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2003

## **Review of Stefan C. Reif, *A Jewish Archive from Old Cairo: The History of Cambridge University's Genizah Collection***

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### **Recommended Citation**

Kiron, A. (2003). Review of Stefan C. Reif, *A Jewish Archive from Old Cairo: The History of Cambridge University's Genizah Collection*. *The Jewish Quarterly Review*, 92 (3-4), 631-635. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1353/jqr.2003.0020>

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## Review of Stefan C. Reif, *A Jewish Archive from Old Cairo: The History of Cambridge University's Genizah Collection*

### Abstract

One of the most spectacular yet quiet revolutions in the modern study of the history of the Mediterranean world has resulted from the recovery just over a hundred years ago of the contents of an attic storehold in the Ben Ezra Synagogue of Old Cairo. The Cairo "genizah" (the technical, religious term applied to a storage area for consigning, or "hiding away" the worn remains of texts considered narrowly or generally sacred, or even heretical, but in either case unfit for ritual use), has yielded an unprecedented cache of more than 200,000 fragmentary documents, most of which date from the 9th through the 15th centuries CE. The story of a major part of this treasure trove, its origins, rediscovery and relocation from Cairo to Cambridge University, and the significance of its contents is the subject of this much needed survey by Stefan C. Reif.

### Disciplines

Jewish Studies | Library and Information Science

STEFAN C. REIF. *A Jewish Archive from Old Cairo: The History of Cambridge University's Genizah Collection*. Richmond, Surrey: Curzon, 2000. Pp. xx + 277, ill., maps.

One of the most spectacular yet quiet revolutions in the modern study of the history of the Mediterranean world has resulted from the recovery just over a hundred years ago of the contents of an attic storehold in the Ben Ezra Synagogue of Old Cairo. The Cairo "genizah" (the technical, religious term applied to a storage area for consigning, or "hiding away" the worn remains of texts considered narrowly or generally sacred, or even heretical, but in either case unfit for ritual use), has yielded an unprecedented cache of more than 200,000 fragmentary documents, most of which date from the 9th through the 15th centuries CE. The story of a major part of this treasure trove, its origins, rediscovery and relocation from Cairo to Cambridge University, and the significance of its contents is the subject of this much needed survey by Stefan C. Reif.

Reif, the Director of the Genizah Research Unit and Head of the Oriental Division at the Cambridge University Library, Professor of Medieval Hebrew Studies in the Faculty of Oriental Studies and Fellow of St. John's College, combines a deep scholarly mastery of the material with an admirable pedagogic commitment to popularize the results of a century of scholarship. In this book Reif has succeeded in realizing his goal to "not restrict the activities of the Genizah Research Unit to the kind of technical conservation, manuscript research and bibliographical publication . . . but also to convey the excitement of the Genizah text to those with no more than a modest interest in what was happening a thousand years ago in the Mediterranean" (p. xiii). In so doing, he tells his story and translates exemplary documents with energy, expertise and even humor. In short, this book delivers an authoritative summation of the current state of genizah studies and a gracefully written popular entrée to the subject suitable for both specialists and non-specialists.

Reif has structured the book in ten chapters, each of which is followed by a very useful annotated bibliographical "guide to reading." The first chapter introduces the reader to the formation of the Egyptian Jewish center in Fustat following the Islamic conquests beginning in the 7th century CE. Fustat was "the first city to be founded by the Muslims in Egypt" and grew under Islamic rule into "the unrivalled centre of Egyptian economic and political life." The neighboring new suburb of Cairo, located along the Nile about two miles to the northeast, gradually came to replace Fustat, beginning in the 10th century, as the administrative capital of the Fatamid caliphate, and eventually eclipsed it altogether. At its zenith under the Fatamids from the

10th–12th centuries, however, prestigious Fustat continued to attract Jewish immigrants and was home to a variety of different Jewish populations, including Jews from the Land of Israel, from Babylonia, Syria, Palestine, Egypt and further west. Internally, the Jewish community was divided theologically between Rabbanites and Karaites, and despite their differences these two groups at times intermarried and otherwise closely associated with each other. In short, Fustat, or “Old Cairo” as it came to be known, was a major urban center and familiar junction for a variety of Jewish communities around the Mediterranean.

The Ben Ezra synagogue in Fustat where the manuscript fragments came to be deposited was built in the 10th century, not as a church as some have speculated, but expressly to serve Jews. Though the original building was destroyed in the early 11th century, it was reconstructed around 1040 on the same site, whose environs existed at the crossroads of a vast trading network that stretched from India and East Asia to the northwestern Mediterranean. The Synagogue’s liturgical rites, customs, architecture, furnishings, library and the diverse riches of its genizah can be explained in part, Reif suggests, by this geographically strategic location.

After locating the reader geographically and historically, Reif sets about narrating the modern encounters with the contents of the Ben Ezra synagogue genizah from the mid-18th century until the arrival of Solomon Schechter, the Reader in Talmudic and Rabbinic Literature at Cambridge University, at the end of the 19th century. He describes a stream of pre-Schechter visitors to the synagogue, such as Jacob Saphir in 1859, Abraham Firkovich, in 1864–65, Antonin Kapustin, and others later in the 19th century, who either purchased fragments or reported the thousands of documents that had been “amassed in the synagogue’s genizah over the centuries” (pp. 15–16). The important visits by Elkan Nathan Adler, Solomon Aaron Wertheimer and Cyrus Adler, who brought fragments back, respectively, to England, Jerusalem, and America in the late 1880s and early 1890s, it seems have been overshadowed in popular accounts by the momentous work of the Rumanian-born Schechter, who himself was following the lead of two Scotswomen, Agnes Lewis and Margaret Gibson. Indeed, the sisters were the ones who brought the fragment of the Hebrew text of the apocryphal book of Ben Sira to Schechter, who upon recognizing it, was spurred to seek out the source of this extraordinary find.

With the support of Charles Taylor, his patron at Cambridge, Schechter traveled to Cairo in December of 1896 and stayed until August of the next year digging through the dusty, overwhelming manuscript detritus Schechter once called “the disjecta membra” of the slain (pp. 81, 86). During this time, he managed to win the permission of the synagogue’s rabbi (also the chief rabbi of Cairo), Aaron ben Shim’on, to relocate approximately 140,000 fragments to Cambridge for study. Reif emphasizes that Schechter was not the first to know about or to acquire fragments from the Fustat synagogue, nor

was he the recipient of the entire contents of the genizah. Indeed, fragments originating from the Fustat synagogue today are dispersed in public and private collections around the world. Schechter was, however, the first to recover the lion's share of them and set about systematically studying and explaining their significance to the world.

Chapters two, three and four narrate the dramatic story of the relocation of 140,000 of the genizah fragments to Cambridge and the scholarly rivalries and suspicions—particularly between Cambridge and Oxford—that ensued. As background to this account, Reif details the early history of Hebrew studies in England and Christian Hebraism in particular at Cambridge University beginning in the 16th century. The fragments' arrival, in short, followed upon several centuries of Hebraica collections development at Cambridge University—a library history that Reif tells with the delight and detail of a true bibliophile. He also draws vivid portraits of the major figures involved in the Cambridge University story, such as Schechter himself, University Librarian Francis Jenkinson, and in particular “the Giblew” twin sisters, Margaret Dunlop Gibson and Agnes Smith Lewis. Reif writes of the sisters' remarkable achievements, at a time when women were often excluded from higher education, and makes sure to acknowledge and honor their half-century of significant contributions “to the fields of Classical and Semitic studies, as well as writing more popular books” (p. 65).

The remaining six chapters of the book survey and summarize the significance of the Cairo genizah finds for biblical, talmudic, liturgical, linguistic, literacy and history of the Jewish book studies. Reif also details the importance of the genizah for reconstructing economic and social relations, intergroup relations and daily life of Jews and non-Jews in that region over the last thousand years. The final chapter concludes with an overview of genizah studies a century after Schechter, and is followed by a useful index of subjects and sources.

It becomes clear over these last six chapters, and in contrast to the publicity surrounding the discovery and study of the Dead Sea Scrolls, that a quiet revolution has occurred in modern Jewish studies. In short, the importance of the study of the genizah cannot be overstated and cannot be overlooked by anyone aspiring to understand Jewish history. The genizah fragments reveal the predominantly oral nature of rabbinic textual transmission since antiquity; they highlight the diverse schools of vocalization, cantillation and accentuation that prevailed throughout the Jewish middle ages; they demonstrate the heterogeneity of ancient and medieval biblical exegetical literatures; they provide new insight into the creative development of Jewish liturgy (both individual and communal) and poetry; they document the rabbinic targumic and Judeo-Arabic paraphrastic traditions and variant readings of the Jerusalem and Babylonian Talmuds. The halakhic and responsa literature, and the historical picture of the geonic era, its rabbinic leaders and their literary output, have been transformed by the genizah discoveries.

Its fragments document the occurrence of medieval conversions to Judaism, of the polemics between the Karaite and Rabbanite communities, and demonstrates that (the Karaites), far from being a novel new movement that arose to challenge rabbinic hegemony, in fact “had a number of doctrines, traditions, and linguistic terms that are in tandem with those recorded in . . . the Dead Sea Scrolls” (p. 156).

The Cairo genizah also offers important physical evidence to show the revolutionary, albeit belated, adoption of the codex form by Jews in Muslim lands in the 8th and 9th centuries; the arrival of paper in 11th century Muslim Spain; the major and minor linguistic components, study habits and levels of literacy of medieval Jews in different lands; and in general illustrates the characteristic scribal techniques and codicological features of medieval Jewish book production around the Mediterranean.

The genizah sheds new light on the history of the resettlement of Jews in Jerusalem after the Muslim conquest of that city in the 7th century and how Jews and Muslims together resisted the Christian Crusader assaults on the Holy Land that began four centuries later. In the genizah we find historical realia such as autograph letters, including the signature of Moses ben Maimon, who became the leader of the Fustat Jewish community in the 12th century after fleeing Spain. Most unusual, and therefore most precious of all perhaps, are the fragmentary remains that document everyday life, marital relations, education, business affairs and other quotidian details. We now know, for example, that some Jewish women during the Middle Ages had far greater control over marriage arrangements and divorce proceedings than previously had been imagined. As Reif puts it: “Among the Palestinian Jewish women, but not among their Babylonian counterparts, it was an accepted practice to insist on the right to demand a divorce for no reason other than incompatibility. . . .”

This book, as its subtitle tells, is confined to telling the story of the history of the Cambridge University genizah collection. It is worth recalling, therefore, as its qualifying subtitle points out, that it does not detail the fate and specific significance of genizah collections outside of Cambridge in the United States, in the former Soviet Union and elsewhere. There is, however, a surprising lack of attention to the significance of the genizah for the study of Jewish mysticism (though there is, notably, an overview of the *hekhlat* literature on p. 143, and discussion of medicine and magic, on pp. 198–202). The word “archive” in the title is slightly misleading in that the haphazard amassing of documents in a genizah is not an “archive,” given that the latter term refers technically to a systematically collected group of documents that have been arranged and described for retrieval purposes. If only it had been the case! Rather, the genizah was very much a storage place, a halfway house between this world and the next.

Whether the unearthing of this medieval grave will detain its contents from achieving a future resurrection remains to be seen. Yet, there is an

unmistakable irony about the fact that Reif has prevented a proper burial for the Jewish past, as his predecessor at rival Oxford, Moritz Steinschneider once proposed, but rather has helped bring back to life a Mediterranean Jewish world that has been all but forgotten. For his decades of service to this cause and for this book in particular, Professor Reif deserves our admiration and thanks.

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