

The Historical Significance of the Cambridge Genizah Inventory Project

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Abstract. The Cambridge Inventory Project, sponsored by the Friedberg Genizah Project and carried out by a number of researchers at the Taylor-Schechter Genizah Research Unit, was the first attempt to provide accurate information regarding the size and classification of the more than 193,000 Genizah manuscript fragments held at Cambridge University Library. Prior to this project, no authoritative list of valid shelf marks was available, nor was it known how many fragments were classified under any one shelf mark. The provision of such data and the creation of a searchable database were essential for the planning and implementation of a future digitization project. This article not only describes the ensuing Inventory Project, it also uses the project's findings, together with additional information in previously unseen archives, to provide a new history of how these collections were formed over time.

Keywords: Cambridge Inventory Project, Cambridge Genizah Collections, Cambridge University Library, Friedberg Genizah Project, Cairo Genizah, Taylor-Schechter Genizah Research Unit, Genizah manuscripts, Genizah fragments, Solomon Schechter, library, digitization, shelf marks, handlists, folios, Hebrew, Arabic, collections, crates, residue.

A complete inventory of the Cambridge Genizah Manuscript Collections was compiled between the years 2004 and 2006. It was undertaken by researchers in the Taylor-Schechter Genizah Research Unit,¹ under the auspices of the Friedberg Genizah Project,² in order to prepare the way for the eventual digitization of these manuscripts. Yet when the project began, the exact number of Cairo Genizah manuscripts at Cambridge, the largest of the worldwide Genizah collections, was still unknown and at this stage thought to comprise “over 140,000 items (with perhaps four times that number of folios).”³ Furthermore, as far as the classification scheme was

¹ The Taylor-Schechter Genizah Research Unit (T-S Unit) at Cambridge University Library (CUL) was founded in 1974 under the directorship of Stefan C. Reif.

² The FGP is a Canadian based “non-profit international humanities venture established in 1999 by Mr. Albert Friedberg” (see <http://www.genizah.org>).

³ See Reif, S. C. [12]: *Hebrew Manuscripts at Cambridge University Library: a description and introduction* (University of Cambridge Oriental Publications; 52), Cambridge University Press; Cambridge, p. 30.

concerned, it was not possible to speak of a single, monolithic collection, let alone know whether shelf mark “X” consisted of just one fragment or many.

Most of the Cambridge Genizah manuscripts were purchased by Cambridge scholars Solomon Schechter and Charles Taylor, primarily from the Ben Ezra synagogue in Old Cairo (some were purchased from other synagogues, local dealers, or excavated from the nearby Jewish cemetery). The resulting collection, shipped in eight large crates or “tea chests”,⁴ was donated to Cambridge University Library in 1898. The Library’s report for that year records that the Taylor-Schechter (T-S) Collection amounted to “about twenty large boxes of fragments”.⁵

Schechter did not know how many manuscripts he had sent back to England; his “policy” in the dark, dusty Genizah was, he reported to the University Librarian, to “take as much as I can”.⁶ Surveying his collection in Cambridge, however, Schechter’s first estimate was that it comprised 100,000 manuscripts.⁷

1 The Old Series

The Library’s *Annual Report* for 1902 recalls that after it arrived the T-S Collection underwent a preliminary sorting:

“The whole of the Collection, with the exception of a small portion in very bad condition, has now been through the process of a first sorting. The Hebrew section has been divided into two main portions by the separation of the more important fragments from those of less interest. These latter have been stored in boxes, ready for further examination. The Arabic portion has undergone the preliminary sorting, and is now gradually being dealt with in the same way as the Hebrew section”.⁸

This task was undertaken by Schechter who “went through practically the whole mass.”⁹ The initial sorting process and the transfer of material into new boxes can be

⁴ The number of crates is confirmed by Schechter in a letter to the University Librarian, Francis Jenkinson (see CUL MS Add.6463(E).3453), and by Jenkinson who recorded in his diary (CUL MS Add.7420/1897) that “Eight large boxes came from Cairo, for which I paid £19.5.3 carriage &c. to Sutton & Co.” (2 March 1897). Thank you to the Syndics of Cambridge University Library for permission to cite and quote from the Library manuscripts and archives.

⁵ “Report of the Library Syndicate on the offer of a collection of manuscripts brought from Cairo (8 June 1898)”, *Cambridge University Reporter*, 14 June 1898, No. 1215, Vol. XXVIII, No. 39, pp. 968-969 [Hereafter the annual reports of the Library Syndicate will be referred to as the Library’s *Annual Report*].

⁶ See Schechter’s letter dated 12 January 1897 in CUL MS Add.6463(E).3416.

⁷ Schechter, S. [15]: *Studies in Judaism*, London, p. 9.

⁸ “Report of the Library Syndicate for the year ending December 31, 1902 (June 3, 1903)”, *Cambridge University Reporter*, June 23, 1903, No. 1463, Vol. XXXIII, No. 48, pp. 1066-67.

⁹ See “Appendix II: Report on the Taylor-Schechter Collection” in “Report of the Library Syndicate for the year ended 31 December 1905 (University Library, May 2, 1906)”, *Cambridge University Reporter*, 2 June 1906, No. 1609, Vol. XXXVI, No. 40, pp. 1008-12.