CHAPTER EIGHT

GENERAL TRENDS IN THE JUDAEO-ARABIC LETTERS FROM THE GENIZAH

8.1. Differences between 11th-Century Letters from the Maghreb and Egypt

The 11th-century letters were divided up into two corpora to investigate possible differences in the epistolary writing of the two regions. The analysis brought to light a number of phenomena which illustrate the more conservative nature of Maghrebian letters in comparison with their Egyptian counterparts. In Maghrebian Arabic material this conservative nature expresses itself, for example, in the script in general, which is more conservative than the Egyptian as Khan (2007b) has pointed out. In the Judaeo-Arabic corpus, differences between Egyptian and Maghrebian letters start with the writing material itself, where vellum continued to be used in Maghrebian letters at a time when paper had completely replaced vellum in Egyptian letters.

The linguistic conservatism of Maghrebian letters also manifests itself in the emulation of an older Classical Arabic writing style and Classical Arabic conventions. This becomes visible in letter introductions. The Maghrebian show a preference for more conservative phrases. In Muslim Arabic letters, kitābī starts to be regularly added to the introductory formula from the 10th century onwards, and it has caught on in 11th-century Egyptian letters where it is the most frequent introductory word. Most of the 11th-century Maghrebian letters do not

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1 This concerns for example the old diacritics of fā’ and qāf in Arabic script. The mediaeval Maghrebian sources show one dot under the letter for fā and one dot above the letter for qāf, an old system that can for instance also be found in Egyptian papyri, while the contemporary Egyptian sources employ one dot above the letter for fā and two dots above the letter for qāf as in Modern Arabic writing.
2 See the chapter on letter style, 6.2. and 6.3.
3 See all the works by Diem in the bibliography.
exhibit this ‘innovation’ but instead show the older introduction *aṭāla llāhu baqā‘a*ka.Orthographically, the Maghrebian sources emulate Classical Arabic to a greater extent than the Egyptian documents. The use of ر for Classical Arabic *tā’ marbūta*, for instance, is much more common in Egyptian material than in Maghrebian letters (see 4.3.3). Similarly, *alif* derived from the Classical Arabic accusative -*an* is found only in adverbial constructions in Egypt. In Maghrebian material it appears after numerals, in place of a Classical Arabic *ḥāl* accusative and other accusatives, often set hypercorrectly (see 4.3.7). Superscribed *alif* is written plene in Egyptian letters, but it follows Classical Arabic non-plene writing convention in the Maghreb (see 4.5.1).

Morphologically, the internal passive is found more often in Maghrebian letters than in Egyptian letters (see 5.3.3b).

On the syntactic level, the negations *lam* and *mā* for the negation of the past are distributed differently in the two corpora (see 7.2). The phrase *lam* + imperfect, which is evaluated as the more ‘classical’ form, appears much more often in the Maghrebian (in 82% of past negations) than in the Egyptian letters (56%), while *mā* + perfect, considered less ‘classical’, is used in only 17% of the examples in the Maghreb but in 43% of examples from the Egyptian letters.

The Maghrebian corpus also exhibits no examples of the *tanwin*-derived constructions, such as NOUN + *an* + ADJECTIVE, NOUN + *an* + ATTRIBUTIVE NOUN and NOUN + *an* + ATTRIBUTIVE CLAUSE with non-generic referent, while in the Egyptian sources these construction types are attested frequently (see 7.4).

The above described phenomena show that the Maghrebian letters are in many regards closer to Classical Arabic, partaking of a set of features which together show the conservative nature of the Maghrebian material. Yet, at the same time, there is also a stronger Jewish element in the Maghrebian letters. This shows itself in Tiberian vocalisation signs and in the use of Hebrew words and phrases, which are hardly ever used in Egyptian letters. The conservatism thus has to be seen as twofold: On the one hand, the Maghrebian letters followed writing traditions, which are reflected in a stricter adherence to Classical Arabic norms. On the other hand there seems to be a stronger religious influence on the language, which becomes visible in the Hebrew element and vocalisation.