Cairo restoration nears completion

After some ten years' work by an international team of architects, historians and archaeologists, the project to restore and investigate the "Genizah Synagogue" of Old Cairo is nearing its end. It has been sponsored and supported throughout by the Charles Taylor Fund at St John's College, Cambridge; the Canadian Centre for Architecture in Montreal; and the Jewish Memorial Collections of papyri, and Arabic codices.

Restoration of the building's superstructure was completed a year ago and the final stage of conservation and recording of the contents is well under way. A full report covering all aspects of the project and its results is being prepared for publication in the near future.

The Ben-Ezra Synagogue, as it stands today, is a late-nineteenth-century reconstruction of the former building which partially collapsed and was subsequently demolished in 1889 (a surviving fragment is pictured on the left).

It is of interest mainly for the fact that its design was extensively copied from the previous eleventh-century building, and as a surviving example of Jewish architecture from colonial Egypt. It was also, of course, the building from which Solomon Schechter extracted the Taylor-Schechter Collection in 1896-97.

When the project began in 1981, the building was in a state of considerable dilapidation, not having been used for worship since the mid-1960s.

Water leaking through the roof onto the painted ceiling, rising ground water threatening the foundations, and settling causing cracks in the walls were among the many problems requiring attention. In addition, all the internal fixtures and contents — curtains, lamps, carpets, carvings, Torah boxes and scrolls — required recording and conservation.

The fundamental structural work got under way in 1988, under the direction of Belgian architect, Jean-Pierre Ral Clint. The party toured the Library and its newest extension and were entertained to lunch, at which the Chairman of the Library Syndicate, Professor Derek Brewer, presided and which was also attended by the Editor-elect of the Faculty Board of Oriental Studies, Prof. Dr. P. Kornicki.

Major projects attract funding

Two major projects, one to describe the Judaeo-Arabic and Arabic material and the other to prepare a catalogue of the Hebrew codices, have attracted the necessary funding for their first year. Support has also been maintained for all other parts of the Genizah Research Unit's programme for 1993, including the study of the fragments relating to medicine.

The most substantial support received in recent months has consisted of £3,191 from the Wellcome Trust; £2,237 from the Charles Taylor Fund at St John's College, Cambridge; and £1,750 from the British Academy.

In addition, the Unit has benefited from the generosity of Aryeh and Raquel Rubin (£5,000); Mr Samuel Sebba (£1,500); the Corob Charitable Trust (£1,257); Dr Ralph Kohn (£1,000); and Mr Cyril Stein, Chairman of the Ladbroke Group plc (£1,000).

Important financial assistance has been received from Mrs Marjorie Glick (£333); Sir Trevor Chinn, of Lex Services plc (£500); Mrs Vivien Duffield (£500); Goldberg Charitable Trust (£500); Jewish Memorial Council (£500); Mr Arnold Lee (£500); Mr Michael Phillips (£500); and Mr A. S. Oppenheimer (£400).

Helpful renewals of their support have been made by Mr Philip Maurice (£350); Mr Conrad Morris (£350); Mr Harry Landy (£300); Mr I. S. Klug (£250); Mr William Margolies (£250); Mr T. H. Reitman (£250); Mrs Helena Sebba (£250); Sir Sigmund Sternberg (£250); Mr Fred Worms (£250). Other contributions, gratefully acknowledged, are those of Mr Charles Taubman (£300); Mrs Clara B. Laks (£300); Mrs Judith Samuel (£250); Mr I. Raine (£100); Mr Michael Daniels (£100); Mr and Mrs Anthony Rau (£100); Mrs Judith Samuel (£100); and Mrs Miriam Shenkin (£100).

Anonymous and smaller donations amounting to £1,573 have also been received and are much appreciated by all who work in the Unit.

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Pitfalls and pericopes

Unlike most branches of early rabbinic literature, the constituents of the literary genres "midrash" and "aggada" have never been systematically tabulated. Despite the fact that over 150 such tracts have been published - some of minor proportions - numerous others have fallen into desuetude and are no longer extant.

Since almost all the manuscript material in the major libraries have now been exploited, the Cairo Genizah remains the major source for the recovery of what would otherwise be non-extant aggadic midrashim.

The identification and classification of midrashic fragments, including those at Cambridge University Library, and the reconstruction of the codices and midrashic compilations to which they originally belonged, are thus major aims which I hope partially to fulfil during the course of projected research.

Until the full fruits can be harvested, however, scholars will have to make do with somewhat more general identifications of the midrashic Genizah material. At most, catalogue entries will include the biblical pericope explicated by the midrashic text, with a cross-reference to an extant midrash (if such a parallel exists) - as, for example:

T-S NS 349.729: "A midrash to Numbers 17: cf. Tanhuma Qorah 6 = Tanhuma Buber 14, p.90."

In other instances, usually because of the state of the fragment, the pericope will not be definitely determined and an alternative form of identification using certain proof-texts will be employed - as, for example:


At times, despite an attempt to postulate a certain pericope, no definite proof can be adduced, so that a general description of the contents (and other pertinent details) will be included - as, for example:

T-S NS 162.118: "From a midrash dealing with the severity of vows, adorning 2 Chronicles 36:15, Lamentations 2:10; Deuteronomy 23:22; Proverbs 20:24; cf. Tanhuma Wa-Yisrael 8."

Numerous objective difficulties prevent an exact identification of fragments in a poor state of preservation. Some remains are so scanty that, even if the original contents are identified, they fail to reflect their true nature.

Three vellum fragments located in T-S NS 178 illustrate this point. The largest (.57) contains a collection based on B.T. Pesahim 54b ("[Four] things God willed to come to pass . . ."), while the two smaller ones (.39 and .53) apparently include a rendering of B.T. Rash Ha-Shnah 16b ("Four things partial the fate of a human being . . .")

When, however, they are pieced together, one immediately detects the remnant of a novel version of the numerical compilations known, for instance, as Pirqa de-Rabbi and Huppai 'Eliahu.

In contradistinction to modern tastes, the Pirqa de-Rabbi compilations seem to have been among the most popular midrashic works of mediaeval times, as attested by more than sixty Genizah fragments found in various collections, representing some two dozen codices.

Other works that enjoyed immense popularity are the midrashic compilations on plene and defective spellings in the Hebrew Bible (Midrash Heserot We-Yeterot), the various midrashic texts relating to the Deuteroque (Midrash 'Aseret Ha-Dibrot), and the Hanukkah Midrash in the new edition of She'elot de-Rav Ahai Gaon (ed. Mirsky, 2, pp.183ff).

Among the pitfalls encountered by the catalogue are numerous fragments initially classified as "midrash", only to turn out as other branches of traditional literature dealing with biblical items that also adduce biblical proof-texts.

These include various collections that also adduce talmudic texts (T-S NS 329.566; NS 170.40); biblical commentaries (T-S NS 177.13; NS 185.64; NS 329.57); kabbalistic texts (T-S NS 288.115); and philosophy (T-S NS 167.46).

It is interesting to note that certain fragments deriving from the encyclopaedic commentary of R. Bahya ben Asher to the Pentateuch (T-S NS 162.171; NS 162.174; NS 171.17) have been hitherto identified as midrashic texts.

Fragments stemming from the non-extant midrashim in the New Series do not appear to be abundant. Nevertheless, each folio represents another stone uncovered in the search for ancient Hebrew literary treasures. There is consequently good reason to pursue further research in order to identify them all.

MYRON BIALIK LERNER
Department of Talmud, Tel Aviv University

Overview of the Siddur

When did prayer become central to Jews, and how are the conflicts and tensions of the talmudic period reflected in the history of its liturgy? Did Christianity and Islam have something to do with the emergence of the first Jewish prayer codices?

What was the fate of the early mediaeval Palestinian rite, and how did its Babylonian equivalent come to dominate the text of the early Siddur? How much cross-fertilisation was there between statutory prayer, mysticism and poetry in the prayer-books of the Middle Ages?

In an attempt to answer these tantalising questions, on which the Genizah manuscripts shed considerable light, and others that relate to earlier and later periods, Stefan Reif, in his Judaism and Hebrew Prayer (Cambridge University Press, 1993), takes the reader on an intriguing journey through periods about 3,000 years apart and into locations as distant from each other in every sense as Sura in Mesopotamia and Cincinnati, Ohio.

In this first attempt for over 60 years to provide a scientific overview of Jewish liturgical history, the latest scholarship and the most original sources are carefully identified and utilised with both scholars and lay folk in mind.

There are 450 pages and the ISBN is 0 521 44874 4.

Lectureship for Geoffrey Khan

Dr Geoffrey Khan, Research Associate in the Genizah Research Unit, has been appointed to a full-time tenured Lectureship in Hebrew and Aramaic in the Faculty of Oriental Studies at the University of Cambridge.

Dr Khan, who joined the Unit in 1983, has developed an impressive reputation as an expert in the detailed study of Semitic languages. In addition to articles and reviews, he has published two books, Studies in Semitic Syntax (Oxford, 1988) and Karaita Bible Manuscripts from the Cairo Genizah (Cambridge, 1990). A third volume, Arabic Legal and Administrative Documents in the Cambridge Genizah Collections, is scheduled to appear within a few months.

Dr Khan joins the ranks of researchers in the Genizah Unit who have gone on to important academic positions, both here and abroad, in the fields of Hebrew, Arabic and Jewish studies.

He is currently on a research trip to St. Petersburg in Russia.
Spanish gems on display

Recently on exhibit at the University Library were 91 items reflecting the culture of the Jews of Spain from the tenth to the fifteenth centuries, when they were resident in the Iberian peninsula, and from the fifteenth to the twentieth centuries, following their expulsion.

The exhibition included early grammars, poetry, illuminated Bibles, scientific manuscripts, philosophical and theological tracts, and personal correspondence. Many were from the Library's Genizah Collection, and they were in manuscript and printed, on paper and on vellum; their languages included Judaeo-Arabic, Judaeo-Spanish, Hebrew and Spanish.

The exhibition, planned by Dr Eleazar Gutwirth, of Tel Aviv University (formerly of Cambridge University Library), and arranged by the Genizah Research Unit, marked the 500th anniversary of the expulsion of the Jews from Spain.

A catalogue, entitled Ten Centuries of Hispano-Jewish Culture, prepared for publication by Dr Stefan Reif, has been published by Cambridge University Library and contains seventeen pages of introductory material by Dr Gutwirth, ten pages describing the exhibits, a bibliography and five plates. It is available from the Library at £5.50, plus postage and packing.

The exhibition was noted in an article entitled "1492: The Good, the Bad and the Ugly", published in CAM (Michaelmas, 1992). Other recent exhibitions at the University Library utilising Genizah material marked the Sixth International Congress for Syriac Studies, the Fourth International Congress on Christian Arabic Studies, and the performance of Professor Alexander Goehr's new cantata, "The Death of Moses".

Exhibits included by the Genizah Research Unit's director, Dr Stefan Reif, have been published by Cambridge University Press; and over £500,000 has been raised from external sources to assist the University of Cambridge's efforts. "Amitav Ghosh's charming volume would not have been possible without these developments."

Dr Ghosh's book was also the subject of a feature filmed at the Library by BBC Television and broadcast on Network East in January, 1993.

The report included a description of the book's background and shots of various Genizah texts.

Safeguarding the fruits of scholarship

While recently in Jerusalem to fulfill some lecturing commitments, I was contacted by lawyers involved in preparing the allegedly unauthorised publication in the USA of Dead Sea Scrolls text and scholarship.

As owners of similar material, we were asked what we regarded as the correct attitudes by which to decide its availability for academic study.

The issues are not simple. To the argument that the owners of manuscripts retain their copyright, the obvious retort is that texts written by a scribe many hundreds of years ago must surely by now be public property.

On the other hand, if an institution invests a great deal of time and money in the reconstruction, conservation and distribution of the treasures, there must be some justification for its claiming the results of its work as its own intellectual property.

If a lengthy programme of research is undertaken by a group of scholars with privileged access to manuscript material, are others duty bound, by convention if not by law, to respect the prior interests of that group?

Given that an inordinate length of time has passed without results being published and that a suspicion is growing of a closed shop and restrictive practice, does this somehow entitle other interested specialists to make rival claims for rights?

There is also the matter of how one decides that information has to lay fallow and is therefore available for public use. The results of scholarship are transmitted to students in closed lectures, to the general public at open meetings, and to the wider world through the media. At what stage do these results cease to be the intellectual property of those who produce them? Is the copying and distribution of these infringements of their rights?

The Genizah Research Unit, as part of Cambridge University Library, follows a policy of making available to scholars, as soon as its resources permit, the originals (in the Library) or copies of their holdings (anywhere else). It makes efforts to conserve these items, so that they can be safely handled, and to prepare descriptions of them to assist scholarly research. Whenever apt, details of important discoveries are immediately to lay foundation stones to the future scholar and researcher. Where information is being compiled for a research publication of its own, such information may be shared with readers before its publication, if they undertake to credit it to its originators.

The private projects of individual scholars are a matter of confidence, but every effort is made to warn scholars of possible duplication of effort. At the same time, there are no exclusive scholarly rights to any parts of the Collection. Photographs of the original material may be made only by the Library's photography department, and where such photographs are provided, it is on the understanding that acknowledgement is made to the Syndics of Cambridge University Library, a full classmark is published, and a copy of the publication received.

The aim of the regulations is to ensure that only quality reproductions are used that will assist further research and that future scholars in the field will find it easy to identify such items and to obtain information about their contents.

STEFAN C. REIF
Director, Taylor-Schechter Genizah Research Unit
Busy time for Genizah staff

Cambridge Genizah researchers have not only been busy with their various projects in the Unit; they have also been conveying the results of their research at academic conferences and public lectures.

Both Dr Stefan Reif and Dr Geoffrey Khan accepted invitations to speak at a conference devoted to Artefact and Text at the John Rylands Research Institute in the University of Manchester.

The theme of the meeting – at which ten scholars from Britain, Israel, the USA, France and Germany gave papers – was the manner in which the physical form of the mediaeval Hebrew manuscript had a direct effect on the development of its literary content.

Dr Khan discussed Cambridge Genizah fragment T-S K35.230, consisting of a letter from an eleventh-century Karaite scholar in Jerusalem, in which he offered to write, in either Arabic or Hebrew script, the commentary on the Pentateuch commissioned by his wealthy patron, thus proving that he and his colleagues (contrary to what has often been supposed) were at home in both languages.

Dr Reif’s paper dealt with the medium used for the transmission of Hebrew prayers, not only in the Middle Ages but also in those periods preceding and following them, and how changes had left their mark on Jewish liturgical periods preceding and following the shift to the Hebrew print medium.

Among the specialized linguistic studies presented at the conference of the International Organization for Masoretic Studies, held in Paris, Dr Khan described how Karaitic transcriptions of the Hebrew Bible into Arabic provided important insights into the way Hebrew was pronounced in the Middle Ages.

At the annual meeting of the British Association for Jewish Studies, held in Cambridge, one seminar was devoted to reporting progress in the work of the Genizah Research Unit.

Dr Haskell Isaacs spoke on the medical material, Dr Khan on Arabic and Judaeo-Arabic fragments, and Ms Meira Polliack on Karaita Bible translations and commentaries. Dr Reif then referred to other developments in the fields of Bible, Targum, rabbinic, mysticism and piyut and outlined plans for future research and forthcoming volumes in the Genizah Series.

On the basis of recent manuscript discoveries, Dr Khan was able to indicate how the Hebrew language continues to change.

Completion of Cairo restoration

Continued from page 1

Johan Bellart. Since then, the roof has been entirely resurfaced, the walls restored, and much stone and woodwork replaced, using traditional materials and techniques. The vexed problem of rising ground water containing corrosive minerals has been combated with the use of a replaceable sacrificial render.

Meanwhile, Professors Menahem Ben-Sasson and Joseph Hacker, of the Hebrew University in Jerusalem, have traced the history of the synagogue from its origins until the present day, using a variety of sources.

Ben-Sasson worked largely on the period up to the fifteenth century, sifting through the Genizah documents for all references to the building. Joseph Hacker concentrated on the more recent history, derived partly from a survey of rabbinic texts.

For archaeologists, Peter Sheehan and Charles Le Quesne, had the job of recording all the structures on the site and setting them into an historical context. Initially, excavation inside and around the synagogue was contemplated, but it was unfortunately not possible to obtain from the Antiquities Service the required permission to dig.

Information regarding earlier stages of the synagogue’s history was gained from pits dug to assess the condition of the building’s foundations. A full measured survey of the enclosing Roman fortifications was also carried out.

Owing to these limitations on archaeological activity around the synagogue, it has been difficult to come to any definite conclusions about its early history.

Menahem Ben-Sasson’s work has evoked a picture of densely crowded and cramped quarters around an agglomeration of buildings of which the synagogue formed the centre. His work, to be published in the project’s report, will no doubt be of great interest to Genizah scholars.

It seems clear that the location has not changed since the Genizah period. Indeed, the walls of the present building stand directly on those of its predecessor.

As the Genizah archive originates from around the same time as the building’s reconstruction in 1040, following its total destruction by Caliph al-Hākim, it provides little evidence for the date of the synagogue’s original foundation. This may not have been much earlier – perhaps in the tenth century.

After this new foundation, however, there is no evidence to suggest that the synagogue was rebuilt until the nineteenth century. Nevertheless, there is clear evidence of major reconstructions around 1500, following a serious fire, and again around 1860. Assuming this to be the case, the many accounts of the Ben-Ezra Synagogue from the nineteenth century, written by Benjamin II (= Israel Joseph Benjamin), Alfred Butler and Jack Mosseri, describe essentially the same building that Maimonides knew. Sadly, extensive research has failed to turn up a single illustration of the building as it was.

As the project draws to its close, many questions remain. The answers must wait for the day when excavation becomes possible.

CHARLES LE QUESNE
Archaeologist for the Ben-Ezra Synagogue Restoration Project

How you can help the T-S Genizah Unit

If you would like to receive Genizah Fragments regularly, to enquire about the Taylor-Schechter Genizah Collection, or to know how you may assist with its preservation and study, please write to: Dr S. C. Reif, Director of the Taylor-Schechter Genizah Research Unit at Cambridge University Library, University, Cambridge CB3 9DR, England. The Library may also be reached by fax (0223) 333160.

Readers not already supporting the Unit are asked to help ensure the continuity of this publication by making a small, regular gift. The sum of £3 (or $8 abroad) per annum is suggested, and payment may be made to the Unit’s Cambridge office or to the American Friends.

The AFWCU is recognized by the IRS as a charitable organization, and contributions are legally deductible for United States income tax purposes. Transfers of such funds are made to the presid-