

# GENIZAH FRAGMENTS

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

No. 71 March 2016

## Faith after the Pharaohs

*The Genizah Research Unit was delighted to contribute to the exhibition 'Egypt: faith after the pharaohs' that took place in the British Museum between 29 October 2015 and 7 February 2016. The exhibition was organised jointly with Staatliche Museen zu Berlin and was generously supported by Blavatnik Family Foundation. The visitors – and there were more than sixty-five thousand of them – had a rare chance to admire unique artefacts from UK, French, German, and Italian collections, some of which had never been publicly displayed before.*

The exhibits spanned from 30 BCE, when Egypt became a province of the Roman Empire after the death of Cleopatra and Mark Antony, until 1171 CE, when the rule of the Islamic Fatimid dynasty came to an end. They told a complex story of

religious evolution from Egyptian and Greco-Roman polytheism to various forms of monotheism: Judaism, Christianity and Islam. Numerous objects of material culture: textiles, jewellery, furniture and interior decorations, enhanced with rich multimedia, provided practical proof of syncretism, and brought the viewers closer to the people that inhabited the land of Egypt during these twelve centuries.

As it is natural for an exhibition centring on religion, a great range of texts in a variety of languages, scripts and writing styles was presented: Homeric Greek samples, Aramaic seals with Egyptian hieroglyphs, oracle tickets, papyri fragments of the New Testament and apocrypha, discussions on divine powers, biographies of Coptic saints, magical instructions, love spells and curses, alongside the famed Codex Sinaiticus and an



**Detail of T-S Ar.51.60:** an illustrated leaf of *Kalila wa-Dimna*.

8th-century copy of the Qur'an. A place of honour was reserved for the Genizah treasures: a Hebrew school primer, a responsum of Maimonides, letters on legal and business matters, and an illustrated leaf of *Kalila wa-Dimna*. The objects eloquently showed mutual influences and long periods of peaceful coexistence between Jews, Christians and Muslims.

The exhibition was a huge success: it enjoyed excellent

reviews in the press and in the professional media. At a special event in Cambridge the exhibition's curator Elisabeth R. O'Connell presented her illuminating perspective on the period, followed by comments from key experts within the field including Dr Ben Outhwaite, Dr James Aitken, and Dr Simon Gathercole.

**Julia Krivoruchko**  
*Genizah Research Unit*

## Cambridge celebrates Solomon Schechter's life and legacy

A one-day symposium on Solomon Schechter was held in the Centre for Research in the Arts, Social Sciences and Humanities in November 2015. Titled 'Solomon Schechter's life and legacy: a Jewish scholar in Victorian England', the event

was organised by Dr Theodor Dunkelgrün, as a part of CRASSH's ERC-funded major project 'Bible and antiquity in 19th-century culture'. The symposium examined the life and work of this major figure of Jewish scholarship,

covering not only his early work on midrash and his discovery of the Cairo Genizah, but also his later career in the USA at the Jewish Theological Seminary and his overall status as an outstanding and often surprising scholar. The

current head of the Unit, Ben Outhwaite, as well as the former head, Stefan Reif, along with a range of scholars from the UK and USA, all gave presentations. Dr Dunkelgrün plans to produce an edited volume of selected papers.

## A Barley Believable Calendar Dispute

This year the leap day 29 February fell on the intercalary month Adar I of the Jewish calendar. Both 2016 and its *anno mundi* counterpart 5776 are intercalated (having extra periods of time inserted into

them) but the two calendars do it differently. Instead of having an extra day every four years, the Jewish calendar adds a 30-day month every two or three years bringing the shorter lunar year in sync with the seasons.

From the 8th century onwards Rabbanite Jews have followed a fixed cycle of intercalations in which seven months are added over nineteen years. Not so the Karaites, whose ideal – rooted in a biblical precept – is to intercalate the year by observing the ripening of barley in the Land of Israel. This ideal was not always attainable: reports on the state of the barley crops in Palestine, easily available today, were often inaccessible to medieval Karaite communities further afield.

**T-S 20.45 recto.** An 11th-century letter from a Byzantine Jew to his brother in Egypt.

When empirical intercalation was practiced, it led to calendar discrepancies between Karaites and Rabbanites. One such occasion is noted in a betrothal deed from 11th-century Egypt dated “Thursday, the ninth day of the month Shevat, which is the month Adar in the year of a discrepancy between the [Rabbanite and Karaite] communities” (T-S 20.42). In such years, holidays were celebrated one month apart by the two groups. In a mixed Karaite–Rabbanite marriage this could seriously impact daily life, especially so at Passover when one spouse would remove leaven bread and the other would still use it. Unsurprisingly, all mixed marriage contracts contained a clause that ensured festivals were respected according to both calendars.

Calendar discrepancies sometimes resulted in violence, as is attested by an 11th-century letter written by a Byzantine Rabbanite to his brother in Egypt (T-S 20.45):

*As you know, my dear brother, the Karaites assaulted us again last year and desecrated the festivals of the Lord. They celebrated the New Year in the eighth month, for they have received letters from Palestine to the effect that no ripe barley was sighted in Nisan. Consequently, their Passover was celebrated in Iyyar... Now, a violent enmity has developed between us and great quarrels have taken place.*

Authorities seem to have sympathised with the Karaites, punishing Rabbanite trouble-makers by imposing a heavy tax of nearly 1000 dinars upon the Rabbanite community.

### 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](mailto: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](http://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.

### Nadia Vidro

Research Associate in the ERC-funded project “Calendars in the Late Antiquity and the Middle Ages” University College London

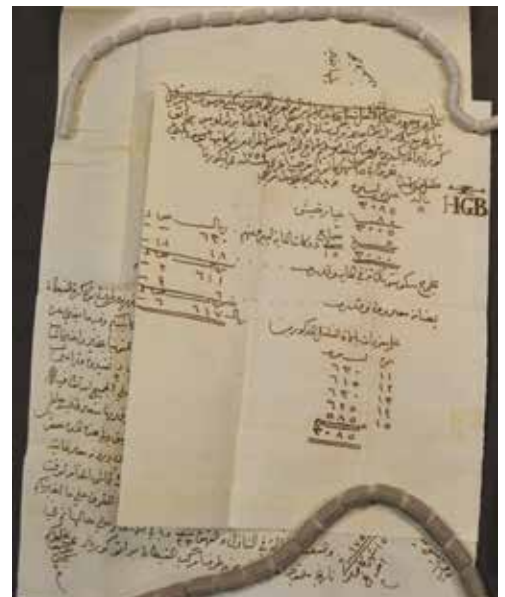
# The Language of Looted Letters

The deposition history of the Genizah is patchy: the majority of manuscripts in the Genizah originate in the medieval period; from the 15th-century onwards, Judaeo-Arabic texts, and especially Judaeo-Arabic documents, are more rare. There is, however, a batch of Judaeo-Arabic business letters from the early 19th century, written between Jewish Egyptian merchants, that found its way into the Genizah. Because they are such a rare exception, these letters are extremely informative for Jewish economic history and for Arabic language history, in particular. They give access to the colloquial Arabic of the time like few other sources, and inform us about the way Jews (and Muslims) of the time would have spoken. The language displayed in the letters is a mix of

colloquial expressions, pseudo-literary phrases and coded trade language. This, however, means that they are also rather inaccessible, especially as there are so few sources with which they can be compared. By sheer luck, I was made aware of a similar collection of Arabic letters in the Prize Paper Collections, housed at The National Archives at Kew Gardens. These Arabic letters were seized in 1759 by British privateers as part of the loot on a Tuscan ship bound for Alexandria; some of them sent to Jewish individuals may well have ended up in the Genizah had they not been intercepted. They have been virtually untouched since that time – most of the letters were still unopened when I first viewed them and they



**Above:** Large envelopes contain a number of smaller letters. Note the star of David on the letter at the top right.



**Right:** Many of the Prize Paper letters have folded sheets of accounts inside.



One of the Prize Paper letters contains a wire sample.

remain in the pristine condition in which they were archived in the 18th century.

The Prize Paper letters are revelatory for our understanding of similar Genizah sources. On the one hand, their linguistic phenomena enable us to get a better grasp of Ottoman Judaeo-Arabic and allow us to read the more difficult passages in the Genizah letters. On the other hand, we can now better understand how the letters were arranged. In the Genizah, no complete sealed envelopes were preserved, as they were read before being deposited, and thus the arrangement of accounts and letters has never been entirely clear. With the undisturbed Prize

Papers serving as comparative reference, the material culture and postal arrangements of Ottoman Genizah letters can be explored in-depth. We can see how accounts (which are only loose sheets in the Genizah) were placed inside the letters; how individual envelopes were gathered in big cover envelopes; how samples of wares were included in the mail.

The Prize Paper and Genizah Collections thus shed light on one another and help us to understand a hitherto much underexplored aspect of economic and language history.

**Esther-Miriam Wagner**  
Genizah Research Unit

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## Avicenna on show

Cambridge University Library began 2016 with a display on medieval medicine through the lens of Genizah fragments. Thanks to the generous support of the Wellcome Trust for the project 'Medicine in medieval Egypt: creating online access to the medical corpus of the Cairo Genizah', I was able to organise the display of five manuscript fragments of Avicenna's *Canon of Medicine*, together with one prestigious printed edition of the Latin version of the work.

The Persian polymath Avicenna (Abū 'Alī al-Ḥusayn ibn 'Abd Allāh ibn Al-Ḥasan ibn 'Alī ibn Sīnā) completed his *Canon of Medicine* (*Al-Qānūn fī al-ṭibb*) during the first quarter of the 11th century. This medical masterpiece was destined to become one of the most influential medical texts in both the Arabo-Islamic world and in pre-modern Europe, an influence that lasted until the 18th century. The greatest selling-point of the *Canon* – and the reason for its long-lasting fame – was its synthetic and didactic structure, a very effective organisation of the teachings of Graeco-Roman physicians that had been translated in the 8th/9th centuries.

The Genizah preserves dozens of fragments of the *Canon* and stands as a further proof of the widespread influence of this text through the centuries.

The display in the University Library included Genizah fragments in Arabic, Judaeo-Arabic and Hebrew, some of them abridgements of the *Canon*, possibly aimed at students of medicine or to be kept as handbooks for the practising physician. The Hebrew fragments testify to the production of Hebrew

versions of the work for Jewish physicians who did not read Arabic (or Judaeo-Arabic), most likely from Southern France or Italy.

The printed book on show, a lavishly illustrated Latin edition of the *Canon* together with other translations of Arabic medical books, was produced in Venice in 1608 by the Giunti family of printers. It was included in the display as a nod to the continuous fame of Avicenna's *Canon* in the medieval and early modern world, a fame that spanned seven centuries of medical history, over different linguistic, cultural and religious traditions.

If you missed the exhibition at Cambridge University Library, it can be viewed online at: <https://exhibitions.lib.cam.ac.uk/avicenna/>

**Gabriele Ferrario**  
*Genizah Research Unit*

Supported by  
**wellcome**trust



## Jewish Prayer Texts from the Cairo Genizah

The Genizah Unit is delighted to report that the latest volume in Brill's Cambridge Genizah Studies series will shortly appear. Stefan Reif, former and founding director of the Unit, Emeritus Professor at Cambridge and expert on the history of Jewish liturgy, has produced an in-depth analysis of some of the most important manuscripts of Jewish prayer to emerge from the Cairo Genizah – our most important source for the analysis of the evolution of the Jewish liturgical traditions. Treating

twenty-five fragments in depth, with transcription, translation, and historical and textual commentary, the book offers an erudite and thought-provoking look at a range of liturgical texts, covering everything from the Passover Haggada to an unusual grace after meals. The book will offer a fresh understanding of the historical, theological, linguistic and social factors that have shaped Jewish prayer.

*Jewish Prayer Texts from the Cairo Genizah*  
Stefan C. Reif (Brill, 2016)



**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.**