The Lab’s work

The Princeton Geniza Lab brings together faculty, postdocs, students and researchers to identify, transcribe and translate the documentary texts of the Cairo Geniza, a cache of more than 330,000 folio pages preserved in a medieval Egyptian synagogue.

A tiny fraction of Geniza manuscripts have been identified, let alone published. Our mission is to make the documentary texts of the Geniza more accessible to scholars and to the wider public in three ways:

- putting transcriptions online and making them text-searchable;
- bringing unpublished manuscript material to light;
- enabling access to the interim products of Geniza research, such as the unpublished transcriptions, translations and other research materials of the field’s founder, S. D. Goitein (1900-85), and of the scholars who entered the field after him.

The new Geniza Lab

The Geniza Lab is currently in a state of expansion. In July 2015, it became an administrative structure in its own right. It still houses our text database, the Princeton Geniza Project, and we have added other projects to our portfolio that are more limited in scope but serve our main mission of mapping the documentary Geniza and making it accessible. We are also moving into a new space (Frist 220), three times larger than the old lab.

The mock-up of the new Lab above is courtesy of our new Lab Coordinator, Gayatri Oruganti.

A calligraphic set of notes in Judaeo-Arabic, Arabic and Hebrew. The sign resembling an inverted question mark at the top of the Arabic text may, according to Geoffrey Khan, indicate that it was copied from an original bearing an authorization mark. We’ve been finding these marks everywhere lately. Cambridge, TS Ar. 40.151 (det.).
More than Goitein

There is a widespread but mistaken perception that Goitein exhausted the documentary Geniza in *A Mediterranean Society* and *The India Book*. Mark Cohen, the co-founder and former director of the Geniza Lab, talks about an “optical illusion” created by the idea that Goitein’s corpus is coterminous with the documentary Geniza. There is much more out there — more to say about Goitein’s texts and texts that Goitein did not discuss.

Web-based resources

What is the difference between the Friedberg Genizah Project (FGP) and the Princeton Geniza Project (besides the way they transliterate the word geniza)? The FGP (www.genizah.org) aims to reunite the entire Geniza digitally through images, bibliographic and other metadata and powerful software for finding joins. The PGP is devoted to a subset of the whole: documentary texts, including letters, contracts, receipts, accounts, memoranda, bills of sale and lease, lists and prescriptions; and our emphasis is on describing, editing and translating them.

The Lab’s expansion comes in tandem with two new hires in the Geniza field, Eve Krakowski and Marina Rustow.

How many documents?

How large is the documentary Geniza corpus, and how much work is cut out for us?

The short answer is we don’t know: S. D. Goitein estimated that the Geniza held 10,000–15,000 documentary pieces. Some have come to suspect that there are many more; the Lab’s director, Marina Rustow, has gone on record with an estimate of 30,000, but cautions that, as in guessing games at amusement parks, the winning guess must come in under the real figure. We won’t know the answer until we start digging our way out.

Krakowski and Rustow, the summer before they arrived at Princeton, each began to think that digging their way out might be in the realm of possibility and started discussing a long-term project of mapping the documentary Geniza. With the Lab’s expansion, that project is now underway.

A tax receipt from the archive of a (Jewish?) tax-farmer named Abū ʾI-Hasan b. Wahb, written by the Coptic jahbadh (cashier) Mikḥāʾīl b. ʾAbd al-Masīh. In the past two months, the DIMMÉ team (see p. 4) has found 15 tax receipts from this early Fatimid archive (dated 1012–15 C.E.), a welcome addition to the 20 receipts from the same archive that Geoffrey Khan published in *Arabic Legal and Administrative Documents from the Cambridge Genizah Collections*. The paleography is not for the faint of heart. *Cambridge, T-S Ar. 35.31 (det.).*
What this means for you

Users of the PGP site will see a slight shift in emphasis over the coming years.

We will continue to run a search-and-retrieve database of transcriptions, as we always have. But we are also working toward developing a corpus of summaries of documents that are still awaiting transcription and translation.

Eventually, the site will also enable scholars to conduct filtered searches and to hive off subcorpora for targeted research.

Users are welcome and encouraged to submit their own transcriptions to us for review and eventual posting online. We will also commission new transcriptions through grant-writing and laboratory-style teaching.

Mapping the documentary Geniza

The current plan is to map the documentary texts of the Geniza in four stages, some running concurrently:

✦ Cleaning the database and laying the groundwork for a solid data infrastructure. We are currently identifying gaps and corrupt files and finding ways to fix them. Be patient as we work out the kinks, but not too patient: let us know when you find problematic files or missing data.

✦ Gathering low-hanging fruit. Hundreds of published document editions remain to be digitized. This is a task in which we have an important and welcome partner in the Friedberg Genizah Project. We also plan to add translations to English and digital images of manuscripts.

✦ Drawing the map. We have begun adding descriptions and other metadata for new documentary material, not all of which we plan to edit ourselves. We welcome user contributions.

✦ Expanding the corpus of editions in meaningful clusters. We will help researchers find meaningful subcorpora that they can edit for thesis and book projects, and are eager to facilitate the participation of specialists and of graduate and undergraduate researchers alike.

The mapping project is not just about knowing what’s out there and making it accessible. The long-term payoff includes being able to track patterns of deposit by genre, provenance and time period; opening up largescale problems of historical demography; tracking the reuse of writing materials as an index of cross-institutional contact and social networks; and launching other quantitative projects that would otherwise have had to rely on a small subset of the total Geniza corpus.

Stay in touch!
We welcome suggestions. Write to our Lab Coordinator, Gayatri Oruganti (oruganti@princeton.edu), or stop by 220 Frist.
Our expanded staff

**Director**

Marina Rustow, Khedouri A. Zilkha Professor of Near Eastern Studies and Professor of History at Princeton, is author of *Heresy and the Politics of Community: The Jews of the Fatimid Caliphate* (2008), and is completing a monograph on Fatimid petitions and decrees. She was named a MacArthur Fellow in 2015.

**Lab Coordinator**

Gayatri Oruganti comes to Princeton with a depth of experience managing data. She studied Arabic, spent two years living in Cairo and Hyderabad, and has experience organizing large events. She has already been instrumental in streamlining the Lab's work, reorganizing its archival resources and updating the PGP.

**Research Team**

Eve Krakowski, Assistant Professor of Near Eastern Studies and Judaic Studies, Princeton, is completing a book tentatively entitled *Coming of Age in Medieval Egypt: Women's Adolescence, Jewish Law and Ordinary Culture*.

Tamer el-Leithy, Assistant Professor of History, Johns Hopkins, is author of the forthcoming book *The Last New Muslims: Religious Difference and Mass Conversion in Medieval Egypt*.

Craig Perry, Postdoctoral Fellow in Near Eastern Studies, Princeton, is completing a book tentatively titled *Masters and Slaves in Medieval Egypt: Domestic Slavery and the Global Reach of Slavery in the Cairo Geniza Documents*. He is a co-editor of the *Cambridge World History of Slavery*.

Naïm Vanthieghem, Postdoctoral Fellow in Near Eastern Studies, Princeton, is a papyrologist who specializes in Greek and Arabic documents, and the author of numerous articles and of a doctoral thesis reconstructing a Greek administrative archive from Egypt.

**IT support**

Ben Johnston, Senior Educational Technology Specialist, McGraw Center for Teaching and Learning, has been the IT brain behind the PGP for more than a decade.

**Advisors, gurus, hecklers and well-wishers**

Jessica Goldberg, Associate Professor of Medieval History at UCLA, is author of *Trade and Institutions in the Medieval Mediterranean: The Geniza Merchants and their Business World* (2012).

Ben Outhwaite is Director of the Genizah Research Unit at the University of Cambridge.

Oded Zinger, Postdoctoral Fellow in Judaic Studies at Duke University, received his BA and PhD from Princeton and worked in the Lab for too many years to count. He is currently completing a book manuscript on gender and legal practices in the Geniza world.

Documents and Institutions in the Medieval Middle East

We’re currently expanding our corpus of transcriptions with grants from the NEH and the ACLS for the project *Documents and Institutions in the Medieval Middle East*. DIMME aims to make legal and administrative documents legible as historical sources by examining scribal practices as evidence for medieval institutions such as legal courts and government bureaus — institutions about whose quotidian functioning little is known.

Our first goal is to develop a corpus of documents from Jewish and Islamic courts, Jewish communal offices and Fatimid and Ayyubid state institutions. We are just over a year into the project (it began in October 2014) and on our way toward a complete working corpus.

We plan to add at least 200 new transcriptions of Hebrew- and Arabic-script documents to PGP by 2017. We are also writing a book that will develop a method for reading documentary texts by drawing on diplomatics, understanding documents as records of institutional power and instruments in the establishment and perpetuation of administrative structures. In plain language, we want to know what scribes thought they were doing when they turned people’s problems into portable, repeatable and enforceable texts. How did they manipulate structures, terms and physical features to effect change in people’s lives, make their acts official, or regulate and consolidate their transactions? The book will include a glossary of the legal and administrative terms that serve a technical function in both Jewish and Islamic documents.

Medieval Hebrew sudoku? *Cambridge, T-S Ar. 40.107 (det.).*