

Piecing together the Medieval Middle East

10 April 2006

An important collection of ancient Jewish and Arabic documents, equal in significance to the Dead Sea Scrolls, and discovered as fragments in an old storeroom, has received a major grant for its upkeep. The Taylor-Schechter Genizah Collection, housed at Cambridge University Library, has been awarded a £475,000 grant from the UK Arts and Humanities Research Council. This will pay for the description, cataloguing and digitization of a substantial part of the total 140,000 fragments, vital in making this unique collection accessible to scholars and lay people worldwide.

The Genizah collection was entrusted to Cambridge University 100 years ago by the Chief Rabbi of the 1,000-year-old Ben Ezra Synagogue in Old Cairo. The widespread Jewish custom of not destroying texts on which the name of God or sections of the scripture were recorded led to such materials being consigned to a 'genizah' ('storage place' in Hebrew), where they would disintegrate through natural processes. What makes the contents of the Old Cairo 'genizah' so precious is that not only were they conserved rather than destroyed by the Egyptian climate but, most unusually, everyday texts and writings were also deposited there.

One hundred years ago, in May 1896, Scottish twin sisters and intrepid Middle East travellers, Mrs Agnes Lewis and Mrs Margaret Gibson, handed Solomon Schechter, a leading Hebrew scholar at Cambridge University, some fragments they had brought back from their latest travels in the Middle East. Schechter wrote to them the next day "in haste and great excitement" about the fragments' huge significance and soon after, with the financial support of Dr Charles Taylor, Master of St John's College, Cambridge, set off for Fustat (Old Cairo) to secure the approval of the synagogue to bring the unwanted contents of the 'genizah' for safekeeping to Cambridge University.

The 140,000 fragments are made up of more than 1/4 million individual leaves of Hebrew, Aramaic, Arabic and Judaeo-Arabic papers. What caused

Schechter to respond to the sisters' lead 'in haste and great excitement' was a piece of the original Hebrew text of Ecclesiasticus from the second pre-Christian century. There are 'heretical' documents such as the 'Zakodite' document, or first Dead Sea Scroll, as well as many important religious tracts and literary works, some of them previously unknown. But what makes the collection unique is the fact that it includes records of everyday life – business and personal correspondence, medical prescriptions, legal papers, musical notations, marriage contracts, school books - which are much rarer to come by than official documents. No other collection in the world has had such an impact on our understanding of the religious, economic and social history of the medieval Middle East and Mediterranean.

The bulk of the Genizah collection dates from the 10th – 13th centuries. However, some works represented in the fragments date back to Biblical times, while others are as recent as the 19th Century. What we get is a unique picture of the everyday lives of these peoples: relations between Jews, Muslims and crusaders, the trade in goods and ideas with other countries, such as India, education, science and medicine, social customs and business practices – including the earliest examples of double-entry book-keeping and the use of cheques, with the familiar wording 'I promise to pay the bearer...'.
The AHRC grant will be used to help complete

Professor Stefan Reif, Founder Director of the Taylor-Schechter Genizah Collection, said: "The Taylor-Schechter Genizah Collection at Cambridge University Library offers a window on the world of the 10th–13th centuries. The largest and most important collection of medieval Jewish, Hebrew and Arabic documents in the world, it is at least equal in importance to the Dead Sea Scrolls. Whilst the Dead Sea Scrolls chronicled the life of a dissident sect that cut itself off from the world, the Genizah fragments tell the story of ordinary people dealing with everyday life, love and lore."

The AHRC grant will be used to help complete

existing projects over the next three years, but there is still much left to be done. Future Genizah projects will include finding funding for visiting scholars, especially from Israel and America; initiating research in fields such as philosophy, mysticism and pharmacology; and further cataloguing and fragment analysis.

Source: University of Cambridge

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