

## European Seminars on Advanced Jewish Studies

### **PROJECT 3 (2010-11): The Material Texts of the Genizah Collection at the Bodleian Library: A New Approach to Genizah Research**

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The Cairo Genizah is a vast accumulation of some 280,000 Jewish manuscripts fragments discovered in the genizah, or store room, of the Ben Ezra Synagogue in Fustat (Old Cairo) late in the nineteenth century. A genizah is usually reserved for worn-out or discarded Hebrew books and papers on religious topics, prior to their ritual burial, which is how Jews dispose of writings containing the name of God. But because even personal letters and legal contracts sometimes open with a divine name, a genizah can also contain secular writings. The Ben Ezra Synagogue collection covers a virtually complete spectrum of Jewish life in the Middle Ages, from religious beliefs and practices, to the involvement of Jews in the economic and cultural life of the Middle East. The latter is reflected in rabbinical-court records, leases, title-deeds, endowment contracts, debt acknowledgments, marriage contracts and private letters. This unparalleled treasure trove makes it possible to reconstruct the socio-religious, cultural and economic history of Jews in the Middle Eastern and Mediterranean region from the ninth to the fourteenth centuries, an era previously little known to Jewish historians.

Reconstructing this data is complicated, however, because the archive has been scattered over many different collections and libraries. Cambridge University Library holds the largest part, with over 140,000 fragments brought there by Solomon Schechter. Other groups are now in libraries in Budapest, Geneva, Jerusalem, London, Manchester, New York, Oxford, Paris, St Petersburg, Philadelphia, Vienna, Washington and elsewhere. An unknown number of pieces are held in private collections. Not only was material placed in the Genizah in a haphazard way, but it was subsequently scattered unsystematically to collections all over the world. As a result, parts of the same manuscript or even of individual leaves have ended up in different continents, making it almost impossible to understand their significance. One of the challenges for researchers has been to identify those fragments that were originally together, so as to be able to interpret them as whole documents.

#### **Digitizing the Cairo Genizah**

For over a century scholars have struggled to make matches between fragmentary documents, relying on their long experience of the collection, deep learning and occasional strokes of good luck. This process has now been revolutionized by the digitization of large numbers of Genizah fragments. Major collections such as those at the University of Cambridge, the Jewish Theological Seminary in New York, the John Rylands Library in Manchester and the Herbert Katz Center for Advanced Judaic Studies at the University of Pennsylvania, together with smaller collections, have either been, or are in the process of being digitized. It is planned eventually to generate a worldwide database of images, enhancing the accessibility of geographically remote Genizah collections and bringing them virtually together.

#### **The Bodleian Collection**

The Bodleian Library Genizah fragments were acquired by purchase or as gifts in the late nineteenth century. Skilful selection ensured that this became one of the most important collections worldwide, featuring Bible, Early Rabbinic literature (Midrash, Mishnah and Talmud), Liturgy (Piyyutim, Selihot) and legal documents.

It is remarkable for the size of many of the documents, since the 4000 fragments comprise about 25,000 leaves, averaging over six leaves per fragment, a number unparalleled elsewhere. Some items consist of whole quires, amounting almost to whole manuscripts rather than fragments. A particularly exciting example are the twenty pages of Maimonides's draft manuscript of his *Mishneh Torah* with corrections in his own hand

The Talmud fragments are especially rare because of mass burnings of manuscripts begun on Rome's Campo de' fiori in September 1553. Little is known of the early history of this text as a result. Yet Talmud fragments of ten pages or more are no exception in this collection, including one of thirty-two pages of tractate Berakhot (Ms. Heb. c. 17/32), and others of 160 pages of the tractates Sotah (Ms. Heb. d. 20/2) and Sukkah (Ms. Heb. e 51) 72. These large portions of text are invaluable for reconstructing the history of the Babylonian Talmud. The oldest dated fragment, from the tractate Keritot 4b (line 4) - 6a (line 31) and 18b (line 17 to end), can be traced to 1123 by the colophon at the end of the tractate. The liturgical material includes over 1500 documents and is similarly important, shedding light on the little-known beginnings of Jewish prayer. Twenty-one fragments are dated to the eleventh century, the oldest being Ms. Heb. d 25/E, copied in 1024. There are also hundreds of fragments of liturgical poetry (piyyutim) from the eleventh to the fifteenth centuries.

### **The Bodleian Digital Library**

The Bodleian Libraries were recently able to digitize their collection thanks to the generous contribution of Mr George Blumenthal, a New York philanthropist, pioneer in digital communications and President of the Center for Online Jewish Studies. The digitized images of the Bodleian collection, with an online catalogue, are now freely accessible worldwide.

The Bodleian online catalogue is based on printed and type-written catalogues produced in the early twentieth century, which are still considered to be generally of excellent quality, despite some problems with the identifications. The catalogue is linked to images in full colour at 600dpi, offering a wide range of search options. One can select fragments according to title, personal name, shelf mark, topic, date/period, language, material (paper, vellum, leather, papyrus), keyword, or combinations of these. Like the catalogues of other institutions with Cairo Genizah collections, the online catalogue is a most useful search engine for Genizah research. One can now compare fragments held in Oxford with others in Cambridge, Manchester, New York, Philadelphia or elsewhere, facilitating international exchange and inaugurating a new era in Genizah studies. Experts will be able to make unprecedented progress with the major research goal of identifying matching fragments held in different locations. Matching fragments in different collections remotely will make it possible to compare versions of particular texts and to deepen our knowledge of the transmission and history of biblical, rabbinic and liturgical literatures.

### **The Material Text of Hebrew Manuscripts**

The past forty years has seen the growth of an awareness of the need to study not only the literary texts, but also the non-textual aspects of manuscripts, commonly called the material texts. A major tool for the study of the material text of Hebrew manuscripts, pioneered by Malachi Beit-Arié and Colet Sirat, is the codicological data-base of the Hebrew Palaeography project, *Sfardata*, a tool for localizing and dating Hebrew medieval manuscripts. Palaeography is usually confined to the study of the script as a criterion for dating. This data-base widens the codicological discipline by regarding manuscripts not merely as vessels for transmitting texts, but as physical objects and cultural products reflecting the social context, technology and aesthetics of their time and place. This codicological discipline must concern itself, according to Beit-Arié, with many other categories of information, including writing materials, inks, quires, pricking and ruling techniques, format and layout, density of letters, devices for producing even left margins, graphic para-scriptural elements and auxiliary signs, decorations and illuminations, scribal formulae at the beginning and end of copying, and formulations of colophons, including the rendering of dates, names and so on. It must also include means for ensuring the right order of the quires, sheets, leaves or columns. Systematically describing all Hebrew manuscripts that bear dates establishes a typology of criteria for localizing and dating the many thousands of manuscripts without colophons.

### **The Genizah Seminar in Yarnton**

The Bodleian digitization project coincided with a six-month-long seminar on the Bodleian Genizah collection, made possible through the generous support of the Rothschild Foundation Europe, as part of a European Seminar on Advanced Jewish Studies. The seminar, held at the Oxford Centre for Hebrew Studies from January to June 2011, was designed to focus not only on the texts of the Bodleian Genizah fragments, but on their material dimensions. This has so far been done only for some isolated cases. The project, expanding on the work of Malachi Beit-Arié and Colet Sirat, introduced a new method of classifying Genizah material by means of palaeographical and codicological features, designed to bring to light the geo-cultural provenance of fragments. It is predicted that this will in turn make it possible to identify the contents of ancient libraries and the reading patterns of local communities.

In a comprehensive summary Beit-Arié has laid out the interrelation between the textual and material analysis of Hebrew manuscripts and the place of Genizah fragments in the study of the material text, which has been the guideline for the Genizah seminar.

Genizah fragments should be analysed, characterized and classified not only by their textual contents, but in terms of the visual incarnation of the text: their physical, graphic and scribal embodiment and also by their social context. In most cases the study of the verbal text cannot be adequately conducted without considering its physicality. This yields fundamental information relating to areas of reproduction and date ranges, and indicates the function of the manuscript, its transmission and the social environment of its producer. It also sheds light on various textual problems embedded in the written texts. Of course the study of handwritten books by palaeographers and codicologists as mere artefacts, without considering their contents and genre, is also to be avoided, since their physicality was bound to be affected by, or dictated by, the nature of the text. Both approaches must be employed in the study of manuscripts.

Almost all literary manuscripts are copies or re-copies of composed, redacted or works produced long after their composition. Many stem from different stages of the text's crystallization or from diverging versions. Some 4000 colophons, as well as literary and documentary sources, attest to the predominantly individualistic mode of the production and consumption of Hebrew manuscripts. Texts in Hebrew characters were reproduced and propagated not by religious or communal authorities, but privately. They were not transmitted in organized frameworks, such as centres of learning or other supervising establishments, but produced by professional or occasional scribes hired by individuals, or copied by scholars or learned people for their own use. Such user-produced copies constitute at least half of the colophonned codices. These circumstances must have had an impact on the transmission of Jewish texts, and, indeed, colophons indicate either explicitly or implicitly that their copyists set out not only to reproduce texts, but also to emend critically and restore corrupted texts, collate models and edit them.

The scribal reproduction of texts involved reshaping their form and visual disposition, introducing hierarchical structure and designing semiotic layouts for the various genres, as well as inserting para-scriptural and peri-textual markings which affected the reader's perception, as well as the searchability of the copied text and its reception. This configuration of copied texts was both functional and interpretative. By enhancing legibility, it was also evolutionary. When we compare the configuration and readability of certain texts and genres over time, from the early strata of Genizah fragments, such as palimpsests, to later medieval codices, we notice gradual shifts in their appearance. Early texts are written in a uniform script, in which headings or endings of textual units are unmarked or just spaced slightly more widely, and thus assimilated within densely written blocks. Later ones are more structurally transparent, enhanced by the integration of auxiliary para-scriptural markings, leading to greater readability and searchability. The emergence of larger initial words, followed by ranges of graduated script sizes reflecting the hierarchy of textual units, as well as occasional decoration and illumination, contributed to readability. The evolution of semi-cursive hands from the last third of the tenth century in Babylonian Geonic writings (as suggested by Shelomo Goitein and substantiated by Judith Olzsow-Schlanger), and their use from the early eleventh century in literary manuscripts combined with the square script, contributed to the transparency of the text's structure. The square

mode was used for headings, initial words and lexical entries in copies written otherwise in a semi-square mode. The emergence of alternative modes of writing the same script type made it possible to differentiate textual strata in composite, glossed and commentated texts. Scribes promoted legibility and comprehension by incorporating graphic markers for underlining certain words or passages, pointing out terms or roots, singling out foreign words or marking biblical citations and lemmata in commentaries, and so on.

Material aspects of manuscripts, such as writing materials, sizes, modes of script, calligraphic quality and codicological regularity, convey information about the producer or patron of the manuscript, as well as the function of the book and its significance. Moreover, an acquaintance with the various technical practices in the fabrication of codices, such as structures of quires and means of ensuring their right sequences, and with scribal practices such as line management and auxiliary signs, are essential in using manuscript texts.

The comprehensive documentation of Hebrew codices with dated colophons since the beginning of the tenth century has unveiled practices characteristic of geo-cultural zones. Because many of these were transformed over time and were characteristic of certain periods, they, and particularly combinations of them, provide solid criteria for identifying where and when manuscripts without colophons were produced. Dated book-scripts make it possible to establish a palaeographical classification and to set up or consolidate a diachronic typology of book-scripts. [Plate 6] The combined palaeographical and codicological analysis of localized manuscripts written in immigrant script-types revealed that most of their codicological features were local. Script-type therefore does not necessarily attest to the area in which a manuscript was written, unless the codicological practices of the manuscript correspond to that area. About one fifth of dated codices were found to have been produced by immigrant scribes or copyists who retained their native type of script while adopting local techniques. Considering all such factors is clearly essential in dealing with Hebrew manuscripts, and constitutes a further justification for a material text approach.

The Genizah literary documents are from fragmented codices, which is why codicological criteria will help identify their area and time of production. While their fragmentary survival and poor state of preservation reduce the possibility of observing some material facets, many dispersed leaves and bifolia from the same codex, kept under different shelf marks within the same or in disparate collections, have so far been identified by scholars. A recent groundbreaking achievement of the Friedberg Genizah Project team (with the active participation of Dr Ronny Shweka) is an automatic handwriting-matching tool able to identify possible joins among all the digitized images of the fragments. This, followed by manual verification, increases dramatically the number of reunified partial codices and allows for wider implementation of codicological criteria and material characteristics. Digital images and automated measurements can substitute the originals with regard to some codicological characteristics, while others can be noticed only by observing the originals, unless they are documented and displayed in the meta-data.

It will be helpful to mention here very briefly some material aspects which should be examined in analysing and characterizing Genizah fragments. It is important to observe whether the writing material is parchment or paper. This has chronological significance in relation to early fragments, since the earliest known extant paper dated literary manuscript does not date before 1005. The appearance of the parchment can indicate whether the manuscript was written in the Near East or elsewhere. The pattern of laid and chain lines to be seen in Arabic paper can disclose the region and period of its production. A survey of the use of parchment in dated and datable documents would clarify its functional significance.

The classification of the *rotulus* book-form and its increased use will provide an additional criterion. Quire structure, which is essential for reconstructing codices, can be detected by the presence of signatures, catchwords, repeated words and marked central openings. Ruled lines and corresponding written lines on both sides of the folio reflect the nature of the document. The ruling technique can

indicate origins: non-Oriental scribes use relief ruling with hard-point on the parchment's hair-side, but Oriental ones rule on the flesh-side. In addition, hard-point ruling guided by prickings in paper manuscripts predated the use of mistara mechanical ruling. Line justification practices and personal para-scriptural elements can help verify matching fragments. Classification can be defined according to size and layout, the proportions of pages and the written surface such as height and width, the use of oblong formats, or the number of columns.

The material approach relating to Genizah fragments needs further research and expansion. In particular, the small number of early dated Oriental codices, whole or fragmentary, calls for a comprehensive palaeographical study of dated and localized letters and documents, in order to establish a more elaborate diachronic and regional script typology.

### **The Material Texts of the Genizah Collection at the Bodleian Library**

It was with this outline in mind that a Genizah research project was conceived to bring together a number of Genizah specialists to examine the material text of a selected number of Genizah fragments in the Bodleian Library and to establish a new method of classifying Genizah fragments. To date, Genizah fragments have been classified according to subject and rather general information about material aspects. Genizah studies have also tended to concentrate on textual variants and vocalization in the biblical text, and on linguistic developments in rabbinic literature and previously unknown liturgical material.<sup>1</sup> These discoveries are rarely datable more precisely than to about a thousand years ago. The new focus on the material text will make it possible for the picture derived from the Genizah material to be much more focused and specific. An examination of codicological and palaeographical aspects of the fragments reveals a lot about local Jewish history and the contribution of host societies to Jewish tradition, and this will in turn create an additional method of classification, different from that of the printed catalogues and electronic search engines. Identifying codicological features will allow us to classify material according to geo-cultural provenance, and therefore to attribute specific linguistic features, and formerly unknown traditions and practices, to local Jewish communities.

The European Seminar on Advanced Jewish Studies involved an international group of scholars who held weekly meetings in Exeter College. They were occasionally joined by experts from the Taylor-Schechter Genizah Research Unit Institute (Cambridge) and from the Rylands Cairo Genizah Collection (Manchester). One seminar was held at the British Library in London, encompassing all the major Genizah collections of the United Kingdom. Participants had unrestricted access to the Bodleian Genizah fragments, and digitized images were available for the seminar presentations.

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<sup>1</sup> See Stefan Reif (ed.) *The Cambridge Genizah Collections: Their Contents and Significance* (Cambridge University Press, 2002).