



THE ORIENTAL INSTITUTE

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January 13, 2015

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Exhibit Shows How Christians, Muslims, and Jews created a Vibrant Society in Medieval Cairo

A new exhibition at the University of Chicago's Oriental Institute Museum will offer a glimpse into everyday life in a lively, multicultural city in ancient Egypt. "A Cosmopolitan City: Muslims, Christians, and Jews in Old Cairo" features many objects that have never been displayed in the museum before and shows how people of different faiths interacted to create a vibrant society. The exhibit is on view from February 17 through September 13, 2015.

The exhibit sheds light on Egypt in the time between the pharaohs and the modern city, roughly 650–1170 AD, when the main population lived in the area known as Fustat, located in today's southern Cairo. Fustat was established in 641 by the first Muslim ruler of Egypt, 'Amr Ibn al-'As. His administration included Christians, whose community was established there some 600 years before, and Jews, who had settlements in the Nile Valley for over a millennium.

"So much is known about Fustat from written sources," said Jack Green, Chief Curator of the Oriental Institute Museum. "This exhibit also presents some of the material possessions of the community, providing insights into the everyday lives of the people who lived in this bustling city."

Visitors to the exhibit will explore how Old Cairo's communities lived together and melded their traditions to create a multicultural society. The neighborhoods of Fustat were populated by people from a patchwork of religious and ethnic communities, including native Egyptians and immigrants from Arabia, North Africa, and other regions of the Middle East.

The exhibit focuses on the three main religious communities—Muslims, Christians, and Jews—whose members, living in "peaceful co-existence," helped shape Old Cairo's neighborhoods, markets, and public places. The administration of Fustat—the commercial and financial capital of Egypt—was headed by a Muslim governor, but he relied upon Christian and Jewish officials to help run the state.

For much of Fustat's history, the people did not express their religion through distinctive clothes, food, or occupations. However, the different languages (Arabic, Coptic, and Hebrew) and major architectural landmarks, including the Ben Ezra Synagogue (one of several in Fustat), the church of St. George, Abu Serga and al-Mu'allaha (the "Hanging Church"), and the mosques of 'Amr and Ibn Tulun—all of which can still be visited today—served as reminders of the diversity of the population.

The show reveals patterns of life in Fustat by exploring the topics of taxes, administration, and industry, as well as more personal aspects of life, such as dining, leisure, family life, and adornment.

Most of the 75 objects in the exhibit have never before been on display. They include richly illuminated Korans, Coptic and Hebrew manuscripts, ceramics, textiles, jewelry, and architectural fragments. Other objects, such as game pieces and dolls, vividly remind the visitor of life in the city more than 1,000 years ago. Many of the artifacts in the exhibit were excavated at Fustat by the American archaeologist George Scanlon between 1964 and 1972.

The show includes important objects recently “rediscovered” in the collection of the Oriental Institute Museum by Research Associate Tasha Vorderstrasse, PhD, who conducted a survey of the Islamic-era material in the museum’s holdings.

Among the objects Vorderstrasse re-identified are parchment pages from the Cairo Genizah, a famed deposit of Jewish manuscripts preserved for centuries at the Ben Ezra synagogue. According to Jewish tradition, objects inscribed with the name “God” or in the Hebrew script were thought to be sacred, and rather than being discarded, they were preserved in an enclosed space in the temple. The contents of the Genizah helped to document all aspects of life in medieval Egypt and the surrounding areas.

Other new discoveries include papyri written in elegant flowing Arabic script by Qurra ibn Shark, the governor of Fustat from 709 to 714. In these documents, Qurra corresponds with Christians and Jews outside Fustat concerning the cultivation of land and other matters related to the smooth running of the state. The correspondence reflects Qurra’s fairness in assessing taxes and dealing with local disputes with non-Muslims.

Another important object in the exhibit, also from the Ben Ezra Synagogue, is an elaborately carved door from the temple’s ark—the cabinet that held the sacred Torah. The door, which dates to about 1030, is carved with a passage in Hebrew from Psalm 118:19; “Open to me the gates of righteousness, that I may enter through them and give thanks to the Lord.” Like many of the objects from Fustat, its decoration reflects the city’s different communities by incorporating both Jewish texts and Islamic design motifs. The door, from the permanent collection of the Walter’s Art Museum, Baltimore, and the Yeshiva University Museum of New York, is on view in the Midwest for the first time.

Old Cairo’s communities will be brought to life through modern readings of the thoughts and memories of the people who lived there. These recordings which can be listened to on iPads in the exhibit, include people describing their city and everyday experiences: a woman writing to her neglectful son, selections from the writings of the 12th century poet Moses ben Abraham Dari, the daily routine of the famed 12th century physician Moses Maimonides, and descriptions of Fustat.

The exhibit is curated by Tasha Vorderstrasse, PhD, Research Associate at the Oriental Institute, and Tanya Treptow, who holds a PhD in Islamic Archaeology from the University of Chicago, with the collaboration of Donald Whitcomb, Associate Professor of Islamic Archaeology at the Oriental Institute. A fully illustrated catalog with essays on many aspects of Fustat is available both in

the Oriental Institute bookshop and online: <http://oi.uchicago.edu/museum-exhibits/special-exhibits/cosmopolitan-city-old-cairo>.

The exhibit and many of the associated programs are made possible by the generous support and collaboration of The Franke Institute for the Humanities, The Center for Jewish Studies, The Center for Middle Eastern Studies, and the Divinity School, at the University of Chicago.

A wide range of public programs is being presented in conjunction with the show, including:

- Saturday January 31: The Alba Consort presents a workshop on the medieval music of Fustat
- Sunday April 19, 1:00–4:00 p.m.: A Celebration of the History and Culture of Old Cairo, including music, poetry, and art
- Wednesday, May 7 and August 6: Curator-led tours of the show at 12:15 p.m.
- June and Sept: Walking tours of Islamic and Islamic-inspired architecture.

For further information about public programs and registration, visit oi.uchicago.edu/register.

- On May 14: Authors Adina Hoffman and Peter Cole, will speak on the topic of “[Sacred Trash: The Lost and Found World of the Cairo Geniza](#)”

“A Cosmopolitan City” Academic Lecture Series

Presented by the Oriental Institute in collaboration with The Chicago Center for Jewish Studies at the University of Chicago, these lectures present a range of topics related to the history, art, and archaeology of medieval Cairo. Sponsored by the Center for Jewish Studies, the Franke Institute for the Humanities, the Center for Middle Eastern Studies, and the Divinity School of the University of Chicago. For time and location of lectures, go to: <http://oi.uchicago.edu/museum-exhibits/special-exhibits/cosmopolitan-city-old-cairo>

- Wednesday, April 1: Paul Walker (Center for Middle Eastern Studies, University of Chicago) The Fatimid Caliphate and Its Non-Muslim Subjects
- Wednesday, April 15: Amy Landau (Walters Art Museum, Baltimore) Threshold to the Sacred: The Ark Door of Cairo’s Ben Ezra Synagogue
- Wednesday, April 29: Tasha Vorderstrasse (Oriental Institute) Multiculturalism and Christian Art in Old Cairo
- Wednesday, May 13: Marina Rustow (Johns Hopkins University, Baltimore) The Material Turn in Cairo Genizah Research
- Wednesday, May 27: Donald Whitcomb (Oriental Institute) From Fustat to Cairo: The Many meanings of “Old Cairo”

The Oriental Institute Museum is located on the campus of the University of Chicago at 1155 E. 58th St. Hours: Tuesday, Thursday through Sunday 10 a.m.

to 5 p.m. and Wednesday 10 a.m. to 8:00 p.m. Free Entry. Suggested donation:
\$10 for adults, \$5 for children. For further information, visit:
www.oi.uchicago.edu/museum