

Summary of the lecture of M. Beit-Arié at the conference

**Der Aufbau der Seite in mittelalterlichen
Handschriften / La construction de la page dans les
manuscripts médiévaux**, Bern, January 25th, 2010

Malachi Beit-Arié – Ruling in Hebrew Codices

The historical circumstances, which scattered the Jewish communities around the Mediterranean basin and further eastward, northward, and westward, brought them into contact with diversified civilizations, religions, and societies. As a result, Hebrew manuscripts are cross-cultural agents and significant artefacts for studying the history of the handwritten book in all the other civilizations around the Mediterranean, predominantly those of Islam and Christianity. Due to the far flung territorial dispersion of the Jews, and their adherence to their national script, medieval codices written in Hebrew characters were produced in a territorial range larger than that of their Greek, Latin, or even Arabic counterparts, as Hebrew handwritten books were manufactured and disseminated within and across all these main and other, more minor, booklore zones.

Jewish society was largely classless, decentralized and literacy was widespread. Book production was initiated not by intellectual or academic establishments but privately. Extensive book consumption and pursuit of further education and studying resulted in a remarkably high rate of user-produced books, which amounts to more than half the extant colophonned codices.

Moreover, the roughly 100,000 extant medieval Hebrew codices and their fragments represent the book production of only the last six centuries of the Middle Ages. The revolutionary codex form, which was adopted and diffused by Christians already in the first centuries of our era and replaced the old roll form from about 300, was employed by the Jews much later. The earliest extant categorically dated Hebrew codices were written at the beginning of the tenth century, all of them in the Middle East. From the eleventh century on, dated manuscripts have survived also from Italy and the Maghreb, while those produced in the Iberian Peninsula, France, Germany, England, and Byzantium date from the twelfth century on. The dated manuscripts furnish us with solid knowledge of the crystallized types of Hebrew book scripts, scribal practices, and codicological techniques in the Islamic East, where the Arabic script was employed, in the Christian West, where the Latin script was used, and in the Byzantine zone, where the Greek script was used, and enable us to draw a firm typology of the hand-produced Hebrew book.

Due to the lack of early medieval codices most of the ruling practices in Hebrew manuscripts do not show the more sophisticated practices known from early Latin manuscripts. On the other hand, due to their wide territorial dispersion they

present a larger variety of techniques. Various instruments and different modes of implementation were employed to carry out the drawing of the ruled horizontal and boundary vertical lines, based on relief and coloured techniques. As time restriction does not allow introducing the various ruling techniques in detail, they will be presented from the viewpoint of efficiency and economy.

Observing their development in the geo-cultural areas of Jewish settlement in Europe (excluding the Byzantine zone) it is noticeable that everywhere, in the *Ashkenazic* zone (central and northern France, Flanders, the German countries, and England), the *Sefardic* zone (extending from the Maghreb to the Iberian Peninsula, Provence and Languedoc) and the Italian peninsula, simpler and more time-saving techniques were replaced by apparently more complex and time-consuming ones, but not in the Middle Eastern zone. However, it can be claimed that what seemed to be a regression in productivity and efficiency in European Hebrew parchment manuscripts turns out to have been a progression, though not necessarily in economic terms. On the contrary, in most areas, copyists who produced copies for their own use and individuals who commissioned books from professional scribes, defied economic constraints and gave priority to other interests, such as comfort of copying, aesthetics, and literary functionality. In Germany and France ruling efficiency was sacrificed in favour of new and vital scholarly requirements. In Spain and other Sefardic areas visual clarity of the ruling scaffoldings, which ensured aesthetic and uniform copying, was preferred over low cost. Only in Italy can one claim an economic rationalization.