

# GENIZAH FRAGMENTS

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

No. 70 October 2015

## Palimpsests? There's more than meets the eye...

*Some manuscripts are difficult to read because they're stained or faded; others have an inconvenient crease above a crucial word. And others are palimpsests with ghostly undertexts that survived medieval attempts to erase them to accommodate new writings. As a part of a new combined methodological approach, from 14–18 September the Genizah Research Unit and Cambridge University Library hosted an international team of scholars and scientists – palaeographers, physicists and specialists of multispectral imaging – joining forces in the deciphering and interpretation of a number of manuscripts with readings that are particularly difficult. Initiated and coordinated by a Hebrew palaeographer, Judith Olszowy-Schlanger of the École Pratique des Hautes Études in Paris in collaboration with Ben Outhwaite of the Taylor-Schechter Genizah Research Unit, the project has applied cutting-edge technology and multidisciplinary scientific analysis to the study of dozens of Genizah fragments.*

The Hebrew palimpsests in particular are a challenge for the reader. They were written on reused leaves from older volumes in Greek, Latin, Christian



T-S K23.4, undergoing multi-spectral imaging. Image by Gregory Heyworth, Michael Phelps, Damian Kasotakis and Roger Easton

Palestinian Aramaic, Georgian or Armenian as well as in Hebrew and Aramaic. The original texts were erased with care to accommodate new ones, but traces of the ancient writing can still be seen between or below the lines of the upper texts. Palimpsests were some of the first fragments to attract the attention of scholars soon after the discovery of the Cairo Genizah. Indeed, both lower and upper texts of these fragments contain unique texts, such as Greek Bible translations of Aquila, and Origen's Hexapla (which had long been considered lost), or the most ancient extant copies of the

Jerusalem Talmud. In most cases, however, the lower texts are difficult and often almost impossible to read. Fortunately, new non-destructive technologies developed recently can successfully assist traditional palaeography by enhancing the texts' readability and providing insights into the

chemical composition of inks and writing materials.

Michael Phelps and Damian Kasotakis of the Early Manuscripts Electronic Library (EMEL), Gregory Heyworth of the Lazarus Project, and Roger Easton of the Rochester Institute of Technology carried

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## Palimpsests? *continued from page 1*

out multispectral imaging using technologies based on innovations arising from the Archimedes Palimpsest project ([www.archimedespalimpsest.org](http://www.archimedespalimpsest.org)), which have been further improved during the EMEL's ongoing work on the palimpsests from St. Catherine's Monastery of the Sinai. The cameras captured some 30 images of each selected Genizah fragment under twelve different wavelengths of

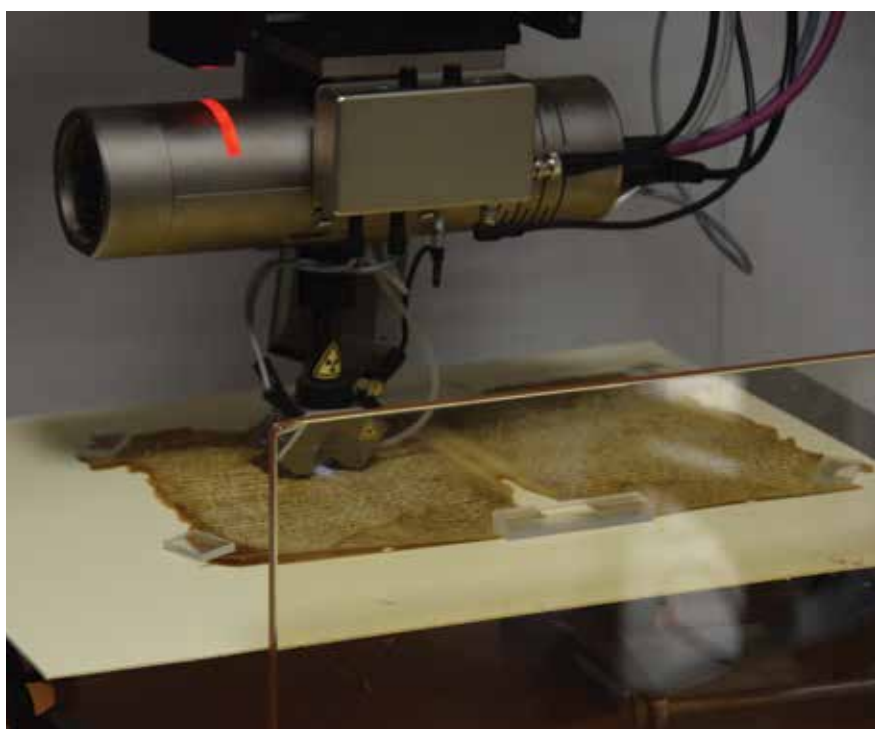
light from ultraviolet through the visible spectrum to the infrared. Special filters were employed for the ultraviolet (UV) fluorescence. Transmissive illumination ("backlighting") was employed on the spots where the parchment is less thick, including tiny letter-shaped channels where iron gall ink had eaten into the parchment. The collected raw data images were then processed to maximize their legibility.

Ira Rabin, Oliver Hahn and Zina Cohen of the Center for the Studies of Manuscript Cultures (CSMC), Hamburg & BAM Bundesanstalt für Materialforschung und-prüfung, Berlin, used their impressive equipment for X-Ray Fluorescence (XRF) screening. XRF technique is commonly used for analysis of elemental composition of various objects in the field of cultural heritage. X-ray incident

radiation causes elements such as calcium, iron, copper, zinc, etc. to emit characteristic X-rays that are recorded and translated into individual intensities by the XRF-spectrometer. This non-contact technique is a breakthrough in the fingerprinting of historical inks and, therefore, has great potential for medieval manuscript studies.

The team of manuscript specialists from Paris – Judith Kogel from the Institut de Recherche et d'Histoire des Textes of the CNRS and Daniel Stökl Ben Ezra and Judith Olszowy-Schlanger of the EPHE – accompanied the scientific teams and interpreted the data. Needless to say, improved readings of the palimpsests and of the faded or disputable passages of important writings such as the so-called 'Kiev letter' (T-S 12.122) or Damascus Document (T-S 16.311) will contribute considerably to our knowledge of Genizah manuscripts and Jewish history in general.

**Melonie Schmierer-Lee**  
*Genizah Research Unit*



T-S F17.4,  
undergoing  
XRF screening.  
Image by  
Damian  
Kasotakis

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## Language, Gender and Law in the Judaeo-Islamic milieu

The intersection of law, language and gender is an area of interest for many scholars. In July 2015, the Genizah Research Unit convened a workshop *Language, Gender and Law in the Judaeo-Islamic milieu*, bringing together – for the first time – scholars of medieval history, law and gender studies as well as modern legal practitioners to explore new horizons for research on the manuscripts. The workshop was made possible by the Parasol Foundation, which

has also funded for the past year a unique post in the social history of women in the Genizah.

The first day focused on the theory and practice of gender, language and law (with speakers including Judge Ben Zion Greenberger of the Jerusalem District Court, who spoke on gender-based ethics in Israeli family law) and on the contribution of medieval culture to modern judicial practice, followed by an evening

reception at which Professor Mordechai Akiva Friedman spoke of his half-century of research on the manuscripts.

The second day's sessions delved into biblical exegesis, talmudic literature, post-talmudic literature, and the mutual influences between law, perceptions of gender, and language. The third day opened with a session devoted to sociolinguistics as a source for gender studies, followed

by a group discussion on how to make the manuscripts more accessible to scholars from other disciplines. Two publications will emerge from the workshop: an edited volume with contributions from the presenters, and a reader containing English translations of important manuscripts for the social history of women in the medieval Islamic world.

**Zvi Stampfer**  
*Genizah Research Unit*

## A Christian liturgical calendar in Hebrew

This join of three fragments from Cambridge University Library is a page of a Christian liturgical calendar in Hebrew. It was probably written in 14th-century southern France, from where it made its way, somehow, to the Cairo Genizah.

Christian calendars in Hebrew are found in a small number of French, Provençal, and German manuscripts, mostly Jewish prayer books, from this period, and all share a similar structure. Each month occupies a whole or half a page; it is headed with the month's name, here transliterated from the French as *Mars, Avril*, followed by the number of days in it, and then the equivalent Hebrew month (*Nisan, Iyyar*). Below are seven columns showing all the possible days of the week.

Along these columns are a selection of saint days and other Christian feasts, in Hebrew transliteration. The letter *sin* stands for 'Saint(e)'. Some of the saints are standard in the Catholic tradition, e.g. St Mark on 25 April. But a number of them are less usual, and specific to western and south-western France, from where this calendar probably originates: St Paul (of Narbonne, 22 March), St Aphrodise of Béziers (28 April), and

**Composite image**  
of T-S AS 144.307,  
T-S AS 144.322, and  
T-S K2.11



St Eutrope of Saintes (Charente-Maritime, 30 April).

The Hebrew rendition of the saints' names sometimes reflects spoken language, e.g. *S. Yordi* (St George, 23 April), *Nonšion Marie* (Annunciation of Mary,

25 March – also marked here as the traditional Jewish day of the *tequfah*, equinox). Sometimes the names are polemically distorted: thus *Hariah Yošiena*, two words suggesting 'excrement', instead of Marie (égyptienne, St Mary of Egypt (2 April).

Why did French Jews write Christian calendars in Hebrew? Jewish traders needed to know when markets, often held on saint days and Christian festivals, were taking place. Knowledge of the Christian calendar was also essential for dating legal documents, for scheduling meetings with Christians – in short, for coordinating all socio-economic activities with the rhythms and structure of Christian medieval life. The inclusion of these calendars in Jewish prayer books, alongside descriptions of the Jewish calendar, suggests that the Christian calendar had thus become an integral part of Jewish time reckoning.

**Sacha Stern**  
*Head of Department of Hebrew and Jewish Studies, UCL, and Principal Investigator of the ERC-funded project 'Calendars in late Antiquity and the Middle Ages.'*

### 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.



## The Genizah Research Unit welcomes Vasile Condrea



For the next six months the Genizah Research Unit will be hosting Vasile Condrea. With funding from the Northern Bridge Doctoral Training Partnership, Vasile will be spending his time in Cambridge learning best practices for assessing and cataloguing Hebrew and Aramaic manuscripts, including how to read different scripts and learning about Hebrew codicology. He will also be preparing descriptions of a selection of Genizah Targum fragments that will be made available on Cambridge Digital Library.

After completing his undergraduate degree in Theology at the University

of Bucharest (Romania), Vasile gained a Licenza in Biblia e Archeologia with Studium Biblicum Franciscanum (2008–2012). In 2011 he came to the UK for an MA at Durham ('Micah 6: A Parallel Perspective of the Biblical Text'). He is now in the final stages of his PhD at Durham. It is a syntactic description of Targumic Aramaic using the Targum of I Samuel as the basis for his study (the provisional title of which is 'The Syntax of the Verb in Targum Aramaic – a Text-linguistic Approach').

**Melonie Schmierer-Lee**  
Genizah Research Unit

## A Novel Approach to the Cairo Genizah

*Pyramid*  
By David Gibbins  
Croydon, UK: Headline  
Publishing Group, 2014 pp. 448.  
RRP £7.99

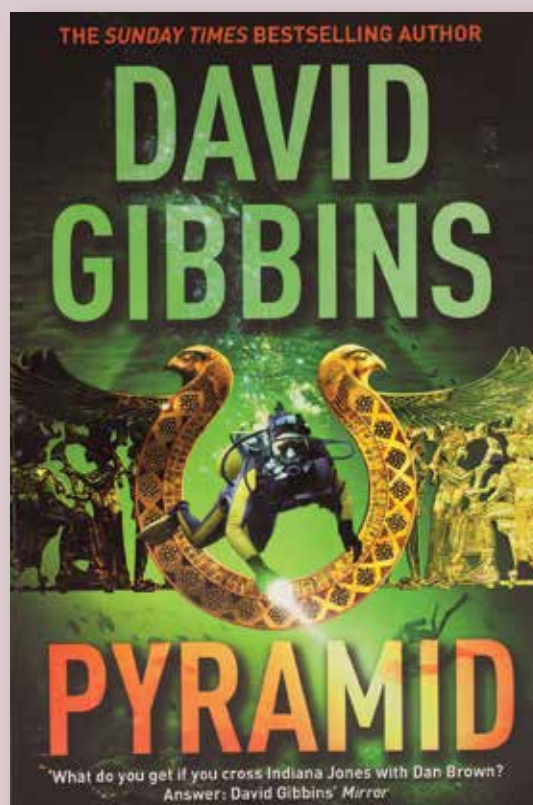
*"Jack looked at his watch, and then up at the hole into the Geniza chamber above him, black and slightly forbidding. 'Okay. There's no time for dithering, or, the gods protect me, for curses. Let's do it.'"*

*Pyramid*, the eighth in David Gibbins' novels on archaeologist and adventurer Jack Howard weaves the Ben Ezra Synagogue and a newly discovered fragment into one of the book's dramatic plot lines. Two fragments of vellum discovered lodged in a hole in the wall of the

Genizah chamber turn out to be a palimpsest – the upper text of which is a letter by Judah ha-Levi to his son-in-law Abraham Ibn Ezra discussing the disappearance of the caliph Al-Hakim.

The Genizah features in some 50 pages of the 448-page novel, and in an author's note at the end Gibbins lays out the historical facts that he drew upon for inspiration. Of the Genizah, he writes *"The story of the recovery and study of the Geniza documents is one of the greatest in the history of scholarship, and its discovery should rank alongside that of Tutankhamun's Tomb in the annals of Egyptian research."*

**Melonie Schmierer-Lee**  
Genizah Research Unit



**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.**