Nadia Vidro returns to the Unit

Throughout my student years in Cambridge I volunteered in the Genizah Research Unit, describing and identifying grammatical and scientific fragments in the Additional Series of the T-S Collection. At that time my work was guided by the late Dr Friedrich Nissen who generously shared with me his knowledge and expertise.

My own research on a medieval Karaite grammatical treatise in Judaeo-Arabic Kitāb al-Uqūd fī Taṣārīf al-Luqā al-Waṣīyya has recently appeared in the Brill series Cambridge Genizah Studies edited by Siam Bhaya, Geoffrey Khan and Ben Outhwaite. I am now very happy to return to the Unit as a Research Associate and will be primarily working on Maozetic and grammatical material in the Old Series and the Mossber Collection.

I have been fascinated by the Genizah world since my BA studies at Moscow State University, yet it was not before I came to Cambridge to work on my PhD in Karaite linguistics that I saw the actual fragments.

We’ve been awaiting the publication of Adina Hoffman and Peter Cole’s Sacred Trash: the lost and found world of the Cairo Geniza (Nextbook-Schocken, 2011), with great anticipation. The Genizah story has been the focus of several excellent books, including Mark Glickman’s recent Sacred Treasure and Stefan Reif’s A Jewish Archive (2000), and the prospect of having two such talented writers turn their attention to the history of the Collection has been mouthwatering. The Unit’s association with Peter Cole began in 2007 when the MacArthur-winning poet and translator spent a period of several weeks in Cambridge digging through the multitude of poetic fragments in the T-S Collection. The initial result of this immersion was his 2008 poem ‘Things on which I’ve stumbled’, but stung by the Genizah bug he, together with his wife, the author, film critic and biographer Adina Hoffman, set out to uncover and chronicle the full story of the Genizah’s discovery.

With a varied cast of academic characters, including the uncompromising Margoliouth, the bicycling Burkitt, the remarkable Neubauer and, of course, the uncompromising Margoliouth, the Genizah story is a gift for chroniclers. Sacred Trash deserves space on the bookshelf of any true Genizah enthusiast.

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The dustbin of history

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Nadia Vidro
The Hermetic art: fragments of alchemy in the Genizah

Providing a satisfactory definition of the meaning of the word ‘alchemy’ seems elusive. Challenging as pursuing one of its final goals: the transmutation of base metals into silver and gold. It is a multi-faceted discipline that can be looked at from different points of view: alchemical texts can resemble cookbooks, obscure allegorical poems, philosophical treatises, raw instructions for laboratory technicians, and every combination of these elements. Beginning in ancient Greece, it is possible to follow the path of alchemical doctrines and practices up to present times, through a itinerary that calls at Hellenistic Egypt, the Islamic states, medieval Latin and vernacular Europe, the Renaissance, up to the psychological-haurostic approach to alchemical imagery attempted by Jung and his school.

Alchemists through the centuries have consistently considered Egypt as the centre of their art: Hermes is said to have chosen Egypt as his final residence, where he brought the secrets of alchemy from Babylon and carved them in an emerald plate which was found in his tomb, the famous Tabula Smaragdina. The very word alchemy was believed to derive etymology from one of the ancient names of Egypt. (Khem, the black land; the land of Egypt), even if a Greek derivation of the term alchemy was first mentioned after the death of Moses. The Hermetic art: fragments of alchemy in the Genizah, Esther-Miriam Wagner, 2011.

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