Digital Library developments

Readers will be pleased to learn that the number of Genizah fragments being delivered via Cambridge University Library’s digital library service continues to grow, with a further 8,000 fragments added over the past month. With initial funding from the Polonsky Foundation, the Cambridge Digital Library (http://cudl.lib.cam.ac.uk/) is intended to provide a sophisticated online platform to enable researchers and the wider public to discover, access and work with its important digitised collections. As the number of digital library collections grows, Genizah scholars will be able to discover related content from other medieval collections held by the Library. They will also be able to navigate more easily the Library: the Taylor-Schechter Collection, all of which has now been digitised thanks to the generosity of the Friedberg Family of Toronto, the long lost Jacques Mosseri fragments and, should all go well with the appeal, the Lewis-Gibson manuscripts too.

Grant Young Cambridge Digital Library

The Cambridge Digital Library has only been online for 18 months and much more development work and content is being planned for the next few years – including, eventually, the full set of manuscripts held by the Library: the Taylor-Schechter Collection, all of which has now been digitised thanks to the generosity of the Friedberg Family of Toronto, the long lost Jacques Mosseri fragments and, should all go well with the appeal, the Lewis-Gibson manuscripts too.

The Genizah Research Unit is grateful for the continued generous support of the Arts and Humanities Research Council, UK, and the Friedberg Genizah Project. We are also extremely grateful for the help of our supporters: the N & J Greenwood Charitable Trust (£2,500); Peter Cole & Adina Hoffman (£1,000); the Manifold Trust (£300); David Soffer (£300); a group via Ruth Crassick (£300); James R Cook (£250); Benjamin Friedman (£250); Warren Stern (£250); Evelyn Benson (£100) and for other smaller or anonymous donations.

The Lauffer Family Charitable Trust has generously contributed towards the cost of producing this newsletter in memory of the late David Lauffer, an enthusiastic student of history and supporter of the Genizah Research Unit.

The Genizah philanthropists Albert and Nancy Friedberg visited Cambridge University Library recently, pictured here with Ben Outhwaite and Esther-Miriam Wagner. Mr Friedberg and his wife were welcomed by Anne Jarvis, University Librarian, and spent a number of hours examining a range of manuscripts from the several Genizah collections at Cambridge as well as treasures from among the Library’s other Hebrew manuscripts. The current healthy state of Genizah Studies, and in particular the remarkable growth of its online presence, owes an enormous debt of gratitude to the Friedberg Genizah Project.

Cambridge and Oxford join forces to buy the Lewis-Gibson Collection

In the words of Mrs Gibson, Solomon Schechter showed ‘much tact and zeal’ in clearing out the Cairo Genizah. Yet the two sisters, Mrs Lewis and Mrs Gibson, showed equal tact and considerable tenacity in quietly amassing their own collection of fragments, one of the earliest to be assembled. Mostly purchased from Cairo book sellers over several visits in the 1890s, the manuscripts of the Lewis-Gibson Collection were donated by the sisters to Westminster College in Cambridge, to whom they were great benefactors, and they have remained in the College’s care ever since.

Since the 1990s, however, the governors of Westminster College – a member of Cambridge Theological Federation, but not the University – had been concerned about the conservation and storage of these precious manuscripts and were keen that they should become more widely available to the ever growing field of Genizah scholarship. A decision was therefore taken to sell the Lewis-Gibson Collection, offering it in the first instance to Cambridge University Library.

Cambridge alone could not afford the purchase price, but, following a conversation between Anne Jarvis, Cambridge University Librarian, and Sarah Thomas, her counterpart at the Bodleian, a partnership was proposed, whereby Cambridge and Oxford will jointly purchase the Collection, share ownership of it, and together endeavour to conserve and digitise the manuscripts as soon as possible. Thanks to a very generous lead gift of £500,000 by Dr Leonard Polonsky, through his Polonsky Foundation, the consortium requires a further £700,000 to secure the purchase and ensure that the sisters’ collection remains accessible to future generations of Genizah scholars. On the 6th of February the two Librarians, along with staff from both institutions, officially launched the appeal for the purchase at a well-attended press event at the British Academy in London. Press coverage has been very promising, with a feature on the Collection on BBC Radio’s Today programme, in the Guardian, New York Times, the New Yorker Online and elsewhere.

Continuing to maintain a high profile is critical, as we only have until August 2013 to raise the remaining funds and complete the purchase.

Once purchased, the Collection will remain in Cambridge for a period of two years where it will undergo conservation and digitisation. Cambridge and Oxford have both committed to digitising the manuscripts in a timely manner, and making those images publicly accessible.

Finally, we should address the issue of the name of the Collection. Genizah scholars have long known it as the Westminster Collection, but, in a decision itself showing great tact and considerable zeal, the two University Librarians have decided to celebrate the achievements of the two pioneering sisters by renaming it the Lewis-Gibson Collection in their honour.

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Delving into the Lewis-Gibson Discoveries

The Lewis-Gibson Collection, like all Genizah collections, possesses its fair share of rare and unique items, and, indeed, it has an overabundance, given its status as one of the first Genizah collections to be assembled from the famous storeroom. Some of these treasures are easy to spot, and their significance requires little explanation. Lewis-Gibson Talmud 257, for instance, is an almost complete leaf of Maimonides’ Commentary on the Mishna, written in the distinctive cursive hand that Maimonides himself employed for the fairier copies of his literary works. It joins dozens of other similar autograph pieces in the wider Genizah, but is a particularly large and fine example. Lewis-Gibson Glass 1A was of great interest to the Smith sisters themselves, who published it, since it is a palimpsest, with an under-text in Christian Palestinian Aramaic that dates probably to around 600 CE. Other treasures, however, require teasing out, as they might appear inconsequential at first.

Lewis-Gibson Misc. 35, for instance, is a Judaeo-Arabic letter on vellum and, as such, joins hundreds of other similar items to be found in the T-S Collection. Reading it, however, reveals that the writer is a woman—rare in itself, but women letter-writers are not unknown in the Genizah world—but, more importantly, she proceeds to give an eyewitness account of events following the Crusader invasion of the Holy Land (1099–1100 CE). She has fled to Tripoli in the Lebanon, which had escaped the Crusader conquest, and from this place of comparative safety she wrote me with him on the day I saw them killed in terrible fashion … I am an ill woman on the brink of insanity, added to the hunger of my family and of the little girl who are all with me, and the horrid news I heard about my son! Since her current plight, she is even driven to suggest that it would be better to be a captive, since those in captivity ‘find someone who gives them food and drink’, whereas as refugees, she and her children are in danger of starving. Flick through fifty more pages of the handsome, but somewhat tiresome, leather-bound Westminster College volume, and you come across Lewis-Gibson Misc. 117, the writer of which was clearly living in a more carefree time. It’s a leaf from a c. 16th-century magical almanac, and includes a practical spell for, shall we say, waking a woman’s interest in you: Take your trousers off and put them over your head, so that you are naked. Say: “So-and-so son of So-and-so is doing this for So-and-so daughter of So-and-so, in order that she will dream that I sleep with her and she sleeps with me!” Such is the range of material encompassed by the Lewis-Gibson Collection, a Genizah in microcosm.

Melanie Schmierer-Lee
Genizah Research Unit

Why is this haggada different from all other haggadot?

At some point in the eleventh century, a competent scribe in Eretz Israel with a delightful Hebrew hand decided to commit to writing the text of the Passover Haggada known to him from his youth. He probably then escaped the clutches of the Crusaders and settled in Egypt, taking his work with him. Like many of his fellow Jews from the Holy Land, he was anxious to ensure that his family traditions were not superseded by those of the local Egyptians.

One of the folios of this Haggada (T-S H2152) came to Cambridge University Library with Solomon Schechter’s hoard in 1897. It is a rich source of customs that were practised in the Holy Land but not in Babylonia. For that reason, I have often lectured and written on its attention to its five and not four Hebrew questions in the mo nihonos, to its instructions in Judaeo-Arabic about how to conduct the seder ritual, and to its Aramaic version of the Exodus story.

A few weeks ago I was preparing an edition of the text for a volume to be published by the University Library’s new Genizah Series. I had long suspected that this folded piece of vellum was one of at least three or four such bifolia in what was originally a volume of the Exodus story. Perhaps this is an attractive and exciting prospect.

Stefan C. Reif
St John’s College

New volume on medical prescriptions published

The fourth volume in our burgeoning Cambridge Genizah Studies series at Brill has recently been published. The work, Medical prescriptions in the Cambridge Genizah Collections: practical medicine and pharmacology in Medieval Egypt, is by two experts in the field of Genizah medicine, Professor Efiarm Lev of Haifa University and former Research Associate in the Unit, Dr Leigh Chipman. The volume follows in the footsteps of Lev’s previous work in this field and takes an in-depth look at the practice of medicine in the Genizah world, as opposed to medical theory, something that we are uniquely able to glimpse thanks to the Genizah’s prediction for accumulating the ephemera of everyday medieval life. Through an examination of thirty selected prescriptions, often hurriedly scrawled in barely legible Arabic and Judaeo-Arabic, Lev and Chipman are able to delve into the world of the medical practitioner, analyse the doctors’ approach to treating a wide variety of illnesses, and discover the panoply of medicinal substances that they could call upon to create their cures. Published in Brill’s larger format, with full-page images and the complete text and translation of thirty medieval prescriptions, this is an attractive and fascinating volume.