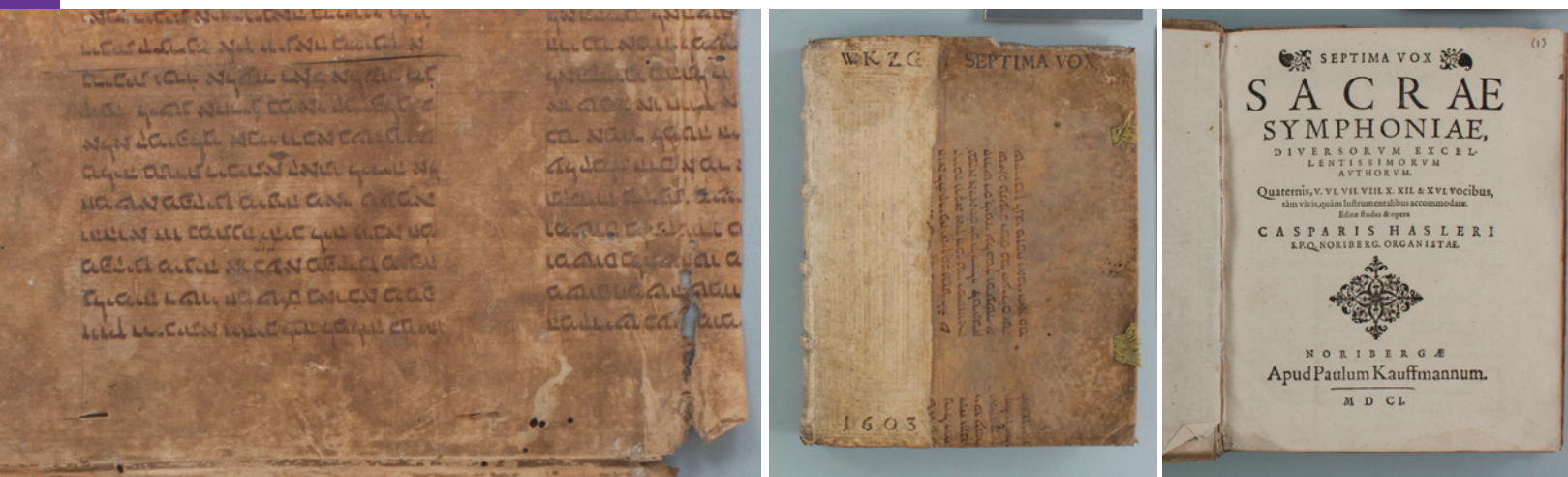


Centuries Later, Medieval “Scrap” Proves Priceless



About 1605, in Nuremberg, a bookbinder used pasteboard to fashion covers for a set of eighteen songbooks to be sent to a chapel in Prague. He then covered the pasteboard, front and back, with old leaves of parchment he had on hand. The scrap bore writing from long ago—the Middle Ages, in fact. Nonetheless it was still sturdy—parchment is virtually indestructible—and ideal to repurpose as covers for a workaday set of books. Bookbinders did it all the time. No one would care about the ancient writing on it. Until four centuries later, when it caused something of a sensation.

Today the songbooks, known as the Sabbateni Collection, belong to Fales Library and support study in music history. Recently, a musicologist noticed that the text on three of the books was Hebrew, not Latin like the others. He brought them to the attention of scholars in Judaic studies, who excitedly informed Marvin Taylor, head of Fales Library, that the “scrap” book covers were in fact fragments of Babylonian Talmud, Tractate Temurah. The scholars asked Taylor to have the covers removed from the three bindings so they could be thoroughly studied. “We were being asked to reveal historical evidence by destroying other historical evidence,” says Taylor. “It was a difficult decision.”

But the scholars’ argument was compelling. Lawrence H. Schiffman, Judge Abraham Lieberman Professor of Hebrew and Judaic Studies, explains, “These fragments display unique readings and will contribute to the ongoing scholarly effort to explain the special character of this tractate and to establish its correct text. Among the cataloged fragments of this text in oth-

er collections are four that were removed from book bindings like ours, and our first task will be to see if any of these are from the same manuscript.”

The German bookbinder was very much on the minds of conservators Laura McCann and Anne Hillam this fall when they set the three songbooks on their workbench and contemplated undoing his work. Normally, they mend rare books. Hillam cautiously began disbinding one of the books, delaminating the parchment leaf from the board using a solution of ethanol and deionized water. She had already tested the solution under a microscope to confirm that it would not destabilize the ink, which was iron gall, derived from a complex natural process involving iron salts and growths formed on oak trees in response to gall-wasp larva. “Iron gall ink etches the parchment,” Hillam says. “It replaced carbon ink, which sits on the surface and can be erased.”

Hillam was soon able to see that the verso—the reverse side—also bore Hebrew writing. Working with infinite patience, she needed about 22 hours per volume. Once removed, the precious parchment leaves were photographed for study by Professor Schiffman and others, and the results will soon be published. The leaves now rest in custom built boxes. The songbooks themselves will be left as is, out of respect for work honorably done 400 years ago.

▲ Above: Conservation photographs of a 17th century songbook with detail from its medieval, Hebrew-lettered binding.