

ABRAHAM IBN EZRA, et al, attributed to, [Miscellany on Geomancy]

In Hebrew, illustrated manuscript on paper

Italy (northern?), c. 1550-75

[i], 74, [i] ff., (collation: modern side sewing too tight to determine) paper size 212 x 133 mm, modern foliation in pencil in Arabic numerals, watermarks (Briquet 7104, "Fleur de lis inscrite dans un cercle" Ferrara, 1560, and Briquet 7108, Ferrare 1586; Rome 1561), single column of 24-26 lines, no framing or ruling (justification 145 x 80 mm) written in brown ink in an Italian current semi-cursive script, gatherings of six leaves, apparently complete, catchwords at the end of gatherings written within pen-drawings of animals or squiggles, modern foliation in pencil, diagrams on ff. some marginal worm-trails occasional touching text, a few repaired, one worm hole in latter half affecting text, a few stains. Modern vellum binding over half boards, paper pastedowns and flyleaves [rebound since 2004]. Dimensions 220 x 135 mm.

This is a small, neatly written manuscript on divination, or geomancy, including three texts often attributed to the great poet, philosopher, and astronomer, Abraham Ibn Ezra. Although treatises on divination in Hebrew are not rare (300 to 350 manuscripts are extant), none of the works in the present manuscript are published, and they appear to relate to the early manuscript tradition that predates the occasional printed editions and are also preserved in three manuscripts all in institutions.

PROVENANCE

1. Probably made in northern Italy, judging from the paper, the script, and the watermarks, and used there at an early date; on the first blank page there is a note in Italian, apparently the testimony of an owner who cast lots. The same owner, perhaps, added some geomantic figures on the page.
2. Solomon Hayyim Halberstam (1832-1900), who signed his name in Hebrew acrostics together with the number of the ms in his collection on the first blank page, his MS "396" in blue. Polish scholar and bibliophile, Solomon Halberstam was a wealthy and avid collector and scholar of Hebrew manuscripts, including codices from Samuel Luzzato's estate and Leopold Zunz's private library
3. Sir Moses Montefiore (1784-1885), purchased together with the entire first Halberstamm collection by Moses Gaster for the Moses Montefiore Library in Ramsgate, England. Most famous English Jew of his time, Montefiore became a legend in his lifetime, fighting worldwide for the lives and rights of Jews. Hirschfeld, no. 432
4. London, Jews' College, since 1898, when most of the Montefiore MSS were transferred and where they remained on permanent deposit until 2001 when they were returned to the trustees, the Montefiore Endowment Committee of the Spanish and Portuguese Congregation in London. Most of the manuscripts in the collection were sold at Sotheby's, New York, October 27 and 28, 2004 (this one lot 321).

TEXT

Most of the works in this volume are found in other manuscripts, a few from the fourteenth to the sixteenth centuries and several written after the seventeenth century. The earliest manuscripts that contain many of these treatises are: Cambridge, University Library, MS Add. 1195 (15th-16th centuries, Sephardic scripts); Florence, Biblioteca Medicea Laurenziana, MS Plut. 88.58 (15th-16th centuries, Sephardic-Italian); and St. Petersburg, Russian National Library, MS Yevr. I 262 (14-15th centuries, Sephardic script). The works contained in the present manuscript are apparently entirely unpublished.

f. 1r, [Geomancy], with instructions for predicting if one will succeed, bear children, etc. Begins "To know if one will succeed in his efforts or not, he should consult the first and second houses and they will indicate the truth";

f. 2r, The 16 geomantic figures, six favorable figures, six unfavorable figures, and four intermediate figures. Includes the names in Latin in Hebrew script: *Acquisitio*, *Fortuna Major*, etc.;

f. 3rv, Geomantic tables and lists of ruling planets for the weekdays and methods of divination. This text is also found in the Florence MS Plut. 88.58, f. 20v.

ff. 4r-20v, *Mishpetei ha Goral u-Ma'asehu* [Lots by the great scholar Rabbi Abraham ibn Ezra], Treatise on geomancy attributed in this manuscript and in some others to Abraham ibn Ezra. The added title is "Rules and practice of Lots." The text begins, "If you wish to perform this art, bring sand or earth from a clean place..." This text is found in several other manuscripts, with textual variations. The same version is found in the Cambridge manuscript, MS Add. 1195, ff. 1-22, though it is not attributed there to Ibn Ezra. The beginning of the text in the Florence manuscript represents another tradition, although the continuation is practically identical and includes the attribution to Ibn Ezra.

ff. 20v-55r, Another treatise on geomancy titled *Mishpat ha-Edim* [Method of calculating the witnesses on all sides (copied) from the book "Ba'al ha-Hokhma ve-Yoda'ah" (The master of Wisdom)]. This work is also found in the Florence MS Plut. 88.58 (ff. 32v-56v) and in Cambridge MS Add. 1195 (ff. 23r-57v), as well as in a few other later manuscripts. In some manuscripts it is attributed to ibn Ezra.

Abraham Ibn Ezra (1089-1164), poet, grammarian, biblical commentator, philosopher, astronomer, and physician was born in Toledo, Spain. The events of Ibn Ezra's life may be divided into two distinct periods; during the first period he lived Spain and in the second period, from 1140 until his death, he left Spain and traveled widely throughout Europe, to Italy and France and perhaps also to North Africa and Asia. Wherever he traveled he sought the company of scholars. Ibn Ezra left a large body of writings, including biblical exegesis, grammatical treatises, religious philosophy, and he was the author of a number of important mathematical, astronomical, and astrological works, drawn from Arabic sources, including *Sefer ha-Mispar*. No works by him in Arabic survive, but he surely knew the language.

ff. 55r-55v, *Loda'at mahshevot ha-Sho'el* [Questions for throwing lots], includes a list of the 16 geomantic figures and the appropriate questions for each figure;

ff. 55v-61r, *Pesakim al Mishpetai ha-Goral*, another treatise on the interpreting the figures. This text is also found in Florence MS Plut. 88.58; in Cambridge, MS Add. 1195; and in St. Petersburg MS Yevr. I 262.

ff. 61r-65r, A treatise on astrological geomancy by Abraham [ibn Ezra?]. Begins, "I, Abraham, the author, say that the great principle is that the first, fifth, tenth and eleventh houses are all good ..." This treatise is not identical to any other work by Ibn Ezra. It is also found in Cambridge, MS Add. 1195; and in St. Petersburg MS Yevr. I 262. In all these mss, there are the same short pieces on geomancy following the text (ff. 65r-66r in this MS)

ff. 66r-73v, *Pesakim al Mishpetai ha-Goral*; a short treatise on geomancy including 64 questions (numbered in the present manuscript from 1-47, 49-65). Begins, "He who wishes to know [how to calculate] the judgment of the lots briefly." The figures (dots) were not entered on ff. 72v-73v. The same text was copied in the Florence, Cambridge and St. Petersburg manuscripts.

f. 74, blank;

f. 74v, A prayer to be recited upon casting lots. Begins "May the Lord reveal in these lots what I inquire, for I fear the Lord" Similar prayers are found in other compilations of geomantic texts.

First introduced into West European intellectual life in the eleventh century, when numerous Arabic texts were translated, geomancy is a medieval Islamic form of divination that became popular in the West in the thirteenth century. During the Middle Ages and the Renaissance the method was widespread, and some of the most prominent representatives of occult sciences, including Bernardus Silvestris, Roger Bacon, Albertus Magnus, Cornelius Agrippa and Robert Fludd, wrote on geomancy. The system was further popularized through "books of fate," and "punctuation" (as it was called after its characteristic patterns of dots) and became a self-help oracle even in the rural peripheries of European life.

In the standard geomantic practice sixteen different configurations are arrived at by the construction of four horizontal rows, each element consisting of one dot (for the outcome "odd" of a particular chance procedure, e.g. making an uncounted number of dots on the ground or on a piece of paper; throwing pebbles, shells, sticks etc.) or two dots (for "even"). In this way, patterns of the typical and well-known geomantic figures are produced.

Like many other medieval Islamic sciences, geomancy as a method quickly was assimilated into Jewish culture. The famous poet, philosopher, and astronomer, Abraham ibn Ezra (c. 1089-1164), composed at least one treatise on the subject. He may also have written another treatise attributed to him in some sources. The attribution in the present manuscripts of three of the texts attests to his association with the subject, even if some of the attributions are spurious. Hundreds of treatises and handbooks in Hebrew were composed and copied beginning in at least the fourteenth century. After the introduction of printing these works and other Hebrew treatises on divination continued to be disseminated mainly in manuscript form. The first printed edition was in 1556 and the next printing was not until 1701. By 1800 only about a dozen editions were printed. It is possible that there were more editions, probably in small formats, and that they did not survive. Nevertheless, the total number of editions probably did

not exceed 20 or 30, whereas the number of manuscript copies register in the hundreds, perhaps as many as 300-350.

The essential text for the modern scholar of geomancy remains Charmasson (1980), who summarizes medieval practice and discusses the various treatises in detail. She includes a comprehensive list of manuscripts arranged by both author (or incipit, for anonymous works) and their current location. However, to date, no comprehensive bibliography of Hebrew treatises on geomancy or divination either in printed or in manuscript form has been compiled. Ideally such a study would compare the Hebrew texts with the voluminous literature on these subjects in Arabic and other languages, and the texts in this manuscript will have to be included.

LITERATURE

Charmasson, Therese. *Recherches sur une technique divinatoire: la geomancie dans l'Occident medieval*, Centre de Recherches Histoire et de la Philosophie de la IVe Section de l'Ecole Pratique des Hautes Etudes, 44, Geneva, Droz, 1980.

Halberstam, S.J.H. *Kobelet Shelomo*, Vienna 1890, no. 396;

Hirschfeld, H., *Descriptive Catalogue of the Hebrew Manuscripts in the Montefiore Library*, London 1904, no. 436; *Important Hebrew Manuscripts from the Montefiore Endowment*, New York, October 27 & 28, 2004, lot 321

ONLINE RESOURCES

Medieval Geomancy (Elizabeth Bennett)

<http://www.princeton.edu/~ezb/geomancy/geohome.html>

Astrological Geomancy (Chris Warnock)

<http://www.renaissanceastrology.com/astrologicalgeomancy.html>

Origins of Geomancy (Wim von Bimsbergen)

http://www.shikanda.net/ancient_models/BINGHAMTON%201996.pdf

Magical Use of the Sixteen Figures (Martin Goodson)

http://www.philhine.org.uk/writings/rit_geomancy.html

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