Immanuel of Rome’s *Bisbidis*: An Italian *Maqāma*?

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**Abstract**

Although Immanuel of Rome’s *Bisbidis* abounds with onomatopoeic inventiveness, it has received little critical attention aside from its status as a curiosity: a dazzling poem by the only Italian Jew with extant medieval Italian lyrics. While this paper explores Immanuel’s familiarity with works by Cecco Angiolieri, Dante Alighieri, and other duecento Italian poets, it aims to demonstrate the ways in which *Bisbidis* embodies the medieval Hebrew-via-Arabic genre of the maqāma. After providing background on secular medieval Hebrew literature composed in the Mediterranean region and situating Immanuel’s composition in its literary-historical context, I evaluate several components – including thematic, formal, and philological correspondences – that *Bisbidis* shares with the Hebrew maqāma.

**Keywords**

Immanuel of Rome – Italy – maqāma – Hebrew literature in Italy – Italian lyric

Immanuel of Rome’s *Bisbidis* is as much an outlier as Immanuel the poet, a contemporary of Dante and the only Jew with extant medieval Italian lyrics. *Bisbidis* has received little attention beyond that of critics who wonder at its unprecedented onomatopoeia and begrudgingly attribute to Immanuel “the pulse and temperament of a real poet.”

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1 Immanuel’s poem is given the title “Bisbidis di Manoello Giudo a Magnificentia di Messer Cane dela Scala” in Rome, Biblioteca Casanatense, MS 433, fol. 124r, and “Bisbio di Manuello giudeo, a Magnificenza di m. Cane dalla Scala” in Bologna, Biblioteca Universitaria, MS 1289, fol. 18r. For the sake of continuity, I refer to the poem as *Bisbidis*, even though its incipit,
lyric a *frottola* – a multi-stanza form of secular music – its characteristics seem not to match the frottola, which did not gain in popularity until the late-fifteenth century. Accordingly, rather than call *Bisbidis* a frottola, which would render Immanuel one of the earliest experimenters in the form alongside Petrarch (1304–1374), it seems more productive to acknowledge that this poem does not adhere neatly to one Italian lyric form. While many of Immanuel’s fellow Italian poets of the late-thirteenth and early-fourteenth centuries were eschewing linguistic variety in favor of streamlined, elegant, *stilnovist* verses, and while others were busy parodying this lyric from within, Immanuel was actively inventing new words and introducing new themes into his vernacular lyric experiment. One could perhaps ascribe Immanuel’s impulse for poetic difference to Cecco Angiolieri and his comic innovations; or one could look to Dante and the unparalleled form and contents of the *Divine Comedy*. Though I explore Immanuel’s Cecco-esque renegade spirit, his invocation of Dantean poetics, and his possible nods to other *duecento* Italian poets in the pages that follow, I instead propose that Immanuel’s *Bisbidis* more closely embodies the medieval Hebrew-via-Arabic genre of the *maqāma* than it does any Italian lyric form. After providing background on secular medieval Hebrew literature

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3 In his analysis of Cecco Angiolieri’s poetry, Fabian Alfie debunks the notion of distinct groups of comic versus non-comic poets. His reinterpretation of categories likewise fits Immanuel, whose Italian lyrics do not fit neatly into one mode, though editors have traditionally placed him among the *poeti giocosi*: Fabian Alfie, *Comedy and Culture: Cecco Angiolieri’s Poetry and Late Medieval Society* (Leeds: Northern Universities Press, 2001), 5.

composed in the Mediterranean region and situating Immanuel’s poem in its literary-historical context, I examine how Immanuel used this poem as a vessel through which to render the maqama in Italian. The following analyses evaluate several components – among them thematic, formal, and philological correspondences – that Bisbidis shares with the maqama.

1 Immanuel’s Literary Environs

Immanuel ben Solomon of Rome (1261–ca. 1335), known in Hebrew as Immanuel ha-Romi (Immanuel of Rome) and in Italian as Manoello/Manoel/Manuel Romano or Giudeo (Immanuel the Roman; Immanuel the Jew), was a poet, philosopher, and biblical exegete. In addition to claiming the title of first poet to write a sonnet in a language other than Italian or Occitan (Hebrew was the target language), Immanuel is the only Jewish poet whose Italian lyrics from this period are extant, surviving in six manuscripts. Bisbidis appears in two of these six: Rome, Biblioteca Casanatense, MS 433, and Bologna, Biblioteca Universitaria, MS 1289.

Frustratingly little of Immanuel’s life is known; most of the biographical information that scholars have propagated as fact is drawn from Immanuel’s fictional writings. He might have held a permanent position of importance in the Jewish community of Rome, likely managing the community’s correspondence.


He seems to have left Rome in 1321, possibly due to the 1321 papal edict to expel the Jews from Rome, though historians are unsure of how stringently the Church enforced the edict. Historians and literary scholars alike imagine that Immanuel moved among Perugia, Fabriano, Fermo, Camerino, Ancona, Gubbio, and Verona, having compiled this unreliable itinerary from Immanuel’s fictional compositions. Of this list, Gubbio is the only location beyond mere speculation, given Immanuel’s tenzone (sonnet exchange) with Bosone da Gubbio and given the moniker “Manuel Giudeo da Gobio” in the Vatican manuscript containing his Italian lyrics, amounting to circumstantial evidence, at best.⁷

Immanuel is best known for his Maḥberot Immanuel [The Maqamas/Stories/Sessions of Immanuel], a Hebrew text of twenty-eight stories in rhymed prose and poetry that is considered to be a Hebrew maqama. In addition to the Maḥberot Immanuel, Immanuel also wrote the following: a treatise in Hebrew on the symbolism of the Hebrew alphabet (not extant); a Hebrew hermeneutic text, Even Boḥan [Examination of Stone]; Hebrew commentaries on most of the Hebrew Bible; an invective epistle in Hebrew to fellow polymath Hillel ben Samuel of Verona; and five poems in vernacular Italian: four sonnets and Bisbidis. Though scholars have devoted some attention to the Italian sonnets, Bisbidis has received very little sustained critical consideration, aside from comments by Leonello Modona and a recent partial explication by Umberto Fortis.⁸

In Immanuel’s Italy, Hebrew was not a spoken language. His Hebrew writing reflects an evolution of the tradition of Andalusian Jews who, in the “Golden Age of Hebrew letters” (ca. 950–1150), spoke Arabic, wrote philosophical, medical, scientific, grammatical, literary, and mathematical treatises in Judeo-Arabic and reserved biblical Hebrew for their secular and devotional poetic compositions.⁹ By Immanuel’s time, many Jews had been forced out of Southern Spain to Northern Spain, Southern France, Italy, North Africa, and elsewhere. Transplanted Andalusian Jews continued their scholarly pursuits in their new locations, translating sources from Arabic and Judeo-Arabic into Hebrew to reach non-Arabic readers. Given his purported position of power

⁷ Vatican City, Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, Vaticano Latino Barberiniano 3953, fol. 128v.
in the Jewish community of Rome, it seems likely that Immanuel’s family had been living in Rome for generations, where Jews were established as early as 139 BCE. Immanuel’s generation of Roman Jews nonetheless accessed and mastered Andalusi intellectualism via its Hebrew texts and translations.

While the Hispano-Hebraic authors from whom Immanuel gleaned many literary techniques spoke Arabic in their daily lives – which becomes clear in their Judeo-Arabic writings and in their occasional Arabic-language calques in Hebrew compositions – Immanuel is highly unlikely to have known Arabic. Even though Hebrew was deeply theologically and philologically ingrained in him, he composed and likely conversed in (Judeo-)Romanesco, Tuscan, or other dialects, depending on the context. Accordingly, Immanuel’s Hebrew and Italian writings add additional layers to the already complex linguistic reality of Andalusian Jewry: maintain the biblical and Mishnaic Hebrew; remove the spoken Arabic, but conserve the Classical Arabic poetic forms, meters, and themes, along with the Andalusi culture of intellectualism; and add spoken and written dialects of medieval Italy, with their host of hermeneutic intricacies.

2 Immanuel and the Hebrew Maqama

Immanuel’s best-known work, the Maḥberot Immanuel, draws its formal inspiration from the Hebrew maqama, a prosimetric form comprising rhymed prose narratives and interspersed rhymed, metered poems. The Hebrew maqama was adapted from the Arabic maqama, which was invented by Badiʿ al-Zamān al-Hamadhānī (968–1008) in the region known today as northeastern Iran. In a typical Arabic maqama, a narrator recounts the fictional “adventures and eloquent speeches” of a roguish, anti-heroic protagonist who is often in disguise and whose identity is only revealed at the story’s end.10 Although al-Hamadhānī is credited with generating the first example, the fifty maqamas of al-Ḥarīrī of Baṣra (1054–1122) became the benchmark of the genre, “a symbol of Arabic eloquence and stylistic dexterity” that fulfilled a didactic rather than purely recreational function.11 Thanks to al-Ḥarīrī, the Arabic maqama quickly gained traction in literary circles as a scholarly genre that showcased the comprehensive secular education in the humanities

and sciences (known as adab) that privileged Muslims – and by extension Jews – prized.\textsuperscript{12} In al-Andalus, al-Saraqūstī (d. 1143) attempted to imitate and surpass al-Ḥarīrī with his own collection of fifty maqāmas, employing a complex two-consonant rhyme scheme.\textsuperscript{13} Other Andalusian maqāmas broke with the classic scheme: while still fictional, these writings served a courtly purpose, rather than a playfully didactic function.\textsuperscript{14}

Although the Arabic maqāma flourished in the eleventh and twelfth centuries, Jewish writers of that period in the east and in al-Andalus did not quickly adopt the genre as they had Arabic poetic styles in the tenth century; rather, Jews living in Christian Iberia were the ones to develop a Hebrew version of the maqāma some two centuries after its invention in Arabic.\textsuperscript{15} Of these collections, the Taḥkemoni by Judah al-Ḥarizi (1165–1225) most closely followed the narrator-hero model of the Arabic maqāma.\textsuperscript{16} It is not surprising that the Taḥkemoni mirrored its Arabic counterparts: though al-Ḥarizi vehemently denied any influence of al-Ḥarīrī of Basra’s maqāmas on his own Taḥkemoni, he composed the Taḥkemoni only after translating al-Ḥarīrī’s entire maqāma collection from Arabic to Hebrew, which he biblicized and selectively Judaized.\textsuperscript{17}


\textsuperscript{13} Drory, “The Maqāma,” 193.

\textsuperscript{14} Drory, “The Maqāma,” 196.


\textsuperscript{16} Taḥkemoni is a proper noun referring to the name of one of David’s warriors in 2 Samuel 23:8.

Other so-called Hebrew maqamas written in Christian Spain, such as Jacob ben El'azar’s early-thirteenth-century *Sefer ha-meshalim* [The Book of Stories] and Isaac Ibn Sahula’s 1281 *Meshal ha-qadmoni* [The Story of the Ancient One], moved away from the canonical model toward varied narrative structures with fictitious plots and/or allegorical frameworks. Similarly, while some of the maqamas in Immanuel’s twenty-eight-chapter *Maḥberot Immanuel* follow the narrator-hero pattern, others diverge into formats that do not rely on Immanuel’s interactions with the *sar* (minister, nobleman, or prince). Still, Immanuel’s collection maintains the maqama’s signature prosimetric structure, with the exception of the final maqama of the collection, *Tofet wa-ʿeden* [Hell and Paradise], a rhymed prose text with no poetic passages.

Although Immanuel was highly unlikely to have had direct access to the Arabic maqama tradition, he was clearly aware of the Hispano-Hebraic maqama, and he refers to Judah al-Ḥarizi’s *Ṭahkemoni* in his *Maḥberot Immanuel* by name. Immanuel’s reliance on the *Ṭahkemoni* as his link to the world of the maqama is significant: while al-Ḥarizi took the introduction to the *Ṭahkemoni* as an opportunity to showcase his personal authorial talents and to spurn any connection to al-Ḥarīrī’s Arabic maqama collection (an improbable claim), he simultaneously aimed to position Hebrew as a language worthy of engaging Arabic in a literary rivalry. In fact, despite their varied forms, many Hebrew maqama-esque works, including the *Ṭahkemoni* and *Sefer ha-meshalim*, share an urge to justify the composition of one such work in Hebrew, as opposed to the purportedly more dexterous Arabic language. For al-Ḥarizi, this task

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19  For a translation into English, see Immanuel Ben Solomon, *Tophet and Eden (Hell and Paradise)*, trans. Gollancz (London: University of London Press, 1921); for analysis of contents, see Dana Fishkin, “Situating Hell & Heaven: Immanuel of Rome’s *Mahberet Ha-Tophet V’ Ha-Eden,*” (Ph.D. Dissertation, New York University, 2011). It should also be noted that in Classical Arabic literature – and by extension medieval Hebrew literature – rhymed prose was considered to be prose and was never classified as poetry.

was at once literary and personal, as he embraced the metaphor of reviving Hebrew for the benefit of the Jewish people:

Therefore, I composed this book to show the strength of the Holy Tongue to the holy people whose eyes are bedaubed that they cannot see, their thoughts that they cannot understand. And everyone who seeks to perceive the pleasantness of its themes and to delight himself in the gardens of its thoughts and to draw from the running waters of its wells will find within it gardens and parks, beds of myrtles and drops of dew, turtle doves and swallows, and cups of sweet wine as the waters that cover the sea, and spacious mansions and damsels very many – this one strikes the strings and that one sings. This one stirs up love and that one kindles flames in the innermost heart with erotic songs and sweet expressions carved from the crag of my side and cut from my invention.  

Before even referencing the Taḥkemoni or mentioning al-Ḥarizi by name, Immanuel takes up al-Ḥarizi's notion of language competition in the introduction to the Maḥbarot. Immanuel does not dwell on the necessity of showing Hebrew's superiority to Arabic, as he was not linguistically capable of such judgment; rather, he refocuses the competition towards his own poetic virtuosity with respect to jealous admirers. Immanuel claims to have chosen this genre for its ability to provide a prose structure to guard his poems from envious fans who want to pilfer his Hebrew verses and claim them as their own: “There were among us men who in their stupidity sang the praises of others in attendance; some boasted that they had composed verses of my own composition” (wa-yiheyu vanu’anashim ‘asher higi’a mi-sikhlutam lehitpa’er be-shirim ḥibarem zulatam u-quine’atam hitpa’aru ve-shirim ḥibaretim ve-he’lamti ‘enai mehem).  

Once he has established a reason for composing/compiling his prosimetrums, Immanuel designates his interlocutor (or, rather, the interlocutor of his pseudo-autobiographical self) as the one who first refers to al-Ḥarizi. This

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22 Immanuel ben Solomon, Maḥberot Immanuel, 2 vols., ed. Dov Jarden (Jerusalem: Bialik Institute, 1957), 1:3, ll. 11–12. Translations from the Maḥberot Immanuel are my own unless otherwise indicated.
figure, the sar, urges Immanuel to gather his poetry and prose together in the style he has seen in the book of “Rabbi Yehuda Ḥarizi.” In a manner that recalls the mixture of audacity and self-deprecation of Dante in Inferno 2 – “For I am not Aeneas, I am not Paul” (Io non Enëa, io non Paulo sono) – Immanuel questions his own ability to undertake such a task and heaps praise on al-Ḥarizi’s maqama collection, but, resolving to compile his own book, he offers a versified prayer to Poesy and thanks to God.23

3 Modeling Hebrew Rhymed Prose onto Italian Lyric

With this background on Immanuel’s literary formation in mind, the reader is now equipped to begin assessing Bisbidis. Music historians classify the frottola as a learned style that was intended for performance at court, rather than as a popular or folk composition, even though the form invited elements of improvisation.24 Characterized as a poem “lacking literary quality” produced by a talentless “hack” who was “trying to keep his job at court,” the typical late-fifteenth-century frottola was not even considered worthy of placement in a lyric anthology and was most often relegated to a single sheet printing.25 Anachronism aside, the elements of this description could not be further from the reception of Immanuel’s poem: not only does Bisbidis appear in two anthologies featuring the most renowned duecento Italian poets but it also displays precisely the inventive and clever lyric details that the later corpus of frottole seems to lack. The only aspect of the frottola corpus that seems to match the tone – if not the underlying significance – of Immanuel’s composition is the meaning of the word frottola as something jocular, which is perhaps why literary historians grasped at this categorization.26 While it is true that Immanuel’s repetitious sound words are genuinely playful, they serve highly complex roles in the poem beyond that of furnishing it with ample banter.

The relatively free-flowing discourse of Immanuel’s poem is completely unlike the sonnet or canzone, not to mention anathema to the hermetic formal character of the terza rima of the Divine Comedy. If pressed to categorize

**Bisbidis**, the Italian-via-Occitan _sirventese_ would be more fitting, if only for its rhyme scheme and for the fact that Immanuel composed a _sirventese_ in Hebrew; beyond a consistent B rhyme, however, _Bisbidis_ shares little in common with the _sirventese_ corpus, particularly when it comes to its most conspicuous attributes, namely its length and _onomatopoeia_. Indeed, its relatively liberal formal constraints and overarching prose-like lyricism fit much more naturally into the rubric of the _maqama_.

In addition to granting the poet relative compositional freedom, Immanuel's unconventional poem has an undeniable musicality that allowed him to enact the music theory he posited in his Hebrew-language commentary on Genesis. In the commentary, Immanuel considers the question of the biblical origins of music with respect to contemporary music practices, moving swiftly from praising Yuval (Genesis 4:21) as “the father of those who play instruments” to condemning the profane uses of music in his current time: “Nowadays, this art is being crushed by the [impure ones] who corrupted its magnificence by using it in taverns and for singing lust songs.” Amnon Shiloah explains that in criticizing Provencal lyrics, Immanuel follows in the footsteps of Jacob Anatoli (1194–1256), the Provencal-Jewish translator of Arabic philosophical texts who served as court physician to Frederick II and possibly worked as a collaborator with translator Michael Scot (whom Dante places in _Inferno_ 20).

One might be tempted to consider Immanuel's lamenting the depravity of contemporary music as contradictory to his own experimentations in secular lyrics in both Hebrew and Italian. Immanuel, however, strives to justify his secular compositions, begging the reader of his _Maḥbarot_ , as Shiloah notes, to consider that music itself had been “stolen”: “What says the science of music to the Christians? / The answer was: I was stolen from the land of the Hebrews” ( _maʾomeret ḥokhmat ha-nigun el ha-noṣrim? gunov gunavti me-ʾereṣ ha-ʿivrim_ ). Perhaps inspired by al-Ḥarizi’s avowal in the _Taḥkemoni_ to reclaim the “stolen waters” of Hebrew language and rhetoric, Immanuel seems to have

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cleverly adapted Maimonides’s (Moses ben Maimon, 1135–1204) theory on prophetic origins to the context of Italian/Christian lyrics to justify his assertion of music’s inherent connection to Judaism. This argument for music’s biblical origins would have distanced Immanuel’s writing historically and theologically from any sources of corruption. Immanuel’s poem seems to be an extension of this argument of origins: replete with medieval Hebrew literary elements and equipped with a sturdy base of biblical (and also post-biblical) Hebrew, it was poised to show knowing readers of Italian the potency of Hebrew letters via lyric form.

Immanuel begins this effort in the opening of Bisbidis in which he engages the very trope of compositional justification that opens most maqamas: “Of all I heard and saw and understood, / now I am inflamed to want to recount” (Di quel ch’aggio inteso – veduto e compreso, / mi sono ora acceso – a volerlo contare). As a late-thirteenth–early-fourteenth-century itinerant Jewish poet in Italy who existed outside of conventional social circles, Immanuel’s willingness to defy lyric conventions is either remarkable or remarkably natural. The following formal analyses bolster what Immanuel’s literary legacy has already made clear: his lyric experiment fits logically with his assertive, aspirational literary agenda.

4 The Cast of Characters in Bisbidis

Immanuel’s poem begins and ends with praise for Verona and its philanthropic and politically savvy ruler Cangrande della Scala (1291–1329). In the opening verses, Immanuel recounts his far and wide travels before announcing “the only place that holds the crown is Verona, / renowned for its words and deeds” (ché pur la corona – ne porta Verona, / per quel che si suona – del dire e del fare). The concluding verses return to the notion of endless traveling but

31 To connect Immanuel with Maimonides, I draw on Jonathan Decter’s analyses of Maimonides’s discussion of “prophetic plagiarism” in the context of the Taḥkemoni: Decter explains that al-Ḥarizi (to whom Immanuel refers repeatedly in his Maḥberot Immanuel) draws on Maimonides’s notion of the biblical prophets as the original prophets (The Guide of the Perplexed 2.40) in order to critique Muhammad’s claim to prophet-hood, and, by extension, to claim that as the original holy language, Hebrew innately contained all of the rhetorical flourishes brought to the fore by Arabic poetry. Thus, in the Taḥkemoni, al-Ḥarizi was reclaiming what had been “stolen away” and “stolen waters”: Decter, “Rendering Qur’anic Quotations,” 359–1. Immanuel, by further extension, seems to reclaim music and poetry as possessing origins in Judaism.

32 Poeti giocosi, ed. Marti, 322. The text of Bisbidis in Appendix A follows Marti’s edition. The translation of the poem is my own; many thanks to Teodolinda Barolini for her meticulous
with a difference: Verona revives the world-weary Immanuel, who dedicates his onomatopoeic masterpiece to Cangrande: “And here is the gentleman – of great valor / whose great honor is known on land and by sea” (E questo è ’l signore – di tanto valore, / che ’l suo grande onore – va in terra e per mare). In between these poetic boundaries, Cangrande serves as counselor to the poet who strives to comprehend a lofty Love:

With Love here in the hall of Cangrande della Scala,
seemingly without wings, I fly

(ch’Amor è ’n la sala – del Sir de la Scala.
e qui vi senza’ala – mi parea volare)

as mentor in charity:

Here’s a home for the infirm, the blind:
the generosity [of Cangrande] keeps them going

(Quivi è un vecchiüme – che non vede lume,
ché largo costume – li fa governare)

and as model of decorous wealth management:

But the most costly things – to Cangrande they’re nothing:
see across the stairs how they steal the precious plates.

(Ma quel che più vale, – e al Sir non ne cale,
veder per le scale – taglier trafugare)

It seems more than mere coincidence that Immanuel would be drawn to the figure of Cangrande della Scala, given that Cangrande was Dante’s patron

who receives ample praise in *Paradiso* 17. As in portions of the *Mahberot Immanuel*, here, too, Immanuel is intent on comparing himself to Dante, and this experimental lyric provides the perfect medium through which to fashion himself as composer at the very court that patronized Dante. Beyond conveniently imbuing Immanuel with a Dantine level of poetic sponsorship, the poem’s figuration of Cangrande as patron creates an unmistakable structural parallel between the *Mahberot Immanuel* and *Bisbidis*: both trace the relationship of an economically dependent poet and a wealthy and cultured superior. In the *Mahberot Immanuel*, Immanuel tweaks the protagonist/narrator paradigm of the Classical Arabic and canonical Hebrew maqamas, figuring himself as the narrator and the hero/protagonist as his patron, the *sar* – amounting to an exact mirror of the poet-patron paradigm of *Bisbidis*.

The mercenary relationship between Immanuel and the *sar* is most clearly articulated in the third story of the *Maḥbarot*, which in manuscript and print editions of the text is titled *Megilat ha-ḥesheq* [*The Scroll of Love*]. In the *Scroll*, the *sar* goads Immanuel into seducing a nun via poetic exchange. When Immanuel’s poetry succeeds in winning her affections, the *sar* reveals that the nun is his half-sister and demands that Immanuel back down or else he will refuse to continue patronizing Immanuel. In other places in the *Maḥbarot*, Immanuel reaffirms their relationship with expressions of *captatio benevolentiae*. Within the fictional construct of the *Maḥberot Immanuel*, the *sar* is not only a friend but also someone to whom Immanuel the narrator is indebted. The same scheme holds in *Bisbidis*; Cangrande is omnipresent and influential, even if he does not speak.

In addition to encountering the hero, the narrators in both Arabic and Hebrew maqamas and *Bisbidis* also meet or observe people from all segments of society and view an array of animals, from ordinary to exotic. Historians have found little evidence documenting the scene of the Scaligeri court in Verona in the early decades of the fourteenth century, nor would it be productive to use this poem as evidence for the cosmopolitan opulence of Verona, as

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34 For instance, the mahberet is titled *Megilat ha-ḥesheq* in Parma, Biblioteca Palatina, MS 2121, fol. 192r, and in the first print edition of *Sefer ha-maḥbarot*, Brescia: Gershom Soncino, 1491. For analysis and a partial translation of the third maḥberet, see Ann Brener, “The Scroll of Love by Immanuel of Rome: A Hebrew Parody of Dante’s *Vita Nuova*,” *Prooftexts* 32.2 (2012): 149–175.
historians have done. In fact, the potentially fictional elements in this poem lend further support to the claim that Immanuel's poem invokes the literary-fictional maneuvers of the Hebrew maqama. In Bisbidis, the narrator mentions a wide range of people, from knights to thieves:

matrons, maidens, widows, maids, barons, marquises, Germans, Italians, French, Flemish, English, singers, minstrels, troubadours, falconers, masters, squires, boys, messengers, fools, pilgrims to Rome and elsewhere, Jews, Muslims, the elderly blind, the poor, the lowly peasants, the lord of such great valor.

(donne, donzelle, vedove, fantesche, baroni, marchesi, Tedeschi, Latini, Franceschi, Fiammenghi, Ingheleschi, cantori, intonatori, trovatori, mangiatori, falconieri, maestri, scudieri, ragazzi, corrieri, babbuini, Romei, pellegrini, Giudei, Sarracini, vecchiume che non vede lume, poverame, villani, il signore di tanto valore.)

The figures on this list, both savory and unsavory, appear regularly in a range of Arabic and Hebrew maqamas, from the protagonist who cheats the country bumpkin to warriors and ferocious lions, pairings that appear in both al-Hamadhānī’s and al-Ḥarizi’s maqama collections. The Maḥberot Immanuel likewise features a range of figures, from the nun in the third maḥberet to a poet who steals clothes from Immanuel in the twentieth. Further, in the ninth maḥberet, Immanuel provides an inventory of professions, fleshing out his enumeration of peoples. Gustavo Sacerdote has linked Immanuel’s list in the ninth maḥberet to Peire da Corbiac’s Tesoro, by way of a thirteenth-century vernacular Italian poem by the comic-realistic poet Ruggieri Apugliese. Even if one were to ignore Immanuel’s mention of Judah al-Ḥarizi in the opening of
the ninth maḥberet, these connections seem tenuous, particularly given the prevalence of this kind of list in other maqamas. Consider, for instance, the listing of story topics, styles, and peoples in the introduction of the *Tahkemoni* as a more probable source:

And I gathered together in this book many parables and sweet themes. Among them various poems and striking riddles, words of instruction, songs of friendship, proverbs of right things; words of admonition, events of the time and todings of the years. The remembrance of death and the place of the shadow of death; words of repentance and pardoning of guilt. The delights of love and songs of love. The betrothing of women, bridal canopy and marriage, and matters of divorce; the drunkenness of drunkards; the asceticism of ascetics; wars of heroes and events of kings; the adventures of the road; songs of praise, and supplications of prayers; ethics of the sages, and associations of the upright. The passion of lovers; gardens and hamlets; words of princes; the patter of children; the hunt of hunters; the treachery of deceivers, and the folly of fools; the slandering of scorners, the blasphemying of revilers. And wonderful songs and epistles written in a marvelous way: – in order that this book may be as a garden in which are all manner of dainties and pleasant plantations. And in it each seeker will find his heart’s desire and will attain of his longing sufficient for his need of that which he lacks.\(^4^0\)

Further, unlike the majority of his fellow Italian poets but very much in line with al-Ḥarizi, Immanuel does not shy away from numerous figures who reveal unpleasant human realities, from the crazed youths who steal Cangrande’s possessions:

Here they’re not shy – throwing punches and slaps, some with black eyes, some bruises

\((Q u i \ n o n \ s o n \ m i n a z z e, \ – m a \ p u g n a \ e \ m o s t a z z e, \\
\ e \ v i s i \ c o n \ s t r a z z e \ – \ e \ o c c h i \ a m b u g l i a r e)\)

Here comes the band of the indigent, so full of hunger, they would gulp down the copper bowl with the broth.

(Qui vèn poverame – con sì fatte brame, ch’el brodo col rame – sì vòl trangugiare.)

Although readers can find some such references in Italian lyrics contemporary to *Bisbidis*, they are not common. To be fair, Cecco Angiolieri and other so-called comic poets certainly referred to disreputable individuals and entities, though not as a catalogue. In tracing the roots of Cecco’s comedic impulse, Fabian Alfie notes the possibility of Cecco’s drawing upon the French *fabliau* tradition, whose authors referred to a range of people, including “men, women, clerics, merchants, peasants, beggars, kings, queens, and nobility.”

This range of figures does, in fact, recall the assemblage in *Bisbidis*. Still, the *fabliau* is unlikely to have been Immanuel’s direct influence in *Bisbidis* for the following reasons: first, *Bisbidis* does not entertain the kind of ribaldry that characterizes the *fabliau* (though salacious elements are certainly frequent in Immanuel’s maqama collection); and second, though scholars continue to debate the origins of the *fabliau*, the genre’s defining elements – sexual exploits and animal fables, among others – are equally endemic to medieval Jewish literature via its Arabo-Andalusian counterparts. Thus, while it is difficult to know if Immanuel borrowed directly from the *fabliau*, it seems more likely that, as a composer of a Hebrew maqama collection that cites other Hebrew maqamas, he would have drawn on the same literary currents that he features in his *Mahberot Immanuel* when configuring the motley group of *Bisbidis*. Further, if Immanuel had equated eroticism in the Old French fabliau with that in Old Occitan troubadour lyric as modern literary critics have, he would have been even less likely to have invoked such currents, given his blunt disparaging of Old Occitan lyric in his commentary on Genesis.

When it comes to the treatment of others, Immanuel’s Italian contemporaries are more focused on local regions than on foreign ones, as Immanuel is

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in *Bisbidis*. For instance, rather than referring to religious and proto-national groups as Immanuel does – *Romei, Pellegrini, Giudei, Sarracini, Tedeschi, Latini, Franceschi* – far more of his contemporaries who refer to locations name regions within the geographical area of Italy rather than those outside, and Jews and Muslims are seldom mentioned. Exceptions from across the *duecento* corpus include Cecco Angiolieri, who refers to Egypt; Folgore da San Gimignano to Spain and Germany; Pietro dei Faitinelli to Cordoba, Granada, and Mecca; Cecco Nuccoli to Ethiopia, Paris, and Galicia; Neri Moscoli to “Saracens, Jews or bad Christians” (*Saracini, Giuderi o mal Cristiani*); Ser Marino Ceccoli to “Jewish Jerusalem” (*Gerusalem giudeo*); and, of course, Dante, who notably refers to Ethiopians and Indians in the *Commedia*. Aside from Dante’s nuanced treatments of others, most of these references fulfill pejorative purposes, in contrast to Immanuel’s consistent references to his own Jewish identity in his Italian sonnets, which serve as gestures of common humanity amid political discord.

While Immanuel refers to *Latini*, Italy is seldom mentioned as one nation among others in contemporaneous lyrics, unless for the purpose of decrying the current political reality as Dante famously does in *Purgatory* 6.76: “Ah, abject Italy, you inn of sorrows” (*Ahi serva Italia, di dolore ostello*). In contrast to this occasional sprinkling of a place name or nationality in the Italian lyric tradition, the *maqama* as a genre abounds with geographical references, both biblical and contemporary to the author. In a manner strikingly similar to the opening of *Bisbidis*, the plot of each *maqama* is most often linked to travel: the narrator travels from one location to another, where he experiences or recounts an adventure involving the protagonist.

In addition to mentioning peoples of various linguistic and theological backgrounds, *Bisbidis* – like many Hebrew *maqamas* – describes wild and exotic animals. The Hebrew *maqama* *Meshal ha-qadmuni* features anthropomorphized animals as its narrators, a phenomenon that flowed into the *maqama*
via the frametale mirror-for-princes narrative *Kalila and Dimna* (originally *Pañcatantra* in Sanskrit), which spread widely across the languages and cultures of South Asia, the Middle East, and Western Europe. Though Immanuel might have had access to *Meshal ha-qadmoni* and to a Hebrew version of *Kalila and Dimna*, he is also likely to have encountered the eastern bestiary tradition via the *Disciplina Clericalis* [*Training for the Clergy*], the widely disseminated work of wisdom literature written by Petrus Alfonsi, known as Moshe Sefardi prior to his conversion from Judaism to Christianity in 1106.

Immanuel informs his reader that “wild animals you will find, / and strange exotic beasts – more than one can count” (*selvaggi ritrovi, / ed animai novi – quant’uom pó contare*), among them horses, parrots, cranes, cows, falcons, greyhounds, lions, monster cats, fat rams, and monkeys (*cavalli, pappagalli, istruzzi, buovi, falconi, levrieri, leoni, gatti mammoni, grossi montoni, simie*). Although his animals do not speak and reason like the jackals Kalila and Dimna, or like the ram and goat, buzzard and rabbit, or stork and frog pairings of *Meshal ha-qadmoni*, they are as integral to the depiction of the scene as the various people: “Below are the horses – above the parrots, / in the room they dance, moving together” (*Di giù li cavalli, – di sù i pappagalli, / su la sala li balli, – insieme operare*). Aside from a reference to a camel in an anonymous *canzone* of the Sicilian School (which likewise mentions astrology, as does *Bisbidis*) and the mythical animals in the *Commedia*, exotic and anthropomorphized animals are difficult to find in Italian lyrics.

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48 The first line of the anonymous poem is “Amor mi’ bello, or che sarà di me?” *Poesia italiana: il Duecento*, ed. Piero Cudini (Milan: Garzanti, 1978), 111–120 (112, 115).
Immanuel’s humanlike monkeys, who seem more likely to have originated in Dante’s language than in the eastern bestiary tradition, are an exception:

Here are the monkeys, with their humanlike smirks beating each other up, gnashing their teeth.
And a laugh. What is it? What happened? What is it?
heee heee heee heee – each man howls with laughter.

(Qui son le simie – con le molte alchimie
grattarsi le timie – e voler digrignare;
E di un riso: che c’è? – che c’è? che c’è?
heee heee heee heee; ogni uom vuol crepare.)

It is unclear whether the humans or monkeys say che c’è (“what is it?”) and heee heee.

Umberto Fortis has argued that che c’è is itself an instance of onomatopoeia, representing the curious reaction of onlookers to the monkeys from the previous verses. Immanuel ascribes the laughter that follows to men: ogni uom vuol crepare (“each man howls with laughter”). It seems plausible, though, that the monkeys, already anthropomorphized, would laugh at the confused humans, rendering heee heee heee heee the mutual response of humans and monkeys to each other. Inferno 29, in which Dante rhymes alchemy (alchimia) and aping (scimia), seems to be the source for the monkey’s disturbingly human-like behavior: “and see that I’m the shade of that Capocchio / whose alchemy could counterfeit fine metals. / And you, if I correctly take your measure, / recall how apt I was at aping nature” (sì vedrai ch’io son l’ombra di Capocchio, / che falsai li metalli con l'alchimia; / e te dee ricordar, se ben t’adocchio, / com’ io fui di natura buona scimia). Immanuel seems to be intentionally aping Dante’s comment on the aping of nature, a borrowing that seems less metaphysically and theologically profound when considered in the context of Immanuel’s lyrical wandering through the Verona of his mind’s eye: the monkeys are actually monkeys who ape the human voices around them.

Aside from this emulation of Dante’s language, Immanuel repeatedly turns to the maqama when constructing the polymath environs of Bisbidis. He evokes the learned atmosphere of the maqama, a genre steeped both in the secular scholarly environment of the medieval Arabic world (adab) and in

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49 Fortis, Manoello Volgare, 100.
medieval Jewish philosophical and theological traditions: “Here astrology min-
gles with philosophy / and theology – you’ll hear it debated” (quivi Astrologia –
con Filosofia / e di Teologia – udrai disputare). There are clear analogues to this
sentiment in the Maḥberot Immanuel: Immanuel refers to the astrological signs
in the opening of the ninth maḥberet when discussing the months of the year
and again to astrology, the stars, and the planets in the twentieth maḥberet.51
Further, in the eighth maḥberet, he provides a lengthy list of philosophical
texts he has read, amounting to a Maimonidean-approved curriculum, and he
includes another list of books in the eighteenth maḥberet.52 Italian poets of
the time seem not to refer to lists of secular intellectual pursuits; Pietro dei
Faitinelli is an exception, though the purpose of his list is to prop up his misogynist
discourse on that which women do not comprehend.53

Immanuel’s reference to theology among these disciplines is particularly
relevant given his Jewish identity. Thirteen stanzas (according to Marti’s line
breaks) after his mention of theology, Immanuel refers to the arrival of “fools,
pilgrims to Rome and elsewhere, / Jews and Muslims” (babbuini, – Romei e
pellegrini / Giudei e Sarracini) at the court of Cangrande. Given Immanuel’s
unknown whereabouts, it would be foolish to imagine that potential theo-
logical discourse at Cangrande’s court informed these verses from Bisbidis. It
seems more productive to consider Immanuel’s affinity with fiction (which
was intrinsic in the Hebrew maqama) and his familiarity with other literary
works that contend with theology – from the Commedia, brimming with theo-
logical debate and critiques of the Church, to Judah Halevi’s 1140 Kuzari, in
which a fictionalized king of the Khazars interviews a Muslim, a Christian, an
Aristotelian philosopher, and a Jew in an effort to determine the religion of
his kingdom.54 Further, the reader should not forget Immanuel’s own writings
across Hebrew and Italian: all of his Hebrew writings – most overtly his biblical

51 Though the study of astrology is traditionally scorned in the Jewish tradition, it nevertheless
became a fixture in the Jewish world, evidenced across many sources, from mosaic zodiac
floors of ancient synagogues to al-Ḥarizi’s depiction of an astrologer in the Taḥkemoni.
53 “Om può saper ben fisica e natura / e legge con Decreto e Decretali, / e conventare en
divina Scrittura / e in tutte sette l’arti liberali, / nigromanzia, alchimia o ver d’augura ... ma
femmena, secondo mia parvenza, non saccio chi conosca enteramente,” in Poeti giocosi,
422.
54 Drory, “The Maqāma.” Judah Halevi originally wrote the Kuzari in Judeo-Arabic in 1140
and the famous Provence-based translator Judah Ibn Tibbon translated it into Hebrew.
For more background information, see Angel Sáenz-Badillos and Daniel J. Lasker, “Judah
Halevi,” in Encyclopaedia Judaica 2nd ed., ed. Michael Berenbaum and Fred Skolnik
(Detroit: Macmillan Reference USA, 2007), 492–501.
commentaries—treat theological matters, and all four of his Italian sonnets deal explicitly with religious identity.\footnote{55}

5 Onomatopoeia in Bisbidis

With these thematic and formal parallels between Bisbidis and the maqama in place, my analysis turns to the poem's extraordinary sound symbolism. While poets such as Cecco Angiolieri certainly toyed with varied comedic registers in their own compositions, and while Dante expertly incorporated high and low language throughout the Commedia, no Italian poet tapped into the onomatopoeic inventiveness that this lyric presents. One of the few instances of sound symbolism in medieval Italian lyric famously appears in Inferno 7, in which Pluto roars, "Pape Satàn, pape Satàn aleppe!"—a cry that, ironically, given the present context, is less an example of onomatopoeia than a potential invocation of Hebrew.\footnote{56} Indeed, it is precisely Immanuel's babble—a weighty word in its own right, recalling both a child's first speech and a calque of the Hebrew roots \textit{b-l-l}, meaning confusion, and \textit{b-b-l}, which serves as place name to Babel and is linked to \textit{b-l-l} in Genesis 11.9— that gives the reader the sense that another language system is at work.\footnote{57} Aside from this moment in Inferno, poets across medieval Italy composed lyrics that repeat words for the effect of creating movement, those that use strident rhyme words, and those that

\footnote{55} For readings of Immanuel's Italian sonnets, see Alfie, "Immanuel of Rome," 307–329; and Levy, "Immanuel of Rome."

\footnote{56} Dante Alighieri, Inferno 7.1. Scholars have dissected the potential Hebrew aspects of this phrase: \textit{satan} is a biblical Hebrew word for adversary and some consider \textit{aleppe} an adaptation of the Hebrew word for the letter \textit{A}, \textit{aleph}. See Berthe M. Marti, "A Crux in Dante's Inferno," Speculum 27.1 (1952): 67–70 (67).

\footnote{57} F. Brown, S. Driver and C. Briggs, The Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon (Peabody: Hendrickson Publishers, 2006), 93, 117. Ilana Pardes explains that in Akkadian, Babel presumably means "the gate to the gods' (\textit{bab iley}), but in the course of the biblical story it is Hebraized via a pun when it is linked to the Hebrew root \textit{bbl} (to confuse)," Ilana Pardes, "Imagining the Birth of Ancient Israel," in Cultures of the Jews: A New History, ed. David Biale (New York: Schocken Books, 2002), 8–41 (13). For in-depth lexical analysis of Babel, see Umberto Cassuto, Part Two: From Noah to Abraham: A Commentary on Genesis V19–XI32 (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1972), 238–249. Further, Hebrew's sharing this root with other Semitic languages, including its quadrilateral form in Aramaic \textit{b-l-l-b-l}, is particularly significant since linguists illustrate a link between quadrilateral/reduplicated verbs and onomatopoeia; for instance, see Stephan Procházka, "Some Remarks on the Semantic Function of the Reduplicated Quadriliteral Verb (Structure FA'FAA)," in Proceedings of the Colloquium on Arabic Lexicology and Lexicography (Budapest: Eötvös Loránd University Chair for Arabic Studies: Csoma de Körös Society Section of Islamic Studies, 1993), 97–103.
play with the letters of the alphabet, but these examples are a far cry from numerous strings of sound words.\textsuperscript{58} There are likewise a few examples in Old Occitan \textit{cansos} of repetitions of words that aim to represent the sounds that instruments make and of “nonsense words” that have generated heated debate regarding Arabic – or more broadly, Semitic – origins.\textsuperscript{59} In fact, sound symbolism in the Medieval Latin and nascent Romance traditions is more generally associated with ignorance (hence babble) than with linguistic virtuosity.\textsuperscript{60} Even if sound words like those that Immanuel invokes in \textit{Bisbidis} existed in Italian (likely, given the universal nature of sound symbolism), they are absent in concurrent Italian poetry. Immanuel’s familiarity with Italian lyric and with Old Occitan lyric – evidenced by his critique in his Genesis commentary and by his discussion of the relative merits of poetry from Spain, Rome, and Provence in the sixth mahberet of his \textit{Mahberot Immanuel} – seems to have no bearing on his use of onomatopoeia in \textit{Bisbidis}.

Both the lack of a consistent use of sound words in lyrics by Immanuel’s Italian contemporaries and the negative association with such words point to the probability that Immanuel derived the idea for sound words from the maqama – a genre based on “rhetorical pyrotechnics” – and the sound words themselves from biblical Hebrew.\textsuperscript{61} Biblical Hebrew abounds in sound words in its typical triliteral verbal roots and particularly in its reduplicated quadrilateral roots.\textsuperscript{62} Such Semitic roots were grounded in medieval theory: there are numerous Classical Arabic and Judeo-Arabic grammatical treatises that

\begin{footnotesize}


\textsuperscript{62} For more information on Semitic root systems, see Nasir Basal, “Root: Medieval Rabbanite Notions,” \textit{Encyclopedia of Hebrew Language and Linguistics}, ed. Geoffrey Kahn (Leiden:
explicate the Arabic and Hebrew root systems, respectively. Further, a few Arabic grammatical treatises theorize onomatopoeia, considering the relationship between sounds and words: al-Thaʿālibi (d. 1038) dedicated one chapter of his treatise on Arabic language *Kitāb fiqh al-lugha* [Book of the Law of Language] to sound words; and grammarian Ibn Jinnī (942–1002) discussed the reasons for which some words sound like their objects. Ibn Jinnī posited that the Arabic language began with onomatopoeia, and fellow theorists proposed that, by extension, other languages were likewise based on onomatopoeia.63 Further, the ninth-century polymath al-Jāḥiẓ (776–868/9) presented lengthy discourses on the implications of the sounds animals make in his *Kitāb al-Ḥayawān* [The Book of Animals].64 He encouraged readers to “listen to cats howling at night and note down the phonemes (ḥurūf) they hear.”65

While to my knowledge medieval Jewish grammarians did not discuss sound symbolism outright, many treated the root system, including Immanuel, who devoted passages to the Hebrew language and its root system in his treatise *Even Boḥan* – a clear indication that he was carefully contemplating the inner-workings of the language in which he formulated both the *Maḥberot Immanuel* and his extensive biblical commentaries.66 In a neat parallel to his

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66 While no critical edition of *Even Boḥan* exists, manuscripts containing the text have been digitized and can be accessed via Ktiv, The International Collection of Digitized Hebrew Manuscripts, under the auspices of the National Library of Israel. Aside from an erroneous mention of Immanuel’s *Even Boḥan* in the Encyclopedia Judaica’s bibliography for its entry on Immanuel (the article refers to a different *Even Boḥan*), one article to date focuses on the text: W. Bacher, “Immanuel b. Salomo’s Eben Bochan,” *Monatsschrift für Geschichte und Wissenschaft des Judentums* 34.6 (1885): 241–257.
discussion of music’s origins in his Genesis commentary, Immanuel regards
the emergence – and dispersal – of language in his introduction to Even Bohan:
in a prescient, Sassure-esque contemplation of the connection of phoneme to
object, Immanuel focuses on the primacy of the language of Adam and Eve
and laments its dissolution as he contemplates the irreparable loss incurred
when language “branched off from its source” (histaʿafu miqoret ha-lashon).67
What better to bring language back to its source than words brimming with
Hebrew sound symbolism? Unfortunately, Immanuel’s Hebrew treatise on the
symbolism of the Hebrew alphabet is not extant; perhaps this would have even
more thoroughly explained his onomatopoeic fervor.

Despite the divergence of modern literary and linguistic studies, not to
mention the historical notion of onomatopoeia as infantile and unworthy
of scholarly attention, the past decades have brought forth renewed interest
in the complexity of onomatopoeia: “onomatopoeia is actually part of the
more general question of sound-symbolism proper, in which sound is related
to a host of perceptual and conceptual phenomena associated synesthetically
with sound.”68 Linguists specializing in Semitic languages have likewise
turned to this phenomenon, reviving medieval considerations of the root sys-
tem and onomatopoeia.69 The maqama seems to be the next logical place of
inquiry. In both the Arabic and Hebrew maqama, the drive to create a literary
tour de force manifests itself in some or all of the following: complex rhyme
schemes that repeat for extended passages, impressive strings of homonyms,
inventive repetitions of roots, “verbal ambiguity, witty puns, word-play or sty-
listic games (such as a letter that can be read forwards or backwards with oppos-
ing meanings, or in which each word contains a certain letter, etc.).”70 Further,
there are striking examples of onomatopoeia in classical Arabic, including in
al-Ṣafadī’s (c. 1296–1363) biographical dictionary al-Wāfī bil-wafayāt [The Book
Fulfilling the Death Notices] in which the protagonist employs a string of ono-
matopoeic phrases while addressing a grammarian, who subsequently turns

67 Parma, Biblioteca Palatina, MS 2304, 71v.
68 Linda R. Waugh, “Against Arbitrariness: Imitation and Motivation Revived, with
69 For background and bibliography on sound symbolism in Arabic, see Kees Versteegh,
“Sound Symbolism,” in Encyclopedia of Arabic Language and Linguistics, ed. Lutz
Edzard and Rudolf de Jong, (Leiden: Brill, 2011); and for Hebrew see Pablo Kirtchuk,
“Onomatopoeia,” in Encyclopedia of Hebrew Language and Linguistics, ed. Geoffrey Kahn,
70 Zvi Malachi, “Rabbi Elijah ha-Kohen’s Scroll of the Fawn: an Allegorical Maqama
from Spain,” in Medieval and Modern Perspectives on Muslim-Jewish Relations, ed.
Ronald L. Nettler (Luxembourg: Harwood Academic Publishers, in cooperation with the
Oxford Centre for Postgraduate Hebrew Studies, 1995), 127–58 (127). Italics are Malachi’s.
into a sheep. The closest instances in Hebrew maqamas are the poems that repeat roots and/or given letters throughout, achieving a kind of sound symbolism via repetition and alliteration.

Given the nature of these rhetorical feats, it is not surprising that al-Ḥarīrī’s Arabic maqama collection became the foundational text for adab instruction, required reading for all students. As already mentioned, many Hebrew maqama authors expressed the idea of virtuosity as a defense of Hebrew’s ability to compete with the dexterity and creativity of Arabic. Immanuel’s use of onomatopoeia seems to be a natural Italian-language analogue of the Hebrew maqama’s rhetorical flourishes. Still, there is more at stake for Immanuel and his maqama-like Bisbidis: unlike Hebrew-language maqamas whose language rendered them inaccessible to the majority culture, making them relatively innocuous forms of defiance, Bisbidis is entirely accessible to Immanuel’s Christian contemporaries and thus vulnerable to a range of critiques.

The chart of sound words in Bisbidis and corresponding biblical Hebrew roots (in Appendix B) elucidates the possible links between Immanuel’s onomatopoeia and Hebrew and traces the appearance of each onomatopoeia in order of appearance in the poem. The analyses that follow diverge from this chronology in order to group thematically aligned entities: sounds produced by instruments (both musical and of war with some ambiguous overlapping) and sounds made by animals and humans – most remarkably women.

The distinction between musical instruments and instruments of war seems purposefully unclear in the poem and serves to intensify the cacophony of Immanuel’s Verona. The “giach of their armored feet” captures both the physical heaviness and metallic character of feet dressed in armor. The Hebrew roots $g-d-d$ and $g-d-ʿ$, both linked to cutting and scratching, are fitting parallels to the movement of the armored foot. The verses that follow these sounds actively blur the boundary between instruments of music and war: “And their instruments become weapons, / thousands of weapons, sounding off at once” (Ma pur li tormenti – mi fan li strumenti, / ché mille ne senti – in un punto sonare). Strumenti become tormenti in this verse, a change actualized by the sounds the poet perceives. Additional parallels between onomatopoeic instruments and biblical Hebrew roots abound: $dudùf dud ùf$, the sound corresponding to flapping of flags, shares sounds with $d-f-f$, meaning push or thrust, or to $d-h-p$.

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meaning push away. In this case, the wind seems to exert force on the flags, creating a sound that embodies a motion of pushing or thrusting. Next, the poet captures the sound of flutes:

Guitars and lutes, violas and flutes:

loud, shrill voices — here you hear them sing.

Stututu ifiu ifiu ifiu — stututu ifiu ifiu ifiu
stututu ifiu ifiu ifiu — drumming, whistling.

(Chitarre e liuti-viole e flaûte,
voci alt'ed agute, — qui s'odon cantare.
Stututù ifiù ifiù-stututù ifiù ifiù
stututù ifiù ifiù ifiù-tamburar, zuffolare)

Stututu recalls three roots that capture the sound of wind instruments: š-p-š-p (chirp, peep, whistle); š-ʾ-p (gasp, pant, breathe, inhale); and š-p-ʿ (the hiss of a serpent). It is fitting that the equivalences in Hebrew to the sounds that instruments make would evoke the sounds that living things make, given the musician’s use of breath to activate the instrument. The next instrument to appear is the trumpet: Bobobò bobobò, — bottombò bobobò, / bobobottomò bobobottomò, — le trombe trombare (“the trumpets sound”). The roots in common with the sound of trumpets complement the sound rising up from inside of a trumpet: b-ʾ is to swell, boil up, and bubble, and b-ʾ-b-ʿ is to “spring or bubble while drowning.”

The next two onomatopoeic passages pertaining to instruments appear within the context of the arrival of all types of people to the court: “And here fools, pilgrims to Rome and elsewhere, / Jews and Muslims, see how they all arrive” (E qui babbuini, — Romei e pellegrini / Giudei e Sarracini — vedrai capitare). Drums and some sort of flute accompany their arrival: Tatim tatim — tatim tatim, tatim tatim, — senti trombettare (“hear the drumming!”). These sound words recall k-t-t, a verb meaning to beat that is most commonly associated with the motion of drumming. Further, tatim and tatim even more strikingly resemble a biblical word for drum: tof, plural tupim. The next sound mimics

73  Weinstock, “Sound and Meaning,” 53. In Hebrew the sound “f” exists lexically within the context of “p” and as such the two sounds are closely linked. The modern Hebrew d-f-d-f, meaning to leaf through, is a tempting fit but is modern, having been coined by Eliezer ben Yehudah, who reduplicated the root in the word for page (dof).
the arrival of foreigners: *Balaùf balaùf-balaùf balaùf, / Balaùf balaùf – udrai tringuigliare* (“you hear it trill here and there”): *balaùf* shares part of *b-l-l*, the root of “mix and confusion (of languages).”

The movement of the horses below and parrots above further captures the jostling of contrasting groups: *Di giù li cavalli, – di sù i pappagalli, / su li sala li balli, – insieme operare* (“Below are the horses – above the parrots, / in the room they dance, moving together”). The sound Immanuel applies to this unlikely, cacophonous pairing recalls the root *d-h*, meaning push: *Dududù dududù dududù dududù dududù, – sentirai naccherare* (“reverberating around you”).

Birds appear again in the onomatopoeia that follows, and their twittering in springtime corresponds to a number of biblical Hebrew roots, among them *h-g* (moan, growl, speak, coo); *ʿ-l-g* (speak inarticulately, stammer); and *l-ʿ-g* (stammer, mock, talk indistinctively): *Gegegì gegegì gegegì / gegegì gegegì, – gli uccelli sbernare* (“the birds twitter in springtime”). Birds make another appearance in the poem, alongside mastiffs and greyhounds: *Li falconi cui cui – li bracchetti gu gu, / li levrieri guuu uu – per volersi sfugare* (“The falcons with their cui cui, the mastiffs go gu gu; / the greyhounds guuu uu – to make an escape”).

Perhaps most compelling example of Immanuel’s nod to Hebrew via onomatopoeia is the instance of *intarlatin*:

Here you’ll find eaters contesting –
it’s a rare treat, to watch them indulge.
Intarlatin – intarlatin
Intarlatin – playing and dancing.

(*Quivi si ritrova – mangiatori a prova, che par cosa nova – a vederli golare.
Intarlatin – intarlatin
intarlatin – ghiribare e danzare.*)

*Intarlatin* bears remarkable resemblance to roots referring to the guttural sound of greedy swallowing: *l-h-m* and *l-ʿ-t* are both to swallow greedily; *l-ʿ-ʿ* is simply to swallow. Further, playing and dancing, the other aspects of the action connected to *intarlatin*, fit nicely with *r-ʿ-l*, meaning quiver, shake, and

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77 Weinstock, “Sound and Meaning,” 54.
reel. Further, *Intarlatin* shares more with Hebrew than editions of *Bisbidis* suggest: the word appears very clearly as *intarlatim* – ending in *m* – in both Casantense 433, fol. 125v and Bologna 1289, fol. 182v. This is significant not only for the sake of editorial accuracy but also for the link to Hebrew, whose plural masculine ending is *-im*. This reality in the manuscripts further links the sound word to the root *l-h-m*, to swallow greedily, and more distinctly situates Immanuel within the context of the Hebrew language.

6 Sounds of Women

The women and female-generated sound of *Bisbidis* provide crucial links between Immanuel’s onomatopoeia and Hebrew, further connecting *Bisbidis* to the world of Hispano-Hebraic lyrics. The sound word that gives the poem its title in the Casanatense (*bisbidis*) and Bologna (*bisbio*) manuscripts constitutes the voice of the woman who appears in the middle of the poem. She will not let the onlooker pass by without giving him unsolicited advice:

One goes up and the other comes down
that lady comes down – she won’t let you pass:
Bis bis bis, bisbidis disbidis
Bisbisbidis – you’ll hear her advise

(*E l’uno va sù – e l’altro vèn giù;
tal donna vèn giù, – che non lassa passare:
Bis bis bis, – bisbidis disbidis
Bisbisbidis – udrai consigliare*)

The sound combinations of *b/p* – *z/s* in biblical Hebrew constitute a “sound made by a swift movement,” an apt characterization of this woman whose presence, advice, and perhaps gossip enliven the atmosphere and command attention. The sound combinations in “Bis bis bis, bisbidis disbidis / Bisbisbidis” correspond to the biblical roots *p-z-z* (to be agile, excited), *s-p* (a hiss, a serpent), *s-p-s-p* (a chirp, peep, whistle), roots that capture not only the energetic, avian quality of the titular female but also her serpent-like aspect, perhaps signifying potential danger.

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82 Kirtchuk, “Onomatopoeia.”
A copyist’s whim to adopt *bisbidis* or *bisbio* from the middle of the poem has colored the limited reception of the poem. Aside from the woman who says *bisbidis*, three types of women speak: widows, matrons, and maidens, their sounds amplifying the sensation of women’s presence in the poem. The verses leading up to their appearance hint at the classic juxtaposition of bitter love, conditioning the female presence: *Qui vengon le feste – con le bionde teste; / qui son le tempeste – d’amore e d’amare* (“Here we have parties, with all the blond ladies: / here come the storms of love and of loving!”).84 Indeed, even if the poet does not actually use the word bitter, the language play of *amor/amar* is embedded in this verse and is doubly meaningful for a bilingual poet aware that the Italian word for bitter shares the consonantal combination of *m-r* with its biblical Hebrew counterpart.

At these parties, the three groups of women make the following sounds, all of which are a combination of charming and sultry: *Le donne muz muz – Le donzelle usu usu / le vedove sciùvi vu; – ti possa annegare!* (“The matrons go muz muz, the maidens usu usu / and the widows sciùvi vu – their chatter drowns out everything else!”). The *muz muz* of the matrons recalls *h-m* (murmur, growl, coo) and *n-ʿ-m* (sing, sweet sounding), while the *usu usu* of the maidens is a composite of *l-ḥ-s* (whisper) and *s-p-s-p* (chirp, peep, whistle).85 All of these are apt roots that a medieval male poet with the era’s dominant proclivity for misogyny might logically attribute to the musings of women.

Such comparisons of sound words in *Bisbidis* to roots in biblical Hebrew corroborate not only Immanuel’s fixation on the Hebrew language while composing this poem but also his orientation towards Hebrew composition even while actively engaging the Italian language. The onomatopoeia of *Bisbidis* – which is its most overt reference to another language and another frame of reference – allowed Immanuel to recreate the dazzling quality of the maqama in Italian, in turn forging a new kind of musicality in Italian lyric. His groups of repeated sound words – which before this poem had no meaning – now manage both to shoulder the rhythm and to complement the storyline.

7 Immanuel and Dante Revisited: The Virtuosic Self

To be fair, Immanuel’s onomatopoeia might have another hermeneutic possibility: rather than acting as the gateway to his rationalization of the Hebrew maqama in Italian, his sound words could represent the closest he could get

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84 Fortis, *Manello Volgare*, 89.
to Dante’s inimitable mastery of language in the *Divine Comedy*. No one is better known for poetic innovation among Immanuel’s Christian Italian counterparts and across literary and geographical traditions than Dante. Immanuel was certainly familiar with *The Divine Comedy*, having copied the structure of Dante’s journey in the final maqama of his Hebrew collection, albeit with the theologically conditioned omission of Purgatory. Given its breathtaking range of vocabulary, registers, and peoples, the *Commedia* could have provided Immanuel with his impetus to linguistic innovation and thematic range in *Bisbidis*. At the same time, the prose-like nature of *Bisbidis* renders it utterly unlike the *Commedia*, whose *terza rima* is a virtuosic metrical form immune to alteration. If *Bisbidis* were representative of Immanuel’s attempt to emulate Dantean poetics, it would seem like a failed attempt, given that its form, language, and contents all adopt numerous elements from a specific medieval Hebrew literary form.

One element, however, that is truly at home in both the medieval Hebrew and Italian lyric traditions is Immanuel’s careful attention to himself: frequent moments of metapoetic reflection and self-conscious resolve to compose pepper Immanuel’s composition, from the opening declaration:

> of all I heard and saw and understood,  
> now I am inflamed to want to recount

(Di quel ch’aggio inteso – veduto e compreso,  
mi sono ora acceso – a volerlo contare)

... to the subtle insertion of “truth claims”:86

> I could barely believe what I was seeing,  
> but indeed it seemed to me to be in a great sea

(ch’io non mi credea – di quel ch’i’ vedea,  
ma pur mi parea – in gran mare stare)

Indeed, such instances – simultaneously relatable and marvelous – appear regularly in both the *Divine Comedy* and the *Maḥberot Immanuel* and likewise appear in an array of pseudo-autobiographical and first-person accounts

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across medieval literary traditions. At least in this aspect, Immanuel’s poem is at home amid its contemporaries.

8 Conclusions

Much like the narrator of a typical maqama (though not consistently the Mahberot Immanuel, whose eponymous narrator is often himself an adventurer), the poetic I of Bisbidis does not take any part in the narrative, remaining an onlooker and observer rather than an active participant. Still, the narrative voice of the poem is decidedly arbiter of the proceedings. This personal absence of Immanuel in Bisbidis stands in contrast to the vibrancy of the bodies and actions he depicts; his references to himself affirm his status as witness, not as player, even if he implicates his subservience to Cangrande. Perhaps this quiet distance is a small nod to his status as astute outside observer who was never truly a part of an Italian poetic circle, and perhaps this status as outlier provided just the impetus to forgo lyric convention and execute such a tremendous hybrid experiment.

The formal flexibility of this nameless Italian lyric style granted Immanuel the freedom to infuse his Italian poetics with both Hebraisms and Hebrew compositional techniques. Of course, some kind of inversion is true for his Hebrew maqama collection, through which he introduced the world of Hebrew readers to the Italian sonnet and sirventese. But his use of these forms in the Mahbarot does not perfectly mirror the indebtedness of Bisbidis to the maqama; rather, it is the maqama itself, and in particular the Hebrew maqama’s fixation on legitimizing Hebrew, that welcomed Italian forms as a means of showcasing Hebrew’s potential for literary ingenuity.

The onomatopoeia in Immanuel’s Italian composition is deliberate. Undoubtedly an instance of profound lyric innovation, it also simultaneously fulfils the period’s prevailing cultural view of Jews as base: while on one level, this babble is seemingly absurd and devoid of meaning, like Pluto’s Hebrew-esque outburst in Inferno 7, on another level, it constitutes the poem’s unwavering and constant refrain and its most complex philological feat. Immanuel has dared his Italian readers to reconsider onomatopoeia, to imagine strings of sounds as his poem’s most sophisticated and ingenious asset.

87 The Mahbarot is replete with such self-praise; the introduction, in which Immanuel discusses his great talent as versifier and need to create a prose structure to protect his poetry from thieves, is a promising place to begin: Immanuel ben Solomon, Mahberot Immanuel, ed. Jarden, 3–7. For early theorizing of the medieval narrative I, see Leo Spitzer, “Note on the Poetic and the Empirical ‘I’ in Medieval Authors,” Traditio 4 (1946), 414–422.
In this effort, Immanuel emulates his fellow Hebrew maqama authors: he has revived the Hebrew language, all though the guise of a highly unconventional Italian lyric experiment.

**Appendix A: Immanuel's Bisbidis**

Del mondo ho cercato – per lungo e per lato
con caro mercato – per terra e per mare.

I've searched the world – long and wide
by land and by sea – with little reward.

Vedut’ho Soria – infin Erminia,
e di Romania – gran parte, mi pare.

I saw Syria all the way to Armenia
and Romania, a large part of it, it seems to me.

Vedut’ho ’l Soldano – per monte e per piano
e si del Gran Cano – poria novellare.

I saw the Sultanate, from the mountains to the
valleys,
and I can tell you about the Great Khan:

Di quel ch’aggio inteso – veduto e compreso,
mi sono ora acceso – a volerlo contare;

Of all I heard and saw and understood,
now I am inflamed to want to recount:

ché pur la corona – ne porta Verona,
per quel che si suona – del dire e del fare.

the only place that holds the crown is Verona,
renowned for its words and deeds:

Destrier’ e corsiere – masnade e bandiere,
coracce e lamiere – vedrai rimutare

You’ll see knights in armor and cavaliers
switching their steeds and flags, coats of arms
and weaponry.

Sentirai poi ’l giach, – che fan quei pedâch,
giach giach giach, – quando gli odi andare.

You’ll hear the giach of their armored feet:
*pedach, giach giach giach*, as you hear them go by

Ma pur li tormenti – mi fan li strumenti,
ché mille ne senti – in un punto sonare:

And their instruments become weapons,
thousands of weapons, sounding off at once:

**Duduf, duduf – duduf, duduf**

**Duduf, duduf, duduf** – the flapping of flags.

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88 My translation first appeared on *Digital Dante*, Columbia University. The text of *Bisbidis* follows Marti’s edition. Many thanks to Teodolinda Barolini for her thoughtful translation suggestions.
Qui vengon le feste – con le bionde teste;
qui son le tempeste – d’amore e d’amare.

Le donne muz muz – Le donzelle usu usu
le vedove sciavi vu – ti possa annegare!
Poi trovan fantesche – tuttora più fresche
a menar le tresche, – trottere ed ambiare.

L’una fa: “Così?”; – e l’altra: “Pur sì;”
e l’altra: “Sta qui, – ch’io vo per tornare.”

In quell’acqua chiara, – che l bel fiume schiara
la mia donna cara – vertù fa regnare;

ch’Amor è ’n la sala – del Sir de la Scala.
e quivi senza’ala – mi parea volare;

c’io non mi credea – di quel ch’i’ vedea,
ma pur mi parea – in gran mare stare.

Baroni e marchesi – de tutti i paesi,
gentili e cortesi – qui vedi arrivare;

Quivi Astrologia – con Filosofia
e di Teologia – udrai disputare;

e quivi Tedeschi, – Latini e Franceschi,
Fiammenghi e Ingheleschi – insieme parlare;

e fanno un trombombe – che par che rimbombe
a guisa di trombe, – chi ’n pian vòl sonare.

Chitarre e liuti – vïole e flaùte,
voci alt’ed agute, – qui s’odon cantare.

Here we have parties, with all the blond ladies:
here come the storms of love and of loving!

The matrons go muz muz, the maidens usu usu
and the widows sciavi vu – their chatter drowns out everything else!

Here you find maidens, ever fresh,
feverishly skipping – trotting and walking along.

One says, “like this?” – and the other “like that,”
and the other, “Stay here, since I’m coming back.”

In that clear water, which makes the beautiful river shine,
my dear lady causes virtue to reign.

For Love is in the hall of Cangrande della Scala:
and here without wings, seemingly I fly;

I could barely believe what I was seeing,
but, indeed, it seemed to me to be in a great sea.

Barons and marquises from every land
noble and courtly: see them arrive here.

Here astrology mingles with philosophy
and theology – you’ll hear it debated;

Here Germans, Italians and French,
Flemish and English, speaking together:

They make echoes that reverberate
like a drum that slowly builds momentum.

Guitars and lutes, violas and flutes:
loud, shrill voices – here you hear them sing.
Immanuel of Rome’s Bisbidis: An Italian Maqāma?

Stututù ifìù ifìù ifìù – stututù ifìù ifìù ifìù stututù ifìù ifìù ifìù – tamburar, zufolare.
Di giù li cavalli, – di sù i pappagalli,
su la sala li balli, – insieme operare.

Below are the horses – above the parrots,
in the room they dance, moving together.

Dududù dududù – dududù dududù
dududù dududù, – sentirai naccherare.

Dududu dududu – dududu dududu
dududu dududu – reverberating around you.

Ma quel che più vale, – e al Sir non ne cale,
veder per le scale – taglier trafugare,

But the most costly things – to Cangrande
they’re nothing:
see across the stairs how they steal the
precious plates.

Con quel portinaro, – che sta tanto chiaro,
che quel tien più caro – che me’ ne sa fare.

With that doorkeeper, who is so sure
of his position
what he holds most dear, he knows best
what to do.

E qui de ragazzi – vedut’ho solazzi,
che quel cotai pazzi – non vidi muffare.

And here the young men: I have seen such
entertainment,
you won’t see such crazy youths growing mold
anytime soon.

Qui non son minazze, – ma pugna e mostazze,
e visi con strazze – e occhi ambigliare.

Here they’re not shy – throwing punches
and slaps,
some with black eyes, some bruises.

Gegegì gegegì – gegegi gegegi
gegegi gegegì, – gli uccelli sbernare.

Gegegi gegegi – gegegi gegegi
gegegi gegegi – the birds twitter in springtime.

Istruzzi e buovi, – selvaggi ritrovi,
ed animai novi – quant’uom pò contare.

Cranes and cows – wild animals you will find,
and strange exotic beasts – more than one
can count.

Qui sono leoni, – e gatti mammoni,
e grossi montoni –vedut’ho cozzare.

Here are lions, and monster cats
and enormous rams – I saw them
butting heads.

Bobobò bobobò, – bottombò bobobò,
bobobottombò bobobottombò, – le trombe
trombare.

Bobobo bobobo – bottombo bobobo
bobobottombo bobobottombo – the trumpets
sound.
Quivi è un vecchiume – che non vede lume, ché largo costume – li fa governare. Here’s a large band of the old, the half-blind: the generosity [of Cangrande] keeps them going.

Qui vèn poverame – con si fatte brame, ch’el brodo col rame – si vol trangugiare. Here comes the band of the indigent, so full of hunger, they would gulp down the copper bowl with the broth.

Quivi è una schiera – di bordon di cera, che l’aere la sera – si crede abbruciare. Here is such an assembly of wax candlesticks that they seem to burn the evening air.


Qui sono gran giochi – di molti e di pochi, con brandon di fochi – vedut’ho giostrare. Here are great games – some for many, some for few, with huge firebrands I’ve seen them joust.

Qui vengon villani – con si fatte mani, che paiono alani – di Spagna abbaiaire. Here come the lowly peasants – whose hands are such that they seem to be huge guard-dogs, barking from Spain.

Qui son le simie – con le molte alchìmie: grattarsi le timie – e voler digrignare; Here are the monkeys, with their humanlike smirks, beating each other up, gnashing their teeth.


Qui son altri stati – si ben divisati, che tra li beati – sen può ragionare. Here, too, are others – so elegantly turned out: their beauty is a topic for the blessed in paradise.

E questo è ‘l signore – di tanto valore, che ’l suo grande onore – va per terra e mare. And here is the lord – of such great valor, that his great honor spreads by land and by sea.
### Appendix B: Biblical Hebrew Roots Related to Sound Words in *Bisbidis*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sound Word in <em>Bisbidis</em></th>
<th>Sound Word in Reference to</th>
<th>Related Biblical Hebrew Roots</th>
<th>Root Meaning</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>giach</td>
<td>armored feet</td>
<td>g-d-d; g-d-ʿ</td>
<td>cutting and scratching</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>dudūf, dudūf</td>
<td>flapping of flags</td>
<td>d-ḥ</td>
<td>push or thrust</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>d-ḥ-p</td>
<td>push away</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>muz</td>
<td>matrons</td>
<td>h-m</td>
<td>murmur, growl, coo</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>n-ʿ-m</td>
<td>sing, sweet sounding</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>usu</td>
<td>maidens</td>
<td>l-ḥ-s</td>
<td>whisper</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>statutū ifiū ifiū</td>
<td>drumming, whistling</td>
<td>s-ʾ-p-s-p</td>
<td>chirp, peep, whistle</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>l-ḥ-ʿ-t</td>
<td>swallow greedily</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>l-ʿ-t</td>
<td>swallow</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>r-ʿ-l</td>
<td>quiver, shake, reel</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>cui cui</td>
<td>falcons</td>
<td>h-g</td>
<td>moan, growl, speak, coo</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>gu gu</td>
<td>mastiffs</td>
<td>h-g</td>
<td>moan, growl, speak, coo</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>guuu uu</td>
<td>greyhounds</td>
<td>h-g</td>
<td>moan, growl, speak, coo</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>bis bis bis, bisbidis</td>
<td>compelling woman</td>
<td>b/p – z/s</td>
<td>“sound made by a swift movement”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>p-z-z</td>
<td>“to be agile, excited”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>s-p</td>
<td>hiss, a serpent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>s-p-s-p</td>
<td>chirp, peep, whistle</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>tatim tatim</td>
<td>drumming</td>
<td>k-t-t</td>
<td>beating (a drum)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>tof, tupim</td>
<td>drum, drums</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>balaūf balaūf</td>
<td>arrival of foreigners</td>
<td>b-l-l</td>
<td>mix and confusion (of languages)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>dududū dududū</td>
<td>horses below</td>
<td>d-ḥ</td>
<td>push</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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