Friedman, Mordechai Akiva. 2016


In addition to the obvious hurdle of deciphering the manuscripts themselves, one of the primary challenges that has faced researchers of medieval Judeo-Arabic texts has been the absence of specialized lexicographical tools. Written for the most part in Hebrew script and in Middle Arabic or other variants of post-Classical Arabic, they often reflect to a greater or lesser degree the regional vernaculars of the writers themselves, especially in non-literary documents such as the thousands of letters and court records that were discovered in the Cairo Geniza. Scholars working on these texts had frequent recourse to post-Classical Arabic-Arabic literary dictionaries, such as Murtaḍā al-Zabīdī’s *Tāj al-ʿArūs* (eighteenth century; 1357 AH repr.), or dictionaries by Western Orientalists, such as Reinhart Dozy’s *Supplément aux dictionnaires arabes* (1881 with three editions and numerous reprints), or dictionaries of regional dialect varieties of written Arabic, such as Frederico Corriente’s *A Dictionary of Andalusi Arabic* (1996)—none of which alone would suffice. Scholars, such as S.D. Goitein, who edited and translated Geniza texts or wrote historical works based on them, occasionally noted unusual lexical items or words pertaining to material culture, but these were scattered throughout the pages and notes of numerous articles and monographs published in both English and Hebrew.

Werner Diem and Hans-Peter Radenberg took a small, first step in collecting the Arabic terms found in S.D. Goitein’s five-volume magnum opus with their *A Dictionary of the Arabic Material of S.D. Goitein’s A Mediterranean Society* (1994). The dictionary is in the format commonly used by general Semitists. The lemmata are entirely in Latin characters, albeit following the order of the Arabic alphabet, and although words that appear frequently in Goitein get longer entries with specific references to their occurrence in *A Mediterranean Society*, the dictionary is for the most part a lexicon consisting of a lemma and its English translation. There is a useful list of 408 words for professions appended at the end. The vast majority of the terms are quotidian, commercial and sociocultural in line with the correspondence and communal documents that were the primary sources of Goitein’s work.

The first major contribution to rectifying the lack of a more comprehensive lexical reference work was Joshua Blau’s pioneering *A Dictionary of Mediaeval Judaeo-Arabic Texts* (2006), a massive dictionary of ca. 9,000 entries in 791
double-columned pages (compared to 241 single-columned pages in Diem and Radenberg). Blau’s dictionary is based primarily upon scholarly and literary sources from the likes of Sa’adya Gaon, Judah ha-Levi, and Moses Maimonides with some references to legal and documentary material as well. The work is aimed at Arabists not necessarily versed in Hebrew as well as Judeo-Arabists, and hence the lemmata are in Arabic script and follow the order of the Arabic alphabet. An English translation is included together with the more detailed Hebrew definition, commentary, and references for the entry that include entire phrases in Judeo-Arabic. Blau himself viewed his dictionary as a foundation to greater lexical coverage of medieval Judeo-Arabic, and he noted that one of the difficulties in fully documenting the language is that it exists in numerous registers, and his dictionary was dedicated to the vocabulary of learned texts, not the writing of ordinary people, who depending upon their education, their occupation, and their geographical background wrote in a variety of registers that were closer to their regional dialects and spoken vernaculars, although the latter are for all intents and purposes lost except for some rare, highly colloquial letters and in the kharjas (envois) of poetry such as the muwashshah and zajal of Andalusian poets.

Mordechai Akiva Friedman’s Dictionary of Medieval Judeo-Arabic, here under review, goes a long way to filling in the gap that still remained even after the appearance of Blau’s groundbreaking dictionary. Friedman, one of Goitein’s devoted disciples and himself a distinguished Geniza scholar, undertook the task of completing Goitein’s major unfinished work, India Book, the correspondence of medieval merchants, mainly hailing from Egypt and the Maghreb, who were involved in the India trade. Not only did he complete the work, but he expanded it enormously into five substantial volumes (one in English and four of Judeo-Arabic texts with Hebrew translations and commentary). At the end of the third volume of India Book, Friedman added a glossary of Judeo-Arabic terms found in the documents. He had created his own dictionary of unusual words and phrases as he was working on the texts and with the publication of Blau’s dictionary drew upon that as well. However, in preparing the correspondence of the merchant Ḥalfon b. Nethaniel ha-Levi, which developed into two volumes, India Book IV (1–2), Friedman discovered that most of the non-Classical words and expressions were not to be found in Blau, and embarked upon his own project which went well beyond the language of Ḥalfon’s correspondence, the rest of the India Book corpus, and came to encompass the language of other medieval Judeo-Arabic texts, such as responsa literature, that he had researched or looked at throughout his long career. By expanding the scope of his sources, Friedman has produced an even more valuable reference work for scholars.