

Jewish Cooks in Medieval Fustat (Old Cairo): A 'Non-Kosher' Case from the Fourteenth Century

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ABSTRACT: This paper explores the medieval Jewish portable food market by concentrating on one case study of Jewish cooks in Fustat (old Cairo) in the fourteenth century. Jewish food vendors supplied kosher food products and ready-made dishes, supervised by officials of the local Jewish community. The paper incorporates findings from Geniza documents, mainly in Judeo-Arabic, including communal correspondence and lists, *halakhic* (Jewish religious law) literature and the Muslim *ḥisba* manuals (guidelines for the market inspector). With its own supervision system exercising social, religious and financial control, the Jewish food industry was part of an autonomous Jewish sphere within the Muslim city.

At the end of the fifteenth century, the Italian-Jewish scholar Rabbi Obadiah Jare de Bertinoro wrote his father three letters about his journey to the Holy Land. In one, he described what he saw in the Jewish market of Cairo during his visit in 1488:

For trade there is no better place in the world than Cairo [...] The Jew can buy everything that is necessary, all kinds of dishes, meat, cheese, fish, vegetables, and in general all that he requires, for everything is sold in the Jews' street; this is also the case in Palermo, but there it is not the same as in Cairo, for in the latter place the Jews cook at home only for the Sabbath, since men as well as women are occupied during the whole week and can therefore buy everything in the market [...].¹

Other European travellers in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries also observed Cairenes' practice of not cooking at home and many were shocked by the number of cooks working in medieval Cairo's markets and streets, selling their food at a stall or on foot. Due to the widespread demand from the full range of the social strata, from the poor to the wealthy, the urban food industry specialized to satisfy diverse customers' tastes.² Those who refrained from buying ready-made foods directly from the cook (*ṭabbākh*) could purchase products, prepare their food at home, and, lacking running water or fire, send the dishes to be cooked in the nearby oven or in the shops of the cook, the butcher, or the baker.³ Thus, eating food at home, whether purchased completely prepared or sent elsewhere for final preparation, was connected to the food industry in the public sphere.

This paper explores the medieval Jewish prepared food industry through the lens of a case study of Jewish cooks in Fustat (old Cairo) in the fourteenth century. Jewish food vendors supplied kosher foods, both uncooked food products or ready-made dishes and were supervised by officials appointed by

the local Jewish community. As I will show, the Jewish food industry was part of an autonomous Jewish sphere within the Muslim city. The paper incorporates findings from Geniza documents, mainly in Judeo-Arabic, including communal correspondence and lists, *halakhic* (Jewish religious law) literature and the Muslim *ḥisba* manuals (guidelines for the market inspector).⁴ The Geniza documents provide an unparalleled resource for learning about the quandaries of daily life in the Mediterranean area, where many religious and ethnic minorities lived side by side.⁵

During the Mamluk period (1250–1517), nearly every aspect of Jewish life deteriorated comparing to the conditions under the Fatimid Caliphate. The decline process of Fustat, Egypt's historical capital city, began in the beginning in the twelfth century, and intensified as a pandemic and famine ravished Egypt from 1200–1201. Many Jews of Fustat, including the *Nagid* (the leader of the Jews in Egypt), gradually moved to the adjacent capital, Cairo, leaving about 200 Jewish families in Fustat by the first half of the fourteenth century.⁶ The *Nagid* stood as the 'Head of the Jews' in Egypt, the representative authority of all the Jewish communities (Rabbanites, Karaites, and Samaritans). He was responsible for the Jewish community's cohesion, administration according to the religious laws, supervision of religion and social services, and maintenance of law and order. Among the *Nagid's* official powers were appointing and dismissing ritual slaughterers (and other religious service providers) and imposing and removing bans and excommunications, which were significant in defining religious and social community boundaries.⁷

Rabbi Yehoshua ben Avraham, a fifth generation descendent of Maimonides, served as the *Nagid* in the capital of Cairo for twenty years, from 1334 until his death in 1355. His letters to Fustat's Jewish community that survive in the Geniza indicate a vital community life in that city, despite the decline in the community's size and economic power.⁸ While these letters were brought to light and published nearly forty years ago, they have yet to receive any in-depth study. Four of these letters illuminate aspects of food supervision and consumption and two deal with the cooks; the following discussion will focus on the latter.

In a long official letter, written in a sharp language, R. Yehoshua the Nagid warns the community about buying from the local Jewish cooks:

[...to the honoured community of the dwellers of Fustat...] I have already warned you about the cooks (*ṭabbākḥīm*). You all should know that it is permitted to cook for the community only to be trustworthy and kosher (person) [...]. And if he (the cook) is bad and irreligious (*kalīl a[ʔ]dīn*), it is forbidden to be in contact with him and to eat from his hands (i.e., something that was made by him). I already informed that those who cook at your place were doing evil, desecrating the Sabbath, and denouncing in *masarūt* (i.e., to denounce a Jew to the Muslim authorities). When I come to Fustat, I will take testimony about each (of them) on

what he has done, and I will take (their) permission (to cook from them). And now, none of them is allowed to cook, and if one of them will cook, he will be under an excommunication; no one will eat from them nothing. The one that will cook should be a good person, and (he) will bring signatures from the community that he is a good Jew, kosher, and appropriate to cook for the community. Be cautious for your souls and faith [...] And be careful disobeying all I mentioned. God will be your helper [...] and peace.⁹

R. Yehoshua informed the community that their local cooks were malicious and he needed to investigate their deeds. He cautioned them not to buy any dish from the cooks nor associate with them until he could come to inspect them; by doing so, the community de facto excommunicated the cooks. If the cooks continued cooking for sale, excommunication would receive an official status and became de jure. Fustat's Jewish small community should be examined as a 'face-to-face' society, characterized by a high level of interdependence between its members and constant mutual supervision; it also was rife with gossip, rumors, and sights social exclusions. In fact, the *Nagid* himself received information about the cooks from an informant. One (of many) curious things in the letter is that the cooks are not even mentioned by their name and it is likely that the community members knew who the subjects of these letters were.

Moreover, previous research indicates that the profession of the Jewish *ṭabbākhīn* was open to interpretation. When Eliyahu Ashtor (1965) first mentioned the above letter as evidence of the community leaders supervising the cooks, i.e. he read the Arabic root Ṭ-B-KH as 'to cook.' However, when he actually published the document (1970), Ashtor translated to Hebrew the profession of those mentioned in the letter as ritual slaughterers, using the Hebrew root SH-Ḥ-Ṭ ('to slaughter'). Goitein (1985) translated another letter, discussed further on, and assumed that their official profession was that of butchers.¹⁰ Since in other Geniza records, such as lists of charities' donors or recipients and legal records, there are mentions of *ṭabbākhs*, we do know that this profession was common among Jews. But the mentions do not help us solve the question of the nature of this profession because they were a tool to identify a specific person. For example, in a list of appeal's donors from Fustat community (October 1335) are mentions several men called Mūsa, one of them refer as *alḥaver Mūsa almelamed* (the teacher) and another is called *Mūsa alṭabbakh* (which perhaps was one of 'our' *ṭabbākhīn*).¹¹ Due to the ubiquity of cooks in greater Cairo, the abundance of names of meat profession names, and the sub-specialties of meat-cooking found in the Arabic literature and Geniza documents, I suggest that they should be referred to as cooks by reading the root Ṭ-B-KH as 'to cook.'¹² Furthermore, we should acknowledge the versatility of medieval life, in which the butcher could also cook in his shop and sell meat dishes.¹³

According to the *halakha*, a slaughterer who sells non-kosher meat (Heb. *trefa*) should be excommunicated.¹⁴ However, in our case, the cooks were not accused of selling non-kosher meat or any other food fraud. According to R. Yehoshua's letter, the cooks were guilty of a triad of sins: they did evil, desecrated the Sabbath, and denounced in *masarūt* a Jew (or Jews, we cannot be sure) to the Muslim authorities. As a result, he prohibited them from cooking for the community, and asks the community to appoint a new cook instead of the 'malicious' cooks.¹⁵ This request reflects the community's genuine need for a cook in daily life, the communal responsibility to providing kosher food to its people, and the medieval 'personal' kashrut model. Under this model, the new cook should be a good, religious (good Jew), and trustworthy person, in contrast to the former cooks. These criteria indicate the essence of the kashrut medieval model as 'personal': the kashrut is not given to the food (the object) but rather to the person who prepares it (the subject). In other words, kosher people prepare kosher foods. This point is significant, as it shows that trust must exist between those who prepare the food and those who consume it.¹⁶

In the Genizah documents, we find two more types of records presenting a similar 'personal' kosher model: slaughterers' (sin. Arb: *dabāḥ*; Heb: *shohet*) appointments and 'kosher certificates' for cheese traders. For the first, the local community's leadership was responsible for appointing a slaughterer whom they considered a trustworthy person who exhibited good conduct and was acceptable to the community. The community leaders signed the appointment letter that was approved by the 'Head of the Jews'.¹⁷ When a slaughterer was negligent in his work, the community could ask the 'Head of the Jews' for help in dismissing and replacing him.¹⁸ Kosher certificates for cheese stated that the manufacturer or trader of the cheese came to the Jewish local court (Heb. *Beit din*); the court would approve the person's kosherness and his reliability ('*rajul ma'mūn*'), granted a kosher certificate for the cheese in his hands.¹⁹

The difference between the two procedures is that appointing of meat professionals needed not only the agreement of the local authority but also ratification from 'Head of the Jews'. Meat-based dishes present more complications than does cheese, and the kashrut laws – along with opportunities for fraud – accompany every stage of a meat dish's production – beginning with the slaughter, through meat handling, to dish assembly and cooking. In light of this level of regulation – and temptation – there is an even greater need for trust between the producer and consumers. Therefore, when the local authority approves of a cook as a 'good and kosher Jew,' it expresses the community's confidence that he will take care of the kosher foods he provides to the community.

In the medieval world, a person's identity and affiliation was determined by one's religion. Linking religious observance, personal integrity, and credibility were not unique to the Jewish food industry. The *Nagid's* accusation that the cooks are evil and fail to observe religious law (*kāna naḥs qalil a(l)dīn*)²⁰

resembles the accusation found in the *ḥisba* manuals, where the food professionals who cheated and changed, mixed, or diluted the dishes' products were considered to lack religiosity (*'man lā dīn labu'*).²¹ Misconduct in the food production domain was not uncommon, and in the Muslim community, for example, the *muḥtasib*, as the Muslim authority, could use punishments such as confiscating merchandise, flogging, and public humiliations against fraudulent food vendors.²² To the best of my knowledge, the *muḥtasib* did not supervise the Jewish food vendors. However, the Jewish leadership community had limited coercive powers against its people. The instrument of the community's direct coercion was excommunication, and it was used sparingly to conserve its power. In the letter, the *Nagid* demanded excommunication for the cooks in practice, while withholding formally imposing the formal instrument, holding the suspect cooks under probation.

Since the *Nagid* writes that he has already warned about the cooks, I want to suggest carefully that before R. Yehoshua sent the long and irate letter warning the Fustat community against the cooks, he sent another letter addressed only to the community's leadership, which could shed light on how his involvement in this controversial issue began. In this letter the *Nagid* wrote:

The group of the elders will be blessed. You know that the *shaykh* Muwaffaq placed before me and informed me that the cooks were harming him. No one is allowed to change the practice to his harm (Muwaffaq). They (the cooks) will cook during the three days in practice and will cook at the end of the day (i.e. in the evening). Do not change the agreed arrangement and be careful about disobeying me. And peace.²³

From this letter, it appears that the *shaykh* Muwaffaq went from Fustat to Cairo to lodge a complaint against the cooks.²⁴ Here too, the cooks were not mentioned by their names. From the complaint it turned out that the cooks were not considered malicious, but, rather, guilty of having harmed Muwaffaq's condition, probably financially, by cooking on days or during hours that it was not customary for them to cook. The role of Muwaffaq was not mentioned in the letter, and Goitein suggested that he was a slaughterer or supervisor.²⁵ Since I assume the letters deal with cooks rather than butchers, it can be suggested that the official role of Muwaffaq was to supervise the foods *kashrut* and the prevent food fraud, similar to the role of the *'arif* (literally: 'the one who knows', the assistant of the *muḥtasib*) who supervised the *harisa* makers while preparing their dishes in the afternoon for long cooking.²⁶ Whatever kind of professional role Muwaffaq served, the letter reveals that the labor relations between the supervisor and the cooks as well as the financial implications were to be resolved through community-social supervision.

Assuming that the two letters do deal with the same affair, the order of events can be suggested as follows: Muwaffak went to complain to the *Nagid* about the cooks; the *Nagid* sent the letter to the community leaders in an attempt to regulate the activities of the cooks and Muwaffak and to resolve the

situation without the need for drastic intervention. Apparently, after the cooks continued to act in their ‘evil’ way, the Nagid wrote the scathing letter against the cooks to the whole community in which he orders them to stop buying food from the cooks and to sever ties with them until he can reach the city and conducts an investigation, and if necessary, dismiss their appointment. It appears, then, that what was started as a labor dispute escalated into legal proceedings and public condemnation, demanding the active participation of all members of the Fustat Jewish community.

To conclude, the case study of the ‘malicious’ cooks from fourteenth century Fustat provide a new look on Jewish cooks, the food market, and the regulation of its supervision. Living in a Muslim-majority society significantly shaped the food culture of Jews in medieval Muslim lands, with Jews sharing many culinary practices and preferences with their neighbors. At the same time, religious dietary laws stipulated differences in the ingredients and dishes between the Jewish and Muslim menus. Kosher certificates, issued by the local Jewish courts, were given to those who made and traded with foods. Meat professionals, including slaughterers and as I suggest also the cooks, needed also approval from the *Nagid*. In the case of the ‘malicious’ cooks, the letter from the *Nagid* functioned as a ‘non-kosher certificate.’ Since food was a key component in marking religious and social identities in the urban landscape, keeping kosher laws was a tool to maintain the community’s boundaries. This does not mean that Jews did not buy food from their neighbors. On the contrary, R. Yehoshua the *Nagid* sent a letter to the Fustat community warning against buying meat from non-Jews.²⁷ The *Nagid*’s preoccupation with food supervision was not limited to religious issues; he was also presented with requests for regulation and intervention in commercial relations, and the labor dispute of the cooks and Muwaffaq was not unusual.²⁸ In these respects, Jewish food industry was a part of an autonomous Jewish sphere within Muslim cities, led by the *Nagid*, and recognized and permitted by Muslim authorities.

Notes

¹ The letters of Obadiah Jare de Bertinoro (1487–90), in: Elkan Nathan Adler, *Jewish Travellers* (London: Routledge, 2005), p. 85. (With some additions according to the Hebrew text).

² Paulina B. Lewicka, *Food and Foodways of Medieval Cairenes: Aspects of Life in an Islamic Metropolis of the Eastern Mediterranean*, Islamic History and Civilization: Studies and Texts, v. 88 (Leiden; Boston: Brill, 2011), pp. 88–90.

³ Amalia Levanoni, ‘Food and Cooking during the Mamluk Era: Social and Political Implications,’ *Mamluk Studies Review*, IX.2 (2005), 201–22 (pp. 207–9). There were meal-carrying utensils for bringing dishes from the cook to the home, or in the opposite direction, to be cooked (Arabic: *ḥāmīl*, *ṣawj ḥawāmīl*); see: Shelomo Dov Goitein, *A Mediterranean Society*, 6 vols. (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1967-1993) IV, pp. 141, 390 fn. 15–17; Miriam Frenkel and Ayala Lester, ‘Evidence of Material Culture from the Geniza—An Attempt to Correlate Textual and Archaeological Findings,’ in *Material Evidence and Narrative Sources: Interdisciplinary Studies of the History of the Muslim Middle East*, eds. Daniella Talmon-Heller and Katia Cytryn-Silverman, Islamic History and Civilization, 108 (Boston ;

Leiden: Brill, 2014), pp. 147–87 (pp. 164–65; 179).; From household shopping lists found in the Geniza, we can learn about dishes prepared at home, including products and their amounts, see: Goitein, *A Mediterranean Society*, p. IV, 230–34.

⁴ The Geniza documents were mostly written in Judeo-Arabic, which is a medieval Arabic, written in Hebrew script and with characteristics of Jewish languages. For the convenience of the readers, I am using the IJMES transliteration system for both Classical Arabic and Judeo-Arabic.

⁵ Stefan C. Reif, *A Jewish Archive from Old Cairo: The History of Cambridge University's Genizah Collection*, Culture and Civilisation in the Middle East. Lat (Richmond, Surrey: Curzon, 2000); Marina Rustow, *The Lost Archive: Traces of a Caliphate in a Cairo Synagogue*, *The Lost Archive* (Princeton, N.J: Princeton University Press, 2020).

⁶ Amir Mazor, 'The Jews in Medieval Egypt under the Mamluks (1250–1517),' in *The Jews in Medieval Egypt*, ed. by Miriam Frenkel (Boston, MA: Academic Studies Press, 2021), pp. 244–68; Eliyahu Ashtor, *History of the Jews in Egypt and in Syria under Mamluk Rule (Hebrew)*, 3 vols. (Jerusalem: Mossad HaRav Kook, 1944–1970), I, pp. 233–46.

⁷ Mark R. Cohen, *Jewish Self-Government in Medieval Egypt: The Origins of the Office of Head of the Jews, ca. 1065-1126*, Princeton Studies on the Near East. Lat (Princeton, N.J: Princeton University Press, 1980), pp. 28–30. The research of the Geniza discusses mostly the Fatimid and Ayubbid period. However, we can assume that these roles of the *Nagid* continue through the Mamluk period.

⁸ Ashtor, *History of the Jews in Egypt and in Syria under Mamluk Rule*, pp. 298–300; Shelomo Dov Goitein, 'The Twilight of the House of Maimonides (Hebrew),' *Tarbiz*, 54.a (1984), 67–104; Mazor, 253.

⁹ Cambridge, Cambridge University Library (CUL), T-S 16.296; My translation based on Ashtor translation to Hebrew of the document with moderate corrections, see: Ashtor, *History of the Jews in Egypt and in Syria under Mamluk Rule*, pp. 84–87.

¹⁰ Compare: Eliyahu Ashtor, 'Some Features of the Jewish Communities in Medieval Egypt (Hebrew),' *Zion*, 30.A/B (1965), 61–78 (p. 67); Ashtor, *History of the Jews in Egypt and in Syria under Mamluk Rule*, pp. 84–87; Goitein, 'The Twilight,' p. 93 fn. 80.

¹¹ CUL: TS K15.18, Goitein, 'The Twilight', Doc. 29.

¹² For food professionals names mentioned in the *hisba* manuals, see Lewicka, pp. 104–5.; mentioning of *Tabbakh* in charity's lists: Mark R. Cohen, *Poverty and Charity in the Jewish Community of Medieval Egypt. Jews, Christians, and Muslims from the Ancient to the Modern World* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), p. 69 fn. 120. For the dictionary definition of the Judeo-Arab root Ṭ-B-KH, see: Joshua Blau, 'Ṭ-B-KH', *A Dictionary of Mediaeval Judaeo-Arabic Texts* (Jerusalem: The Academy of the Hebrew Language, 2006), p. 393.

¹³ CUL: TS 10J13.11, in: Miriam Frenkel, 'The Compassionate and Benevolent': *Jewish Ruling Elites in the Medieval LAlexandria (Hebrew)* (Jerusalem: Yad Ben-Zvi, 2007), Doc. 50. For modern example of selling from Istanbul (1915) see: Minna Rozen, 'The Commerce of Meat and Social Struggles in Jewish Istanbul 1700-1918 (Hebrew)', *Pa'amim*, 105–106 (2006), 83–126 (p.99). These two cases in which the butcher also sell cooked foods was documented by local leaders due to both of the butchers sell non-kosher meat dishes.

¹⁴ Maimonides, *Mishne Torah, Hilkhbot Shḥita*, 10:14; *Hilkhbot Talmud Torah*, 6:14; *Hilkhbot Ma'akhalot Asurim*, 8:9.

¹⁵ We can not be sure to how many cooks R. Yehoshua referred, because in Judeo-Arabic the limits between the dual and plural forms have become blurred. See: Joshua Blau, *The Emergence and Linguistic Background of Judaeo-Arabic*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1965), p. 88.

¹⁶ Maimonides, *Mishne Torah Hilkhbot Ma'akhalot Asurim*, 8:7.

¹⁷ Goitein, *A Mediterranean Society*, II, p. 225.

¹⁸ Gil, Doc. 213, 400, 401, 402.

¹⁹ Nadia Zeldes and Miriam Frenkel, 'The Sicilian Trade — Jewish Merchants in the Mediterranean in the Twelfth and Thirteenth Centuries (Hebrew),' *Michael: On the History of the Jews in the Diaspora*, 14 (1997), 89–137 (pp. 132–37). CUL: T-S 8J6.13

²⁰ CUL: TS 12.296, lines: 16, 18–19.

²¹ Ibn al-Ukhuwwa, *Ma'alim al-Qurba fi Abkam al-Hisba*, trans. by Reuben Levy (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1938), p. *107.

²² Ronald P. Buckley (Trans. and Ed.), *The Book of the Islamic Market Inspector: Nihayat al-Rutba Fi Talab al-Hisba: (The Utmost Authority in the Pursuit of Hisba)* by 'Abd al-Rahman ibn Nasr al-Shayzari, *Journal of Semitic Studies*. Supplement, 9 (Oxford: University Press, 1999), pp. 32–34, 124–25; Lewicka, pp. 112–14.

²³ Oxford, Bodl. Heb. e. 98.68; Goitein published and translated the letter into Hebrew, see: Goitein, 'The Twilight,' Doc. 24, pp. 93–94.

²⁴ The term *shaykh* borrow from the Arab culture, literally means elder, was an honorific title also in the Jewish society. Goitein, *A Mediterranean Society*, I, p. xvii.

²⁵ Perhaps Goitein suggested identifying Muaffaq's profession as a supervisor because in the letter it is written that they should cook in the evening, and in a letter from the mid-eleventh century the supervisor wrote that he is not sleeping on Friday's nights. See: Gil, Doc. 400.

²⁶ Buckley *Market Inspector*, p. 23. According to al-Shyzari, the *barisa* makers should prepare their stews under the 'arif supervision, making sure that they do not mix different types of meat and do not cheat on the proportions of meat and wheat accepted according to the recipe. After putting the meat in the cooking pot, the 'arif stamped the pot with the *muhtasib* seal and it was put in the oven for long cooking overnight. In the early morning, the 'arif would make sure that the cauldron remained sealed and only then the *barisa* makers could sell it. Ibid, p. 60

²⁷ ENA NS 21.12, Goitein, 'The Twilight,' Doc. 17.

²⁸ R. Yehoshua also called to help the 'poor' cheese makers by arranging the sale of cheese in the Fustat and Cairo Jewish communities, see: ENA 3796.12, Goitein, 'The Twilight,' Doc. 25.