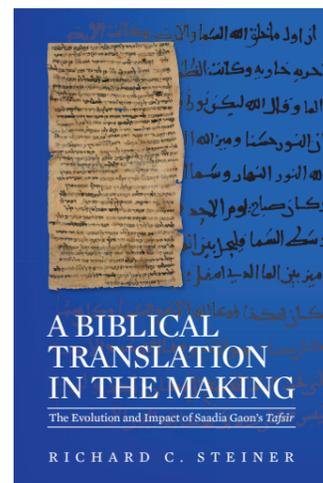


Steiner on Saadya



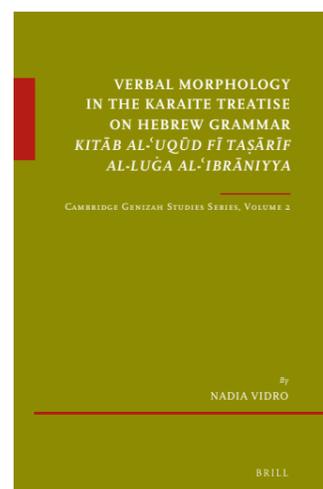
Richard C. Steiner, *A Biblical Translation in the Making: the Evolution and Impact of Saadia Gaon's Tafsir* (Harvard Center for Jewish Studies, 2011)

Perhaps the greatest scholar of the geonic period, Saadya Gaon wielded an influence that stretched far beyond the gates of the Pumbeditha Yeshiva, to the entire Arabic-speaking Jewish community. Al-Fayyumi, as he was known, was a philosopher, halakhist, grammarian, *paytan* and liturgist, but it is with his Arabic translation and

commentary on the Bible, the *Tafsir*, that he had the greatest and most lasting impact on the Jewish world. Richard Steiner, Professor of Semitic Languages and Literatures at Yeshiva University, re-examines the origins of Saadya's great project of translation, elucidates the intellectual world that spawned it, and presents an exciting and novel theory that a copy of the earliest draft of Saadya's work has been preserved in the T-S Collection.

Ben Outhwaite

Nadia Vidro returns to the Unit



Throughout my student years in Cambridge I volunteered in the Genizah Research Unit describing and identifying grammatical and scientific fragments in the Additional Series of the T-S Collection. At that time my work was guided by the late Dr Friedrich Niessen who generously shared with me his knowledge and expertise.

My own research on a medieval Karaite grammatical treatise in Judaeo-Arabic *Kitāb al-Uqūd fī Taṣārīf al-Luġa al-'Ibrāniyya* has also benefitted from Genizah material as I was lucky to discover a number of important fragments of the book in Genizah collections worldwide. My monograph *Verbal Morphology in the Karaite Treatise on Hebrew Grammar Kitāb al-*

'Uqūd fī Taṣārīf al-Luġa al-'Ibrāniyya has recently appeared in the Brill series *Cambridge Genizah Studies* edited by Siam Bhayro, Geoffrey Khan and Ben Outhwaite.

I am now very happy to return to the Unit as a Research Associate and will be primarily working on Masoretic and grammatical material in the Old Series and the Mosseri Collection.



Nadia Vidro

I have been fascinated by the Genizah world since my BA studies at Moscow State University, yet it was not before I came to Cambridge to work on my PhD in Karaite linguistics that I saw the actual fragments.

The Lauffer Family Charitable Trust has generously contributed towards the cost of producing this newsletter in memory of the late David and Renee Lauffer, enthusiastic students of history and supporters of the Genizah Research Unit.

For up to date information, announcements of special events and other interesting news from the Genizah world, please see our Facebook page: <http://www.facebook.com/pages/Genizah-Research-Unit/125835514119021>



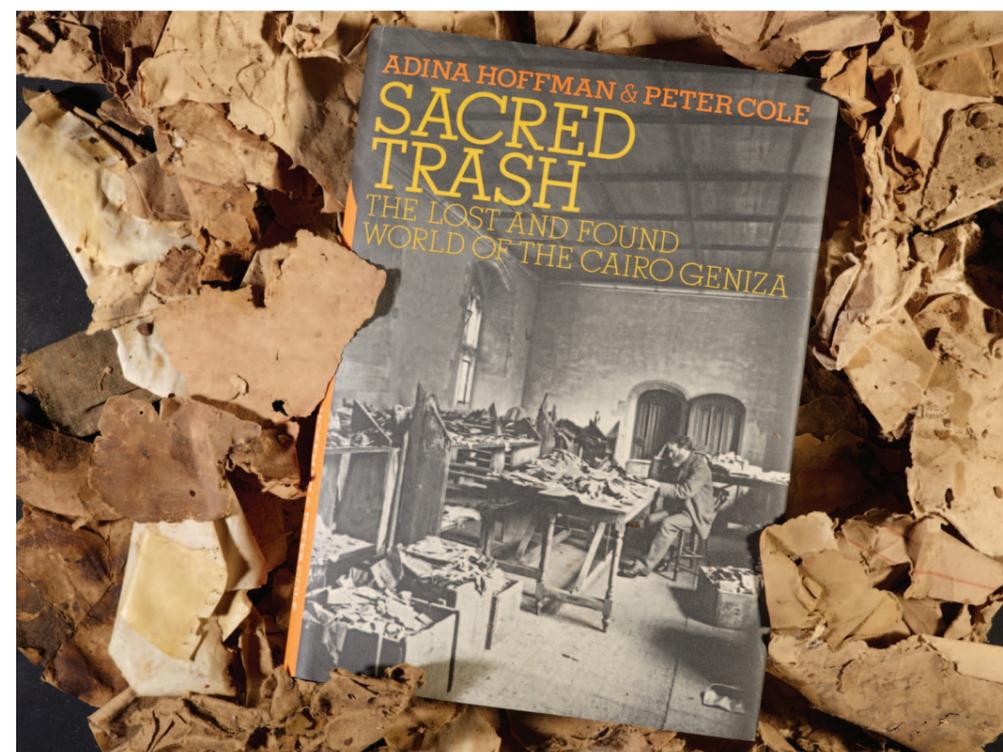
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GENIZAH FRAGMENTS

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No. 62 October 2011



The dustbin of history

We've been awaiting the publication of Adina Hoffman and Peter Cole's *Sacred Trash: the lost and found world of the Cairo Geniza* (Nextbook-Schocken, 2011), with great anticipation. The Genizah story has been the focus of several excellent books, including Mark Glickman's recent *Sacred Treasure* and Stefan Reif's *A Jewish Archive* (2000), and the prospect of having two such talented writers turn their attention to the history of the Collection has been mouthwatering.

The Unit's association with Peter Cole began in 2007 when the MacArthur-winning poet and translator spent a period of several weeks in Cambridge digging through the multitude of poetic fragments in the T-S Collection. The initial result of this immersion was his 2008 poem 'Things on which I've stumbled', but stung by the Genizah bug he, together with his wife, the author, film critic and biographer Adina Hoffman, set out to uncover and

chronicle the full story of the Genizah's discovery.

With a varied cast of academic characters, including the uncompromising Margoliouth, the bicycling Burkitt, the remarkable Neubauer and, of course, the thunderous Schechter, perpetually wreathed in smoke like some barely quiescent volcano, the Genizah story is a gift for chroniclers. *Sacred Trash* deserves space on the bookshelf of any true Genizah enthusiast.

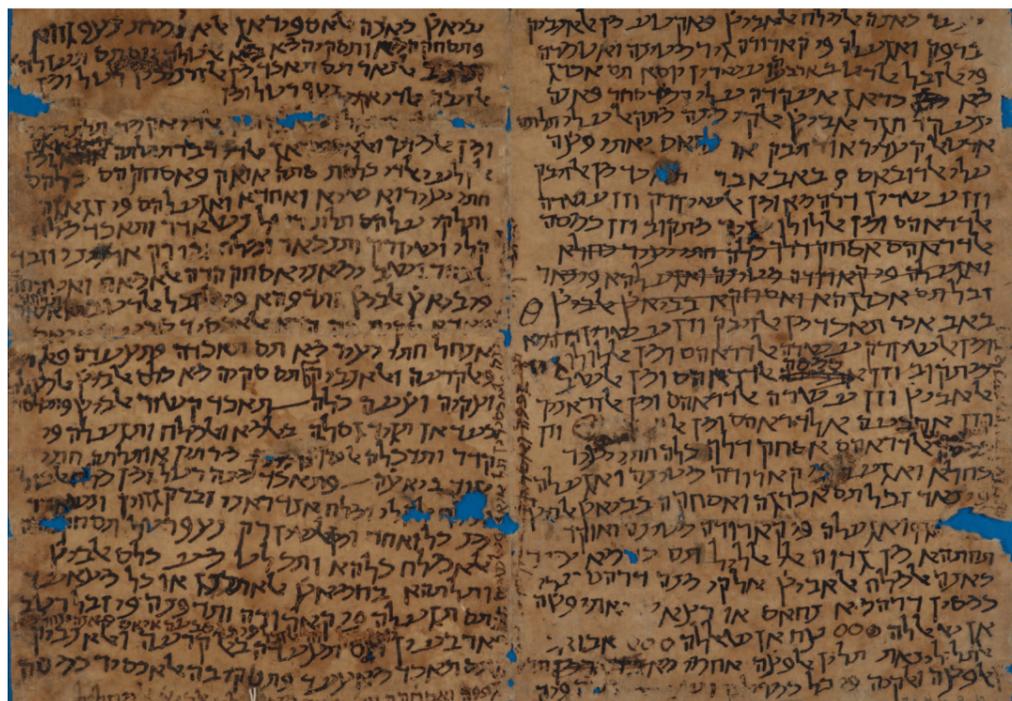
Haim Gottschalk, an MLA student at Indiana University, recently served an internship in the Genizah Unit. We asked him for his impressions of the book.

Sacred Trash: the Lost and Found World of the Cairo Geniza, by authors Adina Hoffman and Peter Cole, weaves history, biographical accounts, and Genizah texts into an accessible, illuminating and entertaining account of the Cairo Genizah manuscripts, their discoverers and the exceptional and often colourful individuals who worked on them.

Sacred Trash chronicles the history of the Cairo Genizah through the lens of the scholars and librarians who catalogued and researched the Collection. Salvaging names lost to history, Hoffman and Cole bring to life the scholars and librarians who worked tirelessly to catalogue and interpret the manuscripts, making the world of the Cairo Genizah accessible to all. The reader is left with a sense of awe at how a single collection has so significantly contributed to the understanding of Jewish history, linguistics, and codicology. *Sacred Trash* is a wonderful book for those interested in Genizah studies, Jewish history, and the history of libraries.

**Haim A. Gottschalk
Indiana University**

The Hermetic art: fragments of alchemy in the Genizah



Example of a collection of practical alchemical recipes, including a prescription for the production of silver (T-S Misc.8.51)

Providing a satisfactory definition of the meaning of the word 'alchemy' seems to be as challenging as pursuing one of its final goals: the transmutation of base metals into silver and gold. It is a multifaceted discipline that can be looked at from different points of view: alchemical texts can resemble cookbooks, obscure allegorical poems, philosophical treatises, raw instructions for laboratory technicians, and every combination of these elements. Beginning in ancient Greece, it is possible to follow the path of alchemical doctrines and practices up to present times, through an itinerary that calls at Hellenistic Egypt, the Islamic states, medieval Latin and vernacular Europe, the Renaissance, up to the psychological-psychoanalytic approach to alchemical imagery attempted by Jung and his school.

Alchemists through the centuries have consistently considered Egypt as the centre of their art: Hermes is said to have chosen Egypt as his final residence, where he brought

the secrets of alchemy from Babylon and carved them in an emerald plate which was found in his tomb, the famous *Tabula Smaragdina*. The very word alchemy was believed to derive its etymology from one of the ancient names of Egypt, (Khem, 'the black land', 'the land of Egypt'), even if a Greek derivation from a root linked to the meaning of solving is more plausible.

Among the recurrent claims that can be found in alchemical texts in Greek, Arabic, Latin and other languages, one of the most widespread is the idea of the pre-eminence of the Jews in the so-called 'sacred art'. This is true, for instance, in the Greek and Arabic corpora of texts attributed to Zosimus of Panopolis (early 4th century CE) where he states that he derived all his knowledge from the teachings of a certain Mary the Jewess, who lived in Egypt and possessed the secrets of the alchemical art; the same is valid for later European alchemists who loved to adorn the covers of their books with Hebrew characters

and, probably under the influence of the phenomenon known as Christian Cabbala, believed in the alchemical mastery of almost all the biblical prophets.

The actual role and involvement of Jews in alchemy is still a much debated issue among academics, however, and this became particularly clear after the publication of Raphael Patai's book *The Jewish Alchemists*. In his attempt to do justice to the role of Jews in alchemy – which in Patai's opinion was deliberately underestimated after the affirmation of the Haskalah movement – Patai takes it to the opposite extreme: in his parade of Jewish alchemists, he lists many non-Jews and extends the borders of alchemy to include works that have nothing particularly alchemical nor indeed Jewish about them. The scholarly reaction to Patai's assumptions pointed to the lack of any original contribution of the Jews to alchemy, which was a fashionable art in the societies in which Jewish communities lived

during the Middle Ages, but never won real interest among them.

As in many other fields, the material preserved in the Taylor-Schechter Collection stands as the primary source for our understanding of the place of alchemical doctrines and practices in the life of the Jewish communities in Medieval Egypt and the Mediterranean basin. Following a preliminary listing of the Genizah fragments of alchemical content by Prof. Gideon Bohak, I am now examining these texts in the light of my previous research on medieval Arabic and Hebrew alchemy. With a rough total of one hundred pieces, the alchemical fragments in the T-S Collection are relatively few, but they represent a unique source for our understanding of how alchemy was perceived, transmitted and practiced among the Jews of Cairo. As a provisional note on the material that I have examined so far, I would like to stress the mainly practical and operative character of most of it, which is devoid of theoretical explanations or allegorical figurations and takes instead the form of recipes and instructions for experimental processes to be conducted within the alchemical laboratory. In this regard, the alchemical tradition represented by the Genizah fragments in Cambridge appears to be closer to the original and pseudepigraphic works of the 10th-century Persian alchemist and physician Muhammad ibn Zakariyā al-Rāzī and in particular to the operative portions of the book that gained wide fame in the Latin West under the title *Liber de aluminibus et salibus*. Much research remains to be done, but thanks to the opportunity presented by my work in the T-S Unit, I am excited by what the fragments from the Genizah may tell us about the alchemical arts of the Jews of Egypt.

Gabriele Ferrario

How scribes shape language

Scribes as agents of language change conference, 4th–6th April 2011

The Genizah is an unmatched source for the linguistic history of Medieval Hebrew and Judaeo-Arabic, and offers the chance to see language change in action over a very long period of time.

To share our excitement at the possibilities that the Genizah can offer to linguistic history, the Genizah Unit invited linguists working on various language families, such as Indo-European, Semitic, Old Egyptian and African, to a three-day conference in Cambridge. The gathering aimed to investigate the role individual scribes and writers can play in the emergence of standard and substandard registers of languages out of scribal communities, to examine how innovations spread within scribal networks and how language change occurs within written registers of languages, and to highlight the importance of written texts as a rich and promising source of data for the examination of language change.

The conference was well attended, with delegates from countries all across Europe — Britain, Germany, Norway, Belgium, Finland, Denmark, and Switzerland — as well as Israel. Among the keynote speakers were leading experts in their fields, such as the sociolinguist Terttu Nevalainen, the Romance experts Roger Wright and David Trotter, eminent English specialists Merja Stenroos and Alexander Bergs, who greatly complemented our local Cambridge talent, plus a large number of young researchers, many still working on their PhDs, which made for a lively and enthusiastic mix of scholarly styles.

Discussions around the talks identified a number of areas of shared interest, such as the contrast between spoken and written languages, and the overarching trends in the creation of different registers (e.g., formal vs informal etc) and the evolution of written languages. Delegates found much common ground and identified surprising parallel developments between languages, which made the sessions very fruitful. The conference was considered a great success by all participants, and has opened up new avenues of research and novel methodological approaches to be explored within the Genizah Research Unit's future projects.

Esther-Miriam Wagner



Genizah researchers Melonie Schmierer and Miriam Wagner, together with the Egyptologist Tonio Sebastian Richter of the University of Leipzig

Editorial

The Genizah Research Unit is built not just upon a world-leading Collection of manuscripts but also on the quality of its people. Since its inception in 1973, it has drawn in some of the 'best and brightest' to work upon the fragments and the current generation is no exception.

Long-term researcher Dr Esther-Miriam Wagner has firmly highlighted the importance of Genizah texts for linguistics in general not just through her recently published book on Judaeo-Arabic, but also by convening a recent conference. She was able to bring together a scattered group of experts on a wide range of historical languages, with the aim of promoting a greater interest in language change driven by the written forms of text, as opposed to the spoken. The Genizah is, of course, a bountiful source for such a study, preserving as it does written texts in high style and vernaculars over a period of nearly 1000 years, and is thus a goldmine for historical sociolinguists.

Speaking of gold, a more recent appointment, Dr Gabriele Ferrario, has identified the Genizah as a significant source for the history of science, in particular for the evidence that it contains regarding the medieval Jewish interest in alchemy. He has already delivered papers at several international conferences on the subject and he has plans for a major study of this unique material in the form of a monograph.

Dr Amir Ashur, who will be returning to Israel next year, continues to astound all of us here with his uncanny ability to find previously unnoticed texts relating to some of the giants of the Jewish Middle Ages, such as Ibn Migash, Yehuda ha-Levi, and, of course, Maimonides.

Thanks to the remarkable organisational skills of our lead photographer, Maciej Pawlikowski, and his team in Imaging Services, we have reached the milestone of a quarter of a million images in the digitisation project, two years in. The New Series is the only substantial part of the Taylor-Schechter Collection still to be photographed. Maciej deserves every credit for reaching this milestone and keeping to the demanding timetable. The digitisation project, sponsored by the Jewish Manuscripts Preservation Society and the Friedberg Genizah Project, is on track to complete the prodigious task of digitising every last fragment in the T-S Collection by the end of next summer.

Space precludes mentioning the work of the various other invaluable members of the extended Genizah team, but their achievements speak for themselves in the greatly increased interest, both academic and more general, that the Collection now attracts.

The Genizah Research Unit is grateful for the major support received from the Arts and Humanities Research Council, UK, the Friedberg Genizah Project and the Isaac Newton Trust.

We also greatly welcome the help of our supporters: Dr Vivienne Cohen (£500); Goldberg Family Trust (£500); N. & J. Greenwood Charitable Trust (£500); Prof. Sir Elihu Lauterpacht CBE QC (£250); Norman Shelton (£200); United Synagogue Cockfosters Ladies Guild (£180); friends of the Ashur family (£150); Roy Hayim (£150); Peleg family (£150); David Sellman (£150); Dr R. Cantor (£100); Mr and Mrs Falk (£100); A. Kaye (£100); P & H Maurice (£100); Dr Alan Shenkin (£100); Wizo in the Wood (£100), and that of the other smaller or anonymous donations.