

Slide 1:

Uncovering the History of the Cairo Genizah Manuscript Collections: the Story so Far ...

A PowerPoint presentation by Rebecca J. W. Jefferson

Slide 2: discovery

The very first thing I read about the Genizah was Simon Hopkins account of “The Discovery of the Cairo Genizah” – the story gripped me and started me on my path to working with the Genizah collections in Cambridge. The quote you see here, particularly stuck with me.

*The discovery of the Cairo Geniza and the removal of its contents to the libraries of Europe and America was (and to a very small extent still is) a gradual process, many of the details of which remain unclear. Some of the evidence is even conflicting and a great deal of basic work needs still to be done before the full story can be written. Simon Hopkins, *The Discovery of the Cairo Genizah*, Cape Town, 1981.*

Hopkin’s article was the first substantial and chronological account of the discovery of the Genizah in English. Over time, many great scholars and researchers have written about the discovery, including Paul Kahle, Abraham Habermann, Nehemiah Allony, Stefan Reif, Charles Le Quesne, Mark Cohen & Yedida Stillman, Eleazer Hurvitz and more recently Peter Cole and Adina Hoffman among others [see *Bibliography* below]. All of their works have individual strengths and bring to light important facts about the Genizah; yet, not one of them is a truly complete account of its discovery and recovery.

Slide 3: some talking points

The following presentation will cover four main points. Firstly, I will touch upon what I call the ‘traditional’ story. Then I will provide examples from my own research that have added new elements to the story. This includes evidence from before Schechter’s discovery, some untold Schechter stories and some later discoveries, sales and schemes! I will then outline the challenges ahead and conclude with thoughts about why this project is important.

Slide 4: the traditional story

I’m rather relying on the fact that most of you are already familiar with the main story of the discovery of the Genizah. The ‘traditional’ story as I am terming it here is Schechter-centric, essentially placing the main focus of the recovery efforts on Solomon Schechter. It is indeed true that Schechter recovered a huge proportion of the material in the Ben Ezra synagogue but, as you will learn, it is not true that he personally retrieved everything held in the Taylor-Schechter Genizah Collection as you can see in this famous photograph from August 1897, which, in spite of being visually arresting, actually shows less than the entire collection of nearly 200,000 fragments (the photograph shows seven or eight crates and the contents of some other boxes scattered over the tables; Schechter’s original shipment arrived in eight tea chests, and his first estimate was 40,000 fragments, which he later revised to 100,000 fragments). The traditional story celebrates Schechter’s vision in removing the entire Genizah for posterity and his

immediate recognition of the historical importance that each and every scrap would impart. Yet, this is not strictly true either. Schechter was undoubtedly a very great scholar, and he was incredibly astute when it came to rescuing the Genizah material, but—as he himself reports—he took everything only because he did not have the time or means to pick and choose select manuscripts on the spot. He would often dismiss as “rubbish” fragments that today are considered important pieces of the mosaic of Jewish life in the medieval world. Finally, the traditional story often leaves out or devotes limited space to activities in the Cairo Genizah before and after Schechter’s Genizah exploits.

Slide 5: new elements of the story: before Schechter’s discovery

In 2007, I discovered sets of letters in various British institutions that expanded the story and filled in the some of the gaps. The letters proved that one of the first people to enter the Genizah after the Ben Ezra Synagogue was rebuilt in 1892 was a man by the name of Count Riamo d’Hulst.

On the left you see a letter sent from Oxford’s professor of Assyriology, Archibald Henry Sayce to the Bodleian’s Oriental librarian, Adolf Neubauer, in March 1895. Neubauer had commissioned Sayce and Sayce had enlisted d’Hulst’s help to find the Genizah manuscripts with a view to purchasing them, either in batches or as a whole:

I have just heard from my Cairo friend [d’Hulst] that he has succeeded in discovering & entering the old subterranean place ¹ from which the Hebrew MSS have all come. It is still filled with MSS & books, the larger & more accessible of which have been torn to pieces in order to sell the papers which have come to Europe. The Jews in charge of the place have offered to sell the whole collection for £50 with £5 bakshish. But the difficulty is how to get such a large quantity of things out of the country. Could the Bodleian get the government/or rather Lord Cromer to do it? (MS Bodl.d.1080, letter dated March 26, 1895).

These letters when pieced together reveal the secret race between Oxford and Cambridge to elevate the standing of their respective Hebraica collections and to find more fragments of the Hebrew Ecclesiasticus (Ben Sira).

The postcard on the right testifies to the Count’s earlier involvement with the Genizah. Writing in 1915, he told the Bodleian librarian:

As to the Kenisah MSS: I discovered them, when (in 1889) carrying on excavations at Old Cairo. They seemed to me valuable but I was not sufficiently Hebrew scholar to decide, so I reported to the authorities of the E.E.F and forwarded a sample box, bought with my own money (MS Bodl.d.1080, postcard April, 1915).

Letters held in the Egypt Exploration Fund (*hereafter* EEF) archives prove that the Count did indeed recover Genizah manuscripts in 1889 and that he had sent them on to the EEF. The Bodleian Library records show that the EEF had donated them to the Bodleian a year later without acknowledging or explaining their exact source.

The image you see here is possibly the Count d'Hulst. I discovered this photograph album of excavations in Egypt in Cambridge University Library. I sent this photograph to Peter Cole and Adina Hoffman for use in their book *Sacred Trash* along with a lengthy and complex explanation of how I'd worked out that this was d'Hulst. Unfortunately, the explanation was so lengthy and complex that I no longer remember myself how I came to this conclusion!²

Slide 6: new elements of the story: the “key to the Genizah”

Many of the letters that I have examined provide greater insights into Solomon Schechter's character. Schechter's larger-than-life personality has already been captured in books and articles by Norman Bentwich, Stefan Reif and Cole and Hoffman, to name but a few, but even they have not tapped into every source.

A good example of Schechter's human fallibility is provided by the letters you see here. The one on the left is a request from Schechter to his younger friend, Elkan Nathan Adler for a letter of introduction to the Chief Rabbi of Cairo. It was most likely sent in October 1896 when Adler was away in Persia and Schechter was in the middle of planning his secret trip to Egypt. It reads:

Dear Adler,

Many, many thanks for your kind letter to the 27 in Cairo. I did not know that I am either a ׁ727 or a 7773 ... (Solomon Schechter Collection, 1/15: Correspondence, undated letter, 1896)

In August 1897, almost a year after Elkan Adler had supplied Schechter with letters of introduction to the Rabbi and to Youssef Cattai, a leading member of the Cairene community, and two days after the London *Times* published Schechter's account of the discovery of the Genizah entitled “A Hoard of Hebrew Manuscripts,” an anonymous letter-writer accused Schechter of failing to properly acknowledge the discoverers who came before him. The letter curiously ends with the statement that Adler practically gave Schechter the “key to the Genizah.” This statement gave Schechter temporary cause to suspect Adler as the anonymous writer. Adler must have written quickly to Schechter to disabuse him of the idea. Schechter, in a reply on the 5th August, seems compelled to give Adler an explanation as to why he failed to acknowledge his help and, indeed, why he erroneously attributed Elkan Adler's help to his brother, Hermann Adler, the Chief Rabbi of England. Schechter's amusing explanation reads as follows:

In putting in the name of your brother in such a stiff formal way I purposed to show the gentiles that the letter of our Chief Rabbi has with the Eastern Jews as much authority as that of the Archbishop with the Coptic Churches ... Your name would have undone the effected and intended. Will you understand me now? You shall soon P. G. be compensated by me. I have to lecture on the subject. (Solomon Schechter Collection, 1/15: Correspondence, letter dated August 5, 1897).

Poor Elkan, even if Schechter did publicly acknowledge his help in a lecture, traditional renderings of the story would continue to repeat Schechter's published statement that the help had come from his brother Hermann.

Slide 7: new elements of the story: scrabbling for fragments

After Schechter's return from Egypt, Genizah manuscripts continued to be offered for sale through suppliers like the Jerusalem bookseller and dealer, W. S. Raffalovich. Here we have a series of letters between Solomon Schechter and Elkan Nathan Adler wrangling over manuscripts. The conflict is sincere, but the tone at times lightly humorous.

The first letter was sent from Raffalovich to Adler on the 9th December 1897 stating that:

I received some fragments from the גזירה of מצרים and as I promised you to show them to you first will you kindly appoint me a time to call upon you ... (Solomon Schechter Collection, 1/15: Correspondence, Adler, Elkan N.)

Five days later, Raffalovich writes again:

I arrived last night from Cambridge. Mr. Schechter said that for you even £5 will be to[o] much to pay for the fragments, but he was kind enough & tried his best for me & I sold them to the University for £20. I knew that they was [sic] not of much interes[t] for you. (Elkan Nathan Adler Collection, Box 2-9, Correspondence, letter dated December 14, 1897)

Adler writes to Raffalovich:

I am sure you have treated me most dishonestly to sell the fragments over my head after your solemn promise to let me buy them – or at least the portion I selected – at the price to be fixed by Mr. Schechter. (Solomon Schechter Collection, 1/15: Correspondence, undated; probably December 15 or 16, 1897).

Raffalovich responds:

I am sorry to say that I am very shocked with the tune of your Post-card for I believe you have misunderstood my letter in which I informed you the truth of what Mr. Schechter said that for you the fragments would not be worth more than £5 and the remained [sic] he told me plain they are valueless, and as I had a chance to take from the Librarian the sum of £20 for it, I don't think it would be honest or reasonable to lose £15. (Elkan Nathan Adler Collection, Box 2-9, Correspondence, letter dated December 16, 1897)

In the meantime, Adler had written an indignant letter to Schechter, forwarding Raffalovich's message.

Schechter writes back:

My first acquaintance with Mr. Raffalovich dated from the month you were away in Bucharia ... It is a lie when he says that I told him that you will pay £5 for 12 select fragments. I gave him no answer to this, but simply bought what you declined to take. To say the truth, I did not find the fragments you selected particularly exciting. Perhaps it will do you good to know that there was neither Sirach or Aquila nor any signature or letter of any importance in the whole collection.

The Librarian left for France yesterday. Otherwise I would have told him that you have גמציאות. I do not know whether the Library has not a law forbidding [it] to part with acquisitions. That you would suspect me of being מסיג גבול is too bad and we shall have a fight when I meet you next. (Solomon Schechter Collection, 1/15: Correspondence, letter dated [December] 15, 1897)

Adler is not convinced:

I accept your explanation but it does not alter the fact that I knew the man first, ordered the MSS first, sorted these particular fragments first & promised to buy them at the price you fixed for me —not your library. I beg you to keep the parcel intact till the Librarian returns & then ask him to decide the point. Probably the fairest thing will be for each party to pay £10 & to choose fragment by fragment in succession. I know there is nothing particularly exciting in the lot but still there are several I should like to have. You see I am perfectly frank & not נוגס ונוטר. With all Maccabean greetings... (Solomon Schechter Collection, 1/15: Correspondence, letter dated December 20, 1897)

Schechter launches into a further defense:

My explanation does alter the facts. I did know the man before you returned from Persia. He did then promise the Genizah MSS before you had with him any transaction. I did not in the least take note of your sorting the fragments. The MSS which interested me most were not among the 12 fragments you selected; as I will show you when you are here. Neither you nor he did tell me with a single word that I have to fix prices for you. Would you refuse to buy MSS which you knew were in my hands? I cannot possibly understand you. However, I am not נוגס ונוטר as you say. (I do not see why you should be). The Librarian is in France now. Write you to him and hear what he will say... (Solomon Schechter Collection, 1/15: Correspondence, letter dated December 20, 1897)

Adler responds with humor and finally gets to the point:

There still seems a little misunderstanding about dates. My acquaintance with Raffalovich dates from the beginning of the Christian year, your's from that of the Jewish, so I have nearly 4 times the advantage of you!

It is evident that Raffalovich did not explain to you the true position, but it is also evident that you knew that an offer from me of £5 was given for fragments & that [and he paraphrases Schechter] “the MSS which interested you most were not among them.” Why then didn't you buy the batch for £15 and leave me my little vineyard for £5? Yours all the same, Elkan Adler. (Solomon Schechter Collection, 1/15: Correspondence, letter dated December 22, 1897).

Slide 8: new elements of the story: further discoveries

Meanwhile, over in Oxford, the great scholar, librarian and collector of Hebraica, Adolf Neubauer, having been pipped to the Genizah post by Schechter in 1897, was not to be outdone, particularly when there were further leaves of Ben Sira to find. Based on advice received from

the Count d'Hulst, Neubauer commissioned excavations in the vicinity of the Ben Ezra synagogue.

The letter displayed here is one of six sent by the Count describing his activities unearthing Genizah fragments.

Some months before I began the work for the Egypt Exploration Fund they had thrown out another big heap of rubbish, which I have found. I have examined this heap; it contains papers of the same nature as those I sent you & in the same proportion. My continued presence upon the spot enabled me also to arrive at some result with regard to the papers in the hiding place in the synagogue. The lowest price for which they are willing to sell them is £35. There are at present about [ten] sacs of papers there [the eight bags I send you to form one sac]; but as far as I could examine it about 9/10 is printed, the remainder manuscript ... I suspect that they have carried & carry all sorts of rubbish paper together, to mix them up with what was left with a view to selling them. They expect Mr. Schechter again in August next (MS Bodl.d.1080, letter dated February 17, 1898).

Two months later, d'Hulst reported on the success of the operation:

My work at Old Cairo is going on successfully & if chance keeps on like at present, I shall with my present work more than double the quantity of Egyptian fragments at the Bodleian (MS Bodl.d.1080, letter dated April 8, 1898).

There was, however, some local opposition (encouraged by an ally of Schechter – we will hear more of this soon). D'Hulst reports:

Last Saturday, after the prayer in the synagogue, we were attacked by a number of Jews armed with sticks. They pretended that the ground upon which we worked belonged to the Synagogue. Sir William Garstin was kind enough to give me on Monday an introduction to Mr. Cattai, the chief of the synagogue.

D'Hulst also notes that:

since last I wrote to Mr. Nicholson I have found that a large part of the courtyard of the synagogue has been covered about one meter high with the same papers.

Slide 9: new elements of the story: sales

In 2008, I began to wonder what had happened to d'Hulst's manuscripts as there was no report of them in any document or catalog. As I gathered more evidence, I could only conclude that the Bodleian had disposed of them. Thanks to Eleazar Hurvitz's Westminster catalogs produced in 2006 and distributed in Cambridge late in 2009, I came across a quote from the Bodleian Library's Curators' Report stating that the Bodleian's unwanted Genizah manuscripts had been sold to "a private collector of well-known position."

Well, now I was determined to find out exactly who this collector was and initially placed all bets on Moses Gaster. Another trip to the Bodleian library and several hours of trawling through accounts ledgers finally rewarded me: the buyer was Elkan Nathan Adler. Now I understood why the traditional story that Adler had acquired his 25,000 strong Genizah manuscript collection by spending some hours in the Genizah stuffing a Torah mantle never made sense. Through a close analysis of the various letters and documents, I estimate that possibly around one third of Adler's collection at the Jewish Theological Seminary (but mostly the small fragments) was originally discovered by the Count d'Hulst.

Slide 10: new elements of the story: schemes

We return to our earlier mention of Schechter's ally. While in Cairo in the winter of 1897, Schechter befriended a well-connected Manchester merchant who conducted business in Cairo, Reginald Q. Henriques. Henriques was quite taken with Schechter and was soon doing all that he could to secure more Genizah manuscripts for him. In 2009, I discovered a set of letters from Henriques to Schechter and the Cambridge University Librarian, Francis Jenkinson, detailing his exploits, as well as notices and invoices relating to a shipment of manuscripts.

The letter displayed in this slide reads:

I write you a line to say that the matter of the Ghenisa is by no means finished. While I was at home in England some German or Austrian whose name I don't know was here & by means of money that golden key to everything in the last succeeded in digging up at least 20 to 25 bags of manuscripts. I shall try to found out who he was & let you know. Now there is another man on the scene Dr [Muller] whose card I enclose you. This man has offered the beadle & people in charge £2 per bag but up to present as I heard of this I stepped in & [collared] what was already dug up which is 5 sacks full. [The paper] I have is all manuscript & mostly of same type as sent you before (MS ULIB 6/6/1/2, letter dated December 8, 1898).

Henriques refers to an unnamed Austrian in several letters, and writes to Jenkinson that:

there are still several people scheming to obtain whatever is brought to light especially an Austrian whose name I communicated to Professor Schechter some time ago. However I am convinced that very little if anything will get into other hands than ours. There is only about one sack now ready in spite of continuing digging &c. I fear the supply is mostly at an end. I send you by this post a manuscript found in the same place & for which the Austrian Count offered £2... It seems to me it may be some very interesting rabbinical writing (MS ULIB 6/6/1/2, letter dated May 12, 1899).

The manuscript which Henriques had troubled to wrest away from the Count was, according to Jenkinson: *pronounced no good by Schechter ... and ... at once sent back with thanks for the trouble taken* (Francis Jenkinson's diary; MS CUL Add.7422 (1899), May 29, 1899).

Henriques supplied Cambridge with six sacks of manuscripts in 1899 and reportedly – although they cannot be traced – another three bags in 1902. My work in the Genizah Research Unit's archives reveals that a fair proportion of the Taylor-Schechter New Series and Additional Series

(again, mostly the small fragments) must have been supplied by Henriques. It is also possible that many of those were originally unearthed by the Count d’Hulst.

Slide 11: challenges ahead: gaps in the evidence

But even with these new elements of the story, large gaps remain. There are 67 known collections of Genizah manuscripts around the world; most of them have an incomplete provenance story. A good example is the Kaufmann collection. David Kaufmann never revealed the source of his manuscripts. His student later reported that his box of Genizah materials was dated 1894. Another account tells that Kaufmann had been planning to purchase the entire Genizah before Schechter ruined his plans. He is also quoted as saying that the Genizah was revealed by a careless Hungarian or Oriental source.

Thinking about the enigmatic Kaufmann for this presentation, I began to conduct searches on his students and collaborators. I noticed that Kaufmann was extremely close friends with, and published alongside, the Oriental, Austro-Hungarian born scholar, David Heinrich Müller. Müller was the first European to bring Jacob Saphir’s travel account – an account that contains the first detailed description of the Cairo Genizah – to wide attention. Müller was also in the Middle East in December 1898 on an expedition in the Yemen, exactly near the time when – if you remember – [see previous slide] – Reginald Henriques makes mention of a Dr. Müller offering £2 a bag for Genizah manuscripts. Coincidence or connection?

Slide 12: summary: why this project is important

So why bother fill in the gaps? We have the collections and great work is being done on them. Who cares who bought/brought what when? Well, I would argue that in the same way that Israeli scientists (and before them researchers on the Penn Genizah Project) are working to digitally join the torn and scattered fragments of the Genizah to restore former books and reunite whole manuscript pages, so too should the various dispersed histories be integrated into one whole story and not left as disparate narratives. The story of how these collections were made, is a librarian’s story and should be important to anyone in the library world. It is an instructive story about how the world’s great Hebraica collections were created. Finally, the recovery of the Genizah needs to be told in as complete a manner as possible just because it is such a wonderful story rich with great characters and their exploits in the name of discovery and scholarship!

The Cairo Genizah discovery: a condensed bibliography in chronological order

- **1866:** Saphir, Jacob, *Eben Sapir*, Lyck.
- **1897:** Schechter, Solomon, “A Hoard of Hebrew Manuscripts,” *The Times* (London), 3 August, p. 13.
- **1898:** Lewis, Agnes Smith, *In the Shadow of Sinai: a Story of Travel and Research from 1895 to 1897*, Cambridge: Macmillan & Bowes.
- **1938:** Bentwich, Norman, *Solomon Schechter; A Biography*, Cambridge: University Press.
- **1941:** Kahle, Paul, *The Cairo Genizah*, Oxford: Basil Blackwell.

- **1947:** Marx, Alexander, “The Importance of the Geniza for Jewish History,” *Proceedings of the American Academy for Jewish Research* 16 (1946-1947), pp. 183-204.
- **1961:** Allony, N, “Genizah and Hebrew manuscripts in Cambridge Libraries,” *Areshet* 3, pp. 395-425 [in Hebrew].
- **1967:** Goitein, Solomon Dov, *A Mediterranean Society*, Volume I: The Jewish Communities of the Arab World as Portrayed in the Documents of the Cairo Genizah: Economic Foundations, Berkeley: University of California Press.
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- **1981:** Hopkins, Simon, “The Discovery of the Cairo Genizah,” *Bibliophilia Africana* 4, Cape Town, pp. 137-78.
- **1985:** Cohen, Mark & Stillman, Yedida, “The Cairo Geniza and the Custom of Geniza among Oriental Jewry: An Historical and Ethnographical Study,” *Pe’amim* 24, pp. 3-35 [in Hebrew].
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- **2009:** Jefferson, Rebecca J. W, “A Genizah Secret: the Count d’Hulst and Letters Revealing the Race to Recover the Lost Leaves of the Original Ecclesiasticus” *Journal of the History of Collections* 21, no. 1, pp. 125-142.
- **2010:** Jefferson, Rebecca J. W, “The Cairo Genizah Unearthed: the Excavations Conducted by the Count d’Hulst on Behalf of the Bodleian Library and their Significance for Genizah history” in B. Outhwaite & S. Bhayro (eds) *From a Sacred Source: Genizah Studies in Honour of Professor Stefan C. Reif*, Leiden: Brill, pp. 171-200.
- **2011:** Glickman, Mark, *Sacred Treasure: The Amazing Discoveries of Forgotten Jewish History in an Egyptian Synagogue Attic*, Woodstock, VT: Jewish Lights Publishing.
- **2011:** Hoffman, Adina & Cole, Peter, *Sacred Trash: The Lost and Found World of the Cairo Genizah*, Schocken NextBook.
- **2013** (in press): Jefferson, Rebecca J. W, “The Historical Significance of the Cambridge Genizah Inventory Project” in N. Dershowitz and E. Nissan (eds), *Language, Culture, Computation: Essays Dedicated to Yaacov Choueka* (Lecture Notes in Computer Science), Berlin: Springer-Verlag.

¹ I will expand on the use of the term ‘subterranean’ and its significance in a forthcoming article “Collecting the Cairo Genizah ...”

² In all seriousness, we can posit a probability of 50% that this photograph is the Count d'Hulst by a process of elimination. The other contender is Ernest Cramer-Sarasin, a cousin of the archaeologist Edouard Naville.

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