



Silk Road Jewish Manuscripts Dating Back to the 11th Century Come to Light

Written in Aramaic, Hebrew, Persian, Judeo-Arabic and Judeo-Persian, the 1,000-year-old documents are the family archive of Abu Nassar Ben Daniel, who lived along the old Silk Road.

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A sample from the Afghan Genizah, dating back to the 11th century.

The appearance of mysterious manuscripts from what has been dubbed the “Afghan Genizah” – recalling the Cairo Genizah, the most important collection of manuscripts in the Jewish world – has roiled the market in Judaica antiquities for the past seven years.

The manuscripts began to appear at around about the same time among a number of antiquities dealers in the Middle East and Europe. “We visited [Hebrew University Iran scholar]

Prof. Shaul Shaked and he showed us photographs of the material that came from southern Russia,” says the Israeli antiquities dealer Lenny Wolfe. “A week later, I was sitting in a coffee shop in Europe and someone told me that a Pakistani dealer had a genizah from the Silk Road. I realized there was something strange here. Materials were popping up at the same time from both southern Russia and the Silk Road.”

A short time later, Wolfe said, he traveled to a Middle Eastern country with Prof. Matthew Morgenstern, head of the Hebrew Language Department at Tel Aviv University to photograph Mandaic amulets, a religion that particularly reveres John the Baptist. “We went to a certain dealer to have coffee and he showed me all kinds of foolishness,” Wolfe said. “I told him, ‘forget about this, you’re wasting my time.’ Then he said he had something to show us on the computer.”

The dealer showed them pages written in Judeo-Persian script.

Morgenstern realized right away that it was extraordinary material. “I told him it was Judeo-Persian from the 11th century and he jumped on it. We knew there was something like this, but now this was a clue,” Morgenstern said.



Lenny Wolfe and samples from the Afghan Genizah.

Wolfe has been following the clue ever since. About three years ago, he was able to purchase 29 manuscripts and bring them to Israel. The manuscripts were sold to the National Library and have been under study ever since. Six months ago, after a long search, Wolfe managed to purchase 100 more documents from the cache. As in the previous case, the Israel Antiquities Authority authorized Wolfe to buy the manuscripts for the state.

However, he has yet to find a buyer for the new manuscripts, which are held in a safe. “I’m sure the material will eventually find its way to an appropriate institution,” he said, declining to say more about negotiations over the material. Neither would Wolfe disclose the price he paid for the manuscripts.

Experts say they believe the price was not astronomical, because the manuscripts contain only text, and no illustrations.

Scholars now know that the source of the manuscripts is not a genizah – a hidden cache of manuscripts – like the one found in Cairo, but rather the archive of a Jewish family of traders who lived on the Silk Road in northern Afghanistan in the 11th century. The head of the family is named in the manuscripts as Abu Nassar Ben Daniel and the family apparently lived in the central Afghani city of Bamyan. The city made headlines 11 years ago when the Taliban blew up two huge statues of Buddha there. The collection of manuscripts came to light a few years later, after the war that led to the downfall of the Taliban in Afghanistan. Rumor has it that the collection was found in a cave or deep rock crevice somewhere in Afghanistan, where it had been secreted by its owners about a thousand years ago.

The manuscripts were written in a wide variety of languages – Aramaic, Hebrew, Persian, Judeo-Arabic and Judeo-Persian – the two latter languages are Arabic and Persian written in Hebrew letters. Legal and commercial manuscripts can be found in the collection along with sacred writings and personal letters.

The main importance of the Afghani genizah is the treasure trove of information it contains about the Jewish community in Afghanistan a thousand years ago. For example, the personal letters reveal the places in which Jews lived, their professions and family structure.

Ofir Haim, a researcher from the Hebrew University, translated and studied the manuscripts that reached the National Library. One of them is a letter in which a family member by the name of Yair tried to justify to the family head Abu Nassar why he did not return to Bamyan and his family.

“If I could have made a living in Bamyan, it is true that I would have fulfilled your wishes...You know that in my occupation, if I am missing from the store for a day, on that day I will lose everything,” Yair wrote. But there were advantages to his remaining in a distant city. In another letter, he wrote: “Eggplants were not yet in abundance and so I did not send any. They were very small. I will send [some] next week.”

One of the significant manuscripts in the new group purchased by Wolfe is a 27-page notebook in which someone, apparently Abu Nassar, wrote down all the amounts of money owed him. The notebook covers a few decades in the beginning of the 11th century and includes hundreds of entries. Haim, who has had a preliminary look at the material, says that most of the names are Muslim, but there are a few Iranian and Jewish names as well. In some cases the debts were noted not in money, but in kind – wheat or barley for example. The amount of information to be gleaned from this document alone is enormous – including place names, economic issues, genealogy and interreligious affairs.

The research, according to everyone involved in it, is only just getting started.