Introduction: A Handbook for Documentary Geniza Research in the Twenty-First Century

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Abstract This essay introduces a special triple issue of *Jewish History* that aims to offer both an introduction to and an in-depth guide for documentary Cairo Geniza studies. We outline the history of scholarship that led to the definition of the *documentary* or *historical* Geniza and in particular introduce the work of Shlomo Dov Goitein, the scholar whose work has essentially defined the field for the past half century. This historical sketch is followed by a brief review of the kinds of materials found in the documentary corpus and a look at the distribution of scholarship to date on different document genres, including some that have so far remained relatively overlooked. The nature of the materials, and the history of their scholarship, helps shape the rationale for the volume's form as we provide an overview of the essays in each of its four sections, which focus in turn on historiography, methodology, document types, and writing Geniza history.

Keywords Cairo geniza · Documentary geniza · Medieval social history · S. D. Goitein · Judeo-Arabic

This special triple issue of *Jewish History* has unusual aims for a journal issue. Rather than presenting a group of thematically linked but distinct essays, it attempts to offer something more comprehensive: a step-by-step guide to the state of the field in documentary Cairo Geniza studies. What follow are essays by the majority of scholars working on the Cairo Geniza documents today, organized in three parts. Those in part 1, "Historiography," survey historiographic developments within the main subfields for which Geniza documents have been used to date (Jewish communal history, economic history, and the history of the family) and address the use of Judeo-Arabic manuscripts for Islamicate intellectual history and of Arabic-script state documents preserved in the Geniza for the study of the Fatimid and Ayyubid states. Those in part 2, "Methodology," provide a detailed practical introduction to finding Geniza materials, to their languages, linguistic registers, and diplomatic features, and to the problems and possibilities that they pose as historical sources. The essays in part 3, "Document Types," offer brief introductions to some of the major document genres preserved in the Geniza,

each accompanied by a sample edition and translation. Part 4, “Writing Geniza History,” offers some brief reflections on the scholarly legacies that have shaped the field so far and its prospects for the future. We are deeply grateful to the editors of *Jewish History* for encouraging this project and devoting so much space to it, and to the collection’s contributors, who accepted our very specific requests for submissions with extraordinary grace and generosity. The essays that they have produced offer a multifaceted assessment of documentary Geniza research—its history, methodologies, challenges, and potential—that we hope will prove useful to students, scholars in comparative fields, and Geniza specialists alike.

This assessment is worth making now in part because the field of documentary Geniza studies is in a moment of transition. A significant increase in the production of document editions and scholarly studies, on the one hand, and efforts to digitize both images and texts of documents, on the other, are changing the ways in which historians can approach these materials. These changes include an increasing awareness of the need to better understand the Geniza as a documentary corpus—both its particular richness and its previously unacknowledged limitations—as well as of the difficulty of dividing documentary from literary production. Increased access to and publication of these texts has also helped pull more scholars into the field and led to greater collaboration, both among Geniza specialists and between these specialists and scholars in related fields of scholarship on premodern everyday writing—particularly Arabic papyrologists. From these collaborations, and encouraged by a series of conferences on the documentary Geniza and Arabic papyri held in recent years—at Yale University in 2013, at the University of California, Los Angeles, in 2014, and at the University of Vienna in 2016—a consensus has emerged about some critical issues of study.¹ Geniza specialists have become increasingly interested in the technical aspects of document production and their import for writing history. We are particularly anxious to analyze genres of writing, to note the patterns of deposit that allowed different document types to survive in different numbers over time and across space, to understand where their graphic and formulaic conventions came from and what they can tell us about document production, and to

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¹“Everyday Writing in the Medieval Near East” (conference sponsored by the Program in Judaic Studies, Yale University, November 3–5, 2013); “Languages of Everyday Writing in the Medieval Islamic World: History, Methodology, Digital Prospects” (conference sponsored by the Center for Jewish Studies, University of California, Los Angeles, December 8–9, 2014); “A Typology of Arabic Documents” (joint conference of the National Endowment for the Humanities–sponsored project “Documents and Institutions in the Medieval Middle East” and the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation–sponsored project “Digital Diplomatics of Arabic Documents” organized by the Institute of Near and Middle Eastern Studies, Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität München, and hosted by the Institute of Oriental Studies, University of Vienna, and the Papyrus Collection, Austrian National Library, Vienna, August 22–24, 2016).

discern what these deposits can tell us about the uses of writing and the differences between ephemeral and record-keeping products. At the same time, we are increasingly aware of how much this shift marks a new beginning and how much we still don't know about the sources on which we all depend. As efforts to give scholars and the public more access to documents unfold, the lack of even basic cataloging standards, the difficulties of making certain collections available, and the problems posed by the reuse of paper have become ever clearer. We are far from answering the questions that most concern us, even as agreement on the essentials itself represents a major step forward in a field long dominated by the methodological outlook of its founding scholar.

This collection therefore attempts both to take stock of Geniza studies as it now stands and to capture how much work still lies ahead and suggest what that work might look like. In this introduction, we will briefly introduce the documentary Geniza and its study, outline some of the major concerns that prompted the development of this issue, and explain what the essays that follow can offer to both beginning and specialist readers seeking to better understand this complex field and its potential.

The Documentary Geniza

What is the *documentary Geniza*? Between the eleventh and the nineteenth centuries, Jews attached to the Palestinian-rite Rabbanite synagogue of Fustat, Egypt (now known as the Ben Ezra synagogue), like Jews as well as Muslims elsewhere in the Middle East, intermittently practiced *geniza*, a ritual disposal of worn-out and useless religious texts. The Ben Ezra synagogue holds a special place in the heart of historians because the community it served used a small chamber in its synagogue as a permanent *geniza* rather than a box or some other form of temporary storage that would periodically be buried. The accidental collection of manuscripts that had accumulated over these nine centuries was discovered by European and American scholars in the late nineteenth century. Today the Geniza's contents are scattered across some seventy libraries and private collections in Europe and the United States.²

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²On the custom of *geniza* among both Jews and Muslims, see Mark R. Cohen, "Geniza for Islamicists, Islamic Geniza, and the 'New Cairo Geniza,'" *Harvard Middle Eastern and Islamic Review* 7 (2006): 129–45; and Mark R. Cohen and Yedida K. Stillman, "The Cairo Geniza and the Custom of the Geniza among Oriental Jewry—a Historical and Ethnographic Study" (in Hebrew), *Pe'amim* 24 (1985): 3–35. On the Geniza chamber's history, discovery by Western scholars, and transfer to libraries and private collections in the United States and Europe, see Stefan C. Reif, *A Jewish Archive from Old Cairo: The History of Cambridge University's Genizah Collection* (Richmond, Surrey, 2000); Adina Hoffman and Peter Cole, *Sacred Trash:*

Forms of *geniza* practice varied not only among communities but also over time, with some periods during which the Ben Ezra Geniza was in use seeing significant deposits of nonsacred material. Most of the Geniza papers—about 380,000 folio pages in all—are fragments of literary manuscripts, largely on religious subjects. But somewhere between thirty and fifty thousand fragments are what is usually termed *documentary material*; that is, they are everyday writings, texts written not to convey ideas to an anonymous and long-lasting audience but to communicate with specific recipients for immediate practical purposes.³ The largest cluster of these everyday writings—perhaps as many as thirty thousand fragments—comes from Fatimid and Ayyubid Egypt and Syria (969–1250) and, less often, elsewhere in the Fatimid Mediterranean, although the corpus also includes smaller but still important documentary clusters from later centuries and further afield (scattered letters come from as far away as Russia and Indonesia). The Geniza's contents are, moreover, supplemented both by records of other communities that resettled in Fustat over the centuries and brought their communal records with them and by materials from other *genizot* and synagogue libraries that were dispersed to collectors in the great Egyptian documentary rush of the late nineteenth century (some of the buyers of ancient papyri, e.g., also purchased boxes of Geniza material from antiquities dealers).⁴

This collection focuses on the classical (Fatimid and Ayyubid era) documentary Geniza, one of the largest groups of everyday writing to have survived from the medieval Islamic world, and perhaps the single densest

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The Lost and Found World of the Cairo Geniza (New York, 2010); Rebecca J. W. Jefferson, "Sisters of Semitics: A Fresh Appreciation of the Scholarship of Agnes Smith Lewis and Margaret Dunlop Gibson," *Medieval Feminist Forum* 45, no. 1 (2009): 23–49; and Stefan C. Reif, "The Discovery of the Cambridge Genizah Fragments of Ben-Sira: Scholars and Texts," in *The Book of Ben Sira in Modern Research: Proceedings of the First International Ben Sira Conference, 28–31 July 1996, Soesterberg, Netherlands*, ed. P. C. Beentjes (Berlin, 1997), 1–22.

³The exact number of fragments remains uncertain because the Geniza has not yet been cataloged fully. See Rebecca J. W. Jefferson, "The Historical Significance of the Cambridge Genizah Inventory Project," in *Language, Culture, Computation: Computing for the Humanities, Law, and Narratives: Essays Dedicated to Yaacov Choueka on the Occasion of His 75th Birthday*, ed. Nachum Dershowitz and Ephraim Nissan (Berlin, 2014), 9–37. The question is also complicated by the fact that many individual pieces of paper contain literary material on one side and documentary material on the other. See n. 21 below.

⁴See Haggai Ben-Shammai, "Is 'The Cairo Genizah' a Proper Name or a Generic Noun? On the Relationship between the Genizot of the Ben Ezra and the Dār Simḥa Synagogues," in *"From a Sacred Source": Genizah Studies in Honour of Professor Stefan C. Reif*, ed. Ben Outhwaite and Siam Bhayro (Leiden, 2011), 43–52; and Rebecca J. W. Jefferson, "The Cairo Genizah Unearthed: The Excavations Conducted by the Count D'Hulst on Behalf of the Bodleian Library and Their Significance for Genizah History," in *ibid.*, 171–200.

and most diverse. The Geniza is notable among documentary corpora in several ways. First, it comprises a broad range of document types, among them thousands of Jewish legal documents (including marriage contracts, deeds of divorce, deeds of sale, wills, and miscellaneous court records) and smaller numbers of Islamic ones; thousands of letters (personal, communal, mercantile, and scholarly) sent around the Mediterranean basin and western Indian Ocean; more than a thousand Fatimid and Ayyubid state petitions and rescripts; bits of the state's own records; hundreds of private petitions for charity and petitions sent to Jewish communal officials in Fustat and other Fatimid and Ayyubid cities; letters sent among these officials alongside hundreds of records that they kept pertaining to their communal welfare organizations; thousands of magical amulets and recipes; hundreds of medical prescriptions; hundreds of commercial accounts; thousands of learned responses to legal questions; and tens of genealogical lists, memorial lists, book lists, bankers' letters of payment, school exercises, IOUs, personal accounts, notes, and shopping lists—an almost unimaginable treasure trove for historians. Moreover, many of these diverse subcorpora are closely interconnected, with the result that they illuminate some of the same people, practices, places, events, and institutions from multiple angles. Individually, these documents are often surprisingly detailed and varied as well as relatively well preserved, especially compared to Islamic and pre-Islamic papyri. For these reasons, the corpus as a whole offers some of the best evidence we possess not only of the social, cultural, and economic history of Jews in the medieval Islamic world but also of the social and economic history of the pre-Ottoman Middle East in general.

Mining the Corpus: Historical Scholarship and Its Gaps

Since the early twentieth century, and even more since the 1960s, a growing number of historians have mined the Geniza corpus for information about an immense variety of topics large and small: Islamic taxation, the Crusades, domestic architecture in Fustat, Fatimid coinage, women's dress, popular theology, pharmacology, contract law, comparative conceptions of charity, the organization of the textile industry, and bathing practices, to name a few at random. Indeed, the documentary Geniza can and has been used to illuminate such a large number of subjects that it is easy to imagine it as inexhaustible and complete, an endless treasure trove of data there for the taking. Yet, in truth, the Geniza is a historical resource that is both more limited, complex, and difficult and more poorly understood for both its strengths and weaknesses than it is commonly thought to be—even by specialists in the field.

Much of this sense of unending richness—and equally much of what we understand (or, in some cases, fail to) about the documentary Geniza—is owing to the monumental output of one scholar, Shlomo Dov Goitein, who worked on the Geniza from 1950 until his death in 1985. Goitein is best known for producing *A Mediterranean Society*, the general vade mecum of all documentary Geniza research and a work often viewed by those outside the field as the last word on the corpus.⁵ He also published hundreds of accompanying articles that add more detail to the summaries that appear in *A Mediterranean Society* and often include editions or translations of the documents discussed there. To this we can now add the publication of four of the seven parts of his *India Book*, left unfinished on his death.⁶ Equally significant is his unpublished *Nachlass*, which includes the index cards that served as the detailed and analytic database of all his studies, and his thousands of transcriptions and hundreds of translations of individual fragments as well as his definitions of hundreds of words in the Geniza corpus.⁷ In the wake of Goitein's monumental work, which opened up discussion of literally thousands of subjects illuminated by the documentary Geniza, it is easy to mistake his Geniza for the Geniza itself—especially since most scholars after him have tended to rely on the documents that he identified.⁸ This is understandable given that his index cards are still the closest thing we have to a catalog of documentary fragments; yet such a view also creates fundamental distortions, since we now know that he addressed less than half of what is extant.

Part 1 of this issue thus takes stock of Goitein's accomplishments and of the work that has been done since, a survey that illuminates how his

⁵S. D. Goitein, *A Mediterranean Society: The Jewish Communities of the Arab World as Portrayed in the Documents of the Cairo Genizah*, 6 vols. (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1967–93). The sixth volume—the cumulative index—was left unfinished at Goitein's death and completed by Paula Sanders.

⁶Half of Goitein's *India Book*, developed after his death by Mordechai Akiva Friedman, has appeared in English as S. D. Goitein and Mordechai Akiva Friedman, *India Traders of the Middle Ages: Documents from the Cairo Geniza: India Book* (Leiden, 2008), which summarizes and translates parts of pts. 1–3, and in Hebrew as S. D. Goitein and Mordechai Akiva Friedman, *Joseph Lebdi: Prominent India Trader (India Book I)* (Jerusalem, 2009), *Maḍmūn Nagid of Yemen and the India Trade (India Book II)* (Jerusalem, 2010), and *Abraham Ben Yijā: India Trader and Manufacturer (India Book III)* (Jerusalem, 2010); and S. D. Goitein, Mordechai Akiva Friedman, and Amir Ashur, *Halfon the Travelling Merchant Scholar: Cairo Geniza Documents (India Book IV/B)*, 2 vols. (Jerusalem, 2013).

⁷For Goitein's definitions, see Werner Diem and Hans Peter Radenborg, *A Dictionary of the Arabic Materials in S. D. Goitein's "A Mediterranean Society"* (Wiesbaden, 1994). On Goitein's transcriptions, see the history of the Princeton Geniza Project at <https://geniza.princeton.edu/pgp/about>.

⁸Christopher Stokoe, Gabriele Ferrario, and Ben Outhwaite, "In the Shadow of Goitein: Text Mining the Cairo Genizah," *Manuscript Cultures* 7 (2014): 29–34.

choices have tended to determine not only the documents we use but also the subjects we pursue. The organization of *A Mediterranean Society* reflects some of the concerns of the historiography of his day,⁹ but the first three volumes—*Economic Foundations*, *The Community*, and *The Family*—also match the three main areas of documentary Geniza research produced since. As the historiographic essays included in this part of the collection make clear, the greatest amount of documentary Geniza scholarship has addressed the history of Jewish communal organization. Interest in this subject precedes not only Goitein but also the study of the documentary Geniza. But Goitein transformed this subfield entirely. Miriam Frenkel and Moshe Yagur trace how the initial discovery of the Geniza did and did not change scholarly paradigms about the nature of medieval Jewish communal leadership, while Arnold Franklin discusses Goitein's impact on the field and the work that followed in his wake. Goitein also followed the trajectory of mid-twentieth-century social history in giving over the first volume of *Mediterranean Society* to the topic of economic foundations, and outside Jewish historiography the Geniza has proved of greatest interest to economic historians. Phillip I. Lieberman and Roxani Margariti discuss both how Geniza scholarship has changed economic historians' understanding of Jews' roles in the Islamicate economy and the (sometimes contentious) use of Geniza materials in larger narratives of both the Islamicate and the Mediterranean economies. Finally, Goitein pioneered the study of medieval Islamicate family history with his work on the Geniza. Eve Krakowski examines his approach to the history of the family and describes the two trajectories taken by scholarship since: study of the legal aspects of Jewish marriage and anthropologically inflected analysis of family structures and relationships.

Yet these choices are not the only ones imaginable. Marina Rustow's essay in part 1 on Fatimid and Ayyubid state documents preserved in the Geniza (state petitions, decrees, rescripts, and records) describes these documents' enormous potential to explain how both states worked while also documenting how Goitein's lack of interest in this corpus has led to its neglect within

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⁹Despite his unwillingness to engage systematically with historiography, Goitein's work on economic, communal, and family history and on the history of daily life belonged firmly within the trajectories of post-World War II social history, including its turn to anthropology in the 1970s. A good summary of these trajectories in the United States is William H. Sewell Jr., *Logics of History: Social Theory and Social Transformation* (Chicago, 2005), 23–80. For Goitein's participation in and exit from the French Annales school, see Peter Miller, "Two Men in a Boat: The Braudel-Goitein 'Correspondence' and the Beginning of Thalassography," in *The Sea: Thalassography*, ed. Peter Miller (Ann Arbor, MI, 2013), and "From Spain to India Becomes A Mediterranean Society: The Braudel-Goitein 'Correspondence,' Part II," *Mitteilungen des Kunsthistorischen Institutes in Florenz* 56 (2014): 113–35.

Geniza studies as well as among political historians of both regimes. Likewise, while Goitein's basic vision of which materials should count as documentary is accepted by most scholars in the field, it is in truth somewhat arbitrary. Should we, as Goitein did, include as documents *responsa* (responses to legal queries, which often addressed specific events yet were also sometimes collected for posterity), while nonetheless following his lead in not including liturgical poetry, *piyyut*, which was composed for use in everyday religious practice? More importantly, do historians of the literary Geniza miss out on intellectual developments by ignoring the vision of religion contained in, for instance, its voluminous legal records? Do social historians miss the meaning of their subjects' lives if they do not know what texts these subjects read or the details of how they worshipped? This collection largely keeps to Goitein's vision of the documentary corpus, following most scholarship in the field. But Sabine Schmidtke's historiographic essay on the use of *geniza* materials (from both the Ben Ezra synagogue and elsewhere) for Islamicate intellectual history suggests one important way to move beyond this division—and thereby transcend some of its limitations for historical understanding.

Though the historiographic essays in part 1 focus on subjects that have been examined deeply enough to warrant dedicated treatment (communal organization, the economy, the family, intellectual history, and state documents), it should be noted that scholarship since Goitein has also addressed a number of other topics lying at the intersections of these subjects and beyond. Among these, the structure of charity and charitable institutions has received perhaps the most attention, as scholars including Mark Cohen and Miriam Frenkel have participated in broader scholarly discussions about the nature and importance of charity in defining monotheistic religious communities from late antiquity through the Middle Ages.¹⁰ Given that legal documents

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¹⁰See Mark R. Cohen, *Poverty and Charity in the Jewish Community of Medieval Egypt* (Princeton, NJ, 2005), and *The Voice of the Poor in the Middle Ages* (Princeton, NJ, 2005); and Miriam Frenkel, "*The Compassionate and Benevolent*": *The Leading Elite in the Jewish Community of Alexandria in the Middle Ages* (in Hebrew) (Jerusalem, 2006), and "Dhimmī Donations and Foundations for Jerusalem (638–1099)," *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 27 (1984): 156–74. For the larger scholarly conversation in which these works participate, see Peter Brown, *Poverty and Leadership in the Later Roman Empire* (Lebanon, NH, 2002); Michael D. Bonner, "Poverty and Charity in the Rise of Islam," in *Poverty and Charity in Middle Eastern Contexts*, ed. Michael D. Bonner, Mine Ener, and Amy Singer (Binghamton, NY, 2003), 13–30; Mark R. Cohen, "Introduction: Poverty and Charity in Past Times," in "Poverty and Charity: Judaism, Christianity, and Islam," special issue, *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 35, no. 3 (2005): 347–60, and "Feeding the Poor and Clothing the Naked: The Cairo Geniza," in *ibid.*, 407–21; Michael Bonner, "Poverty and Economics in the Qur'an," in *ibid.*, 391–406; Peter Brown, "Remembering the Poor and the Aesthetic of Society," in *ibid.*, 513–22; and *Charity and Giving in Monotheistic Religions*, ed. Miriam Frenkel and Yaacov Lev (Berlin, 2009).

make up the largest subcorpus of papers preserved in the Geniza, it is not surprising that a great deal of work has likewise been done on legal history. The vast majority of this work addresses marriage documents and is thus covered in Krakowski's essay on the history of the family, while work on commercial legal documents is considered in Lieberman and Margariti's treatment of economic history; parts of the legal corpus are also discussed in the individual essays on document genres in part 3. The survival of administrative Fatimid state documents and Islamic legal ones in the Geniza has also motivated study of state and state-oriented documentary production, a subject first addressed by Geoffrey Khan and more recently by Marina Rustow, who joins this evidence to other Geniza materials to examine both the workings of the Fatimid state (as discussed in her essay on state documents) and its relation to Jewish communal leaders and institutions.¹¹ Rustow, Krakowski, Craig Perry, and others are also collaborating on a large-scale effort to bring these last two subjects of inquiry together by comparing the forms and formulas of Islamic administrative and legal documents with Jewish ones as a means to reconstruct the institutional practices that each reflects—a first step toward a more comprehensive treatment of these materials.¹²

At the same time, other subjects that the Geniza could productively be used to study have remained relatively, and in some cases entirely, neglected. These include both questions that Goitein did not explore systematically and others that he worked on intensively but have not been taken up since. Part 4 of this collection considers some of these areas, as do some of the historiographic essays, but a few more are worth noting here. The Geniza evidence contains an enormously rich variety of evidence for domestic architecture and material history, which Goitein discussed in detail in volume 4 of *A Mediterranean Society* but which few scholars have addressed since, with the exception of some major studies on clothing.¹³ This material has been the subject of very recent renewed interest, but much more might yet be done

¹¹Geoffrey Khan, *Arabic Legal and Administrative Documents in the Cambridge Genizah Collections* (Cambridge, 1993); Marina Rustow, "A Petition to a Woman at the Fatimid Court (413–414 AH/1022–23 CE)," *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 73 (2010): 1–27. Rustow's book about these materials, *The Lost Archive: Traces of a Caliphate in a Cairo Synagogue*, is forthcoming from Princeton University Press.

¹²"Documents and Institutions in the Medieval Middle East," a project funded by the National Endowment for the Humanities (project director, Marina Rustow) and by the American Council of Learned Societies (collaborative fellowship, Marina Rustow and Eve Krakowski). Eve Krakowski, Marina Rustow, Craig Perry, Tamer el-Leithy, and Naim Vantiegham are preparing a book under the auspices of this project on the technical forms and features of Jewish and Islamic legal and administrative documents from the Fatimid and Ayyubid periods.

¹³On clothing, see Yedida Kalfon Stillman, "Female Attire of Medieval Egypt: According to the Trousseau Lists and Cognate Material from the Cairo Geniza" (PhD diss., University of Pennsylvania, 1972); and Ora Molad-Vaza, "Clothing in Mediterranean Jewish Society as

with it.¹⁴ Likewise, Goitein produced a separate volume on the Geniza evidence for Jewish education in addition to his substantial consideration of the subject in volume 2 of *Mediterranean Society*, but these materials have not subsequently been examined.¹⁵ As Krakowski discusses in her essay on family history, in its wills, dowry lists, marital agreements, and other contracts and deeds the Geniza also contains an enormous trove of information about property holding, the intergenerational transfer of property, credit, and the circulation of money in society. Geniza material has also been utilized in some scholarship on interfaith relations in the medieval Islamic world, but there is no single monograph specifically dedicated to these relations, about which the Geniza again preserves voluminous data.¹⁶

The corpus also preserves a great deal of evidence for the political history of the Fatimid and Ayyubid empires, not only within the actual state products mentioned above, but also within many letters and legal documents that mention state officials and their actions in passing and thus suggest how the workings of government penetrated its subjects' daily lives. While some of this material is difficult to parse, some does provide possible correctives to narratives produced by the elite.¹⁷ More generally, the use of Geniza evidence

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Reflected in the Documents of the Cairo Geniza" (in Hebrew) (PhD diss., Hebrew University, 2010). On material culture, see further n. 26 below.

¹⁴For a recent examination of the archaeological record of Fustat in light of Goitein's work on the Geniza, see Matthew Harrison, "Fusṭāṭ Reconsidered: Urban Housing and Domestic Life in a Medieval Islamic City" (PhD diss., University of Southampton, 2016). Geniza evidence has also been the subject of recent interest in tracing the understanding, use, and movement of various goods as part of economic, social, or art history. On the different nature and the discrimination of goods in metropolises and the hinterlands, see Jessica L. Goldberg, *Trade and Institutions in the Medieval Mediterranean: The Geniza Merchants and Their Business World* (Cambridge, 2012), 211–46. Paul Freedman and Ittai Weinryb are currently using Geniza evidence to study the use of spices and bronze, respectively, while Miriam Frenkel proposes to take up material history more generally.

¹⁵S. D. Goitein, *Jewish Education in Muslim Countries: Based on Records from the Cairo Geniza* (in Hebrew) (Jerusalem, 1962).

¹⁶See in general Mark R. Cohen, *Under Crescent and Cross: The Jews in the Middle Ages* (Princeton, NJ, 1994); and S. D. Goitein, *Jews and Arabs: Their Contacts throughout the Ages* (New York, 1974). For Goitein's avoidance of the issue in his magnum opus, see Jessica L. Goldberg, "On Reading Goitein's *A Mediterranean Society*: A View from Economic History," *Mediterranean Historical Review* 26 (2011): 171–86.

¹⁷For some attempts to use this evidence for the eleventh century, see Moshe Gil, *Palestine during the First Muslim Period (634–1099)* (in Hebrew), 3 vols. (Tel Aviv, 1983), *In the Kingdom of Ishmael* (in Hebrew), 4 vols. (Tel Aviv, 1997), *Sicily 827–1072 in Light of the Geniza Documents and Parallel Sources* (Palermo, 1995), "Institutions and Events of the Eleventh Century Mirrored in Geniza Letters (Part I)," *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 67, no. 2 (2004): 151–67, and "Institutions and Events of the Eleventh Century Mirrored in Geniza Letters (Part II)," *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 67, no. 2 (2004): 168–84.

for the social history of the Fatimid and Ayyubid empires remains limited, though some has been deployed by scholars like Eliyahu Ashtor and Yaacov Lev in their general studies.¹⁸ But hesitations about using Geniza evidence to illuminate broad social history are as much political as epistemological (as Jessica L. Goldberg discusses in her essay on the Geniza as a historical source). The question of whether material from a numerically tiny religious minority group can illuminate general aspects of social history adequately must be posed on a case-by-case basis, depending on what kinds of material the documents contain, rather than decided by blanket characterizations of the value and meaning of Jewish sources.

Finally, this collection does not address the material that makes up the vast majority of the Cairo Geniza proper: Jewish religious texts, including liturgical poetry; fragments of the Bible, the Mishnah, the Talmud, and *midrash*; biblical exegesis; and legal codes, digests, and commentaries. Historians of Judaism have written so much about the contents of this immense body of material that this scholarship deserves to be surveyed in a volume of its own and must remain beyond our purview here. But it is worth noting that far less work has been done on the social contexts and uses of these texts: how they were produced, copied, and in what formats circulated; who read them, for what purposes, and in what settings.¹⁹ Just as Schmidtke's essay makes clear that Judeo-Arabic philosophical, theological, and polemical works offer evidence for social as well as intellectual history, the same holds equally true for the rest of the literary Geniza, including, of course, paraliterary texts like medical and magical documents (addressed by both Leigh Chipman and Ortal-Paz Saar in part 3), which can illuminate the prevalence of disease and its treatment and the social uses and contexts of magic. At the broadest level of all, all these materials, documentary and literary alike, can be used to consider the social uses of writing—a question that necessarily underlies all Geniza scholarship but that few scholars have tackled directly.²⁰

Methodology: Approaching Geniza Documents

How then can scholars who wish to use Geniza documents to examine any of these richly documented but understudied subjects, or others, do so in ways

¹⁸See Eliyahu Ashtor, *A Social and Economic History of the Near East in the Middle Ages* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1976); and Yaacov Lev, *State and Society in Fatimid Egypt* (Leiden, 1991).

¹⁹For a valuable beginning, see Judith Olszowy-Schlanger, "Cheap Books in Medieval Egypt: Rotuli from the Cairo Geniza," *Intellectual History of the Islamicate World* 4 (2016): 82–101.

²⁰For exceptions, see Goldberg, "Mercantile Letters" (in this collection), and "Methodological Essay on Commercial Contracts" (in this collection); and Franklin, "Reading Geniza Letters Anew" (in this collection).

that profit from Goitein's and his successors' work while also moving beyond the frameworks that have long dominated the field? The methodological essays in part 2 begin to address and grapple with this question.

For beginners, the most daunting problems, confronted at the very outset of research, are technical. Finding documents relevant to a given topic remains enormously difficult; not only is the documentary Geniza dispersed across seventy library and private collections, but it also remains very imperfectly cataloged, a problem that massive scholarly efforts are currently attempting to remedy. Central among these is the Friedberg Genizah Project (FGP), which has digitally imaged the vast majority of the corpus and aims to provide a union catalog of all the collections. Yet the nature of documentary material makes this an especially challenging task. Our sense of these challenges and of how to address them is rapidly changing, as digitization projects like FGP both allow and force us to take stock of what the Geniza does and does not contain and how its contents should be categorized. For example, even the basic and widely accepted practice of cataloging documentary fragments by shelf mark can lead to bibliographic confusion, given the sheer number of fragments of paper that have been the subject of reuse (as, for instance, when a fragment includes a Rabbanite sermon on one side and a Fatimid state rescript on the other).²¹ For now, Oded Zinger's essay on finding documents offers a thoroughgoing guide both to the latest technology and to the scattered publications that contain the results of decades of Goitein's and his successors' labor to make these materials accessible.

Once a group of relevant documents has been identified, how does one read them? Almost all Geniza documents from the classical period are written in Judeo-Arabic (Arabic written in Hebrew script), Arabic in Arabic script, Hebrew, or Aramaic, or a mixture of some or all of these. Judeo-Arabic is of particular interest for documentary specialists as it is the language of most everyday production. Two essays in part 2 thus focus on different aspects of this written language. Andreas Kaplony addresses the relationship between Judeo-Arabic and other Middle Arabics (i.e., varieties of medieval written Arabic that diverge from the Arabic of the grammarians who defined classical Arabic in the ninth century), which has been the subject of dispute. He argues that the Judeo-Arabic of the documentary Geniza is best understood as reflecting a common Fatimid documentary Arabic derived mainly from the languages of state administration rather than the grammarians' reference

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²¹Rustow, "A Petition to a Woman at the Fatimid Court"; Roni Shweka, Marina Rustow, and Judith Olszowy-Schlanger, "The She'iltot, Recycling Manuscripts and Efrayim b. Shemarya, T-S F13.1 and More," Taylor-Schechter Genizah Research Unit, University of Cambridge, Fragment of the Month, October 2011, <http://www.lib.cam.ac.uk/Taylor-Schechter/fotm/october-2011/#sthash.pjG1QIOD.dpuf>.

language. As a practical matter, anyone literate in Arabic and armed with the standard Arabic and Hebrew transliteration table (included in this collection) can therefore learn to read Geniza Judeo-Arabic.²² Esther-Miriam Wagner discusses Geniza documents' varying registers and frequent code switching between Hebrew and Arabic (Aramaic appears mostly in a static repertoire of formulas within legal materials). Written Judeo-Arabic also reflects geographic variety and, in addition, often exhibits forms of professional jargon; it thus presents difficulties of interpretation that will be familiar to anyone who works with everyday rather than literary production.

But even when Geniza documents are semantically clear, they can remain difficult to understand and especially to group and parse by genre, one reason why cataloging them has proved so daunting. While some document types, such as Jewish marriage contracts and divorce deeds (*ketubbot* and *gittin*), follow a clear template and are immediately recognizable, others do not; many letters, legal documents, and administrative records are too variable to be classified this easily. One aspect of reading Geniza documents that can help untangle this problem is attention to their material forms and their formulas, including writing supports, physical layouts, scripts, the use of recognized terms and clauses (in Hebrew, Aramaic, and Arabic alike), and the order in which component parts appear. Mass digitization has increasingly drawn scholars' attention to these features as an integral aspect of documentary production and made it clear that even documents that do not follow a clear template nonetheless employ recurring conventions and formulas that bore specific meanings for their original readers. Understanding these conventions can prevent us from reading these passages naively, allow us to classify documents that use them more precisely, and yield otherwise unavailable evidence for how different types of documents worked—how and why people wrote them, why they look the way they do, and what their social force and uses are.

Since the task of reconstructing these conventions and their meanings is still ongoing, part 3 offers a series of essays focused on a sampling of characteristic document types, each centered around an image, illustrative edition, and annotated English translation of a single document. The types that we have chosen to include reflect the state of current research on particular genres rather than the overall distribution of the corpus and are, thus, representative but not exhaustive. Thus, although petitions, both state and private, did not survive in enormous numbers (hundreds rather than thousands have

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²² An automatic feature switching transliteration between Hebrew and Arabic characters is a current goal of both the Arabic Papyrology Database (<https://www.apd.gwi.uni-muenchen.de/apd/project.jsp>) and the Princeton Geniza Project (<https://geniza.princeton.edu/pgp/index.php>).

been identified to date), they have been especially well studied and accordingly are the subject of two essays: one by Marina Rustow on Fatimid state petitions and one by Mark Cohen on private charity petitions. Both illustrate the richness of analysis that is possible when a genre is distinct and relatively easy to identify.

We have included essays on several different kinds of letters and legal documents, the two largest categories of documents. Jessica L. Goldberg discusses commercial letters, Ben Outhwaite Jewish communal ones, and Renée Levine Melammed and Uri Melammed women's private letters, while Phillip I. Lieberman describes commercial contracts, Amir Ashur premarital agreements, and Craig Perry bills of sale for slaves. In contrast, we have only one example of a list or table, the third largest category of documents in the Geniza but one that has been much less thoroughly studied. However, Jessica L. Goldberg's essay about this document notes the enormous variety of extant lists, tables, and accounts preserved in the corpus, both those on which some work has been done and those that have barely been examined to date. Three great paraliterary corpora are each represented by a single essay: Leigh Chipman presents Geniza medical writings through one of their most practical documentary outputs, the medical prescription; Ortal-Paz Saar introduces the vast trove of magical texts through a recipe (rather than the more common amulet); and Robert Brody describes *responsa*, Jewish jurists' responses to legal queries, using two short examples from different centuries. Taken together, these essays illustrate both how far the field has come in recent years toward gaining a firmer understanding of specific genres of Geniza documents, and how much remains to be done: the essays on legal documents, for example, will help interested readers identify the key components of a Geniza legal deed and recognize some of the basic forms that these deeds assume, but each emphasizes that we have not yet gained a handle on these documents' full variety and range, much less mastered them in their entirety as an index of rabbinic courts' activities.

Moving Forward

Our lack of mastery of the courts' activities is in part due to a broader problem: we still do not know exactly how many documents of a given genre survived from different locales in different periods, nor why. Perhaps the most important shift to emerge from recent cataloging efforts has been scholars' increased attention to the nature and distribution of the deposits that produced the documentary Geniza in the first place.²³ Both Solomon Schechter

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²³Rebecca J. W. Jefferson, "The Historical Significance of the Cambridge Genizah Inventory Project," in *Language, Culture, Computation: Computing of the Humanities, Law, and Narratives*, ed. N. Dershowitz and E. Nissan (Berlin, 2014), 9–37.

and then Goitein presented the Geniza as a jumble of all imaginable writings by the Jewish community. Yet it is now clear that, among Jews in the classical Geniza period, Geniza practice was variable. Large swaths of the documentary corpus comprise certain kinds of documents clumped around specific individual and family archives or reflect periodic impulses to deposit parts of the community's legal and administrative records.²⁴ In contrast, other categories of everyday literate production rarely made their way into the Geniza, being instead retained by individuals and families as part of their private records. Goitein also treated all the documentary material as a single corpus reflecting the practices of a society that had some coherence across the Mediterranean and over the two and a half centuries of the classical period, to the delight and chagrin of critics and scholars in his wake.²⁵

Part 4 explores further the challenges and possibilities that the field now faces, beginning with an essay by Jessica L. Goldberg on the methodological problems that this lumpy distribution and Goitein's approach to the Geniza materials pose to the project of writing history from Geniza documents. The essay highlights both the difficulties involved in moving out from under Goitein's long shadow and the possibilities that doing so might open up.

The remainder of this closing section is less systematic and more idiosyncratic than the collection's first three parts. It is the fruit of our request to a cross section of Geniza and comparative scholars that they prepare short essays on any aspect of the field's past, present, or future that seemed to them most worth highlighting. The results illuminate unexpected aspects of the scholarly choices from which Geniza studies has emerged and the choices that might best shape the field moving forward. As is to be expected given Goitein's outsized influence on the field, several of these essays examine his work, in ways that complement the historiographic essays in part 1. Oded Zinger and Craig Perry address Goitein's approach to the history of women and the history of slavery, respectively, while Phillip I. Lieberman discusses Goitein as a microhistorian. Moving beyond Goitein, Mark Cohen describes how Geniza studies first went digital, and Arnold Franklin discusses how a genre-based approach to Geniza letters could transform the way we use them.

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²⁴Though in general the existence of such archives has been inferred from the density of deposit, in the case of Nahray b. Nissim there is clear evidence of the act of archive deposit from the Elkan Nathan Adler Collection (held at the Jewish Theological Seminary), whose materials were collected before the Geniza contents were thrown into confusion by the renovation of the Ben Ezra synagogue at the end of the nineteenth century. The materials in the class mark ENA 2805 are a coherent, albeit small, part of Nahray's archive. We are grateful to Avrom Udovitch for directing our attention to this collection.

²⁵For an overview of Goitein's reception as a historian, see Goldberg, "On Reading Goitein's *A Mediterranean Society*."

Hassan Khalilieh and Efraim Lev both describe the Geniza's potential to illuminate aspects of social and legal history for which it is not yet widely known: Islamic maritime law and the history of medicine. Finally, Youval Rotman compares the foundational assumptions made by Geniza scholars to those held by papyrologists.

The year 2017 marked the fiftieth anniversary of the appearance of volume 1 of *A Mediterranean Society*. In this half century, we have vastly expanded our knowledge of the Geniza documents, yet in some ways we have only scratched the surface of what the documentary Geniza can reveal about social, economic, and cultural history as well as about the nature of literate production and the uses of literacy in the medieval Islamic world. The very questions that this extraordinarily rich corpus poses will continue to change as its contents become increasingly accessible and, thus, amenable to new forms of study. This handbook thus captures a turning point in the historical unfolding of Geniza scholarship: it is meant both to help readers access the harvest of decades of work on the documentary corpus and to explore the prospects that new methods of study are now opening up. We hope that it will not only provide a starting point for newcomers to the field but also help highlight for those laboring in the trenches how much important work lies before us.²⁶

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²⁶The present issue and this introduction were completed before the publication of Elizabeth Lambourn, *Abraham's Luggage: A Social Life of Things in the Medieval Indian Ocean World* (Cambridge, 2018), a history of material culture among Jews in twelfth-century India, focused on the merchant Avraham ibn Yijū.