

## Renaissance and Reformation Renaissance et Réforme



**Allen, Laurie, Samantha Blickhan, Laura Newman Eckstein, Emily Esten, Arthur Kiron, and Marina Rustow, principal investigators. Scribes of the Cairo Geniza. Other**

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the digital medium, the Library is actively striving to keep true to its core mandate of preserving its written heritage for the common advantage of all scholars (and not as a precious hoard, possessed and maintained in secret). If there is one point of regret it is that, as highlighted above, the images are heavily impacted by the presence of the Library's digital watermark signalling the strict copyright and reuse policy for both text and images; this, inevitably, has an impact on scholars' work and thwarts IIF's native sharing and reuse capabilities. Nonetheless, these groundbreaking pathways through the Library's collections offer a lot to scholars and the general public, and the novel use of already game-changing technologies is certainly notable, as they make available tools and functionalities that are not possible when working with the original manuscripts.

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**Allen, Laurie, Samantha Blickhan, Laura Newman Eckstein, Emily Esten, Arthur Kiron, and Marina Rustow, principal investigators.**

**Scribes of the Cairo Geniza. Other.**

Zooniverse and partner institutions, 2017. Accessed 6 January 2020.

[scribesofthecairogeniza.org](http://scribesofthecairogeniza.org).

Scribes of the Cairo Geniza is a crowd-sourced project supported by Zooniverse and the five leading centres of Geniza research. First, a word about the Cairo Geniza and the documents found there. "Geniza" is the Hebrew term for "storeroom, storehouse," which in this case refers to the storage facility located in the upper gallery of the Ben Ezra Synagogue, Fustat (Old Cairo), built ca. 890 CE. For centuries, though especially during the Middle Ages, the Jews of Cairo placed all of their no-longer-needed, no-longer-usable, and no-longer-legible documents in the storeroom—and there they sat for more than half a millennium.

During the 1860s–90s, documents from the Geniza began to appear on the antiquities market in Egypt, with major collectors purchasing them and bringing them to European centres (Oxford, London, Budapest, etc.). Finally,

in 1896, Solomon Schechter, reader of Hebrew in Cambridge, made his epic journey to Cairo. Schechter gained the favour of the rabbi of the community and was invited to take the remainder of the Geniza documents back to Cambridge for further study, analysis, and cataloguing.

All told, there are ca. three hundred thousand Cairo Geniza documents, about two-thirds of which are housed at the Cambridge University Library, with the remaining one-third spread across approximately seventy libraries, museums, and private collections. The five largest collections (and the approximate number of manuscripts held) are as follows: Cambridge University Library (ca. two hundred thousand), Jewish Theological Seminary (J.T.S.), New York (ca. thirty thousand), Bodleian Library, Oxford (ca. twenty-five thousand), John Rylands Library, Manchester (ca. five thousand), University of Pennsylvania (ca. two thousand). All five of these institutions serve as Institutional Partners for Scribes of the Cairo Geniza, along with Princeton University and the University of Haifa, leading centres of Cairo Geniza research.<sup>1</sup>

The majority of the documents are classical Jewish sources (Bible, Mishna, Tosefta, Talmudim, Midrashim, Targumim, etc.), though in almost every case we gain new readings of these ancient compositions. (The main exception is the Bible, whose text was essentially fixed ca. 100 CE, though even here the documents reveal occasional departures from the *textus receptus*.) From the eleventh to the thirteenth century, we gain documentary and other evidence (hitherto unknown), which truly brings the life of the medieval Jewish community alive—not only in Cairo but across the entire reach of the Jewish world, from Iberia in the west to India in the east (due to economic and other ties). The Geniza has yielded everything from bridal trousseau lists to the memoir of a Catholic monk who converted to Judaism in the year 1102—and everything imaginable in between.

The classical texts are written in Hebrew and Aramaic, while the majority of the documentary evidence is in Judeo-Arabic. Most of the documents are written on vellum, parchment, and paper. And while most of the material is from the Middle Ages, as per the purview of this journal, it is important to

1. The former does not own any Cairo Geniza documents, but has been a leading centre of research for decades, due especially to the presence of Shelomo Dov Goitein (1900–85) at the Institute for Advanced Study. The latter owns several dozen documents, and recently has established itself as a leading research centre in the field.

note that the Jews of Cairo continued to deposit documents in the Geniza as late as the seventeenth century. Of special interest, perhaps, is a letter written in Yiddish sent from a mother in Jerusalem to her son in Cairo dated 1567 ([blog.nli.org.il/en/oldestyiddishletter](http://blog.nli.org.il/en/oldestyiddishletter)). In sum, due to the discovery of the Cairo Geniza, with its mass of documentation, we know more about the real-life world of medieval Cairo than, say, medieval Paris.

Over the course of the past century-and-a-quarter, scholars have made major strides towards cataloguing the entire assemblage of documents. An even greater boon to Geniza research occurred in 1999, with the launching of the Friedberg Genizah Project (FGP) ([fgp.genizah.org](http://fgp.genizah.org)). Two decades later we now have a nearly complete set of digital images of the roughly three hundred thousand documents, amounting to around 740,000 images (according to the statistics presented on the FGP website). In addition, ca. fifty thousand transcriptions of texts are available at FGP, along with bibliographical and other useful information. The upshot is, any researcher anywhere in the world can access a huge amount of information about any document. All of this is enhanced by the excellent search capacity at FGP, which allows one to search by genre, author, collection, etc. Thus, for example, if one wanted to view every Geniza manuscript of, say, Psalm 23, in any of the seventy or so library, museum, or private (etc.) collections, FGP allows for such a refined search. In sum, this is the way of scholarship in the year 2020.

In addition, transcriptions of numerous Hebrew documents have been incorporated into the database of Ma'agarim, the Historical Dictionary Project of the Academy of the Hebrew Language (Jerusalem) ([maagarim.hebrew-academy.org.il](http://maagarim.hebrew-academy.org.il)), which one day will serve as the basis for the Hebrew equivalent of the *Oxford English Dictionary* and similar comprehensive reference works.

With all of this as background, we turn now to the recently launched website Scribes of the Cairo Geniza (henceforth SCG). The main goal of the website is to create transcriptions of the Cairo Geniza documents through a worldwide crowdsource initiative, supported by Zooniverse. Obviously, as indicated above, many documents already have been transcribed, published, and incorporated into surveys of Jewish history, liturgy, etc.,<sup>2</sup> but much more

2. The authoritative statement is S. D. Goitein, *A Mediterranean Society: The Jewish Communities of the Arab World as Portrayed in the Documents of the Cairo Geniza*, 6 vols. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1967–93). For a single volume condensation, see S. D. Goitein, *A Mediterranean Society: An Abridgment in One Volume*, ed. Jacob Lassner (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004).

work remains to be done.<sup>3</sup> Compared to the vast size of the corpus, however, the number of scholars who work in the field is limited; and thus was launched the SCG project, with the goal of crowdsourcing the work.

True, basic skills in Hebrew and/or Arabic are necessary to contribute to the project, but the website has a feature that speaks to this point. As one sets about to assist, one is asked to “Choose a Workflow” (see Fig. 1).

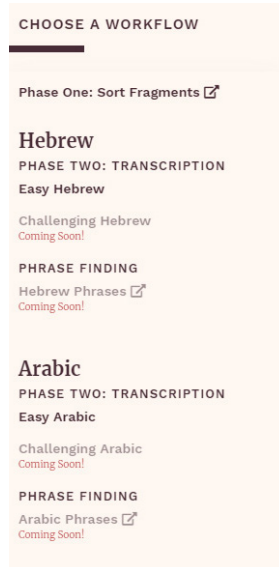


Figure 1. “Choose a Workflow” options at [scribesofthecairogeniza.org/classify](https://scribesofthecairogeniza.org/classify).

Clicking on the initial prompt, “Phase One: Sort Fragments,” brings one to the following statement, “**YOU DO NOT NEED ANY LANGUAGE EXPERTISE** to participate!” — with further instructions following (see Fig. 2).

3. For a contribution by the present writer, see [johannes-obadiah.org](https://johannes-obadiah.org), created by Gary A. Rendsburg and Peter Shamah (August 2018), dedicated to the life of the aforementioned Catholic monk who converted to Judaism.

## Welcome to Scribes of the Cairo Geniza!

**YOU DO NOT NEED ANY LANGUAGE EXPERTISE**  
to participate!

### Sorting Purpose and Goal

The purpose of this workflow in Scribes of the Cairo Geniza is to sort fragments in order to prepare them for [transcription](#). In this phase, you will sort fragments into different categories based on their script types: whether they are written in Hebrew or Arabic scripts and formal or informal scripts, and whether they contain specific visual characteristics.

Figure 2. “Phase One: Sort Fragments” instructions at [scribesofthecairogeniza.org/classify](https://scribesofthecairogeniza.org/classify).

Which is to say, almost anyone with even a modicum of literacy will be able to distinguish visually between Hebrew script (with its more angular alphabet) and Arabic script (with its more cursive alphabet).

Those who wish to transcribe may skip this step and proceed directly to “Phase Two: Transcription.” In this section one is given the option of Easy Hebrew or Easy Arabic vs. Challenging Hebrew or Challenging Arabic. As of this writing, only the easy options are available, with the challenging ones marked as “Coming Soon!” (see Fig. 1, above). Documents within these classifications already have been triaged via the “Phase One: Sort Fragments” process (see above), so that transcribers may commence their work straightaway.

For the purposes of this review and for my own curiosity, I decided to proceed with an “Easy Hebrew” option. The documents appear randomly, which is to say, the user is not able to search for a particular text (e.g., Babylonian Talmud, Tractate Shabbat) or genre (e.g., Jewish law), but rather the system generates the documents one at a time for the user. The first document I was given was labelled J.T.S. ENA 3581 (see Fig. 3).

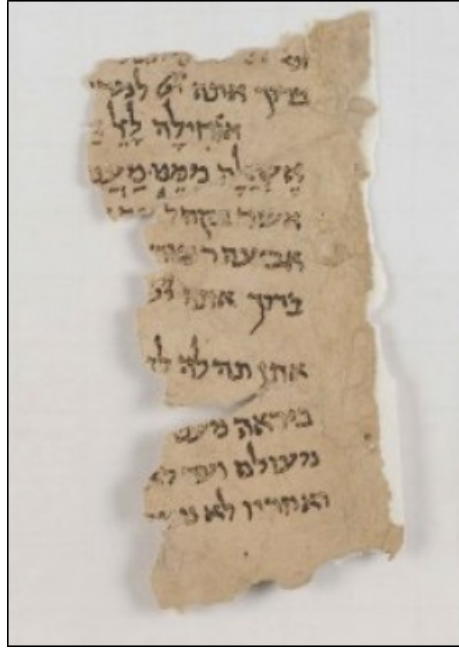


Figure 3. J.T.S. ENA 3581.4, frg. 1r, as presented at SCG, though without the complete shelfmark information.

Naturally, I was curious to know whether or not this document had ever been transcribed. In addition, since I know the J.T.S. collection relatively well, I realized that the shelfmark was incomplete. At this point, I turned to FGP, where I sorted through the various shelfmarks beginning with ENA 3581, until I determined that “my” document was ENA 3581.4, frg. 1r. It would be helpful—not for the volunteer transcriber, but certainly for the experts who have created SCG—if the complete shelfmark were indicated, especially for the next stage of the project, as more and more transcriptions are aggregated and made available to scholars.

I also learned from FGP (assuming that the information there is accurate and complete) that ENA 3581.4, frg. 1r has not received much attention; no transcription and no bibliography are indicated. Since I am familiar with the Cairo Geniza contents, I realized from looking at the document before me that it was a piece of Jewish liturgy. In fact, it is a relatively well-known *piyyut*

(liturgical poem), entitled אוֹחִילָה לֵאל 'ohila la-'el "I shall await God" (after the incipit), still recited to the present day by the precentor on Yom Kippur. But—and here is the most important point—the version of the poem in ENA 3581.4, frg. 1r is different from the one recited today. Now, to be sure, I state all this as a non-expert in the field of Jewish liturgy, but this is precisely the kind of information forthcoming from SCG that will be valuable to those who research the history of Jewish prayers (and Jewish texts more generally).

The sample document presented here is relatively easily legible, but just in case, and certainly for other documents that require closer inspection, SCG includes a host of tools to aid the reader (see Fig. 4):



Figure 4. Toolbar to aid in the transcription process.

Notwithstanding all the tools and clear instructions, crowdsourced volunteers are not left to their own devices. A very significant feature of the website is the “Talk” module, which allows contributors to learn more, raise issues, communicate with one another, and, most importantly, have their comments addressed by a team expert (see Fig. 5).



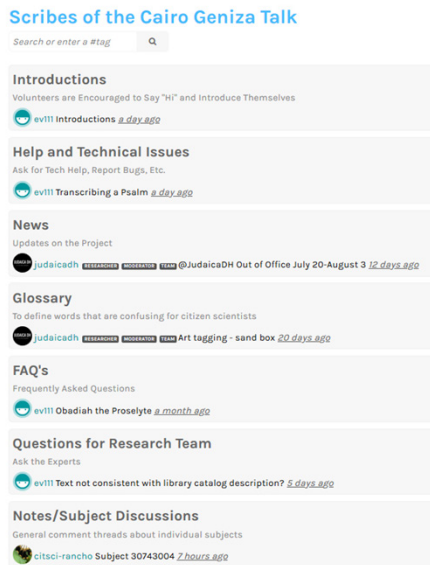


Figure 5. Gateway to learn more, ask questions, etc.: [zooniverse.org/projects/judaicadh/scribes-of-the-cairo-geniza/talk](https://zooniverse.org/projects/judaicadh/scribes-of-the-cairo-geniza/talk).

Yet another important aspect of the SCG project deserves mention here: the interface language is available in English, Hebrew, and Arabic. Presumably, most will use English, but the Hebrew and Arabic options make the project accessible to Israelis and to millions of Arabic speakers across the Middle East and North Africa.

I, for one, can see many pedagogical benefits of SCG. The next time I teach my course in Hebrew manuscripts, each student will be required to contribute to SCG in some fashion. Through such experiential learning, the students will gain greater appreciation for the work of scholars firsthand; instead of just looking at websites such as FGP and Ma'agarim, the students will become the scholars!

Naturally, one is curious to know more about the people busy at work in classifying and transcribing. The Introductions section (see above, Fig. 5) allows one to gain a sense of the global reach of this project, precisely as one would expect from a Zooniverse endeavour. Sample comments follow (some are shortened):

- “Geologist from New Zealand here, but [I am] a calligrapher interested in medieval scripts and manuscripts, mainly in Roman alphabets, but interested in the social information that can come from things like the geniza, so happy to chip in on basic manuscript classification.”
- “I am a pharmacist from Cairo, Egypt, Arabic is my native language, but I have no experience with Hebrew. Let me know if I can help with anything.”
- “I’m Khalid! Just wanted to stop by and say hello. Love what you guys are doing and it’s been a blast sorting through the text so far.”
- “Hi everyone, I’m Natalie from London. I’m doing my undergrad in Theology, and have a cultural/religious background in Hebrew. This is my first zooniverse project, and I’m really enjoying it. It’s incredibly peaceful sorting through the fragments and classifying things.”
- “Hi, I’m Annabelle, librarian, and long ago I did Byzantine Studies, focusing on (Greek) manuscripts from Egyptian Desert Mothers and Fathers. I also learned a bit of Coptic, and a very tiny bit of Syriac, and even less Arabic and Hebrew, but enough to enjoy helping with this project.”

It is a pure delight to learn more about the dedicated crew of enthusiastic volunteers who make this project (and other Zooniverse projects) possible.

When I first learned of the website, I questioned its title, *Scribes of the Cairo Geniza*, thinking that somehow the enterprise would allow scholars to determine which medieval scribes wrote which documents—even though such investigations would require the use of specialized tools such as paleography, codicology, and even AI deep-learning and machine-reading. Such findings, of course, could not possibly result from the crowdsourced project under review here. As I proceeded in my examination of the website, however, I quickly realized that the “scribes” in the project title are not the medieval ones but rather their modern counterparts, “ordinary people” all engaged in the most basic aspect of humanistic research: making primary sources more readily available to interested parties.

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