

A Day in the Life of a Genizah Researcher

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In 1996, having spent a wonderful three years at the HJS department, I left to study Cairo Genizah manuscripts in Cambridge. The collection at Cambridge University Library is huge, some 140,000 classified fragments, and contains enough Hebrew and Arabic material for a thousand doctorates (even though I'm still struggling to get one). By 1999, I'd managed to persuade the Director of the Taylor-Schechter Genizah Research Unit, Professor Stefan Reif, to hire me and I have worked in the Unit ever since (that is, until he works out how to fire me).

Work tends to begin between 8-9am. Our indefatigable Director has already been here an hour and looks on approvingly while his researchers (I use the plural liberally) drag themselves in early after a night on the sofa with Friends and Jacob's Creek. The first task of the day is to answer e-mail queries relating to the Genizah manuscripts. This usually consists of spam, a few genuine questions, many silly questions, and more spam. Heavy sighs are emanating from the Professor's room.

We are a small unit of nine people: the Professor, his wife Shulie, Dr Ben Outhwaite, Dr Friedrich Niessen, Mr Ellis Weinberger, Dr Efraim Lev, Dr Avi Shvitiel, Mrs Sarah Sykes, and myself.

Ben Outhwaite works on the liturgical manuscripts. He receives descriptions from a catalogue being compiled in Israel and checks the manuscripts to ensure that the details are accurate. He is also compiling a catalogue of Hebrew letters from the Middle Ages.

Friedrich (Fred) Niessen is writing a catalogue of the Arabic material in the New Series of the collection. Both of them supervise undergraduates in their spare time. Avi Shvitiel is a part-time Senior Research Associate working with Fred. He started their catalogue and now he comes twice a month to supervise its final stages.

Shulie Reif is our proofreader and editor. She has the sharpest eye which nothing can pass (you will observe that I haven't shown her this article). She and the Professor are a lovely couple and we marvel at their ability to work together and stay speaking.

Ellis Weinberger is our computer boffin; he works on our website (<http://www.lib.cam.ac.uk/Taylor-Schechter>), is in charge of the digitisation project to get the manuscripts online, and generally makes himself available every time one of us (or is it just me?) has another unexplained glitch.

Sarah Sykes handles the correspondence that arrives from all over the world, makes bookings for visits, and is in charge of mailing our bi-annual newsletter. Sarah is forgetful and thoroughly organized all at the same time (don't ask).

Efraim Lev is a Visiting Research Fellow from Israel. He is with us for one year, gathering all the evidence he can find on medical substances in the medieval

manuscripts. His enthusiasm is endless and he has already mentally written about two books and five articles and has moved on to envisioning future projects.

Me? I work on the Unit's bibliography. I hunt for all the articles and books I can find that mention the manuscripts. These are manifold: we have just sent the second volume to the Press which incorporated over 324 monographs and 767 articles, that is, over 25,000 references. I enter the references into a database noting the type of reference, be it a mention, quote, transcription or translation. Then I go to check the manuscript to see that the reference is right. It is often wrong. Two scholars are currently competing for the top prize in the erroneous classmark competition. The next half hour could be spent finding that 'T-S K25' is actually referring to a tiny scrap of paper classmarked T-S K25.235. But I enjoy my work; it provides me with a unique opportunity to become acquainted with a lot of interesting written material and to familiarise myself with fields of research that I wouldn't otherwise encounter.

Work continues until the coffee break at 10.30. We all go down to the canteen together. Shulie sometimes brings treats from Israel; Fred sometimes brings doughnuts from a Jewish bakery; library coffee is always soapy. Talk is manuscripts, religion, politics, tv, kids and grandkids, not necessarily in that order or necessarily unconnected.

At any point in the day, the nature of the work might change. The professor will come into my office and ask me to write a description for an exhibition of some fragments, or a piece for our newsletter, or he might announce that a group is coming to see the collection and I'll have to prepare a general talk. Right now, I'm helping to proofread Avi and Fred's catalogue. Soon preparations for the newsletter celebrating 30 years of the Unit will begin. We all have lunch at our desks and the sound of crunching ensues. Our consumption is strictly along national lines. The Brits (Me, Sarah, Ben): crisps, chocolate, maybe a sandwich; the Israeli (Efraim): vegetables; the German (Fred): a fastidiously prepared lunchbox filled with items promoting good health. Avi has gone over to St John's College and the Professor is on a lunchtime committee. Fred's young twins give their daily call to dad; Ben rings to check all is ok with his toddler. I surf the net looking at popular ... ahem, at Genizah related items. Ellis pops his head round the corner, could we check his latest addition to the website?

After lunch, the guys might confer over an interesting manuscript. Perhaps Avi has found another unknown fragment, or Ben has seen an interesting watermark or script type. Fred and Efraim might be discussing the medical manuscripts they hope to publish. The Professor will be buzzing around with a hundred tasks to complete before sundown. By 4 o'clock, Sarah has gone for the day and then come back for her keys and then back again for her shoes. Shulie has gone home and Fred is off back to London in a while. The day is drawing to a close: a reader comes in who's lost his way; a librarian drops by to ask the Professor a question; the phone rings: a Japanese TV crew want to film some manuscripts. Soon there are only a few of us left. The office is quiet apart from the sound of typing. Five o'clock passes; I tidy my desk, unplug the kettle, and leave to the soft tones of the Professor speaking into his dictaphone.

He'll be staying at least another hour yet.