

Irina Visan*

Hebrew Medical Manuscripts in Portugal between the 13th and the 16th centuries.

R E S U M O

Portugal foi um importante centro intelectual judaico na Idade Média e durante o século XVI. Os manuscritos hebraicos que sobreviveram desse período testemunham a riqueza da comunidade judaica em diferentes áreas, como a filosofia, a linguagem e a gramática, a medicina, a astro-medicina, a farmacologia. Este artigo descreve o contexto de produção dos manuscritos hebraicos médicos entre os séculos XIII e XVI e mostra a incerteza que paira sobre o número exato desses manuscritos compostos em Portugal no período em causa. O artigo explora o catálogo de manuscritos hebraicos da Biblioteca Nacional de Jerusalém e fornece uma lista de sete manuscritos científicos elaborados em Portugal entre os séculos XIII e XVI; desses sete, três são com certeza manuscritos médicos ou tratam de problemas médicos. O artigo chama a atenção para a importância da pesquisa dos manuscritos hebraicos de medicina e para a análise do seu conteúdo, tarefa que ainda não foi levada a cabo.

Palavras-chave: Manuscritos hebraicos; Medicina; Idade Média; Portugal.

A B S T R A C T

Portugal has been an important Jewish intellectual center in the Middle Ages and during the 16th century. The Hebrew manuscripts that survive from this period testify to the prosperity of the Jewish community in different fields such as philosophy, language and grammar, medicine, astro-medicine, pharmacology. This article describes the context of production of the Hebrew medical manuscripts between the 13th and the 16th centuries and it looks at the uncertainty that hovers over the exact number of Hebrew medical manuscripts that were written in Portugal during this period. The article explores the catalogue of the Hebrew manuscripts at the Jewish National and University Library in Jerusalem and provides a list of seven scientific Hebrew manuscripts that were written in Portugal between the 13th and the 16th centuries, three of which being medical manuscripts or concerning medical issues. Furthermore, this article is a call to explore the Hebrew medical manuscripts and to analyze their content.

Keywords: Hebrew manuscripts; Medicine; Middle Ages; Portugal.

This article describes the historical context of production of Hebrew medical manuscripts that were written in Portugal between the 13th and the 16th centuries. It wishes to emphasize the importance of these medical works, which remain up until now unstudied. In fact, scholars and historians make various estimations about the exact number of Hebrew medical manuscripts that were written in Portugal between the 13th and the 16th centuries and they rely in their studies upon different sources without reaching any consensus. In this article I will present the records of the catalogue of the Hebrew manuscripts at the Jewish National and University Library in

* Tel Aviv University.

Jerusalem¹ regarding the Hebrew medical manuscripts that origin from Portugal between the 13th and the 16th centuries. The Institute of Microfilmed Hebrew Manuscripts in the National Library of Israel is a vast and complete source of information because it possesses microfilm copies of all Hebrew manuscripts extant in public and private collections around the world².

Without giving the exact number of Hebrew medical manuscripts that survive from this period from Portugal, we find in the catalogue a record of seven scientific manuscripts that were written in Portugal from 1200 to 1540 (the latter corresponding to the establishment of the Inquisition). From these seven scientific manuscripts the catalogue indicates that three manuscripts are medical treatises or deal with medical issues. One of the manuscripts is a collection of various works, on different subjects, and includes medical issues and recipes in Spanish. Another manuscript is a translation from Latin into Hebrew of the commentaries on the *Antidotarium Nicolai*, a canonic medieval text on medical recipes and compound drugs. The original manuscript is located in the collection of manuscripts at the National Library of Israel (Heb. 8° 4013). The catalogue indicates that a third manuscript which is written by the physician Joseph Catelan for himself contains medical recipes and a medical treatise in Galego-Portuguese (in Hebrew characters) by Maestro Samuel (Esperel), the physician from Cordoba. In addition, it seems important to enquire whether one of the remaining four scientific manuscripts (which was written in 1374) may also contain medical issues. In the colophon of this manuscript the scribe describes himself as ‘Sar Shalom Harofe’ (which means physician) and we know that in general doctors copied medical works for themselves or for other interested.

This article stresses the need to create a catalogue of the medical Hebrew manuscripts that were written in Portugal between the 13th and the 16th centuries. It is also a call for a paleographic study of these medical manuscripts which are written in sepharadic demi-cursive script (very different from the modern Hebrew square characters³) and for their thematic study. This kind of study is important not only because it will allow to understand what were the topics that interested the Jewish physicians during the late Middle Ages and the Renaissance but it will also shade a light on the writing strategies and techniques of Jewish physicians that write on medical recipes, methods of treatment and cures and various medical advices. It is important to determine which medical manuscripts reflect the concrete experience of the Jewish physicians and which are works of compilation or are inspired by works of other medics, notably in Greek, Arabic and Latin. In addition, this short article also aims to summarize the contributions of Israeli researchers to the problematic of medical Hebrew manuscripts that were written between the 13th and the 16th centuries. While the contributions of Portuguese historians like Maria José Pimenta Ferro Tavares and Margarida Garcez Ventura on the topic of Jewish communities in the 15th century is largely known in Portugal, the work of the Israeli historians on the subject is less known in the Portuguese academic landscape.

I will provide at the end of the article a list of seven Hebrew scientific manuscripts with the respective years of writing. I will transcribe from Hebrew into English the name of the scribe, the patron for whom it was copied (if available) and the location in different libraries around the world.

Jewish communities and medicine through the Middle Ages

The European Mediterranean countries such as Italy, France (especially southern France), Spain and Portugal have been very important intellectual centers for the Jewish communities throughout the Middle Ages. The Israeli historian Ron Barkai indicates that “[...] the communities

¹ The website of the catalogue is: Sfardata.nli.org.il/sfardatanew/search.aspx?

² See the description of this Institute on: <http://jnul.huji.ac.il/imhm/>

³ See an example of the Sepharadic demi-cursive script at the end of the article.

of this region represented the core of Jewish intellectual activities during the high and late Middle Ages⁴. The Hebrew manuscripts that survive from this period, whether original treatises, comments, works of compilation (compendiums), adaptations and translations, witness to the intensity of the intellectual activities of the Jewish communities in different domains such as philosophy, language and grammar, and physical sciences including medicine, astro-medicine⁵, pharmacology etc. From a totality of 1563 Hebrew manuscripts that were copied through the Middle Ages, the Israeli researcher Michael Reigler has found that 1042 were in fact written in the Mediterranean Europe: 666 manuscripts had survived from Italy, 225 from Spain, 49 from the south of France and 36 from Portugal.⁶

The medical profession was highly regarded by the Jewish community during the Middle Ages. Besides being a practical occupation it has also a spiritual vocation: the physician assists the weak and the suffering and is apprehended as an instrument in the hands of God to cure and heal the sick. In *Medicine in the Bible and the Talmud* Fred Rosner cites a midrashic story in order to illustrate the allegoric function attributed in the Jewish tradition to the physician, who is described as the tiller of the earth, responsible to take care of the Creation but not to interfere in it. The sick man is compared to the vineyard that needs to be plowed and fertilized and weeded while the fertilizer is the medicine and the healing means⁷. The *Encyclopedia Judaica*⁸ mentions that medicine was sanctioned by biblical and Talmudic law therefore explaining the long tradition of rabbi-physicians which were very involved in the community life. Indeed, the researcher Joseph Shatzmiller notes that, "In the countries of the Mediterranean Europe during the High or Late Middle Ages (1250 onward), one can hardly find a Jewish community that did not count at least one medical doctor among its members"⁹. He adds that that it is easy to recognize the Jewish medics due to the label *judeus* that is attached to their name¹⁰. But despite the popularity of this profession, Shatzmiller indicates that until the late Middle Ages there is no written tradition of medicine in Hebrew: « In fact, there was almost no medical literature that might have been called « Jewish », that is, written for Jews doctors in their language and based on a particular Jewish experience or doctrine »¹¹. As Ron Barkai explains, during the early Middle Ages, the Jews doctors wrote mostly in Arabic; Hebrew was still considered at this time as a holy and spiritual language that served for religious works and discussions; Jews preferred to write secular treatises on medical issues in Arabic, which was « used as the daily instrument of communication »¹².

The revival of the Hebrew language begins around the 12th century, "when a considerable number of Jewish medics leave the lands of Islam, establish a firm contact with the Latin culture and abandon the Arabic to the profit of the Hebrew"¹³. From the 12th century and thereafter the Hebrew

⁴ Barkai Ron, *A History of Jewish Gynaecological Texts In The Middle Ages*, 1998, Brill Leiden Boston Koln, p.3.

⁵ In his book *Jews, Medicine, And Medieval Society* Joseph Shatzmiller reminds us that in the 14th century astrology, logic and metaphysics were all part of the curriculum of the student of medicine. The celestial bodies were thought to influence the condition of the human body and knowledge of astrology was necessary in the practice of medicine (p. 37).

⁶ Reigler Michael, *Colophons Of Medieval Hebrew Manuscripts As Historical Sources*, Tel-Aviv, 1995, p.64.

⁷ Rosner, Fred, *Medicine in the Bible and the Talmud: Selections from Classical Jewish Sources*, Ktav Publishing House Inc, Yeshiva University Press, 1977, p.165-166

⁸ Page 720

⁹ Shatzmiller Joseph, *Jews, Medicine, And Medieval Society*, University of California Press, Berkeley Los Angeles London, 1994, p.1.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. ix.

¹¹ Shatzmiller Joseph, *op. cit.*, p.10.

¹² Barkai Ron, *A History of Jewish Gynaecological Texts In The Middle Ages*, 1998, Brill Leiden Boston Koln, pp. 8-9.

¹³ Barkai Ron, *Les Infortunes de Dianah ou la gynécologie juive au Moyen-Age*, 1991, Paris, Toledot-Judaïsmes, Les Éditions du Cerf, p. 120.

language begins to be used in scientific treatises on astronomy, astrology, cosmology, geometry and mathematics.¹⁴ During this period, Hebrew also begins to be used in medical works that concern the human body; in his book about Hebrew gynecological manuscripts from medieval Spain Ron Barkai shows that from a totality of 15 gynecological treatises in Hebrew that circulated at this time, the majority are originally written in Hebrew (eight manuscripts), five are a translation from Latin into Hebrew and only three manuscripts are a translation from Arabic into Hebrew.¹⁵ This study also points to the fact that Jewish culture accorded much importance to the translation of medical works from Latin and Arabic into Hebrew, an intellectual effort that reveals the aspiration to create a corpus of medical works in Hebrew and to contribute by this means to the instruction of future generations of Jewish doctors. Because access to medical university studies was denied to women and Jews, the medical expertise was mainly acquired by the observation of experienced doctors and by reading medical treatises.

The work of Ron Barkai brought a pioneer contribution in the field of medieval Hebrew manuscripts of medicine that were written in Spain. Barkai mentions that in general, the medical Hebrew manuscripts, a very important patrimony for the Mediterranean culture, are dispersed in different libraries in the world and remain largely non explored:

L'un des problèmes auxquels se heurte le chercheur en médecine juive [...] réside dans le fait que la plupart de ces textes sont des manuscrits qui n'ont encore fait l'objet d'aucune analyse textuelle. Ces manuscrits sont dispersés dans des bibliothèques un peu partout, et leur description dans les catalogues est souvent erronée et manque de précision.¹⁶

On one hand, the Middle Ages are the « Golden Age » for the Jewish culture and there is a profusion of Hebrew manuscripts of medicine at this period; Hebrew becomes an important instrument to vehicle and transmit scientific knowledge. But on the other hand, we notice the scarcity of works which analyze the content of these medical works and which examine the medical discourse in the Hebrew manuscripts of medicine. It is true that in some cases we only have the fragments of a manuscript and we can't analyze the entire discourse; during the Inquisition many Hebrew texts were publicly burned and it is not rare to find only some detached folios, or even some lines from a manuscript that survived because they were hidden under the covers of non Hebrew books. It is also true that in some cases the content of a manuscript of medicine does not lend itself to a textual analysis because it only contains a list of herbs and drugs. But as Ron Barkai showed, the majority of the medical Hebrew manuscripts that were written in Spain do present a structured narrative and use different rhetorical procedures. Consider for example, the *Sefer-Ha-toledet* (Book on generation), which is an adaptation from Latin into Hebrew of a gynecological treatise¹⁷. This medical work adopts the form of a fictional dialogue between two biblical characters, Ya'akov and his daughter Dinah. The empirical knowledge about the women's body is not presented in a systematic way but is rather put in an interesting and colorful narrative.

Hebrew medical manuscripts in Portugal

As stressed at the beginning of the article, the opinions of the scholars diverge respecting the exact number of Hebrew medical manuscripts that were written in Portugal from the 13th to the

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 14.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 4-5.

¹⁶ Barkai Ron, *Les Infortunes de Dianah ou la gynécologie juive au Moyen-Age*, 1991, Paris, Toledot-Judaïsmes, Les Éditions du Cerf, p. 10.

¹⁷ The source of *Sefer Ha-toledet* is in the Greek *Gynaïkeia* which was composed by Soranos of Ephesus and later translated into Latin by Muscio (6th century). See Barkai Ron (1991), p. 117.

16th centuries. At the beginning of the 20th century Cardozo de Bethencourt pointed to the vagueness and the uncertainty that hover on the topic of Hebrew manuscripts that originate from Portugal. He said that the Hebrew manuscripts consist only in some religious works, one *Ketoubah* from 1483, one grammar treatise by David Kimchi and few works of little importance¹⁸. However, things have changed since then and some important studies have been done on the topic of the Jewish community in Portugal. In her numerous works Maria José Ferro Tavares looked at the political, economic and historical aspects of the Jewish community in Portugal during the late Middle Ages and the 16th century. *Os Judeus em Portugal no século XV* and *Judaísmo e Inquisição* are key works in this field. In *A herança judaica em Portugal* and in *As Judiarias de Portugal* the author provided important indications on historical Hebrew inscriptions from different places and sites in Portugal. François Soyer wrote on the Spanish and Portuguese Inquisitions and on the persecution of Jews and Muslims in the Iberian Peninsula. An important facet of his research is devoted to the medical discourses on corporal exceptionalities such as hermaphrodites, transgender and androgenic individuals in Portugal between the 12th and the 18th centuries.¹⁹ Despite their immense contribution, these studies don't help in establishing a consensus on the exact number of Hebrew medical manuscripts that survive from Portugal and they don't shed any light on the content of these medical manuscripts. To the contrary, the historians evoke different numbers of possible Hebrew medical manuscripts that were written in Portugal between the 13th and the 16th centuries and thus perpetuate the confusion on this subject. In an article on the Jewish science in Portugal in the 15th century Helena Avelar de Carvalho and Luis Campos Ribeiro²⁰ mention without specifying their sources, that there exist 12 Hebrew manuscripts that were written in the late Middle Ages in Portugal. They indicate that 8 of the 12 are medical manuscripts, 3 are astrological/astronomical treatises and one combines medical and astrological/astronomical issues. This information is contradictory to the records of the Hebrew catalogue at the Jewish National and University Library in Jerusalem, which recognizes only seven Hebrew scientific manuscripts that were written in Portugal between the 13th and the 16th centuries. One of the reasons for such a divergence may be the fragmentary character of the Hebrew manuscripts: from time to time researchers discover fragments (folios or even lines) from Hebrew manuscripts that survived only because they were hidden under the cover of non Hebrew books. But can the fragment be considered as a new manuscript, or does it belong to another manuscript? An example to such a fragment is discussed by Tiago Moita, who found in the library of the Ducal Palace of Vila Viçosa three (or more as he says) Hebrew fragments of scientific works from the 15th century. These fragments are gathered in three bundles in a carton folder under the title *Hebrew medical and scientific mss. 15 century found in the covers of Portuguese book*. In his article Tiago Moita analyzes the first Hebrew fragment which is a part of a translation from Latin into Hebrew of the medical treatise of Gerardus de Solo; However, Moita indicates, at the end of his study that he does not hold enough knowledge in the Hebrew language to allow him to

¹⁸ Bethencourt, Cardozo, "Inscriptions hébraïques du Portugal" in, *O Archeologo Português*, Collecção Illustrada de Materiaes e Noticias publicada pelo Museu Ethnologico Português, Vol. VIII, Fevereiro e Março de 1903, p.3: «En fait de manuscrits juifs que peut-on signaler? Quelques livres de l'écriture Sainte, à Lisbonne, Evora, Coimbra, et Porto ; - une *Ketoubah* de l'an 1483, à Evora ; - une Grammaire de David Kimchi, à Porto ; - et, ça et là, quelques ouvrages de moindre importance.

¹⁹ Soyer, François, "Androgyny and the Fear of Demonic Intervention in the Early Modern Iberian Peninsula: Ecclesiastical and Popular responses" in, *Ordering Emotions in Europe 1100-1800*, ed. By Susan Broomhall, Leiden: E.J. Brill, 2015.

²⁰ Carvalho Helena Avelal de and Ribeiro, Luis Campos, "A ciência Judaica em Portugal no século XV" in L.U. Afonso, P.M. Pinto (eds.), *O livro e a iluminura judaica em Portugal no final da Idade Média*, Biblioteca Nacional de Portugal, 2015.

correctly identify this fragment and to determine which of the medical works of Gerardus de Solo is translated in this Hebrew fragment²¹.

We should also mention the international symposium that was held last year between the 25th and the 27th of February at the National Library of Portugal in which were presented the results of a pioneer research project on the topic of Hebrew decorated manuscripts of the 15th century. The project was carried out between March 2012 and March 2015 and was financed by the FCT. Although the project studied the Hebrew manuscripts that were written in Portugal during the 15th century it focused on illuminated manuscripts, which are for the most part religious works (mostly religious and liturgical manuscripts were illuminated because of their ritual importance while the scientific manuscripts were considered secular and non exceptional productions). This research project did not provide any new information on the exact number of medical Hebrew manuscripts that were written in Portugal between the 13th and the 16th centuries and it did not study their content. Many questions still remain unanswered, such as what are the exact titles of the medical manuscripts, who are the authors, and what is the medical content of these important historic documents.

In my research at the Institute of Microfilmed Hebrew Manuscripts in the National Library of Israel I consulted one medical manuscript, the only one which is originally preserved in the collection of manuscripts at the National Library of Israel. This manuscript has 229 folios and it is composed of two different medical works. The first part is a translation from Latin into Hebrew of the *Expositio super Antidotarium Nicolai* by the French physician and cleric John of Saint-Amand (13th-14th century). Isaac ben Abraham Cabrit translated this medical work into Hebrew. The second part of the manuscript is a medical book entitled *Gerem Ha- Ma'alot* which was written in Arabic by the apostate Jew Josué ben Joseph Lorqui (the physician of the Antipope Benedict XIII) and translated into Hebrew by Joseph Vidal ben Benveniste ben Labi. The book includes four medical chapters and a description of different plans and herbs with their nutritive attributes and respective healing powers. It is not known why these two medical works are brought together in the same manuscript. As it is mentioned in the catalogue, the manuscript is in a very poor condition, it has humidity stains especially at the beginning and at the end and in different places it has been damaged by insects. The manuscript was copied by an unknown scribe with the aid of another unknown scribe (who copied pages 166 to 172 in a cursive script). The manuscript was written for an unknown patron in the Portuguese city of Leiria and despite its importance, the content of this work has never been the object of any study or rigorous description.

The first work in this manuscript is thus a translation from Latin into Hebrew of the *Expositio super Antidotarium Nicolai* which is a commentary by John of Saint-Amand on the original *Antidotarium Nicolai*. It is the most engaging work of Saint-Amand²², one of great importance and largely diffused in the medieval universities²³. In general, the Antidotariums were books of prescriptions or collections of different recipes of compound drugs. In these books we come across various combinations of plants, minerals and animal materials that should produce healing substances. As it is mentioned by Mireille Ausécache, the Antidotariums were essential sources of information for the medieval physicians who had to fabricate by themselves different doses of drugs for their patients long before this task was assigned to the apothecaries²⁴. The *Antidotarium*

²¹ Moita, Tiago, "Tratados Médicos dos Judeus em Portugal no Século XV: Análise do núcleo de fragmentos hebraicos do tratado de Gerardus de Solo da Biblioteca do Paço Ducal de Vila Viçosa".

²² Glick Thomas, Livesey Steven J., Wallis Faith (eds.), *Medieval Science, Technology, and Medicine An Encyclopedia*, Routledge, New York, 2005, p.291

²³ Ausécache, Mireille, « Manuscrits d'antidotaire médiévaux : quelques exemples du fonds latin de la Bibliothèque Nationale de France » in *Médiévales* 52, printemps 2007, pp. 55-74.

²⁴ Ausécache, Mireille, *Idem*.

Nicolai is considered to be one of the most important works of the medical School of Salerno. It contains an alphabetical list of pharmaceutical prescriptions, indications how to preserve the different types of drugs and an appendix of units of weights and measurements of the doses of drugs. Contrary to other books of prescriptions from the same period such as the *Antidotarium Magnus*, the *Antidotarium Nicolai* is a more succinct and concentrated source of knowledge as it contains a selection of the more efficient remedies²⁵.

The Hebrew manuscript which is a translation of the *Expositio super Antidotarium Nicolai* begins with the following words:

”שבדה גזמ אזה המ הנושאר”ה הלאשהו הלא מה רוביחה הזב מתריקה הלפנ רשא תולאשה

The translation of this phrase says: The questions that will be discussed in this treatise are the following and the “first [question] is what is the nature of the honey”. Follows a thematic division of the different chapters in which are elucidated questions on the preparation of healing substances from Honey. The first chapter presents the characteristics of the honey. The second explains why it is necessary to put honey in different drugs. The third discusses which substance is better for healing compositions, the honey or the sugar (it will be argued that the honey has much more virtues; the honey is more consistent and it is more efficient in the composition of concoctions, it has a better taste and adds a purifying element to the composition of concoctions). The fourth chapter explains how to cook the medical concoction. Those are only some aspects of the *Expositio super Antidotarium Nicolai* and it is very important to study the Hebrew translation of this key book of European Pharmacopoeia.

In the following section I will provide the list of seven Hebrew scientific manuscripts which are described in the catalogue of the Hebrew manuscripts at the Jewish National and University Library in Jerusalem.

The scientific manuscripts that were written in Portugal between 1200 and 1540

- 1) Sar Shalom Ha’rofe Ben Moshé Shalom Me’Leon (scribe), Santiago do Cacem in the kingdom of Portugal, 1374. Copied for an unknown patron. Location: Russia St. Petersburg oriental Inst. C.21. This might be a medical manuscript for the scribe is a physician (he describes himself as ‘Ha’rofe’ - the physician); in addition, in the colophon the scribe asks for the blessing of wisdom of the Holy Bible and for the blessing of proficiency in the practice of medicine.
- 2) Yossef Ben Gdaliah Franco (scribe), 1411. Copied for an unknown patron. The name of the author: S’ Ali Ben Ragil. Written in Portuguese in Hebrew script. Location: Uk Oxford Bodleian Lib. Ms. Laud. Or. 310.
- 3) Abraham b. Judah ibn Hayyim (it is possible that the scribe is also the author), written in Loulé, 1462. A collection of different works which includes also medical and other recipes in Spanish. Location: Italy Parma Bib. Palatina Parm. 1959.
- 4) Unknown scribe, 1^o *Expositio super Antidotarium Nicolai*, translation by Isaac Ben Abraham Cabrit, 2^o *Gerem Ha- Ma’a lot*, Joseph Vidal ben Benveniste ben Labi, Leiria, 1478. Location: Israel Jerusalem NLI, Heb. 8^o 4013.
- 5) Nisim ben Yossef Vibash, written for oneself Lisboa, 1489. Location: Italy Firenze Bib. Laurenciana Plut 88.27

²⁵ Vallejo, José Ramon, Cobos José Miguel, “El recetario de la Escuela de Salerno conocido como el “Antidotarium Nicolai” in *Medicina Naturalista*, 2013; Vol. 7- N^o 1, p. 35-41.

- 6) Yossef Ben Abraham Calomiti, written for oneself, Porto, 1496. The title of the manuscript: Be'ur Kzat Dvarim Mi'sefer Iesod Olam (Explanation of some elements from the book of Iesod Olam (the source of the universe). 2- The Book of Iesod Olam bt Itzhak Ben Yossef Israeli. Library: Italy Firenze Bib. Laureniana Gaddi 158.
- 7) Yossef Ha'rofe Catlian, written for oneself, 1451-1500. Includes a medical treatise in Galego-Portuguese by Shmuel Esperal and medical recipes by the physician Joseph Catelan in Galego-Portuguese in Hebrew characters. Location: Italy Vatican Bav. Vat. Ebr. 372.

Anexo

