

Eva Mira Grob  
Documentary Arabic Private and Business Letters on Papyrus

# Archiv für Papyrusforschung und verwandte Gebiete

Begründet von  
Ulrich Wilcken

Herausgegeben von  
Jean-Luc Fournet   Bärbel Kramer  
Wolfgang Luppe   Herwig Maehler  
Brian McGing   Günter Poethke  
Fabian Reiter   Sebastian Richter

Beiheft 29

De Gruyter

# Documentary Arabic Private and Business Letters on Papyrus

Form and Function, Content and Context

by  
Eva Mira Grob

De Gruyter

Die vorliegende Arbeit wurde von der Philosophischen Fakultät der Universität Zürich im Herbstsemester 2009 auf Antrag von Prof. Dr. Andreas Kaplony und Prof. Dr. Ulrich Rudolph als Dissertation angenommen.

ISBN 978-3-11-024704-6  
e-ISBN 978-3-11-024705-3  
ISSN 1868-9337

*Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data*

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the Library of Congress.

*Bibliografische Information der Deutschen Nationalbibliothek*

Die Deutsche Nationalbibliothek verzeichnet diese Publikation in der Deutschen Nationalbibliografie; detaillierte bibliografische Daten sind im Internet über <http://dnb.d-nb.de> abrufbar.

© 2010 Walter de Gruyter GmbH & Co. KG, Berlin/New York

Druck: Hubert & Co. GmbH & Co. KG, Göttingen  
∞ Gedruckt auf säurefreiem Papier

Printed in Germany  
[www.degruyter.com](http://www.degruyter.com)

To the one I love – and Who loved and loves me with everlasting affection



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## Acknowledgements

First of all I would like to express my deep gratitude to Prof. Andreas Kaplony. You were a true “Doktorvater”! I am impressed by the way you live, engaging in distinguished, hard-working scholarship while staying human, responsive, curious – and enthusiastic.

Thanks to the Schweizer Nationalfonds, which made this research financially possible, and the National Centre of Competence in Research on “Mediality: Historical Perspectives,” with their directors Prof. Christian Kiening, Prof. Martin-D. Gleßgen, and Prof. Martina Stercken. Working in a research association was inspiring and broadened my horizon!

My thanks go to all members of the Oriental Institute of Zürich and to the papyri group. Thank you, Prof. Ulrich Rudolph, for contributing the second opinion and for your involvement. Special thanks also to Dr. Edward Badeen for all his encouragement and to Dr. Johannes Thomann for technical and statistical support and the many stimulating discussions!

Thanks go also to the wider community of papyrologists and the International Society for Arabic Papyrology for their warm welcome and the platform they provide to the young generation. I benefitted from so many dedicated scholars who gave me the opportunity to discuss my work with them. Thank you Prof. Petra M. Sijpesteijn, Prof. Geoffrey Khan, Dr. C. Lucian Reinfandt, and Dr. Federico Morelli! My special thanks to Prof. Werner Diem, whom I admire for his work, for his kind support and feedback. It is always such a pleasure meeting you!

Thanks to all the collections whose staff gave me access to their treasures and the permission to reproduce letters from them. My special gratitude to the Vienna collection and its former director Prof. Cornelia Römer for having every confidence in me and for the significant support!

I appreciate the opportunity given by Prof. Herwig Maehler and the other members of the board to have my research published as *Beiheft zum Archiv für Papyrusforschung und verwandte Gebiete*. It is a great honour for me to contribute the first study of the small but growing field of Arabic papyrology to this renowned series. My thanks also go to David M. Taylor, M.A., and Victoria R. M. Scott, M.A., for English-language editing.

Last but not least, my deep gratitude goes to my family and close friends, who always stood by my side, were supportive and helped me through.

Thank you all! And as you remain in the language of the papyri:

ختم الله لكم بالسعادة واخلف لكم اكثر منه اضعافا

May God seal you with bliss and give you multiple compensations!

**Illustrations are used courtesy of the following collections:**

Institut für Papyrologie, Ruprecht-Karls-Universität Heidelberg

Musée du Louvre Paris. Claire Tabbagh. Collection Numériques

Nasser D. Khalili Collection of Islamic Art. The Khalili Family Trust

Österreichische Nationalbibliothek Wien, Papyrussammlung

Staatliche Museen zu Berlin – Preußischer Kulturbesitz. Ägyptisches Museum und Papyrussammlung. Sandra Steiß

Staats- und Universitätsbibliothek Hamburg, Handschriftensammlung

## **Introduction**

Arabic letters on papyrus challenge the modern reader. There are few to no diacritical dots to distinguish homographs, no systematic spacing between single words, and in the majority of cases a low degree of graphical structuring. However, contemporary readers usually read and understood these documents easily – probably because the recipient of a letter knew what to expect. The letters are formulaic, and their information packaging follows an algorithm typical for their time and content. Here formulaic letter writing means not only the reuse of the same formulae or topoi but expressing thoughts in a predictable linguistic way and order, both as a matter of readability and as one of adequacy and politeness. The main concern of this work was to discover the unwritten rules and norms behind Arabic letter writing on papyrus.

But first of all, some preliminary remarks. I would like to begin by explaining the background and selective criteria used in the terms of the title: “Documentary Arabic Private and Business Letters on Papyrus: Form and Function, Content and Context”. Thereafter, I wish to discuss the state of affairs in Arabic papyrology, the central questions and the methodological approaches to this work.

### **Arabic**

“Arabic” in this work pertains to the language of the documents and also to their script. Judaeo-Arabic documents in Arabic language but Hebrew script were excluded.<sup>1</sup>

### **Letters**

As for the characteristics of a “letter”, there are whole typologies from antiquity on. For our purposes it is sufficient to define them as being written by a specific sender (or in the name of a specific sender) on a support like papyrus, parchment, etc.; being directed to a specific recipient or group of recipients; and being transported by an intermediate person. The specific characteristics of letters are thus (1) the presence of an address (internal or exterior) identifying both sender

---

<sup>1</sup> Most of the Judaeo-Arabic documents are in any case later than the ones under consideration here. However, research on Judaeo-Arabic texts, mainly from the Cairo Genizah, is far more advanced than Arabic papyrology. On the importance of the Cairo Genizah for Arabic papyrology, see Diem 2008b:846-7.

and recipient, and (2) a message directed to the recipient. However, for Arabic letters, in the majority cases the internal address is lacking (see chapter 2.2.).

The self-designation *kitāb* that sometimes appears in the letters is not useful to draw on for a definition. For while *kitāb* signified in principle “missive” in the early documents, and gained a broader meaning over time, it has a much broader application than the term “letter”.<sup>2</sup>

### Documentary letters on papyrus

The present survey concentrates on *documentary*, *original* letters. Model letters described in secretaries’ handbooks or copies of famous letters found in anthologies or historical sources are excluded. Literary transmissions and treatises are beyond the scope of this work.<sup>3</sup>

As the study is confined to letters written on papyrus from Egypt, the time span covered by the analysis is the 1<sup>st</sup> - 4<sup>th</sup> / 7<sup>th</sup> - 10<sup>th</sup> centuries, with a focus on the 3<sup>rd</sup> / 9<sup>th</sup> century. The majority of these Arabic letters were written by Muslims.

### Private and business letters

“Private and business” not only refers to the letters’ content but to the environment of emergence being the private realm and the realm of economy and trade – in contrast to official and administrative correspondence from, to, and between the authorities. The private realm leads us close to the grass-roots perspective on writing and the written records of people who were not professional scribes. Furthermore, the papyri correspondence formed a part of life of many people who, though illiterate, nevertheless used letters as a means of communication. In such an environment, letter writing standards were quite different from those in the official realm, where one could refer to traditions of letter writing in terms of different schools and levels of administration. Even though correspondence in the private realm must have been heavily influenced by official formulary and formulae, it possessed its own characteristics and standards. As a rule, there is a personal relation between the sender and recipient of a private or business letters that extends beyond the correspondence itself. In this sense private and business letters are written from specific individuals to specific recipients (or groups of recipients) who share a high degree of solidarity and familiarity without a big power divide. See chapter 3.5.2. on the distinction between the private letter and business letter.

For many letters, the classification as private or business is straightforward. However, there are letters that are more borderline: What about letters between functionaries that, besides work correspondence, contain passages of a private nature? The division between private and official correspondence is not strict, and

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Madigan 2001:107.

<sup>3</sup> See for that concern Gully 2008, focusing on the 5<sup>th</sup> - 9<sup>th</sup> / 11<sup>th</sup> - 15<sup>th</sup> centuries.

similar formulaires were used in both realms. Moreover, the actual relationship between sender and recipient was the shaping force in the correspondence, rather than the desire to conform to the demands of a particular text genre. Therefore, a few examples of letters between low functionaries are represented in this survey. Petitions exhibit another problematic overlap between private and business letters. Petitions to authorities were excluded from this survey. However, letters of request were included when the sender was apparently familiar with the recipient and had actually sent his request, rather than handing it over personally (as was the standard procedure of submitting a petition). The distinct genre of letters of recommendation has been excluded altogether. Orders of payment (or delivery) form another special subcategory of letters. Generally, they are extremely short, consisting only of *Basmala*, *initial blessing(s)*, the order itself, and *final blessing(s)*, and lack any structural complexity. Furthermore, they have a pronounced “one-way” nature, without mutual interest in correspondence between the parties involved. Being unattractive for this study, they were also excluded.

### Arabic papyrology

Arabic papyrology works with Arabic documentary texts mainly from Egypt, found in excavations, or in diggings by locals who subsequently sold them on the antiquity markets. Many thousands of documents (some of them fragmentary) have reached European and American libraries – among them a high percentage of letters. But so far only a small portion of the documents (about 2500 pieces) have been edited and published (see chapter 1).

The first cornerstone of Arabic papyrology was laid by Karabacek 1894 with the famous PERF: “Papyri Erzherzog Rainer: Führer durch die Ausstellung”, a catalogue with rich commentary on documents of the Vienna collection, followed by the important editions of Abel 1896-1900 on papyri kept in Berlin, and Becker 1906 on papyri in Heidelberg – including some of the famous Arabic Qurra-letters. After World War I, the next important editions were published in the 1930s and, after World War II, in the 1950s – both with the Austrian Grohmann as a leading figure.

In 1937 Jahn published the first article dedicated to Arabic epistolography: “Vom frühislamischen Briefwesen. Studien zur islamischen Epistolographie der ersten drei Jahrhunderte der Hīgra auf Grund der arabischen Papyri”. It included the edition of 17 Arabic papyrus letters. Then, in the 1950s, the ground-breaking work for Arabic letters followed: The volume of Dietrich 1955 on the letters of the Hamburg collection contained the edition of 69 mostly papyrus letters with detailed commentary. The same year also saw the publication of Grohmann's fifth volume of the Papyri of the Egyptian Library with 73 economic texts, among them many business letters.

From the 1970s up to the present, we owe a multitude of publications to Rāḡib. Among them are the important archives of textile merchants from the Fayyūm. Since the 1990s Diem has also made an invaluable contribution to general Arabic papyrology, and specifically to letters, publishing many volumes of editions with rich commentaries and indices. Unlike most of his predecessors, Diem did not just concentrate on papyrus letters but dedicated three heavy volumes of editions exclusively to letters on paper (P.Vind.Arab. I to III).

With more and more scholars working in the field of Arabic papyrology, the volume of published letters has risen considerably since the 1990s. However, studies and reflections on Arabic epistolography have remained sparse. An important contribution was made by Khan 1990 with his article on “The historical development of the structure of medieval Arabic petitions”. He also paid special attention to diachronic aspects in some of his other publications. The phraseology of letters was the subject of an article by Diem in 2004 on the phenomenon of the epistolary perfect. A first general, concise overview on Arabic letter writing can be found in Diem 2008b, in which he also touches on the value of Arabic letters as a source for cultural, social, and political history – a source however, whose potential has not yet been tapped. The article includes a bibliography of the most important editions. Moreover, in his volumes of editions Diem includes a multitude of small surveys on aspects of letter writing that range very broadly, from topoi to phraseology to layout. Unfortunately, due to their scattered nature, these valuable surveys and compilations are not easily accessible to anyone not already familiar with his works.

### **Methodology and central questions**

The point of departure for the present work was a field of study providing almost exclusively primary data – i.e., many editions of uneven quality (see chapter 1.4. on the actual corpus of editions of letters for this work). Reflections and also secondary resources are to a very large extent missing. Both the compilation and processing of the primary data and the search for methodologically adequate approaches were challenges and important concerns.

The Arabic Papyrology Database (APD) was the first step for the retrieval of data. Being a full-text database with sophisticated possibilities to run searches, it provides an important basis of research. Data are being steadily entered into the APD (openly accessible on [www.ori.uzh.ch/apd](http://www.ori.uzh.ch/apd)) with the mid-term aim of covering all published documentary Arabic papyrus and paper documents. In the context of this study, I entered and processed two archives – P.Marchands (letters from the 3<sup>rd</sup> / 9<sup>th</sup> c.) and P.QuseirArab. (letters from 7<sup>th</sup> / 13<sup>th</sup> c.), thereby enlarging the database by more than 200 documents. The work with the documents in the frame of their linguistic processing in the APD was very intense.



Coming from General Linguistics with a typological background, I was fascinated by the letters' intriguing, unwieldy structures and their foreign character. The central question of the thesis developed as follows:

What is the algorithm (i.e., the order of operation) of Arabic letter writing?

A comparison with the epistolography of surrounding or preceding cultures showed the stunning peculiarity of the Arabic ones. It very soon became clear that they deserved a special treatment – but which one?

Being part of the Swiss National Centre of Competence in Research on “Mediality: Historical Perspectives”, I came into contact with many issues of mediality in premodern societies that challenged my linguist's perspective of treating text primarily as the coding of linguistic information. Aspects of materiality, creation of authority, interference with vocality, etc., cast new light on systems of notification in their specific cultural context. Discussions within the research association on the different dimensions of script were especially fruitful and an important direction to my approach.<sup>4</sup> In adapting six basic dimensions of scripts for my letters, I came to a cluster of questions:

1. *Referential dimension of script: The epistolary language*

What distinguishes the language of the papyri letters? Can we postulate a Documentary Standard as a counterpart to the Literary Standard of Classical Arabic

2. *Operative dimension of script: The epistolary formulary*

What are the letters' elements and underlying templates? What kinds and levels of dependencies and restrictions are there for the formulary and the content of the letter? What can we learn from a letter's layout and graphical markings?

3. *Presentic dimension of script: The epistolary dialogue*

How are the relationships between the parties displayed? What are the codes to decipher their relationship? Which elements carry what kind of social functions?

4. *Auratic dimension of script: The epistolary charisma*

What status had the written word as a written word?

5. *Performative dimension of script: The epistolary interface*

How is speech mapped onto the documents? What happens in the act of reading a document? What is the general significance of vocality in letter writing? How does the materiality of papyrus influence the concept of letter writing?

6. *Reflexive dimension of script: The epistolary frame*

How does the “letter” nature determine structure? How do the letters refer to themselves? Are there changing conceptions of letter writing over time?

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4 Cf. Krämer 2005; Kiening 2008.

Analysing the documents in consideration of these questions and reflecting on their wider cultural environment, I found myself following different tracks in questions of **form and function, content and context**. In the beginning it was difficult to estimate how big the additional benefit of a holistic approach would actually be in understanding the letters' structure. But I was surprised and excited by the results and the unexpected connections that showed up in the course of the research.

The scarcity of existent surveys on Arabic epistolography left me with the challenge of finding a concrete methodology with which to approach the different questions presented above. In many cases personal compilations of data and quantitative analyses formed the basis for the more detailed, qualitative analysis or hypotheses that followed. My mode of operation was strongly inductive, leading to a great familiarity with the material. Besides the letters – which are the topic of this thesis – other documentary material was consulted frequently. See especially chapter 1's review of the conventional custom of assigning centuries to undated documents, chapter 5 on the development of script, and chapter 3 for general considerations of the setting of the letters within the wider spectrum of written records.

### Overview on results

This study is the first broader survey of medieval Arabic documentary letters. It combines basic information and overviews with entirely new insights into the respective topics. The results are presented in five main chapters:

#### *Chapter 1: Numbers, materials, and distribution over time*

Arabic private and business letters in the general setting of ongoing arabisation and islamisation. Review of the conventional custom of assigning centuries to undated documents. The transition from papyrus to paper. The material covered in this analysis.

#### *Chapter 2: Formulary*

The important concepts of Arabic letter writing, information structure, and templates. The different sections, their peculiarities, structure, and order.

#### *Chapter 3: Pragmatics*

Letter writing, sending, and reading: content and style seen in the light of the cultural context. Ten annotated sample letters are given in the appendix that cover some typical occasions of letter writing.

#### *Chapter 4: Language*

The typical features of the letters' varieties of Arabic. Concepts of epistolographic structuring. New suggestions on approaches to a Documentary Standard.

### *Chapter 5: Script and layout*

Script developments. Aspects of text arrangement in primary and secondary use of a papyrus sheet. Compilation and classification of the layout features set into relationship to the letters' inner structure.

### **Letting the letters “speak” to us**

It was an important concern to give the letters themselves a central place in the study. A multitude of examples illustrating my arguments are presented from private and business letters taken from different collections and editions. Deviations from the Arabic text of the editions are marked with footnotes. However, the translations are all given in English, harmonised and adjusted to the specific purpose of the example – staying as close to the Arabic text as possible.

The transliteration of the Arabic text follows the DIN 31635-standard (based on the rules of the Deutsche Morgenländische Gesellschaft). No shortening or lengthening of vowels is reflected, e.g., *fi l-bayt* (instead of shortened *fi l-bayt* “in the house”) or *baytuhu* (instead of lengthened *baytuhū* “his house”). *Hamza* is always transliterated as <ʾ>, even at the beginning of a word. The *Nisba* suffix and form *faʿīl* of nouns with weak third radical are transcribed with geminated consonant, analogous to the pronunciation of today, e.g., *nabiyyun* and *al-qūṣiyyu* (instead of *nabīyun* “a prophet” and *al-qūṣīyu* “the one from Qūṣ”).

The placement of short vowels for case and mood-distinction has been retained when the Arabic *rasm* (consonantal skeleton) allowed for it. However, not all grammatical deviations from Classical Arabic have been marked. See chapter 4.1. for the selective placement of “read so (!)” .



## Abbreviations

r	recto	
v	verso	
rs	right side	
m	middle	
ls	left side	
rm	right margin	
lm	left margin	
[ ]	Single square brackets:	Text believed to be written by the scribe but disappeared since. Completed by the editor.
{ }	Curly brackets:	Text written by mistake (by the scribe). In cases where a misspelled word (in curly brackets) was corrected by the scribe himself, the correct word follows the misspelled one without brackets. If the editor corrected the word, the corrected word follows in angular brackets.
⌈ ⌋	Double square brackets:	Erasures, deleted by the scribe.
< >	Angular brackets:	Text left out by the scribe. Completed by the editor.
˘ ˙	Insertion:	Text written by the scribe above the writing line.
...	Missing letters:	The amount of dots corresponds roughly to the amount of missing letters.

Example: P.Marchands II 1.v1-2: [ls1] (...) *bi-l-fayyūmi* [ls2] [*ba*] *lliḡ hudīta*

Edition P.Marchands II – document 1 – .verso – lines 1 to 2 : [left side line 1] – (text left out) – Arabic text – [left side line 2] – [Arabic text completed] Arabic text

For sigles of editions, see bibliography.



## 1. Numbers, materials, and distribution over time

The first Arabic private and business letters appear in Egypt<sup>1</sup> in the late 1<sup>st</sup> c. Hiġra / 7<sup>th</sup> c. CE and early 2<sup>nd</sup> c. Hiġra / 8<sup>th</sup> c. CE.<sup>2</sup> From the turn of the 3<sup>rd</sup> / 9<sup>th</sup> century, the number of documents preserved explodes, and there is evidence of archives of connected documents from that century. But the question of assigning a date to a document is still in many instances problematic. See chapter 1.1. for new insights into the topic.

One thing is clear, however: Arabic correspondence became increasingly routine in an environment of advanced arabisation (see chapter 1.2.). The distribution of the published documents reflects a steadily increasing production of Arabic papyri which continued until the time when papyrus gave way to paper after the 4<sup>th</sup> / 10<sup>th</sup> century. This transition from papyrus to paper is analysed in chapter 1.3.

So far, only a few hundred Arabic documentary private and business letters in Arabic script have been published.<sup>3</sup> The major editions comprise about 600 items with full edition and translation:<sup>4</sup> 500 of them provide an image of the document; 100 do not. Of these 600, about 60% are written on papyrus and 40% on paper.<sup>5</sup>

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1 In what follows, only documentary evidence from Egypt is considered, including the few cases of letters having been written from outside Egypt and sent to partners within Egypt.

2 The oldest business letter known so far was edited by Yūsuf Rāġib 1991a as P.RagibPlusAncienneLettre. It is written over a Latin text on parchment. The letter itself does not carry any date, but was assigned the 1<sup>st</sup> c. Hiġra due to palaeographic considerations. Besides P.RagibPlusAncienneLettre, another very early letter is P.Hamb.Arab. II 65. Its script points to an emergence in the mid of the 1<sup>st</sup> / 7<sup>th</sup> c. (Dietrich 1955:220) (See chapter 5, illustration 9).

For a general compilation of the oldest known papyri (and documentary parchments), see Rāġib 1996b.

3 About three-fifths of these letters are business letters, the other two-fifths being private letters. Their differentiation is, however, in many instances problematical, since private and business affairs are often intermingled.

4 Another ca. 100 private and business letters lack either an edition or a translation. More than 400 letters are listed in catalogues of collections without edition and translation (especially P.Ryl.Arab. I, P.Ryl.Arab. II, and P.Khallili II) However, out of these 500 pieces, 200 are provided with a picture (P.Khallili II).

Other writing materials only very sporadically occur.<sup>6</sup> The percentage of letters among documentary Arabic material is high. If we include official letters as well, letters amount to 40% of all documents published so far.

The present survey will only consider the ca. 350 published papyrus documents that are provided with full edition and translation (80% with picture).<sup>7</sup> See chapter 1.4. on the corpus of this survey. The fact that the papyrus documents outnumber the paper documents does not reflect the actual holdings of most collections but is probably caused by the generally easier readability of papyrus documents and the special interest of the research community in the first few centuries of Islam.

### 1.1. The ordeal of dating

Only a handful of Arabic private or business letters carry a date themselves, are written on the same papyrus sheet as another dated document, or are reliably dateable on the basis of content (i.e., are *internally dated*).<sup>8</sup> The overwhelming majority have been assigned by their editors to one century or to a span of several centuries, and paper documents cause the editors even more problems than those on papyrus.<sup>9</sup> Around 300 years elapsed between the Muslim invasion of Egypt in 639 CE by ʿAmr b. al-ʿĀṣ and the replacement of papyrus by paper in Egypt. Papyrus production was probably stopped in the first half of the 4<sup>th</sup> / 10<sup>th</sup> century (see chapter 1.3.). The majority of the papyrus documents have been assigned to the 3<sup>rd</sup> / 9<sup>th</sup> c., mainly on the basis of palaeographics: Existent palaeographic studies of Arabic papyrology focus nearly exclusively on the early documents and sketch the script developments in the 1<sup>st</sup> - 2<sup>nd</sup> c. Hiġra (see chapter 5.1.). This “Early Script” was contrasted with the later script of advanced cursiveness: consequently, papyrus documents with advanced cursiveness were usually

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5 If we also include documents without full edition or translation, the figures grow even more extreme and result in a dominance of papyrus letters of nearly 80%. Nearly all paper documents are thus published with full edition, translation, and scan. See the editions by Diem (P.Berl.Arab. II; P.Heid.Arab. II; P.Vind.Arab. I; P.Vind.Arab. II) and Khan (P.GenizahCambr.).

6 So far, only three private and business letters on parchment have been published (P.RagibPlusAncienneLettre; P.GissArab. 16; P.Giss.Arab. 17), and one business letter on an ostrakon (P.GrohmannOstraka 4).

7 Republished letters are only counted once.

8 Internally dated Arabic private and business letters on papyrus (only documents with full edition and translation):

P.Jahn 3 (dated 127 / 745); P.Jahn 4 (after 127 / 745); P.Giss.Arab. 9 (around 178 / 794); P.Ryl.Arab. I VI 8 (around 200 / 815); P.Cair.Arab. 288 (before 236 / 851); P.Philad.Arab. 75 (= P.LevideLLaVidaDamietta = P.World p. 122) (before 241 / 855, after 238 / 853); P.Khalili I 30 (after 268 / 882); P.Hamb.Arab. II 57 (before 270 / 883); P.Cair.Arab. 334 (before 278 / 891-2); P.Hamb.Arab. II 42 (after 304 / 916-7); P.Hamb.Arab. II 45 (before 310 / 922-3).

9 Of the paper documents, 20% were assigned a span of two centuries or even more by their editors.



assigned to the 3<sup>rd</sup> / 9<sup>th</sup> century. This common practice ended up not being questioned any more.<sup>10</sup>

However, a comparison using internally dated documents shows that this is problematic. Chart 1 below comprises a compilation of internally dated documents from Egypt, distinguished by the writing materials papyrus, parchment, and paper.<sup>11</sup> In chart 2 only the papyrus documents are represented. Table 1 compares the distribution of internally dated documents per century to documents assigned a single century by their editors. The disaccord in the distribution is striking.

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10 Cf. Grob (in press)a . See Morelli 2001:12-13 on similar problems regarding Greek texts of the Arab period.

11 The following numbers are based on my own compilation of published documentary Arabic material from Egypt, and include all obtainable publications. As of May 09, I was aware of 478 Arabic documents on papyrus, 312 on paper, and 66 on parchment that carry a date in their text, most of them of legal nature. Another 191 on papyrus, 70 on paper, and 4 on parchment can be assigned a short period of time with great certainty by content or on the basis of related, dated documents. However, *ante quem* and *post quem* are not distinguished. The following compilation is based on both of these groups.

At present, no central database of edited Arabic documents exists. The ISAP Checklist of Arabic Documents can be found at [www.ori.uzh.ch/isap/isapchecklist.html](http://www.ori.uzh.ch/isap/isapchecklist.html) (Aug. 2009). Some documents are already included in the Arabic Papyrology Database (APD, [www.ori.uzh.ch/apd](http://www.ori.uzh.ch/apd)) (Aug. 2009).

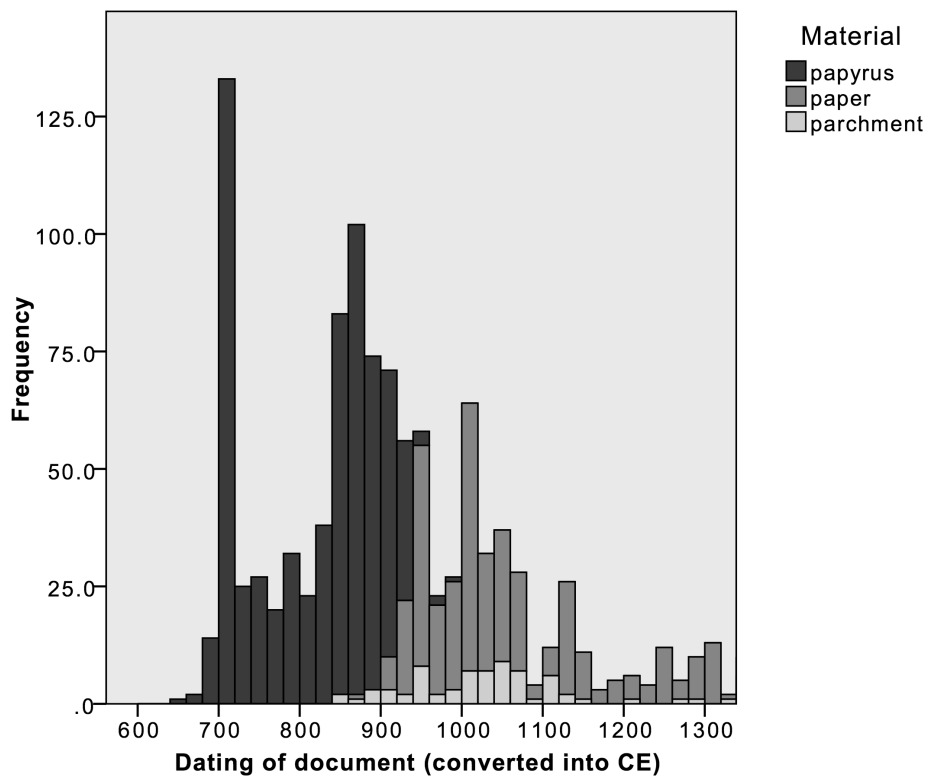


Chart 1: Internally dated Arabic documents from Egypt written on papyrus, paper, and parchment

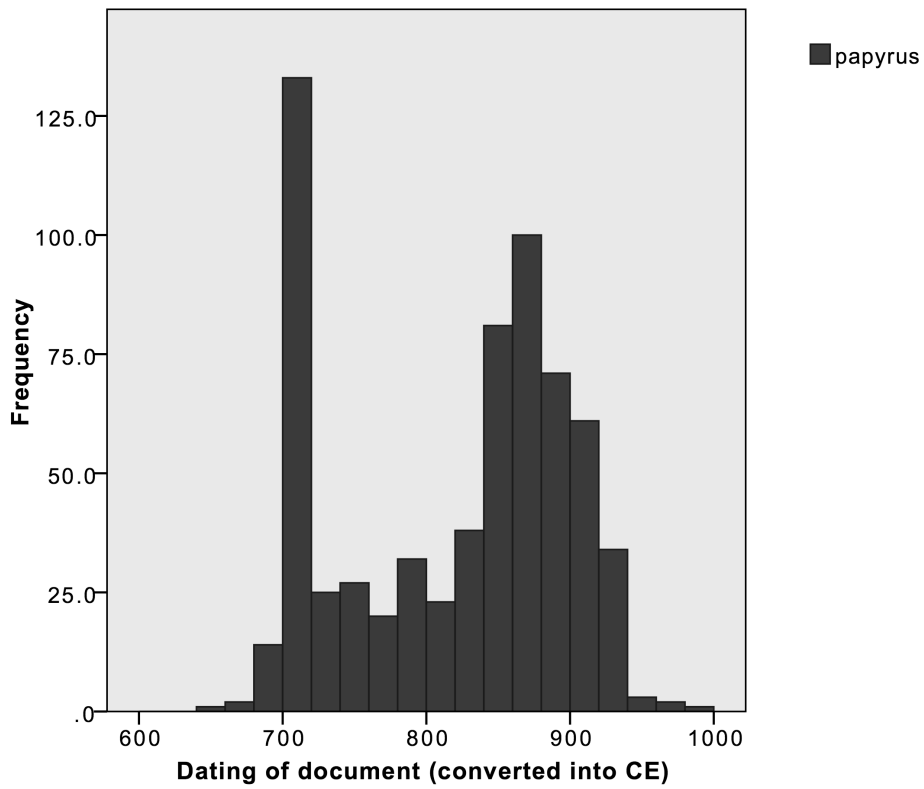


Chart 2: Internally dated Arabic documents from Egypt written on papyrus

Document type (papyri from Egypt)	7 <sup>th</sup> c. CE	8 <sup>th</sup> c. CE	9 <sup>th</sup> c. CE	10 <sup>th</sup> c. CE	total
Internally dated, <sup>12</sup> all genres (chart 2)	18	236	321	94	699
	3%	35%	<b>48%</b>	14%	100%
Internally dated, all genres, without protocols <sup>13</sup>	4	113	278	81	542
	1%	24%	<b>58%</b>	17%	100%
Internally dated, without years 706-715 <sup>14</sup> , all genres	18	110	321	94	542
	3%	20%	<b>60%</b>	17%	100%
Internally dated, without years 706-715, all genres, without protocols	4	62	277	81	476
	1%	15%	<b>65%</b>	19%	100%
All genres, assigned <i>one</i> century	6	71	1012	25	1114
	1%	6%	<b>91%</b>	2%	100%
All genres, assigned <i>one</i> century with full edition and translation	6	54	526	23	609
	1%	9%	<b>86%</b>	4%	100%
Private and business letters, assigned <i>one</i> century with full edition and translation <sup>15</sup>	1	29	255	14	299
	1%	9%	<b>85%</b>	5%	100%

Table 1: Distribution of papyri

The compilation of internally dated documents illustrates clearly that the 3<sup>rd</sup> / 9<sup>th</sup> c. shows by far the highest concentration in absolute numbers, accounting for about half of all published documents. The 2<sup>nd</sup> / 8<sup>th</sup> c. is represented with about a third, and the 4<sup>th</sup> / 10<sup>th</sup> c. with a sixth of all documents.

We would now expect that the temporal distribution of the non-dated documents would loosely correspond to the temporal distribution of the internally dated

12 From these 699 documents, 90% are provided with edition and translation, 5% with edition but no translation, 3 pieces (0.3%) with translation but no edition, and another 5% provide neither edition nor translation.

13 Texts that were not specified a kind by their editors are also subtracted here.

14 The years 87-97 / 706-15 comprise mainly the exceptional case of the Qurra dossier and some of the numerous protocols produced under the reign of the caliphs Abū Muḥammad °Alī b. Aḥmad al-Mu°taḍid al-Muktafi Billāh (289-95 / 902-8) and Abū I-Faḍl Ġa°far b. Aḥmad al-Mu°taḍid al-Muqtadir Billāh (295-320 / 908-32).

Other dossiers of documentary material only contain very few dated documents.

15 Letters that have been assigned two or more centuries are not listed here.

documents.<sup>16</sup> However, the proportions of non-dated documents assigned the 1<sup>st</sup> / 7<sup>th</sup>, 2<sup>nd</sup> / 8<sup>th</sup>, 3<sup>rd</sup> / 9<sup>th</sup>, or 4<sup>th</sup> / 10<sup>th</sup> c., respectively, are different. The 3<sup>rd</sup> / 9<sup>th</sup> c. is clearly over-represented. More than 90% of the non-dated documents on papyrus were assigned the 3<sup>rd</sup> / 9<sup>th</sup> century. Indeed, “3<sup>rd</sup> / 9<sup>th</sup> c.” is considered the default-category for Arabic papyri. This is supported by the observation that fewer papyri are assigned “3<sup>rd</sup> / 9<sup>th</sup> c.” when documents are worked on further: Among documents with full edition and translation, the percentage of documents assigned “3<sup>rd</sup> / 9<sup>th</sup> c.” is smaller than on lists of unedited papyri in catalogues of collections. But it is still far higher than the percentage assigned to this century in the internally dated material.

From these figures we can conclude that a considerable number of non-dated papyrus documents assigned to the 3<sup>rd</sup> / 9<sup>th</sup> c. – including many private and business letters –are in fact probably either 2<sup>nd</sup> / 8<sup>th</sup> or early 4<sup>th</sup> / 10<sup>th</sup> c. documents.<sup>17</sup> Note that in the references to editions for the examples, I retained the assignation of centuries by the editors.

Whereas Arabic papyrus documents cover only about 300 years, paper documents are spread over a longer period, starting with the late 3<sup>rd</sup> / 9<sup>th</sup> century. Although some published paper documents are assigned the 9<sup>th</sup> / 15<sup>th</sup> or 10<sup>th</sup> / 16<sup>th</sup> c., the majority was probably written between the 4<sup>th</sup> / 10<sup>th</sup> and the 7<sup>th</sup> / 13<sup>th</sup> century. Having shown that dating of papyrus letters is already problematic, dating of paper documents is *highly* problematic, and palaeographic studies are an absolute *desideratum*. This is particularly true because the palaeographic spectrum increases enormously after the 4<sup>th</sup> / 10<sup>th</sup> century.

However, dating a given document by palaeography remains a difficult task, because the age of the writer, the closeness to centres of innovation, and other speculative factors must be considered.

## 1.2. The arabisation of Egypt

Observations of numbers and distribution of Arabic documents in the first few centuries of the Hiġra are closely connected (1) to questions of arabisation,<sup>18</sup> changes in overall population size,<sup>19</sup> and conversion to Islam and Islamisation,<sup>20</sup>

16 See Habermann 1998 on the distribution of Greek documentary evidence, especially p. 156 with a drawing comparing the distribution of (dated or datable) letters to the distribution of dated documents of all genres. The graphs are parallel to a large degree.

17 Particularly the 4<sup>th</sup> / 10<sup>th</sup> c. For further discussion, see chapter 1.2.

18 On the arabisation of Egypt, see especially Garcin 1987; Décobert 1992; Wasserstein 2003. In special consideration of the documentary material, see Björnesjö 1996; Richter 2009.

19 On changes in overall population size of Egypt, see especially Russel 1966; Brett 2005. For approaches considering the whole Muslim empire(s), see Issawi 1981; Garcin 2000.

20 Islamisation here understood as socio-cultural consequences of the conversion to Islam (Décobert 1992:274). On the islamisation of Egypt, see especially Lapidus 1972; Bulliet 1979; Brett 2005. Be aware that arabisation and Islamisation do not have to run parallel. E.g., in a quantitative and qualitative analysis of Arabic toponyms in Egypt, Björnesjö 1996b states

and (2) to the degree that transactions and interactions are reflected in written records.<sup>21</sup> Here the focus will be on the former issues. The latter factor is still to a great extent unexplored.

The increasing number of Arabic documents points to several parallel developments. The first stage included a growing Arabic-speaking population outside of the capital al-Fustāt<sup>22</sup> and the language shift in administration from Greek to Arabic under the caliph ʿAbd al-Malik. However, the language transition was hardly abrupt – Greek (and, on low administrative levels, also Coptic) persisted as languages of the Muslim chancery, possibly into the 3<sup>rd</sup> / 9<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>23</sup>

Arab officials were among the first to settle in the countryside. The majority of the early documents, including letters, are therefore related to tax paying and administration. Administrative Arabic documents, like tax receipts, however, say little about the arabisation of the local population.

It took some time before Arabs became involved in agriculture (mid 2<sup>nd</sup> / 8<sup>th</sup> c.). Settlings of Muslim Arabs and intermarriage with Copts were an important precondition for broad conversions among the native population.<sup>24</sup> In this context, Frantz-Murphy 1991 points to the importance of fiscal reforms, which reduced the influence of the Coptic Church and Coptic elite by making tax-payers directly liable to the government. Numbers, however, are lacking, and documentary material also shows that the different parts of Egypt were not arabised at the same pace.<sup>25</sup>

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(p. 28): “Par ailleurs il est fort intéressant de noter qu’une province du Delta garde jusqu’au X<sup>IV</sup>e siècle au moins une assez forte proportion de toponymes non arabes (...), alors que le Delta a été massivement islamisé plus tôt que la Haute-Egypte. Une pénétration assez marquée de l’élément arabe dans le paysage ne dénote donc pas forcément une plus forte islamisation.”

21 E.g., a simple shipping of wheat from A to B could be accompanied either by no documentation or by extensive written documentation, including shipping notes, receipts in duplicate, letters announcing and confirming the shipping, and entries into stock-books, etc. Cf. Kaplony 2010.

22 The actual location of discovery of most of the Arabic papyri from Egypt is unknown. However, where we are provided with information either by the collections or by content of the documents themselves, it results in a clear dominance of Upper Egypt and the Fayyūm.

23 Sijpesteijn 2007a:446.

24 Sijpesteijn 2007a:453.

25 Diem 2006a evaluates the names of parties in written obligations and comes to the conclusion: “(...) so läßt sich aus diesen Zahlen doch schließen, daß die Arabisierung und Islamisierung der Provinz al-Fayyūm langsamer erfolgt ist als die der Provinz al-Ušmūnayn” (Diem 2006a:130). These findings are also supported by Mouton 2002:457.

Although documentary material would be perfect for studies of this nature, its potential is far from being tapped (Diem 2006a:126). However, see Björnesjö 1996a for a first survey based on Arabic and Coptic papyri. The ongoing PhD-thesis of Lennart Sundelin (Princeton University), “Arabization and Islamization in the Countryside of Early Medieval Egypt (1st-7th/7th-13th cent.): The Case of the Fayyūm,” will be the first comprehensive analysis of Arabic papyri in this regard.