cairo 1910, pp. kb-1z, 1–18.; M. Şerefeddin Yaltakaya, "İbni Sina" nın basılmamış şiirleri in *Büyük Türk Filozof ve Tıp Üstadı İbni Sina şasiyeti ve eserleri hakkında tetkikler.* İstanbul 1937, pp. 40–51. Avicenne, *Poème de la médecine.* Ed. Henri Jahier, Abdelkader Noureddine. Paris 1956.; Henri Jahier, Abdelkader Noureddine, *Anthologie de textes poétiques attribués à Avicenne.* Alger 1960.
13. Ibn Sīnā, *al-Qānūn fī l-tibb.* Būlāq 1294, vol. I, pp. 5–6. Cf. I. Ormos, "A key factor in Avicenna's theory of phonation." *Acta Orient. Hung.* 1x 1986, pp. 283–292.