Book Review: Rebecca J. W. Jefferson, The Cairo Genizah and the Age of Discovery in Egypt: The History and Provenance of a Jewish Archive. London: I. B. Tauris & Company Limited, 2022. xiv, 267 p. ISBN: 9781788319638*

Amalia S. Levi
BCDSS, Bonn University

Rebecca Jefferson's *The Cairo Genizah and the Age of Discovery in Egypt: The History and Provenance of a Jewish Archive* is a book about fragments—and about fragmentation, and the actors and processes behind it. Alongside climate conditions, misuse, or neglect, the book shows fragmentation as a result of multiple intersecting personalities, motivations, and circumstances that are inexorably tied to the violence of European imperialism and colonialism.

Jefferson has written not only a deeply erudite book, based on sleuthing and painstaking research, but also a breathtaking account that reads like a novel about belle-époque hotels and exclusive clubs, European consuls with insider knowledge of the antiquities trade and adventurers scouting local markets, archaeologists working under the scorching sun and the relentless dust, and tourists and scholars alike vying for fragmented treasures.

The book conceptualizes the Cairo Genizah as a "Jewish archive," thus emphasizing its assembled and constituted nature. Comprising biblical, rabbinical, and liturgical fragments, as well as legal documents, personal letters, and other texts, this unruly archive would ultimately not only revolutionize the study of the life of medieval Jewish communities, but also the broader world of the Mediterranean communities they lived among. The involvement of multiple actors and institutions with these fragments, now housed in Europe and the US, is reflected in many of the fragments' long, arduous, often convoluted provenance.

The book is the outcome of the author's years-long fascination with the topic, which started with her work as bibliographer of the Taylor-Schechter Genizah Collection, and her research into the under-explored history of other genizah collections around the world. The book succeeds in reconstructing the provenance of these collections, when possible, revealing the connections and networks underpinning them, and unraveling many long-standing assumptions. Jefferson emphasizes that the text contained in the Genizah fragments needs to be understood together with the "multi-temporal journeys in and out of different social settings" that they underwent, thus tracing an arc across owners and users across time (xiii).

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Fifteen chapters masterfully cover a period of approximately thirty years. The practice of genizah and its many expressions is explained in detail (Chapter 1), particularly as various European scholars would visit Near Eastern Jewish communities in the 1860s seeking out genizot with materials previously considered forever lost (Chapter 2). The 1870s saw a large number of travelers and treasure-hunters arrive in Egypt, while manuscript-hunters, rummaging through monasteries, were in pursuit of Coptic, Syriac, and Arabic manuscripts. Intermediaries, scholars, European consuls, as well as British and Anglo-American missionaries bought antiquities, decorated their homes with them, and sent massive amounts of books and manuscripts to the British Museum, among other institutions (Chapter 3). In the 1880s, the increasing demand for Hebrew manuscripts by European and American tourists and collectors, both individuals and those sent by museums and libraries, resulted in a dramatic rise in the number of antiquities dealers—local and foreign alike—in Egypt and the Holy Land, and unprovenanced objects would increasingly be taken away or smuggled out, even as new legislation prohibiting the export of antiquities without license was being passed (Chapters 4–5).

While each of the first five chapters provides a panoramic view of a decade, the following ten chapters cover two-year increments. By 1892, manuscripts newly discovered in the genizot in the East found their way—fragmented, severed, scattered, and undocumented—in libraries around the world. By then, the actors who had seen the manuscripts in their original find spot(s) in the completely restored Ben Ezra Synagogue were gone and thus their provenance was being lost forever (Chapter 6–7). Between 1892 to 1894, as hordes of material appeared, new actors raced to acquire and study them, while at the same time large amounts of manuscripts were being dismembered and fed into the market for fragments (Chapters 8– 9). Despite the secrecy surrounding the efforts to acquire manuscripts, soon the news began leaking out as both private collectors and scholars, among them Solomon Schechter, had by then recognized the monumental importance of the finds. They had also realized that materials previously interred in an underground location were carried secretly and tossed into what came to be known as the Cairo Genizah: an enclosed space in the restored Ben Ezra synagogue. For Schechter, their damp and earthy smell was a marker of provenance that would eventually reveal the relationship among many of the fragments (Chapter 10). In Cairo between 1896 to 1897, Schechter would use his noted erudition and engaging personality, as well as his social skills and networking with Egypt's Jewish business elite, to scout other genizot. Despite his frustration with the "locals'" and the dealers he ended up amassing thirty bags with tens of thousands of fragments, before continuing his travels south of Cairo and then to Palestine (Chapters 11–12). To guard his leading role in scholarship, Schechter strove to maintain secrecy over the materials that he considered belonged to him due to his efforts and large personal funds he had spent acquiring them. These discoveries however that came to be known as "the Cairo Genizah" had caused a flurry of interest by scholars, dealers, librarians, financiers, and community leaders among other actors, and resulted in a steady flow of fragments through often undocumented, clandestine activities that obscured the provenance of collections (Chapters 13–14). Through a seemingly inexhaustible supply of fragments throughout the twentieth century, what had started

out as 40,000 fragments just about a century ago has grown to be nearly 200,000 based on an inventory of the Taylor-Schechter Genizah Collection in 2009, while additional collections in other institutions have been increasingly catalogued, and yet others remain in private hands with no information available (Chapter 15).

The epilogue of the book emphasizes the convoluted nature of the provenance of the Cairo Genizah fragments due to processes such as disinterment, dismemberment, poor handling or care, natural and man-made disasters, and even institutional practices and policies—today ironically fragmented even further among fifty institutions and eighteen private collections. The book concludes with a handy and comprehensive appendix that lists institutions with genizah collections consisting of over 500 fragments each and provides location, acquisition date, and provenance information when known.

The book raises important ethical questions, particularly regarding the acquisition and dispersal of genizah fragments. It discusses not only the role of Western scholars in this process, and their entitlement in acquiring these fragments from local Jewish communities who often were misled to give up their treasures, but ultimately their complicity in this process that resulted in the dismemberment and destruction of the cultural heritage of communities in the East, often for commercial gain. It is not a coincidence that this plunder of genizah materials took place at a time when European Jews, believing that their brethren in the East were in decline and in need of regeneration, were involved in various "civilizing missions" initiatives.[1]

The book succeeds not simply in uncovering provenance information for collections in European and US institutions, but additionally in contributing towards "understanding the deeply entangled and problematic history of the West's coetaneous appreciation and despoliation of the East" (189). The sad reality of this despoliation becomes apparent when we consider the fate of some of those fragments that, brought to Europe, were destroyed during World War II (179). As the public today is aware of and sensitive to problematic histories of collections in European or US institutions, the book fittingly emphasizes that originating communities today engage in initiatives to reclaim their past and put in place museums to exhibit these stories (185–86).

As Jefferson asserts, these entangled histories of collecting practices ultimately impinge upon the ways we encounter collections today. Alongside dubious and inadequate provenance information due to haphazard acquisition, some collections were not stored or cataloged properly, thus result-

1. Such as the Alliance israélite universelle (AIU) and the Hilfsvereins der Deutschen Juden. The longtime Secretary of the AIU, Jacques Bigart, would state that the aim of the Alliance schools was not "to turn out little scholars, but to let a ray of civilization penetrate souls closed to Occidental ideas, arouse notions of personal dignity, and give general knowledge of the progress of humanity." Jacques Bigart, "The Alliance Israélite Universelle, "*The American Jewish Year Book* 2 (1900): 57.

ing in mixed up material, and yet others have weeded out fragments that previously, based on the values of their era, were considered "waste." The book succeeds in showing the importance of going back to institutional archives for better understanding the collections we work with.

Some small points of critique do not subtract from the book's quality. The book would benefit if the appendix, now provided as bullet points per collection of genizah fragments, would be provided in a tabular format to aid comprehension. It is a great resource, and it would be great to have it online and computationally available, possibly with relevant links provided (though this is certainly another project of its own and was probably not feasible in the timeline of the book). Additionally, sometimes the book tends to be verbose, and minuscule details might seem overbearing to some readers. Such quotidian details however serve to humanize the actors involved and bring to life places that not many will have the chance to experience in their lifetime, particularly places as they stood over a hundred years ago. In the end, such seemingly mundane, albeit engaging details make the book appealing to a more general audience too.

Ultimately, these details serve a purpose. The book is a call for more provenance research on the various dispersed collections that form what is known as the Cairo Genizah. While recognizing the difficult, time consuming, and painstaking work required, the author argues that institutional archives can yield relevant documentation. Such records, together with evidence digitally facilitated by the circulation and exchange of information among previously siloed institutions, can help researchers recover histories of collections that have been assumed to be lost. The book is proof that this is possible.