

GENIZAH FRAGMENTS

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

No. 80 October 2021

Genizah in a time of Covid

Towards the end of March 2020 Cambridge University Library announced that, in accordance with government pandemic advice, staff should work from home wherever possible.

There followed a mild scramble in the Genizah office for useful reference works – those of Moshe Gil being particularly sought after – before we all disappeared to our respective homes, presuming that we'd be meeting back in the office within a few weeks or months. We had already had to cancel our public engagement activities – lectures and visits – following Public Health England guidance, but there was a general feeling that the work of research and cataloguing of the Collection could go on with only minor disruption. As we settled in to our new home offices, the University was rapidly rolling out VPN connections – to allow remote access to electronic resources – and purchasing new software, such as Microsoft Teams, to allow remote collaborative working. In the GRU's case, we were already prepared: we had been using the collaboration software Slack for years, having introduced it to facilitate teamwork (and cut down on chit-chat in the office). And because of the digitisation of the



One of the highpoints of lockdown was managing to design and mount the exhibition, *Ghost Words*, which features a range of palimpsest manuscripts, including the unique 'Yannai Quire' from the Genizah. Visiting it was more of a challenge at times, but its run has been extended till December 2021 for anyone who would like to make the trip to see it.

Collection, we have had access to the entire Taylor-Schechter Collection in electronic form for a decade already – either through our own servers or via the indispensable Friedberg Genizah Project website. Thanks to the application of technology, and the tremendous resilience of the research team, we have been able therefore to continue work more or less

unabated on a number of active projects. This has been despite the demands of childcare and home schooling, the necessity to share home-office space with spouses and grown-up children, and, in two cases, of researchers getting stranded abroad (in Greece and Germany). Despite these challenges we have, over the course of the last 18 months, catalogued

in detail some thousands of documentary, calendrical and poetry fragments, designed and delivered a major exhibition on palimpsests, published uninterrupted a new *Fragment of the Month* every month, and created new electronic resources, such as our increasingly popular *Genizah Fragments* blog. The blog, in particular, is intended as a

continued overleaf

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replacement for the venerable *Genizah Fragments* newsletter. At the start of lockdown, we had just written, edited and printed April 2020's edition of *Genizah Fragments*. In fact, we had for once managed to meet our own deadlines, and it was all ready to be posted out, ahead of schedule. Sarah Sykes was busy stuffing the envelopes when lockdown was announced, and she dutifully carried all the copies home to complete the task. Unfortunately, with the closure of the University Library offices we lost access to the franking machine, and Sarah was not going to buy and lick 1000 stamps. Instead, using the

ironing board as a work space, all the envelopes were labelled, stamped with a return address, stuffed, sealed and stored under the stairs in her hallway to await the re-opening of the UL. July came and there was a gradual opening up of services. Waiting patiently to hear of more developments, in August it became clear to Sarah that a proactive approach was needed and the Facilities Management team were contacted to find out if the Post Room was now operative. It was indeed! Sarah proceeded to load her car with multiple boxes of prepped envelopes and duly delivered

them to the Staff Entrance. A few days later she received an email to say that all had been dispatched, a delay of only four months.

The difficulties that we experienced in getting that issue of *Genizah Fragments* into people's hands, along with the expense that it regularly involves, have led us to take the difficult decision to retire the newsletter with this issue. While it performed an important task over several decades, the production of a paper newsletter is no longer practical for us nor the most efficient way that we

can communicate the latest developments in the work on the Genizah Collection. Instead, the *Genizah Fragments* blog will be the main focus for updates on the GRU, the Collection and the burgeoning Genizah community, and we recommend to anyone that hasn't yet looked at it to point their browser at <https://www.lib.cam.ac.uk/genizah-fragments>, and not to forget either that we produce a *Fragment of the Month* article every month, as well as regular updates to the Cambridge Digital Library.

Ben Outhwaite

Recent discoveries



T-S AS 144.94

In the year 1108 CE the cantor Obadiah b. Aaron he-Ḥaver ordered a calendar. The calendar must have been of sentimental value – it was to chart the first 15 years in the life of Obadiah's son, born in Kislev of that year. Obadiah b. Aaron he-Ḥaver recorded the birth of his son on the cover page of the calendar booklet, first in Hebrew, then again in Arabic. In Hebrew, he gave the child's Hebrew name Ḥalfon b. Obadiah, the date of his birth according to the Jewish calendar and the corresponding Hijri year, and noted that the year in which the boy was born was plain (it had 12 months). Switching to Judaeo-Arabic, he remarked that the birth took place immediately after the call for (the evening?) prayer. Obadiah b. Aaron hopes that the child will be granted many good days and pleasant years and that he and his elder brother (from a different father) will get the opportunity to show Obadiah b. Aaron their erudition. The Arabic script record below contains the boy's Arabic name Kalaf b. 'Abdallah and the Hijri year of his birth. Sadly, Obadiah b. Aaron's hopes came to nothing – the boy Ḥalfon passed away. His devastated father crossed out the birth record and wrote at the top 'The child has died'. In his distress he struggled with the writing – the record of the death reads **נפטר הידל** instead of **הילד**.

Nadia Vidro



T-S NS 297.132

Medieval Hebrew and Judaeo-Arabic texts are the GRU's bread and butter, but in recent years the Arabic-script fragments of the Taylor-Schechter Collection have drawn increasing attention. T-S NS 297.132 is one such fragment, belonging with 11 others in the same folder. Previously catalogued as a 'literary (theological) text,' they have now been identified as part of a tiny horizontal codex (each folio measuring only 9 x 10 cm) of *Asbāb al-Nuzūl* (*The Circumstances of Revelation*) by the eleventh-century Muslim scholar Abu al-Ḥasan al-Wāḥidī. It is an exegetical work describing the circumstances in which the Prophet Muhammad received the words of the Qur'an. This book is the earliest and most influential representative of a subgenre of Qur'anic interpretation focused on the circumstances of prophecy. It is also decidedly Islamic, which raises questions about why Egyptian Jews possessed it. The most common explanation is for some polemical purpose, but even if that is the case, the owner still showed it enough deference to store in a genizah.

Nick Posegay



T-S NS 306.104

This bifolium is a copy of al-Muḥassin b. 'Alī l-TanūḲī's (d. 939-34) *Kitāb al-faraj ba'da l-šidda* ('Relief After Adversity'), a collection of anecdotes intended to bring comfort and strength to the reader. In this fragment, we encounter various historical figures, such as: Muḥammad b. 'Abd al-Malik al-Zayyāt (d. 847 CE), a vizier of the Abbasid Caliph al-Wāṭiq (d. 847 CE); Aḥmed b. Isrā'īl [sic.] (here described as the scribe of Ibn al-Zayyāt); 'Umar b. Hubayra (d. 726), an Umayyad political and military figure; and 'Uṭman b. 'Affān (d. 656 CE). Several sewing-stations along the internal fold of the bifolium indicate that these two leaves were once bound in a quire. The paper is unpatterned and has suffered some water-damage. The text, which is partially vocalised with standard Arabic vocalisation signs, is written in a sans serif *ta'liq*-style script. The letters are consistently pointed with diacritical dots and *ihmāl* signs are found beneath individual letters to ensure the correct reading (e.g., under 'ayn). Three-dot verse-dividers arranged in triangular formation mark the end of a paragraph or section.

Magdalen Connolly



T-S NS J270

A letter sent from Ashkelon to Bilbays, in which Abū Sa'd writes to his brother that he has been trying to help a man named Musallam redeem his sister from the Crusaders in Nablus. After travelling to Nablus to negotiate with her Crusader captor, the men were given permission to depart with the woman even though 60 dinars were still owed to the Crusader. The men tried everything they could think of to clear the debt with Abū Sa'd even offering to place his own son as a pledge, but now Musallam and his sister have travelled to Egypt to try to raise the money (possibly by arranging a marriage for her). Abū Sa'd has heard nothing more from them, but the Crusader has arrived in Ashkelon demanding the debt be cleared or the woman returned to him. Poor Abū Sa'd has been left in a difficult situation, with neither woman nor money to give to the Crusader. This letter, from the mid-12th century, is one of thousands that were catalogued with enriched metadata as part of a recent project. It had previously been published by Goitein and Gil, and now the tagging of personal names, towns, and other details in the letter will allow us to search and mine the catalogue data more effectively in future.

Melanie Schmierer-Lee



T-S NS 264.66

The correct identification of this fragment was a triumph of collaborative working. I originally dropped an image of it in Slack, telling my colleagues that it was probably a book cover, made from several bits of paper laminated together. Some of the paper also appeared to have responsa on them, addressing a Nagid. It was then noticed by other colleagues that the regular holes in the fragment suggested not a book cover, but a *maṣṭara*, a ruling board (a board with pieces of string threaded through it; paper is pressed down on the board to make impressions of lines, producing lined paper), and that not only did some of the responsa appear to be copies of Abraham Maimonides' rulings, but others were actually in his handwriting too. So, it is a ruling board that recycles paperwork from Abraham Maimonides' archive!

Ben Outhwaite



T-SA 43.12

This shorthand Hebrew Bible is a palimpsest. The abbreviated text of 2 Kings 7:9-8:4; 10:6-23; 12:9-13:7; 15:20-16:6 is written over the top of what was once an Arabic codex of substantial dimensions, probably on astronomy. Geometric diagrams in black and red ink can still be seen beneath the biblical text. 77 fragments of shorthand biblical manuscripts have now been catalogued as part of our 'Bible of the Land of Israel' project. These shorthand Bibles employ a range of different techniques for abbreviating the text, and these different techniques seem to relate to the different functions these manuscripts served. The fragment pictured was probably someone's personal copy of this part of Kings, abbreviated in such a way that the user could still read the text without the aid of another manuscript. Other shorthand Bibles seem to have served as tools for professional scribes, preserving, in a highly compact manner, aspects of the biblical text (such as the accentuation). These would then have been used as reference tools in the copying of the biblical text.

Kim Phillips

80 issues of Genizah Fragments

This is the final edition of *Genizah Fragments* as a printed newsletter. When the Genizah Research Unit's founder, Prof. Stefan C. Reif, launched *Genizah Fragments* in 1981, it was to offer "a more popular account of our activities which would acknowledge the part played by all those who have assisted our efforts, as well as keeping the public informed of new developments and discoveries" (issue 1). The intervening years have seen the newsletter report countless discoveries, from new leaves of Ben Sira (issues 3 and 61) to Nehemiah Gaon's seal impression in the Mosseri Collection (issues 56 and 63), as well as new vistas for research, from Bible, Talmud, Jewish history, Hebrew literature, Arabic language and literature, to *materia medica*, magic, palaeography and commerce.

It is in the technological developments where the passage of time is perhaps most keenly seen, with the GRU gaining its own computer in 1984, enabling "the researcher to gain swift access to his specific subject of interest" (issue 8). In 1988 email arrives, described as "an international exchange of messages", bringing "speedy responses" to scholars' queries (issue 16). By 1995, it is predicted the GRU "may become [the] envy of the world" with a plan to turn catalogues "into a form that will be readable on screen, allowing other scholars instant access" (issue 30). The Genizah OnLine Database (GOLD) is launched soon after (issue 31).

Time, too, is seen in the familiar faces that grow ever so slightly more aged with each conference photograph. There

is the ever-present search for funding to keep pace with burgeoning research, boosted by public awareness of the collection and its significance. Reports of organised visiting groups as well as the success of exhibitions in the UK and abroad bear witness to the manuscripts' ability to capture the attention of audiences ranging from heads of state and diplomats to classrooms of children. Conservation and digitisation milestones are announced with the fanfare these great steps forward deserved: by issue 3 (1982) all of the fragments had been conserved and encapsulated in "moon film" (melinex having been developed by the space industry, see issue 9). The Collection was inventoried (issue 53) with the support of the Friedberg Genizah Project (launched in

1999, see issue 38), and then fully digitised (issues 55 and 64). New Genizah collections arrive in Cambridge, with the loan of the Mosseri Collection (issues 51 and 53), and the joint initiative with the Bodleian to purchase the Westminster fragments (now renamed the Lewis-Gibson Collection). The retirement of Stefan Reif, the GRU's founder, in 2006, saw the baton passed to the next generation of Genizah scholars, and Ben Outhwaite was appointed Head of the GRU (issues 51 and 52). 80 volumes later, it is time for the printed newsletter to also pass on the baton. As *Genizah Fragments* relaunches in 2021 in its new iteration of a blog, we hope you will continue to enjoy reading about our discoveries and triumphs in a new format.

Melonie Schmierer-Lee

Keeping in touch with the Genizah Research Unit

Although we will no longer be producing our bi-annual newsletter, staying in touch with us has never been easier. You can contact us directly by email: genizah@lib.cam.ac.uk and by post: Genizah Research Unit, Cambridge University Library, West Road, Cambridge, CB3 9DR, as usual. We can also be reached by telephone (01223) 333129.

You can read about our latest projects and news on our webpages at <https://www.lib.cam.ac.uk/collections/departments/taylor-schechter-genizah-research-unit> as well as our new *Genizah Fragments* blog <https://www.lib.cam.ac.uk/genizah-fragments>. The blog features several posts each week about recent discoveries, conversations with Genizah scholars on their latest research, reviews of publications, and more. If you've ever wanted to read more about medieval cheese, Mediterranean piracy, or Saadia Gaon's calendrical theories, there'll be something for you on the *Genizah Fragments* blog. Subscribe to the blog to receive notifications by email so you never miss a post.

The GRU can also be found on social media, through our Facebook page (<https://www.facebook.com/CambridgeGRU>), where you can read announcements and get notifications whenever we publish a new blog post or *Fragment of the Month*. We also regularly post manuscript images on both Facebook and our new Instagram page (@CambridgeGRU).

Thank you to all readers of the *Genizah Fragments* newsletter. We look forward to sharing even more of our work with you in the years to come.

Sarah Sykes

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