

LIONS OF JUDAH. IDENTIFYING AN ITALIAN *GENIZAH* FRAGMENT
IN BOLOGNA STATE ARCHIVE

What is the importance of illuminated Hebrew manuscripts from the Genizah?

The discovery of Cairo *genizah*,¹ – a treasure trove of hundreds of thousands of Hebrew manuscript and early printed book fragments, as well as several complete (or nearly complete) manuscripts – around 150 years ago in the attic of the Ben-Ezra synagogue in Fustat, has led to innovations in many disciplines of Jewish Studies. Although today taken for granted, our current knowledge about social, economic and intellectual history of medieval Jewish communities, liturgy and Hebrew poetry, textual traditions or Jewish philosophy and mysticism owes tremendously to the wisdom of those who have collected and preserved these artefacts for the generations to come.

Following the scholarly acknowledgment of the value of the material found in the Cairo *genizah*, several attempts have been made to uncover local *genizot* in European archives and libraries.² As part of the *genizah* collection in its wider sense it is important to include also fragments of Hebrew texts that were later re-used

by non-Jews in book bindings or notarial files, as flyleaves, paste downs or palimpsests. The endeavours to collect and catalogue these fragments should not be underestimated as this material is likely to provide new knowledge about the manifold life of medieval Jewish communities. Despite the fact that considerable work has already been carried out,³ lots of the found fragments still need to be unbound, preserved and studied.

The illuminated Hebrew manuscripts from various *genizah* collections have attracted only very little scholarly attention so far. According to the *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, “still almost totally unutilized, and lying undisturbed among *genizah* manuscripts of Cambridge, Oxford, and the British Museum, are approximately 60 illuminated fragments of the Fatimid and Ayyubid periods, which taken collectively, characterize both the quality and the content of the Judeo-Arabic culture during the period of its highest development”.⁴ These fragments comprise illuminated *ketubbot*,⁵ biblical and prayer book fragments, children’s primers and miscellanea. In fact, it is not possible to estimate the value

¹The word *genizah* is a short form of the phrase *bet genizah* from rabbinical Hebrew, meaning “treasury” as in late biblical Hebrew *genez* (pl. *genazim*, *ginzei*). The verbal noun *genizah* means the act of storing something away, while (*bet*) *genizah* comes to mean “storage place” in connection with the Jewish custom of storing away old books and manuscripts following the rabbinical ruling that old Torah scrolls and all other writings with the divine name should be buried. These outworn texts were originally meant to be stored temporarily in a room in the synagogue until a permanent burial place was found but during the time it became customary to keep these manuscripts hidden in a storage in the synagogue as was the case in the Ben Ezra synagogue in Fustat. The term *genizah* (pl. *genizot*) is a generic term as several such depositories are known. See G. KHAN - M. BEN-SASSON, *Genizah, Cairo*, in: M. BERENBAUM - F. SKOLNIK (eds.): *Encyclopaedia*

Judaica, 2nd ed., Vol. 13, Macmillan Reference USA, Detroit 2007, pp. 460-461.

²See e.g. A. LEHNARDT - J. OLSZOWY-SCHLANGER (eds.), *Books within Books: New Discoveries in Old Book Bindings*, Brill, Leiden, 2014, pp. 1-7.

³Professor Mauro Perani has been a pioneering scholar in this field; he has worked and published extensively on the material from the European *genizah*, particularly those in Italy and Spain and since 1992 has been the Director of the Italian *Genizah* Project.

⁴See KHAN - BEN-SASSON, *Genizah, Cairo*, in BERENBAUM - SKOLNIK (eds.), *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, op. cit., p. 469.

⁵*Ketubbot* are Jewish marriage contracts. See, as an example, MS. Heb. c.13, ff. 25b-26a, The Bodleian Libraries, University of Oxford, a 11th century Levantine *ketubbah*, where circles of micrography form intersecting arches.

and proportion of illuminated Hebrew manuscripts in the *genizah* before they have been systematically examined.

Up to date the only part of decorated *genizah* material that have been made public are a few biblical manuscripts from the Firkovitch collection, now preserved at the Russian National Library in St. Petersburg. It is thanks to some of these early dated or datable codices with masoretic designs, produced between the early tenth and eleventh centuries in Egypt and Tiberias, that we may assume micrography to originate in the Near East.⁶ Micrographic patterns in these manuscripts vary from simple geometrical, vegetal and floral designs to more intricate carpet page style decorations but they all share the practice of using motifs characteristic to Islamic art while they avoid figurative representations. Leila Avrin's pioneering study of the illuminations in the Moshe ben Asher codex of Prophets from Tiberias⁷ has laid the foundation for the scholarly study of Hebrew micrography. There is no doubt that micrography is just one of the important aspects of the illuminated Hebrew manuscripts from the *genizah*.

⁶ For examples, see Firkovitch Bible II. B. 19a (Fustat, 1008-1013); Firkovitch Hebr. II. B. B. 12 (Tiberias, early 10th century); Firkovitch Hebr. II. B. B. 269 (Egypt, late 10th century). Cf. B. NARKISS, *Illuminations from Hebrew Bibles of Leningrad, The Bialik Institute, Jerusalem 1989*; S. IAKERSON, "Mivhar Peninim". *Selected Pearls/Treasures of Jewish Culture in Saint Petersburg (manuscripts, documents, incunabula, ritual objects)*, Saint Petersburg 2003; M. BEIT-ARIÉ, C. SIRAT, M. GLATZER (eds.), *Codices Hebraicis Litteris Exarati Quo Tempore Scripti Fuerint Exhibentes*, Turnhout Brepols, Paris, Jerusalem 1997, 1999, 2002; D. STERN, *The First Jewish Books and the Early History of Jewish Reading*, «The Jewish Quarterly Review» 98:2 (2008), pp. 163-202.

⁷ As to the dating of the famous Moshe ben-Asher codex of Prophets from Tiberias, according to the scholarly consensus its colophon is no longer believed to have been written in the year 894/895 by Moshe ben-Asher. Jordan Penkower has claimed that the colophon was copied from at least two other manuscripts. Cf. J. PENKOWER, *A Pentateuch Fragment from the Tenth Century Attributed to Moses*

Psalms incipit fragment at the ASBO

The fragment ebr. 44, found in Archivio di Stato di Bologna (= ASBO) comprises one bifolium parchment sheet of a manuscript that used to be a medieval Ashkenazi Hebrew Bible with lavish micrographic decorations; nowadays it is part of the collections of the ASBO.⁸ Despite the fact that the parchment sheet has been cropped and folded for its later use as a wrapping material in a non-Hebrew work in Italy, it is in a relatively good condition and well preserved. On folio 1a there is the end of the book of Ruth (Ruth 4:9-4:22), written in a beautiful Ashkenazi square script in black ink, with text in three columns (28 lines per column) and *masorah magna* and *masorah parva*, as well as vocalisation – possibly by another hand – in brown ink.

Folio 1b marks the beginning of the book of Psalms, with a half a page micrographic opening panel around the initial word *Ashre*; there are further micrographic decorations at the top and bottom of the page (Fig. 1).⁹ The micrographic decoration in the upper margin consists of three pairs of identical birds in mir-

Ben-Asher (Ms Firkovitch B 188), «Tarbiz» 60:3 (1991), pp. 355-370. Malachi Beit-Arié believes that the colophon of this manuscript of the biblical books of Prophets was written only ca. 1129/1130. See BEIT-ARIÉ, SIRAT, GLATZER (eds.), *Codices Hebraicis Litteris*, op. cit., vol.1, 28. On the illuminations of this manuscript, see L. AVRIN, *The Illuminations in the Moshe Ben-Asher Codex of 895 C.E.*, Ph.D. Diss., University of Michigan, 1974.

⁸ As I am not a Facebook user, I would like to thank Dr Eva Frojmovic for drawing my attention to the publication of this fragment on Facebook by Professor Mauro Perani. Many thanks are also due to Professor Mauro Perani and Dr Francesca Boris of ASBO for their most generous help in consulting this fragment – without their assistance this article would not have been written.

⁹ Cf. M. PERANI (ed.), *Fragments from the "Italian genizah": An Exhibition Catalogue*, Giuntina, Florence 2009; M. PERANI - S. CAMPANINI, *I frammenti ebraici di Bologna. Archivio di stato e collezioni minori*, in «Inventari dei manoscritti delle biblioteche», Vol. CVIII, Leo S. Olschki Editore, Firenze 1997.

ror, while the lower margin contains repetitive floral and geometrical motifs in micrography. The initial word panel in the middle of the page has been surrounded externally by one large text frame, likely to have been written by

the main scribe in Ashkenazi square script in black ink and inside this frame there are two further frames of small text as part of the micrographic *masorah* in brown ink.



Fig. 1 - Fragment ebr. 44, fol. 1b-2a, ASBO, Bologna (written in Germany, late 13th century).

There is no doubt that the focus of the central micrographic decoration are the two identical facing rampant lions. Although strictly speaking these two figures are in their appearance closer to domestic cats than any leonine representation, it is now clear from other related micrographic Bibles that lions must have been intended. Furthermore, this is not a medieval bestiary but a metaphorical representation of two fantastic lions with magnificent floral tails, separated by a beautiful image of *fleur-de-lis*. The lion as a symbol for the tribe of Judah expresses power and royalty and *fleur-de-lis* connotes a noble status. From a stylistic point of view it is important to note the repetitive dots in the background of the micrographic lions, as

well as the birds and floral motifs in the upper and lower margins of the folio.

Typical to so many Ashkenazi Hebrew Bibles from the 13th and 14th centuries, also in this Bolognese manuscript the text of Psalms has been written in a specific wavy manner so that only every other line starts and ends in parallel with the one before. Folio 2a begins with Psalms 12:2 and its text continues from Psalms 16:2 onwards to Psalms 18:3 on folio 2b. On these two folios there are no micrographic decorations but both *masorah magna* and *parva* have been included in brown ink. It appears to be the case that the masoretic text has not been written by the same very neat and orderly hand who was responsible for the micrographic script.

The group of micrographic Bibles attributed to the Ashkenazi masorete Judah, son of Judah

Even though only a segment of the Writings part of the once complete Hebrew Bible has been preserved, Bologna fragment ebr. 44 with its beautiful floral and vegetal motifs, birds and lions in micrography is invaluable for the study of micrography in medieval Ashkenazi Bibles. It is first because of the many professional scribal hands that were involved in the production of this Psalms incipit fragment. Second, the artistic style of the micrography and particularly the usage of the motif of the two facing rampant lions, have enabled us to link this fragment to an already identified group of 13th century Hebrew Bibles with micrography that were produced in Germany.¹⁰

This group of Hebrew Bibles with micrography is very important in the history of decorated Hebrew manuscripts in Ashkenaz since micrography has become the dominant genre of

decoration for the first time, covering large surfaces as an integral part of the layout of the manuscript pages. Not only has micrography become an alternative to painted illumination, taking over many of the functions of the latter, but this change probably also marks a shift in the making of Hebrew manuscripts from individual scribes to an urban workshop, as these micrographed codices comprise works of a team of very professional Hebrew scribes and masoretes.

The three other biblical codices that have been created by this group can all be found in different collections; these include the Sofer Bible in a private collection in London, manuscripts Or. fol. 1-4 at the Staatsbibliothek in Berlin and MS. Can. Or. 137 at the Bodleian Library in Oxford. The earliest among these is the Sofer Bible, a complete Hebrew Bible manuscript, where its scribe and *masorete* Judah, son of Judah provides in the colophon the date of completion, 1264. This manuscript is furthermore an important witness of revolutionary codicological practices¹¹



Fig. 2 - MS. 1264, fol. 110a, Germany, 1264; David Sofer private collection in London.

¹⁰ R. FRONDA, *Attributing of Three Ashkenazi Bibles with Micrographic Images*, «Ars Judaica» 9 (2013), pp. 45-56.

¹¹ See M. BEIT-ARIÉ, *The Makings of the Medieval Hebrew Book: Studies in Palaeography and Codicology*, The Magnes Press, Jerusalem 1993, p. 38.

that may have started in Würzburg or in its vicinity.¹² As to the rich repertoire of micrographic designs in the Sofer Bible, the lions are a favoured theme. On folio 110a at the beginning of the book of Jeremiah, two identical facing rampant lions appear with the signature “lion’s whelp, Judah, son of Judah, the scribe” (Fig. 2).¹³

The second appearance of the same pair of lions is to be found in another complete Hebrew Bible, codex Or. fol. 2, now in Berlin, on folio 130a at the beginning of the book of Isaiah. Here the two facing rampant lions, no longer in the form of domesticated cats, have been equipped with the sharp teeth of wild ani-



Fig. 3 - MS. Or. fol. 2, fol. 130a, Staatsbibliothek zu Berlin, Berlin (written in Germany, late 13th century).

mals; still, in between them there is the same signature “Judah son of Judah” (Fig. 3).¹⁴ Manuscripts Or. fol. 1-4 have not been dated but on the basis of its micrographic decorations it is possible to date them post 1264 and locate them to the same workshop that produced the Sofer Bible.

The third manuscript of interest is a liturgical Pentateuch, MS. Can. Or. 137 at the Bodleian Library. In this manuscript the lions in the appearance of domesticated cats are once more a favourite motif. Even though this codex does not include any signature referring to the direct involvement of Judah, son of Judah, on

the basis of codicological, palaeographical, as well as stylistic grounds it is safe to link manuscript Can. Or. 137 to the previous two Bibles. On folio 167b, at the beginning of the book of Numbers there is a rampant lion that is stylistically and in its composition very close to the lions in the Sofer and Berlin Bibles (Fig. 4). Besides, most para-scriptural devices that appear in the background of the micrographic images are common within this group of manuscripts. Therefore, this Oxford Pentateuch could be dated to late 13th century and located to the diocese of Würzburg or its vicinity.

The psalms incipit fragment at the ASBO

¹² FRONDA, *Attributing of Three Ashkenazi Bibles with Micrographic Images*, op. cit., pp. 45-56.

¹³ גור אריה יהודה בר יהודה הסופר

¹⁴ יהודה ברבי יהודה

is stylistically and from the point of view of its layout closest to manuscript Can. Or. 137. It is important to examine the format of the de-

corated pages in the two manuscripts which is extremely similar. First, the large initial word is located in the middle of the page surrounded



Fig. 4 - MS. Can. Or. 137, fol. 167b, The Bodleian Libraries, University of Oxford (written in Germany, late 13th century).

by a small inner rectangular panel. Second, the micrographic decoration around the initial word is surrounded by a frame of text that is written in large square Ashkenazi script and in black ink, similar to the main text. Third, in the ASBO fragment, as well as in manuscript Can. Or. 137 the lower marginal micrography has been designed as a wide band, while the upper one comprises a narrow decorative band. Fourth, even the location of similar motifs is paralleled in both codices – birds inhabit the upper margins, while lions and floral motifs, including *fleur-de-lis* are found in the central panels and similar repetitive floral and geometrical patterns inhabit the lower margins.

Not only are the motifs of birds and lions, geometrical, vegetal and floral designs very similar but so is the very hand of the micrographic artist that has been responsible for these two manuscripts. As much as the fragment allows

to judge, it is even likely that the main scribe of both Bologna fr. ebr. 44 and Oxford Can. Or. 137 was one and the same person. Although both manuscripts have been cropped, their physical dimensions and proportions between the main text and micrography still appear similar; text only folios contain 28 lines of text in both cases.

Other Hebrew manuscripts that are related to the workshop of Judah son of Judah

Beside the Sofer and Berlin Bibles, the Oxford Pentateuch and the Bologna fragment, it is actually possible to identify a few other manuscripts that may have been produced either in the same workshop or in an association of the scribes of this workshop in the Würzburg area. Another micrographic manuscript of this group, Or. 2091 comprising the Former and Latter

Prophets as well as the Hagiographa is currently housed in the British Library.¹⁵ According to Margoliouth, this codex is written in a fine 13th century German Jewish hand in Ashkenazi square script. Although there are no direct references to its scribe, on the basis of the micrographic decoration (Fig. 5) this manuscript may be linked to the four previous ones. The affinity of all these Ashkenazi Bibles mostly concerns their simi-

larities in composition and style of micrographic decorations, as well as the very same motifs of lions, birds, floral and geometrical designs.

Micrographic ornaments in this manuscript cover areas from half a page to one third of a page, and appear in the upper as well as the lower margins, but mainly as an integral part of the initial word panel at the beginning of individual biblical books. The central position of



Fig. 5 - MS. Or. 2091, fol. 309a, The British Library, London (written in Germany, 13th century).

the large Hebrew letters of their opening words emphasises also the prominence of micrographic decoration that surrounds them. Apart from its visual appeal, micrography with the initial word functions as an important device to facilitate the reading of the whole Bible as a collection of different books.

In Biblioteca Palatina Parma there is a late 13th century Ashkenazi biblical codex, manuscript 2960 (de Rossi 795) that is of interest

in connection with this group of micrographed Bibles.¹⁶ Since the manuscript includes only one micrographic panel, half a page initial word decoration at the beginning of the book of Ruth on folio 5b, it is very hard to confirm this but the panel looks as if its scribal artist was linked to the workshop of Judah, son of Judah (Fig. 6). It has a strikingly similar usage of stylistic and compositional elements, such as the same motifs of animals (prominently, the lion) and birds, flo-

¹⁵ This corresponds to No. 117 in the Margoliouth catalogue. See G. MARGOLIOUTH, *Catalogue of the Hebrew and Samaritan manuscripts in the British Museum*, 3 voll., London Sold at the British museum, London, 1899-1915.

¹⁶ See B. RICHLER (ed.), *Hebrew Manuscripts in the Biblioteca Palatina in Parma: catalogue*, The Hebrew University of Jerusalem The Jewish National and University Library, Jerusalem 2001, n. 289, p. 62.

ral designs and geometrical frames, dots in the background and large textual frame.

Malachi Beit-Arié has confirmed the similarity in the style of writing of the Sofer Bible of 1264 with three other biblical codices.¹⁷ It is

interesting to note that these manuscripts are all dated and also contain some information about their scribes. Firstly, manuscript hébreu 1-3 of 1286 in Paris¹⁸ was written by the scribe Isaac, son of Jacob while the occasionally micrographic



Fig. 6 - MS. 2960 (de Rossi 795), fol. 5b, Germany, 13th century; Biblioteca Palatina, Parma.

masorah was completed by Kalonymus.¹⁹ The second manuscript Add. 9401-9402 at the British Library was completed in 1286 by the scribe Isaac, son of Judah for a patron called Morde-

chai.²⁰ The third codex that Beit-Arié lists in this connection is housed in Berlin with the shelfmark Ham. 80 (2).²¹ This Hebrew Bible was written by the scribe Meir, son of Jacob for Abraham,

¹⁷ See BEIT-ARIÉ, *The Makings of the Medieval Hebrew Book*, op. cit., p. 158, footnote 36.

¹⁸ At the Bibliothèque nationale de France; see also G. SED-RAJNA, *Les manuscrits hébreux enluminés des bibliothèques de France*, Peeters, Leuven-Paris 1994, pp. 181-183 and see also J. DEL BARCO, *Bibliothèque Nationale de France: hébreu 1 à 32. Manuscrits de la bible hébraïque*, Turnhout Brepols, Turnhout 2011, pp. 22-27.

¹⁹ Probably because of the masorete's name Kalonymus, Gabrielle Sed-Rajna has located this manuscript to South Franconia, Ulm (?), assuming the

link between the Kalonymus here and that of the Ambrosian Bible of 1236-1238. See SED-RAJNA, *Les manuscrits hébreux*, op. cit., pp. 181-183. There is, however, no connection made between the Kalonymus here and that of the Ambrosian Bible in Javier del Barco's catalogue. See DEL BARCO, *Bibliothèque Nationale de France*, op. cit., pp. 22-27.

²⁰ This corresponds to N. 70 in the Margoliouth catalogue. See MARGOLIOUTH, *Catalogue of the Hebrew*, op. cit.

²¹ To be more precise, the manuscript is currently at the Staatsbibliothek zu Berlin. See catalogue n.

son of Natan and the micrographic *masorah* was completed by Hayyim, son of Schneur in the year 1289/90.

Not all of these three manuscripts include prominent micrographic decorations, nor do they seem to be the works of Judah, son of Judah and there is no clear indication that they were made in the same workshop. Nonetheless, the affinity in their style and the proximity of their dates allow them to be considered as relatives. The end of the 13th century witnesses the peak of the genre of micrographed Bibles and it could be the case that following the success of the Judah, son of Judah's workshop, others were established in Franconia and nearby. It is likely that similarity in the style of writing – as suggested above by Beit-Arié – or in decoration means close working relations between master and apprentice or father and son in handing over such scribal practices.²²

Conclusion

All these manuscripts have their fascinating stories to tell. After their production by highly professional Hebrew scribes and micrography artists, turbulent times for the Ashkenazi Jews in the Middle Ages have taken the codices – that possibly originated from the same or closely related scribal atelier – afar from one another for centuries. Employing micrography as a complementary tool to codicology and palaeography for dating and localising Hebrew manuscripts and fragments has made it possible to identify a group of related manuscripts produced in 1264 and thereafter in the area of Würzburg. Despite the fragmentary nature of Bologna fr. ebr. 44 it can now be confirmed that this manuscript belongs to the same group.

It is therefore likely that the workshop of Judah, son of Judah functioned as the cradle for

the Sofer Bible, Berlin manuscripts Or. fol. 1-4, Oxford manuscript Can. Or. 137 and the Bologna fragment ebr. 44, while the British Library manuscript Or. 2091, Parma manuscript number 2960, codices hébreu 1-3 in Paris, as well as the London manuscripts Add. 9401-9402 and the Berlin Bible Ham. 80 (2) – although perhaps not the works of the same scribal team, but due to their codicological, palaeographical and stylistic similarities – were possibly created in Franconia, too.

The unusual name of the scribe and artist Judah, son of Judah²³ and the very special and personal signature of his workshop, as well as the multiple hands of his colleagues provide us with details about the division of labour and careful planning that was involved in the making of medieval Hebrew Bibles with micrography. As these codices were produced in an environment where scribal ateliers had been well established, it is reasonable to assume that Jewish scribes and artists became professionally organised in a similar manner to their non-Jewish colleagues as a result of the increasing wealth of medieval Jewish communities and the demand for private books. Likewise the patrons of these manuscripts stand between the two cultural traditions: on the one hand requesting complete Hebrew Bibles with Aramaic translations and on the other hand being open to having their codices decorated with the local Gothic style.

While this is only the beginning of systematic studies in Ashkenazi micrography and a modest attempt to encourage further search for illuminated fragments in the various *genizah* collections, it is to be hoped that one day we will be able to fully appreciate the importance and proportion of illuminated Hebrew manuscripts from the *genizah*.

Rahel Fronda

email: rahel.fronda@hebrewmicrography.com

479 in N. ALLONY - D.S. LOEWINGER, *Hebrew Manuscripts in the Libraries of Austria and Germany*, State of Israel Ministry of Education and Culture Institute of Hebrew Manuscripts, Jerusalem 1957.

²² Several families of Hebrew scribes are known to date. Cf. R. FRONDA, *Masters of Micrography: Examples of Medieval Ashkenazi Scribal Artists, Ruling the Script: Formal Aspects of Written Com-*

munication in the Middle Ages, forthcoming 2015.

²³ In Ashkenazi families children were not named after living parents, so both the father and the son carrying the same name is rare. See E.R. SAMUEL, *New Light on the Selection of Jewish Children's Names*, «The Jewish Historical Society of England - Transactions» 23 (1969/70), pp. 64-85.

SUMMARY

This article deals with a biblical fragment which belongs to the European genizah and is currently housed at the ASBO in Bologna. The fragment is important for it comprises an extraordinary illuminated manuscript, more precisely one containing micrographic decorations. These very micrographic representations of facing rampant lions, bird and floral motifs have enabled the Bologna fragment ebr. 44 to be identified as part of a group of Ashkenazi Bibles with micrographies that were produced in the area of Würzburg between 1264 and 1300. In this case, the lion as the symbol of Judah refers to the workshop of scribal-artist Judah, son of Judah, with extant manuscripts in London, Berlin and Oxford. In this study Hebrew micrography is employed as a complementary tool to codicology and palaeography for dating and localizing medieval Hebrew manuscripts and fragments. While it is a modest attempt to draw attention to illuminated fragments in the genizah collections, one hopes that future research will further our knowledge of the making of decorated medieval Hebrew manuscripts.

KEYWORDS: Hebrew micrography; European genizah; Lions of Judah.