The Cairo Geniza and its Scholars

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On behalf of Jewish History Class
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Interior of Ibn Ezra Synagogue, site of medieval geniza (synagogue of Maimonides)

picture from Sacred Trash, by Hoffman, Adina & Cole, Peter, Schocken: NY, 2011, 15
A genizah, Hebrew for "hiding place," is a depository for sacred Hebrew books that are no longer usable. Since they cannot be thrown out because they contain God's name, these documents, often called shemot or "names," are put in a genizah. Genizot are usually found in the attic or basement of a synagogue, but can also be in walls or buried underground. Non-religious documents can be put there as well.

http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/History/Genizah.html

Rabbi Shlomo Aaron Werthheimer (Jerusalem) sold geniza fragments to various Universities

picture from Sacred Trash, by Hoffman, Adina & Cole, Peter, Schocken: NY, 2011,33
Cambridge University bought geniza fragments from Rabbi Wertheimer

picture from Sacred Trash, by Hoffman, Adina & Cole, Peter, Schocken: NY, 2011,142
The importance of the Cairo Genizah became apparent in 1896, when two Christians brought some leaves to Solomon Schechter, who at the time was a professor of Talmudic and rabbinical literature at England's Cambridge University. Schechter recognized them as the Hebrew original "Book of Wisdom," ascribed to Ben Sira. The Book of Wisdom became part of the Christian biblical cannon (Ecclesiastics) when translated into Greek. Before its discovery in the Cairo Genizah, no known Hebrew version existed, some scholars even doubted its existence. Schechter led an expedition to Cairo where, over several painstaking months, he extracted thousands of pages from the genizah and took them to back to Cambridge. The sealed, dark room in the dry Egyptian climate allowed for the preservation the documents.

http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/History/Genizah.html
Librarian Adolf Neubauer bought Geniza fragments on behalf of Oxford University, he was in competition with Solomon Schechter for claim to understanding importance of the Cairo Geniza for research and some say Schecther who personally went to the Geniza to bring back Geniza fragments beat him to the cache; [picture from Sacred Trash, by Hoffman, Adina & Cole, Peter, Schocken: NY, 2011,36]
Solomon Schechter, Description of Original State and contents of the Geniza

• One can hardly realize the confusion in a genuine, old Genizah until one has seen it. It is a battlefield of books, and the literary productions of many centuries had their share in the battle, and their disjecta membra are now strewn over its area. Some of the belligerents have perished outright, and are literally ground to dust in the terrible struggle for space, whilst others, as if overtaken by a general crush, are squeezed into big, unshapely lumps, which even with the aid of chemical appliances can no longer be separated without serious damage to their constituents. In their present condition these lumps sometimes afford curiously suggestive combinations; as, for instance, when you find a piece of some rational work, in which the very existence of either angels or devils is denied, clinging for its very life to an amulet in which these same beings (mostly the latter) are bound over to be on their good behavior and not interfere with Miss Jair’s love for somebody. The development of the romance is obscured by the fact that the last lines of the amulet are mounted on some I.O.U., or lease, and this in turn is squeezed between the sheets of an old moralist, who treats all attention to money affairs with scorn and indignation. Again, all these contradictory matters cleave tightly to some sheets from a very old bible. This, indeed, ought to be the last umpire between them, but it is hardly legible without peeling off from its surface the fragments of some printed work, which clings to old nobility with all the obstinacy and obstructiveness of the Parvenu
Solomon Schechter sorting & organizing Geniza Fragments in attic of Cambridge Univ. Library

described in Sacred Trash, by Hoffman, Adina & Cole, Peter, Schocken: NY, 2011, 89
Importance of the Geniza

- The discovery of the documents in the Cairo Genizah has been likened to the 20th century discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls. In addition to valuable Biblical and Talmudic documents, it gave a detailed picture of the economic and cultural life of the Middle Eastern and Mediterranean region over many centuries. No other library in the world possessed such an array of religious and private documents from the 10th to 13th centuries, when the Fatimid caliphs (10-12th centuries) and Ayyubid sultans (12th-13th centuries) ruled. The genizah revealed a wealth of information from this period, an era previously not well-known in Jewish history. Its leaves described the vital role the Jews played in the economic and cultural life of the medieval Middle East as well as the warm relations between Jews and Arabs, through community minutes, rabbinical court records, leases, title-deeds, endowment contracts, debt acknowledgments, marriage contracts and private letters. Pages from the genizah identify hundreds of previously unknown people as well as provide new information about well-known men such as theologian and philiogist Yosef al-Fayumi (842-942). More than 200 previously unknown poems by Yehuda Halevy (c. 1080-1145) were found in the genizah. Perhaps the most important papers found belong to Rabbi Moses ben Maimon (Maimonides or the "Rambam," 1135-1204), the greatest medieval Jewish philosopher and physician. The genizah contained over thirty works authored by the Rambam, including commentary on some Mishna tractates and a number of letters. Before this discovery, only a few lines of original Rambam writings had ever been found.

- [www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/History/Genizah.html](http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/History/Genizah.html)
Geniza Scholars and their approaches

- **(1) Solomon Schechter**: brought back 26 trunks of geniza docs. To Cambridge Univ.
- **(2) Louis Ginzberg**: Yerushalmi Fragments, Geonica, Eine unbekanntne jüdische Sekte. [Zadokite Text of DSS] (halakhic texts)
- **(3) Israel Davidson**: Geniza poetry including Yannai
- **(4) Menachem Zulay**: pioneer in research of poetry of geniza
- **(5) Haim Schirmann**: pioneer in research of poetry of geniza, and accomplished violinst
- **(6) Ezra Fleischer**, [friend of Chaim Vilsker who was librarian at Hebrew Univ., formerly of Saltykov Library St. Petersburg] and head of Geniza poetry Research Institute
- **(7) Jacob Mann**: doc. Evidence- letters, contracts, court records on communal life
- **(8) S.D. Goitein**: A Mediterranean society: the Jewish communities of the Arab world as portrayed in the documents of the Cairo Geniza (trade, accounts, etc.)
- **(9) Marc Cohen**: Voice of the Poor in the M.A.; *Voice of the Poor in the M.A*. Under the auspices of the Princeton Geniza Proejct one of Goitein’s leading students Cohen has since the mid-1980s supervised able students to transcribe and create a large searchable database of the Geniza’s historical documents in Judeo-Arabic and Hebrew. Known as the “TextGarden”, the database currently includes some 400 thousand fragments, nearly a quarter of the Geniza’s documentary nonliterary materials
- **(10) Stephen Reif**: liturgical aspects; Reif has advanced the organization of Schechter’s original finds far beyond the black binders on rows and rows of shelves a few aisles down from the Charles Darwin papers in the closed stacks of the University library. The Taylor-Schechter collection constitutes 70% of the worlds Geniza stash. Besides what Schechter carted back it includes purchases from Wertheimer, chest, Henriques, and others. It was Reif who in 1973 began systematic examination. An energetic Scottish Jewish scholar and bibliographer Reif laid out an ambitious 10 year plan to bring order to the jumbled mess by conserving, cataloging, microfilming, and creating a bibliography for the collection in its entirety. Beyond Cambridge, Geniza fragments are held physically in private storerooms from the JTSA in NY to the Bodleian at Oxford. 75 collections have been counted.
Israel Davidson: Pioneer in Geniza poetry including discovery of Yannai poems

picture from Sacred Trash, by Hoffman, Adina & Cole, Peter, Schocken: NY, 2011.102
Salman Schocken owner of Schocken press and financial founder of Medieval poetry
Geniza Research Institute

picture from Sacred Trash, by Hoffman, Adina & Cole, Peter, Schocken: NY, 2011,113
Schocken’s Institute for the Study of Hebrew Poetry originally in Berlin, moved to Israel as result of anti-semitism before Holocaust

picture from Sacred Trash, by Hoffman, Adina & Cole, Peter, Schocken: NY, 2011,114
Menachem Zulay, pioneer in poetry of Geniza studies

Jacob Mann, author of *the Jews in Egypt and in Palestine under the Fatimid Caliphs*

picture from Sacred Trash, by Hoffman, Adina & Cole, Peter, Schocken: NY, 2011,134
Haim Schirmann, pioneer in Geniza poetry and accomplished violinist

Published 1938 a biography of Rabbi Yehudah HaLevy; _Hebrew Poetry from Spain and Provence_ (1956) and 1965 collection of some 250 previously unpublished Geniza poems, and did much research on documentary archival geniza documents relating to poet Dunash ben Labrat including some of his prose. Schirmann founded the Israel National Academy of Geniza Research for Hebrew Poetry in 1967. The Institutes extensive index of meters, refrains, genres, opening lines, rhyme schemes, stanzaic structures, and scriptural citations all cross-referenced was an attempt to map the “genetic identity” of 90 thousand poems.

picture from Sacred Trash, by Hoffman, Adina & Cole, Peter, Schocken: NY, 2011, 177
Postcard to Prof S.D Goitein of Univ. of Pennsylvania and Later Princeton

picture from Sacred Trash, by Hoffman, Adina & Cole, Peter, Schocken: NY, 2011,182
S. D. Goitein author of The Mediterranean Society (7 vols.)

Ezra Fleischer, [friend of iluy Chaim Vilsker librarian at Hebrew Univ.] and head of Geniza poetry Research Institute

Fleischer described Dr. Chaim Vilsker [husband of Dr. Gita Gluskina], the son in law of Rav Menachem Mendel Gluskin (ztsl, Av bet din of Minsk, son of Rabbi Aaron Ori Gluskin) as an iluy (genius); Vilsker discovered unpublished poems of Rabbi Yehudah HaLevy in the Saltykov library
“The study of the Geniza has given us not so much a quantitative increase in knowledge although that has been immense; and not just a qualitative advance that surpasses expectation although that has been astonishing; and not merely an influx dizzying as that has been of dates and names, of hues and lights and voices. The recovery of the Geniza has meant rather, the spectacular completion of a breath-taking landscape, the perfect harmonious and inevitable unity of which all of a sudden seems revealed”

Ezra Fleischer discovers poem by wife of Rabbi Dunash ben Labrat

- wife of Dunash ben Labrat’s wife which told of the couples painful separation: Will her love remember his graceful doe/ her only son in her arms as he parted?/ On her left hand he placed a ring from his right/ on his wrist she placed her bracelet/ as a keepsake she took his mantle from him,/ and he in turn took hers from her/ would he settle now in the land of Spain/ if its prince gave him half his kingdom
Stefen Reif with members of Taylor-Schechter Geniza Research Unit

picture from Sacred Trash, by Hoffman, Adina & Cole, Peter, Schocken: NY, 2011, 227
2007 sold unidentified Geniza fragments

picture from Sacred Trash, by Hoffman, Adina & Cole, Peter, Schocken: NY, 2011,239
Today, a large portion of the Cairo Genizah's documents are available at the University Library in Cambridge, where documents are under glass, bound in albums or placed loosely in boxes. Smaller collections are spread out across the world, in libraries in London, Oxford, Paris, Frankfurt, Vienna, Budapest, Leningrad, and Philadelphia.
Penn/Cambridge Genizah Fragment Project

Documents from the CAIRO GENIZAH date from the 9th through 15th centuries. Written in Hebrew, Aramaic, Arabic, and Judeo-Arabic, they catalogue the social, cultural, and religious lives of Jews around the Mediterranean basin.

“Made possible by a generous gift from Mr. Jeffrey Keil.”

Learn about the Cairo Genizah, this ongoing project and its recent developments.

Browse the list of fragments contributed by the University of Pennsylvania Museum, the Cambridge University Library and the Library of the Jewish Theological Seminary of America.

Search the list of fragments by title, author, date, language, call number, contributing institution, etc.

Tools compare fragments on screen.

Credits this online presentation was made possible by the concerted efforts of individuals from several institutions.

Contact us regarding the collection or the web site.

Baraita di-melekhet ha-mishkan 6-10 (click to view)
Search fields of selected digitized Geniza texts
Kabbalistic Geniza text
[Classified list of angels' names]
Judeo-Arabic. 11th century-12th century?, Halper 437]

http://sceti.library.upenn.edu/genizah/browse.cfm#
Kabalistic text from Geniza by Menahem Azariah da Fano
[?Asarah ma?amarot, V-VI]
Hebrew. 17th century?], Halper 439

http://sceti.library.upenn.edu/genizah/browse.cfm#
Adon Olam with correspondent commandments, sephirot, also a discussion of grammatical rules of vocalization and nouns:
Hebrew. 19th century, Halper 191
Kabbalistic Blessing of the new moon from siddur found in Geniza; Hebrew. 14th century-16th century?
Cabalistic commentary on B.T. Masekhet Berakhot 3a: Hebrew. Geniza text, 15th century-18th century?

http://sceti.library.upenn.edu/pages/index.cfm?so_id=2138
807 papers listed in RAMBI on Cairo Genizah
Friedberg project and Yaacov Choueka

Albert Friedberg, a kind of latter-day Salman Schocken, has financed a massive project to make all Geniza fragments available online. Carried out by a staff of mostly young ultra-orthodox women in an unprepossessing office building surrounded by shwarma stands in Jerusalem. With an international team of scholars, the cyberwizard behind the Friedberg site is Yaacov Choueka. Choueka is revolutionizing the study of the Geniza. As planned when the project is complete, photographs of hundreds of thousands of the Fustat ms. – the recto and verso of 331,351 folios from the Ben Ezra cache – will be available at the click of a mouse on the Friedberg website, along with half a million items of data about these ms., compiled over the course of the previous century. It adopts state-of-the-art face-recognition technology to the medieval context. And the Friedenberg programmers have made possible the mechanical identification of candidates for “joins” the reunion of long separated parts of torn ms. As well as fragments from the same scribe.