

Moses Maimonides and his circle in the Cairo Genizah

The life and work of Moses Maimonides, one of the most influential Jewish thinkers of the Middle Ages, is bound up with the remarkable collection of manuscripts known as the Cairo Genizah. Maimonides was a philosopher, a physician, a scientist, a theologian and a jurist, and he spent most of his adult life in Egypt. Evidence of his prodigious intellectual activities, as well as important information about his life and his social circle, is scattered throughout the vast Genizah archive in both primary and secondary sources: autograph writings from both fair and draft copies of his most famous works; letters and notes in his hand; documents relating to his varied activities in Egypt; and hundreds of copies of his works, ranging from those made within his own lifetime in Egypt to those copied centuries later around the Jewish world. The ongoing project, which involves collating and classifying known fragments from the Genizah and methodically searching it for further traces, seeks to provide scholars with two essential tools: a catalogue of all texts relating to Maimonides' works, classified between the different types, and the discovery of primary sources related to his life, his family and his social circle in Egypt.

Project description

Despite the interest shown in one of medieval Judaism's greatest thinkers, Moses Maimonides (c. 1138–1204), there has not been a systematic attempt to comb the principal source for texts relevant to his life and work, the Cairo Genizah. The Cairo Genizah is a collection of manuscripts recovered 100 years ago from the Ben Ezra Synagogue in Fustat, Old Cairo. In keeping with a rabbinic tradition that one should not idly dispose of holy texts, the Jewish community of Fustat placed writings that they had no further need of in a sacred storage chamber – a Genizah – in the synagogue, where they accumulated from around the eleventh century until the chamber was emptied at the end of the nineteenth century. Parts of the collection are now scattered around the world, but the great majority, approximately 193,000 in number, are held in Cambridge University Library, as part of the Taylor-Schechter Cairo Genizah Collection.

Far from being just a collection of Bibles and prayer-books, however, the Cairo Genizah preserves a cross-section of the complete written output of the Jewish community of Egypt, who deposited not just sacred texts but enormous numbers of other writings too, including secular poetry, philosophy, personal letters and legal documents. The Genizah Collection is particularly rich in material for the period of Maimonides' activity in Egypt. Within the Genizah Collection we possess not only the earliest and best copies of his written works, including drafts of his codification of Jewish law, the *Mishneh Torah*; his commentary on the *Mishnah*; his philosophical work, the *Guide for the Perplexed*; and medical works in his own hand; but also texts highly relevant to his biography, exposing in particular his major public role as a pillar of the Jewish community during the crisis of the Crusades.

A number of texts from the Genizah relating to Moses Maimonides have been catalogued or published, but discoveries have tended to be serendipitous, rather than as a result of careful searching. Over the last two and a half years I have carried out research with the help of a British Academy/Leverhulme Small Grant that enabled me to travel to Cambridge University Library and systematically examine the Genizah Collection there in order to locate and catalogue all the Maimonidean fragments. The project concentrated mainly on one part of the T-S Collection, the Additional Series, and came to an end earlier this year. I would like now to extend the project to focus on other parts of the T-S Collection, and complete the work.

So far, the project has uncovered more than 1500 fragments relating to Moses Maimonides in the Genizah Collection. I work on the collection both remotely – using digital images – and by scouring the hundreds of black plastic folders in Cambridge that contain the Genizah fragments themselves. Experience has taught me that while transcription and in-depth analysis can be performed from the images available online, the initial identification of the fragments, from the hundreds of thousands available, is most efficiently performed in person on the physical manuscripts themselves.

The project is greatly facilitated by the fact that the largest Genizah collection, the Taylor-Schechter Collection, along with most other Genizah collections worldwide, has now been fully digitally imaged. Furthermore, the project will take advantage of Cambridge University Library's Digital Library (<http://cudl.lib.cam.ac.uk>) to disseminate the results of the research, in the form of mounting high quality images and full descriptions of the discoveries online.

Once the fragments have been identified and classified I aim to publish the results in several ways.

1. To mount descriptions of all the items alongside images of them on Cambridge Digital Library (<https://cudl.lib.cam.ac.uk>). Digital images already exist of all items from the T-S Collection, but Cambridge Digital Library only mounts images online for which they have some kind of descriptive metadata. I would thus supply descriptions for all items identified in the project and have them placed online in this freely available resource (as TEI files – both images and data are free to download from Cambridge Digital Library).
2. Interesting fragments to be published individually as they are discovered, either as peer-reviewed journal articles or on the Genizah Research Unit's popular 'Fragment of the Month' web resource (<http://www.lib.cam.ac.uk/collections/departments/taylor-schechter-genizah-research-unit/fragment-month> -- see, for example, my previous discovery here: <http://www.lib.cam.ac.uk/Taylor-Schechter/fotm/may-2012/index.html>)
3. To produce a sourcebook, with transcriptions and translations of the texts relating to the life of Moses Maimonides in Egypt. This would feature manuscripts already known as well as new items discovered over the course of the project. The book will be co-written with Dr Ben Outhwaite, head of

the Genizah Research Unit at Cambridge University Library, and will probably be published in Brill's Cambridge Genizah Studies series.