

*‘Could I betray a woman so wise?’*  
**Jewish Women in History (9th–17th centuries):  
Knowledge, Texts, and Objects**  
International Conference – École Pratique des Hautes Études



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EPHE-PSL, Salle D059 Jules Delamarre, Sorbonne  
17, rue de la Sorbonne, 75005 Paris (escalier E, 1er étage)

## **Presentation**

In 1984, Professor Ezra Fleischer published an eleventh-century Genizah fragment from the Taylor-Schechter Collection in Cambridge that features what is today considered the earliest Hebrew poem written by a woman, namely by the wife of the renowned poet and grammarian Dūnash ben Labrāṭ (925-990).<sup>1</sup> The poem, which stands as a highly lyrical exemplar of the nascent Andalusian Hebrew poetry, reads as follow:<sup>2</sup>

“Will her love remember his graceful doe  
her only son in her arms as he parted?  
On her left hand he placed a ring from his right,  
on his wrist she placed her bracelet.  
As a keepsake she took his mantle from him,  
and he in turn took hers from her.  
Would he settle, now, in the land of Spain,  
if its prince gave him half his kingdom?”

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<sup>1</sup> Ezra Fleischer published the fragments T-S NS 143.46 and Mosseri IV.387 which help complete the text of the poem that was already published by Nehemya Allony, based on the fragment Mosseri VIII.202.2; see Nehemya Allony, “Four Poems,” *The Jewish Quarterly Review*, vol. 35, No. 1 (1944), pp. 79-83; Ezra Fleischer, “On Dunash Ben Labrat, his Wife and his Son; New Light on the Beginnings of the Hebrew-Spanish School,” *Jerusalem Studies in Hebrew Literature*, vol. 5 (1984): 189-202 (Hebrew).

<sup>2</sup> Translation from Peter Cole, *The Dream of the Poem: Hebrew Poetry from Muslim and Christian Spain, 950-1492*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007, p. 27.

Should we trust the attribution proposed by Ezra Fleischer and subsequent scholars, this poem chronicles the moving farewell of a tenth-century Jewish woman—her newly born son in her arms—to her husband who was preparing to depart from her. The woman sublimates her love for her spouse and her suffering for the emotional loss that she is about to experience through lyrical verses, in which she also recollects the exchange of tokens of affection and requests that her husband does not forget her.

If the poem was indeed composed by a woman, it represents the highest degree of creative and intellectual initiative, that of authorship (or, with an expression which is the subject of much discussion in research and which we do not fully embrace, the highest degree of intellectual “agency”). This would indeed be an extremely rare example in a medieval world where knowledge and literature was mostly produced and transmitted by men. It is significant that the name of the only high medieval Jewish woman remembered for having written poetry has not been transmitted to posterity, and she is only referred to as the “wife” of someone else, albeit a prominent figure such as Dūnash ben Labrāṭ.

The Genizah document calls for reflection on the challenges of reconstructing women's history—particularly in the context of intellectual history—but also underscores the significance of restoring the names and histories of women who contributed to medieval culture and society. These women played a crucial role in family and community interactions, collaborating with their male contemporaries to shape the social and intellectual landscape. The document thus emphasizes that no woman's history can be disassociated from the historical, cultural, and social context in which women acted and interacted in relation to (or in contrast with) men: it is a history of relationships and interactions between the genders. The wife of Dūnash, and her poetic sensibilities, are embedded within her marital, familial and maternal history (e.g. the allusion to their son), but also, more broadly, within a tapestry of communal and social intersections, shedding light on the nuances of Andalusian and trans-Mediterranean Judaism(s). Through its references to rings, bracelets, and cloaks, the poem reminds us that materiality permeates the realms of emotions, intellectual creativity and relationships. Composed of fragments of quotidian life, history—and women's history—is also material.

The historical source on which the poem is copied, namely a fragment from the Cairo Genizah, calls attention also to the variety of the documentation and methodological approaches that can be mobilized for reconstructing women's history. The poem has come down to us by chance, through a fortuitous twist of history, having been scattered and then discovered among the fragments of the Cairo Genizah. But how many other sources reflecting women's history have been lost and have not survived to the present day? And how many other documents of this nature await exploration by historians in archives? Among these documents, we shall also include those clearly written by men—by the fathers, sons, and partners of the women we are interested in—such as the poem by Dūnash ben Labrāṭ himself copied on the same Genizah fragment of that of his wife, in which the poet responds to her, reassuring her that a woman like her will never be forgotten: “Could I betray a woman so wise given by God as the bride of my youth?”<sup>3</sup> And in addition to the documentation that evinces a shared history between the genders, a fortunate exchange of feelings, and at times even an idealisation of women, it is imperative that those sources which reflect the abuses, violence, and denigration suffered by women are not allowed to be lost in the folds of history.

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<sup>3</sup> “Were you seeking the day of my death when you wrote: / ‘Have you betrayed and abandoned your vows?’ / Could I betray a woman so wise / given by god as the bride of my youth? / Had my heart ever thought to leave you / I would have torn it into pieces. / For those who betray their beloved companion, / God brings down with the trials of foes. / Lions soon will devour his flesh, / and vultures will consume his blood. / Who resembles the stars of dawn” (Genizah fragment T-S NS 143.46); translation from Cole, *The Dream of the Poem*, p. 26.

The Genizah fragment transmitting the poems by Dūnash's wife and by Dūnash himself is an extraordinary document which well exemplifies the scopes of the international conference “*Could I betray a woman so wise?*” Jewish Women in History (9<sup>th</sup>–17<sup>th</sup> centuries): Knowledge, Texts, and Objects,” which will be held in Paris, at the EPHE-PSL Sorbonne, on 9-11 June 2026, and which is kindly sponsored and funded by the European Union. The conference seeks to explore different bodies of textual and material sources and to identify novel methodological perspectives to trace elements of female knowledge, devotion, and everyday life in the study of medieval Judaism. The conference will gather scholars working on different aspects of women's history and medieval and early modern Jewish history, literature and history of art. The various degrees of Jewish female presence and participation in culture and society will be sought in the context of literature, education, personal correspondences, art, magic, medicine, and legal affairs. Contributions that present original and unpublished sources, or that propose innovative methodological approaches capable of linking texts and artefacts to the complexity of women's experiences, are particularly welcome. While the primary focus of the conference is on Jewish women in the Middle Ages, comparative contributions addressing the Christian and Muslim worlds will also be presented. Although the core emphasis of the conference is on the Middle Ages, with due consideration for the distinctive nature of Jewish history, the temporal frame extends, on occasion, into the early modern period.



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