THE CAIRO GENIZAH UNEARTHED:
THE EXCAVATIONS CONDUCTED BY THE COUNT
D’HULST ON BEHALF OF THE BODLEIAN LIBRARY AND
THEIR SIGNIFICANCE FOR GENIZAH HISTORY

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The rich collection of Hebrew books and manuscripts at the Bodleian Library was once described as ‘the greatest Hebrew library in the world’,¹ yet little is known about the history of the Genizah fragments that constitute such an important part of the Bodleian’s holdings.² Not only are details about its acknowledged suppliers sparse, but the story of Count Riamo d’Hulst, the elusive excavator and antiquarian who gathered material for the Bodleian intermittently over a period of nine years was, until recently, completely unknown.³ Furthermore, the mysterious whereabouts of the ‘great many sacks’ of Genizah material (possibly 10,000–15,000 manuscript leaves) that d’Hulst excavated in 1898 and referred to only in an addendum to the Bodleian’s Hebrew Catalogue⁴ remains to be addressed.

The following article will provide a reconstruction of this history, showing how the Bodleian came to acquire its unique, handpicked Genizah collection and revealing where d’Hulst’s missing fragments have gone. Such an investigation will shed new light on the discovery of the Cairo Genizah manuscripts in the late nineteenth century, on

² For a summary of the importance of this collection, see the article by the Bodleian’s Hebraica and Judaica curator, Dr Piet van Boxel, ‘The Hebrew Collections in Oxford: a Treasure Grove for Jewish Studies’, European Judaism: a Journal for the New Europe 41 (2008), pp. 56–66. Van Boxel points out that the ‘acquisition policy of the Bodleian Librarians’ has made the Oxford Genizah collection ‘a unique resource for the study of rabbinic texts and Jewish history’ (p. 62).
their perceived value, and the ways in which they were subsequently dispersed around the world.

By the spring of 1889, the Ben Ezra synagogue in Fustat (Old Cairo) had declined into such a state of disrepair that the leaders of the Jewish community decided that it should be dismantled and rebuilt.\(^5\) During this process, manuscripts that had been hidden away for over a millennium in the Ben Ezra’s Genizah chamber were suddenly revealed. Many of these fragments were, according to an anonymous source, removed and left lying around the synagogue yard:

The workmen on tearing down the roof dumped all the contents of this attic into the courtyard, and there the MSS were lying for several weeks in the open. During these weeks many dealers could obtain bundles of leaves for nominal sums.\(^6\)

The first two known Europeans to see this newly exposed material were the British collector Greville John Chester (1831–1892)\(^7\) and the German excavator Count Riamo d’Hulst (c. 1855–1920).\(^8\)

D’Hulst, acting as an officer of the Egypt Exploration Fund (EEF), had been redeployed at the end of the archaeological season (October 1889) to explore the rubbish mounds of Old Cairo in the hope of recovering pottery from the Fatimid period.\(^9\) Some of d’Hulst’s excavations

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\(^7\) For biographical details see M. L. Bierbrier, *Who was Who in Egyptology*, 3rd rev. edn (London, 1995), pp. 96–97. Chester’s life is the subject of a doctoral thesis by Gertrud Seidmann (Wolfson College, Oxford). Seidmann has also written a number of short articles about Chester for the Wolfson College magazine *Romulus*.

\(^8\) Very little is known about the Count D’Hulst, including his date of birth and death, which can only be surmised from his possible involvement in the Franco-Prussian war of 1870–71 and from details in his wife’s letters. Of his character, Amelia Edwards, a co-founder of the Egypt Exploration Fund, once wrote that the Count was ‘a most energetic, enthusiastic and accomplished man—archaeologist, traveler, linguist, photographer, Arabist, critic etc’ (quoted in ‘Egyptian Exploration’, *The Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, 12 February 1898, p. 15). For more details about his life, see Jefferson, ‘A Genizah Secret’, pp. 125–142, as well as some of the additional facts uncovered by Simone Weny in ‘L’Architecte de l’État Charles Arendt (1825–1910) et la restauration de la chapelle du château d’Esch-sur-Sûre (Luxembourg)’, *Hémecht: Zeitschrift für Luxemburger Geschichte Revue d’Histoire Luxembourgeoise* 55 (2003), pp. 483–523.

\(^9\) See the Egypt Exploration Fund committee meeting minutes of 25 July 1889 in the archives of the Egypt Exploration Society (EES).