

GENIZAH FRAGMENTS

The Newsletter of the Taylor-Schechter Genizah Research Unit, Cambridge University Library

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35,000 visitors and counting

Genizah exhibition reaches new audiences



So far, over 35,000 people have found their way to the University Library's Milstein Exhibition Centre, and stepped back a thousand years in time to view the manuscripts of 'Discarded History: the Genizah of Medieval Cairo'. Since opening at the end of April, the exhibition has kept the Genizah Research

Unit constantly busy running curator tours, public lectures and study days to add to the experience. The response has been quite overwhelming, and the remarkable number of visitors justifies the faith that the University Library has in the tattered Fustat fragments to command a wide audience.

We've received many kind communications congratulating us on the exhibit, and only a few criticisms. One change we did make in the early weeks of the exhibition was as a response to public pressure: many visitors pointed out that the commentary on Isaiah by Sa'adya Gaon was exhibited upside

Above: The trousseau list of the wealthiest woman in the Genizah, accompanied by Fatimid period ceramics loaned by the Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge.

continued overleaf



down. We eventually decided to take action, and there is now a caption beside it explaining why it is upside down: because the Crusader who wrote in Latin that 'this is a commentary on Isaiah' didn't understand how Hebrew books worked, and he wrote it upside down on the original fragment. Other messages have encouraged us to make this a permanent exhibit (if only! There is much competition to get exhibition space and time in the UL) or to take it on tour. We certainly hope to take the

exhibition abroad, encouraged by how popular it has been in out-of-the-way Cambridge, and we are in discussions as to where to take it.

In addition to study days, public talks and hands-on sessions, the Unit collaborated on a number of special one-off events around the exhibit. We were delighted to host Michelle Paymar as she showed a rough cut of her new major documentary on the Genizah 'From Cairo to the Cloud'. Years

Above: During the half time interval of a professional comedy performance based on Genizah personalities, the CamLates audience were able to view the exhibition.

in the making, and with talking heads from all corners of the Genizah world – from former director of the GRU Stefan Reif, through to recent writers such as Mark Glickman (author of 'Sacred Treasure') and the novelist Dara Horn ('A Guide for the Perplexed') –, it's an impressive array of Genizah erudition that should be on wider release sometime next year.

The second event was more edgy: as part of 'Cam Lates' – a series of after-hours events for adults across the University – a troupe of actors put on an

improvised comedy show in the UL, drawing inspiration from the fragments. Cued by two short talks from the research staff, the resulting rambunctious comedy poked fun at Maimonides' more folksy medical remedies, and the torturous pre-nuptial conditions imposed on the bridegroom Toviyya b. Eli ibn Zaffan. This event exposed an entirely new audience to the Genizah, and was a lot of fun.

By the time 'Discarded History' ends, we'll be worn out, but it's been a thoroughly rewarding and enlightening experience for the research unit, and we hope that we'll have the opportunity to show new audiences further treasures of the Fustat Genizah soon.

Ben Outhwaite
Genizah Research Unit

The Genizah Research Unit is grateful for the generous support of the Friedberg Genizah Project, and the Wellcome Trust (Research Resources). We are also appreciative of other smaller or anonymous donations, including those made following visits to see the manuscripts and Discarded History exhibition in Cambridge University Library.

The Bible of the Land of Israel: re-examining the Palestinian vocalisation tradition

The award of a new grant will enable researcher Dr Kim Phillips to examine all known Genizah manuscripts of the Bible vocalised with the so-called Palestinian vocalisation, the Niqqud Erets-Israeli – approximately 120 manuscripts. This form of vocalisation, which marks vowels above the consonants, is a system both less complete and more ‘popular’ in character than the dominant Tiberian system. It is only found in manuscripts from the Cairo Genizah, where it is mainly

used to vocalise liturgical poetry, rabbinic texts, targum fragments and the Hebrew Bible. Despite pioneering work by Kahle, and more recent work by Dietrich, Chiesa, Revell and Yahalom, there remain many unanswered questions both about the system itself and the manuscripts that employ it.

Dr Phillips’ project, which will run over four years, will pay particular attention to the different layers of Palestinian vowel and accent

Detail of T-S AS 63.151, part of the book of Joshua with Palestinian vowel and accent signs. The Palestinian signs are written above the consonants, in a similar way to the Babylonian vocalisation system, and are thought to have been first used to record the correct pronunciation of liturgical texts, before their use was extended to biblical manuscripts too.

signs, attempting to produce a rigorous typology, and will examine the underlying consonantal text, to see how this compares with the consonantal text types of the Tiberian and Babylonian-vocalised manuscripts of the Bible. Furthermore, the project will examine the masoretic notes found on many of the manuscripts, an area previously neglected, as well as analyse in detail the unique serugin fragments, which present an abbreviated biblical text, probably to be used by scribes.



The project is expected to critique previous reconstructions of the historical development of the Palestinian tradition found in biblical manuscripts, to propose a new typology of text types, and to provide a body of research data for future studies on this enigmatic reading tradition of the Bible. The result will be a descriptive map of the Palestinian Bible materials preserved in the Genizah, placing the fragments in their linguistic and historical context.

Melonie Schmierer-Lee
Genizah Research Unit

Visiting Scholars at the Genizah Research Unit

We were delighted to host two visiting scholars in the Genizah Research Unit this summer. José (Pepe) Martínez Delgado of the University of Granada joined us from March–June, and spent his time working on the Cordoban grammarian Hayyuj. Professor Yoram Erder of Tel Aviv University joined us from July–August to work on early Karaite commentaries on the Bible and Sa’adya Gaon’s polemic against the Karaites.

Friends of the Genizah

Looking for a way to make a contribution? The Genizah Research Unit is supported by generous donors around the world. Support research and scholarship on the Genizah collection and receive exciting benefits, such as products featuring items from the collection, invitations to events, behind-

the-scenes tours, and more, by becoming a ‘Friend of the Genizah’.

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For more information on becoming a ‘Friend of the Genizah’, visit <http://tinyurl.com/y6wvzees>

Eli ben Amram and his Companions

Elinor Bareket's new book, *Eli ben Amram and his Companions* (Sussex Academic Press, 2017) takes a close look at Jewish leadership in medieval Fustat by focussing on Eli b. Amram, politician and poet of the middle of the eleventh century. Eli succeeded Efraim b. Shemarya, who died in 1055, as head of the Fustat community, and, like his predecessor, endured a number of controversies, including a serious falling-out with the Jerusalem

Gaon Solomon b. Judah, who referred to Eli in one of his letters as *הבוגד המעולה*, 'the distinguished traitor'. Eli has fortunately left quite a large written legacy in the Genizah, which enables us to see beyond Solomon's cruel characterisation. The legacy includes letters, legal deeds and quite a number of poems. Poetry, for Eli, was a means to a political end, as most of his extant compositions are poems of praise for leading Egyptian Jews, including the Karaite Tustari brothers, courtiers

to the Fatimid Caliph. Through such flattering poems, Eli sought to advance his status and secure his leading position among Fustat's Jews. Bareket's thought-provoking study examines in detail how the language of letters and poems functioned as a mechanism to negotiate the complex network of social relationships that existed in the medieval Mediterranean.

Ben Outhwaite
Genizah Research Unit



Left: The political art in the eleventh century: Eli b. Amram's paean of praise for the Karaite courtier Abraham b. Sahl (T-S 13J10.12).

HOW YOU CAN HELP To receive *Genizah Fragments*, to inquire about the Collection, or to learn how to assist with its preservation and study, please write to Dr Ben Outhwaite, Head of the Genizah Research Unit, at Cambridge University Library, West Road, Cambridge, CB3 9DR, England.

The Library can be reached by fax (01223) 333160 or by telephone (01223) 333000. Inquiries by email should be addressed to the Unit at: genizah@lib.cam.ac.uk

Contributions to the Unit are made to the "University of Cambridge," which enjoys charitable status for tax and similar purposes.

In the USA the Collection is supported through "Cambridge in America". For further information please contact them on 212-984-0960 or see their website: www.cantab.org

"Cambridge in America" is recognized by the IRS as a charitable organization, 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.

Need more Genizah in your life?

To read about the latest discoveries of Genizah researchers, from Karaite halakha, to tax receipts, to stolen cows, browse our 'Fragment of the Month' articles online:

<http://tinyurl.com/y8rcd766>

Or dip into over 20,000 catalogued Genizah fragments on Cambridge Digital Library:

<https://cudl.lib.cam.ac.uk/collections/genizah>

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.