International Journal of Multicultural and Multireligious Understanding

http://ijmmu.com
editor@ijmmu.com
ISSN 2364-5369
Volume 12, Issue 5
April, 2025
Pages: 278-288

The Cult of Moses in Medieval Egypt: Dammūh and Kanīsat Mūsā as Case Study

Yi Zhou

Peking University, Beijing, China

http://dx.doi.org/10.18415/ijmmu.v12i5.6729

Abstract

This paper examines the cult of Moses among Jews in medieval Egypt under Islamic rule. The first section provides potential explanations for its origins and formation, and then examines the concept of Moses veneration among Jews in the Islamic world. The second section focuses on Dammūh and Kanīsat Mūsā ("Synagogue of Moses") as important sites for practicing the Mosaic cult among medieval Egyptian Jews. Drawing from Jewish and Muslim sources, especially the Cairo Genizah, the study aims to address why these sites were important for the Jews in medieval Egypt, and the role Dammūh played in their social life.

Keywords: *Moses; Medieval Egypt; Dammūh; Kanīsat Mūsā; Cairo Genizah*

Introduction

I. Jewish Cult of Moses

1.1. Jewish Tradition of Saint-Worship in Pre-Islamic Egypt

What cultural, social, and religious background fostered the cult of Moses in Egypt? One may find answer in Egyptian Jews' long-lasting involvement in local worship activities, including pilgrimages. Not too long after the fall of the Second Temple, the Jews in the Hellenistic and Early Roman Egypt started to form a national identity and consolidating an identification with Jewish historical memory. The growth and increasing prevalence of pilgrimage traditions to the graves of Jewish heroes and forefathers was "nourished by an infrastructure of ideology and practice that did not clearly emerge until the third century CE."[1] The Jews at Elephantine worshipped in and made pilgrimages to the local temple of *YHWH*. The Egyptian Jews celebrated Jewish festivals unique to Egypt (e.g., the festivals in 3 Maccabees and the Septuagint festival on Pharos Island in Alexandria), and sometimes participated in non-Jewish cults.[2] Mount Sinai, where Moses received the *Ten Commandments* from God, was arguably another popular destination for Jewish pilgrims in Egypt.[3] The tradition of studying and worshiping in a

[1] Allen Kerkeslager, *Jewish Pilgrimage and Jewish Identity in Hellenistic and Early Roman Egypt* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania, 1997), 43
[2] Kerkeslager, 149
[3] Kerkeslager, 76-81

synagogue only recently formed,[4] while synagogues and ancestral graves were often used as healing sanctuaries carrying magical effects.[5]

Before Rabbinic Judaism became standardized and widespread, Jewish customs that evolved independently ouside the Talmudic academics in Palestine and Babylonian were often considered "unorthodox." However, these customs reflect how Judaism during the early post-exilic period developed in a cuturally diverse world. A similar trend appeared in Syria-Palestine. Archaeological evidence from synagogues in late antique Palestine proves Jewish worship of Helios—a cult that later found its way into Genizah mystical texts.[6] We cannot exclude the possibility that Jewish reverence for Moses and pilgrimage to Kanīsat Mūsā in later periods has its roots in ancient local Jewish cults.

1.2. Jewish Veneration of Moses in the Islamic World

The popularity of Mosaic veneration in medieval Islamic society may be because that Islam also holds special esteem for the Qur'anic prophet Musa, a parallel to the Biblical Moses who wrought remarkable miracles. This similarity could lead Islamic authorities to be more accepting of Jewish reverence for Moses. Whilst Islam recognizes and honors Moses as God's messenger, miracle worker, and interlocutor, it diverges from Jewish beliefs regarding Moses's enduring prophetic significance; Muslims regard Muḥammad as a prophet who followed Moses, whose life was comparable to Moses's but ultimately superior to it.[7] Therefore, Moses stands out as a central figure in polemical works by the Jews of the medieval Islamic world. Abraham Ibn Daʾūd praises the virtues of Moses and holds him in high regard: Moses represents the Jewish faith in Islamic tradition, which is also referred to as "the religion of Moses" (*dīn/sharīʿat Mūsā*).[8] By venerating Moses, Ibn Daʾūd implies that no other non-Jewish prophets hold the same reverence. Maimon ben Joseph the Dayyan holds Moses in the highest esteem. To counter against the claim that Muḥammad is "seal of the prophets" (*khātam an-nabīyīn*) and Quran is the conclusive divine scripture, he extols Moses as "the best among creatures" (*khayr makhlūq*) and "the most respected among the messengers" (*ajall marsūl*); there is no reason for God to replace Moses by other prophets, and to substitute Torah with other scriptures.[9] In Maimon's polemics, Moses was even crowned "the chosen (*al-muṣṭafā*) among mankind" and "master of mankind" (*sayyid al-bashar*), titles endowed only to Muḥammad in Islam.[10]

Moses Maimonides places additional emphasis on Moses' reverence. In his constant attempt to exhort his fellow Jews stay faithful to Judaism against the wave of conversion to islam, he mentions Moses in order to undermine Muḥammad's status and thus refuting Islamic arguments against Judaism. Maimonides in his *Guide for the Perplexed* delivers a powerful statement of Moses' highest position amongst all Jewish prophets:

[4] According to the Byzantine historian Socrates of Constantinople, the Jews of Alexandria in 412 C.E. spent Sabbath not in a synagogue, but in the market place, and "devoted their attention not to the hearing of the Law but to theatrical amusements." This evidence reveals that not every Jew in antiquity recognized the synagogue's spiritual significance. See Shaye Cohen, "Pagan and Christian Evidence on the Ancient Synagogue," in Lee Levine, ed., *The Synagogue in Late Antiquity* (New York: Jewish Theological Seminary, 1987), 159

[5] Kerkeslager, 24

[6] One text found in the Genizah known as the *Sefer ha-Razim* (Book of Secrets) reflects Jewish cult of Helios. It reads "Holy Helios who rises in the east, good mariner, trustworthy leader of the sun's rays... who of old did establish the mighty wheel of the heavens." See Michael A. Morgan, *Sepher ha-Razim* (Chico, CA: Scholars Press, 1983), 71

[7] Shari Lowin, "'A Prophet Like Moses'? What Can We Know About the Early Jewish Responses to Muḥammad's Claims of Mosesness?" *Hebrew Union College Annual*, Vol. 90 (2019), 227

[8] Haggai Mazuz, "Jewish-Muslim Polemics," in Phillip I. Lieberman, ed. *The Cambridge History of Judaism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021), 953-954

[9] Mazuz, "Jewish-Muslim Polemics," 954; originally cited from L. M. Simmons, "Maimun's Letter of Consolation. Arabic Text," *Jewish Quarterly Review*, o.s. 2/3 (1890), 335-68.

[10] Ibid.

> *That his prophecy was distinguished from that of all his predecessors is proved by the passage, 'And I appeared to Abraham, etc., but by my name, the Lord, I was not known unto them' (Exod. 6: 3). As to the distinction of Moses' prophecy from that of succeeding prophets, it is stated as a fact, 'And there arose not a prophet since in Israel like unto Moses, whom the Lord knew face to face.' (Deut. 44: 10).*[11]

Maimonides sees the miracles wrought by Moses as "not of the same class as the miracles of other prophets"[12]:

> *No prophet will ever, like Moses, do sign publicly in the presence of friend and enemy, of his followers and his opponents. ... Then it is pointed out that the signs were made in the presence of Pharaoh, all his servants and all his land, the opponents of Moses, and also in the presence of all the Israelites, his followers.*[13]

Intriguingly, one may ask if Moses Maimonides's high reputation, along with the achievements of the Maimonidian thread, contributes to Jewish veneration of a "Moses-like figure," especially in late medieval Egypt. The epitaph of Moses Maimonides, "From Moses to Moses no one arose like Moses" (*mi-Moshe ʿad-Moshe lo qam ke-Moshe*), was taken from a Hebrew dictum already well-known during his lifetime. Even Maimonides self-regarded as a "Moses reborn." Indeed, there were no other individuals named "Moses" between the Biblical prophet and Maimonides. The Hebrew Bible only mentioned one individual named "Moses". For over a millennium from the Second Temple period, the name was uncommon among famous Mishnaic and Talmudic scholars.[14] The Jews in the Middle Ages began to identify more closely with their given names, often associating themselves with historical figures who shared the same name and fulfilled messianic roles.[15] Maimonides himself was no exception to this trend. During his time, the messianic fervor among Jews reached its peak amidst waves of forced conversions to Islam. Maimonides' leadership as Nagid, along with his guidance and encouragement to his fellow Jews, garnered him even greater veneration. Maimonides' appreciation of his namesake esteem probably contributed to the admiration for Moses among his fellow Jews, particularly in Egypt, where he spent the rest of his life.

II. Dammūh: Jewish Cult of Moses in Practice

The Jews in medieval Egypt celebrated the land's strong connection to Moses through a remarkable custom: making frequent pilgrimage to a synagogue called Kanīsat Mūsā ("Synagogue of Moses"), located in Dammūh (sometimes transliterated as "Dimwah" or "Damwah"), a small town on the southwestern outskirts of Fustat.[16] In this section, I will examine their historical and societal backgrounds, including some less-studied aspects that have not received much attention in existing scholarship. Drawing from Jewish and Muslim sources, especially the Cairo Genizah during the eleventh to the thirteenth century, I aim to address these questions: Why was the Kanīsat Mūsā and pilgrimage to Dammūh important for the Egyptian Jews? What role did Dammūh play in the social life of the Jews?

[11] Moses Maimonides, *Guide for the Perplexed*, translated by Michael Friedländer (New York: Dover Publications, 1956), 223-224

[12] Ibid.

[13] Ibid.

[14] Israel Yuval, "Moses redivivus: Maimonides as a 'Helper to the King' Messiah," *Zion* 72 (2007), 161-162 (in Hebrew). Yuval also points out that the wide spread of Islam increased the popularity of the name "Musa," which in turn made "Moshe" more commonly used among the Jews.

[15] Ibid.

[16] On the location of Dammūh, there are two assumptions: (1) the Arabic name "Dammūh" could be the Coptic "Tammuh," a town in al-Jizah near the ruins of ancient Memphis; (2) Dammūh could be a twin city of Tammuh gradually becoming apart from each other due to geo-climatic or human influence. See Norman Golb, "The Topography of the Jews of Medieval Egypt," *Journal of Near Eastern Studies*, Vol. 24, No. 3 (July 1965), 256

2.1. History of Dammūh and Kanīsat Mūsā

The history of Dammūh and its synagogue dates back to its legendary linkage with the life of the Prophet Moses. Benjamin of Tudela (d. 1173) mentioned a "In the outskirts of the city is the very ancient synagogue of our great master Moshe... Old Miṣrayim (*miṣrayim ha-qedūmāh*, i.e., the ruins of ancient Memphis) is three miles in extent."[17] Al-Maqrīzī traced the erection of the synagogue to about forty years after the destruction of the Second Temple, i.e., over five hundred years before the rise of Islam.[18] He also noted that the synagogue was at first a monestary, and was later purchased by the Jews from the Christians in a time of unrest. This could be a wrong statement, since even Christian authors did not mention that their possession of the synagogue; if that were the case, as it was for the synagogue in Qasr al-Sham'a, Kanīsat Mūsā would not have attracted such many Jewish pilgrims.[19] Abū Ṣāliḥ recorded that "The Jews have in this district (Dammūh) a synagogue, enclosed by a wall, within which are lodgings for them, and a garden in which are trees and palms,and a circular well with a water-wheel... It is said that the prophet Moses, in the days of Pharaoh, visited this place, and prayed in it, and slept in it."[20] The synagogue was built upon the site where Moses' stay in Egypt after his departure from Midian and before the Exodus. A well-growing tree planted by Moses in the synagogue wondrously prevented itself from being cut off for the construction of a *madrasa* nearby, and as admonishment of rule-breaking deeds, withered when a Jewish man and woman commited adultery below it.[21] The association with Moses thus granted the synagogue with its name. It is questionable whether the Egyptian Jews themselves ever recorded the synagogue's history. Genizah documents do not offer discussion of its history, either. We may assume, however, that the Egyptian Jews were so accustomed to the Mosaic tradition that they inherited and celebrated it not by writing it down, but integrating it into their everyday religious practices, such as going for a festive pilgrimage to Dammūh.

Kanīsat Mūsā suffered a grim fate in the late Middle Ages. A fourteenth-century illustrated map portraying Jewish pilgrimage routes, sheds light on the later history of the synagogue. The author of the scroll noted that "today Kanīsat Mūsā is in Jewish hands."[22] This expression implies that the synagogue had been taken from the Jewish community at some point. It was reopened in 1310, following the 1301 Mamluk decree that closed Jewish and Christian places of worship.[23] There is a possibility that the synagogue was demolished even earlier. According to Ibn Ẓahīra (1223-1293), "Dammūh was adjacent to Fustat; In Fustat there was a sycamore under which Moses prayed, and it is now destroyed."[24] In 1498, the Mamluk Sultan ordered the destruction of Kanīsat Mūsā, but the synagogue may not have been totally destroyed. Travel accounts about journeys to Dammūh persisted until the mid-sixteenth century.[25] By the seventeenth century the synagogue was completely in ruins.[26] The Jews of Egypt, nevertheless, upheld legends concerning this synagogue. The Egyptian Jewish historian Yosef Sambari (1640-1703), for

[17] Benjamin of Tudela, *The Itinerary of Rabbi Benjamin of Tudela*, translated by A. Asher (New York: "Hakesheth" Publishing Company, 1900), 153-154

[18] Richard Gottheil, "An Eleventh-Century Document concerning a Cairo Synagogue," *The Jewish Quarterly Review*, vol. 19 (April 1907), 502-503; originally cited from "Al-Khiṭaṭ" of al-Maqrīzī.

[19] Golb, 255-256

[20] Abū Ṣāliḥ, *The Churches and Monasteries of Egypt and Some Neighbouring Countries*, translated by B. Evetts (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1895), 196-197

[21] Gottheil, 503

[22] Rachel Sarfati, "Real and Fictive Travels to the Holy Land as Painted in the Florence Scroll," in Ingrid Baumgärtner, Nirit Ben-Aryeh Debby and Katrin Kogman-Appel eds., *Maps and Travel in the Middle Ages and the Early Modern Period: Knowledge, Imagination, and Visual Culture* (Berlin, Boston: De Gruyter, 2019), 239-240

[23] Ibid.

[24] Moshe Gil, *Documents of the Jewish Pious Foundations from the Cairo Geniza* (Leiden: Brill, 1976), 101; originally cited from "Maḥāsin" of Ibn Ẓahīra.

[25] Joel Kramer, "A Jewish Cult of the Saints in Fatimid Egypt," in *L' Égypte Fatimide-son art et son histoire* 28/29 (1998), 579-601.

[26] Ibid.

instance, continued to connect the ruined synagogue to the remarkable history of Moses in the city of Dammūh and the story of law-giving.[27]

Given the attraction and reputation of Kanīsat Mūsā, could there be a thriving Jewish community? Although no evidence suggests an indigenous Jewish community in Dammūh, it may have once existed but gradually declined. With the rise of the Fatimids in the tenth century, most of the Jews were found in urban areas such as Cairo, Fustat, and Alexandria where commerce prospered; whilst in small towns like Dammūh the Jewish population reduced, and the place greeted a flocks of Jews only during festivals of pilgrimage. Owing to the adjacence of Dammūh to Fustat, the Jews in Fustat could frequent the Dammūh sanctuary. Yet after the collapse of the Fatimid Caliphate in 1171, Fustat was mostly deserted after Cairo took its place. The Jews became more embedded in an urban milieu, and fewer of them may long live in Dammūh. Goitein suggests an analogy between Kanīsat Mūsā and the great Palestinian synagogue of Fustat, i.e., the Ben Ezra synagogue. The Fustat synagogue turned into a popular tourist destination after its heyday started to fade in a still later period.[28] Likewise, Dammūh may increasingly become merely a site for worship instead of a long-term residence for a specific Jewish community.

When Moses Maimonides and his son Abraham took on the reviving Dammūh in the thirteenth century, Dammūh was clearly facing a decline since the end of the twelveth century. Moses Maimonides once raised fund for operating the Dammūh sanctuary after a period of neglect; and on one occassion, approved the lease of a land—adjacent to Kanīsat Mūsā and belonging to the *qodesh* (pious foundations)—to a certain Abraham ha-Levi (b. Yahya) al-Najib (al-Watiq). The lessee was granted the right to supervize the Dammūh santuary, to cultivate and operate a *saqiya* (irrigator) on the land for thirty years before it was reclaimed by the *qodesh*.[29] Although the deal was only a small package, revitalising a discarded region and preventing it from a recession has long been common in Egypt—Maimonides' decision apparently aimed at Dammūh's revival.[30] The pietist reform led by Abraham b. Moses b. Maimon also rekindled the passion for this ancient holy site.[31] The Maimonidian revival of Egyptian Jewry may have set Dammūh temporarily freed from an enduring recession. The decline of Dammūh at Moses Maimonides' time was witnessed by Benjamin of Tudela. When he made a visit there in 1170, he made no mention of any other person except Sheikh Abu Nasr, the beadle of Kanīsat Mūsā.[32] It makes sense to conclude that, by the end of the twelveth century, the local Jewish that once resided in Dammūh was almost completely dispersed.[33]

2.2. Dammūh within the Genizah Society

Dammūh appears many times in Judaeo-Arabic letters in the Genizah, mostly dated from the eleventh to the thirteenth century. This sub-section will explore Dammūh's role as pilgrimage destination, *qodesh*, and venue for public announcements within the Genizah society.

2.2.1. Site of Pilgrimage

Despite the Holy Land (*Eretz Yisrael*) being the primary pilgrimage site for medieval Jews and the Hebrew Bible's directive for Jews to make a pilgrimage (*'aliyat ha'regel*) to Jerusalem three times annually during *Pesaḥ*, *Shavu'ot*, and *Sukkot*, it became popular amongst diasporic Jews to undertake

[27] Haggai Mazuz,"Sambari's Description of Synagogues in Egypt—How Reliant Was It on al-Maqrīzī?," in Bethany J. Walker and Abdelkader Al Ghouz eds., *History and Society during the Mamluk Era (1250-1517): Studies of the Annemarie Schimmel Institute for Advanced Study III* (Bonn: Bonn University Press, 2021), 199-203
[28] S. D. Goitein, *A Mediterranean Society: An Abridgment in One Volume* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), 207
[29] T-S 10J4.11
[30] Gil, *Pious Foundations*, 319
[31] Joel Kraemer, *Maimonides: The Life and World of One of Civilization's Greatest Minds* (New York: Doubleday, 2008), 276
[32] Benjamin of Tudela, *Itinerary*, 154
[33] Golb, 258

"minor" pilgrimages to holy sites associated with Judaic saints or the tombs of sages and righteous individuals (*ṣadīqīm*). The practice of going for these "minor" pilgrimages resembles the Islamic tradition of *ziyāra* or *ziyārat al-qubūr* (tomb visitation), which is distinct from the *ḥajj* pilgrimage to Mecca. In *ziyāra*, Muslims visit sites associated with Islamic saints like prophets, Muḥammad's companions, and members of Muḥammad's family. It is tempting to ask whether the Islamic milieu shaped the culture of venerating saints among the Middle Eastern Jews. There has been a parallel between Jewish tomb visitations in the Middle East and Islamic traditions, with both Jews and Muslims often visiting the same revered locations. Thus the Arabic term "*ziyāra*" is also used to describe Jewish pilgrimages to the shrines of biblical figures and Talmudic sages.[34] Pilgrimage to Dammūh was a shared culture amongst Jews and Muslims. Muslim involvement in the pilgrimage was also recorded by al-Maqrīzī, "Dammūh welcomed people from all segments... Sometimes Muslim were invited by friends. Even Jews who converted to Islam came."[35]

Dammūh became highly appealing to the Jews in Egypt not only due to its antiquity and Mosaic association, but also because its synagogue housed an old Torah scroll. Goitein highlighted that Torah scrolls and books are considered the most honorable possessions of any synagogue.[36] In the beginning of a thirteenth-century letter to the Rayyis Elijah (who is identified as the judge Elijah b. Zechariah), the sender requests him to look after "the work on a copy of the Bible in Dammūh" (*'amal al-muṣḥaf alladhī fi-dammūh*); once the sender receives the copy, he will immediately send it onto Eliyya.[37] We also find accounts recording a list of items associated with Dammūh, which were collected by Mevorakh al-[...] the beadle (*khādim*) of Dammūh from Saʿīd b. Mevorakh, including one copy of bible (*muṣḥafīn Torah*) in the synagogue.[38] Goitein observed that belongings (especially Torah scrolls and furnishings) of the Palestinian synagogues were often better protected than that of the Babylonians.[39] After Cairo restored public order following a sack in 1075, the Torah scroll of Kanīsat Mūsā was transferred to the synagogue of the Palestinians.[40]

Notably, Kanīsat Mūsā was not associated with any particular Jewish sect. The pilgrimage to Dammūh was a shared custom among all Jews in Egypt. Kanīsat Mūsā was considered a holy place for both Rabbanites (Palestinians and Babylonians alike) and Karaites.[41] The Karaites' involvement in the pilgrimage was probably due to their veneration of the synagogue's antiquity.[42] Disputes took place between the Rabbinites and Karaites regarding the lighting of candles.[43] The 15th century Italian Rabbi Obadiah de Bertinoro once traveled to Egypt and noted, "I did not have the opportunity to go to Demu (Dammūh), a place outside Fustat where *Moshe Rabbenu* prayed, as people say. Two synagogues are there, one of the Rabbanites and one of the Karaites, and people somtimes pray there on *Shabbat* and feasts." However, no other account mentions the existence of the Karaite synagogue in Dammūh so far. Obadiah of Bertinoro likely drew this conclusion due to the Karaites' involvement in the pilgrimage. In a letter to his father, Obadiah discussed the Karaites' customs and adherence to the Torah based on his observation.[44] As a visitor, he appeared to be unfamiliar with the local Jewish practices in Egypt. Obadiah's distinction between Rabbanite and Karaite synagogues in Dammūh may be inaccurate. Instead, there was only Kanīsat Mūsā, a shared property of all Jewish communities in Egypt.

[34] Martin Jacobs, *Reorienting the East: Jewish Travelers to the Medieval Muslim World* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2014), 57
[35] Goitein, *An Abridgment, 207;* originally cited from "Al-Khiṭaṭ" of al-Maqrīzī
[36] Goitein, *An Abridgment in One Volume*, 149
[37] T-S NS 292.24
[38] ENA 3795.9. In this fragment, "Dammūh" is spelled as דמויי instead of דמוה.
[39] Goitein, *An Abridgment*, 148
[40] Goitein, *An Abridgment*, 149
[41] Gil, *Pious Foundations*, 99
[42] Golb, 255
[43] Abū Ṣāliḥ, *Churches and Monasteries*, 197
[44] See Obadiah's complete letter on "Rabbi Obadiah De Bertinoro," https://www.chabad.org/library/article_cdo/aid/111914/jewish/Rabbi-Obadiah-De-Bertinoro.htm (Last accessed: April 30, 2024)

Al-Maqrīzī recorded that "A [special] festival is celebrated in this synagogue, on which the Jews pilgrimage [there] together with their households on *Shavu'ot* in the month of Sivan. They do this instead of making the *ḥajj* to Jerusalem."[45] Sambari added that the Jews also visited Dammūh on the seventh day of Adar to commemorate Moses' death.[46] The Genizah confirms that the pilgrimage was indeed a household event. An undated letter contains the sender's response to an inquiry about whether the family of the addressee's uncle had departed for Dammūh, likely for a pilgrimage.[47] Pilgrimage to Dammūh did not cease during unrest. Genizah records a devout pilgrim who took risks to go there. A 13th-century letter to Yoseph ha-Levi mentions that the sender met Abū l-Ḥasan, the addressee's son, who insisted on going to Dammūh. The sender managed to convince Abū l-Ḥasan to travel there by boat for safety during prayers. However, Abū l-Ḥasan decided to stay until Wednesday, despite the sender's efforts to bring him back on Tuesday.[48] Jewish pilgrimage to Dammūh might have increased after the Crusader conquest of Jerusalem in 1099. When traveling to Holy Land was dangerous, they saw local *ziyāra* as an alternative to *'aliyah*.

2.2.2. Charity and Upkeep

Kanīsat Mūsā was part of the pious foundations (*qodesh or heqdesh*) and needed regular maintenance. In a letter of appointment dated 1150, issued under the authority of Nagid Samuel b. Hananya, Isaiah ha-Levi b. Misha'el was chosen as the "administrator and overseer (*al-tawalā wa'l-nāẓir*) of "Jewish affairs in Fustat, the synagogues, the synagogue of Dammūh and its plantations, Torah scrolls, wrappers, oil vessels, books, and other possessions," and was tasked with managing the *qodesh*.[49] Dammūh and its synagogue were singled out, likely suggesting their dignity. Isaiah was also endowed with great authority and autonomy, as the appointment ruled, "There will be no hand over his, nor any opinion over his." However, not everyone appointed to oversee Dammūh received such a privilege. In one decision of Moses Maimonides' majlis, judges and elders in attendance agreed to pay 17/3 dinars as the poll tax (*jizya*) for the supervisor of Kanīsat Mūsā, Abraham b. Yahya al-Najib, the same person who was granted a land in Dammūh to prevent the region from decay.[50] The money was taken from income of the *qodesh*, and was used to cover repairs for its caravanserai, and there was a need to save al-Najib from harm if he failed to pay the tax.[51] A list of names detailing recipients of "clothes for the poor" includes one "Yūsuf *khādim* Dammūh", appareantly indicating the beadle of Kanīsat Mūsā.[52]

Lists and accounts often documented the items necessary for the synagogue.[53] The daily upkeep of the synagogue typically involved a communal effort, as evidenced by a letter from Yefet b. Manasseh al-Qaṭāʾif to his brother Ḥalfon[54], and a family letter possibly from the judge Elijah b. Zechariah, both requesting the purchase of oil for the synagogue.[55] A rich woman named Khulla bat Shabbat ordered in her will that "half of her wealth should be used for the pilgrimage to Dammūh, and the other half should

[45] Gottheil, 38; originally cited from "Al-Khiṭaṭ" of al-Maqrīzī
[46] Haggai Mazuz, "Sambari's Description of Synagogues in Egypt," 202
[47] T-S 8J23.16
[48] T-S 8J15.5
[49] T-S 16.63
[50] Kraemer, *Maimonides*, 279
[51] Ibid. A relatively higher proportion of donations went to scholars and officials, as against charity. For instance, He asks a friend in Fustat to give 10 dinars to the Head of the yeshiva, 14 dinars to certain scholars and judges, 10 dinars to the synagogue of Dammūh, and 20 dinars to help the poor. See Aryeh Leibowitz, "The Pursuit of Scholarship and Economic Self-Sufficiency: Revisiting Maimonides' Commentary to 'Pirkei Avot'", *in Tradition: A Journal of Orthodox Jewish Thought*, Vol. 40, No. 3 (Fall 2007), 41
[52] T-S NS J293(b)
[53] T-S AS 186.118
[54] T-S NS J303(a)
[55] Moss. II,116.2; Moss. II,116.3

remain with the court."[56] This further demonstrates Dammūh's social function as *qodesh* and pilgrimage destination.

Those who worked for the synagogue, such as masons and *parnasim*, were paid for their labour.[57] Benjamin of Tudela vaguely described the man he met in Dammūh who looked after the synagogue as "*parnas* and beadle."[58] Typically, a *parnas* and a beadle have different roles within a synagogue, with the former overseeing financial matters. We have no clue why both title were bestowed upon a single person. Benjamin's unfamiliarity with the synagogue's affairs as an outsider may have led to his confusion, or it could be that the synagogue was simply short of staff.

2.2.3. Rules and Regulations

Similar to the annual pilgrimage festival at the Mount of Olives in Jerusalem, where excommunications were declared, the festive gathering of Jewish pilgrims in Dammūh was also a time for public announcements.[59] The great assembly could last for days, sometimes even more than a week. In the year 1234, a legal document from Qus addressed the case of a Jewish bigamist who had been banned in Fustat, Cairo, and Dammūh. The decision of his excommunication in Dammūh might have been announced during pilgrimage festivals.[60]

An eleventh-century statute from the Genizah prohibits various forms of misbehavior among Jewish pilgrims during their gathering in Dammūh and Kanīsat Mūsā. Merrymaking, marionette shows, beer brewing, bringing Gentiles and apostates, unaccompanied women, adult men accompanied by boys, desecration of *Shabbat*, chess, instrumental music, clapping, dancing, and socialisation between men and women, are all forbidden.[61] The prohibition apparently suggests the prevalence of these activities in Dammūh. Goitein notes that the Jewish authority in Egypt issued this statute when the Fatimid caliph al-Ḥākim (996-1021) strictly enforced Islamic law and ethics. And, when the leading Jews became aware of the pressure, they understood the urgency to deal with the misconduct within the community.[62] Again, the letter might be announced publicly during pilgrimage seasons.

Three of the above misconducts, "bringing Gentiles and apostates (*poshe'a*), unaccompanied women, adult men accompanied by boys," deserve further investigation. Cuffel argues that the term *poshe'a* in this statute probably refers to Jewish converts to Islam, as interpreted in other Genizah texts.[63] It seems that some Jewish leaders were reluctant to welcome apostates (mostly Muslims, according to al-Maqrīzī) into the synagogue and its garden, possibly out of the fear that their Jewish co-religionists would become attracted to Islam.[64] Cuffel points out that in Islam, young men were considered sexually attractive to other men, although this is religiously forbidden. Therefore, the Genizah document strictly prohibited the practice of "adult men accompanied by boys." Participation of women in the pilgrimage offers a glimpse into women's mobility in the Genizah society. Women's travel was restricted in general, but they were permitted to go on the pilgrimage to Jerusalem and to visit synagogues. However, behavior at holy sites was under firm control, and men and women were strictly separated. The statute also

[56] T-S 10J7.10
[57] Benjamin of Tudela, *Itinery*, 154
[58] Ibid.
[59] Goitein, *An Abridgment*, 209
[60] T-S 13J26.6 For a detailed discussion of the case, see Mordechai A. Friedman, "Polygyny in Jewish Tradition and Practice New Sources from the Cairo Geniza," in *Proceedings of the American Academy for Jewish Research*, 1982, Vol. 49 (1982), 50-51
[61] T-S 20.117
[62] Goitein, *A Mediterranean society: the Jewish communities of the Arab world as portrayed in the documents of the Cairo Geniza, Vol. 5* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1967), 21-22
[63] Alexandra Cuffel, *Shared Saints and Festivals among Jews, Christians, and Muslims in the Medieval Mediterranean* (Yorkshire: Arc Humanities Press, 2024), 172-179
[64] Ibid.

stipulated that a woman was allowed to visit Dammūh alone only if she was very old. This phenomenon is common in other cultures as well; within Genizah society, older widows had the greatest mobility.[65]

Conclusion

Jewish veneration for Moses and their pilgrimage to Dammūh in later periods may trace back to ancient local Jewish cults. Moses prominently features in polemical works by Jews in the medieval Islamic world, and Maimonides' esteem for him likely bolstered admiration among his fellow Jews, especially in Egypt where he resided. References to Dammūh are frequent in Judaeo-Arabic letters found in the Genizah. This underscores Dammūh's significance as a pilgrimage destination, *qodesh*, and venue for public announcements within Genizah society. Through examining these historical threads, we gain insight into the enduring reverence for Moses and the cultural significance of Dammūh in medieval Jewish life.

References

[1] Abū Ṣāliḥ, *The Churches and Monasteries of Egypt and Some Neighbouring Countries*, translated by Evetts, B. (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1895).

[2] Benjamin of Tudela, *The Itinerary of Rabbi Benjamin of Tudela*, translated by Asher, A. (New York: "Hakesheth" Publishing Company, 1900).

[3] Maimonides, Moses, *Guide for the Perplexed*, translated by Friedländer, Michael (New York: Dover Publications, 1956).

[4] Morgan, Michael A., *Sepher ha-Razim* (Chico, CA: Scholars Press, 1983), 71.

[5] ENA 3795.9, Center for Digital Humanities at Princeton,https://geniza.princeton.edu/en/documents/34313/ (Accessed April 1, 2025).

[6] Moss. II,116.2; Moss. II,116.3, Center for Digital Humanities at Princeton, https://geniza.princeton.edu/en/documents/16848/ (Accessed April 1, 2025).

[7] T-S 10J4.11, Cambridge Digital Library, https://cudl.lib.cam.ac.uk/view/MS-TS-00010-J-00004-00011/1 (Accessed April 1, 2025).

[8] T-S 8J23.16, Cambridge Digital Library,https://cudl.lib.cam.ac.uk/view/MS-TS-00008-J-00023-00016/1 (Accessed April 1, 2025).

[9] T-S NS J293(b), Cambridge Digital Library, https://cudl.lib.cam.ac.uk/view/MS-TS-NS-J-00293-B/1 (Accessed April 1, 2025).

[10] T-S AS 186.118, Cambridge Digital Library, cited from Center for Digital Humanities at Princeton,https://geniza.princeton.edu/en/documents/22563/ (Accessed April 1, 2025).

[11] T-S NS J303(a), Cambridge Digital Library,https://cudl.lib.cam.ac.uk/view/MS-TS-NS-J-00303-A/1 (Accessed April 1, 2025).

[12] T-S 10J7.10, Cambridge Digital Library,https://cudl.lib.cam.ac.uk/view/MS-TS-00010-J-00007-00010/1 (Accessed April 1, 2025).

[65] Judith Baskin, "Mobility and Marriage in Two Medieval Jewish Societies," in *Jewish History*, Vol. 22, No. 1/2 (2008), 227

[13] T-S 13J26.6, Cambridge Digital Library, https://cudl.lib.cam.ac.uk/view/MS-TS-00013-J-00026-00006/1 (Accessed April 1, 2025).

[14] T-S 20.117, Cambridge Digital Library, https://cudl.lib.cam.ac.uk/view/MS-TS-00020-00117/1 (Accessed April 1, 2025).

Secondary Sources

[1] Baskin, Judith, "Mobility and Marriage in Two Medieval Jewish Societies," in *Jewish History*, Vol. 22, No. 1/2 (2008), 223-243.

[2] Cohen, Shaye, "Pagan and Christian Evidence on the Ancient Synagogue," in Lee Levine, ed., *The Synagogue in Late Antiquity* (New York: Jewish Theological Seminary, 1987), 159-181.

[3] Cuffel, Alexandra, *Shared Saints and Festivals among Jews, Christians, and Muslims in the Medieval Mediterranean* (Yorkshire: Arc Humanities Press, 2024).

[4] Friedman, Mordechai A., "Polygyny in Jewish Tradition and Practice New Sources from the Cairo Geniza," in *Proceedings of the American Academy for Jewish Research*, Vol. 49 (1982), 33-68.

[5] Gil, Moshe, *Documents of the Jewish Pious Foundations from the Cairo Geniza* (Leiden: Brill, 1976).

[6] Goitein, S. D., *A Mediterranean Society: An Abridgment in One Volume* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003).

[7] Goitein, *A Mediterranean society: the Jewish communities of the Arab world as portrayed in the documents of the Cairo Geniza, Vol. 5* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1967).

[8] Golb, Norman, "The Topography of the Jews of Medieval Egypt," *Journal of Near Eastern Studies*, Vol. 24, No. 3 (July 1965), 251-270.

[9] Gottheil, Richard, "An Eleventh-Century Document concerning a Cairo Synagogue," *The Jewish Quarterly Review*, vol. 19 (April 1907), 467-539.

[10] Jacobs, Martin, *Reorienting the East: Jewish Travelers to the Medieval Muslim World* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2014).

[11] Kerkeslager, Allen, *Jewish Pilgrimage and Jewish Identity in Hellenistic and Early Roman Egypt* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania, 1997).

[12] Kraemer, Joel, *Maimonides: The Life and World of One of Civilization's Greatest Minds* (New York: Doubleday, 2008).

[13] Kramer, Joel, "A Jewish Cult of the Saints in Fatimid Egypt," in *L' Égypte Fatimide-son art et son histoire* 28/29 (1998), 579-601.

[14] Leibowitz, Aryeh, "The Pursuit of Scholarship and Economic Self-Sufficiency: Revisiting Maimonides' Commentary to 'Pirkei Avot'", *in Tradition: A Journal of Orthodox Jewish Thought*, Vol. 40, No. 3 (Fall 2007), 31-40.

[15] Lowin, Shari, "'A Prophet Like Moses'? What Can We Know About the Early Jewish Responses to Muḥammad's Claims of Mosesness?" *Hebrew Union College Annual*, Vol. 90 (2019), 227-255.

[16] Mazuz, Haggai, "Jewish-Muslim Polemics," in Phillip I. Lieberman, ed. *The Cambridge History of Judaism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021), 946-973.

[17] Mazuz, Haggai, "Sambari's Description of Synagogues in Egypt—How Reliant Was It on al-Maqrīzī?," in Bethany J. Walker and Abdelkader Al Ghouz eds., *History and Society during the Mamluk Era (1250-1517): Studies of the Annemarie Schimmel Institute for Advanced Study III* (Bonn: Bonn University Press, 2021), 197-212.

[18] "Rabbi Obadiah De Bertinoro,".

https://www.chabad.org/library/article_cdo/aid/111914/jewish/Rabbi-Obadiah-De-Bertinoro.htm (Accessed April 30, 2024).

[19] Sarfati, Rachel, "Real and Fictive Travels to the Holy Land as Painted in the Florence Scroll," in Ingrid Baumgärtner, Nirit Ben-Aryeh Debby and Katrin Kogman-Appel eds., *Maps and Travel in the Middle Ages and the Early Modern Period: Knowledge, Imagination, and Visual Culture* (Berlin, Boston: De Gruyter, 2019), 232-251.

[20] Yuval, Israel, "Moses redivivus: Maimonides as a 'Helper to the King' Messiah," *Zion* 72 (2007), 161-188 (in Hebrew).