

Impact case study (REF3)

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| Institution: University of Cambridge | | |
| Unit of Assessment: 25 Area Studies | | |
| Title of case study: Discarded history in the Cairo Genizah | | |
| Period when the underpinning research was undertaken: 2009 – to date [based on publication dates] | | |
| Details of staff conducting the underpinning research from the submitting unit: | | |
| Name(s): | Role(s) (e.g. job title): | Period(s) employed by submitting HEI: |
| Dr Benjamin Outhwaite | Head of Genizah Research Unit | 1999– |
| Dr Gabriele Ferrario | Research Associate | 2010-2017 |
| Dr Christopher Stokoe | Senior Research Associate | 2013-2016 |
| Dr Zvi Stampfer | Research Associate | 2014-2016 |
| Dr Amit Ashur | Research Associate | 2010-2012 |
| Period when the claimed impact occurred: 1 August 2013 – 31 July 2020 | | |
| Is this case study continued from a case study submitted in 2014? N | | |
| 1. Summary of the impact (indicative maximum 100 words) | | |
| <p>Since its discovery at the end of the 19th century, the enormous manuscript collection known as the Cairo Genizah has sought to educate the public about the Jewish communities of the medieval Islamic world and promote an appreciation of its manuscripts as a unique treasure within the UK Jewish community. Through school visits, web and social media engagement, television documentaries, exhibitions and meetings with religious groups, the Genizah Research Unit (GRU) at Cambridge University Library has made the collection available as a unique educational resource both in the UK and internationally, to be used by scholars, rabbis, school children, and the interested general public.</p> | | |
| 2. Underpinning research (indicative maximum 500 words) | | |
| <p>The Cairo Genizah Collection at Cambridge University Library (CUL) consists of more than 200,000 fragments of medieval and early modern manuscripts (with some printed material) recovered from the 'sacred storeroom' (genizah) of the Ben Ezra Synagogue in Old Cairo (al-Fustat) in 1897. Its discovery revolutionised the academic study of pre-modern Judaism and of the Jewish communities of Islamic lands, estimated at 90% of the world's Jewish population in the High Middle Ages.</p> <p>The research has been carried out in the Genizah Research Unit (GRU) of CUL, a team of post-doctoral researchers under the direction of Dr Benjamin Outhwaite. The GRU works on curating, conserving, identifying, analysing, cataloguing and researching CUL's Cairo Genizah Collection, as well as carrying out a public engagement programme.</p> <p>Since 2007, the GRU has had a series of projects mainly on the documentary texts (letters, legal deeds etc) in the Genizah, identifying these as the manuscripts with the greatest potential for wider scholarly use and for stimulating a public interest in the Jewish experience of the Middle Ages [R1, R2, R3, R4, R5]. The projects have resulted in a significant store (more than 10,000 manuscripts) of sources relevant to the social, political and economic history of the Jews of</p> | | |

Islamic lands, and specifically of the Jews of Egypt, North Africa and Syria-Palestine, in the period 969–1250 CE [R6].

An AHRC project (2009–13) identified and digitised a large body of documentary material in the oldest part of the Collection. Discussions with the Andrew Mellon Foundation on the potential of text-mining to extract descriptive metadata from published works on Genizah manuscripts led to a major grant (2012–15) to carry out an innovative bibliometric analysis of Genizah citation data, identify relevant works of history, scan their full text with Optical Character Recognition, and then text-mine them for keywords and manuscript identifiers. This data was then used to produce descriptive metadata for digitised manuscripts. The end result was the successful addition of automatically extracted keyword-metadata to Cambridge Digital Library for approximately 6,000 documentary manuscripts, enabling greater access to a much wider range of material, as well as greatly improved and ‘fuzzy’ searching.

The GRU’s smaller projects dealt with specific aspects of the documentary collection: letters and legal deeds in the Mosseri Genizah Collection at CUL (Isaac Newton Trust, Dr Gabriele Ferrario, 2011–12); women in the Genizah world (Parasol Foundation, Dr Zvi Stampfer, 2014–15); the life and career of one of medieval Judaism’s foremost thinkers, Moses Maimonides (British Academy, Dr Amir Ashur, 2013–15); and manuscripts of medieval medicine (Wellcome Foundation, Dr Gabriele Ferrario, 2015–17).

The work of the GRU over the last decade has principally been dedicated to researching how best to decipher, interpret, and make the difficult, obscure and fragmentary documentary material of the Cairo Genizah available to as wide an audience of scholars and interested amateurs as possible, thereby turning it into an accessible and crucial resource for the history of the Jews of Islamic lands in the Middle Ages. Over the years, the GRU has attracted sufficient research and philanthropic funding to digitise the entire collection (more than 300,000 images), acquire further manuscripts, and maintain a programme of cataloguing, research and engagement.

3. References to the research (indicative maximum of six references)

[R1] B. Outhwaite, ‘Beyond the Leningrad Codex: Samuel b. Jacob in the Cairo Genizah’, in N. Vidro, R. Vollandt, E.-M. Wagner and J. Olszowy-Schlanger (eds), *Studies in Semitic Linguistics and Manuscripts* (University of Uppsala Press, Uppsala (2018), 320–340. ISBN 9789151302904.

[\[Link\]](#)

[R2] B. Outhwaite, C. Stokoe and G. Ferrario, ‘In the shadow of Goitein: text mining the Cairo Genizah’, *Manuscript Cultures* 7 (2014), 29–34. [\[Link\]](#)

[R3] A. Ashur and B. Outhwaite, ‘Between Egypt and Yemen in the Cairo Genizah’, *Journal of Islamic Manuscripts* 5.2–3 (2014), 198–219. [\[DOI\]](#)

[R4] A. Ashur and B. Outhwaite, ‘An eleventh-century pledge of allegiance to Egypt from the Jewish community of Yemen’, *Chroniques du manuscrit au Yémen* 22 (2016), 34–48. [\[Link\]](#)

[R5] B. Outhwaite, ‘Lines of communication: Medieval Hebrew letters of the eleventh century’, in E.-M. Wagner, B. Outhwaite and B. Beinhoff (eds), *Scribes as agents of language change* (De Gruyter, Berlin, 2013), 183–198. [\[DOI\]](#)

[R6] Genizah Research Unit, the Cambridge Digital Library Cairo Genizah Collection:

<http://cudl.lib.cam.ac.uk/collections/genizah> This ever-growing dataset represents the principal output of the GRU, with high-quality digital images and descriptive metadata for Cairo Genizah fragments. The research staff of the GRU have placed more than 22,000 fragments online through the Unit’s various research and cataloguing projects. The dataset is publicly available under an open licence.

("R1–R5 were all independently peer reviewed by international presses and R6 was the main output of peer reviewed grant applications".)

Funded projects:

1. ‘The Cairo Genizah manuscripts: Taylor-Schechter Old Series and the Mosseri Collection’, AHRC (GBP575,978; 2009–13).

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2. Digitisation of the Taylor-Schechter Collection at Cambridge University Library, Friedberg Genizah Project (GBP1,054,000; 2009–12).
3. 'Artefacts of Ancient Judaism: a teaching site utilising library collections', with Dr James Aitken, Divinity Faculty, Cambridge, funded by the Subject Centre for Philosophical and Religious Studies, Higher Education Academy (GBP3,885; 2010–11).
4. 'Historical Sources in the Jacques Mosseri Genizah Collection', Isaac Newton Trust grant (GBP28,805; 2011–12).
5. 'Discovering History in the Cairo Genizah: navigating the Taylor-Schechter Collection', Andrew Mellon Foundation (USD458,517; 2012–15).
6. 'Moses Maimonides in the Cairo Genizah', British Academy-Leverhulme Small Research Grant (GBP6,480; 2013–15).
7. 'Women in the Genizah world', Parasol Foundation (formerly the Bonita Trust) (GBP95,000; 2014–16).
8. 'Medicine in Medieval Egypt: creating online access to the medical corpus of the Cairo Genizah', Wellcome Trust (GBP100,073; 2015–17).

4. Details of the impact (indicative maximum 750 words)

With work on the Genizah Collection at CUL reliant on research funding and philanthropy [E1], the GRU has placed an emphasis on improving the profile of the Cairo Genizah and on educating the public about the relevance of its discoveries. In particular, the GRU has focussed on what the Genizah reveals about the history of the Jewish communities of the medieval Mediterranean and Near East, as something of broad public interest as well as an important – and, until the 20th century, neglected – aspect of Jewish heritage. The success of this approach can be noted through the extensive media coverage of the Cairo Genizah as a significant cultural treasure, the presence of Genizah manuscripts in major public exhibitions – national and international – and through the vastly increased numbers of the public who request to visit and view the collection in CUL [E2]. Moreover, these visitors are now as likely to request to see marriage deeds, children's exercises or begging letters, as to see 'the oldest Bible manuscript'. Of particular importance has been the increased interest in learning about the Genizah from the UK's Jewish community: synagogue groups and Jewish schoolchildren now make up the largest proportion of the Collection's visitors. The Hasmonean High School, Hendon, for example, has been bringing 200 year 9 students annually for the last four years [E3].

Online engagement

The GRU reaches its different audiences mainly through web-based and public engagement. Educators, in higher and school-age education, are served mostly through the Genizah Collection of Cambridge Digital Library, the Fragment of the Month series (now in its 14th year, with more than 90 short online articles), the bibliographic database, and teaching resources such as the short movies on conserving manuscripts ('A brush with history') and medieval medicine ('Beneficial if God wills'), and the Artefacts of Ancient Judaism teaching site. There have been 29,000 unique users of the Genizah on the Digital Library since 2013, with more than 780,000 page views [E4]. The two movies, produced by CUL as part of the Wellcome-funded project on medicine in the Genizah, have more than 8,000 views on YouTube [E5]. We have received requests from teachers and university lecturers to add further material to the digital collection, as well as add further translations into English to improve its use in teaching. The Princeton Genizah Project and the National Library of Israel's comprehensive Ktiv digital library are both importing our data.

Exhibitions

Public engagement has been carried out through exhibitions, the media and cultural engagement, and a programme of visits and lectures at CUL. The GRU has advised on the use of Genizah manuscripts in public exhibitions [E6], including 'One God – Abraham's legacy on the Nile' (Berlin, 2015–16; 60,000 estimated visitors) [E8], 'Egypt: Faith after the Pharaohs' (British Museum, 2015–16; 66,000 visitors) [E7], and 'Jews, Money, Myth' (Jewish Museum,

London, 2019; 16,000 visitors) [E8]. Genizah manuscripts featured in CUL's 600th anniversary exhibition 'Lines of Thought' (2016; 48,000 visitors), before, in 2017, they had their own dedicated exhibition, 'Discarded History: the Genizah of Old Cairo' (42,000 visitors over 6 months) [E8]. The exhibition was popular with synagogue and Jewish school groups, with daily curator tours and several study days laid on. The success of the exhibition led to an invitation to tour it in the US, and for a show-and-tell of the manuscripts to assembled religious leaders and ambassadors at the Israeli Embassy for their Eid al-Fitr events in 2017.

Media

The GRU has worked closely with radio, TV, authors, and film-makers to promote the Genizah in popular culture. CUL's Genizah Collection featured prominently in episode 2 ('Among Believers', first broadcast September 2013) of Simon Schama's major BBC series 'The Story of the Jews'. Uri Rosenwaks' three-part documentary series on Moses Maimonides, 'Ha-Nesher ha-Gadol' ('The Great Eagle') used manuscripts and extensive interviews with GRU researchers. It was broadcast on Israeli public television (IPBC) in 2017 (c. 300,000 viewers per episode). The producer of Jay Rayner's 'The Kitchen Cabinet' (BBC Radio 4, 2018) contacted us to advise on a segment about the medieval spice trade. The work of the GRU, with interviews of staff, was the subject of a feature on Swiss public radio (SRF – Schweizer Radio und Fernsehen, November 2019) [E9]. A longterm collaboration with Canada-based film-maker Michelle Paymar culminated in her feature-length documentary 'From Cairo to the Cloud' (2018) [E10]. In her testimonial Paymar writes that: 'Quite simply, without the assistance of Ben Outhwaite and the researchers, scholars, and staff of the Genizah Research Unit, From Cairo to the Cloud - The World of the Cairo Geniza, a feature-length documentary film, could not have been completed.' Researchers from the GRU were interviewed extensively for the film, and the GRU advised on the script and supplied much of the imagery. The movie has been shown at international film festivals, with its UK premiere at the Cambridge Film Festival 2018, where researchers took part in a live Q&A following the screening [E9]. The GRU has advised several authors on aspects of Genizah history for their novels. Correspondence with Stefan Hertmans helped with the historical background to his international hit 'De bekeerlinge' (2014; English version, 'The Convert', 2019). We also assisted American author Michael David Lukas for his novel based on the discovery of the Cairo Genizah, 'The Last Watchman of Old Cairo', which won the US National Jewish Book Award for Fiction in 2018. And Manchester-based author Henye Meyer's 'Who is like your people?' (2021) is a novel based on the documents of 'Obadiah the Proselyte', found in the Genizah Collection. American cookbook doyenne Joan Nathan visited for help on medieval recipes and ingredients from the Genizah for her 'King Solomon's Table: a culinary exploration of Jewish Cooking from around the world' (2017) [E11]. The GRU's conservation and digitisation work featured – alongside the Dead Sea Scrolls – in a National Geographic cover photo-essay 'Bible Hunters' (2018).

Public engagement

Throughout, and especially since the reception of the 'Discarded History' exhibition [E6], the GRU has maintained a programme of public visits and lectures to the Collection in CUL. These are advertised on the GRU's website, and through outreach, and we are approached to host visits by groups of usually 20 or 30 visitors at a time. Visits last for two or three hours and consist of a lecture and Q&A on the Genizah, and a viewing of selected manuscripts. Visitor numbers were 673 in 2017–18, and 968 in 2018–19 [E12]. Visitors are mostly from the UK Jewish community – synagogues, schools and religious leadership – but we have also hosted the Sutton Trust, history students from KCL, UCL and Norwich universities, US and Israeli tour groups, secondary school children and lifelong learners. The success of these engagements can be seen in the number of repeat visitors we have, often bringing different groups of people with them, and the requests to put on special displays of themed material (divorce deeds, to show their diversity, for a recent visit by the senior rabbis of the Federation of Synagogues). The success of these visits can be seen in the communications that we receive afterwards: 'deeply memorable learning experience' (Alyth Synagogue); 'staff members commented on how valuable it was to carry on the link with you' (Hasmonean High School for Girls); 'an amazing

resource and a spyglass into Jewish history' (Beis Tefillah Synagogue); 'everyone who went has phoned me to thank me (a rarity in itself)' (Finchley Reform Synagogue); 'thrilling seeing the more everyday documents' (Reform Rabbi); 'the best thing about the day' (Sutton Trust widening participation group); 'they really have become a major contribution to public education not to mention illumination for academics' (Anglo-Israel Archaeological Society); 'it is important for our students to see that their heritage is being researched' (Hasmonean Multi-Academy Trust) [E3].

5. Sources to corroborate the impact (indicative maximum of 10 references)

[E1] [Cambridge Digital Library](#), Evidence of philanthropic donations to the GRU.

[E2] Selected press coverage.

[E3] Visitor feedback and testimonials from Hasmonean High School and Director of Education, Jewish Learning Exchange

[E4] [Genizah bibliography database](#), [Fragment of the Month series](#), [Artefacts of Ancient Judaism teaching site](#), Google Analytics for the Genizah Collections on Cambridge Digital Library (CUDL).

[E5] YouTube videos and views for Wellcome-funded project.

[E6] Selected exhibition press coverage.

[E7] Testimonial from the Byzantine World Curator, British Museum curator.

[E8] Visitor figures for exhibitions.

[E9] Radio and TV engagement.

[E10] Testimonial from Michelle Paymar, Film-maker.

[E11] Engagement with authors of popular books.

[E12] Visitor statistics, GRU.