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 Shelson; 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.

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.

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.


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.


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 ...

Chancery deeds

No one has satisfactorily explained why the Cairo Genizah preserved Arabic text in what is called Fatimid, Ayyubid and Mamluk chancery (diwān 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 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 formulary 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 talmudic 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...
Chancery deeds

Continued from page 2

between the lines, thus lending
by the researcher to track
by weight. Al-
the price of
production of the images
for this most ambitious
a notebook in which the
immediately before
and their signatures on
agreement, a complex
documented. The cataloguing and
description of the manu-
scripts must go on, how-
ever, since images are just
one of the resources needed
the Genizah is unusual in that the
we try not to have favourites. But
the Genizah Collection compared with
all, much work to be done.
Again, lots of young fresh faces. A
healthy turnover brings new
and those of twenty or so years ago?
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?

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.

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

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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
work is relatively easy 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
dread

Of course! It would be invidious,
though, to list them all, at the risk
of overlooking anyone important,
though, to list them all, at the risk
of overlooking anyone important,
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of overlooking anyone important,
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 the importance of 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 projects based on dated codices, including Sfar Data – directed by Professor Malachi Beit-Arié in Israel – and the Comité de Paléographie Hébraique project formerly run in France by Professor Colette Siger.

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.

Real life through letters

Have you ever wondered about everyday life during the Genizah period? Or planned to read S.D. Goenion’s brilliant 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 in the form of letters fictitiously derived from the Cairo Genizah.

Nathan and Janet Appleman Professor of Midrash and Intercultural 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 tunes and the vicissitudes in the life of a merchant trader. Close relationships between siblings are detailed, 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 treatment as a sivor – are somewhat fantastical. One is reminded, however, of the figure of al-Wuhshah, the businesswoman (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*


Edited by Rebecca Jefferson and printed by Cambridge University Press

**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) 323816 or by telephone (01223) 333900. 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 directly to the Development Office at the University Library, 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.

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**4 Genizah Fragments**

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

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A Delightful Compendium of Consolation: A Fabulous Tale of Romance, Adventure & Faith

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