

## The Cairo Genizah Project

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The “Cairo Genizah” is the name given to a large body of writings that were kept during the Middle Ages in the storage-room (Hebrew: *genizah*) of an old synagogue of Fustat and were only brought to light again during the course of the nineteenth century. These thousands of fragments of books and documents, which are today scattered over a dozen libraries of Europe and the United States (the largest collection being at Cambridge University Library), have in the course of the past seventy years provided scholars with precious new information in the realm of ancient Hebrew literature: fragments of the once lost Hebrew text of the book of Ecclesiasticus (“Ben Sira”) were initially found among the Genizah papers; while the so-called “Damasus Covenant” or “Zadokite Fragments”—the first known manuscript text of the sectarian genre uncovered later in some abundance in the caves of Qumran—were discovered in the Cambridge Genizah collection, and startled the scholarly world upon publication. Research into the phonology and morphology of ancient Hebrew has been greatly aided by the publication of Biblical texts from the Genizah containing the so-called old Palestinian vocalization, with its many deviations from the later standardized vocalization of the scholars of Tiberias; while the discovery in the Genizah of large portions of old Hebrew poetic texts has provided scholars with the means to reassess the culture of the Jews of Byzantine Palestine, and to understand more thoroughly the developments and changes in the character of the Hebrew language during early medieval times. The Genizah fragments have also been found to include many philosophical, scientific and literary texts of the Jewish middle ages—written either in Hebrew or Judaeo-Arabic—which had previously not been known to exist at all, or were known about only through allusions in other writings.

In recent decades the interest of scholars has begun to shift from the literary portions of the Cairo Genizah to the historical ones. The Genizah has preserved thousands of court documents, legal instruments, and personal as well as business letters of the Jews of medieval Egypt, as well as other documents and letters written in foreign lands which, for various reasons, made their way to Fustat and were later deposited in the ancient synagogue there. Historical research here at Chicago has fallen into two general parts: the study of documents detailing aspects of the social and cultural life of the Jews of medieval Egypt *per se* and the examination of a special group of letters and documents having the common feature of *European* origin. For the orientalist, the latter genre is of high interest as showing some of the connections between Europe and the Near East before and during the period of the Crusades. Some of these documents, which are preserved in Cambridge, Oxford, London and New York, have already been published by Dr. Norman Golb, while others are now being prepared for publication; and there are many hundreds of Genizah documents which have still to be examined with care by present and future scholars. The suggestion may thus be ventured that the continuous perusal of these valuable texts should lead to a considerable widening in our knowledge of the Levant during a crucial period in its history.



Leaf from a treasure-hunting manual in Judaeo-Arabic preserved in the Cambridge Genizah collection.