

# Reading in the Provinces: A Midrash on Rotulus from Damira, Its Materiality, Scribe, and Date

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'A battlefield of books': this is how Solomon Schechter described the mass of tangled and damaged manuscript debris when he entered the Genizah chamber of the Ben Ezra synagogue in Fustat (Old Cairo) in 1896 (fig. 2.1). This windowless room, together with similar caches in other synagogues and in the cemetery Basatin in Cairo, yielded over 350,000 fragments of manuscripts, kept today in more than seventy collections worldwide.<sup>1</sup> Most of the fragments date from the Fatimid and Ayyubid periods: more than ninety-five percent come from books while the rest are fragments of legal documents, letters, and other pragmatic writings. They were preserved thanks to the long-standing Jewish tradition of disposing of old writings with particular respect, founded on the belief that Hebrew texts containing the name of God are sacred: rather than being destroyed or thrown away, worn out books and documents—both holy and trivial—were instead placed in dedicated space, a Genizah, to decay naturally without human intervention. This massive necropolis of discarded writings offers us unprecedented knowledge of Jewish life in medieval Egypt in general and of Jewish book history in particular. Thousands of fragments are witnesses to the centrality of Hebrew books in liturgy, in professional activities, and in private life, as well as offering a mine of information about how these books were made and read: their materials, forms, and formats.

Particularly interesting, in this respect, are recent discoveries at the Genizah that attest to the unexpected importance of vertical scrolls, or rotuli, in the book culture of Oriental Jews. Indeed, as a result of a systematic search in various Cairo Genizah collections—a collaboration between Gideon Bohak of the University of Tel Aviv and myself—nearly 500 fragments of books written in rotulus form have been found.<sup>2</sup> Judging from their palaeographical features, they were written in Egypt between the tenth and thirteenth centuries.<sup>3</sup> It is likely that most of the rotuli were produced in Fustat and discarded in the local Genizah. However, as we shall see, some of the rotuli were produced in smaller Egyptian towns. It is unclear why the writings from the provinces were discarded in the Fustat Genizah, but their conservation is an important source for the study of reading and book-making practices outside of the Egyptian capital. In this chapter, I will focus on one fragment of a literary rotulus—now Cambridge University Library Taylor-Schechter (henceforth TS) C 1.67 (figs 2.2–2.3)—which was discovered in the Cairo Genizah and brought to Cambridge by Solomon Schechter, Rabbi and reader in Rabbinitics at Cambridge University. A detailed palaeographical analysis traced its origin to the small Delta town of Damira. After a brief presentation of the corpus of rotuli in Hebrew script from the Cairo Genizah, I will turn to focus in some detail on the physical description, palaeography, and dating of this rotulus.

## The Geniza Rotuli

The rotulus form has been used in traditions of Jewish book making since antiquity. Although no ancient rotuli have been preserved, the Mishnah and the Talmud both mention *takhrikh* (תַּכְרִיחַ), a 'roll' or 'wrapper'. This term usually refers to the practice of attaching together vertically three or more legal documents to facilitate their archiving.<sup>4</sup> However, there is some evidence that the vertical scroll form was also used to copy literary or liturgical texts; the Talmud Yerushalmi mentions a *takhrikh berakhot* (תּוֹכְרֵב בְּרַכּוֹת), 'a roll of blessings'.<sup>5</sup> Yet despite these references, Hebrew books in rotuli form have been largely disregarded by book historians and codicologists, who instead tend to focus their attention on more traditional horizontal Bible scrolls and codices.<sup>6</sup> Few would have suspected that preserved rotuli fragments would number so many: until now most known rotuli have systematically been dated before the year 1000, conceived of simply as a transitional hinge between the scroll and codex.<sup>7</sup> Yet the recent discovery of hundreds of rotuli in the Cairo Genizah shows not only that this 'third form' of the Hebrew book was much more common in Oriental Jewish communities than previously believed, but also that use of the format extended well into the thirteenth century and even later.

The survival of this ancient book form in the community at Fustat is less surprising when we consider that this form was in fact relatively common in medieval Egyptian society; also among Christians, Muslims, and Samaritans. Indeed, Greek and Samaritan prayers on rotulus are preserved, as are rotuli with excerpts from the Koran in Arabic, probably used for magical and apotropaic purposes.<sup>8</sup> Particular to the Jewish rotuli from the Cairo Genizah, however, is their specific function and proficient, professional readership. An analysis of their materiality quickly



Fig. 2.1  
Solomon Schechter  
at work in the Old  
University Library,  
Cambridge.  
Photo: © Syndics  
of Cambridge  
University Library.

shows that the overwhelming majority of these Jewish books on rotuli were low-cost copies, often user-produced and destined for a personal devotion, individual study, or as a professional vademecum. It is likely that personal notebooks, *megillot setarim* (מִיִּרְתָּם תּוֹלִיגַם), literally 'personal or concealed rolls', mentioned in the Geonic literature were such rotuli, although the term *megillah* usually refers to horizontal scrolls.<sup>9</sup> Various factors suggest the economic concerns of the readers: including the use of lesser-quality, often reused writing materials; a lack of decorative features; a high density of the text formed from the small size of its characters; minimal left-hand margins; and reduced interlinear spaces.<sup>10</sup>

Their extremely varied contents, too, shed light on the potentially broad appeal of the fragments. More than 55% of their identified texts contain liturgy. Only a few include standard prayers (for instance TS H 10.310, TS 20.57, TS 6H 8. 3, and TS 13 H 1. 4), while the majority contain liturgical poems or *piyyutim* (פִּיּוּטִים) (TS H 8. 43). Very few fragments contain passages directly drawn from the Bible: a few fragments of the Psalms exist (TS AS 43. 23), part of a prayer anthology rather than a Biblical manuscript as such, as well as various passages of haftarah (Bodl. MS Heb. b 18. 23; JTS, ENA 3974. 3). A few known rotuli with passages from the Pentateuch (e.g. TS AS 7.2), seem to have either been used as a copying exercise or were a copy of a short portion of the text, rather than that of the entire Biblical book. Secular poetry is attested, for instance, in fragments of work by Judah ha-Levi (TS 13 J 24. 13).<sup>11</sup> A small corpus concerns science and *materia medica* (TS 20. 150, TS NS 90. 47), while the Genizah also preserves the earliest attested manuscript of the *Sefer Yeşirah* (Book of Creation) (TS 32. 5, TS K 21. 56, TS K 12. 813<sup>12</sup>), the version used by the tenth-century exegete Sa'adyah Gaon for his much-renowned commentary. Magic and astrology also feature in the rotuli fragments (Bodl. MS Heb. a 3. 31)<sup>13</sup>, as do passages of Hekhalot literature, a mystical body of writings detailing chariot-bound ascents to heaven (e.g. Bodl. MS Heb. a 3. 25a).

Another relatively large group of the fragments contains scholars' books. They include Biblical translations and commentaries, for instance Sa'adyah Gaon's Arabic paraphrase of the Bible, the *Tafsir* (TS Ar 1a. 140); lists of Biblical variants and textual difficulties known as the *Masora* (Bodl. MS Heb. a 3. 30); and lexicographical works, such as Sa'adyah's list of seventy words attested only once in the entire Bible (*hapax legomena*) (TS Ar. 53. 9). Likewise, the rotulus seems to have been a favoured book form for students of Jewish legal tradition. Several of the Genizah rotuli contain tractates of the Babylonian Talmud (Bodl. MS Heb. e 52 (R))<sup>14</sup>, the Mishna (TS F 2(1) 167), legal compendia such as *Halakhot Gedolot* (TS F 5. 151, TS NS 329. 1020), *Sheiltot* of Rabbi Aha de Shabha,<sup>15</sup> and commentaries or glossaries used to facilitate the study of the Babylonian Talmud (Bodl. MS Heb. b 12. 33, TS G 2. 20).<sup>16</sup>

Lastly, the Cairo rotuli contain several copies of the so-called 'late midrashim', which seem to be anthologies of earlier Rabbinic texts and quotations, such as *Pirqa de-Rabbenu ha-Qadosh* (MS



Fig. 2.2 (left)  
A midrash on  
rotulus (front),  
Damira, Egypt  
(thirteenth  
century). Pen on  
paper. Cambridge  
University Library,  
Taylor-Schechter  
C 1.67. Photo:  
© Syndics of  
Cambridge  
University Library.

Fig. 2.3 (right)  
A midrash on  
rotulus (dorse)  
Damira, Egypt  
(thirteenth  
century). Pen on  
paper. Cambridge  
University Library,  
Taylor-Schechter  
C 1.67. Photo:  
© Syndics of  
Cambridge  
University Library.

Bodl. Heb. a 2 fol. 24; TS H 7. 21; TS K 21. 85; TS K 21. 94; LG Talm. II. 95)<sup>17</sup> or a composition similar to the work published under the title *The Pearl of Rav Meir* (*Margenita de Rav Meir*) or *The Pearl of the House of Rav* (*Margenita de-bei Rav*) (TS C 1. 67).<sup>18</sup> In addition to this rotulus, I was able to identify yet another fragment in the Cairo Genizah containing passages of the *Pearl*, a fragment on a horizontal scroll dated c.1000.<sup>19</sup> The *Pearl* is a short, homily-like ethical essay whose main subject is the punishment for bad actions and the failure to follow God's commandments in this world and in the world to come. The Genizah fragments are the earliest witnesses to the heritage of this text.

### The Damira Fragment

In the following sections, I will focus on the physical characteristics and palaeographical dating of the Genizah rotulus TS C 1. 67. A detailed study of its text is beyond the scope of this materially-oriented essay, however it is important to stress that, like most medieval midrashic and homiletic

compilations, *The Pearl* is an example of a non-authoritative and 'open' text whose versions vary a great deal from one manuscript to another. Individual manuscripts present important differences of wording and intertwine passages found in other identifiable works within their unique texts. The rotulus TS C 1. 67, for example, contains a passage (lines 1–4) that appears somewhat closer in content to a collection of midrashic homilies printed under the title of *Pesiqta hadta* (the passage concerning Yom Kippurim) than it does to the corresponding passage of the printed version of the *Pearl*.<sup>20</sup> However, despite such differences, the core of the rotulus text and its order in the context of TS C 1.67 does correspond to the later printed edition of the *Pearl*.

TS C 1. 67 is written with black-fading-to-grey carbon ink, on inferior quality, grey, thick Egyptian paper with clearly visible rag fibres. The fragment contains forty-two lines and the text is written in one continuous block on the recto. Paper is the writing material of some sixty percent of the rotuli from the Cairo Genizah studied thus far, and the preserved fragment measures 32.5 x 11.5 cm. It was composed of at least three sheets of paper (*kollemata*) glued together vertically before the text was written, as evidenced by the written line overlapping two of these sheets in line 3 of the fragment. Only a small part of the upper sheet is preserved but the full width of the rotulus is generally complete, with the end of the line preserved in most cases. As for its length, the rotulus is damaged, torn off at the beginning and at the end. When compared with the printed edition, the preserved portion corresponds to about one third of the text. It is therefore likely that the complete rotulus was originally about one metre long.

It seems that this was an optimal size of a paper rotulus. We know only three Genizah rotuli on paper whose length has been fully preserved: a section of the *Sheiltot* of Rabbi Aha de Shabha reconstructed from seven fragments joined together, measuring 120 cm; a copy of liturgical poems on the verso of a reused letter in Arabic by a Muslim official, CUL Add. 3336, measuring 150.5 cm; and a Babylonian Talmud, Tractate Beṣah, Bodl. MS Heb. e 52 (R), measuring 158.5 cm (six paper sheets). Indeed, the Beṣah roll appears to represent a maximum length for a paper rotulus. This version was in fact copied across three rotuli which together formed the same codicological unit, effectively presenting the text in three 'tomes'.<sup>21</sup> Fragments of the other two rolls of this same codicological unit have been found too, suggesting that the division of the tractate into three portions, copied on three separate rotuli, was judged the largest practicable solution for accommodating this long text. We must remember that unlike rotuli made of parchment, some of which reached up to three metres, paper was far less resilient: too long a rotulus would be easy to damage and tear. Still, a relatively short rotulus like TS C1. 67—about one metre long and also very narrow—could be easily rolled and unrolled when held in the hand. This was a perfect format for a small, inexpensive, light, and portable book intended for personal reading.

The verso of the rotulus in its present state is blank except for a note in Arabic and Hebrew, containing a magical formula for protection of the book against worms:

דיסח לא באתק נמ ינ ארבע נול ע למ כק כב  
kabij kaj mal'un 'ibrānī min kitāb al-ḥasid<sup>22</sup>  
[litt. Kabij kaj is cursed, in Hebrew, from the Book of the Pious]

There are, however, some traces of Hebrew letters at the top of the fragment corresponding to the end of the upper sheet, just above the place where the two parts were glued together. They may suggest that the upper part of the verso, now lost, originally contained the end of the text. As is usually the case with the Genizah rotuli, the scribe did not make rulings to guide the lines of their text; the rotuli are, after all, informal books. This is why the fragments' lines are not always regularly spaced, their writing often sinking in the middle of the rotulus and lifting again towards the end. However, here the scribe has taken particular care to justify the fragment's long block of writing. The right-hand margin is narrow, only around 1 cm, but straight nonetheless. The margin on the left, though, is not even: most frequently, rotuli scribes tend to run lines of text right up to the paper's edge, but sometimes when the writing is either too short or too long for the line, care is taken to reduce calligraphic interference. Here, to avoid large blank spaces, the scribe has created fillers either by extending the upper horizontal strokes of the lines' final letters (for instance lines 19, 22, 24, 28, 31) by elongating the letter's basis (see the *nun* at the end of line 32), or by using a horizontal line, sometimes a mark of an abbreviation, as a space filler (for instance in lines 18, 21,

25, 41, 42). To accommodate the ends of lines that are too long, the scribe chose to write the last word in slightly smaller characters, above the line, with a slant up to the right (lines 17, 26, 37, 38, 39). Besides this textual consideration at a linear level, there are no other graphic indications of separate sections of paragraphs of the midrash in the fragment, nor any punctuation marks for that matter. The text runs as a regular block of uninterrupted short lines. However, the fact that the lines are short and relatively generously spaced, and given their low density and careful, clear handwriting, the scroll is not uncomfortable to read.

The script is Oriental of the Egyptian sub-type and belongs to the non-square register, similar to that used in legal documents and other less formal books.<sup>23</sup> It also contains several cursive features, with characters measuring around 3 x 3 mm. The pertinent features of the script are consistent with Egyptian manuscripts of the first half of the thirteenth century (see Appendix), and both this date and location can be confirmed and further specified by the identification of the scribe of our rotulus as the scribe of a legal document in Arabic in Hebrew script, TS NS J 2 (figs 2.4–2.5). A systematic handwriting analysis leaves no doubt that the scribe of this text is the same as our rotulus, TS C 1. 67. His name in the related legal document is slightly damaged but can be read as Moshe ben Mevorakh. The document, published in 1971 by Shlomo Dov Goitein, records donations to the community chest (*heqdash*) by several members of a family in exchange for the honour of their youngest member, Ibrahim (Abraham), to be chosen to read in the synagogue, intoning the scroll of Esther during the celebration of the festival of Purim in front of the assembled congregation.<sup>24</sup> The father of Ibrahim, Abū al-Fakhr ben Abū al-Faraj, also offers in return to relinquish a reimbursement claim for the cost of transport by beasts, perhaps horses, which the community had hired from him for the trip of a prominent visitor. This was a member of an aristocratic family of Mosul, the *Nasi* (or ‘Prince’ of Davidic descent) Joshiah, son of Jesse

Fig. 2.4 (left)  
A legal document  
in Arabic in  
Hebrew script on  
rotulus by Moshe  
ben Mevorakh  
(front), Damira,  
Egypt (thirteenth  
century). Pen on  
paper. Cambridge  
University Library,  
Taylor-Schechter  
NS J 2. Photo:  
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University Library.



Fig. 2.5 (right)  
A legal document  
in Arabic in  
Hebrew script on  
rotulus by Moshe  
ben Mevorakh  
(dorse), Damira,  
Egypt (thirteenth  
century). Pen on  
paper. Cambridge  
University Library,  
Taylor-Schechter  
NS J 2. Photo:  
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University Library.

ben Solomon, who had travelled to Ashmūn and al-Maḥalla al-Kubra in Lower Egypt.<sup>25</sup> Most importantly for our rotulus, this legal record of the donation and settlement contains a precise date and place of writing: ‘in the second third of the month of Adar of the year 1555’ of the Seleucid era, that is in February 1243, in a town of Small Damira (*Damira ha-qetanaḥ*). The town of Damira, situated on the al-Maḥalla canal rather than on the Nile proper as stated in the document, is mentioned in a number of Genizah documents, and according to the twelfth-century traveler Benjamin of Tudela it had a large Jewish community of some 700 individuals.<sup>26</sup> As pointed out by Goitein, like other provincial towns in Egypt, Damira was also home of scholars and teachers.<sup>27</sup>

TS C 1. 67 is thus provided with a context of production. But, equally importantly, the precise dating of this rotulus proves that the roll format was still in use for small, portable copies of literary texts in the thirteenth century, both in Fustat and across various Jewish settlements in Egypt. The contents of the Cairo Genizah now rest deep in library vaults, a corpus of minute fragments scattered across multiple institutions worldwide. But cases like this show there are still many codicological puzzles held within them, able to shed light both on the small, personal world of Jewish Egypt and the ongoing presence of the continuous page.

### Palaeographical Appendix

The handwriting’s specific features include: particularly rounded bases of the letters *lamed*, final *mem*, *kaph*, *nun*, and *pe*; concave upper horizontal lines of *beth*, *daleth*, and final *mem*; the reduction of strokes and a rounded execution as one movement of the upper part and the right-hand downstroke of the letters *he*, *ḥeth*, *kaph*, final *mem*, *pe*, final *pe*, *resh* and *tav*; and relatively long ascender of the *lamed* and descenders of *nun*, final *pe* and *qoph*. There is some slight shading or difference between horizontal strokes written with the full width of the calamus’ nib, and thin vertical and oblique strokes. The shapes of the pairs of letters, which can be similar in some script-types or handwritings, are different in this manuscript: *beth* versus *kaph*, *gimel* versus *nun*, *daleth* versus *resh*, *he* versus *ḥeth*, final *mem* versus *samekh*. The only confusion concerns one of the allographs of the letter *aleph* and a ligature of *nun* followed by a *vav*, both adopting an N-shape.



line 25: וניאש

The most salient morphological features include:



*Gimel* traced with two straight lines that cross at the level of the baseline; with the right-hand downstroke straight and almost perpendicular to the baseline, going below the meeting point. The downstroke points sharply upwards and does not contain an additional ‘roof’. The left-hand stroke is long and parallel to the baseline.



*Zayin* is wedge-shaped and its head is placed to the right of the downstroke



Final *nun*, with a wavy descender and a head placed to its right.

