

Document Cards

Each group investigates one real document from the Cairo Genizah. Read the card, then open the original on the Cambridge Digital Library and look closely before completing Appendix C.

1 A Child's Alphabet Primer

T-S K5.13 · Egypt, 11th century · Hebrew on parchment

A colorful page used to teach young children to write the letters of the Hebrew alphabet and the vowel signs. Its bright decorations were meant to delight young learners. A page like this was expensive to make and was probably shared by several children at school.

Look closely: What does this tell you about how the community valued education? Who do you think paid for it?

View the original: cudl.lib.cam.ac.uk/view/MS-TS-K-00005-00013

2 A Shopping Order

Mosseri I.6.2 · Egypt · Arabic, with Hebrew on the back

A small slip of paper, about the size of an index card, ordering payment for goods including firewood, cheese, green beans, and a fat chicken. On the back is a passage from the Talmud (Hullin 3b). The paper was reused, and a scrap of everyday business ended up saved because of the sacred text on its other side.

Look closely: What does this show about daily life and diet? Why might paper have been reused?

View the original: cudl.lib.cam.ac.uk/view/MS-MOSSERI-I-00006-00002

3 A Loan Between Neighbors

T-S Misc. 24.66 · Fustat, 1256 CE

A record of a Jewish baker borrowing money from a Muslim miller. The two depended on each other: the miller supplied flour, and the baker turned it into bread to sell.

Look closely: What does this document suggest about relations between Jews and Muslims in the marketplace? What can it not tell us?

View the original: cudl.lib.cam.ac.uk/view/MS-TS-MISC-00024-00066

4 A Home for Sale

Add. 2586 · Fustat

A legal deed recording the sale of one quarter of an apartment in Fustat for 17 gold dinars. Shares of buildings were often bought, sold, and inherited, and a deed like this was written by a scribe and signed by witnesses.

Look closely: Why would someone buy only part of an apartment? What does the deed reveal about law, property, and family?

View the original: cudl.lib.cam.ac.uk/view/MS-ADD-02586

5 A Promise Before a Journey

T-S 8J34.1 · Egypt

A conditional divorce deed from Faraj ben Habib al-Barqi to his wife Husna bat Isaac, to take effect only if he did not return by Passover. Under Jewish law, a woman whose husband disappeared could not remarry. Men who traveled far for trade sometimes gave their wives deeds like this so the wives would not be left stranded if they never came home.

Look closely: What risks did traveling merchants and their families face? How did this deed protect Husna?

View the original: cudl.lib.cam.ac.uk/view/MS-TS-00008-J-00034-00001

6 A Last Letter Home

Or. 1081 J1 · Written in 'Aydhab, Red Sea coast, about 1170

A letter from David ben Maimon to his older brother, the great scholar Moses Maimonides, in Fustat. David describes crossing the desert after being separated from his caravan, learning that another caravan was robbed, and finding nothing to buy in the port but indigo. He decides to sail on to India and asks his family not to worry. It was his last letter: David drowned at sea, and years later Maimonides wrote that he still grieved for him.

Look closely: What does this letter reveal about trade routes and the dangers of travel? About family?

View the original: cudl.lib.cam.ac.uk/view/MS-OR-01081-J-00001

7 A Judge's Draft

T-S 12.832 · Fustat, late 12th century · in Maimonides' handwriting

A draft letter written by Maimonides himself, as a leader of the Jewish community, to a local judge. It concerns the heirs of a man who was killed, whose money had been invested with business partners. Maimonides instructs the judge to summon the partners, press them to acknowledge the debt, and settle the case, with an oath or a ban for those who will not cooperate.

Look closely: How did the Jewish community handle business disputes and protect heirs? What does this show about Maimonides' role?

View the original: cudl.lib.cam.ac.uk/view/MS-TS-00012-00832

8 A Lost Book Found

T-S 12.863 · 10th century · Hebrew on paper

A leaf from the Wisdom of Ben Sira, a book of proverbs written in Hebrew around 180 BCE. For about a thousand years, the Hebrew original was lost and the book was known only in Greek and Syriac translations. Genizah leaves like this one, which Schechter and Taylor donated to Cambridge in 1898, restored the Hebrew text, and a scroll found at Masada in 1964 later confirmed it.

Look closely: Why was this discovery so exciting to scholars? How does a second, independent source strengthen a conclusion?

View the original: cudl.lib.cam.ac.uk/view/MS-TS-00012-00863

Descriptions written by JIMENA from catalog records of Cambridge University Library and the Princeton Geniza Project.