People and Paper in Ninth- to Eleventh-Century Egypt

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Medieval Egypt is at the heart of two major collections. First, the Papyrus archive which contains about 350,000 to 400,000 multilingual written texts dating from Pharaonic times to the medieval period, around 50,000 of which are in Arabic. The papyrus collection also includes numerous deeds written on paper, since the switch from papyrus to paper took place around the ninth to tenth century. After that date, only paper was used. Second, the Geniza archive of the Jewish community of Fustat, consisting of about 350,000 to 400,000 papers dating roughly from the seventh to the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, mostly in Judeo-Arabic and Arabic. Together, they total more than 750,000 papers covering a timespan of about a millennium[1] and reveal a continuum from late antique writings in Demotic or Greek to deeds in Arabic after the Arab conquest of Egypt in 642. Combining these two archives, and

[1] The numbers are approximate due to the fact that the archives are dispersed in many locations in Europe, the United States and Egypt. The exact total number as well as the number of Arabic papyri is still a matter of debate. Adolf Grohmann, *From the World of Arabic Papyri*, Cairo, 1952, pp. 2-3, mentions that 50,000 Arabic documents had been found, of which roughly 16,000 were written on papyrus, most of the rest being later documents on paper. Y. Raghib, "Les plus anciens papyrus arabes," in *Annales Islamologiques*, no. 30, 1996, 1-19, here 2, considered this number to be far too low and suggested that the total was probably more than 150,000 Arabic papyri, the Vienna collection alone containing some 83,300 pieces in Arabic (of which 46,300 were papyrus and 36,335 paper).

going beyond religious or linguistic communities, gives us a broad geographical perspective of the place of the written word in Egyptian society and helps to position the archives in a historical framework. The sheer number of these texts invites us to consider the wider picture that might explain their creation. Clearly, explanations such as the appearance of the printing press, associated with a surge in written texts in European history, do not fit the bill here. The introduction of the printing press in the nineteenth century was certainly an important development, but we need to think of other explanations in the present context.[2]

Various reasons can be put forward to explain the number of written texts contained in these archives. Firstly, technical innovations like the invention and spread of paper in the eighth and ninth centuries, gradually replacing the more expensive papyrus, have been cited as a factor behind the ninth-century explosion of written texts associated with the "golden age" of the Abbasid Empire.[3] Secondly, extensive writing has been associated with empires themselves, including the Abbasid Empire (750-1258), which needed written texts to run its bureaucratic machine and to keep its provinces under control. Both these factors may have played a role in the number of written texts. However, these archives predate the Islamic empires (whether Umayyad, Abbasid or Fatimid) as well as the academic texts of eighth- and ninth-century Islamic scholars by several centuries. The bulk of the texts in the Papyrus and Geniza archives come neither from the offices of imperial chanceries which employed professional writers nor from religious or monastic establishments. Although the Papyrus and Geniza archives contain deeds that had originally come from chanceries, these papers were recycled

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[2] Elizabeth Eisenstein, *The Printing Revolution in Early Modern Europe*, 2nd edition, Cambridge, UK, 2005.

[3] Jonathan Bloom, *Paper before Print*, New Haven, 2001; "The Introduction of Paper to the Islamic Lands and the Development of the Illustrated Manuscript", in *Muqarnas*, Vol. 17, 2000, pp. 17-23; Johannes Pederson, *The Arabic Book*, Princeton, NJ, 1984, pp. 37-38.

and used for other purposes. They attest to the fact that the written word was not limited to administrative officials or scholars but was diffused well beyond imperial and religious institutions.

The following pages address the question of how a premodern society could create this amount of written texts. The focus is on social rather than institutional factors, on the people who made use of the written word, and how and why they did so. In other words, the social and cultural aspects of writing are brought to the fore. The paper pays attention to the period from the ninth to the eleventh century, which was particularly rich in archival papers, with special reference to deeds and letters that are datable and are part of personal or family archives, providing a better focus on the written word at a given moment in time. At the same time, it shows the many common traits shared by these two archives and by the deeds of these three centuries and the deeds of earlier periods.

Finally, the geographical aspect of the two archives allows interesting comparisons, given the fact that the Geniza archive essentially deals with an urban population mainly centred in Fustat whereas on the whole, the Papyrus collection deals with a provincial and rural population, with a significant portion of the papers hailing from specific regions like al-Fayum, an oasis about 100 kilometres away from Fustat. This difference in location reflects a difference in socioeconomic standing. The people living in provincial and rural areas were often more modest than the traders and merchants living in Fustat who have been brought to light in studies on the Geniza archives. The papers left by these people from the provinces are particularly significant because they indicate that writing was not the sole prerogative of urban centres; and that between the ninth and eleventh centuries written texts were used among a more modest, provincial or rural sector of Egyptian society. By including rural and provincial populations, we therefore get a broader view of the way in which the society of this time made use of the written word.

S.D. Goitein's work has shown that the majority of papers in the Geniza archive deal with business matters. This confirms the significance of writing in the context of a commercial society. The impor-

tant family archives mentioned below, in both of the two collections, deal with commercial or economic matters. The Jewish merchants had wide networks extending eastwards and westwards, to India and North Africa, an indication of the importance of international trade, especially in the eleventh century, and the prosperity it brought to those who were involved it in. Letters written to partners, lists of goods, instructions to employees, problems with transport, litigation regarding money matters, all of these things formed part of the lives of these people. Family archives, such as those of the Ibn Awkal family, active between the 980s and 1076, contain a large number of deeds and letters which cover four generations. This successful merchant had an extensive commercial network extending to Palestine, Iraq and North Africa. His complex international network can explain why he employed secretaries and scribes to help him manage it.[4] He, like numerous other long-distance merchants, enjoyed both wealth and a high social status, he had slaves in his household, and stood at the top of the business hierarchy in terms of wealth and status.

The letters and deeds dealing with business matters were neither limited to merchants in international trade nor to persons active in Fustat, the main commercial centre of Egypt. Papers in the Papyrus archive of the same period indicate that various sorts of business, at times large, at times small, were recorded on paper not only in provincial towns in Egypt, but also in rural areas.

The Papyrus archive, for instance, contains a large number of papers relating to the town of Fayum, an important textile centre with a significant production and trade in cloth. The archive of a

[4] Norman Stillman, "The Eleventh Century Merchant House of Ibn 'Awkal (A Geniza Study)", in *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient*, no. 1, April 1973, pp. 15-88; S.D. Goitein, *A Mediterranean Society: The Jewish Communities of the Arab World as Portrayed in the Documents of the Cairo Geniza*, Volume 1, Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1999, pp. 157-158; Goitein, *Letters of Medieval Jewish Traders*, Princeton, NJ, 1973, pp. 26-34; Moshe Gil, "The Jewish Merchants in the Light of Eleventh-Century Geniza Documents", in *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient*, Vol. 46, no. 3, 2003, pp. 273-319.

ninth-century family of cloth traders, the Banu Abdul Munim / Abu Hurayra family, studied by Yusuf Raghib, contains a large number of papers covering some four generations. This family archive can be used to compare the scope of the activities of a merchant in international trade residing in Fustat to that of a trader in a provincial town. The activities and geographical sphere of the Banu Abdul Munim / Abu Hurayra family – ranging from Fayum where the cloth was made to Fustat where it was sold – were more restricted than those of Ibn Awkal. However, what they had in common was their use of written communication as an important tool for trade. Like Ibn Awkal, Abu Hurayra regularly exchanged letters with his partners in Fustat. His business had its complexities, which included dealing with agriculturists, organizing transport to Fustat, seeing that the cloth was sold, and so on, but his sphere of action was limited, and consequently not comparable with the Fustat merchants who had partners abroad and shipped their merchandise to faraway destinations.[5]

The Papyrus collection also sheds light on the practice of writing in rural areas within the period of the ninth to eleventh centuries. Although one would not expect villagers to have made much use of paper in the early medieval period, the Papyrus archive gives a different perspective, by showing not only individual papers related to rural areas but also family archives, involving different members of a family, or encompassing more than one generation. Jean-Michel Mouton has studied the family archive of the three Banu Biham brothers, who resided near Fayum, in a village called Damuyah. This family left 39 papers dating from 992 to 1029 dealing with economic matters, which include seven contracts, and receipts for taxes and the sale of agricultural products. Indeed, it was common practice for tax payments to be put down in writing, as we know from the hundreds of tax receipts that the collection contains. But these people

[5] Ragheb Youssef, "Marchands d'Egypte du VII^e au IX^e siècle d'après leur correspondance et leurs actes", in *Actes des congrès de la Société des historiens médiévistes de l'enseignement supérieur public*, Reims, 1988, pp. 25-33.

also put their other dealings down on paper, such as the purchase of a house and the sale of agricultural products.[6] One would imagine that in a rural context, an oral contract would suffice for the sale of agricultural products, especially in view of the fact that oral contracts were and are legal in Islamic law as long as they are properly witnessed. In fact, the Banu Biham were not alone in this practice since written contracts in rural areas were not uncommon, as shown by the many deeds published by Adolf Grohmann. The contracts he published not only include deeds of purchase undertaken in villages, but also deeds between close family members such as husband and wife where one would expect that an oral contract or an informal understanding would be sufficient.[7] However, the use of written contracts in rural regions should not be considered evidence of widespread literacy as this is unlikely to have been the case in such areas. Much more likely is the scenario we see in the work of Jennifer Cromwell on Jeme (Djeme) and an eighth-century village scribe in Upper Egypt who left many papers.[8] This scribe undertook to write contracts and fiscal deeds on behalf of the illiterate villagers; nevertheless, he was not the only person in the village who could write. In fact, Cromwell not only identified some 40 sets of handwriting within this archive, of varying levels of skill, but also the handwriting of a couple of women.This is not unusual. Recent publications show an ongoing trend of letter writing, by women to other women or to their male relatives, from late antiquity to early Islam.[9]

The letters in the Abu Hurayra/Banu Abdul Munim archive as

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[6] Jean-Michel Mouton, "Un village copte du Fayyoum au XI[e] siècle, d'après la découverte d'un lot d'archives", in *Comptes rendus des séances de l'Académie des Inscriptions et Belles-Lettres*, 146, no. 2, 2002, pp. 447-458.

[7] Adolf Grohmann, *Awraq al-Bardiyat al-Arabiya fi Dar al-Kutub al-Misriya*, Cairo, Dar al Kutub, 1934, case 56, p. 146 ff. dated 239/853; case 69 p. 220 dated 459/1067.

[8] Jennifer Cromwell, *Recording Village Life: A Coptic Scribe in Early Islamic Egypt*, Ann Arbor, MI, 2017.

[9] R.S. Bagnall and R. Cribiore, *Women's Letters from Ancient Egypt, 300 BC-AD 800*, Ann Arbor, MI, 2006; Khaled Younes, *Joy and Sorrow in Early Muslim Egypt: Arabic* P*apyrus Letters, Text and Content*, PhD thesis, Leiden University, 2013; Terry G. Wilfong, *Women of Jeme: Lives in a Coptic Town in Late Antique Egypt*, Ann Arbor, MI, 2002.

well as those of the Geniza merchants have another feature in common which sheds light on the way that paper was used and on why it was so widespread. Many of the letters dealt with business matters but they were not limited to this; although trade was an essential part of their correspondence, the letters include a lot of private and family content. The letters of the Geniza merchants often mentioned family and friends, and referred to a variety of personal matters, like the writer's health, the difficulties of travel or quarrels with a family member. Likewise, Banu Abdul Munim / Abu Hurayra's letters contain family news, such as the announcement of a death, a family quarrel, complaints from his brother that he and his sister did not have any wheat in the house and would Abu Hurayra please send them the wheat they need, Abu Hurayra's advice to a young husband not to stay away from his wife for too long because this caused her distress, and so on.[10]

This feature is relevant insofar as it sheds light on the attitude that was held towards writing; what is more, it is an additional factor that could go to explain the volume of paper that the archives contain. Without doubt, writing was a tool that traders and merchants used to run and control their business, but these family letters show that writing was also a tool of communication, to swap family news and make friendly exchanges with one's work partners. In other words, these people used the written word for other purposes than their livelihood; and these papers, containing family matters and swapping news, were a significant part of their culture. Exchanging letters was a common practice in both urban and rural locations, both before and after the Arab conquest.

What does all this mean? In a couple of articles published some years ago, I suggested that the words "literacy" and "illiteracy" were

[10] Goitein, *A Mediterranean Society*, vol. 1 p. 11; Yusef Ragheb, *Marchands d'Etoffes du Fayyoum du III^e au IX^e siècle d'apres leurs archives (actes et lettres)*, vol. 2, *La correspondance administrative et privee des Banu Abd al-Mu'nim*, Cairo, 1985, pp. 44-46; Daisy Livingstone, "Life in the Egyptian Valley under Ikhshīdid and Fāṭimid Rule", in *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient*, Vol. 61, no. 3, 2018, pp. 426-460.

not sufficient for an understanding of premodern societies. Instead, we need to see the broad spectrum and the many types of variation between the two terms.[11] I was referring to the early modern period, but this model can be applied to earlier centuries too. In the light of the Geniza and Papyrus archives, it is appropriate to stress another aspect, notably the people who needed the written word and preserved these papers, aware of their content, but not able to read it. It is unlikely that the level of literacy was high. One literate person in an entourage could serve a large number of illiterate people. This is what some of the village deeds suggest, especially when they involved women who had someone read them out for them.

One further explanation can be put forward for the extensive writing and existence of family archives. Papyrologists have uncovered ample evidence showing that in the centuries prior to the Arab conquest of Egypt in 642, family archives were a common practice, among persons who had large estates (the Zenon archive), as well as those with smaller businesses (the Aurelius Leonidis archive). This fourth-century archive in many ways reminds us of the ninth-century archive of Banu Abdul Munim / Abu Hurayra in spite of the five centuries that separate them: both were traders; both bought flax from villagers and sold it to craftsmen; both had to deal with other flax traders; both lived in relatively close proximity, in flax-growing, textile-producing regions; both used writing to record their dealings.[12] Their similar conditions led to similar practices.

There is also a continuity from late antiquity to the Arab conquest in the existence of family archives that include both business matters and private letters between family members and friends. If we set aside the issues of both language (whether these letters are in Demotic, Aramaic, Coptic or Judeo-Arabic) and religion (Coptic,

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[11] Nelly Hanna, "Literacy among Artisans and Tradesmen in Ottoman Cairo", in Christine Woodhead (ed.), *The Ottoman World*, London, 2012, pp. 319-331; "Literacy and the 'Great Divide' in the Islamic World, 1300-1800", in *Journal of Global History*, 2, 2007, pp. 175-194.

[12] Philip Venticinque, *Honor Among Thieves: Craftsmen, Merchants, and Associations in Roman and Late Roman Egypt*, Ann Arbor, MI, 2016, pp. 85-89.

Jewish or Muslim), we can see a continuous and uninterrupted line of such letters and family archives for about a millennium.[13]

These factors offer a partial explanation for the volume of the Papyrus and Geniza archives of medieval Egypt; they help us to better understand these treasures that have come down to us and the societies which created them.

[13] B.A. van Groningen (ed.), *A Family-Archive from Tebtunis (P. Fam. Tebt.)*, Leiden, 1950; Clive Foss, "Egypt under Muʿāwiya Part I: Flavius Papas and Upper Egypt", in *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies*, Vol. 72, No. 1, 2009, pp. 1-24; J.G. Winter, "The Family Letters of Paniskos", in *The Journal of Egyptian Archaeology*, 13, nos. 1/2, April 1927, pp. 59-74; Paul Heilporn, "Des nouvelles de Paniskos", in *The Bulletin of the American Society of Papyrologists*, no. 49, 2012, pp. 119-138; George Fredric Franko, "Sitometria in the Zenon Archive: Identifying Zenon's Personal Documents", in *The Bulletin of the American Society of Papyrologists*, 25, No. 1/4, 1988, pp. 13-98; Joseph A. Fitzmyer, "The Padua Aramaic Papyrus", in *Journal of Near Eastern Studies*, 21, no. 1, Jan. 1962, pp. 15-24.