

GENIZAH FRAGMENTS

The Newsletter of Cambridge University's Taylor-Schechter Genizah Research Unit at Cambridge University Library

Gaon's seal

The conservation of the Jacques Mosseri Genizah Collection, which began in April 2006, has proved to be a most absorbing task. One of the challenges over the past year has been the search for a solution to the flaking inks evident on some of the fragments.

Research is also being carried out to determine the best means of conserving a treasure of the Collection – the personal seal of Nehemiah Gaon, head of the Iraqi Jewish Academy in Pumbedita during the tenth century. The survival



of such an artefact (pictured above) is extremely rare and this clay seal is in a fragile condition.

Scientific analysis has been necessary to confirm its composition before proceeding with treatment, and research continues into the consolidation of this unique object.

During my time on the Mosseri project, it has been a pleasure to work with the curatorial staff and scholars involved, and to meet others interested in the Collection and its conservation. It is thus with some sadness that I am leaving the project in October to take up another post within the Conservation and Preservation Department. While my interest in the treasures will remain, I shall be entrusting their conservation into the hands of Lucy Cheng, who will continue the work on this fascinating Collection.

NGAIO VINCE-DEWERSE
Cambridge University Library



Professor Judith Olszowy-Schlanger (left) visited the Conservation Department to discuss with Ngaio Vince-Dewerse methods of preserving the rare Geonic seal found in the Mosseri Collection, currently housed in the Library

Unit wins award

The Genizah Research Unit and its former director, Professor Stefan Reif, have been honoured with a "body of work" award from the Association of Jewish Libraries, in recognition of "the incredible contributions they have made to preserving and cataloguing Genizah materials, and for their contribution to scholarship in numerous areas of Jewish and medieval studies."

The award was presented in June at the Association's annual convention in Cleveland, at which T-S Research Associate Esther-Miriam Wagner represented Professor Reif and the Unit. The prize was conferred on the recipients at a ceremonial dinner by Jim Rosenbloom, of Brandeis University, and Elliot H. Gertel, of the University of Michigan.



On behalf of the Genizah Research Unit, Esther-Miriam Wagner receives a special "body of work" award from the Association of Jewish Libraries, presented by Jim Rosenbloom (left) and Elliot H. Gertel

Gifts to T-S

The T-S Unit gratefully acknowledges the ongoing support of the Friedberg Genizah Project for the cataloguing of the Collection, amounting to £32,000 over the past year. Major funding was also received from the Arts and Humanities Research Council towards cataloguing and digitisation.

We are grateful to Mrs H. E. Alexander, MBE, FRSA, for a generous donation of £1,000 in memory of her husband, A. V. Alexander, CBE.

Other substantial assistance has been received in recent months from the Athelney Charitable Trust (£1,000); Stephen Massil (£550); Mr and Mrs David C. Sellman (£500); Lady R. Lipworth (£250); the Jewish Association of Cultural Societies (£150); Borehamwood and Elstree Synagogue (£150); and £100 each from Dr R. Cantor; the Rofeh Trust; Norman Shelton; Mrs Miriam Shenkin; and the Sterling Charitable Trust.

For these donations, and for other smaller or anonymous gifts, the Research Unit again expresses deep appreciation to its many supporters.

Cairo 25th

The Israel Academy of Sciences and Humanities in Jerusalem hosted a one-day conference to celebrate the silver jubilee of the Israeli Academic Centre in Cairo, which facilitates co-operation between Israeli and Egyptian academics. Its director, Professor Gabi Rosenbaum, presided.

Among those who attended were several previous directors, as well as former diplomatic staff who negotiated the Centre's establishment as part of the 1979 peace treaty with Egypt or who have since served in Cairo.

During the proceedings, Professor Stefan Reif spoke on the significance of the manuscripts recovered from the Ben Ezra synagogue.

Soundings within

"Things on Which I've Stumbled" is the title of a compelling new book of poems by Peter Cole. It is also the title of the book's long, central poem, based on Cole's impressions and discoveries in the Genizah while he worked as a researcher in the Taylor-Schechter Genizah Research Unit and as the Unit's first-ever "poet-in-residence" in March 2007. Anonymous fragments from the Unit's poetry collections are used in the poem and appear in italics.

Cole has authored two other highly praised collections of poetry: *Rift* (Station Hill Press, 1989) and *Hymns & Qualms* (Sheep Meadow Press, 1998). He is also a major translator of Hebrew poetry and has published, among many other titles, *Selected Poems of Shmuel HaNagid* (Princeton University Press, 1996), *Selected Poems of Solomon Ibn Gabirol* (Princeton University Press, 2001) and, lately, an impressive, comprehensive anthology of medieval Hebrew poems, *The Dream of the Poem: Hebrew Poetry from Muslim and Christian Spain 950–1492* (Princeton University Press, 2007) which received the National Jewish Book Award and the Association of American Publishers' Hawkins Prize for the best university press book of the year.

Last year, Cole was awarded a MacArthur Foundation Fellowship in recognition of his work as a poet, translator and editor. He and his wife, Adina Hoffman (author of the acclaimed *House of Windows: Portraits From a Jerusalem Neighborhood*), are currently writing a book about the Cairo Genizah for Nextbook/Schocken Book Series.

Featured here is an excerpt from "Things on Which I've Stumbled" in *Things on Which I've Stumbled* (New Directions, New York, 2008; ISBN: 978-0-8112-1803-0).

In a crawl space over the prayer floor,
a storeroom perched on Coptic columns,
high in the wall of the women's gallery
(reached by ascent on a ladder only
and entered doubled over ...)
where the legend's serpent, waiting, coils—
the words in darkness held to paper,
rags really,

brought to light in dimness linger
as words do, as knowing is
not what's there but how we lift it
up with the winches of syntax and sense,
up in the eye of desire for linkage
of every sort, including chance—
pointing and leading through that sense,
like Keat's hand,

reaching through the poem ...

And in your innocence being borne—

—

With me, for a moment, please ...

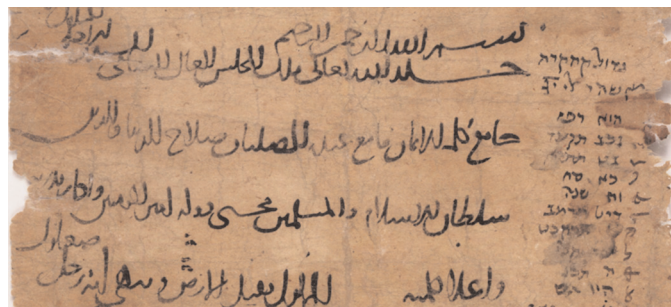
—

*all carried,
into the air and on*

*and with all his desire brought me
and from within his heart he taught me
my heart's secret
and so my ... was raised,
and my eye has not grown dim*

... was the badge
of sense they wore
on their sleeves
almost thin;
beauty limned
in so many seams,
though not as gems,

but soundings within ...



A detail from MS CUL T-S K2.96 (verso): a twelfth-century chancery document which contains lines of a petition addressed to Saladin concerning forced government service

Chancery deeds

No one has satisfactorily explained why the Cairo Genizah preserved Arabic texts from the Fatimid, Ayyubid and Mamluk chancery (*dimān al-inshā*), the bureau charged with, among other tasks, receiving petitions from Egyptian and Syrian subjects and issuing decrees in response to them.

To date, 135 such documents have been published – a few in the 1950s and '60s by the Genizah pioneers S. D. Goitein and S. M. Stern and, more recently, a large group by Geoffrey Khan in his *Arabic Legal and Administrative Documents in the Cambridge Genizah Collections* (Cambridge University Press, 1993).

Their discovery is significant since it belies the oft-repeated notion that few government documents have survived from the pre-Ottoman Near East. While medieval Europe preserved Latin documents as evidence of privileges granted by rulers, and while the Ottoman bureaucracy created a paper trail that will take scholars centuries to map, the medieval Near East – so the lament runs – is "document-poor."

This is, however, far from true. In addition to tens of thousands of Arabic papyri from Egypt preserved in Vienna and elsewhere, there is an as-yet unknown number of Arabic chancery documents in Cambridge and other Genizah collections.

The manuscript repository of a synagogue is hardly a place to locate a large cache of Egyptian chancery documents. But since the Fatimids (969–1171) relied heavily on the process of hearing petitions in open court as an instrument of rule – a procedure the Ayyubids (1171–1250) and Mamluks (1250–1517) retained and developed – one might well have expected to find petitions submitted to the chancery by Jews, and copies of the decrees issued in response, among the Genizah documents.

Some chancery documents from

the Genizah do indeed concern Jews – but only some. A significant number relate to Muslims or Christians, and still others are directives sent from one government bureau to another. Their preservation raises the question of how they migrated from the palace in the new city of Cairo to the synagogue of the Syrians in Fustat, a point I am seeking to answer by studying dozens of such documents in Cambridge and elsewhere.

Both Stern and Khan have suggested that Jewish courtiers may have brought the documents to Fustat's Jews, an explanation that works particularly well for the Fatimid material. Several Jews known from Genizah documents served the Fatimids as palace bureaucrats (*kuttāb*), physicians or local governors in Syria.

Petitions follow set formulae. They may have wished to provide Jewish community leaders with model documents that could be used in seeking the protection of the rulers in Cairo.

Those formulae, moreover, developed over time. Synagogue leaders would have kept old petitions on file as templates and retired them when a new ruler was declared, or when the formula was so changed as to render the old petitions obsolete. They would then have been discarded in the Genizah chamber, together with other outdated archival material in Hebrew, Aramaic and Judeo-Arabic.

While that explanation works well for petitions, the decrees suggest another route. A surprisingly large number have reached us with Hebrew script on the verso – frequently biblical or targumic passages written for practice by novice scribes.

These suggest that they were pressed into service as scrap. Indeed, decrees tended to be written on large and sumptuous pieces of paper with wide spaces

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Into 'battle'

Those who read our April front-page story closely – the kind of close reading that we who pore over medieval manuscripts are accustomed to – will have noticed that the agreement concluded between Cambridge University Library and the Friedberg Genizah Project was reached “in principle.”

We are now delighted to announce that the principle has been upheld, and all the parties involved – Friedberg; its new sister organisation, the Jewish Manuscript Preservation Society; and University Librarian Peter Fox – have put pen to paper and placed their signatures on the agreement, a complex document crafted over many months.

Production of the images for this most ambitious of digitisation projects will begin early next year, and we can all look forward to a time – not too far in the future – when the entire contents of Schechter’s “battlefield of books” will be but a mouse-click away.

The cataloguing and description of the manuscripts must go on, however, since images are just one of the resources needed

by the researcher to track down fragments of interest. The Unit’s major projects to identify and catalogue liturgical, responsa, documentary and magical manuscripts proceed, and funding has been sought to embark on new projects next year.

Such work continues to draw a wider audience than might be anticipated: the Israeli newspaper *Ha’aretz* recently published an article on the fascinating magical charms and amulets on which Dr Gideon Bohak has been working. That medieval Jews, devout and learned in Torah, should also have called upon the magical arts is just one of the revelations gleaned from Schechter’s hoard, and the more we sift through it, the more will come to light.

I take this opportunity to welcome back the editor of *Genizah Fragments* (and the Unit’s bibliographer), Dr Rebecca Jefferson, who was on maternity leave since the beginning of the year following the birth of Isaac Benjamin.

BEN OUTHWAITE
Head of Genizah
Research Unit

Chancery deeds

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between the lines, thus lending themselves particularly well to reuse.

This scenario accords with a recent discovery made by Frédéric Bauden at the University of Liège – a notebook in which the Egyptian historian al-Maqrīzī (1364–1442) embedded a pair of decrees from the Mamluk sultan al-Nāṣir Aḥmad (1342–45).

According to Bauden’s reconstruction, a group of *amīrs* in 1389–90 overthrew the reigning sultan, forced him from Cairo, raided the palace and sold the chancery archives by weight. Al-Maqrīzī, who had worked in the chancery until a year earlier, was in a position to know about the raid and to take advantage of its booty. Meanwhile, the price of

paper in Egypt had risen enough to make buying recycled paper a necessity for many.

The annals of Fatimid history, too, are filled with accounts of raids on the palace by warring military regiments, and it may well be that what Bauden describes for the fourteenth century occurred repeatedly from the eleventh to the sixteenth. Thus young scribes ended up practising their Hebrew and Aramaic exercises on the backs of precious decrees from the chancery in Cairo.

These documents permit the reconstruction not just of one lost archive but of two, and are a precious resource for historians of the medieval Near East.

MARINA RUSTOW
Emory University

Godfrey Waller, Superintendent of the Manuscripts Reading Room, retires this month after nearly 45 years’ service with Cambridge University Library. Regular users of the Reading Room will miss his expert guidance, professionalism and friendly conversation, while members of the Genizah Research Unit have particularly relied on his ever-ready and enthusiastic support. In this interview, *Genizah Fragments* seeks to capture some of his most vivid memories of a rewarding career, and of the development of the Genizah Unit across nearly three decades.

As one of Cambridge University Library’s longest-serving staff members, when and how did you become aware of the Taylor-Schechter Genizah Collection?

The first real contact I had with the Collection was when I took over as Superintendent in 1981. Before then, while aware of its existence, I had no working knowledge of it. I remember a small number of staff trying to sort through a massive amount of material. In those days, it was as much a conservation project as anything.

Have you noticed any differences between today’s Genizah scholars and those of twenty or so years ago?

They are a lot younger, for a start! There are many more women, and many scholars from a wide range of countries. But everyone who comes, whether for the first time or after several visits, receives a special welcome in our room. The staff here are well aware of the importance of this priceless collection.

And how has the Research Unit changed over the years?

Again, lots of young fresh faces. A healthy turnover brings new vigour – and there is still, after all, much work to be done.

How has your supervision of the Genizah Collection compared with that of the other collections?

Every collection is precious, and we try not to have favourites. But the Genizah is unusual in that the broad scope of its subject matter attracts a splendid variety of scholars. For all its basic original sorting, and despite the different scripts, languages and topics, the numbering is relatively simple to handle, so it’s a boon to know that the classmark is all we need.

Are there any Genizah scholars you will remember with particular fondness?

Of course! It would be invidious, though, to list them all, at the risk of overlooking anyone important, but I can truthfully say that I remember so many of them for different and special reasons. I only wish I could see them all again, particularly many who,



unfortunately, are no longer with us. I count among my friends Moshe Gil, Menahem Ben Sasson, the late Michael Klein and, of course, Stefan Reif, each of whom lavished kindness and encouragement in so many ways.

Do you have any special Genizah moment you can share with us?

A highlight, in a rather singular way, was the private visit of the late Dr Josef Burg, then a Minister in the Israeli Government. He was impressed, I know, with the arrangements the Unit had made for his visit, but he still thought it necessary – managing in the process to alarm his bodyguards – to do an about-turn as he was leaving to come over to me and express his “thanks for letting me see your room.”

What have you enjoyed most as Superintendent?

Obviously, the variety of the work and the scholars, many of whom kept returning on a regular basis. It was also fulfilling to see them getting along so satisfactorily with their studies. We try to work on the principle of “all-inclusive” service: we have what they want, and the quicker and more efficiently we can serve them, the more they can get done, and the more content they become.

Sometimes we get celebrities – well-known authors, politicians, scholars (including the odd “Monty Python”), and the occasional naturalist. These give us bragging rights – my children have grown tired of me spotting “my” readers on television! And it’s always a delight to see the younger students gain their degrees, deposit their dissertations, and return a few years later as professors or lecturers somewhere in the world.

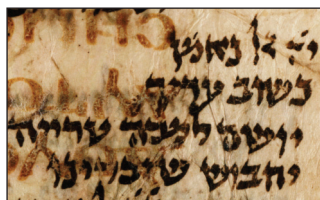
Uncovering codicology

Researchers in the Taylor-Schechter Genizah Research Unit attended a two-day Hebrew codicology workshop at Cambridge University Library conducted by Judith Olszowy-Schlanger,

Professor of Medieval Hebrew Palaeography at the École Pratique des Hautes Études in Paris. The course, organised by Geoffrey Khan, Professor of Semitic Philology in the Faculty of Asian and Middle Eastern Studies, was also attended by doctoral students from the Faculty.

Using a range of Genizah manuscripts to demonstrate the scientific methods of examining and recognising Hebrew scripts, Professor Olszowy-Schlanger opened with a discussion on the historical approaches to palaeography in general, and to Hebrew palaeography in particular.

She described the difficulties inherent in the science, emphasising past methods of description that ranged from relying on eye and experience to measuring every letter stroke individually. She also outlined some of the current Hebrew palaeography



MS CUL T-S 12.184: a palimpsest with a distinctive Palestinian Hebrew script

projects based on dated codices, including Sfar Data – directed by Professor Malachi Beit-Arié in Israel – and the Comité de Paléographie Hébraïque project formerly run in France by Professor Colette Sirat.

The aim of present-day Hebrew palaeographers, said Professor Olszowy-Schlanger, was to describe the various Hebrew scripts according to their “pertinent features” – the distinctive Babylonian *alef*, for example. These could function like a list of “symptoms” and be used to “diagnose” other manuscripts.

Participants in the workshop were encouraged to familiarise

themselves with every aspect of a manuscript, including material, ink, type of support, pricking, ruling, text layout and density. They were taught how to recognise handwriting features by the general shape of a letter and the thickness of its strokes; the base and headline of each letter, its “feet” and serifs; the ascending and descending strokes; the meeting points of strokes; and the overall consistency of forming them.

These ideas were later put into practice by comparing a number of fragments to ascertain whether they were written by the same scribe. The remainder of the course was assigned to examining dated Genizah manuscripts to learn about specific script types (especially Oriental) using a known set of “pertinent features” or “symptoms.”

Conducted on an informal basis, the workshop also involved lively discussions on Genizah manuscripts and their provenance, providing fascinating insights and careful guidance into the complex world of medieval Hebrew scripts.

How you can help

IF YOU would like to receive *Genizah Fragments* regularly, to inquire about the Taylor-Schechter Genizah Collection, or to learn how you may assist with its preservation and study, please write to Dr Ben Outhwaite, Head of the Taylor-Schechter Genizah Research Unit, at Cambridge University Library, West Road, Cambridge CB3 9DR, England.

THE LIBRARY may also be reached by fax (01223) 333160 or by telephone (01223) 333000. The internet access is at <http://www.lib.cam.ac.uk/Taylor-Schechter>. Inquiries by e-mail should be addressed to genizah@lib.cam.ac.uk.

ALL CONTRIBUTIONS to the Unit, whether for research or other activities, are made to the “University of Cambridge,” which enjoys charitable status for tax and similar purposes.

IN THE USA, “Cambridge in America” supports the Taylor-Schechter Collection with its unfunded grant number 7/78. Please contact the Director of the Annual Appeal at 100 Avenue of the Americas, New York, NY 10013-0271 (tel: 212-984-0960).

“CAMBRIDGE in America” is recognised by the IRS as a charitable organisation, and contributions for the benefit of the Genizah Research Unit are legally deductible for USA income tax purposes. Contributions are similarly deductible in Canada even if made directly to the Development Office at the University of Cambridge.

The family of the late David Lauffer have once again kindly contributed to the expenses involved in producing this issue of *Genizah Fragments*. This generous gesture is greatly appreciated by the Unit, which fondly recalls David’s support and interest over a lengthy period.

Real life through letters

Have you ever wondered about everyday life during the Genizah period? Or planned to read S. D. Goitein’s brilliant *A Mediterranean Society*, but were discouraged by the sheer bulk of its five volumes? If so, then Burton L. Visotzky’s *A Delightful Compendium of Consolation** is tailor-made for you, an historical novel told in the form of letters fictitiously derived from the Cairo Genizah.

Nathan and Janet Appleman Professor of Midrash and Interreligious Studies at New York’s Jewish Theological Seminary, Visotzky spent much of his career researching rabbinic literature and cataloguing Genizah manuscripts before turning to fiction.

The epistolary format (often a difficult genre to master – and read) has been employed by Visotzky with great skill, for within the first few pages one is cast into a fast-moving world of adventure, filled with rebellious daughters and rabbinical lore, and a fair sprinkling of caravans, pirates and exotic locations.

The letters tell the story of the al-Tustaris, a real-life Karaite merchant family in eleventh-century Fatimid Cairo, during the

period from which the bulk of Genizah manuscripts is derived. The central character of the book is Karimah, who runs away from home with Ismail, a Muslim, and whose father, Dunash HaCohen al-Tustari, now considers her dead.

In his grief, he seeks comfort from his mentor, friend and trading partner, Rabbi Nissim (another true figure whose stories of consolation were discovered in the Genizah). Karimah, meanwhile, maintains contact with her brother, Iskander, from whom we learn details of the family for-

tures and the vicissitudes in the life of a merchant trader. Close relationships between siblings are, indeed, an authentic feature of Genizah letters.

Through these letters, Visotzky skilfully weaves historical fact with familial stories and enchanting talmudic tales, though some of Karimah’s escapades – such as her recruitment as a sailor – are somewhat fantastical. One is reminded, however, of the figure of al-Wuhshah, the business-woman (also named Karimah) whose unusual personal and trading exploits feature in a number of Genizah documents.

The novel is set against the backdrop of a majority Muslim culture and paints a picture – which not always obtained – of harmony between the communities. The text is vivid, clear and full of warmth, additionally providing (for the uninitiated) a useful glossary and source notes.

REBECCA JEFFERSON
Research Associate

* *A Delightful Compendium of Consolation: a Fabulous Tale of Romance, Adventure & Faith* (ISBN 1-934730-20-3) is published in paperback by Ben Yehuda Press, New Jersey.

