

Cambridge Semitic Languages and Cultures

# Arabic Documents from Medieval Nubia

GEOFFREY KHAN



UNIVERSITY OF  
CAMBRIDGE

Faculty of Asian and Middle  
Eastern Studies



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## 12. SCRIPT AND LAYOUT

### 12.1. Preliminary Remarks

The documents in the corpus exhibit a number of variations in the form of their script and the layout of the script on the writing support.

As is generally the situation in medieval Arabic documents, it is difficult to match the form of script in the documents of our corpus with the names of specific script styles that appear in medieval literary sources. This is not only because of the lack of specific descriptive details in the literary sources but also because the script of the documents was typically not carefully executed according to a specific standard (*muḥaqqaq*) but rather was a non-official, poorly executed script, current for popular purposes (*muṭlaq*).<sup>1</sup>

Diacritical dots on the consonants are written only sporadically. There are numerous unconventional ligatures between letters within words and sometimes across words.

### 12.2. Cursive Tendencies

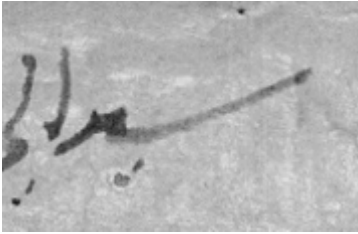
Letter shapes are often simplified by cursive tendencies. These include:

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<sup>1</sup> For this distinction, see al-Qalqaṣandī (d. 821 AH/1418 AD), *Ṣubḥ al-ʿAṣā*, III: 26; Khan (1992, 44–46).

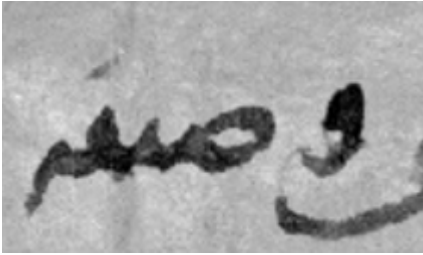
The writing of *sīn* and *šīn* without teeth, e.g.,

Figure 7: سير 'he has sent' (4r:4), left, and شر 'evil' (6r:8), right



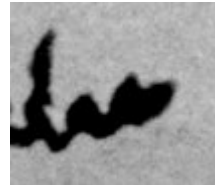
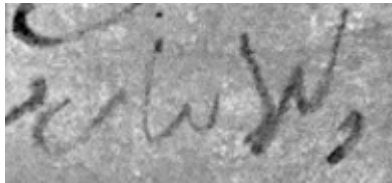
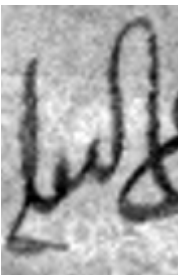
The contraction of the loop in *fā'* and *qāf*:

Figure 9: وصيفة 'a female slave' (4r:4)



Levelling of distinctions between letter forms, e.g.,

Figure 10: الدولة 'the dynasty' (8r:4), left, والانفاذ 'and the sending' (10r:5), middle, هذا 'this' (45:2), right

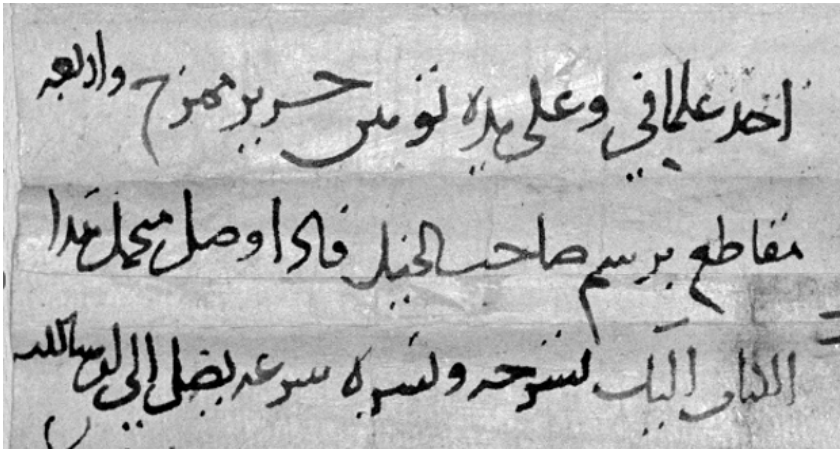


### 12.3. Writing Line

The documents show some differences with regard to the orientation of the writing lines.<sup>2</sup>

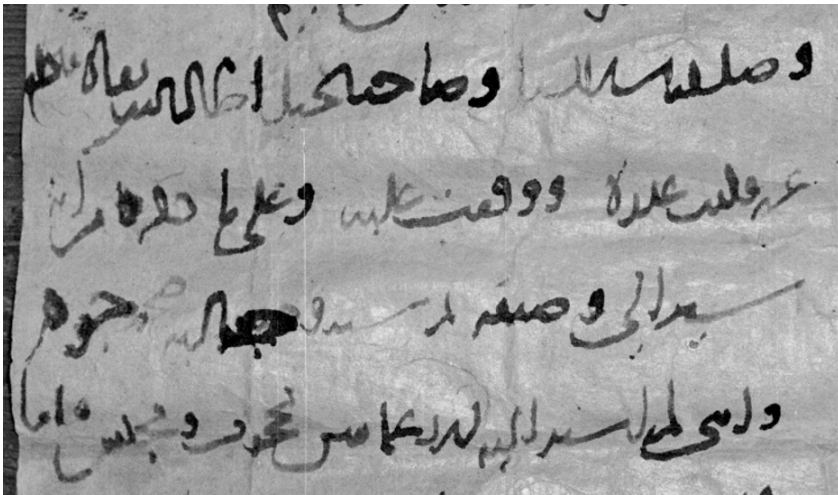
It is common for the line of the script to be level throughout most of the line and then to slant upwards at the end of lines, often stacking words to allow them to be inserted in the remaining space before the left margin, e.g.,

Figure 13: 2r:5–7



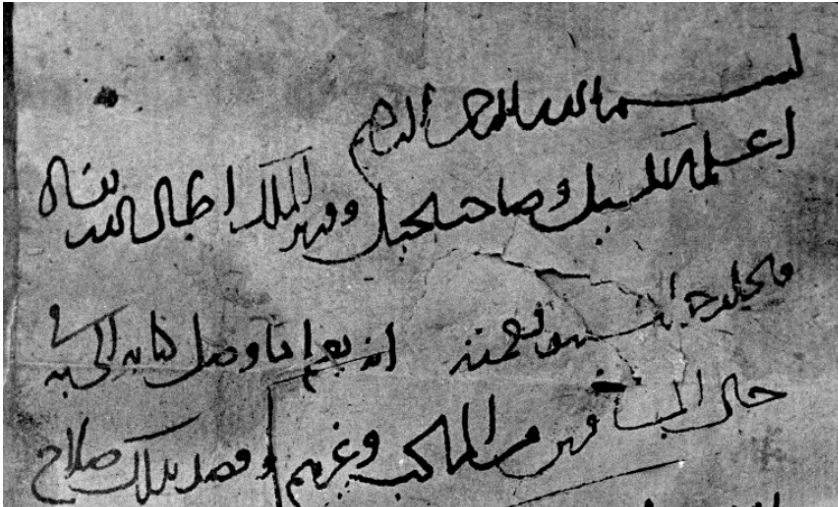
<sup>2</sup> I am using the term writing line to refer to the overall writing line upon which words are placed. This differs from the baseline, which refers to the invisible line upon which single characters within a word are placed. For this distinction, see Grob (2013).

Figure 14: 4r:2-5



In some documents, the writing line slants downwards in most of the line and then is moved upwards at the end with the same angle of downwards slant, e.g.,

Figure 15: 3r:1-4



### 12.4. Line Spacing

In many of the letters, especially those to the eparch, the spacing between the lines is generous, which ensures that the descenders and ascenders of letters do not clash. This can be seen in the samples given above. Other clear examples of this feature are the following:

Figure 16: 6r:1–5

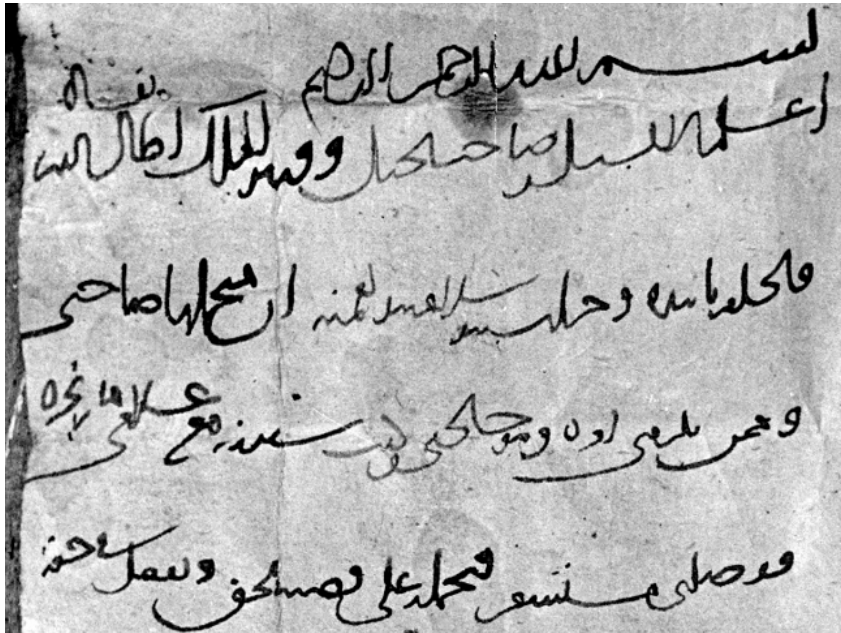
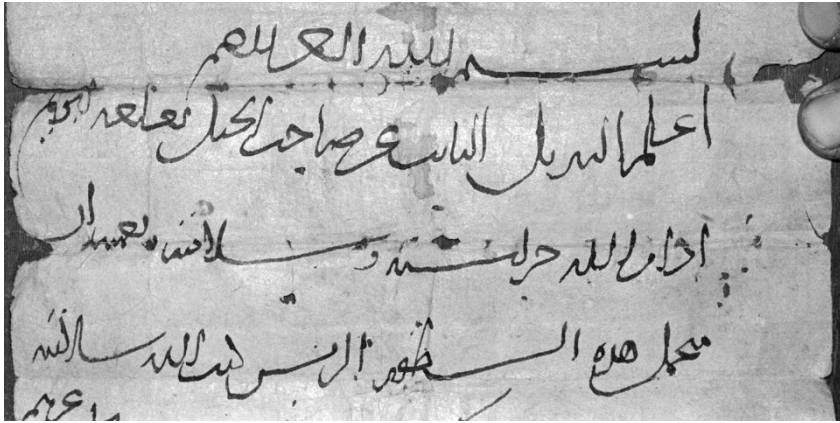






Figure 18: 26r:1–4



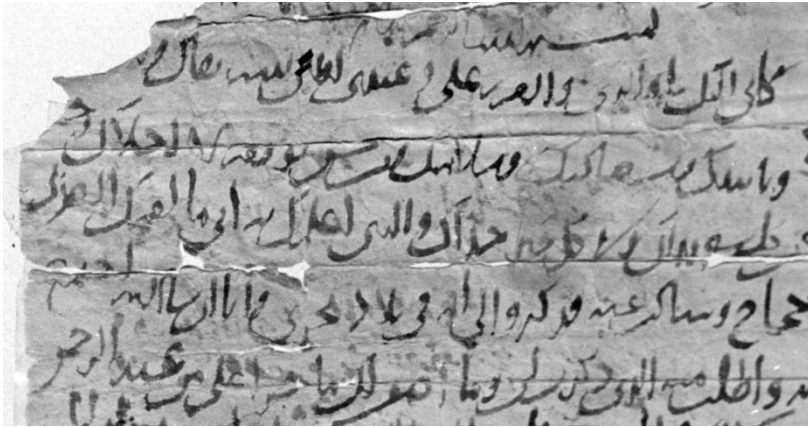
Wide line spacing is a characteristic feature of letters written to addressees of high social status in the Fatimid period. It is found in petitions to the chancery and letters to dignitaries. It is also found in dispositive documents issued by the chancery, such as decrees.<sup>3</sup> The fact that letters in our corpus that are addressed to the eparch and his deputy have this feature reflects the fact that the writers addressed them as dignitaries with a high social status.

In letters that are not addressed to an eparch or dignitary the line spacing is often narrower, e.g.,

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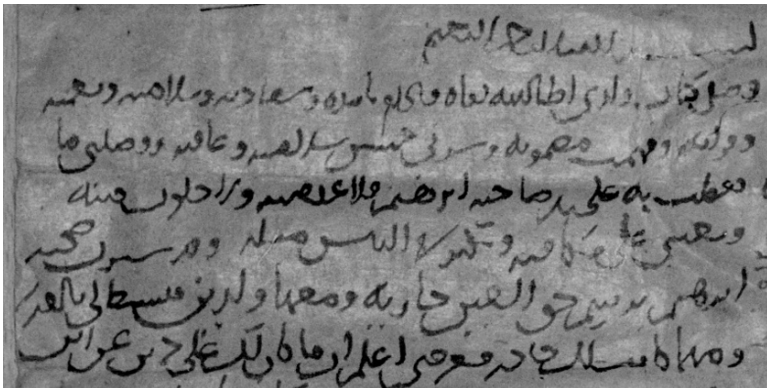
<sup>3</sup> For plates of petitions to the Fatimid chancery, see Khan (1993a). For plates of Fatimid decrees, see Stern (1964). For an example of an Arabic letter with wide spacing to a Karaite dignitary, which has been preserved in the Genizah, see Khan (1993b). For more on the layout and production of Fatimid chancery documents, see Rustow (2020).

Figure 19: 38r:1–6



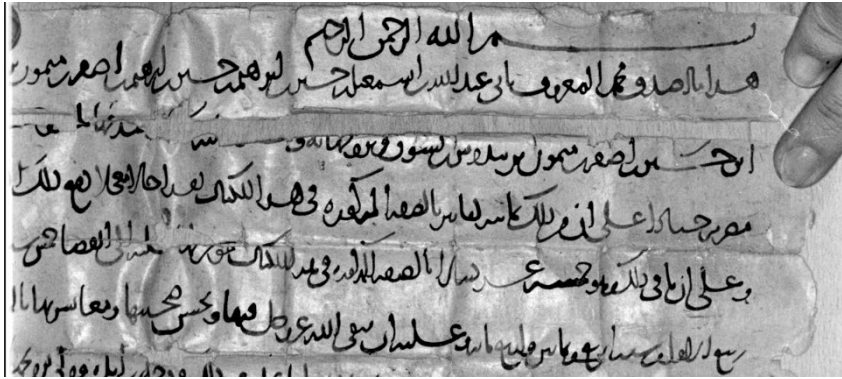
The letters sent by the secretary of Uruwī also do not exhibit conspicuously wide line spacing. This suggests that the secretary was not schooled in Fatimid epistolary *étiquette* to the same extent as the Egyptian writers of letters, which may reflect that he was a Nubian, e.g.,

Figure 20: 17r:1–7



The line spacing of the legal documents is generally not conspicuously wide, but the spacing in the large marriage contract 48 is slightly wider than other documents:

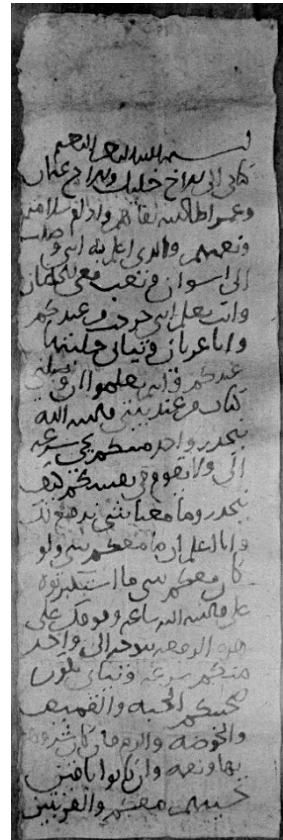
Figure 21: 48r:1–6



### 12.5. Width of the Document

Documents to eparchs and other dignitaries are typically written with a wide format. Letters to addressees of lower social rank are sometimes written on narrower sheets, e.g., Figure 22.

Figure 22: 37 recto



### 12.6. Thickness of the Pen

The samples given above of line spacing in letters also show that those letters written to the eparch and his deputy with wide line spacing tend to be written with a finer pen than those with narrower line spacing.

## 12.7. Margins

Figure 23: 7r:1–6

In both letters and legal documents, a wide space is typically left at the top before the beginning of the text and in the right margin, whereas the text is written up to the left margin, e.g., Figures 23 and 24.

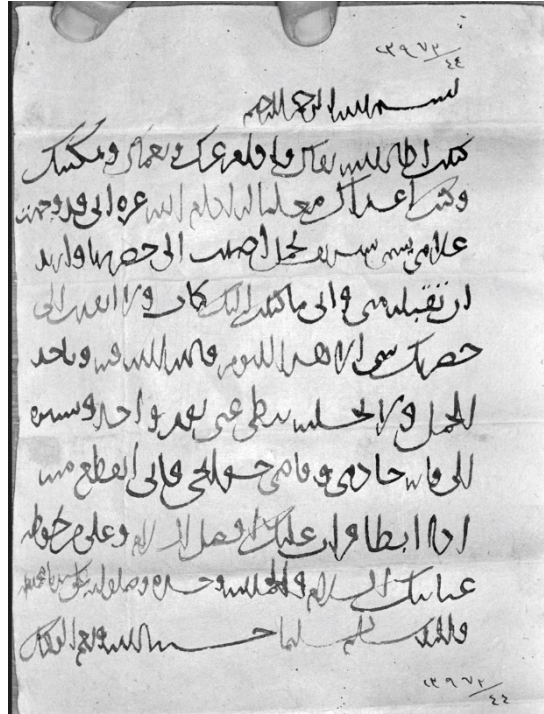
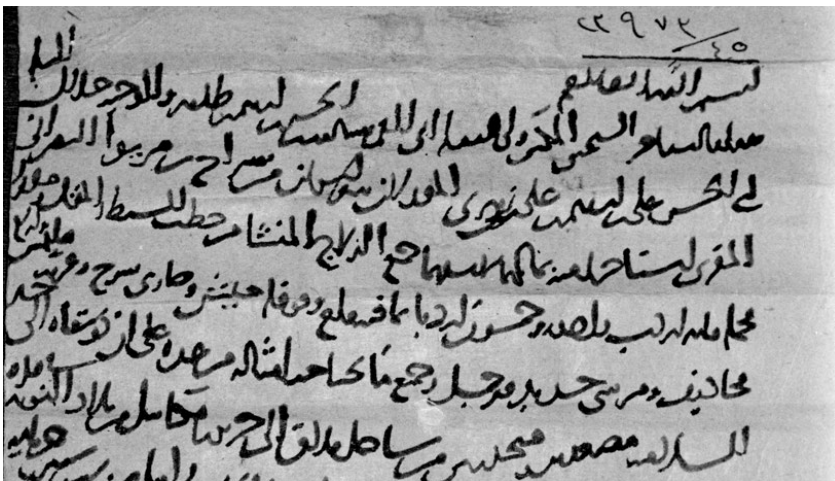


Figure 24: 45:1–8



In letters, the text is generally continued from the bottom of the sheet into the right margin before the writer turns to the verso of the sheet. This practice does not occur in legal documents.

When text is added to the right margin in letters, this may be written as a single line perpendicular to the main text, e.g., Figure 25.

More often, however, the added text in the margin is written as a series of short lines arranged diagonally in relation to the main text. The first of these short lines is written nearest to the end of the main text at the bottom of the sheet and the following lines are written below, filling the margin to the top of the sheet, e.g., Figure 26.

Figure 25: 2 recto

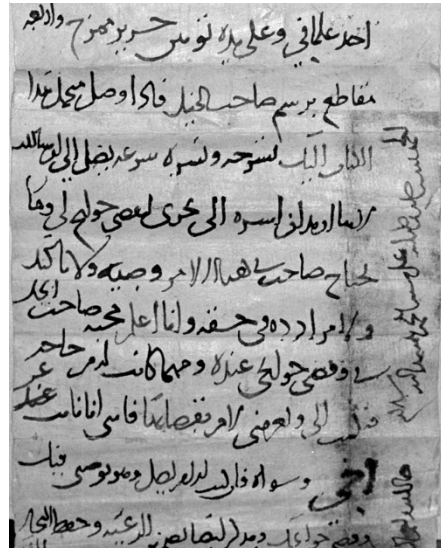
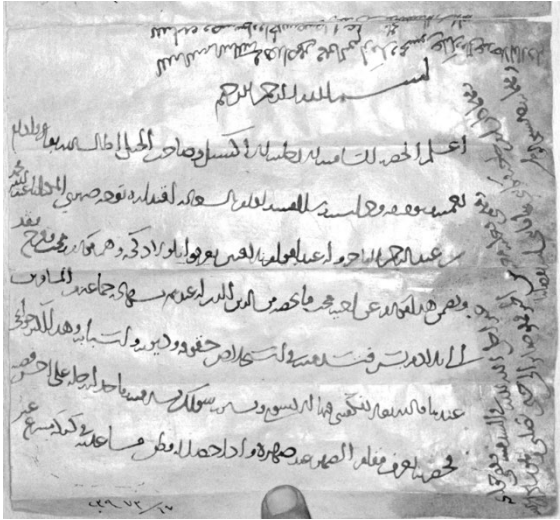


Figure 26: 4 recto



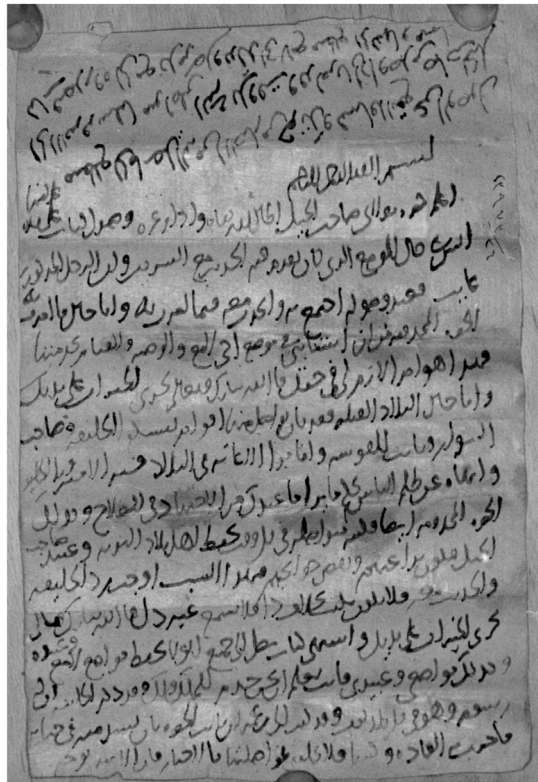
Figure 27: 11 recto



The marginal text occasionally continues into the top margin, written at approximately 180 degrees relative to the main text, e.g., Figure 27.

Figure 28: 16 recto

In some cases, the text continues directly from the bottom of the letter into the upper margin. This appears to be because not enough space was left in the right margin to contain text, e.g., Figure 28.





## 12.8. Text on the Verso

When an address is written on the verso of a letter and there is no continuation of the text of the letter onto the verso, the sheet is turned around the vertical axis and the address is written on the top, e.g.,

Figure 29: 6 recto (left) and 6 verso (right)

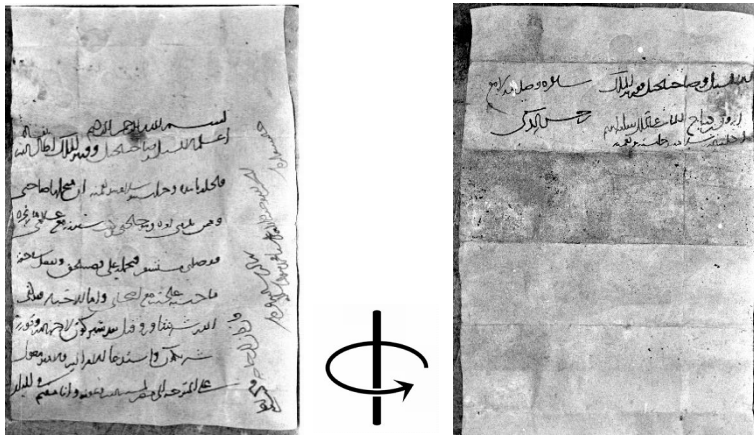


Figure 30: 11 recto (left) and 11 verso (right)



When the text of the recto of the letter continues onto the verso, the sheet is turned around the horizontal axis and the text of the letter is written from the top. The address is then added by

turning the verso 180 degrees, so that the address is up-side-down relative to the text of the verso, e.g.,

Figure 31: 4 recto (left) and 4 verso (right)

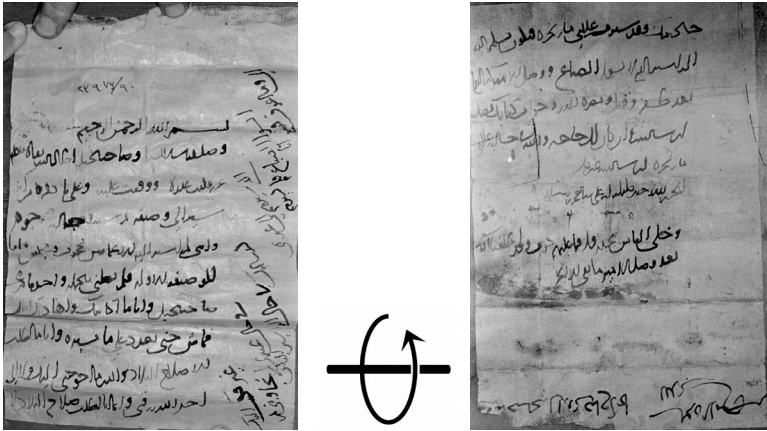
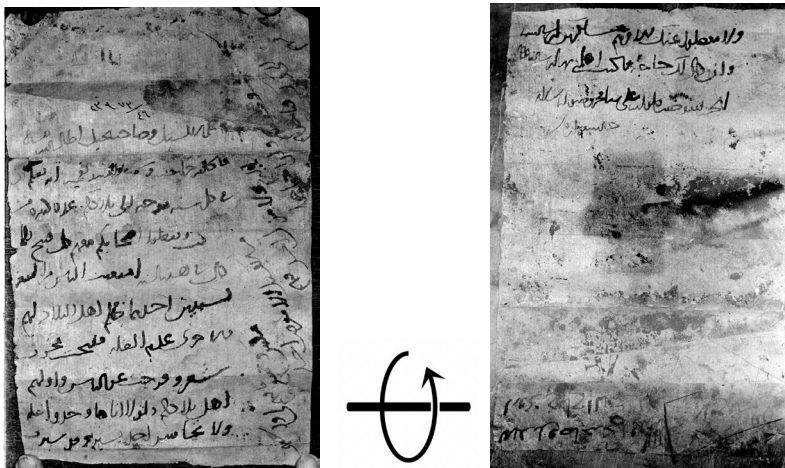


Figure 32: 5 recto (left) and 5 verso (right)



As far as I can establish from the photographs, legal documents were turned on both axes.