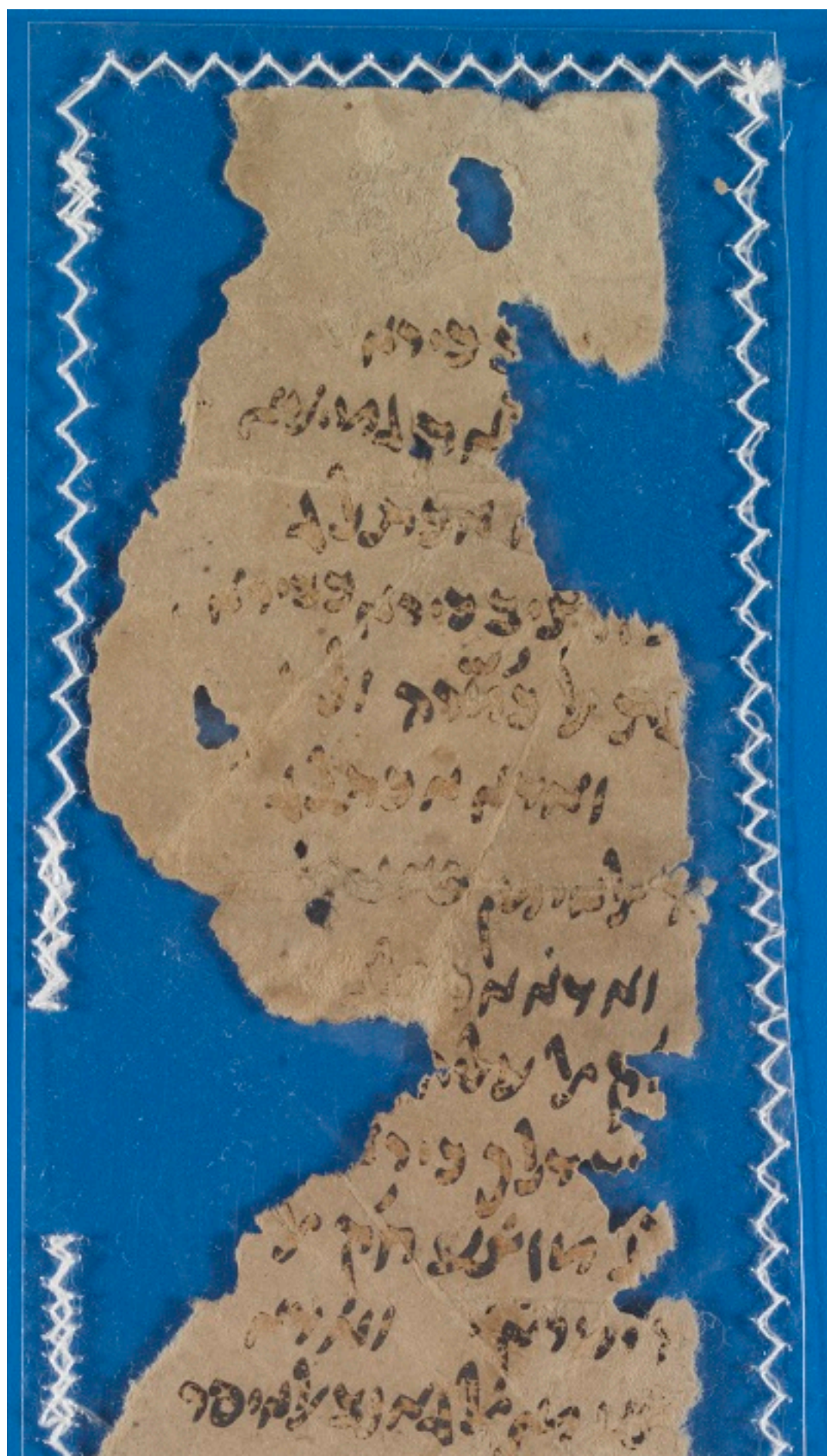


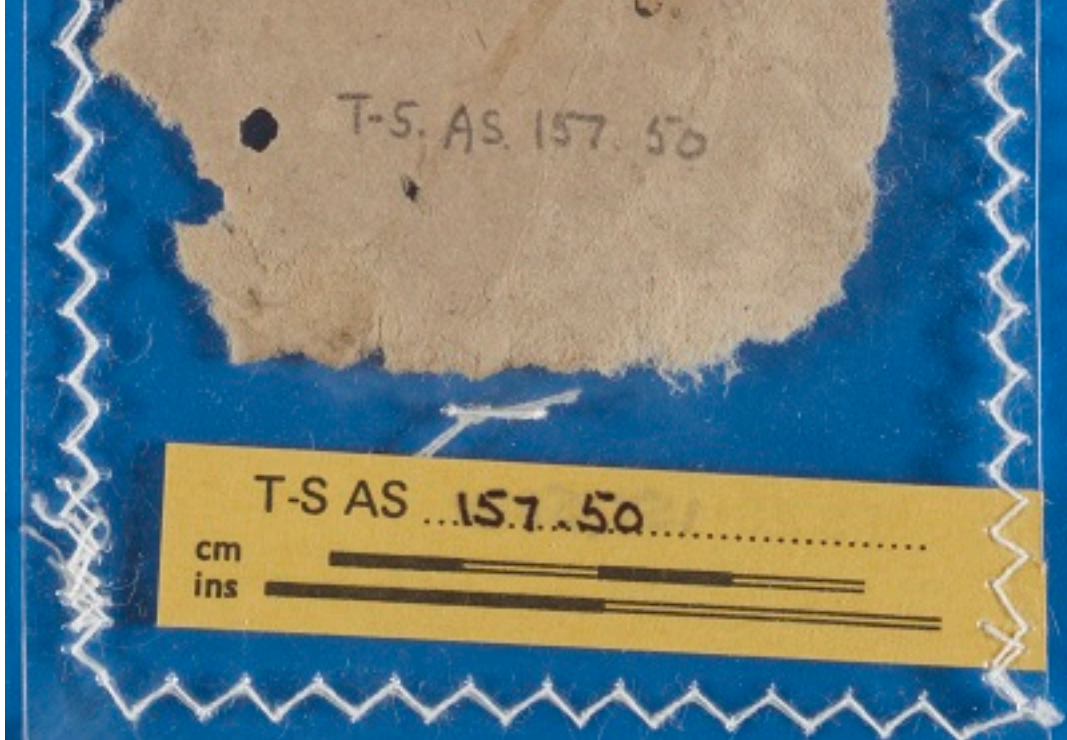
Cambridge University Library

Fragment of the Month: April 2008

T-S AS 157.50: A twitch divination text in the hand of Ḥalfon b. Manasseh

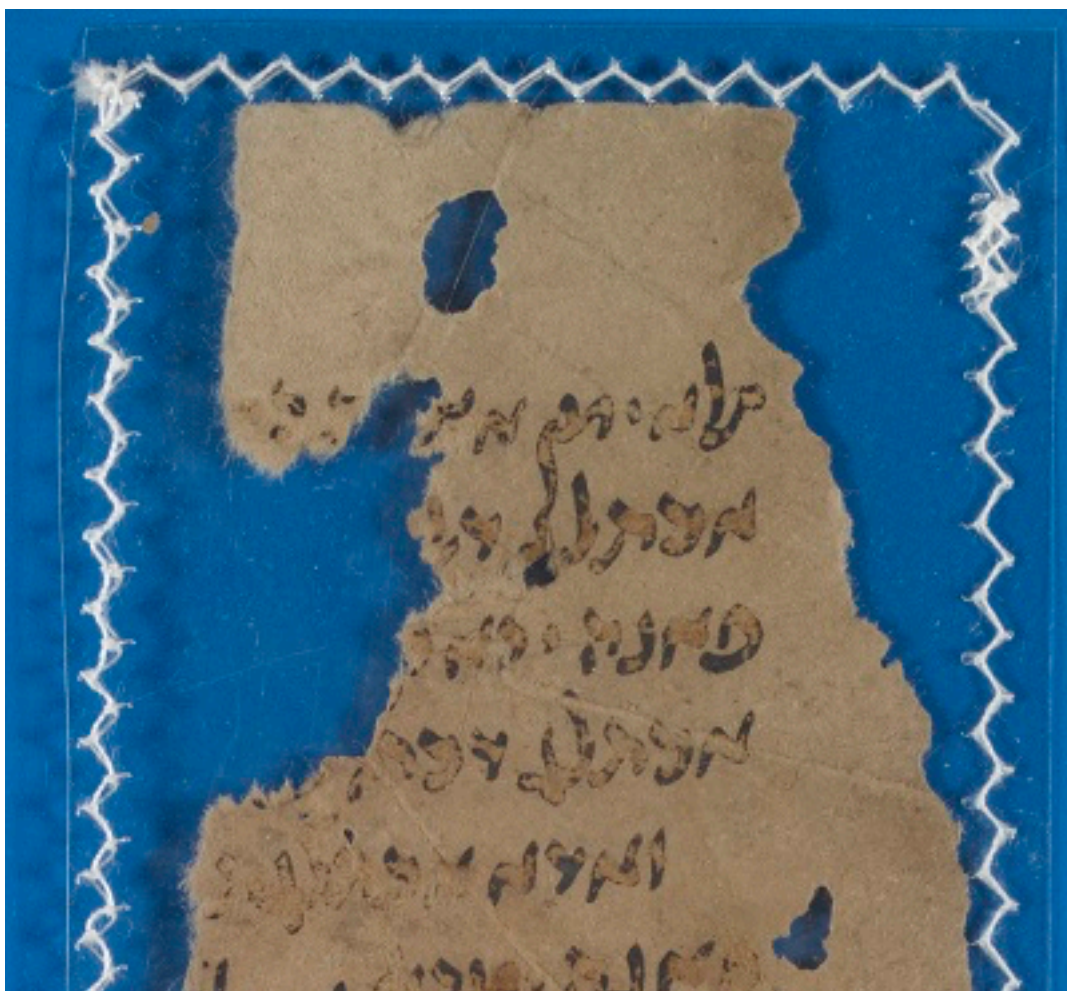
Esther-Miriam Wagner and Gideon Bohak

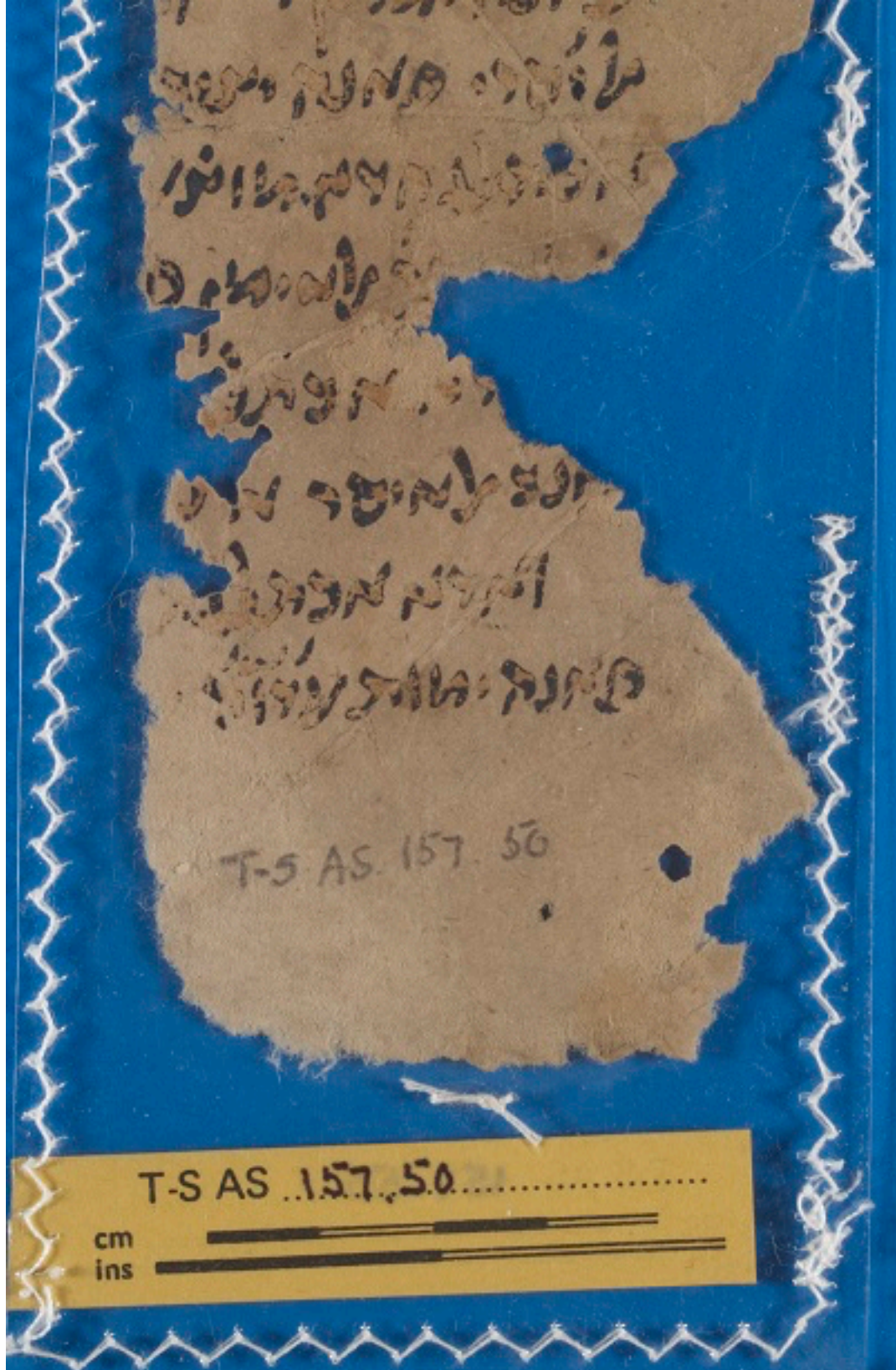




T-S AS 157.50 recto

The 12th-century scribe Ḥalfon b. Manasseh, who has been mentioned before on this site (see FOTM July 2007), produced thousands of legal documents and letters, and is probably the most prolific writer in the Genizah. It was a bit of a surprise, however, for me to come across one fragment in Ḥalfon's hand containing phrases not usually encountered in the extremely formulaic language of Judaeo-Arabic legal documents. In particular, the phrases 'if his left side twitches', 'if his penis twitches' and 'then his enemy will die' seemed quite out of place in a legal contract and gave me the idea to consult with Professor Gideon Bohak, our visiting scholar and expert on magical and divinatory texts in the Genizah. This led to the quick identification of the fragment as belonging to the well-established genre of twitch divination, possibly a part of the *Book of Twitches* (*Kitāb al-Iḥtilājāt*) or a similar work.





T-S AS 157.50 verso

Twitch divination (palmomancy) seems to have its roots in ancient Greek works (although the Arabs attribute it to an Indian origin) and it is a comparatively common subject in the Genizah. In fact, the *Book of Twitches* and other works on twitch divination seem to have been so popular that the phrase *'idā iḥtalaja* 'if ... twitches' can be found in an abbreviated form כח, for example in T-S NS 33.130. In the NS fragment, the book is given a Jewish origin, its authorship being ascribed to Shem, son of Noah. The 'Greeks' found it in King Solomon's treasury and carried it away, before Bustanai, scion of David (the seventh-century Babylonian exilarch Bustanai b. Ḥaninai) supposedly retrieved it.

As a professional scribe, Ḥalfon b. Manasseh may have written T-S AS 157.50 for a client, but it is also intriguing to consider that this may have been his very own copy. Many members of the Jewish community were fascinated with magic and divination; Ḥalfon himself also wrote several horoscopes, and other Genizah

amulets and magical texts seem to have been written by professional scribes. Magic and astrology were not restricted to the ill-educated, but prominent, learned members of the community also delved into such matters.

Fragments from the *Book of Twitches* or other works on twitch divination appear elsewhere in the T-S Collection: Judaeo-Arabic versions can be found for example under the classmarks T-S A45.21, T-S Arabic 45.11, T-S Arabic 48.38, and TS AS 173.423; Arabic versions are found in T-S AS 177.21, T-S AS 177.56 and T-S AS 181.130.

The intriguing fragment at hand does not, however, conspicuously parallel the other texts; particularly noteworthy is the focus on the twitching male organ, which appears on both sides of the leaf, under two different terms, *kumudda* and *dakar*. This is an unusual example, therefore, of a genre that, though quite alien to us today, was clearly well-established and quite freely circulated among the medieval Jewish community of Egypt.

Transcription:

One side:

- 1 ... ב כירא
- 2 ... אר גמיעא
- 3 ... [אד] א אכתלג
- 4 ... [וי] ציב כירא כבירא
- 5 ... [אכתל] גת אל כמדה ולד
- 6 ... ואדא אכתלג
- 7 ... ה אלאימן פאנ[ה]
- 8 ... ואדא אכתלג
- 9 ... קאל עליה ...
- 10 ... דלך כירא ...
- 11 ... [אכת] לג מוצ'ע חק אל
- 12 ... [פאנ] ה ימרץ'. ואדא
- 13 ... [מו] צ'ע מן אלגאנב אלאיסר

The other side:

1 אלאימן אצ...

- 2 אכתלג דל[ך] ...
- 3 פאנה ירא ...
- 4 אכתלג דכרה ...
- 5 ואדא אכתלגת ...
- 6 פאנה ימרץ'. וא[דא] ...
- 7 אליסרי פאנה יציב ...
- 8 אכתלג חדא מוצ'ע ...
- 9 ... אלימן ...
- 10 ... [א]דא אכתל[ג] ...
- 11 [ג]אנב אליסר א...
- 12 ואדא אכתלגת ...
- 13 פאנה ימות עדוה ...

Readers are invited to send comments to genizah@lib.cam.ac.uk. The Taylor-Schechter Genizah Research Unit is not under any obligation to acknowledge or to publish comments.

If you enjoyed this Fragment of the Month, you can find others [here](#).

Contact us: genizah@lib.cam.ac.uk

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