Judaica in “Early European Books”

Digitising UCL’s pre-1700 Jewish books

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SLIDE 1 This presentation is about our digitisation project funded by ProQuest, to contribute to the first ever module of Early European Books dedicated to Judaica and Jewish History.

SLIDE 2 EEBO (Early English Books Online) has been around for decades, and currently numbers 146,000 works printed before 1700. When the commissioning net was cast wider, to include pan-European publishing, Early European Books was launched, and currently offers around 22 million page-images of content – 75,500 titles – presented in 22 “collections” or modules, published twice yearly. Over time, module sizes have reduced: in the early days, source library was the underlying structural logic for the project (all pre-1700 books from the Danish National Library for example) resulting in massive collections of 2-3 million pages. The project now presents modules focused on topics or themes: travel literature, religion in France, medicine and science etc, which come in at around 200-500 pages.

University College London (UCL) will be the sixth contributing library to the project, and our collection will be at the modest end of the scale, with 521 titles (170,000 pages), split roughly equally between Hebrew and non-Hebrew language works. English language works are included, so there will be some overlap with EEBO. The
licence agreement is signed and the plan is to start sending books for scanning late this year (October – November) with release planned as the second module of 2024.

SLIDE 3 As the current EEB place-of-publication map shows, there is a marked skew so far towards Western Europe. With UCL’s Judaica module, more red dots should appear on the right-hand side of the map, with representation of Jewish publishing centres in Krakow, Berlin, Prague, Salonika and Istanbul.

SLIDE 4 The majority of the books to be digitised come from the Mocatta Library, which was set up jointly by the Jewish Historical Society of England and UCL in 1906. It was largely destroyed by bombing in 1940 but was reconstructed through donations from individuals and institutions. It ceased to exist as a separate library in 1990 due to financial problems and the rare items were transferred to UCL Special Collections.

SLIDE 5 The books come from a number of different provenances. A few items are from Frederick Mocatta’s original library. He was a philanthropist, historian and avid book collector. There is also a large number of books from the collection of Asher Myers, the editor of the Jewish Chronicle, and you can see on the slide here his bookplate, and he also had his signature stamped on a number of his bindings.

SLIDE 6 Other individuals include: Sir Hermann Gollancz, who was professor of Hebrew at UCL; the Canadian Rabbi Aaron de Sola – you can see on the left the bookplate that is in the books that were donated from his library; the journalist and lobbyist Lucien Wolf – on the right-hand side is his bookplate with his portrait; and the civil servant and historian Albert Montefiore Hyamson.

SLIDE 7 The collection also includes a number of items from different libraries, including the Guildhall Library in the City of London, which donated the majority of its Jewish holdings to the Mocatta Library as part of its postwar reconstruction. There are also books from the Jewish Museum of London, and a large number of books belonging to the Judith Lady Montefiore College: when it moved from Ramsgate to London it deposited most of its library at UCL. On the left is their bookplate including the Montefiore family crest.
SLIDE 8 the books exemplify a lot of the early history of Hebrew printing. We have three Hebrew incunabula (books printed before 1500). On the right-hand side of the slide is our oldest incunable, Pirke Avot with Maimonides’ commentary, which was printed in Soncino by Joshua Solomon Soncino in around 1484. On the left-hand side is Makre Dardeke, which is a dictionary of biblical roots with explanations from the Bible commentaries of David Kimhi and Rashi. It is in Hebrew but also includes translations in Judeo-Arabic, and Italian written in Hebrew characters. It was printed in Naples by Joseph Gunzenhauser in 1488. The other incunable that is not shown on the slide is an edition of Proverbs with a commentary by Immanuel Ben Solomon of Rome, which was also printed by Gunzenhauser, in 1487.

SLIDE 9 There is also a large number of first editions: this example is Shmuel Arkevolt’s Arugat ha-Bosem, which is a Hebrew grammar. This is one of the books from the Montefiore Library: you can see their stamp on the title page. It also has the signature of Leopold Zunz, the German founder of the Wissenschaft des Judentums, on the fly leaf: a number of his books were in the Montefiore Library.

SLIDE 10 Many of the major centres of 16th century Hebrew printing are represented in this collection. Venice is the most common one but there are also many books from Amsterdam, Basel, Prague, Frankfurt and more. This is an example from Venice: it is an Ashkenazi mahzor printed in Venice in 1568 by the Christian printer Giorgio de Cavalli. He actually got into trouble with the Catholic church for publishing unexpurgated and unlicensed Hebrew books; he was fined and some of the books were confiscated and burned. This book comes from the Guildhall Library, but it was originally in the British Museum: you can see their stamp at the bottom of the title page. The rather lovely printer’s device features an elephant, and the motto means ‘slowly but surely’.

SLIDE 11 As for the non-Hebrew material, which is about half the books to be digitised, this falls into a number of categories. There is a large number of volumes of Josephus, some in the original Greek and also translations into Latin, English, German, French and Italian. There are books by Christian Scholars of Hebrew and Judaism: this example is Santes Pagnini’s Hebrew dictionary. And there are polemics, both pro- and anti-Jewish, and works aimed at converting Jews to Christianity.
SLIDE 12 The non-Hebrew material also includes works by Jewish authors, notably Manasseh ben Israel’s works in Portuguese with translations into English and Latin. This example apparently belonged to the Romantic poet Robert Southey, which I am very intrigued by and would like to know more. There are also translations of Hebrew works into other languages.

SLIDE 13 Another thing that makes many of these books special are the illustrations. The example here is an astronomical work. It is actually one of the few items that is not from the Mocatta Library; this one is from our Graves Collection. It has lots of illustrations as you can see on the slide: I think the one in the middle is supposed to show an eclipse and then on the right is an astrolabe.

SLIDE 14 Another example of an illustrated work is the pseudepigraphal work *The Testament of the Twelve Patriarchs* in English, which has rather lovely woodcuts: on the left-hand side is Reuben and on the right-hand side is Zebulun.

SLIDE 15 Many of these books are special because of their bindings. A lot of them are very high status books with fine bindings. On the slide is the Arkevolty that I showed the title page of earlier, and this is its goatskin binding with brass clasps. There are a number of items that have clasps, including at least one we have not actually been able to unlock, so that is going to be a challenge to digitise! On the right-hand side is this beautiful morocco binding with gilt gauffred edges.

SLIDE 16 Finally something else that makes these books special are the annotations. These include owner’s inscriptions: we saw the inscriptions of Zunz and Southey earlier. Then there are annotations to the text in the margins, doodles and also censors’ marks. Here on the slide is the incunable the *Makre Dardeke* I showed you earlier, and that is the signature of the censor Camilo Jaghel. I have not looked to see whether he just inspected it or whether he actually made any erasures, but that is something we are going to ask the digitisers to look out for.

SLIDE 17 When it comes to annotations, many of the volumes we hold represent colourful life-histories, and one of the most welcome and arresting features of ProQuest’s inclusion policy for EEB is around multiple copies of works at both title and edition level. The logic goes that the longer a physical book has survived, the more unique it becomes. Many of the books in our collections bear the scars and
medals of their long lives – and owners’ notes, scribbles, inscriptions, notes to self or the author make for fascinating and humanly relatable dialogues between author and reader.

**SLIDE 18** Some of the most arresting additions are doodles, like these dedicated, so the note at the top left reads, “for my most loving sister”. ProQuest have taken the decision to include multiple copies where we hold them in order to preserve each copy’s unique life-stories as artefacts. This is game-changing for us in the case of authors like Flavius Josephus or Manasseh ben Israel, where multiple copies will be included.

**SLIDE 19** One of the most obvious challenges technically for this project is the capture and presentation of Hebrew books, which of course paginate right to left. From the very earliest conversations with both publisher and scanning contractors, we were keen to emphasise the importance of presenting online books in the correct orientation. This is especially important in the context of a module aimed primarily at Judaica specialists, who will expect to be able to navigate on-screen sources intuitively. The existence of inevitable awkward items where Hebrew paginates left-to-right, or non-Hebrew content flows right-to-left, cranks the headache factor up another notch, but our joint investigations have shown that EEB currently includes 164 books with Hebrew content, of which only 13 are exclusively in Hebrew. 59 of these 164 works paginate right to left, but of those 59, only 31 “read” the right way round on screen. However, even when the reader is parachuted straight to the title page of a Hebrew work – as here – you land at “page 351 of 362” and the “page” number used to navigate the online file is the mirror image of the page or folio numbers in the original book. The argument to date has been that PDF files can only be created “left to right” – which really does not make sense if images are captured in the correct, print sequence.

In brief, from the very start, everyone involved in this project will be acutely aware of the challenges of navigation, image and page numbering and presentation – the analysis of existing live content has resulted in the correction of navigation for the 28 books which were revealed as “back to front” on screen. We are jointly creating scenarios for the scanning contractor to deal with challenging book orientations and variants: UCL staff will be in the studio when capture of the Hebrew language half of
the project begins, and a ProQuest editor will be assigned to the module, with a hotline to both UCL and the scanning company. The aim is to avoid remedial image-shuffling and to create an authoritative, intuitive resource, not just for Jewish historians worldwide, but for historians of culture, literature, publishing, books and readers in early-modern Europe.