The Cairo Geniza

What is now known as the Cairo Geniza came to the attention of scholars between the 1860s and 1890s. A hoard of about 330,000 separate pages of books and documents had accumulated in a storage room of a medieval synagogue in Fustat and began to find their way to dealers, private collectors, and libraries.[1]

The last decades of the nineteenth century were the great era of Egyptology and of discoveries in Pharaonic tombs. Amid Europe's fascination with the ancient world, a few intrepid scholars went to Egypt in search of post-Pharaonic material. In 1896–97, two Oxford scholars, Bernard Grenfell and Arthur Hunt, excavated a rubbish heap outside the Hellenistic city of Oxyrhynchus in the Fayyum (modern al-Bahnasa) and found it contained a half-million Greek papyri – including three pages from a lost Christian Gospel.[2] That year and in the same spirit, Solomon Schechter, reader in rabbinics at Cambridge University, tracked down the source of the Geniza documents and brought the remaining manuscripts back to Cambridge.[3]

A *beit geniza* is a storage chamber where texts in Hebrew script are deposited when they are too worn out to remain in circulation, or, in the case of documents, when the business they have transacted has been concluded. Most of what the Geniza contained were fragments of literary texts: the Hebrew Bible, biblical commentaries and translations, rabbinic literature (including some of the earliest known fragments of the two Talmuds), philosophy, science, poetry, and belles lettres. Some of these works had been transmitted well into the modern age, and the copies now found contained interesting textual variants. Other works had been entirely unknown before the Geniza's discovery, or known only from quotations in other medieval works. One of these was a legal code by 'Anan ben David, an eighth-century Iraqi Jew who devised his own school of Jewish law, one different from the rabbinic tradition that had preceded him. The Geniza also yielded more than eight hundred works by the shadowy Palestinian liturgical poet Yannai, who probably lived in the seventh century, all of whose works had been lost except one.[4] Many of the poems of Yannai that survived in the Geniza had been copied on top of erased (palimpsested) Greek texts that themselves held clues to Egypt's pre-Islamic, Hellenistic past and that of its Jewish communities.

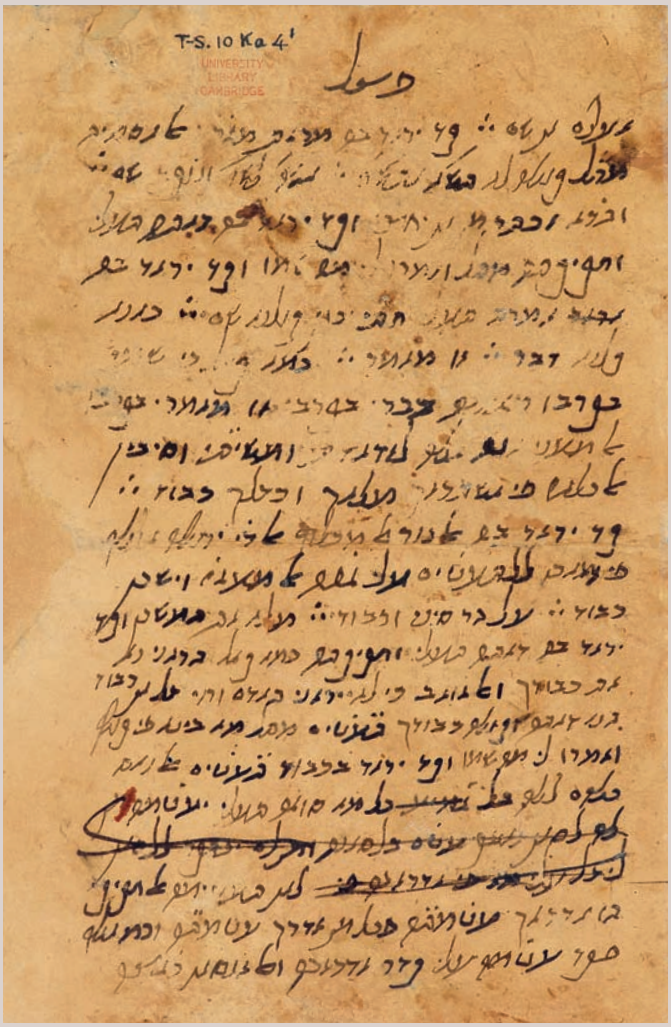
The Geniza also totally transformed parts of Jewish history thought to be known and understood. Moses Maimonides, who lived in Egypt from the 1160s until his death in 1204, was a member of the synagogue where the Geniza was housed. Among the finds are draft pages of some of his works in his own hand, including the philosophical masterpiece *The Guide for the Perplexed.* (One page from the *Guide* was pieced together from three fragments in two separate libraries as recently as 2004.) There are also letters from Maimonides's brother, David, an India trader whose business ventures supported the great sage's scholarship until he died in a shipwreck, forcing Maimonides to seek work at the Ayyubid court as a physician.

A sizable and significant minority of the Geniza's pages – probably more than fifteen thousand – are documents (letters, contracts, lists, accounts, children's exercise books) written by known and unknown figures. These have cast light onto entirely new realms of the Jewish and Islamic pasts, such as trade, agriculture, the roles of women, education, the history of childhood, sex, food, and the function, symbolism, and prices of textiles and clothing.[5]

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Because there are no medieval testimonies on the practice of *geniza*, we will never be sure what motivated the Shami congregation of Fustat to store its papers. Based on modern practices of *geniza*, however, scholars have made some educated guesses. One reconstruction speculates that medieval Jews believed that just as the body is a container for the soul and deserves a proper burial, so too should manuscripts be buried after they've become too worn to transmit knowledge. Indeed, some modern Jewish communities store texts in a *geniza* until they can be buried. In Ottoman Jerusalem in the nineteenth century, Jews emptied their *beit geniza* and brought it to the cemetery once every seven years in a festive ceremony, or else during droughts in an effort to bring rainfall. For unknown reasons, the members of the Shami congregation in Fustat did not bury their papers systematically, and in the eleventh century, when they rebuilt their synagogue, they provisioned it with a *beit geniza* so large that they could fill it up indefinitely.[6]



A draft of Maimonides's *Guide for the Perplexed*. Egypt, late twelfth century, Judeo-Arabic fragment discovered in the Cairo Geniza. Cambridge University Library, coll. Taylor-Schechter. By kind premission of the Syndics of Cambridge University Library.

The community deposited its papers in their *geniza* chamber continuously for nearly nine centuries, but the best-documented period is 1000–1250. This is fortunate for two reasons. First, until the Geniza's discovery, this had been one of the least-known periods in Jewish history, populated only by the religious, philosophical, and literary works that happened to have been continuously transmitted rather than lost, destroyed, or confiscated and censored by the church in medieval Europe. Second, during this period Egypt happened to be the center of the Islamic world and the hub of the Mediterranean and Indian Ocean trades. Geniza documents were therefore able to illuminate not only medieval Jewish communities but the entire burgeoning society of which they were a part.

There have been other sensational finds since the Cairo Geniza. In 1945, a number of ancient Christian books came to light at Nag' Hammadi in Upper Egypt. One of them was the apocryphal Gospel of Thomas, almost in its entirety, in Coptic translation; it turned out to be the same Christian text in the

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original Greek that Grenfell and Hunt had excavated at Oxyrhynchus half a century earlier. In 1947, a Palestinian shepherd at Khirbet Qumran near the Dead Sea discovered a clay jar containing ancient Hebrew books. Excavations of the site over the next decade revealed an ancient Jewish library—now known as the Dead Sea Scrolls—containing the earliest copies of biblical and apocryphal Hebrew texts ever found. Both these finds were small compared to the riches of Oxyrhynchus and the Geniza. But while Oxyrhynchus yielded mainly documentary texts related to a provincial town, the Geniza has offered generations of scholars the opportunity to reevaluate medieval Jewish culture in the context of the cosmopolitan, urban culture that produced and consumed it. ●

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1. The Geniza's contents are now housed in fifty libraries and several private collections. Most are being made available online as digital images through the Friedberg Genizah Project (www.genizah.org).

2. On the excavation of Oxyrhynchus and its contents, see Peter Parsons, *City of the Sharp-Nosed Fish: Greek Lives in Roman Egypt* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 2007).

3. For a wonderful, readable account of the scholarly discovery of the Geniza, see Adina Hoffman and Peter Cole, *Sacred Trash: The Lost and Found World of the Cairo Geniza* (New York: Schocken, 2011).

4. Hoffman and Cole, *Sacred Trash*, 103, 119.

5. The classic work is S. D. Goitein, *A Mediterranean Society: The Jewish Communities of the Arab World as Portrayed in the Documents of the Cairo Geniza*, 6 vols. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1967–88). There are now also scores of newer works by Goitein's students and their students.

6. Goitein, *Mediterranean Society*, 1:17.

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