

How to read Judaeo-Arabic manuscripts

in five easy steps if you already know Arabic

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PREFACE

This guide is intended to help anyone with functional Arabic read Judaeo-Arabic texts — not just printed texts, but manuscripts. In normal graduate seminar conditions, with once-weekly, three-hour meetings, usually by the third or fourth week of class my students are deciphering Judaeo-Arabic documents from manuscript images and doing it impressively well.

I've geared this guide toward reading documents rather than long-form texts — letters, legal deeds, lists, accounts and other ephemera — especially from the Cairo Geniza. The majority of these are in Judaeo-Arabic. (A minority are in Hebrew, Arabic, Judaeo-Persian, Ladino and a smattering of other languages.) My experience reading this material skews toward the years between 950 and 1300, the period from which most geniza documents date. A growing number of geniza documents from the Ottoman period have recently been identified by scholars such as Dotan Arad, Matthew Dudley, Alan Elbaum and Jane Hathaway, and many of these are in Judaeo-Arabic. The orthography and paleography of those documents is distinct from the pre-1500 material on which I focus here, but not so distinct that this guide won't help you read them. But they probably need their own paleographic guide. There is also some fourteenth- and fifteenth-century material from the geniza, but for reasons having to do with the urban demography of Cairo, there's less than from the earlier and later periods. In any case, focusing on documents from the period I cover here should set you up to approach most Judaeo-Arabic geniza documents.

Documents aren't easy to read. The scripts are wildly diverse, the orthography and syntax can be idiosyncratic, and even if you can decipher and parse everything on the page, you're still eavesdropping on a conversation for which you have little context. Most of the struggle relates to interpretation. But you won't get to the stage of interpretation until you can decipher the texts, and that's what this guide aims to help you do.

For documentary material from the geniza, the easiest access-point is the [Princeton Geniza Project](#) database. It was founded in 1986 by Mark R. Cohen and A. L. Udovitch. Cohen directed it for thirty years. I became the director in 2015, and I now co-direct it with Eve Krakowski. At the PGP, we focus almost entirely on documentary texts. We include literary texts if they have clear documentary value, for instance if they were copied by someone well-known from the documents, or if they contain historical information that corroborates or complements what's in the documents.

What about the thousands of long-form texts in Judaeo-Arabic dating from the tenth to the twentieth century? If you're interested in philosophy, biblical exegesis and other fields of medieval intellectual production, Judaeo-Arabic codices are highly rewarding to read, especially if you want to know who read the texts you're studying; most premodern Judaeo-Arabic texts were copied by ordinary readers rather than professional scribes. Loads of printed long-form texts can be accessed from the [Friedberg Jewish Manuscript Society](#) website via the Judeo-Arabic tab. If you're accustomed to reading long-form Arabic texts, Judaeo-Arabic codices should be easy to approach, and this guide will get you started.

I first assembled this guide as a graduate student around 2000, when I started sharing Judaeo-Arabic texts with my fellow Arabists. It's evolved as I've taught with it over the years and adjusted it to more structured classroom conditions. Please feel free to share it. If you have improvements to suggest or questions I haven't answered, I'd be delighted to hear from you, in the comments here or via email.

INTRODUCTION

The history and linguistic description of Judaeo-Arabic is being rewritten as we speak. The main twentieth-century tradition of Judaeo-Arabic philology, the most prominent representatives of which are Joshua Blau and Simon Hopkins, regarded Judaeo-Arabic as a form of ‘middle Arabic.’ The term ‘middle’ suggests either a chronological marker (in the same way that Middle English is the phase of the language between Old English and English) or a midpoint on the continuum between the classical ideal and the colloquial dialects. There are two assumptions embedded in the term ‘middle Arabic’: that it ceased to exist at some point, which is untrue; and that there’s a single continuum and a single form of classical Arabic at one end of it, which also turns out to be untrue.

The astonishing wealth of observations that Blau and Hopkins muster assume a single classical ideal from which middle Arabic deviated via pseudo-corrections and dialectal features. More recent scholars — especially Geoffrey Khan and his students — regard non-classical Arabics (plural) as a set of sociolinguistic phenomena that can encompass multiple registers and varieties in a single performance. Sometimes the word used for this multi-register performance is ‘multiglossia’, a term used by Said Badawi and imported into the study of Ottoman-era Egyptian Judaeo-Arabic by Benjamin Hary. This school regards non-classical features not as deviations from the norm, but as equally legitimate ways of rendering the language. But at least some of this work assumes that the most prestigious form of the language is a single classical ideal from which, again, other forms deviated.

The evidence of manuscripts and inscriptions complicates this picture. For the past several years, there has been an epigraphic revolution underway in the study of early Arabic. More than fifty thousand published [inscriptions](#) and a rigorously systematic approach to their linguistic analysis by scholars such as Ahmad al-Jallad, Leïla Nehmé, Marijn van Putten and Phillip Stokes have begun to transform the consensus around what classical Arabic was. These linguists are reevaluating what we know about the ideal of Classical Arabic by putting it into the context of a whole range of formal Arabic styles that were used in the ‘classical’ period. The new narrative suggests that there was not a single continuum running between high and vernacular registers of Arabic, but multiple prestige varieties of the language, and that they existed before and after the spread of the Qur’ān. Van Putten has recently argued that early Arabic grammarians such as Sībawayh and al-Farrā’ evinced a much greater tolerance for variation than later grammarians would, or that instructors of Modern Standard Arabic would today. In certain genres and social settings, non-classical usages were not only systematic, but also as prestigious as classical Arabic, or even more so depending on the context.

Judaeo-Arabic studies will have to catch up with these developments. As Stokes has put it, in light of the epigraphic revolution, “we must allow for a much broader definition of what Classical Arabic meant.” While it is true that, as Stokes has put it, “the prestige registers for many communities included, but were not limited to, features that the grammarians prescribed for poetry and Quranic recitation,” there were other prestige registers as well.¹ Judaeo-Arabic texts — and Arabic-script documentary texts as well — will help us to identify those prestige registers. The first place I would begin describing it would be letters, both the routine missives of traders and the communiqués of government officials as preserved in the original manuscript documents, not as copied into long-form works, which can reasonably be suspected to have ‘normalized’ the language to make it conform to certain standards.

It isn’t necessary to read linguistic scholarship on Arabic or Judaeo-Arabic if all you want to do is learn

¹ Phillip W. Stokes, “In the Middle of What? A Fresh Analysis of the Language Attested in the Judaeo-Arabic Commentary on Pirqē ’Āvôt (the Sayings of the Fathers), Middle Arabic and Implications for the Study of Arabic Linguistic History,” *Journal of Semitic Studies* 66 (2021): 406n15.

to read Judaeo-Arabic texts. But even the casual user of Judaeo-Arabic editions and reference works will encounter some of the assumptions embedded in the older work, so it's important to know what those assumptions are and how to spot them. Twentieth-century editors of letters from the Cairo Geniza routinely saw fit to distance themselves from "incorrect" usages by adding a (!) after words that deviated from classical norms, even though business and family letters adhere to their own standards of prestige writing. Another distinguished twentieth-century editor of Arabic letters festooned his editions with hamzas even though his manuscripts completely lack them. For modern Arabic speakers, the understandable tendency is to make printed texts in Arabic adhere to the norms of modern standard Arabic, and we might be tempted to do the same (or risk the wrath of our second-year Arabic teachers). Users (and creators) of text editions should be aware of the assumptions behind them, and of the dangers of erasing the specificity of what's in the manuscripts by producing artificially normalized text editions. Readers of Judaeo-Arabic, moreover, have loads of data that they can contribute to the project of rewriting the history of Arabic. The most exciting work today has removed the imagined *cordon sanitaire* of putative grammatical incorrectness and, instead, dispassionately (but enthusiastically) observes how widespread non-classical features were, even in prestigious texts.

The other important development to be aware of was an accelerating [publication](#) of Arabic-script documents toward the end of the twentieth century. The [Arabic Papyrology Database](#) lists 13,376 documents, with 4,372 in transcription. Comparing those documents — or the nearly three-quarters of them that date to 950–1300 — with the Judaeo-Arabic documents from the geniza makes it perfectly clear that they share many, if not most, features that used to be attributed to Judaeo-Arabic. Consequently, for medieval documentary texts, the term Judaeo-Arabic might even be misleading. A more accurate term would be "documentary Arabic," a term recently suggested by Andreas Kaplony.² Medieval Jews referred to it as "Arabic in Hebrew script" (*'arabiyya bi-khatt 'ibrani*)³, reflecting their awareness that, as Sibawayh put it, "it's all Arabic" (*kullun 'arabiyyatun*).⁴

² Andreas Kaplony, "Scribal Traditions in Documentary Arabic: From the One Imperial Standard Language to the One (Jewish) Language for Transnational Communication (from the Seventh to the Twelfth Centuries)," *Jewish History* 32 (2019).

³ See, e.g., Cambridge University Library, T-S 8J16.19 + T-S NS 323.13 (join: Oded Zinger), second fragment, recto, line 4 (image and unpublished transcription of S. D. Goitein: <https://geniza.princeton.edu/documents/4274/>); T-S K25.230, ed. and trans. Geoffrey Khan, "On the Question of Script in Karaite Manuscripts: New Evidence from the Genizah," *Bulletin of the John Rylands Library* 75 (1993).

⁴ Quoted in Marijn van Putten, *Quranic Arabic: From its Hijazi Origins to its Classical Reading Traditions* (Leiden, 2022), 117.

RESOURCES

Key books and articles

- Blau, Joshua. *The Emergence and Linguistic Background of Judaeo-Arabic*. Jerusalem, 1999. (until recently, holy writ)
- ———. *A Grammar of Medieval Judaeo-Arabic* (Hebrew). Jerusalem, 1995 (ditto)
- ———. *Judaeo-Arabic Literature: Selected Texts*. Jerusalem, 1980 (a chrestomathy, good for all levels)
- Khan, Geoffrey. “Judeo-Arabic,” in *The Encyclopedia of Arabic Language and Linguistics*, ed. Kees Versteegh (Leiden, 2007), 2:526–36 (better than Blau on sociolinguistics; the best we have until the history of Judaeo-Arabic is rewritten to take into account the epigraphic revolution in Arabic)
- ———. “Middle Arabic,” in *The Semitic Languages: An International Handbook*, ed. S. Weninger (Berlin and New York, 2011), 817–35
- ———. “Judeo-Arabic,” in *Arabic Historical Dialectology: Linguistic and Sociolinguistic Approaches*, ed. C. Holes (Oxford, 2018), 148–69
- Stokes, Phillip W. “In the Middle of What? A Fresh Analysis of the Language Attested in the Judaeo-Arabic Commentary on Pirqē ’Āvōt (the Sayings of the Fathers), Middle Arabic and Implications for the Study of Arabic Linguistic History.” *Journal of Semitic Studies* 66 (2021): 379–411.

Dictionaries

- Blau, Joshua. *A Dictionary of Mediaeval Judaeo-Arabic Texts*. Jerusalem, 2006. (especially good for literary materials, but includes some published documentary geniza texts)
- Friedman, Mordechai Akiva. *A Dictionary of Medieval Judeo-Arabic in the India Book Letters from the Geniza and in Other Texts*. Jerusalem, 2016. (copious — delivers much more than it promises)
- Wehr, Lane, Dozy and Kazimirski are also very useful.

Websites

- [The Friedberg Genizah Project](#) (images of nearly the entire Cairo geniza, some transcriptions and translations, and abundant bibliographic data)
- [The Friedberg Judeo-Arabic Project](#) (electronic corpus of 110 classical and modern Judaeo-Arabic texts, with more than 280,000 lexical items)
- The National Library of Israel [Ktiv](#) project (loads of manuscript images, many in Judaeo-Arabic)
- [The Princeton Geniza Project](#) (descriptions of more than 30,000 documentary texts from the Cairo and other genizas; transcriptions of ~5,200 documents and counting; translations will begin to be added soon)
- [Scribes of the Cairo Geniza](#) (the Geniza world’s answer to Candy Crush Saga and Sudoku)
- [The Society for Judaeo-Arabic Studies](#) (international academic association based in Jerusalem, conferences every 2 years)

THE GUIDE

STEP 1: LEARN THE HEBREW ALPHABET

Learn the Hebrew alphabet via the chart on the next page, including the names of the Hebrew letters.

Notes

1. The order of the Hebrew alphabet is the same as the Arabic order for *ḥisāb al-jummal* (*mashriqī* version).
2. In Hebrew, unlike in Arabic, most letters have only one form. Five Hebrew letters also have a final form, used only at the ends of words: *kaf*, *mem*, *nun*, *peh* and *tsadi*.
3. There are hardly any ligatures in Hebrew. This makes paleography easier than it is in Arabic.⁵
4. Some pairs or triads of similar letters are difficult to distinguish in handwritten texts, even for experienced paleographers:
 1. ך and ך (from right to left: *dalet* and *resh*)
 2. כ and כ (*kaf* and *bet*)
 3. ם and ם (final *mem* and *samekh*)
 4. ם and ם, ם, ם (*vav*, *zayin*, and final *nun*)
 5. ם and ם (*vav* and *yod*)

⁵ But see below, Step 2, #3.

Table 1: The Hebrew alphabet (with numerical values)

Hebrew character		Letter name	Numerical value
א		<i>’aleph</i>	1
ב		<i>bet</i>	2
ג		<i>gimel</i>	3
ד		<i>dalet</i>	4
ה		<i>heh</i>	5
ו		<i>vav</i>	6
ז		<i>zayin</i>	7
ח		<i>ḥet</i>	8
ט		<i>ṭet</i>	9
י		<i>yod</i>	10
final form: ך	כ	<i>kaf</i>	20
ל		<i>lamed</i>	30
final form: ם	מ	<i>mem</i>	40
final form: ן	נ	<i>nun</i>	50
ס		<i>samekh</i>	60
ע		<i>‘ayin</i>	70
final form: ף	פ	<i>peh</i>	80
final form: ץ	צ	<i>tsadi</i> (or <i>ṣadi</i>)	90
ק		<i>qof</i>	100
ר		<i>resh</i>	200
ש (or שׁ)		<i>shin</i> (or, with dot on the left tooth, <i>sin</i>)	300
ת		<i>tav</i>	400

STEP 2: LEARN THE LETTER EQUIVALENTS

Study these two charts of the Arabic alphabet. The first has the Arabic letters with their corresponding letters in Judaeo-Arabic. The second moves in the opposite order, Judaeo-Arabic to Arabic, with interesting results.

Notes

1. There are more letters of the alphabet in Arabic (28) than in Hebrew (22). Some Hebrew letters have to perform two functions, which are distinguished in some texts with a dot or a stroke (e.g., ז for ض). In other texts, no distinction is made, so deciphering them is like reading unpointed Arabic.
2. Some letters in pointed Judaeo-Arabic use diacritical marks as a nod to their phonetic equivalent in Arabic, e.g., ض = ז and ص = צ
3. Other letters in pointed Judaeo-Arabic depart from phonology and instead imitate how they look in Arabic.
 1. Even though ז is etymologically closer to ז (zayin) than to ד (dalet), it is represented as ד in imitation of Arabic ذ.
 2. In the case of غ, there is neither strict etymological nor orthographic logic, but a loose phonetic equivalence: although غ is etymologically closer to ו than to ל, in classical Judaeo-Arabic orthography غ is represented as ל.
 3. In the wild, by which I mean in medieval documentary texts, ל can represent either و or غ depending on the scribe. While this seems confusing in theory, in practice, medieval scribes rarely used dots, and context usually suffices for distinguishing between letters.
4. The definite article in Arabic, ال, is the name of God in Hebrew, אלה. To avoid needlessly writing out the name of God, scribes write it with an *alef-lamed* ligature.
 1. Due to typographic limitations, I have to use a lot of words to describe the ligature. The unicode version אֱ doesn't quite do it justice.
 2. The ligature is constructed like this: remove the right "leg" from the *alef*, and lengthen the left "arm" upward, or suture the ascender of the *lamed* onto the *alef*. The result should look like you spliced an *alef* and a *lamed* together.
 3. There's a better version of the ligature [here](#).
 4. This is the only ligature you will find in medieval Judaeo-Arabic manuscripts, with the exception of Andalusī hands, such as those of Maimonides and Yehuda ha-Levi, which tend to be highly cursive and have abusive ligatures all over the place and are a nightmare to read.
 5. The אֱ ligature does not exist in Judaeo-Arabic.

This chart on the next page has the Arabic alphabet in its usual order. Note the Hebrew-letter equivalents.

Table 2: Arabic to Judaeo-Arabic

Arabic	Judaeo-Arabic	
ا	א	
ب	ב	
ت	ת	
ث	ת	
ج	ג or ג	
ح	ח	
خ	final form: ך	כ
د	ד	
ذ	ד	
ر	ר	
ز	ז	
س	ס	
ش	ש	
ص	final form: ף	צ
ض	final form: ף	צ
ط	ט	
ظ	ט	
ع	ע	
غ	ג or ג	
ف	final form: ף	פ
ق	ק	
ك	final form: ך	כ
ل	ל	
م	final form: ם	מ
ن	final form: ן	נ
ة or ه	ה	
و	ו	
ي or ی	י	
The <i>alif maqṣūra</i> , in practice, can be written with <i>yod</i> (י) or <i>alef</i> (א).		

The chart below, by contrast, lists the Judaeo-Arabic characters according to the Hebrew alphabet. This is the table you'll be using while starting to decipher Judaeo-Arabic texts. Note how the Arabic letters group together.

Table 3: Judaeo-Arabic to Arabic

Judaeo-Arabic		Arabic
א		ا
ב		ب
ג		ج غ
ד		د ذ
ה		ه ة
ו		و
ז		ز
ח		ح
ט		ط ظ
י		ي ی
כ	ך	ك خ
ל		ل
מ	ם	م
נ	ן	ن
ס		س
ע		ع
פ	ף	ف
צ	ץ	ص ض
ק		ق
ר		ر
ש		ش
ת		ت ث



Do NOT yield to the temptation to transcribe your texts from Hebrew to Arabic script. If you do, you risk depending on the chart as a crutch. Your goal should be to read without the chart.

STEP 3. PRACTICE READING PRINTED JUDAEO-ARABIC TEXTS

Easing into reading

Decode the sample texts below. (All these words, and even phrases, are attested in Judaeo-Arabic texts, though not always in this order.)

אשהד אלא אלאה אלי אללה ואשהד אנ מחמד רסול אללה

בסם אללה אלרחמן אלרחים אלחמד ללה רב אלעאלמין אלרחמן אלרחים מלך יום אלדין
איאך נעבד ואיאך נסתעין אהדנא אלצראט אלמסתקים צראט אלדין אנעמת עליהם גיר
אלמגצוב עליהם ולא אלצאלין

A bit of a challenge

Decipher the following passage from Maimonides' Commentary on the Mishnah, written in Fez some time around 1165.

1. The first line is in Hebrew. It consists of two biblical verses, Deuteronomy 7:5 and Deuteronomy 12:3. As per usual in medieval texts, only the first words of the verses are written out. Readers were assumed to know the Bible more or less from memory. I've put the Hebrew words in **red**.
2. ל"ז is a common abbreviation in Hebrew-script texts. It stands for *zikhrono* (or *zikhronah*, or *zikhronam*) *li-vrakha*, may his (or her, or their) memory be blessed. It's used exclusively after the name of someone who has died.
3. In practice, you will find Hebrew words and phrases mixed in with Judaeo-Arabic. Don't freak out. If you can determine the roots of Arabic words and use an Arabic-English dictionary, you can do the same in a Hebrew-English dictionary. The trilateral root system works the same way.
4. For Hebrew phrases that you suspect may be of biblical or rabbinic origin, [Sefaria](#) is an excellent resource.
5. Lines 2ff. are in Judaeo-Arabic. The editor (Joshua Blau) has been very kind and given three helpful kinds of diacritical markings, which I sadly cannot reproduce in Google Docs, so I've also given you a scan of the page from his book. They are:
 - a. an occasional *shadda*;
 - b. single dots above the double-duty letters;
 - c. double dots above ה when it's used for ه.

תתצו ואשריהם תגדעון וגו' ואבדתם את שמם מן המקום ההוא | ותכרר האדאן
אלגרצאן פי עדה מואצע והו כאן אלקצד אלאול אלגאמע לגמלה אלשריעה כמא
אעלמונא ז"ל פי תפסירהם אלמרוי לקולה תעאלי את כל אשר צוה י"י אליכם ביד
משה קאלוא הא למדת שכל המודה בעבודה זרה כופר בכל התורה כלה וכל הכופר
בעבודה זרה מודה בכל התורה כלה פאערף הדיא

From Joshua Blau, *Judaeo-Arabic Literature: Selected Texts* (Jerusalem, 1980), p. 206. See there for more reading practice.

תתצו ואשריהם תגדעון וגו' ²⁶ ואבדתם את שמם מן המקום ההוא ²⁷ |
 ותכרר האדאן אלגרצאן פי עדת מואצ'ע והו כאן אלקצד אלאול אלזאמע ^{סו, א}
 לגמלה אשריעה כמא אעלמונא ז"ל פי תפסירהם אלמרוי לקולה
 תעאלי את כל אשר צוה י"י אליכם ביד משה ²⁸ קאלוא ²⁹ הא למדת
 שכל המודה בעבודה זרה כופר ³⁰ בכל התורה כלה וכל הכופר בעבודה
 זרה מודה בכל התורה כלה פאערף הדא:

תתצו ואשריהם תגדעון וגו' ²⁶ ואבדתם את שמם מן המקום ההוא ²⁷ |
 ותכרר האדאן אלגרצאן פי עדת מואצ'ע והו כאן אלקצד אלאול אלזאמע ^{סו, א}
 לגמלה אשריעה כמא אעלמונא ז"ל פי תפסירהם אלמרוי לקולה
 תעאלי את כל אשר צוה י"י אליכם ביד משה ²⁸ קאלוא ²⁹ הא למדת
 שכל המודה בעבודה זרה כופר ³⁰ בכל התורה כלה וכל הכופר בעבודה
 זרה מודה בכל התורה כלה פאערף הדא:

ת. מזבחותיהם תתצו ואשריהם תגדעון וגו', פר' מזבחותיהם תתצו ואשריהם תגדעון וגו'.
 א. את כל אשר פר' מוסיף: וגו'.

(פר' וגו'), דברים יא טו. 25. אשר לבבו פונה היום וגו' (פר' וגו'), דברים כט יז.

26. מזבחותיהם תתצו (פר' תתצו) ואשריהם תגדעון וגו' (פר' תגדעון וגו'), דברים ז ה.

27. ואבדתם ... דברים יב ג. 28. את כל אשר ... (פר' מוסיף: וגו'), במדבר טו כג.

29. קאלוא, ספרי שם; הוריות ח א; קדושין מ א. 30. כופר, ס כפר.

If you've survived this far, you're now ready to look at a manuscript.

STEP 4. COMPARE MANUSCRIPTS WITH PRINTED EDITIONS

Read this [typed edition](#) of a geniza letter, from Shelomo b. Yehuda, ga'on of Jerusalem (1025–51), writing from Ramla in 1029 to his son, Avraham, in Fustat.

1. Lines are numbered according to the manuscript.
2. [Square brackets] enclose text not present in the MS because it has been obliterated by wear and tear.
3. <Angle brackets> enclose letters not present in the MS because the scribe has erroneously omitted them.
4. //Double slashes// enclose words that the scribe has added above the line (an insertion as an afterthought).
5. If you're enamored of these sigla, thank you so much, and see [here](#) for more.

Now compare the typed edition with the manuscript image on the same webpage.

1. Note the diagonal text in the margin. This is typical of geniza letters. Scribes wrote in the right margin at 45 degrees to the main text, and sometimes in the top margin as well, before continuing on verso. (Here, the only text you'll see in the top margin is the shelfmark, written in pencil some time in the twentieth century by the librarians at Cambridge.)
2. Make a note of letters you find particularly challenging to identify.
3. One of the challenges of this scribe's hand is the detachment of the serif from the rest of the letter. Are there other peculiarities that you notice?
4. Are there any *alef-lamed* ligatures? How can you distinguish them from *lamed*?

For a more challenging Judaeo-Arabic letter, go to the next page.

[Feeling bold? Read on.](#)

Read the printed edition below of another geniza letter, from the trader Nahray b. Nissim to one of the employees in his trading firm, written around 1055.

1. The manuscript is fragmentary at the top and on the left.
2. In the printed edition, the editor of the text (Moshe Gil) has indicated abbreviations and numbers with a stroke above the word. That's most likely due to typographical limitations; in the manuscript, Nahray writes them with either a stroke or a dot, but dots weren't readily available for typesetting purposes in 1997, when Gil published his edition.
3. Nahray uses some abbreviations:
 - a. 'קרא and 'קיר both stand for קיראט (a unit of weight)
 - b. 'נצ stands for נצף
 - c. 'רב stands for רבע
 - d. 'דינר stands for דינאר
4. Remember those numerical values you learned in Step 1? You'll need them here.

New York, Jewish Theological Seminary, ENA 1822A.14

Ed. Gil, *In the Kingdom of Ishmael*, vol. 2, doc. 261

1 [בקי]

2 [ענהא וכס י קרא בקי ד וי קרא וחבה]

3 ה דנא [אלא סדס ב] לה מנהא מא דכר אנה דפעה לן

4 סדס ולה ענד אבן מרואן ען זית נצ ורצ דינ ולה]

5 בקיה חסאבה תקתציה מא [רקעה קן] [ין אלקן] [בר]

6 אבן אלסכרי לאבו אלחסין אלשמאעין פיהא דינ ותלתי וחבה תקבצהא איצא מנה]

7 ולה תלת קזדיר ענד אלעגילה תתפצל תביעה וע נסים בן אל [רקעה]

8 ד כשאבה דינ וי קרא וע נסים בן פשקיל תמן אלקזדיר ד]

9 אלגוהרי ד דנא וקירטין וע אבו אלחסן בן אלעפאג תמן רזמה דינרין ד קרא]

10 ינחט לה סדס בקי דינרין ורצ ונצ מן קבל אבן מסרנה] ד קיר דלך ג אלא קיר]

11 דפע דינ וג רבאעיאט עדד מנהם רבאעי בהרג הו אלדי להם מן חק פי אלשן

12 תקתציה פי אלבאקי ותואזנה //הדא// פי אלמקבוץ אבן אלדמי לי ענדה ד דנא ו

13 דפעה ה דנא ותמן מנהא דינרין מכסרה ורבאעי בהרג תקבץ מנה אלבקיה]

14 ותרכת ענדר קרויה ג ותלת חנין לי ענדה דינרין מכסרה רהן ע דינ ורצ תמן עוד]

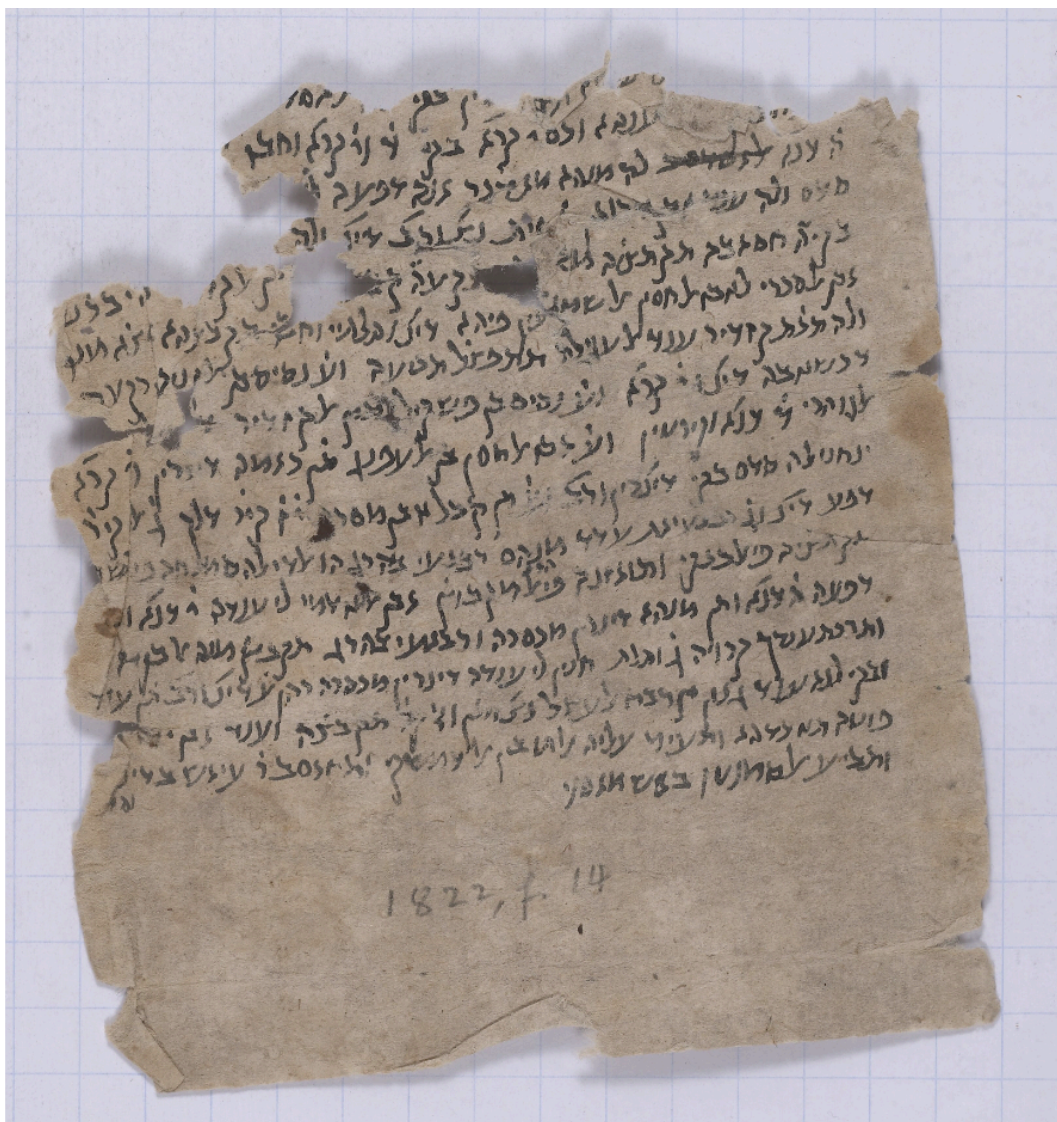
15 ובקי לנא ענד גנון מן רבח אלעדל נצ תמן ו קיר תקבצה וענד אבן ין

16 פוטה תאכדהא ותעיד עליה אלחובין אלדמשקי ותחאסב ד עיאש בדינן

17 ותביע אלסמנטן באש מא סוי

This is the same letter in its original manuscript form. Compare the two texts side-by-side. Then see if you can read through the manuscript without looking at the printed edition.

1. Sorry about those wrinkles! (Fun fact: it costs holding institutions a considerable amount of money in conservation hours, equipment and expertise to “relax” a wrinkled piece of parchment or paper. And there are 400,000 Geniza fragments! When you see what it takes to conserve them, you stop minding the wrinkles as much.)
2. On a scale of 1 to 10, 1 being the neatest, 10 being the messiest, this scribe is about a 6. These are real-world conditions.
3. See if you can count how many ways Nahray makes his alef. The alef is one of the most characteristic letters of individual scribes, and it’s a shape-shifter. Many scribes consistently make the alef more than one way (consistent inconsistency). The terms current in use for some of these are “N-alef” and “K-alef,” for reasons you can probably figure out.



STEP 5. STUDY THE RANGE OF SCRIPT STYLES YOU'RE LIKELY TO ENCOUNTER IN THE WILD

Now you've had a taste of real-world decipherment battles. You might be feeling the need for better equipment. Fear not: here is a chart of the range of scripts and hands that you're likely to encounter when you read medieval manuscripts.

1. Members of the [Scribes of the Cairo Geniza](#) team designed the chart as part of our field guide to Hebrew-script transcription. Laura Newman Eckstein produced the chart based on the research and expertise of Judith Olszowy-Schlanger.
2. As a general (but breakable) rule, professional scribes wrote official documents or copies of texts in square script; but all scribes wrote informal documents in cursive scripts. The geniza letter you read above is in a cursive script. But Hebrew rarely gets as cursive as Arabic. (But not never: Maimonides and the poet Yehuda ha-Levi are among the most cursive writers of medieval Hebrew, and seasoned professionals struggle with their handwriting.)
3. There are Ashkenazi scripts in this chart (Hebrew as written by scribes from the Christian-ruled parts of Western Europe). In practice, you will not find Judaeo-Arabic manuscripts in Ashkenazi scripts (though you will find Ashkenazi fragments in some Cairo Geniza collections).
4. The link behind the chart will bring you to the high resolution image files (in PDF and .svg).

Cairo Geniza Alephbets

[illegible]

Created by Laura Newman Eckstein for the project "Scribes of the Cairo Geniza" in association with The University of Pennsylvania Libraries. Credit to Dr. Judith Olszowy-Schlanger for her work in finding and typologizing the fragments as well as the various institutions listed next to each fragment for letting us use their collections.

Now you're ready to encounter medieval Judaeo-Arabic manuscripts in the wild.

Have fun!