The Aramaic legal tradition is remarkable in both its coherence and its diversity. Aramaic deeds of sale from antiquity share a common basic structure, but in their details, they differ radically from corpus to corpus. These differences reflect the multiple layers within this tradition and the diverse sources and influences that it absorbed over the centuries. The present contribution is concerned with one layer in particular, Aramaic deeds of sale from the Judean Desert. These corpora from the Judean Desert, though hardly homogenous, share distinct features that set them apart from other Aramaic legal materials and unify them into a discrete regional sub-tradition. First, I will discuss these features in detail, and then I will consider the broader implications of the distribution of these features.

My analysis concerns five principal corpora of Aramaic materials, three of which were discovered in the Judean Desert. Let us begin with some general comments about these five corpora. First, the Elephantine papyri from southern Egypt, which date to the 5th century B.C.E., include eleven deeds of conveyance, of which two are deeds of sale.\(^1\) Second, the Wadi ed-Daliyeh papyri, which date to the mid-4th century B.C.E. and were discovered in the Judean Desert about fourteen kilometers north of Jericho, consist of twenty-seven documents, including at least ten slave sales and one real estate sale.\(^2\)


Third, there are the Jewish Aramaic papyri from Wadi Murabba’at and Nahal Ḥever. These sites have yielded hundreds of documents dating to the two major revolts against Rome in the late 1st and early 2nd centuries C.E., among which were many Aramaic and Hebrew legal papyri, including sixteen deeds of conveyance in Aramaic and four in Hebrew. Fourth, discovered in the Cave of Letters at Nahal Ḥever alongside the Hebrew, Jewish Aramaic, and Greek papyri, are the fourteen Nabatean Aramaic legal papyri including at least three deeds of sale. Finally, there are the documents from Dura-Europos, over 150 parchments and papyri from the early 3rd century C.E., composed mostly in Greek, including two deeds of sale that betray a good deal of Semitic influence, but also more importantly a deed of sale for a female slave written in Syriac (known as P. Dura 28).

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