

‘Genizat Germania’—Hebrew and Aramaic
Binding Fragments from Germany in Context

Studies in Jewish History and Culture

Edited by

Hava Tirosh-Samuelson
(Arizona State University)

and

Giuseppe Veltri
(Leopold-Zunz-Centre for Jewish Studies,
University of Halle-Wittenberg)

VOLUME 28

‘European Genizah’: Texts and Studies

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VOLUME 1

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BRILL

LEIDEN • BOSTON
2010

This book is printed on acid-free paper.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Lehnardt, Andreas.

Genizat Germania : Hebrew and Aramaic binding fragments from Germany in context / by Andreas Lehnardt.

p. cm. — (Studies in Jewish history and culture, ISSN 1568-5004 ; 28)

The present volume is a collection of papers read at the international conference, Genizat Germania: Hebrew and Aramaic Binding Fragments, from German Archives and Libraries, held in Mainz in June 2007.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-90-04-17954-7 (hard cover : alk. paper) 1. Manuscripts, Hebrew—Germany—Congresses. 2. Manuscripts, Aramaic—Germany—Congresses. 3. Manuscripts, Medieval—Europe—Congresses. 4. Paleography, Hebrew—Congresses. 5. Judaism—History—Medieval and early modern period, 425–1789. 6. Rabbinical literature—Bibliography. 7. Genizat Germania (Project) I. Title. II. Series.

Z115.4.L44 2009
091.089924—dc22

2009031465

ISSN 1568-5004
ISBN 978 90 04 17954 7

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PRINTED IN THE NETHERLANDS

CONTENTS

List of Illustrations	xi
Contributors	xiii
Introduction	1
<i>Andreas Lehnardt</i>	

PART I

STUDIES IN ‘GENIZAT GERMANIA’

Puzzling the Past: Reconstructing a Maḥzor from Receipt Wrappings	31
<i>Saskia Dömitz</i>	
Images Tell a Tale of Place and Time: A Methodological Study of Artwork in Service of Context	41
<i>Naomi Feuchtwanger-Sarig</i>	
Reconstructing Manuscripts: The Liturgical Fragments from Trier	61
<i>Elisabeth Hollender</i>	
Makulierte hebräische Handschriften in Eberhardsklausen— eine bibliotheks- und literaturgeschichtliche Untersuchung ...	91
<i>Marco Brösch</i>	
The Discovery of Medieval Targum and Maḥzor Fragments in Freiberg/Saxony	157
<i>Andreas Kunz-Lübcke</i>	

PART II

STUDIES IN THE “EUROPEAN GENIZAH”

Hebräische Dokumente und Geschichtsquellen in der „Europäischen Geniza“	171
<i>Abraham David</i>	
Calamus or Chisel: On the History of the Ashkenazic Script ...	183
<i>Edna Engel</i>	
An Early Ashkenazi Fragment of the Babylonian Talmud from the Czartoryski Museum in Cracow	199
<i>Judith Olszowy-Schlanger</i>	
New Fragments of Unknown Biblical Commentaries from the “European Genizah”	207
<i>Simcha Emanuel</i>	
385 Printed Books of the Fifteenth to Eighteenth Centuries, Bound with Medieval Hebrew Manuscripts in the Estense Library in Modena	217
<i>Mauro Perani with the cooperation of Emmanuela Mongardi and Ezra Chwat</i>	
Commentaries on the Azharot and Other Liturgical Poems Found in the Biblioteca Civica of Alessandria	277
<i>Saverio Campanini</i>	
Ein neues Fragment zu Sifre Devarim	297
<i>Michael Krupp</i>	

PART III

EUROPEAN PROJECTS

Genizat Austria: The “Hebrew Manuscripts and Fragments in Austrian Libraries” Project	317
<i>Josef Oesch</i>	

CONTENTS

ix

Hebrew Manuscript Fragments in the Czech Republic: A Preliminary Report	329
<i>Daniel Polakovič</i>	

PART IV

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Bibliography of the “European Genizah”	335
<i>Andreas Lehnardt</i>	
Index of Persons	365
Index of Subjects	370
Color Plates	379

LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

Fig. 1	<i>Mahzor</i> , Friedberg (Hessen), Stadtarchiv, Fragm. Hebr. 29a	381
Fig. 1a	Detail from Friedberg (Hessen), Stadtarchiv, Fragm. Hebr. 29a	381
Fig. 2	<i>Ketubbah</i> , Krems, 1391/2, Vienna, Österreichisches Nationalbibliothek, Cod. Hebr. 218	382
Fig. 3	Spanish <i>Haggadah</i> Fragment from the Cairo Genizah, Cambridge, Cambridge University Library, T.-S. K.10.1	383
Fig. 4	<i>Golden Haggadah</i> , Catalonia, ca. 1320, London, British Library, Add. MS 27210, fol. 31v	384
Fig. 5	<i>Mahzor</i> , Stadtarchiv Hildesheim, Signatur Bestand 58 Nr. 3	385
Fig. 6	<i>Padua Ashkenazi Mahzor</i> , New York, New York Public Library, Humanities and Social Sciences Library/Dorot Jewish Division, **P Ms. Hebr. 248, fol. 249r	386
Fig. 7	<i>Xanten Bible</i> , Xanten, 1294, New York, Public Library, Jewish Item, Spencer Collection 1, Vol. 2, fol. 64r	387
Fig. 8	<i>Vienna Siddur and SeMaK</i> , Vienna, Austrian National Library, Cod. Hebr. 75 fol. 45r	388
Fig. 9.1–2	<i>Bible with Targum</i> , Freiberg Saxonia, Bergarchiv	389
Fig. 10	Detail from Freiberg Saxonia, Bergarchiv	390
Fig. 11	<i>Babylonian Talmud</i> , Berakhot 8b, Czartoryski Museum 3; Photography Olszowy-Schlanger	391
Fig. 12	<i>Bible Commentary</i> , Universitätsbibliothek Salzburg 87 454 S II	392
Fig. 13	<i>Bible Commentary</i> , Universitätsbibliothek Salzburg B 89, 157 I	393
Fig. 14	<i>Sifre Devarim § 404</i> , Krupp Collection, Jerusalem ...	394
Fig. 15	<i>Megillat Ta'anit</i> , Monastery of St. Paul im Lavantal, Cod. 39c 4 VDSr	395
Fig. 16	<i>Torah (Dtn 31–34)</i> , Klagenfurt, Diocesan Archives, Cod. XXXIa3 IIr.	396

Fig. 17	Teplá, Bishopric of Plzeň (Pilsen), Library, sig. 4–52, Photography Daniel Polakovič	397
Fig. 18	Teplá, Bishopric of Plzeň (Pilsen), Library, sig. 4–52, Photography Daniel Polakovič	398

CONTRIBUTORS

MARCO BRÖSCH (Trier University) is research assistant at the ‘Kompetenzzentrum für elektronische Erschließungs- und Publikationsverfahren in den Geisteswissenschaften’ at the university of Trier and a member of the ‘Historisch-Kulturwissenschaftliches Forschungszentrum Trier (HKFZ)’. He is currently completing a dissertation (PhD thesis) on the old library at the monastery in Eberhardsklausen (“*Die Klosterbibliothek von Eberhardsklausen und ihre Bestände. Von den Anfängen bis ins 16. Jahrhundert*”).

SAVERIO CAMPANINI earned his PhD in Jewish Studies from the Università Ca’ Foscari di Venezia and is currently a researcher at the University of Bologna and at the Freie Universität, Berlin. His main topics of interest are the Kabbalah, Christian Kabbala, and Gerschom Scholem’s life and works. He is author of *The Book Bahir: Flavius Mithridates’ Latin Translation, the Hebrew Text, and an English Version* (Turin: Nino Argano Editore, 2005).

ABRAHAM DAVID (PhD 1976, Hebrew University Jerusalem) is Head Researcher of Hebrew Manuscripts at the National Library Hebrew University. Among his publications are *A Hebrew Chronicle from Prague, c. 1615* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press 1993); *In Zion and Jerusalem. The Itinerary of Rabbi Moses Basola (1521–1523)*, (Jerusalem: C. G. Foundation, 1999); *Reflections on Jewish Jerusalem* (Tel Aviv, 2003) (in Hebrew), and numerous scholarly articles.

SASKIA DÖNITZ (PhD 2008, Free University Berlin) was research assistant in the *Sefer Hasidim* Project at the institute of Jewish Studies, Free University Berlin. Her PhD is a literary analysis and study of the reception of *Sefer Josippon*. Currently, she is research assistant in the project ‘Genizat Germania’, Mainz University. She is author of “Jüdische Buchstabenspekulationen vom Sefer Yetzira bis zu den Haside Aschkenas—Das Alphabet des Rabbi Aqiva und sein literarisches Umfeld,” in: K. Herrmann; G. Veltri (eds.), *Judaistik zwischen den Disziplinen. Jewish Studies between the Disciplines, Festschrift Peter Schäfer* (Leiden: Brill, 2003), 149–179; “Von Italien nach Ashkenaz: Sefer

Yosippon und die historiographische Tradition des Mittelalters,” in A. Kuyt; G. Necker (eds.), *Orient als Grenzbereich: Rabbinisches und Außer-rabbinisches Judentum* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2008), 169–182.

SIMHA EMANUEL (PhD 1993, Hebrew University Jerusalem) is professor for Talmud at the Hebrew University Jerusalem. His main field of research is the Halakhic literature in the Middle Ages. Among his numerous books are *Newly Discovered Geonic Responsa and Writings of Early Provençal Sages* (Jerusalem, Cleveland: Ofeq Institute, 1995); *Fragments of the Tables. Lost Books of the Tosaphists* (Jerusalem: Magnes, 2006). He published pioneering articles on the “European Genizah”.

EDNA ENGEL (PhD 1990, the Hebrew University of Jerusalem) is a senior researcher in the Hebrew Paleography Project on behalf of the National Library in Jerusalem and the Israel Academy of Sciences and Humanities. She is co-author of *Specimens of Mediaeval Hebrew Scripts. Vol. 1, Oriental and Yemenite Scripts* (Jerusalem: Israel Academy of Sciences and Humanities 1987); *Specimens of Mediaeval Hebrew Scripts. Vol. 2, Sefardic Script* (Jerusalem: Israel Academy of Sciences and Humanities, 2002) and numerous scholarly articles, among them “Evolutionary Stages of Medieval Hebrew Scripts as Reflected in the ‘European Genizah’”. In „*Fragmenta ne pereant*“: *Recupero e studio dei frammenti di manoscritti medievali e rinascimentali riutilizzati in legature*, ed. by Mauro Perani and Cesarino Ruini (Ravenna: Longo, 2002), 89–119.

NAOMI FEUCHTWANGER-SARIG (PhD 2000, Hebrew University Jerusalem); she wrote her dissertation on “Torah binders from Denmark”; a post-doctorate she spend at the Center for Advanced Judaic Studies, University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, on “The Jewish Book: Material Texts and Comparative Contexts”. At present she is Project Coordinator in the Jewish Art and Visual Culture Research Project, The Goldstein-Goren Diaspora Research Center, Tel Aviv University. She is the author of: “Gender in Woodcut and Engraving: Images from Jewish Venice at the Turn of the 17th Century (A Re-Examination of Sefer haMinhagim, Venice, 1593 and 1601),” in: Michael Graetz (ed.), *Ein Leben für die jüdische Kunst. Gedenkband für Hannelore Künzl* (Heidelberg: Universitätsverlag C. Winter 2003), 101–117; “Bernard Picart: Image, Text and Material Culture,” in: Julie-Marthe Cohen, Jelka Kröger, Emile G. L. Schrijver (eds.), *Gifts from the Heart. Ceremonial Objects from the Jewish Historical Museum* (Amsterdam,

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ELISABETH HOLLENDER (PhD 1993, Cologne University) is professor for Jewish Religion at the Center for Religious Studies (CERES) at the Ruhr Universität Bochum. She was visiting professor at the Institut for Jewish studies Frankfurt on Main University and Heisenberg-Fellow for Jewish Studies at the Heinrich-Heine-University Düsseldorf. Her main research is on Medieval Hebrew poetry and commentaries. She is co-author of *Rabbinische Auslegungen zu Ester* (Leiden: Brill 2000); and she is author of *Clavis Commentariorum of Hebrew Liturgical Poetry in Manuscript* (Clavis Commentariorum Antiquitates et Medii Aevii 4) (Leiden: Brill, 2005); *Piyyut Commentary in Medieval Ashkenaz* (Studia Judaica 42) (Berlin, New York: De Gruyter, 2008).

MICHAEL KRUPP (PhD, 1971) was lecturer at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem and head of the program ‘Studium in Israel’ (1977–2003). He is author of numerous books, articles and editor of the Journals ‘Religionen in Israel’ und ‘Interfaith Encounter in the Land of the Bible’. Currently he is publishing a critical edition and translation of the Mishna (*Jerusalem Mischna*, Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, up to now 3 vols.). He is also collector of Hebrew manuscripts and owns a large collection of Jewish manuscripts, among them several binding fragments from Yemen.

ANDREAS KUNZ-LÜBCKE (PhTh 1996; Leipzig University) is visiting professor at the University of Leipzig. He was research assistant at Leipzig University. He is author of *Ablehnung des Krieges. Untersuchungen zu Sacharja 9 und 10* (Herders Biblische Studien 17) (Freiburg et al.: Herder, 1998); *Zions Weg zum Frieden. Jüdische Vorstellungen vom endzeitlichen Krieg und Frieden in hellenistischer Zeit am Beispiel von Sacharja 9–14* (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 2001); *Die Frauen und der König David. Studien zur Figuration von Frauen in den Daviderzählungen* (Arbeiten zur Bibel und ihrer Geschichte 9) (Leipzig: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 2004); *Der König Salomo. Von der Weisheit eines Frauenliebhabers* (Biblische Gestalten 9) (Leipzig: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 2004); *Kindheit in den antiken Mittelmeerkulturen* (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener, 2007).

ANDREAS LEHNARDT (PhD 1999, Free University Berlin) is professor for Jewish Studies at the University of Mainz. He is conducting a project on Hebrew binding fragments in Germany called ‘Genizat Germania’. He is author of *Qaddish. Studien Untersuchungen zur Entstehung und Rezeption eines rabbinischen Gebetes* (Texte und Studien zum Antiken Judentum 87) (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2002); *Rosh ha-Shana. Neujahr* (Übersetzung des Talmud Yerushalmi II/3) (Tübingen: Mohr, 2000); *Beša. Ei* (Übersetzung des Talmud Yerushalmi II/4) (Tübingen: Mohr, 2003); *Pesahim. Pesah-Opfer* (Übersetzung des Talmud Yerushalmi II/6) (Tübingen: Mohr, 2004); *Die Kasseler Talmudfragmente* (Kassel: University Press, 2007); *Ta’anivot. Fasten* (Übersetzungen des Talmud Yerushalmi II/9) (Tübingen: Mohr, 2008); *Die Jüdische Bibliothek an der Johannes Gutenberg-Universität Mainz 1938–2008* (Stuttgart: Steiner, 2009).

JOSEF M. OESCH (PhTh 1977, University of Innsbruck) was up to 2008 professor for Alttestamentliche Bibelwissenschaft at the University of Innsbruck. He was until his retirement Director of the Project „Hebräische Handschriften und Fragmente in österreichischen Bibliotheken“, continued now by Dr Martha Keil, St. Pölten. Among his publications are *Petucha und Setuma. Untersuchungen zu einer überlieferten Gliederung im hebräischen Text des Alten Testaments*, Orbis biblicus et orientalis 27 (Freiburg Schweiz: Universitäts-Verlag u.a., 1979); *Fragmenta Hebraica Austriaca*, ed. Christine Glassner; Josef M. Oesch (Wien: Verlag der Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, 2009).

JUDITH OLSZOWY-SCHLANGER (PhD 1995, Cambridge University) is professor at the Section des Sciences historiques et philologiques (Historical and Philological Sciences), École Pratique des Hautes Études, Sorbonne. She is author of *Karaite Marriage Contracts from the Cairo Geniza. Legal Traditions and Community Life in Mediaeval Egypt and Palestine* (Études sur le Judaïsme Médiéval 20) (Leiden: Brill, 1997); *Les manuscrits hébreux dans l’Angleterre médiévale: étude historique et paléographique* (Collection de la Revue des études juives, 29) (Paris-Louvain: Peeters, 2003).

MAURO PERANI is professor of Hebrew, and Hebrew codicology and palaeography at the Faculty of Preservation of Cultural Resources, University of Bologna, seat of Ravenna, and Director of the ‘Italian Genizah Project’, to which he has been associated for twenty years, in collaboration and with support of Italian and Israeli institutions. He has published many catalogues of the most important collections of the

fragments found in the 'Italian Genizah'. He is co-author with Encica Sagradini of *Talmudic and Midrashic Fragments from the "Italian Genizah": Reunification of the Manuscripts and Catalogue* (Firenze: Giuntina, 2004); for more references see the bibliography.

DANIEL POLAKOVIČ from the Jewish Museum in Prague is conducting a research project on Hebrew fragments in collections of Czech archives, libraries and museums. He has published the studies and articles mainly in year-book *Judaica Bohemiae*.

CALAMUS OR CHISEL:
ON THE HISTORY OF THE ASHKENAZIC SCRIPT

Edna Engel

The correlation between calamus writings (palaeography) and inscriptions (epigraphy), disputed in early palaeographic studies, strengthens the assumption these methods of writing are identical. Moreover, contemporary studies confirm that similar calligraphic features are revealed in both manuscripts and inscriptions.¹

Ashkenazic script is the Hebrew script that was employed in various medieval Western Europe territories, mainly in France and Germany. Many extant manuscripts, as well as documentary material, stars, charters and stone inscriptions, were written in this script between the twelfth and sixteenth centuries. Written in three main modes—square, semi-cursive and cursive—this Ashkenazic script, drawn with a quill, is beautiful and has outstanding graphic components. Thanks to the flexible quill, letters in this script are adorned with fine decorations and delicate hairlines that contribute to its elegance and marvelous calligraphic texture.²

The understanding of Ashkenazic script has recently been enriched by important research on the tombstones discovered in Würzburg.³

¹ The first to notice this relationship was C. Sirat. See her article 'Écriture sur pierre et écriture sur parchement', *La revue du louvre* 4 (1983): 249–254. Sirat compares the Hebrew medieval inscription found in Paris with Ashkenazic calligraphic script in the thirteenth century. For a methodological comparison of calamus writings with stone inscriptions, see: E. Engel, *The Development of The Hebrew Script From the Period of the Bar-Kokhba Revolt to 1000 A.D.*, Thesis submitted for the degree Doctor of Philosophy to The Hebrew University of Jerusalem, 1990.

² Recent research on Ashkenazic script will be published in two studies:

1. "Observations of the Ashkenazic script", in: *Specimens of Mediaeval Hebrew Scripts, vol. III, Ashkenazic script*, edited by E. Engel and M. Beit-Arié (to be published by the Israeli Academy of Sciences in 2009).
2. E. Engel, "Between France and Germany: Gothic Characteristics in Ashkenazic Script" included in a volume devoted to Professor C. Sirat, to be published by Cambridge University press.

³ In an international project entitled "Cultural Memory of the Würzburg Jewish Stones," the approximately 1500 gravestones from 1147 to 1346 that were discovered in Würzburg in 1987 were assembled, studied and classified. The project was initiated by Professor Dr Dr Karlheinz Müller of the University of Würzburg, with the

The study of these tombstones, together with the examination of other inscriptions found in German cemeteries, has helped to verify the relationship between calamus writings and stone inscriptions in Ashkenazic script.

This paper presents historical observations on square Ashkenazic script which are supported by comparisons between its appearance in calamus writings and in inscriptions on tombstones from Würzburg, Worms and Prague.

The Beginnings of Ashkenazic Script

Study of the emergence of Ashkenazic script substantiates the relationship between historical events and the geographical distribution of Hebrew scripts. Verifiable evidence for Jewish settlement in Germany is not known before the ninth century. At that time, massive immigrations to Germany from Italy on the one hand and from France and Provence on the other, initiated many settlements of Jews. Nevertheless, a European branch of Hebrew script is not found prior to the eleventh century.

All extant Hebrew texts written between the second century A.C. and the ninth century reveal a unified proto-square script, which seems common to all regions where Hebrew script was employed.⁴ The development of this script into regional types, around the eleventh century, gradually gave impetus to the growth of a European branch of Hebrew script, with the Ashkenazic style being preceded by the Italian. Furthermore, evidence indicates that the route of Oriental script to Germany started in the Middle East, made its way to the Iberian Peninsula via North Africa,⁵ then, probably, onward to Italy and Germany.

participation of Prof. Shim'on Schwarzfuchs, Dr Avraham (Rami) Reiner and this author's palaeographic contribution.

⁴ On the Hebrew script written between the second century A.C and the ninth century see *ibid.*, E. Engel, *The Development of The Hebrew Script From the Period of the Bar-Kokhba Revolt to 1000 A.D.*

⁵ See, E. Engel, "Styles of Hebrew Script in the Tenth and Eleventh Centuries in the Light of Dated and Datable Geniza Documents," in: M. A. Friedman (ed.), *Te'uda XV* (Tel-Aviv: Tel Aviv University, 1999), 386–387.



Plate 1. The First Dated Ashkenazic Manuscript

The first dated Ashkenazic codex contains the Babylonian Talmud written in 1177 (Plate 1).⁶ Its largest part was copied by a professional scribe, apparently named Izhak, who used a square script.⁷ The manuscript includes thirteen quires starting from *Seder Qidushim*.⁸ Its letters lack the fully square pattern of thirteenth century Ashkenaz, but rather, it exhibits a style of Ashkenazic script which resembles the Oriental proto-square script known from the eighth to tenth centuries.

A comparison of the script in Ms. Firenze with the Oriental and Italian proto-square script⁹ with the Ashkenazic script of the thirteenth century demonstrates the affinity of Ms. Firenze with the earlier style rather than with the later one (Plate 2).

The *alef* in Ms. Firenze, like that of the Oriental and Italian *alef*, slants to the right, and the base of its left leg is composed of a thin stroke. The *alef* from thirteenth century script has a vertical stance. A double stroked line constructs the base of its left leg.

The head of the *nun*, as with all other short horizontals (like *gimel* and *vav*), is shaped like a triangle, similar to that of the Oriental and

⁶ Ms. Firenze Bib. Nazionale II-I-7.

⁷ The name Izhak is dotted several times in the text (e.g., page 148).

⁸ Codicological and palaeographical descriptions of the manuscript are in *Sfardata*, the database of the Hebrew Palaeographic Project of the National Israeli Academy for Sciences.

⁹ The letters of Oriental proto-square script are from a Genizah fragment—a divorce form issued in Jerusalem in 872/3. The letters of the Italian proto-square script are from Ms. London, British Library, Add. 27214, copied in Italy in 1090/1091.

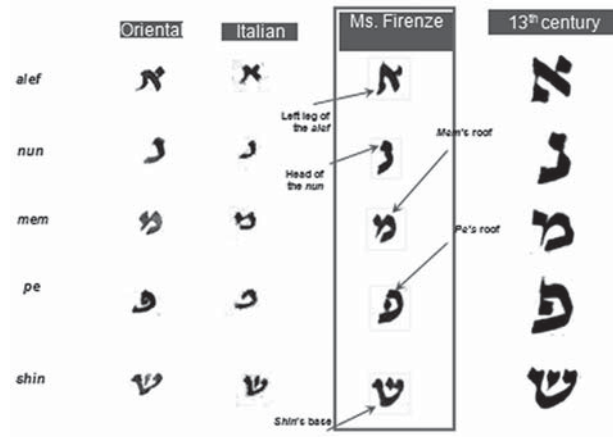


Plate 2. Beginnings of the Ashkenazic Script

Italian styles. The *nun*'s head in the thirteenth century specimen is made by a clear horizontal stroke.

The *mem*'s roof also demonstrates similar development. The twelfth century Ashkenazic letter, like the Oriental and Italian ones, still has a sharp pointed top, while the *mem*'s roof from the thirteenth century is made with a curved line.

The *pe* and the *shin* represent an intermediate stage, between those from the eleventh and the thirteenth centuries. The twelfth century *pe* has a small horizontal roof, more developed than the pointed one in the first two examples, but still lacking the large horizontal roof from the thirteenth century. A similar pattern is seen with the base of the *shin*. It has a pointed form in the first two examples. It then turns into a small curve in the earliest Ashkenazic style and into a larger curve in thirteenth century script.

Comparison of the earliest Ashkenazic script in Ms. Firenze with contemporary remnants of tombstones (Plate 3) confirms the resemblance of the early Ashkenazic script to the proto-script. In both calamus writing and inscriptions, all lines are schematic and rough and the script exhibits a common careless quality. Lines here have uniform width and they lack additional adornments such as heads, tags or serifs. The straight horizontal lines and straight verticals, as well as their right-angled connections, give an angular and sharp impression. The texture is condensed, characterized by small letters and narrow spaces between words and letters.

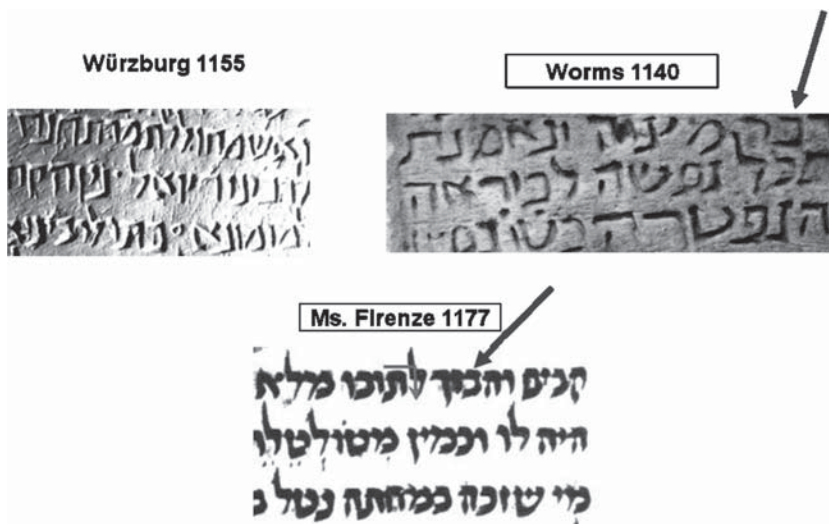


Plate 3. The 12th century: Script and Inscriptions



Plate 4. The 13th century



Plate 5. The 13th century: Scripts and Inscription

*The Thirteenth Century (Plate 4)*¹⁰

The thirteenth century marks the formation and crystallization of Ashkenazic script into a full-fledged writing, a process that reaches its peak toward the last third of the century. At this stage, the letters are larger, gaining greater bulk and ornamentation. Bold horizontal strokes with contrasting thin verticals replace the undifferentiated lines of twelfth century script. Tags and serifs adorn the horizontals and the even verticals of the twelfth century are transformed into undulated strokes.

These thirteenth century shifts are also manifested on tomb inscriptions. Plate 5 presents a tomb inscription from Würzburg dated to 1243 and a manuscript copied in 1272.¹¹ The comparable proportions and similar morphology of letters in both examples contribute to the close resemblance of this manuscript and inscription. This similarity is further emphasized by comparing these examples with the selection from Ms. Firenze (Plate 5).

¹⁰ Ms. Bibliotheca Apostolica Vaticana (Vatican), Vat. Ebr. 482, fol. 553v; copied in La Rochelle in 1215. By permission of the Vatican Library.

¹¹ Ms. Jerusalem, The Jewish National and University Library (JNUL) Heb. 4° 781/1, Germany 1272, known as the *Worms Mahzor*. By permission of the JNUL.

The pattern of the *alef* becomes elongated while still keeping the same connections between its three components. Similar modifications are visible in the *mem* and *lamed* respectively, showing a curved roof and a short thorn connected to the shaft.

While the earliest appearances of the twelfth century script still follow their origins in Oriental proto-square script, the development of the thirteenth century is marked by additional factors. The role of the Latin script is significant, but since it is manifest specifically in the semi-cursive mode, it is not treated here. Another influential occurrence is the development of clear distinctions between two major regional styles, German and French.

*The German Style*¹²

Letters in the German style have rigid forms (Plate 6/1).¹³ Their lines all match an elongated square pattern, exhibiting a large space inside each letter. Horizontal lines are stretched, leading to the partial elimination of their decorative additions. Verticals are made with erect strokes.

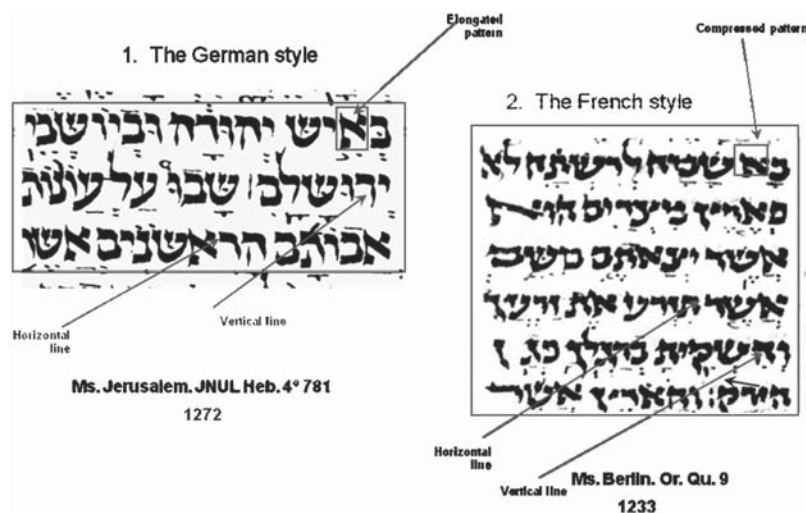


Plate 6.

¹² Ibid., Specimens of Mediaeval Hebrew Scripts (to be published).

¹³ Ibid., Ms. JNUL.

Due to the meticulous strokes that form the lines of each letter, German square script is characterized by its homogenous appearance. The script's texture is more spacious and its shading is marked by wide horizontals that contrast its thin vertical lines.

*The French Style*¹⁴

Unlike the elongated figure of the German style, letters in the French style (Plate 6/2)¹⁵ have a wider and compressed pattern. Their inner space is smaller and most lines—horizontal and vertical—are inclined, soft and undulating. Verticals are shorter than those of the German style, thus creating a smaller distance between the roof of the letter and its base. In contrast to the rigid and homogeneous image of the German style, letters in the French style have a wavering and unsteady look.

It is not surprising that inscriptions on the Würzburg tombstones present the same German style manifest in Ashkenazic manuscripts, as demonstrated on the three stones dated from the 1240s (Plate 7). However, the presence of the French style on Würzburg tombstones from the 1230s (Plate 8) raises a question. A comparison of these three inscriptions with a French manuscript (Plate 8)¹⁶ demonstrates letters in the distinctive French style, with their small size and weighty appearance (as a result of small interior spaces relative to their wide contours). Horizontal lines are soft and undulated. Vertical lines are inclined, either short or curved, providing a curved appearance to the whole letter.¹⁷

¹⁴ Ibid. (to be published).

¹⁵ Ms. Staatsbibliothek zu Berlin, Ms. Or quart 9, fol. 115v, copied in Rouen (France) in 1233. By permission of the Staatsbibliothek of Berlin.

¹⁶ Ms. Bibliotheca Apostolica Vaticana (Vatican), Vat. Ebr. 482, fol. 553v, *ibid.*, note 10.

¹⁷ During the twelfth century there seems to have been distinct regional difference between these two centers, however researchers do not agree about the exact time of these changes. According to Prof. Yaakov Sussmann the distinct regional difference between the two geographical centers—French and German—began to fade around the second half of the thirteenth century. Dr. Avraham (Rami) Reiner claims that mutual influences between the two centers started well before. According to his approach, German students traveled to study in the academy of Rabbenu Tam in France. When they returned to the Rhineland communities (at the beginning of the thirteenth century), they brought with them the new methods of study which originated in the French academies. Perhaps those new French methods, brought to the German communities, can explicate the existence of script in the French style in Würzburg during this period?



Würzburg 1247

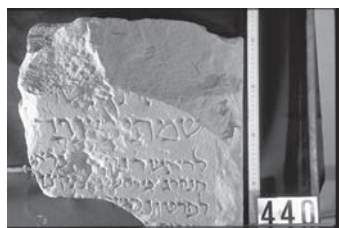


Würzburg 1243



Würzburg 1244

Plate 7.



Würzburg 1236



Würzburg 1236/37



La Rochelle 1215/6



Würzburg 1239

Plate 8.



Plate 9. The 14th century

The Fourteenth Century

The characteristic image of the thirteenth century's square script is maintained in fourteenth century script (Plate 9).¹⁸ However, the calligraphy of the Ashkenazic script already reaches its peak in the last third of the thirteenth century. That is the time when Gothic art flourishes in Germany and France, as demonstrated by architecture, sculpture and other arts. Hebrew script does not fall behind.

One apparent result of the expulsions of Jews from France is the status of the elegant German style remaining as the single extant regional style from the fourteenth century onwards.

The meticulous German script, refined in the fourteenth century by the neat cutting of the quill, strikes the eye with the new quality of its strokes. The relatively bold and even strokes typical of the thirteenth century are changed into large thick horizontals, contrasted by thin delicate verticals. This contrast enlarges letters' interior spaces. Horizontals are straight, the joint between horizontals and verticals turns into a decorative element, and verticals are changed into a form that resembles a drop shape. The drop shape is a prominent feature of the verticals. Already appearing in the thirteenth century, it becomes a distinctive feature of many modes and styles of Ashkenazic script in the fourteenth century. Like the verticals, horizontals also have more

¹⁸ Ms. Jerusalem, Israel Museum 180/94, copied in 1344. By permission of the Israel Museum.

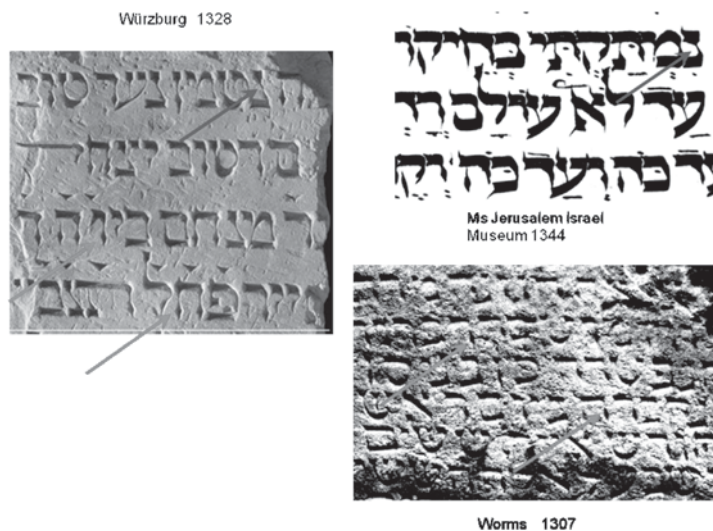


Plate 10. The 14th century: Script and Inscriptions

decorative elements, such as serifs and fork shapes at the edges of their strokes.

Würzburg and Worms tomb inscriptions from the fourteenth century manifest this same idea of calligraphic intensification (Plate 10). Their fine and elegant character is evident by emphasized shading with wide horizontal lines that contrast thin verticals, but most of all by the drop shape of the verticals, which asserts their affinity to contemporary Ashkenazic writing (demonstrated in Plate 10). The refined and distinctive appearance of this script, in stone as well as in manuscripts, is exemplified by the *nun*, whose slanted and delicate vertical expresses a clear contrast to its wide horizontals.

The Fifteenth Century

The square script of the fifteenth century can be portrayed as a simplification of fourteenth century script. As straighter lines become integral to letter forms, the decorative features are reduced (Plate 11).¹⁹

¹⁹ Ms. Jerusalem, The Jewish National and University Library (JNUL) Heb. 4° 1114, copied in 1418. By permission of JNUL.

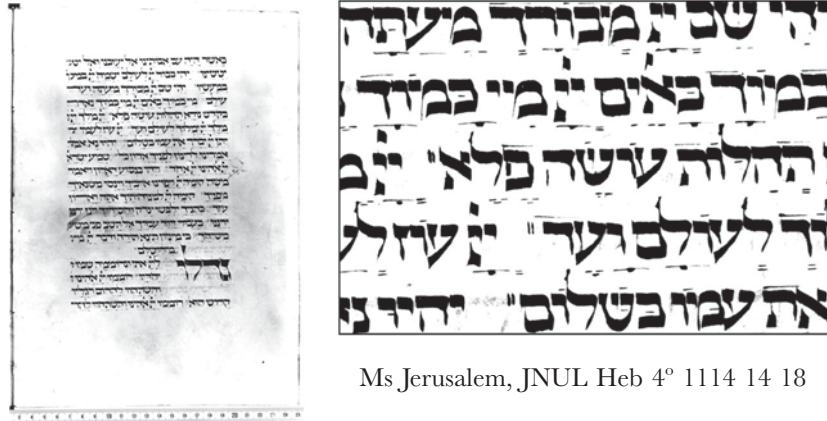


Plate 11. The 15th century

Letters are mostly built using bare lines, almost entirely lacking any decorative elements.

However, the calligraphic script still has a distinct elegance, mainly extant in the handwriting of professional scribes like Yoel ben Shimon, a scribe and artist who emigrated from Germany to North Italy and continued to use his native Ashkenazic script (Plate 12). Although he was active in Italy, his handwriting is of particular interest for its display of the square Ashkenazic script of his time.²⁰

Despite its elegance, Yoel's handwriting can easily be dated to the fifteenth century, since it lacks most of the ornamental features that were typical of the fourteenth century. Its squarish pattern is accentuated by the straight alignment of the horizontals, the right-angled joints between horizontals and verticals, and the wide spaces inside letters. The shading from the fourteenth century is furthered by wide horizontals in contrast to very thin verticals. The uniformity of fifteenth century script is emphasized by the erect stance of letters, arranged precisely side by side.

An example of these same characteristics in an inscription is found on a tombstone from 1492 in the cemetery in Prague (Plate 13).²¹

²⁰ See, Y. Zirlin, *The Early Works of Joel ben Simeon, A Jewish Scribe and Artist in the 15th Century*, Thesis submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy to the Senate of The Hebrew University of Jerusalem, January 1995.

²¹ See, O. Muneles (ed.), *Epitaphs From The Ancient Jewish Cemetery of Prague* (Jerusalem: Israeli Academy of Sciences, 1988), 52 (Plate 9).



Plate 12. The 15th century—Yoel ben Shimon' script

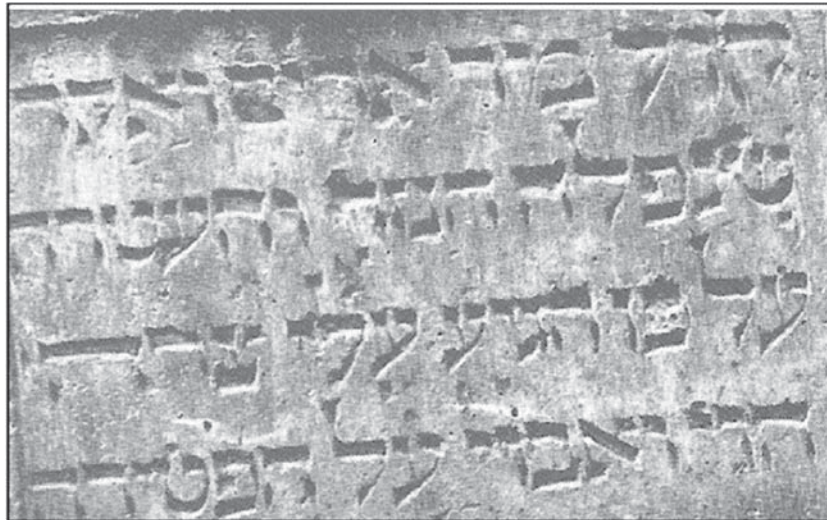


Plate 13. The 15th century—Prague 1492

Although limited by the engraver's technique, the cutting maintains typical features of the period, such as the straight alignment of the horizontals and the conspicuous shading between wide horizontals and slender verticals.

Conclusion

This article uses palaeographic criteria to demonstrate the evolution of square Ashkenazic script: from its beginnings as a simple script, to its ornamented shapes during the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, through the mid-fifteenth century, when the quality of medieval Hebrew script has been fully transformed.

However, the main aim of analyzing scripts according to such palaeographic criteria is to place undated pieces, as illustrated by the dating of two fragments from 'Genizat Germania' (Plate 14),²² a *Mahzor* fragment found in Kassel Universitätsbibliothek and a biblical fragment found in Speyer.

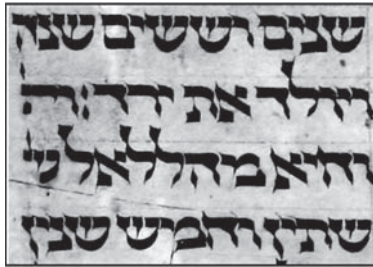
The first specimen shows, in this author's opinion, an affinity to fourteenth century script. The stance of letters is inclined, their interior spaces are not large (contrasting their wide contours) and decorative elements, such as the drop shape, are emphasized.

The Speyer fragment illustrates an intermediate character, which this author would date to the late fourteenth or early fifteenth century. Some decorations from the fourteenth century style are retained, such as serifs and fork shapes at the edges of horizontal strokes. However, the overall vision, exhibited by large spaces inside letters, straight horizontals and very thin verticals is closer to typical fifteenth century script.

²² Plates of the Germany Genizah are published by permission of Prof. Dr. Andreas Lehnardt, Mainz.



Speyer Landesarchiv Fr. Nr. 148



Kassel Universitätsbibliothek



Ms Jerusalem Israel Museum
180/34

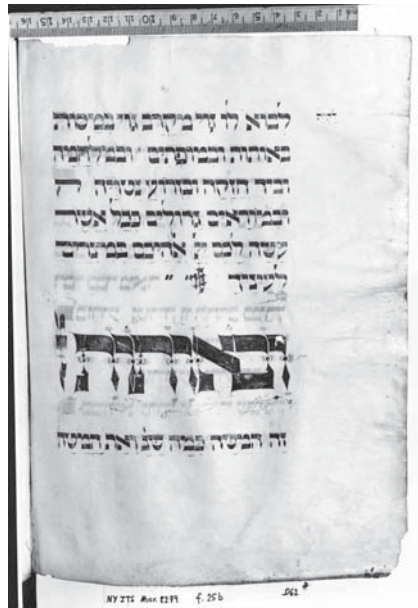


Plate 14. 'Genizat Germania'