A Handbook and Reader of
Ottoman Arabic

Edited by Esther-Miriam Wagner
INTRODUCTION

The idea for this *Handbook and Reader of Ottoman Arabic* grew from a small seed. Originally, I had planned on an informal gathering with Geoffrey Khan, Rex Smith, and some fellow postdocs and students to talk about our respective Ottoman Arabic projects. To my great astonishment, a number of eminent Arabic linguists agreed to join us when I presented the idea, and from there we started drawing in Ottoman historians working on literacy and experts working on other languages in the Ottoman Empire. Our intended small workshop thus grew into the first conference on the topic, which took place in the Faculty of Asian and Middle Eastern Studies in Cambridge in 2016.

I had begun pondering the need for a volume focused on Ottoman Arabic after working on Early Modern sources in the Cairo Genizah, where the lack of reference works available to consult when working on these materials made for tedious checking of fringe dictionaries and dialectal grammar books. In my own experiences of being an Arabic student in Germany in the 1990s, in a very traditional German philology department, the Arabic texts taught had a chronological cut-off in the late medieval period. Students were provided with introductions to pre-Islamic poetry, Classical literature, and excursions into Muslim Iberian authors, but a contemptuous attitude prevailed towards anything written from the 15th century onwards.

Khaled Rouayheb (2015, 1) has summarised this attitude towards Ottoman Arabic in his description of the Ottoman period in the context of Arabic history as the perception of a “bleak
chapter of cultural, intellectual, and societal ‘decadence’ (inḥiṭāṭ) that began with the sacking of Baghdad by the Mongols in 1258 and came to an end only with the ‘Arab awakening’ of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.” When it comes to Arabic sources, this frame of mind is still quite wide-spread: more purely minded Arabic philologists might still recoil at the mention of philological work on these late Arabic sources characterised by vernacular influence and Middle Arabic orthography. This is why the gathering of like-minded people brought about much joy and an enthusiastic network of people who appreciate and work on Ottoman Arabic, who investigate literacies of Arabic in the Ottoman Empire, and who want to discuss the political, historical, and sociolinguistic circumstances behind Ottoman Arabic phenomena.

1.0. Koineisation of Arabic in Ottoman Arabic

Under Ottoman rule, we see a shift in Arabic literacy, and marked changes in the use of Arabic can be observed in various registers in contrast to earlier time periods. To a degree, this transformation follows on from changes in the Ayyubid and Mamluk period, but occurs on a much larger scale and extends to a much larger number of vernacular features.

The frequency with which these features occur depends on the literary genre of the texts concerned. Poetic, medical, and theological texts may show very few deviations from the norms of early medieval texts, whereas utilitarian prose in particular is marked by large scale introduction of vernacular and koine forms.
Some of the more frequent changes are tied in with the religious affiliations of the writers. Although particular changes can be found in the case of Muslim writers, too, Christian and Jewish communities appear to have been less guided than their Muslim counterparts by the literary ideal of al-‘arabiyya. As a result, where appropriate, the writings of Jews and Christians include a larger number of colloquial forms than those composed by their Muslim compatriots. Especially when writers attempted to connect to one another on an emotional level, we see colloquial forms occur in correspondence, or vernacular forms may be used to render speech in court documents.

Although Christian and Jewish texts may show a greater number of non-Classical forms than Muslim texts, due to religiously-anchored attitudes towards Classical Arabic among writers of the latter, this does not mean there are no shared trends observable in all Ottoman Arabic texts. A methodological flaw haunting grammatical description of Judaeo-Arabic and Christian Arabic texts is the method by which materials are compared to one another. Rather than comparing those forms which diverge from the Classical inventory to comparable contemporary texts, i.e., other letters, documents, philosophical texts, etc., analyses often concentrated on divergences from Classical Arabic only, thus incorrectly marking shared confessional forms as particularly Jewish or Christian.

The reality of Jewish or Christian Arabic forms was thus compared to the ideal of Muslim Arabic. Yet, Muslim texts are

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1 For a discussion on confessional varieties and their validity as a category, see Holes (2019), den Heijer (2012), and Wagner (2018).
often slightly more prescriptive, and many progressive language features do indeed appear to emerge first in Jewish and Christian texts.

Language deviation is additionally facilitated by the use of a different alphabet—such as Hebrew, in the case of Judaeo-Arabic, or Syriac, in the case of Garshuni texts. The use of a different script appears to open avenues of orthography influenced by spelling conventions in the relevant contact language that are closed to writers only employing Arabic script.

2.0. **Shared Trends and Divergences of Koineisation across Confessional Boundaries**

Trying to answer the question of how the choice of alphabet influences the writing of Ottoman Arabic, the texts in this *Reader* reveal a heterogeneous picture. Obvious differences become apparent in terms of orthography. Double spelling of consonants in cases of gemination occurs increasingly in Judaeo-Arabic sources from the later medieval period, but is largely confined to w and y. In the 19th and 20th centuries this appears to spread to all consonants, as in texts II.34 and II.36. Judaeo-Arabic texts of the later Ottoman period, in particular utilitarian prose texts, also reveal certain patterns of the realisation of short vowels that are hidden in Arabic script. The same can be found in texts written in Mandaic script, which, in addition to a large number of *plene*-spelled vowels, also reveals the dialectal pronunciation of suffixes, such as Classical Arabic -k as vernacular -č. Yet, other texts, in particular those written in Garshūnī, show an astonishing affinity to Classical Arabic orthographical norms.
A divergent feature can be found in the spelling of otiose ʾalif. In Judaeo-Arabic, this appears in medieval works, such as the Bible translation by Saadya Gaon, but has been lost in documentary sources. Christian utilitarian prose composed in Arabic, however, keeps this norm inherited from Arabic scribal traditions. Another divergent phenomenon is the vocalism patterns frequently found in Ottoman Judaeo-Arabic sources. Whether these patterns are specific to spoken Jewish Arabic or whether the use of the Hebrew alphabet allows shared colloquial speech patterns which were later abandoned by the other communities to emerge still needs to be investigated further.

The definite article preceding the ‘sun letters’ is most often not spelled in Judaeo-Arabic sources, but may also, albeit rarely, be missing in Christian and Muslim texts.

The very frequent plene-spelled short vowels, defective spelling of Classical Arabic long vowels,  for Classical Arabic short /a/, and tafkīm and tarqīq in Judaeo-Arabic correspondence and in Mandaic sources is aided by the use of different alphabets and Hebrew and Mandaic orthographical conventions. Ṭāʾ  marbūṭa for ṭāʾ, however, occurs only in Christian letters, where it appears to be associated with the use of Arabic script.

The replacement of interdental fricatives by stops and the omission of final nūn of the nunation is shared in texts written by all confessions.

When we focus on the morphological, syntactic, and lexical levels, the differences become somewhat less pronounced. For example, while the vernacular bi-imperfect and the written koine
form of lam as a general negation seem to emerge somewhat earlier in non-Muslim sources, they are common features found in texts written by members of all confessions. Pronouns and pronominal suffixes appear to be spelled colloquially mostly in non-Arabic alphabets, but the phenomenon occurs in Arabic script as well.

The lexicon of non-Muslim writers often includes vocabulary from the liturgical languages of those communities, but these should be classed as register-specific loanwords. Utilitarian texts in all confessional groups, in particular, display a rich assortment of colloquial phenomena.

Overall, most Ottoman Arabic texts show increased influence of vernacular forms compared with medieval texts, and allow greater access to the spoken language. At the same time, written koine forms become customary in the texts.

In terms of shared and divergent features, the biggest fault-line seems to be utilitarian prose versus literary texts, rather than along confessional boundaries, although non-Arabic scripts additionally facilitate the emergence of non-Classical forms.

3.0. Notes

Having met Efe Khayyat from Rutgers University at another conference and discovered our shared passion for Ottoman Arabic, the two of us set about organising another conference at Rutgers in 2017. With his support, more contributors to the volume were recruited. The meetings culminated in a third and final workshop at the Woolf Institute in Cambridge in 2019.
When we discussed what form the written output of the conference could take, the idea of a Handbook and Reader of Ottoman Arabic emerged. The aim of such a volume would be to make a large number of short 15th–20th-century Arabic texts available and easily accessible to students and scholars of Arabic. Commentaries would elucidate shared linguistic phenomena and language change reflected in the written sources.

The Handbook section thus gathers articles intended to educate about a wide range of topics pertaining to literacy and education in the Ottoman Empire. The Reader section contains samples of texts provided by over twenty-five different scholars. Some of the texts were reproduced from other publications, with the obligation to leave them unchanged in this edition. Classical Arabic transcriptions and conventions were used alongside colloquial modern counterparts. It was therefore not possible to employ a homogenous transliteration system. This was somewhat difficult for me, conditioned by my Germanic schooling, but I have embraced the spirit of variationism.

The articles in the Handbook section have the references added at the end of each article, while the references for the Reader section are gathered at the end of the volume.

All texts in the Reader part that were originally composed in scripts other than Arabic have been rendered in Arabic transcription in order to allow access for scholars unfamiliar with the Hebrew, Syriac, and Mandaic alphabets. The transcription follows the system developed by Werner Diem (2014), and serves to open up the original text to the uninitiated, especially to native readers of Arabic. In the transcriptions, no statements are made
about place of articulation or vowel quality or quantity, and no attempt has been made to provide a normalised Arabic version of the original text.

The table below shows the transliterations for the Classical texts:

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4.0. Acknowledgments

This volume would not have been possible without the support of many institutions and individuals. First and foremost, my heartfelt thanks go to all the scholars who have contributed to this volume: Dotan Arad, Ani Avetisyan, Christopher Bahl, Alex Bellem, Guy Burak, Magdalen Connolly, Humphrey Davies, Werner Diem, Ahmed Ech-Charfi, Matthew Dudley, Michal Erdman, Tania García-Arévalo, Ghayde Ghraowi, Charles Häberl, Benjamin Hary, Nahem Ilam, Geoffrey Khan, George Kiraz, Feras Krimsti, Efe Khayyat, Necmettin Kizilkaya, Michiel Leezenberg, Jérôme Lentin, Boris Liebrenz, Olav Orum, G. Rex Smith, Kristina Richardson, Omer Shafran, Liesbeth Zack.

The Woolf Institute supported me first through a Research Fellowship, then appointed me as Director of Research and finally as Executive Director, always allowing me to continue my research passions, with funding provided for all three workshops.

The Faculty of Asian and Middle Eastern Studies of the University of Cambridge provided funding towards the first and third workshops. Rutgers University and Efe Khayyat funded the second workshop, while the T-S Genizah Research Unit of the Cambridge University Library contributed to the first workshop.

My profound gratitude goes to Gottfried Hagen, whose advice was crucial for the organisation and conduct of all three workshops. Geoffrey Khan and Clive Holes were ever supportive, and we had great intellectual input from Enam al-Wer, Helen Pfeifer, and Hakan Karateke. Thanks also go to John-Paul Ghobrial, Didem Havioglu, Tuna Artun, Peter Hill, and Khaled el-
Rouayheb, as well as all Woolf Institute staff who facilitated the conferences.

Last but not least, I owe a great debt to Aaron Hornkohl, Alissa Symon and Flora Moffie, who with great enthusiasm and passion helped me in bringing this volume together.
I. HANDBOOK