1-1-2003

The Hebrew Manuscripts in the Valmadonna Trust Library

Roger S. Kohn
Library of Congress, rogerkohn@hotmail.com

Approbations

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Reviewed by
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Valmadonna Trust. Library. *The Hebrew manuscripts in the Valmadonna Trust Library,* edited by Benjamin Richler. [London:] Valmadonna Trust, 1998. xiii, 167, 27 p.; colored illustrations; 28 cm. Limited edition of 300 numbered copies . (ISBN: 965-219-019-5). No price listed.

The Valmadonna Trust Library in London is one of the most important private collections of early and rare Hebrew printed books in the world. Privately owned by a family trust based in Vaduz (Liechtenstein) and administered by trustees in Zurich, its books and manuscripts are housed at a London residence and cared for by Mr. Jack V. Lunzer, Custodian. An exhibition in 1989 revealed its treasures to the public by displaying five manuscripts and forty-five early printed Hebrew books at the Pierpont Morgan Library in New York.

There are 291 manuscripts described in the catalogue edited by Benjamin Richler, Director of the Institute of Microfilmed Hebrew Manuscripts in Jerusalem. Richler has devoted most of his professional active life to the description of Hebrew manuscripts over the world and is the author of a *Guide to Hebrew manuscript collections* around the world, an excellent introduction to the existing and past collections and repositories of Hebrew manuscripts.

The manuscripts preserved by the Valmadonna Trust library are mostly from Italian origin and "close to 60% of the manuscripts are written in Italian scripts" (Introduction, p. xi). Other significant collections of manuscripts are from Yemen, India and in Judeo-Arabic or Judeo-Persian. Chronologically, the bulk of the collection covers from the seventeenth to the nineteenth centuries but a few manuscripts are earlier. Among the most valuable manuscripts are Ms. Valmadonna #1, the only surviving Hebrew manuscript of English Jewry before the 1290 expulsion (written in 1189) and two Pentateuch manuscripts, one from Spain in the eleventh or twelfth century, the other from Ashkenaz around 1300 (Mss. #2 & #3). The most recent manuscripts are from Yemen, a 1936 prayer book for Simhat Torah (Ms. Valmadonna #30, cat. #123, p. 74) and a Passover Haggadah finished in 1929 (Ms. Valmadonna #28, cat. #132, p. 77).

"Most branches of Jewish literature are represented in the Valmadonna collection of manuscripts: Biblical texts, translations and commentaries, Talmudic texts and commentaries, Halakhah and responsa, prayerbooks… poetry, Kabbalah, homilies, polemics, science and magic" (Introduction, p. xii). More specifically from Italy, the collection contains commentaries, sermons, responsa, prayers and poems, including an autograph copy of the commentary on Proverbs written by Leone-Aryeh da Modena (1571-1648; Ms. Valmadonna #258) and thirty-two volumes of the halakhic compendium *Pahad Yitshak* of Isaac Lampronti (1679-1756; Ms. Valmadonna #18).

Few of the manuscripts, only fifty out of almost three hundred, had been previously described. For the majority of the manuscripts, Benjamin Richler is the first to describe the contents of the manuscripts in a publication for scholars. These manuscripts have been collected over some forty years by the Valmadonna Trust which purchased them at the various sales held to disperse the David S. Sassoon Collection during the late 1970s and early 1980s and the auctions organized by the Society of Judaica Collectors in Jerusalem. Sixteen manuscripts come from the Sassoon Collection and five others from the library of the late Israel Mehlman, of Jerusalem.

The catalogue, printed in three hundred copies, is lavishly illustrated with eleven color pictures. The descriptions for the manuscripts are arranged in thematic order—starting from the Bible and its commentaries, to the Talmud, then prayer, philosophy, sermon, history, and science—a sort of ranking of Jewish lore from the explicitly divine message from the creator, the Torah, to the more mundane and profane knowledge. This arrangement is the preferred one in the cataloging of Hebrew manuscripts and books in the British Isles, used at the Bodleian Library in Oxford, also at the University Library in Cambridge and now at the Valmadonna Trust. This thematic arrangement was chosen over a more pragmatic arrangement of manuscripts by shelf mark (call number), which would simply record the acquisitions as they are received, leaving the sorting by categories to the indexes.

A typical entry describing an individual manuscript would include first the catalogue number—given by Richler—and a heading, followed by the codicological description of the contents, the manuscript shelf mark in bold, and the paleographical description, including lengthy quotations in Hebrew from the colophon (the end of the manuscript where the copyist gives information about the date and place of writing).

The layout of a typical entry in the catalog is over two columns, the left one in English, the right one in Hebrew. As noted by Richler in his introduction,

> The catalogue is written in both English and Hebrew but the descriptions are not always identical in both versions.
> Lengthy quotations in Hebrew, lists of liturgies etc., are often listed in the Hebrew descriptions, but omitted or referred to in brief in the English descriptions, while treatises or bibliographical references in non-Hebrew languages are described in full in the English catalogue and in brief in the Hebrew listings. Most of the indexes are also in both languages but, likewise, are not identical (Introduction, p. xiii)

There are four indexes in Latin characters and six in Hebrew. Four indexes—- of Persons, Titles, Place Names, Languages—exist in both languages. Only in Hebrew are there indexes for Poems and *Piyyutim*, and for Subjects. The Subject index is not comprehensive. An index for dated manuscripts and for autograph manuscripts would have been a valuable addition to the indexes.

The researcher would be wise to search *both* in Hebrew and in English indexes for any entry of interest, since the English and Hebrew versions of the notice for any given manuscript are not similar. Sometimes the index records information not found in the notice in that language. In Ms. Valmadonna #202 (cat. #348, p. 31), the name of the compiler, Mordekhai ben Imanuel le-veyt Buteri is mentioned only in the Hebrew column, but the Latin characters index (p. 158) has an entry for "Butria, Mordecai b. Immanuel 48." (There is a parallel entry in Hebrew characters for the compiler.) Another discrepancy is found in the description for Ms. Valmadon-

na #234 (cat. #77, p. 47): in the third paragraph in Hebrew, the name of Shabtai Elhanan Pesaro appears without a parallel in the English column. What is found in the Latin characters index entry for "Pesaro, Shabbetai Elhanan b. Matzliah" (p. 162), is only mention of another manuscript, cat. #59, not of cat. #77. In the Hebrew index, (p. *tet-zayin*, [16]), under the same name, we find mention of both cat. #59 and cat. #77. These inconsistencies in the indexes limit access to an otherwise very fine catalogue.

Private manuscript collections of Judaica are often not as well documented and accessible as public ones. Thanks to the combined efforts of a seasoned researcher, Benjamin Richler, and an enthusiastic and dedicated custodian, Jack V. Lunzer, one such private collection, the Hebrew manuscripts of the Valmadonna Trust Library, is now better known and more accessible.

Bibliography

Benjamin Richler. *Guide to Hebrew manuscript collections.* Jerusalem: The Israel Academy of Sciences and Humanities, 1994. [1], xvi, 314 p. : ill. ; 25 cm

Hebraica (saec. X ad saec. XVI): manuscripts and early printed books from the Library of the Valmadonna Trust: an exhibition at the Pierpont Morgan Library, New York : catalogue by Brad Sabin Hill. [London, England]: The Library, [1989]. 1 v. (various pagings) : facsims. (some col.) ; 25 cm

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Roger S. Kohn holds the position of Hebraica Cataloger at the Library of Congress. He coordinates the AJL Job Opportunities committee.