

# Art history from below

## The imagery of the Cairo Genizah

Much attention, scholarship, writing and a number of exhibitions have been dedicated to the texts of the Genizah. Little focus, however, has been given to professional and amateur visual decoration and drawings that were used to adorn the writing.



Woolf Institute  
2021

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**Supported by the Shores Charitable Trust**

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## Art in the Cambridge University's Genizah Collection

### INTRODUCTION

The everyday details of ordinary lives in the distant past hold a particular fascination, but are usually difficult to discover. The quirks that give individuality to every time and place rarely figure in the annals of official history. Taken for granted by those who live them, and therefore seemingly not worth being recorded, they survive by accident, the cast-offs of past cultures. Only now are they precious to us, as we seek to follow the by-ways of distant lives.

The Cambridge Genizah Collections are just such a treasury of cast-offs – a waste paper bin of literate Jewish communities who settled in Egypt, and used a storeroom in the Ben Ezra Synagogue in Fustat, Old Cairo to discard their old writing. Because of the Jewish custom that nothing containing the name of God may be destroyed, even the most mundane pieces of writing were preserved and are extant to testify to the life of the times.

The Cambridge Collections hold about 220,000 of a total of 350,000 fragments from the Genizah. The preserved documents provide unparalleled historical evidence of the religious, family,

political and commercial relationships within Jewish societies and the wider Muslim and Christian communities, with the oldest pieces of writing estimated to originate from the 5<sup>th</sup> century, and the latest ones deposited just before the 'discovery' of the Genizah by Solomon Schechter in 1896.

Much attention, scholarship, writing and a number of exhibitions have been dedicated to the texts of the Genizah. Little focus, however, has been given to the professional and amateur visual decoration and drawings that were used to adorn the writing. The reason for this is perhaps the lack of beautifully illuminated documents as can be found in other collections – the images found in the Genizah are less professional in nature and could be considered folk art. Parallel to similar descriptions in history and linguistic study, this could be called art history from below.

The Woolf Institute has prepared this exhibition and catalogue of a selection of the unique visual materials from the collection, making them publicly available for the first time, and we are grateful to Cambridge University Library for making the images available for us.

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## MEMORY IN ARCHIVE EXHIBITION CATALOGUE

This exhibition catalogue consists of 34 illustrated pages of fragments from a range of documents, including marriage contracts, stand-alone drawings, literary works and page decorations in the Hebrew, Arabic and Coptic languages. Most of the images were drawn and painted during the medieval period especially in the Fatimid, Ayyubid and Mamluk Eras. Generally, local organic and inorganic pigment colours were used on papers and parchments. Some pages have been smudged, or have faded. Many fragments are torn.

Many images can be found on marriage contracts (*ketubbot*, sg. *ketubbah*) which were painted according to local Jewish aesthetic preferences, creativity and the financial situation of families. Other illustrations were drawn as amulets, talismans and good luck charms. Others again were spelling exercises for children. A few pieces show Coptic and Egyptian Muslim influences. Others contain Sephardic art from Spain. While there are few figurative drawings, most display architectural, geometric and vegetal elements. We do not know the names of the artists who created the pictures. At first glance, some of these images seem childish or naïve. But, at second glance, you may see ingenuity and artistic depth. There are still many unanswered questions about the symbolic meanings and history of the images. This exhibition offers the opportunity to see the intricate mingling of religious and secular art in this great treasure trove that is the Cairo Genizah.





## KETUBBOT IN THE GENIZAH COLLECTION

A *ketubbah* is a Jewish marriage contract. It outlines the rights and responsibilities of the groom, in relation to the bride to financially protect the bride in the event of divorce or his death. Historically, the earliest *ketubbah* formulation goes back to the Talmudic Era. The *ketubbah* is still used in contemporary Jewish communities. The marriage contract contains information, such as the marriage date, family names, marital status of the bride (single, divorced or widowed). Some list financial and related obligation, and at the bottom of the document, one can find the individual signatures of the groom and witnesses.

The Genizah reveals much about marital life in medieval Egypt. Through the marriage and divorce documents we learn that polygamy was possible (probably under the influence of Muslim law), that in the early medieval period, Rabbanite and Karaite communities were still intermarrying (which became strictly separated later on), and that divorce was quite common. There was even the practice of conditional divorces in the case of husbands travelling abroad, to protect women from becoming abandoned and not being able to remarry if the men died on their travels

and there were no witnesses who could testify to their passing.

A *ketubbah* will be written specifically for the individual couple. Although we do not have a chance to go back in time to the moment of the wedding celebration, we have the opportunity to imagine the marriage culture by examining the marriage contract. In order to explore and understand Jewish culture and life in medieval times, marriage contracts are thus quite significant documents available to us.

*Ketubbot* are usually designed according to the Jewish communities' local artistic customs of the countries where they lived. Traditionally, a marriage contract document is decoratively framed with geometric and floral patterns, animals (especially birds) and human and angel-like figures. Usually, quasi-architectural elements such as columns, arches and significant traditional Jewish objects such as a *Menorah* were part of the decorations as well. Often, ink with local organic and inorganic colour pigments were used on paper or parchment depending on financial status. The *ketubbah* has been consistently written in Hebrew and Aramaic.





Marriage contract, manuscript, ink and paint on paper, dated approximately 19<sup>th</sup> century in Cairo.



The top of the *ketubbah* is cut in the shape of a trefoil arch/Torah Crown and the left part of the text has survived until now. The document is divided into three sections placed one above the other. The upper register of the decoration is in the shape of a Moorish arch containing floral decorations in the shape of a diamond shape. The corner of the arch is decorated with a vase and branches with red poppies. The second narrow framed section usually included traditional blessings and quotations from religious texts for the bride and groom, framed by floral branches as seen here. The *ketubbah* text is surrounded by a rectangular straight line border, filled with sparse decorations, consisting of only a tendril in the shape of an S and red poppy anemone (anemone coronaria) flowers, called “*kalanit metzuya*”. *Kalanit metzuya* is derived from the Hebrew word “kala” כלה which means bride. It is significant for Jewish tradition with its beauty and majesty, evoking the image of a bride on her wedding day. Also, it was chosen as the national flower of the State of Israel in 2013. Centuries ago, red poppies were still popular flowers in Jewish tradition. This decoration style was probably continued symmetrically on the other side of the paper to aestheticise the significance of the document. In the centre, the main text section contains the marriage contract details. The bold coloured words at the top are a biblical quotation and there is an elaborate signature below. The text is enclosed by green coloured Moorish scalloped arch style decorations with a *muqarnas* look-a-like pattern style and dark greyish blue-green branches. The decoration has a limited colour palette. Plain style and coarse brush strokes are identifiable.

[*Muqarnas* is one of the key elements; a three-dimensional decoration in Islamic architecture that is used for decorating vaults, niches, porches and domes of religious buildings.]

Title: Ketubbah with Vase  
Date: Approximately 19<sup>th</sup> century  
Medium: Ink and paint on paper  
Type of Resource: Marriage contract  
Language: Hebrew and Aramaic  
Place: Cairo  
Accession Number: TS-K-010-010-F





# Art history from below

## The imagery of the Cairo Genizah



Marriage contract, manuscript, ink and paint on paper, dated approximately 19<sup>th</sup> century in Cairo.

The ornamentation of the wedding contract, the left part of which has survived, is fairly plain consisting mainly of floral embellishments. The rectangular and floral borders are painted in oil-green, brown and yellow colours. The inner frame is decorated with a Moorish scalloped arch style spandrel to separate the text section. Like the simplistic style of the frame decoration, the written text is compressed at the top half of the page with little artistic skill. The limited colour palette, the simple decorative designs and coarse brush strokes reveal the ability and probably the limited financial situation of those commissioning this *ketubbah*.

Title: *Ketubbah* with Flower  
Date: Approximately 19<sup>th</sup> century  
Medium: Ink and paint on paper  
Type of Resource: Marriage contract  
Language: Hebrew and Aramaic  
Place: Cairo  
Accession Number: OR-I080-008-006-F



Marriage contract, manuscript, ink and paint on paper, dated to the 19<sup>th</sup> century in Cairo.

This very typical wedding contract is surrounded by floral and geometric shaped decorative borders on both sides. Although the edges and margins of the page are damaged and torn, and occasionally colours are browned or faded, the right margin decoration is still visible and part of the contract text is preserved. Decoration includes two different flowers; one of them resembles an Egyptian lotus style in a green round medallion at the top of the margin. The lotus symbolises the purity and rebirth in Egyptian culture which might have influenced the artists of the time. The most attractive part on the flower paintings is the naturalistic and stylistic differences. While the first flower is depicted in a very naturalistic way by using dark red and purplish white colours, it seems three-dimensional with full bloom form. The second five petal flower is painted in a very stylised pattern. In this design, the motifs are strong and painted rather than randomly sprinkled. The text is written in straight lines with some words written in a large font size showing the skill of the person who prepared the *ketubbah*.

Title: *Ketubbah* with Lotus  
Date: 5578 of the Era of Creation/1817 CE  
Medium: Ink and paint on paper  
Type of Resource: Marriage contract  
Language: Hebrew and Aramaic  
Place: Cairo  
Accession Number: TS-016-106-F



# Art history from below

## The imagery of the Cairo Genizah

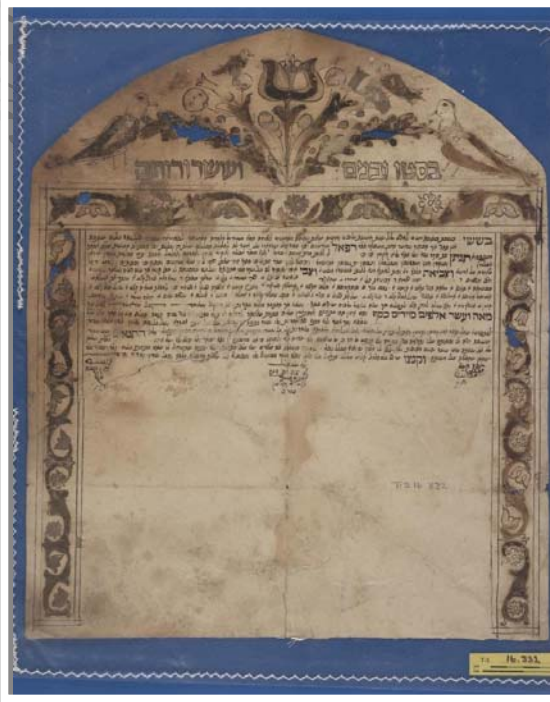
Marriage contract, manuscript, ink and paint on paper, dated approximately 18<sup>th</sup> century in Cairo.

Although the ink and colours have occasionally flaked off or faded and the top of the paper and the right side is torn, the remaining fragment still shows the beautifully composed embellished design. The text is surrounded by a border with exotic local flora and fauna and divided into three sections placed one above the other. The upper section of the decoration consists of lush dark green gushing foliage and flowers in a small vase in the centre. The second narrow framed section includes traditional blessings and expressions for the bride and groom. The marriage contract has side frames which are filled with ivy-like shaped verdant tendrils around the white simple stylised Pelargonium-like five petal flowers. The text of the contract is enclosed by a rounded arch, decorated with the same local floral patterns. These flowers may symbolise a happy marriage.



Title: *Ketubbah* with Dense Plant  
Date: Approximately 18<sup>th</sup> century  
Medium: Ink and paint on paper  
Type of Resource: Marriage contract  
Language: Hebrew and Aramaic  
Place: Cairo  
Accession Number: OR-I080-009-020-F





Title: Ketubbah with Birds  
Date: 1816  
Medium: Ink and paint on paper  
Type of Resource: Marriage contract  
Language: Hebrew and Aramaic  
Place: Cairo  
Accession Number: TS-016-332-F

Marriage contract, manuscript, ink and paint on paper, dated 1816 in Cairo.

The top of the *ketubbah* is cut in the shape of a pointed arch.

On the top, the arch-shaped section has been decorated with tulips – in bud and in blossom – and branches. In the centre is one large “blooming tulip”, brown and light in colour. The floral decoration is surrounded by two large and two smaller sized exotic birds on both sides. Also, in this section, there are expressions of blessing in between these decorations. Mainly the brown toned colours in the decoration have mostly faded and discoloured on the S-shaped scrolling flower and leaf formations of the border. These motifs are repeated along the sides of the *ketubbah*, and the frame of the text has been left open along the bottom margin. The contract text starts just below the frame and has been completed halfway through the paper. Three signatures are visible; these might belong to the groom and witnesses to the marriage.



# Art history from below

## The imagery of the Cairo Genizah



Title: *Ketubbah* with Zodiac and Jerusalem

Date: 1821

Medium: Ink and paint on paper

Type of Resource: Marriage contract

Language: Hebrew and Aramaic

Place: Fustat in modern day Cairo

Accession Number: OR-I080-009-021-F

Marriage contract, manuscript, ink and paint on paper, dated 1821 in Fustat.

The top of the *ketubbah* has a cut round-headed arches. This contract is comprised of richly painted figurative and quasi-architectural elements on the top with flowers and zodiac signs included on the borders. In *ketubbah*, representations of the zodiac are among the most prevalent motifs. This *ketubbah* is divided into three sections placed one above the other. The upper section of the design uses a dynamic rhythm of decorative

architectural elements framed with spirally ornamental columns which are reminiscent of a *Torah* ark as seen in synagogues. There are colourful trees on each side of the architectural element with four brown coloured birds hovering around it. The decoration – within the central architectural component – features scenes of life in the synagogue. At the centre top of the document, there is a hexagonal shape with a face and beams like the sun, surrounded in grey-blue colours resembling clouds over the cityscape. An evil eye amulet has been drawn to protect the couple. This painting is set in a fantastic landscape with architectural objects, trees and details of buildings representing life. This scene might point to the Holy City of Jerusalem with its domed architecture and trees on tiny rocks, painted towards the back. In the narrative, there is a Jewish couple standing under a *chuppah* during their wedding ceremony, symbolising the home or indoor place of their new house.

Among the striking things in this design is the difference between the illustrations of the male and female figures: the male – with the word 'bride' above his head is depicted from front view while the female figure - with 'groom' written on her head is depicted 'en profile'. Interestingly, from this perspective, she looks pregnant with swelling in the abdominal area. In addition to the married couple, there are also four figures painted in the same scene, placed one floor below the bride and groom. In this place, three human figures – probably family members – are wearing Jewish pointed hats and are seated whilst the other serves food to them.

Under these detailed painted sections, beautiful colourful calligraphy is included with words of blessing. The contract text margin is filled with figures representing the twelve Signs of the Zodiac in round medallions. This includes in a clockwise direction six figures: Scorpio, Libra, Virgo, Leo, Cancer and Gemini; and in a counterclockwise direction another six figures: Sagittarius, Capricorn, Aquarius, Pisces, Aries and Taurus. Moreover, the frame consists of lily-like flowers with different colours symbolising the marriage, purity, love, passion, confidence, wealth and thankfulness. The colourful palette, rich and creative decorative design reveals the artistic talent of the creator and the financial position of the couple for whom this *ketubbah* was written.

[*Chuppah* (חופה) a canopy covered with a cloth, sheet or tallit, under which Jewish couples stand during their wedding ceremony. The *chuppah* symbolises the new home of the couples.]

## Micrography in the Genizah Collection

Micrography as an art form was first developed in the Near East in the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries. During the Middle Ages, micrography spread across the Diaspora to the Sephardic communities of Spain and Portugal, and to the Ashkenazic communities of Eastern Europe. Calligraphers use tiny script in different designs in order to beautify the sacred words. Hexagonal shapes and the six-pointed star of David, Scandinavian and Celtic knot-work patterns, grotesque and mystical creatures as well as floral and geometric forms from the Islamic art tradition were commonly used in micrographic passages. Also, it was used in religious manuscripts, Scrolls of Esther and for wedding contracts.



Title: Micrography and Calligraphy Practice

Date: still to be dated

Medium: Ink on parchment

Language: Hebrew

Type of Resource: Religious fragment

Place: Cairo

Accession Number: TS-K-005-009 B

Micrographic and calligraphic decorative exercises on paper.

This page is folded in the middle which might indicate the pages of a sketchbook. As you can see on the left side, the calligrapher has repeated the alphabet for practice. Also, the calligrapher has created a design with a six-pointed Celtic knot or Star of David knotted together four times with very tiny scripts. On the right side of the page, there are also different designs which are reminiscent of candlestick bases or possible frame decorations.



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## The imagery of the Cairo Genizah



Biblical text surrounded with delicate micrographic decoration with ink on parchment decorating the religious text.

The upper right margin of the fragment has three six-pointed stars of David (Hexagram), each follows the next in micrographic design.

Title: Margin with Micrography

Date: Post-medieval

Medium: Ink on parchment

Language: Hebrew

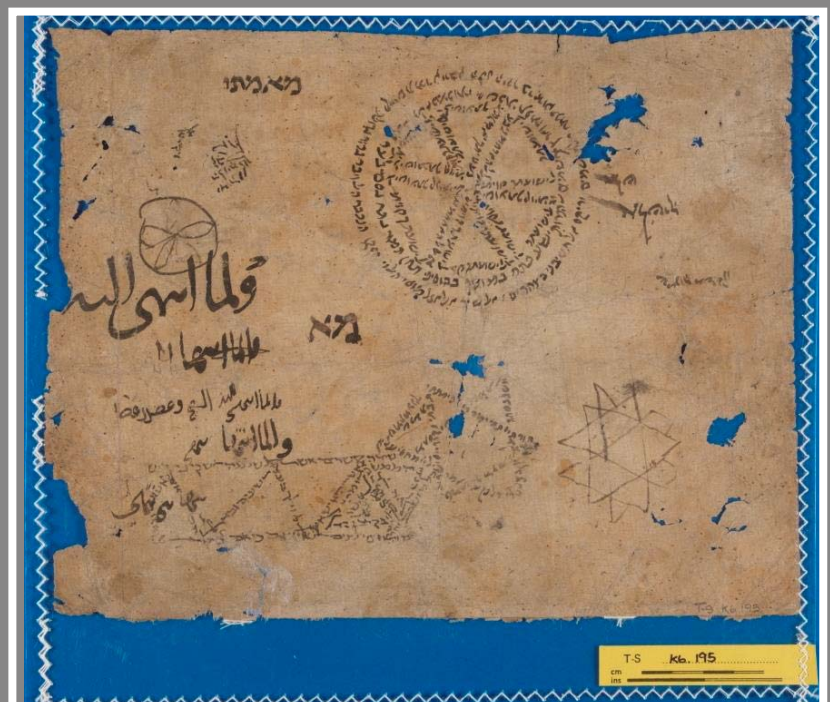
Type of Resource: Religious fragment

Place: Cairo

Accession Number: TS-A-001-003

Micrographic decorative practice drafts with ink on paper.

The calligrapher may have been working on a design for a sizable biblical text. To begin with, they have drawn the form of a geometrical shape and then inserted Hebrew words around it. There is one beautiful petal rosette with six petals and a double circle framed and successfully finished around it. Also, notice the Arabic and Hebrew letters – possibly notes – on the left side of the page in larger font size and darker ink.



Title: Micrographic Decoration Drafts

Date: still to be dated

Medium: Ink on paper

Language: Hebrew and Arabic

Type of Resource: Decorative elements fragment

Place: Cairo

Accession Number: TS-K-006-195 F



## Magic, Amulets, Talismans or Ink Trials in the Genizah Collection

Do you believe in magic? And no, I am not mentioning the song by The Lovin' Spoonful.

Do you believe in spells? Or maybe in the evil eye, in bad spirits?

How about astrology?

This subject of magic attracted much attention in all religious communities in the ancient world and has been indispensable for cultures in which science and religion were not yet separated. In fact, just as it is today. Now it is time:

*"I'll tell you about the magic, and it'll free your soul..."*

*"If you believe in magic come along with me..."*

*[Lyrics of The Lovin' Spoonful in "Do you believe in magic?"]*

Magical practices such as love, bad-luck, misfortune spells and curing of diseases or any protection against harm were common throughout history in all religions and cultures. Amulets or talismans were produced to counteract dangerous animals, situations of fear and distress, and to provide protection from all kinds of evil spirits and demons.

In Jewish tradition, especially in Kabbalistic practices, amulets and talismans borrow from mysticism. They are used for bringing luck or to avert evil. In addition, Jewish Egyptians believed these objects would protect pregnant and postpartum women as well as new-born babies. They were also known as a good luck charms, objects believed to confer protection upon its holder. Common jewellery, coins, drawings, plant parts, animal parts and written words were used for these magical items. Jewish amulets emphasise text and names with signs and symbols surrounding one object.

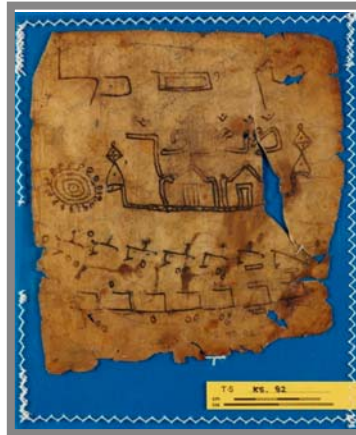
### PEN OR INK TRIALS

Sometimes images cannot be identified clearly, and are perhaps just doodles in the margin of a book. We are not sure who made these doodles, how old they were and what the meaning of these images is. There are thousands of interesting doodles waiting to be researched!



# Art history from below

## The imagery of the Cairo Genizah



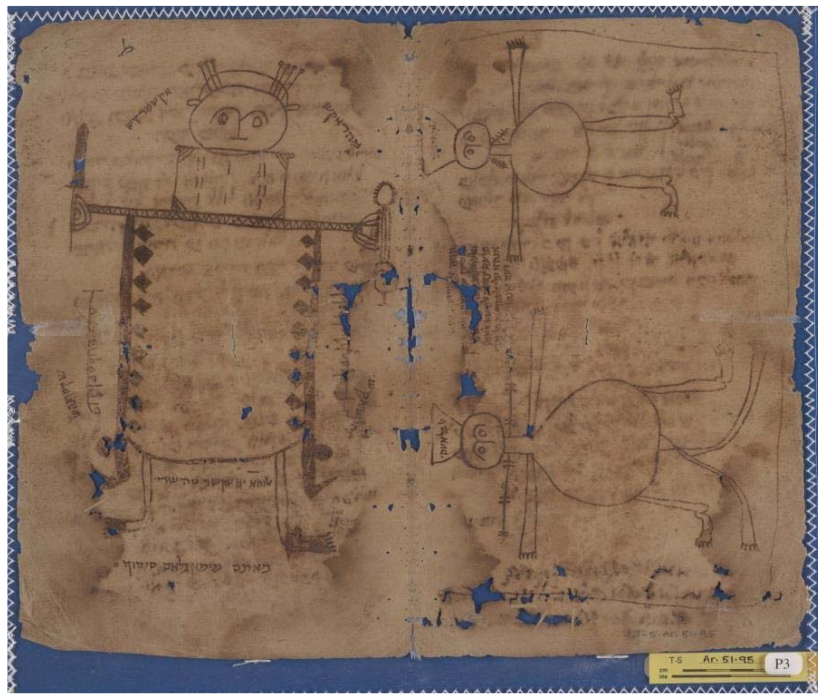
Amulet fragment with black ink on parchment dated to the medieval period.

This sketch-like drawing page has some lettering which looks like a child's writing exercises. On the top, there is a pairing of Hebrew letters in *Atbaš* אַתבש style, meaning that the first and last letter of the alphabet are paired up, the second and the second last, and so on. This was often used for secret writing. Above the ship, the letters, which have with final alphabetic forms, are gathered.

There are more details and deliberately drawn forms in between the lettering that may indicate this image as a practice sheet in order to create an amulet. In the centre of the recovered paper, there is one obvious drawing. It shows a stylised tall dragon head prow of a ship, and displaying Noah's Ark. This is the wooden vessel that Noah built as commanded by God (Genesis 6:9). In the centre of the vessel, there are two rectangular objects with framed pitched roofs which may represent the Ark of the Covenant where there are two tablets on which the Ten Commandments are written. *"According to all the likeness of the tabernacle which I will shew thee, and of all the vessels for the service thereof: and thus you shall make it."* (Exodus 25:9) The Ark of the Covenant is also understood as a similar construction to Noah's Ark. In different art forms in Jewish art history, Noah's Ark and the Ark of Covenant are designed in a similar way. On the bow of the ship, there is an evil eye for protection.

Title: The Ark and Evil Eye  
Date: Medieval  
Medium: Ink on parchment  
Language: Hebrew  
Type of Resource: Illustration fragment  
Place: Cairo  
Accession Number: TS-K-005-082-F





Title: Three Demons for Magical Amulet  
Date: Late medieval  
Medium: Ink on paper  
Language: Judaeo-Arabic; Pseudo-Arabic  
Type of Resource: Text and illustration fragment  
Place: Cairo  
Accession Number: TS-AR-051-095-P3-F

Practice (?) page with black ink on paper, dated late medieval period.

Amulets and talismans were designed to protect people from illness, harm or all kinds of evil spirits and demons, as well. These fascinating figurative drawings might be kabbalistic magical amulets. Looking at the page, one can say they are of simple design, some inscribed with enchanting words and figures in ink. They look like a portrayal of demons or angels, male or female, appearing as hybrid creatures or humans, which can be identified through various characteristic features, like animalistic tails.

The page is divided by two parts. On the upper left there is a large sized highly stylised figure which might be representing a demon. The figure might be a depiction of Ashmedai, the king of demons. Actually, the body parts of this creature are formed by some special stylised objects. On its round head, there is a crown with seven antennas like rods and the neck part looks like a scroll in which there seems to be some scribbles. The creature is clothed with a Coptic-style tunic (or one may say talismanic shirt) which is decorated with a diamond shape. It holds a sword or a *mezuzah*, to protect Jewish homes. It was common to depict the amulets with stylised objects such as *Torah* scrolls and other sacred items that would ward off the demons; the use of iron bars and knives were thought to scare demons away. Between the legs, there are some inscribed words including “the sealer is Maymūn, the slave of Sayhūk”.

The bottom right side of the page includes two similar figures. One has two tails, possibly representing a demon. The magical figures are wearing crowns on their round shaped heads with stylised hair; the swollen stomach may indicate pregnancy. We can understand from these two figures that the amulet might be for protection for a woman in labour. Mothers were generally afraid of the appearance of Adam’s first wife, Lilith, who escaped from the Garden of Eden and became a demon. It is thought that her purpose was to kill new-born Jewish children. In order to protect the pregnant or postpartum women and their new-born from evil, special adjurations and/or magic words were written on amulets which were hung over the baby’s or the mother’s bed. In this image, the figures have fully opened arms with tassel-like feet; the flat design, straight narrow nose and united eyebrows slightly downturned at the corners of the face are reminiscent of the Coptic drawing tradition.



# Art history from below

## The imagery of the Cairo Genizah

Magical figure and inscription with black ink on paper fragment, dated late medieval period.

The page is torn but the main part is still visible. This is an image of an amulet figure, sigil, magical ring surrounded with non-sensical writing in Arabic script. The body of this figure is drawn with the rectangular forms looking like a Coptic-style tunic or talismanic shirt with a snake figure wrapped round his shoulder. The figure wears a cone-shaped hat called a *pileus cornutus* hat which is simply decorated. It has a large Egyptian-style eye, arched eyebrows, long nose and stylised curly hair. Today, we do not know if this spell worked, but it must have given hope to the individual for whom it was created. Also, the artist seems to have worked using his imagination to create the form of this figure.

*[During 12th-18th century, cone-shaped / pileus cornutus hats were required to be worn in public by Jewish people in Medieval Europe for the purpose of being distinguishable as Jews.]*



Title: A Demon for a Magical Amulet  
Date: Late medieval  
Medium: Ink on paper  
Language: Arabic; Pseudo-Arabic  
Type of Resource: Text and illustration fragment  
Place: Cairo  
Accession Number: TS-AR-051-112-B

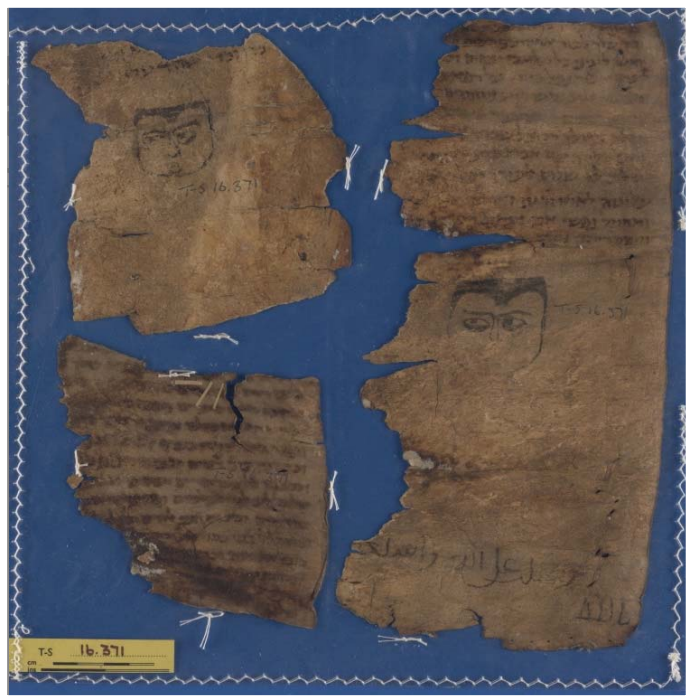
Demonic illustrations with black ink on paper.

These doodles look like children's drawings, but they were produced for Kabbalistic practices. The imagery includes Hebrew words around the figures, showing that these are magical demon creatures for amulets. The name "Abraham Judah Ḥalabī" is written on the paper. Squarish or round shaped heads, two long lined legs and arms and a further line with round tails are characteristic of Kabbalistic demons and sigils.

A small dot in the centre of the head might refer to a third eye in the back of the head believed to hold a physical and spiritual function. Today it is known as the pineal gland. Did you know the pineal gland was thought of as the third eye by ancient Egyptians and the source of the soul? Today it is thought of as the source of the melatonin and serotonin which affect our daily lives. If these tiny demons had connections to the pineal gland, the person indeed had a problem in their life.



Title: Demons' Sigil  
Date: 16<sup>th</sup>-18<sup>th</sup> century  
Medium: Ink on paper  
Language: Hebrew  
Type of Resource: Text and illustration fragment  
Place: Cairo  
Accession Number: TS-K-006-184-B



Portrait doodles or protective amulet figures with ink on parchment.

It is hard to identify the image without further information. However, the images appear to be two angry male faces with large smoky-eyed/shadowed eyes, thick monobrows, big noses, dark coloured dense hair and thick lips. They are similar in design to Coptic art features. The design has not been finished as a full figure; it may have been a doodle or practice before completion on the actual amulet or talisman.

Title: Portrait of a Coptic Man?

Date: Late medieval

Medium: Ink on parchment

Type of Resource: Illustration fragment

Place: Cairo

Accession Number: TS-016-371-B

Doodles or protective amulet figures with black ink on paper fragments.

These jottings appear to be of a bird, possibly an ibis in the front of the top of the page. The bottom of the page has a side view of a similar bird but a doodled scorpion tail comes out of his back. The figure looks to be standing on a nest. Above the creature is a scribbled snake figure. There are Coptic numerals such as ϣ '6' and Hebrew letters around the creatures. It was common to use Arabic, Hebrew and the Coptic languages together in 11<sup>th</sup>-13<sup>th</sup> century Egypt. The depiction might have belonged to a magical practice.



Title: Ibis

Date: 11<sup>th</sup>-13<sup>th</sup> century

Medium: Ink on paper

Language: Hebrew and Coptic letters

Type of Resource: Illustration fragment

Place: Cairo

Accession Number: TS-K-005-098-B





# Art history from below

## The imagery of the Cairo Genizah



A portrait drawing and inscription with ink on paper, dated 13<sup>th</sup>-14<sup>th</sup> century.

This fragment features a young boy with a wide face, almond-shaped eyes close to each other, thick eyebrows adjacent to each other, a tiny mouth and long hair falling under the turban. This reminds us of the Mamluk-style characteristics in Islamic art. Only the figure's head with its bulky turban has been preserved. It is hard to identify the rest of the image from this little drawing. However, we may guess from similar Mamluk art traditions where young men were often depicted as horsemen holding the halter of a horse and carrying a sword in their hand, that this might be also subject of this image.

The translation of the text surrounding the boy's face reads:

“Excellent fortune has come to you – good luck and a happy amen! Your fortune is on the increase every day, in a pure, new flourishing. Be thankful to God, and he will give you increase, for with Him is the greatest increase.” (Exhibition Catalogue *Discarded History: The Genizah of Medieval Cairo Exhibition Guide and Translations*, Translated by Prof. Geoffrey Khan, University of Cambridge.)

The fragment was thus probably used as a charm or talisman.

Title: Portrait of a Young Mamluk Horseman  
Date: 13<sup>th</sup>-14<sup>th</sup> century  
Medium: Ink on paper  
Language: Arabic  
Type of Resource: Text and illustration fragment  
Place: Cairo  
Accession Number: TS-AS-183-272-F



Title: Horseman and Saluki  
Date: Medieval  
Medium: Ink on parchment  
Language: Arabic  
Type of Resource: Illustration fragment  
Place: Cairo  
Accession Number: TS-AS-154-491-B

Figurative doodles and letters with black ink on parchment.

Throughout history, scribes and readers often liked to doodle on manuscripts. Some of the doodles were even made hundreds of years after a book's publication.

These discoveries, on the one hand, might be doodles by either children or adults. On the other hand, they might have been trials for magical drawings on amulets or talismans. It is hard to give a precise explanation for this fragment, but the images may provide an inkling.

The figure on a horse-like animal holds a spear-like object; two Saluki-type dogs (front part of the body of one is torn off) are running in front of the horse with a few serpent like doodles around it. These scribbles remind us of hunting or battle scenes which feature in Medieval manuscripts. Saluki-type dogs were very popular with Arab tribesmen for hunting. The person who made this scribble may have copied the figures from a manuscript image.



# Art history from below

## The imagery of the Cairo Genizah



Title: Horseman and an Archer  
Date: post-medieval  
Medium: Ink on paper  
Language: Hebrew  
Type of Resource: Text and illustration fragment  
Place: Cairo  
Accession Number: TS-NS-324-003-F

Manuscript and illustration with ink on paper.

The text above the drawings is religious in nature. In the right bottom margin of the manuscript, there are interesting but unrelated stylised figures, probably drawn in later centuries. These two figures look like warriors. On the left, a figure sits on a simply drawn horse holding a spear in his right hand and a pointed hat (or helmet) in his left hand. On the right side, the archer is standing alone. He is depicted in action with a stretched bow, positioned to shoot his arrow through the horseman. He carries a shield on his back. Both of the figures have tiny dotted eyes, small lined noses and long bearded faces.

Interestingly, the pattern of these figures reminds us of the much earlier “Bayeux Tapestry” which includes the story of the conquest of England by William, Duke of Normandy in 1066, recalling style of long cavalcades on horseback, and standing archers on the lower level.



Detail of the Bayeux Tapestry - 11th century.  
City of Bayeux

(Reproduced with kind permission of the Musée de la Tapisserie de Bayeux)



## Primers in the Genizah Collection

Although Jewish children in Egypt spoke Arabic, the language they learned to read and also write was Hebrew, as the primary purpose of education was to learn to read the Bible. The Genizah has preserved a large amount of manuscript fragments written by children, showing us the development of student handwriting lettering exercises and the copying of biblical texts. Children wrote each letter over and over again for practice, a practice commonly used in today's education. Usually children would learn the alphabet and practice writing. According to the eminent Genizah scholar S. D. Goitein, teachers would educate students through games. They would prepare large outlines of letters with ink, and the children would fill them in with red, green, brown and other colours. Several children would share a primer such as the one preserved below as they would have been expensive to produce.

Title: Children's Book  
Date: 11<sup>th</sup>-12<sup>th</sup> century  
Medium: Ink and paint on paper  
Language: Hebrew  
Type of Resource: Illustration  
Fragment  
Place: Cairo  
Accession Number: TS-K-005-013-F



Illustrated page with ink and paint on paper, dated approximately 11<sup>th</sup>-12<sup>th</sup> century.

The paper is divided into two parts. The left part is a Hebrew textbook for children; the inked outline of the alphabet characters were probably drawn by the teacher and coloured in by the student. Each letter was repeated side by side with the different vowels underneath, very much like in modern Hebrew schools. This side of the page is decorated with a red and green coloured six-pointed Star of David which resembles a flower. The right part of the sheet is decorated with architectural elements and significant objects related to traditional Jewish synagogues within a rectangular frame. The ark form illustration consists of red- and gold- like brown coloured columns and a pointed arch; standing in the centre is a seven-branched lamp and menorah. There are two six-pointed stars on each side of the red and green menorah. A decorated opened scroll is visible at the bottom of the menorah. A candle lamp – drawn with red colour – hangs from the top of the arch. The corner of the ark is enlivened with the flower motive in triangular form.

# Art history from below

## The imagery of the Cairo Genizah

### Narrative images, Carpet Pages and Page Decorations in the Cairo Genizah



Title: Lion and Mother

Date: 13<sup>th</sup> – 14<sup>th</sup> century

Medium: Page from a book; ink and paint on paper

Language: Arabic

Type of Resource: Kalīla wa-Dimna manuscript fragment

Place: Cairo

Accession Number: TS-AR-051-060-F

Arabic manuscript illustration, ink and paint on paper, dated around the 13<sup>th</sup> century.

The bottom left corner of the page is torn. Kalīla wa-Dimna is originally one of the fable books in the Indian Panchatantra, dating back to the 6<sup>th</sup> century. After it was translated by Abdullah Ibn Al Muqaffa' in the 8<sup>th</sup> century, Kalīla wa-Dimna became very famous in Arabic literature. Numerous versions were produced and illustrated by Muslim artists throughout the Muslim world. The Arabic literature takes its name from Kalīla and Dimna, two jackal protagonist brothers of the first story at the court of the Lion, the King of the animals. Kalīla is the symbol of truth and honesty and Dimna is the symbol of falsehood and lies. Dimna represents a malicious characteristic of human beings who would do anything for the sake of their ambitions. Moral advice is dispensed by animals talking to princes.

In this illustrated fragment, the artist chose to narrate the story of the Lion and his mother's conversation from the first tale of the book, where the Lion's mother sees Dimna's jealousy and gives advice to her son to counteract the betrayal.

The Lion King and his mother are seated opposite one another on the plain green strip of grass surrounded by simple floral elements without linear perspective. The scene does not include a frame; instead of the lined frame surrounding both figures, there are green painted plants, with red flowers in bud, and lastly, red coloured Arabic written words which become a natural border. The Lion is seated on the left, and the mother lioness on the right, her mouth open and her left paw raised in an act of giving important advice to her son. The Lion King is coloured in light yellow, while the lioness is in skin colour; both have a goldish yellow mane indicating the sign of wealth. In most Arabic manuscripts of Kalīla and Dimna, identical motifs recur.



# Art history from below

## The imagery of the Cairo Genizah



Title: A Crow and a Rat  
Date: Late Medieval period  
Medium: Ink and paint on paper  
Language: Arabic  
Type of Resource: Kalīla wa-Dimna manuscript fragment  
Place: Cairo  
Accession Number: TS-AR-040-009-F

Arabic manuscript illustration with ink and paint on paper from the late medieval period.

The image on the fragment is similar to the manuscript illustration in the Bibliothèque Nationale (Paris), Arabe 3465, fol. 87. The illustrated Arabic script in the Bibliothèque Nationale belongs to a famous fable story of the Dove from the Arabic version of the traditional Sanskrit collection of fables Kalīla wa-Dimna by 'Abdullah Ibn al-Muqaffa'. Similarly, this Genizah fragment has a dark coloured crow flying on two painted blooming flowers whilst holding a rat by the tail in its mouth. The story is about the friendship between a dove, a rat, a crow, a gazelle and a turtle, and their hostility towards the hunter who is coming to catch them.





Title: Dragon Knot  
Date: 11<sup>th</sup>-12<sup>th</sup> century  
Medium: Ink and paint on parchment  
Language: Hebrew  
Type of Resource: Manuscript and illustration fragment  
Place: Cairo  
Accession Number: TS-K-005-001-B

An illustrated manuscript page – a carpet page - from a book with ink and paint on paper dated approximately 11<sup>th</sup>-12<sup>th</sup> century.

Carpet pages are used inside Christian, Islamic and Jewish illuminated manuscripts and are a characteristic feature of insularly illuminated manuscripts, contributing aesthetic value to religious texts. They are entirely dedicated to decoration and are filled entirely with decorative motifs; complex patterns of interlaced animal figures, architectural, geometric and vegetal motifs and brilliant colours with tiny drops of red patterns are used. Well known examples of such carpet pages in the British context can be found in the “Lindisfarne Gospels”. In the Genizah Collection this rare page includes animal figures and geometric forms, embellished with red and brown colours and ink dots which are prevalent in the entire decoration. Some art historians, however, point their origin towards similar Coptic decorative book pages.

In the main section of the fragment, the decorative element – interlace – is looped with knotted animal and geometric forms applied in complex patterns to fill the space. Four symmetrically long bodies of dragon-like heads (or legless creatures) are intertwined with each other. The dragons are shown “en profile” with their heads turned towards each other, have pointed ears and open mouths with pointed teeth. The bodies are knotted and are decorated by dots. Although interlaced animals and dot pattern embellishment are reminiscent of the 8<sup>th</sup> century Celtic zoomorphic knot style ornaments with fantastic figure-like dragons, they were also popular in Anatolian Seljuks metalworks and stone ornamentations. You can see the artistic style of these cultures with the curving, interweaving animals with heads turned towards each other, baring their teeth. There are heart motifs on the corners of the main section of the decoration. There are also Islamic influences with the two-folded or winged rumi motif (stylised leaf), placed between two hearts on the bottom of the page. The borders and the form of the decoration were created by a uniquely Jewish art form – micrography – that uses tiny script to draw decorative outlines. Although the details of the words are difficult to see, the contours resemble micrography. Interlace decoration is confined to rectangular borders. The frame is filled with interlace chain motifs and knot patterns.



# Art history from below

## The imagery of the Cairo Genizah



An illustrated manuscript page from a book with ink and paint on paper, dated approximately 11<sup>th</sup> -12<sup>th</sup> century.

The contours in this carpet page resemble micrography. Geometric decoration are confined to rectangular borders. Since the page is quite damaged and its colours are faded, it is difficult to see the decorative details of the border. However, there are some marks where the outline of Hebrew letters are drawn with ink and coloured with brown. The space is filled with tiny red and green dots. The central section of the illustration is formed with the six-petal rosette which is known as a symbolic flower of life. There are geometric elements, such as repetition of six-pointed star of David/Hexagram, transforming into a larger hexagon that symbolises harmony and balance or the meaning of life. They generate a circle pattern in a whole form. Repeating geometric rhombuses are outlined by what resembles miniature scripts and filled with flower motifs surrounding the central circle motif.

Title: Six Petal Rosette  
Date: 11<sup>th</sup>-12<sup>th</sup> century  
Medium: Ink and paint on parchment  
Language: Hebrew  
Type of Resource: Manuscript and illustration fragment  
Place: Cairo  
Accession Number: TS-K-005-001-F



Illustrated manuscript fragment with ink and paint on parchment.

Only this part of the page has survived. The page is decorated with Hebrew script and geometric patterns. Geometric shapes are found in ancient cultures because they are the oldest and most basic elements of decoration which have been meaningful and important. The effect of design based on symmetrical and geometrical bases, the desire for order, the development of the pure line and repeated shapes gives great comfort to a person who is uneasy with uncertainty and chaos.

On this fragment, the interior of the main circle form is decorated by repeating the interconnected stars, circles and polygonal forms in different sizes. In the centre of the circle can be found the six-pointed star – the Star of David. (In one form, it consists of two intertwined equilateral triangles). This is a symbol commonly associated with Judaism. The frame lines of the shapes defining the form are left blank and the interior of the forms are decorated with floral branch motifs and red and green dots. The decoration page was probably framed with a rectangular shape. There is a small sized Celtic style knot border motif painted with green and red dots above the page.

Title: Hexagons and the Star of David  
Date: still to be dated  
Medium: Ink and paint on parchment  
Language: Hebrew  
Type of Resource: Illustration fragment  
Place: Cairo  
Accession Number: TS-K-010-002-F





# Art history from below

## The imagery of the Cairo Genizah

Illustrated manuscript fragment with ink and paint on paper.

Only this part of the page has survived. The page is decorated with Hebrew script and geometric patterns. From the start, this richly textured and decorated page attracts our attention, and gives us an idea of the Jewish aesthetic pleasure with its golden colour paint and detailed patterns. Actually, there is a conspicuous flaw in the decoration that seems unfinished – the red colour contours of patterns and letters which could not be painted; it is mysterious as to why the paper was abandoned as well as what the remaining pieces might have been. The centre of the fragment includes a large sized rhombus shape that was a common design pattern in Jewish decoration and small six-pointed Stars of David above and below. It is possible that polygonal shapes were continued around the decoration. The rhombus consists of two separate triangular shapes and Hebrew words fill the frame. The triangular forms are decorated with downwards and upwards floral heart forms with disposed palmette plants. The main colour of the decoration is gold and filled with the Egyptian blue colour. Although some words are drawn with black ink, there are also gold coloured letters contoured with black ink. The colours of the fragment remind us of the Sarajevo *Haggadah*, the oldest Sephardic *Haggadah* known to exist. The six-pointed stars continue from the tip of the rhombus. In the centre of the six-pointed star, a spiral motif creates a heart shape and ends with a palmette painted in gold. This floral pattern is framed with a hexagon painted in Egyptian blue. At the same time, the arms of the star are decorated with palmettes. The palmette flower pattern hangs down in a heart form from the tip of the star. The fragment ornamentation seems to have the most fundamental elements of Islamic decoration pattern influenced by Spanish art.



Title: Lozenge and the Star of David

Date: still to be dated

Medium: Ink and paint on paper

Language: Hebrew

Type of Resource: Illustration  
fragment

Place: Cairo

Accession Number: TS-K-010-014-F

Illustrated manuscript fragments with ink and paint on parchment.



Red, green, orange and gold-like brown colours were only used on parchments by wealthy people who could afford such expense. The frame has the six-pointed Star of David pattern consisting of the hexagon and triangular forms. Geometric shapes were created by drawing micro copy (with minute Hebrew letters) with black ink. The decoration is filled with floral shapes of red, green and brown dots. These fragments include frameless Hebrew words in red, framed by a drawing with ink and painted with gold-like brown colours. These decorated fragments might be parts of a marriage contract or another religious document.

Title: The Star of David and Flowers

Date: still to be dated

Medium: Ink and paint on parchment

Type of Resource: Illustration fragment

Language: Hebrew

Place: Cairo

Accession Number: TS-K-010-007-PI-2-3-F

Illustrated page with ink and paint on paper.

Most of the upper right corner of the painting has been torn and the edges of the page are frayed. However, this stunning illustration includes two long-legged herons (or other wading-birds) that look like lovers. They are perched among plants and illustrated in the centre of the decoration with stylised flowers in a frame. The page decoration seen here has shades of red, blue and brown tones and is probably the cover of a manuscript. Since there is no text on the page, it is hard to identify.



Title: Two Lovers/ Heron Birds

Date: still to be dated

Medium: Ink and paint on paper

Language:

Type of Resource: Illustration fragment

Place: Cairo

Accession Number: TS-NS-324-002-F



# Art history from below

## The imagery of the Cairo Genizah

Illustrated manuscript fragments with ink and paint on paper.

The fragment includes beautiful zoomorphic lettering with vivid colours alongside fairly orderly Hebrew calligraphy. The decorative inscription is both zoomorphic and anthropomorphic, where entire words were built out of grotesque animals and people. Such letters were used in *Haggadot* throughout European Jewish history, particularly in Spain. These whimsical animals kept readers interested; they also showed the artist's talent. The calligrapher used the vivid red, greyish-blue and white colours on the bodies and heads of the letters. The artist did not ignore the pointed beard of the figures.



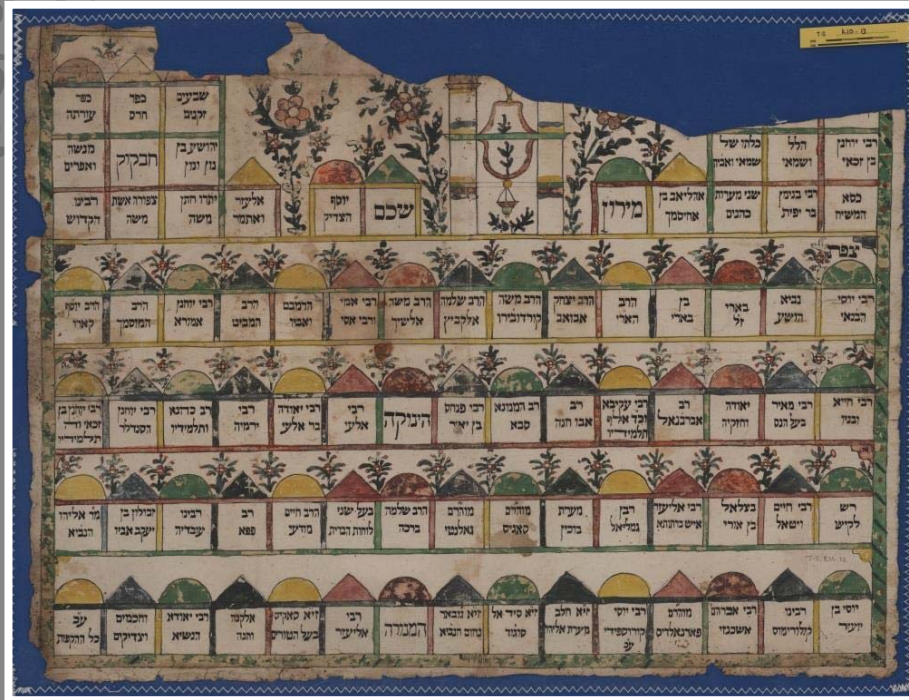
Title: Zoomorphic Letters  
Date: tbc  
Medium: Ink and paint on paper  
Language: Hebrew  
Type of Resource: Text and illustration fragment  
Place: Cairo  
Accession Number: TS-K-010-001-F

In the margin of a Biblical text is a decoration seen with ink on paper. The decoration has some symbolic geometric forms. It is like a stylised figure with two feet and a round head carrying a crown. The body features geometrical shapes and some text. This decorative element marks the end of Isaiah and the beginning of Jeremiah. It contains a short biographical notice of Jeremiah prefaced to his book.

Title: Marginal Decoration  
Date: tbc  
Medium: Ink and paper  
Language: Hebrew  
Type of Resource: Text and illustration fragment  
Place: Cairo  
Accession Number: TS-K-010-009-F







A memorial cemetery miniature painting, illustrated manuscript, with ink and paint on paper, dated approximately 18<sup>th</sup> century.

Although the upper margins and some parts are torn and colours have faded, the illustration still has a very brilliant colour palette and is significant for being a document of value. The painting has been framed with a spiral decorative border that creates a cemetery space. The lavishly and symmetrically illustrated painting shows the artistic style and appreciation to the subject. The painting is non-figurative and consists of a two-dimensional (flat) surface. Nevertheless, architectural details and objects and the construction of the divided layers of the cemetery garden must be admired. On the upper level of the painting, there is a hanging bell and an oil lamp between two coloured columns. Blooming local flowers embellish the areas surrounding the graves. The tombstones are decorated with different colours in semicircular and triangular forms. Each tombstone has a name of a significant Jewish scholar including Moses ben Maymūn (Maimonides), Joseph Karo and Isaac Luria. Although these people lived and were buried in different geographical places and times, they were chosen for this cemetery illustration as they were significant in Kabbalistic tradition. The miniatures must have been created for a visual commemoration.

Title: Commemorate Cemetery

Date: 18<sup>th</sup> century

Material: Ink and paint paper

Language: Hebrew

Type of Resource: Text and illustration fragment

Place: Cairo

Accession Number: TS-K-010-013-F



# Art history from below

## The imagery of the Cairo Genizah



A *Shiviti*, Hebrew Biblical text with ink and paint on paper for wall decoration, dated 1852 CE.

The *Shiviti* shows the image of a candlestick used in some Jewish communities for contemplation of God's name. It is usually hung in the prayer area of the synagogue or within the home. This decoration has been attributed to a person who donated money to the synagogue. In honour of their generosity, their name has been put on this decoration which, in this case, has not been preserved. Large holes and tears are seen in several parts of the decoration; there is some fading, mixing of ink and paints. Rectangular-framed decoration is created with architectural elements and objects that are used in synagogues. The decoration is divided symmetrically into three sections with two white coloured Tuscan style columns and round arched with a red line. The arch pediment is decorated with diamond forms, beautiful flowers and branches. The artist painted the architectural elements with white, red, blue and green colours. His attention to detail of the capitals and bases of the columns must be admired. Moreover, he depicted two twisted (Solomonic) columns on either side of the decoration which were inspired by those of King Solomon's Temple in Jerusalem. The illustration represents the Ark, the place in the synagogue in which the *Torah* scrolls are kept. The centre part consists of the first five of the Ten Commandments using calligraphy. On the right and left sides, a seven-branch menorah – a candleholder – is depicted. These illustrations are filled with words written in a small script containing text from Psalms 23 and 121. The base and flower are brown in colour and the lamps are red. These side parts of the illustration are decorated with wall tile-like rectangular multi-coloured diamond patterns. After the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the *shiviti* tradition turned into a significant part of Judaic art.

Title: *Shiviti*  
Date: 1852 CE  
Medium: Ink and paint, paper on wall  
Language: Hebrew  
Type of Resource: *Shiviti* for Wall Decoration  
Place: Cairo  
Accession Number: TS-K-010-022-F



This fragment relates to one of the well-known Biblical stories of Abraham and the three angels. In Genesis 21:1 “*And the Lord visited Sarah as he had said, and the Lord did unto Sarah as he had spoken*” (King James Version). In this image, Abraham welcomes the three divine angels by bowing to them. In front of his tent, the visitors bear the news to Abraham that his wife Sarah will have a son. Sarah secretly listens to the conversation inside the tent. This was popular iconography in Christian and Jewish art history.

In this illustration, three visitors have been depicted with angelic wings and Abraham kneels in front of them. Sarah is depicted as listening surreptitiously from a position of concealment in a European style wooden structure. The Geniza fragment must have been one of the copies of many similar designs found in *Haggadot* such as the copies published in Amsterdam (1695) and Hamburg (1740). The costumes of a bygone age, architecture style, landscape and the formulation of the figures points towards the Amsterdam copy. The Amsterdam *Haggadah* was revolutionary in its type and later illustrations with similar designs were used in many contemporary *Haggadot*.

Title: Abraham Welcoming Three Angels  
Date: 19<sup>th</sup> century  
Medium: Ink on paper  
Language: Hebrew  
Type of Resource: Printed text and illustration  
Place: Cairo  
Accession Number: TS-NS-269-259-F





# Art history from below

The imagery of the Cairo Genizah

## Science in the Cairo Genizah



The Lunar calendar illustration manuscript in Arabic with ink and paint, dated approximately 13<sup>th</sup> century.

The edges of the page are frayed. Jews and Muslims follow the lunar calendar for religious rituals. This fragment is simply line framed with a large almond shaped eye, arched eyebrows and the Arabic style of personification of the planet Sun with a face placed at the centre of the frame. It is surrounded with descriptions of the months according to the phases of the moon in a one month-cycle. Each of the moons are coloured according to phases by using red colour.

Title: The Lunar Calendar  
Date: Approximately 13<sup>th</sup> century  
Material: Ink and paint on paper  
Language: Arabic  
Type of Resource: Text and illustration fragment  
Place: Cairo  
Accession Number: TS-K-010-003-B



A calendar written in Hebrew and a decorated manuscript with ink and paint on paper, dated to 5583 of the Era of Creation/1822-1823CE.

These circles include the names and descriptions of the year, months and days, decorated with floral and geometric patterns.

Title: The Jewish Calendar  
Date: 5583 of the Era of Creation/1822-1823 CE  
Medium: Ink and paint on paper  
Language: Hebrew  
Type of Resource: Text and illustration fragment  
Place: Cairo  
Accession Number: TS-K-010-020-F

# Art history from below

The imagery of the Cairo Genizah

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