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## Cataloguing the Cairo Genizah

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**Abstract:** The Cairo Genizah collections are an extraordinarily important resource for many fields of Jewish Studies. Some of the difficulties confronted by scholars in exploiting these materials are described, and the importance of producing a series of reliable catalogues of the various collections is emphasized.

### Significance of the Cairo Genizah

In Jewish tradition, a *genizah* is a repository for sacred materials—primarily sacred writings—which are unsuited for ritual or similar use, whether because of long wear or other disqualifying circumstances, but must nonetheless be disposed of in a respectful fashion and not simply discarded. This article deals with the vast body of material (mostly manuscript but also printed) known collectively as the Cairo Genizah, and I use the term “Genizah” without further qualification to refer to this material. For reasons which are obscure, the Genizah is home not only to sacred materials, but to a great deal of secular writing as well. This treasure-trove, which has had an extraordinary impact on most branches of Jewish studies concerned with the pre-modern period, originates in a number of locations in the vicinity of Fustat (Old Cairo).

The best known and most important of these repositories was the so-called Ben Ezra synagogue, built in the early eleventh century and still standing; throughout the Middle Ages it served as the central synagogue of that portion of Cairo’s Jewish population which followed Palestinian Rabbinic tradition. (Other sources include Karaite synagogues and Jewish cemeteries.) The significance of this collection, or these collections, derives from a combination of two factors: the prominence of Cairo as a cen-

ter of Jewish life and culture during the Middle Ages, and the Egyptian climate, which preserved fragile organic materials virtually unharmed for many centuries. As a result of these factors, the Genizah collections provide us with a cross-section of Jewish life in medieval Cairo, and shed a great deal of light on Jewish life and cultural activity elsewhere as well.

This material is also of great interest for the social and economic history of the Middle East in the medieval period, as there is no archive of comparable scope deriving from the dominant Islamic society of the time. Furthermore, the Genizah fragments are important not only for the study of the period in which they were written, but—in many cases—for earlier periods as well, because Genizah copies of such Jewish classics as the Talmud are often earlier and more accurate than those preserved elsewhere.

### Characteristics of Genizah Fragments

Because written materials were discarded only when they were no longer of use, and because of the high cost of producing manuscripts, literary works generally found their way to the Genizah in badly damaged copies. The typical Genizah item is not a complete manuscript, but a fragment of one or two leaves, and in many cases these are damaged as well. Furthermore, the pages of a single manuscript frequently became separated; it is very common to find the leaves of a single manuscript scattered today in three or four different libraries. On the other hand, non-literary writings often lost their value with the passage of time, and were deposited in the Genizah while still more or less intact.

The primary languages of the Genizah writings are those used over the last millennium and more by the Jews of the Middle

East: Hebrew, Aramaic and Arabic. When used for communication between Jews, Arabic usually took the form known as Judeo-Arabic: written in Hebrew characters, with an admixture of Hebrew and Aramaic words and expressions. The Genizah, however, also contains substantial numbers of fragments written in Arabic script, especially official documents issued by various branches of the Muslim government. Occasionally one encounters fragments containing texts in other languages, generally written in Hebrew characters, such as Judeo-Persian, Judeo-Greek, or even Yiddish.

In terms of content, the Genizah materials cover a very wide range. Among the literary fragments, which comprise perhaps three-quarters of the total, the most popular categories are liturgical texts (including vast quantities of liturgical poetry), Biblical and related texts (including translations and commentaries in a number of languages), and Rabbinic literature; other, less prominent, categories include philosophical, scientific, mystical, and linguistic writings. Among the non-literary items, probably the most numerous types are legal documents and private letters; we also find, for example, school exercises and merchants’ account books, as well as communal records of various sorts.

Most of the fragments found in the Genizah may be dated to the early centuries of the second millennium CE, but there are a fair number of earlier items, as well as a substantial quantity of later ones, including a number of nineteenth-century pieces. The Genizah repositories were discovered and exploited in rather haphazard fashion by a number of nineteenth-century travelers and dealers; as a result of their activities, these manuscripts are today scattered over the northern hemisphere. To further complicate

matters, several important Genizah collections, located in the Soviet Union and Hungary, were virtually inaccessible to Western scholars until the fall of the Iron Curtain. Today, almost all of the Genizah collections may be visited freely, and most of the material may also be consulted in the form of microfilms at the Institute of Microfilmed Hebrew Manuscripts, Jewish National and University Library, Jerusalem.

It is impossible to give an exact figure for the total quantity of Genizah material, but a rough estimate of 500,000 leaves would probably not be too far off the mark. More than half of the extant Genizah fragments are located in the Cambridge University Library; other important collections include those of the Saltykov-Schedrin Public Library in St. Petersburg, the Jewish Theological Seminary of America in New York, the Bodleian Library in Oxford, and the British Library in London.

#### Classification of Genizah Material

In most of these collections, some attempt has been made to organize the material thematically, but none of these attempts at classification are very reliable, for a number of reasons. The difficulties of identifying fragmentary materials are very considerable—beginning with the physical state of the fragments, proceeding to the decipherment of a wide variety of handwritings (although most of those found in the Genizah are quite legible), the need to understand at least three languages, and, most demanding of all, to identify limited textual passages without the benefit of context.

Frequently one encounters a passage, for example, a discussion of the legal implications of a Biblical verse, which might equally well belong to a Bible commentary, a rabbinic work of one sort or another (commentary, code, responsum), or even a work of religious philosophy or ethics. These difficulties are, of course, compounded when the text in question is not known from any source outside the Genizah; but even if the

text is otherwise known, large parts of Jewish literature cannot (yet?) be accessed and searched systematically. Finally, there are quite a few fragments which it is impossible to classify unequivocally, for the simple reason that they contain two or more different texts: Apparently because of the scarcity and cost of writing materials, the blank spaces left in writing one text were often used later for a totally unrelated one.

The difficulties of identifying individual fragments, and the limited usefulness of the various libraries' attempts to organize their holdings systematically, make the production of reliable catalogues exceedingly important for the future progress of scholarship in the many disciplines which depend to a large extent on the resources of the Genizah. The production of such catalogues is, however, a daunting and often thankless task, and ideally requires the cooperation of a large number of scholars specializing in various disciplines, a thing not easily achieved.

Progress to date has been rather modest. Comprehensive, if rudimentary, catalogues have been prepared for some of the smaller collections. The Genizah Unit of Cambridge University Library has made a concerted effort to assess its enormous holdings, proceeding by way of a series of catalogues of particular types of material, such as Biblical or rabbinic texts. The Jewish Theological Seminary of America has taken the innovative step of producing a rough catalogue of its Genizah holdings, with emphasis on the fragments of rabbinic literature, in computerized form. A great deal remains to be done, however. It is to be hoped that both institutions and individuals will come to realize the crucial importance of such an undertaking, and cooperate in bringing it to fruition.

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