

Amir Ashur

The Autograph Writings of
Maimonides
in the Cambridge University Library

Granada, 2025

COLECCIÓN TEXTOS Y CULTURAS JUDÍAS

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To my beloved wife Racheli whose
patience, understanding, and constant
support sustained me through years
of Genizah research.

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INTRODUCTION

THE CAIRO GENIZAH AND THE DISCOVERY OF THE AUTOGRAPHS OF MAIMONIDES

The Cairo Genizah, preserved for centuries in the Ben Ezra Synagogue of Fustāṭ, is one of the most remarkable documentary survivals of the medieval world. For nearly a thousand years, the Jewish community of Egypt deposited writings of every sort—sacred texts, letters, drafts, legal documents, school exercises, medical notes—into its storeroom. When Western scholars first gained access to the materials in the late nineteenth century, they discovered an immense, unorganized body of manuscripts reflecting the daily, intellectual, legal, and spiritual life of a vibrant Mediterranean society. Among these hundreds of thousands of fragments lay a set of discoveries that would fundamentally reshape the study of one of Judaism’s greatest thinkers: the autographs of Moses Maimonides.

Before the discovery of the Genizah, only seven words were known with certainty to have been written by him: “*Proofread against my book, I am Moses son of Rabbi Maimon, of blessed memory.*”¹ The Genizah has yielded dozens of leaves written by Maimonides. Some of them he signed; some are identifiable by the characteristics of his handwriting even though they bear no signature; and some are recognizable by their content. In several places, especially in responsa, he signed with the formula “*Written by Moses.*” Maimonides’ handwriting has distinctive features that make it possible to identify the author of many fragments. However, the signs are not always unequivocal, and there are lines of similarity between his script and that of others.

The identification of Maimonides’ handwriting did not occur immediately. The earliest Genizah scholars recognized many texts by content but did not

1. הוגה מספרי אני משה ברבי מימון זצ"ל. Oxford Bodley MS. Huntington 80 (folio 165r). <http://maimonides.bodleian.ox.ac.uk>

always expect to find Maimonides' own penmanship. The first Maimonides' autograph from the Genizah was published by G. Margoliouth, from the British Museum, now kept in the British Library².

The turning point came with the careful work of early twentieth-century scholars, who began to notice consistent palaeographic features in fragments attributed to him.

Over subsequent decades, additional fragments emerged from Genizah collections in Cambridge, Oxford, London, New York and Manchester, gradually forming a coherent corpus of autographs.

These discoveries transformed the field of Maimonidian studies. Instead of relying solely on later manuscripts or printed editions, scholars suddenly had access to his own drafts, his personal letters, his responsa, his medical prescriptions, his marginal notes, and even discarded scraps from his desk. Here was the rare opportunity to observe a medieval author in the full complexity of his working environment: correcting lines in his own treatise, drafting a responsum on the back of a reused leaf, jotting a quick instruction for a community official, or penning a medical note in the margins of a recycled folio. Through these fragments, the Genizah became not simply a repository of his writings but an intimate record of his daily activity as a jurist, philosopher, physician, and communal leader.

In 1957, Joshua Blau took the first major step toward consolidating this material when he published all the Maimonidean responsa then known to survive in autograph, integrating them into his landmark edition of the responsa. Later generations—most notably M.A. Friedman, Paul Fenton, Colette Sirat, Simon Hopkins, Amir Ashur and many others—introduced stricter palaeographic criteria, refined identifications, and added newly discovered fragments from unexamined collections.³ Each decade brought more clarity: drafts of the *Guide for the Perplexed*, large expanses of his Commentary on the Mishnah, early stages of the *Mishneh Torah*, personal letters, administrative directives, and numerous responsa written in his own hand.

Equally significant was the growing recognition of the sheer diversity of this material. Maimonides' autographs do not belong to a single genre or to one phase of his career; rather, they capture the full range of his intellectual and communal life. In some fragments we meet the philosopher, drafting and redrafting chapters of the *Guide*; in others, the halakhist shaping legal codes or responding to queries from distant communities. Many pieces reflect his

2. BL Or. 5519 B.1. G. Margoliouth, 'Responses of Maimonides in the Original Arabic', *JQR*, 11 (1899), pp. 533–550

3. See the bibliography below.

authority as a judge, resolving disputes brought before him from across Egypt. Still others reveal the physician, carefully prescribing treatments or recording medical observations. Administrative notes show him organizing communal charity, coordinating the redemption of captives, or managing financial affairs, while his letters present the teacher and mentor, advising students and corresponding with scholars near and far. Taken together, these fragments create a vivid, multidimensional portrait of a towering figure at work. The Genizah fragments preserve all these activities with immediacy and texture. Many were written quickly, with minimal formality; others are lavishly revised drafts of major works. Some carry traces of everyday use—stains, folding marks, secondary writing—revealing the life cycle of a text long before it became a library treasure object.

By the late twentieth century, with improved access to collections worldwide and the rise of digitization, the corpus of Maimonides' autographs grew not only in size but in methodological coherence. Scholars began assembling catalogues, identifying joins, and comparing handwriting across collections. This work revealed, for example, that fragments of the *Guide* are dispersed across Cambridge, Manchester, Oxford and New York, yet clearly stem from the same autograph draft. Shared features—ink flow, pen angle, characteristic ligatures—demonstrated beyond doubt that these leaves once belonged to Maimonides' personal papers before they entered the Genizah.

Today, the autographs of Maimonides constitute one of the most precious components of the Cairo Genizah. They offer a rare window into the creation of his works, the rhythms of his daily life, and the functioning of the Jewish community of medieval Egypt. No other medieval Jewish thinker is represented by such a rich and varied autograph record. The Genizah allows us not only to read his texts but to watch him write: to see where he hesitated, where he refined an argument, where he crossed out a word in irritation or urgency, where he paused to add marginal clarification for a student or judge.

This book continues that tradition of documentation and clarity. By presenting the autograph fragments coherently, with updated descriptions, bibliographic references, and contextual observations, it aims to make this exceptional body of material more accessible to scholars of Jewish law, philosophy, medicine, and social history. The autographs of Moses Maimonides are more than historical curiosities: they are the living residue of a towering intellect at work, preserved—almost miraculously—by the Cairo Genizah and now dispersed in collections around the world.

Together, they form an unparalleled documentary monument to the life and thought of one of the greatest figures of the medieval world.

This book does not attempt to present the full corpus of Maimonides' autographs, but rather only those preserved in the Genizah collection of

Cambridge University Library. Over the course of this long-term project, I identified approximately 1,800 Genizah documents in Cambridge that relate either to Maimonides' own work or to the activities of his immediate circle—a remarkably large number, which will no doubt grow further once the remaining Genizah collections worldwide are systematically examined. Completing that wider survey is a project I hope to undertake in the future.

Cambridge, 2nd December 2025