

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

Studies in Jewish History and Culture

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VOLUME 28

‘European Genizah’: Texts and Studies

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VOLUME 1

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Andreas Lehnardt



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

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CALAMUS OR CHISEL: ON THE HISTORY OF THE ASHKENAZIC SCRIPT

Edna Engel

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The Beginnings of Ashkenazic Script

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

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

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

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

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

יש כעיזז ומצל הסיקין כימין
 זה מיהלחת ביז זינכעוטין זינמי
 הכליות וטוזי כלאות עמו הרגל י
 ול כשמלו ובית עורה להיזן זה

Ms. Firenze Bib. Nationale II-I-7 1177

Plate 1. The First Dated Ashkenazic Manuscript

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

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

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

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

⁶ Ms. Firenze Bib. Nationale II-I-7.

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

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

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

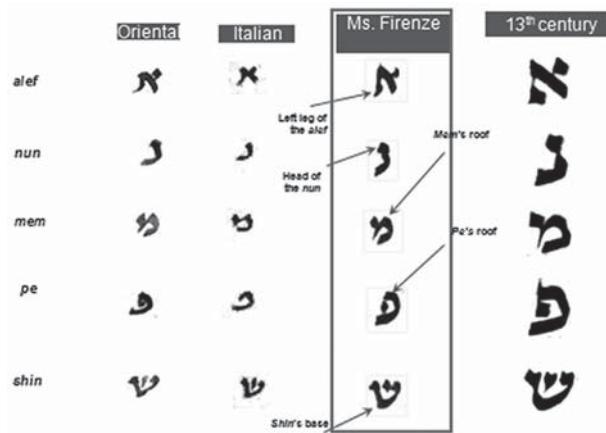


Plate 2. Beginnings of the Ashkenazic Script

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

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

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

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



Plate 3. The 12th century: Script and Inscriptions



Plate 4. The 13th century



Plate 5. The 13th century: Scripts and Inscription

The Thirteenth Century (Plate 4)¹⁰

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

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

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

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

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

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

*The German Style*¹²

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

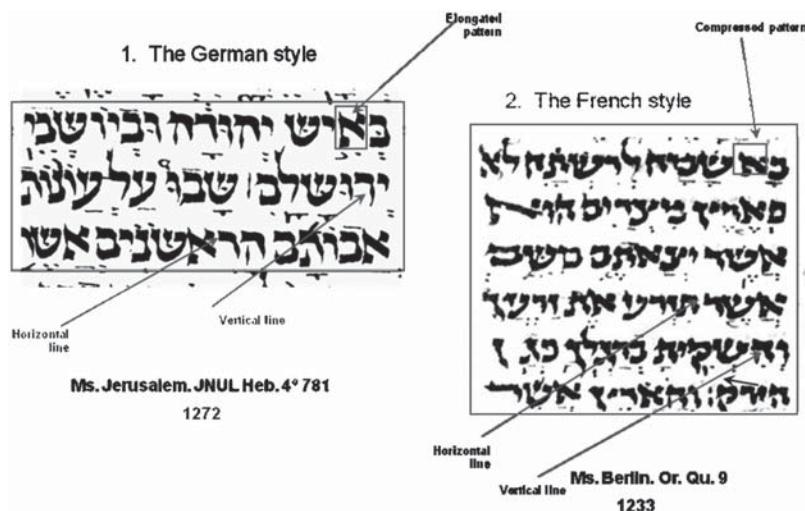


Plate 6.

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

¹³ Ibid., Ms. JNUL.

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

The French Style¹⁴

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

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

¹⁴ Ibid. (to be published).

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

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

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



Würzburg 1247



Würzburg 1243



Würzburg 1244

Plate 7.



Würzburg 1236



Würzburg 1236/37



La Rochelle 1215/6



Würzburg 1239

Plate 8.

Plate 8



Plate 9. The 14th century

The Fourteenth Century

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

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

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

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

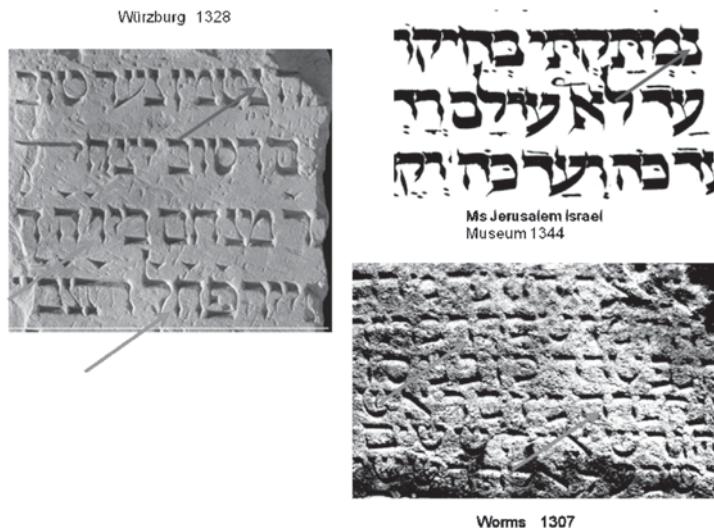


Plate 10. The 14th century: Script and Inscriptions

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

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

The Fifteenth Century

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

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

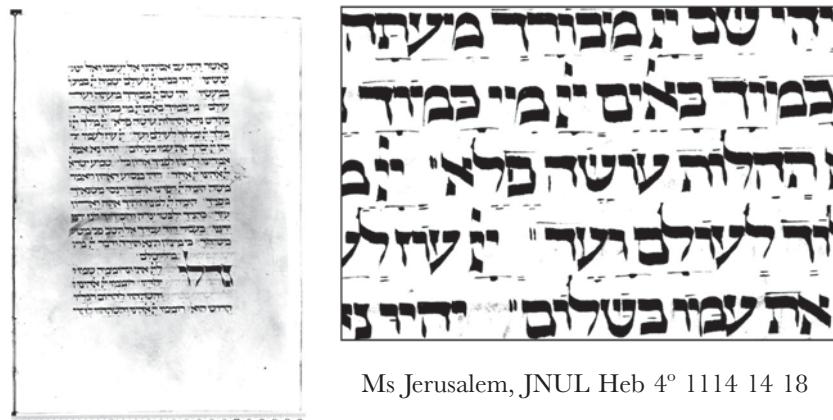


Plate 11. The 15th century

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

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

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

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

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

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



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

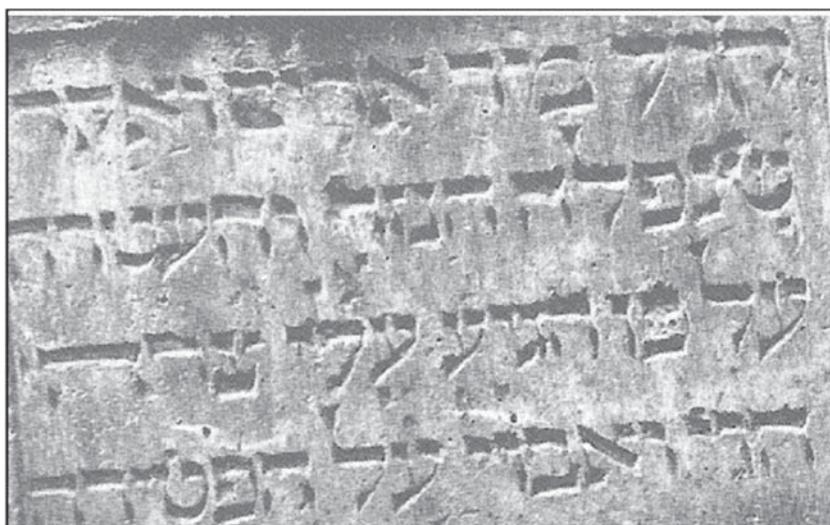


Plate 13. The 15th century—Prague 1492

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

Conclusion

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

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

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

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

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



Speyer Landesarchiv Fr. Nr. 148



Kassel Universitätsbibliothek



Ms Jerusalem Israel Museum
180/34



Plate 14. 'Genizat Germania'