IMAGES TELL A TALE OF PLACE AND TIME: 
A METHODOLOGICAL STUDY OF ARTWORK IN SERVICE OF CONTEXT

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This paper was conceived on November 23, 2006, when I received an image of a Mahzor fragment that Professor Andreas Lehnardt sent to me for art-historical identification (fig. 1). It had been found in the repository of binding fragments in the Stadtarchiv in Friedberg (Hessen) within the framework of the ‘Genizat Germania’ project. I was asked to localize and date the fragment on the basis of its illustration and to comment on the frequency with which such decorative devices appear in contemporary Hebrew manuscripts.

The left margin of the said fragment, of a large folio size, is partly occupied by a horned deer, almost seven centimeters long, rendered in red and light-brown ink (fig. 1a, detail). At first glance, there seems to be no immediate relation between the illustration and the text inscribed on the page. Moreover, the fact that the image was not allocated an area within the text space, along with its vertical, upright position, serves as additional substantiation of the assumption that it is probably no more than a marginal decoration, drawn by a different hand than that of the scribe, who, furthermore, utilized a darker brown ink for the text.

The purpose of this paper is to examine the method for dating and localizing a manuscript—or even a fragment for that matter—by using art-historical criteria. It aims to present the methodology by which non-textual features may serve as keys for the study of a manuscript and for ascribing it to a specific place and time, using style as the main parameter for evaluation. An attempt to tackle the issue was made by Gabrielle Sed-Rajna, in “Les moyens auxiliaires pour l’identification des écoles de scribes des mss. Hébreux,” La paléographie hébraïque médiévale: Actes du Colloque International… Paris, septembre 1972 [organized by

1 The crude, simplified, and stylized illustration does not allow for an unequivocal identification of the specific type of Cervidae mammal. In this, as in other manuscripts that will be mentioned throughout the paper, therefore, the term “deer” will serve as a general designation.

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components of an illuminated manuscript, it is important to bear in mind that they were often not produced by the same hand, sometimes not even in the same scriptorium or workshop, in the same country or artistic milieu, or on the same date. The examination of these two components may therefore lead to quite different results regarding the origin and dating of a manuscript.

Art in Service of Dating and Localizing: Methodological Remarks

Hebrew manuscripts are a world full of information. They are not only part of our intellectual heritage as historical and cultural documents; as material objects, they are a multi-tiered treasure-trove for research in many fields. While most scholars focus primarily on the content of a book, art historians focus on its visual appearance, especially its layout, decorative scheme—namely iconography and style—and binding. Correlating text and image, on the other hand, is the cultural historian’s domain.

Illuminated manuscripts, and manuscripts as a whole, can best be dated and localized when they contain a colophon. In many colophon inscriptions, the name of the scribe(s), the date(s) of production of the manuscript, and the place(s) in which it was copied are provided. In addition to this information, sometimes supplemental details are also included which identify the circumstances under which the scribe labored, his wages, the name of his patron, and the occasion for which the manuscript was commissioned.

3 The different hands that collaborate in the production of illuminated manuscripts and the interrelation between their respective tasks are discussed by Bezalel Narkiss, “The Relation Between the Author, Scribe, Massorator and Illuminator in Medieval Manuscripts,” La paléographie hébraïque médiévale (n. 2 above), 79–96.

4 The technical term “colophon,” meaning “end,” “summit,” or “top,” is Greek in origin (κολοφών), and was incorporated into modern scholarship through late Latin, using the same word.

5 The mode used by the scribe and the artist to document their names in Hebrew manuscripts does not always fall into the category of a textually rendered colophon and is sometimes more fanciful, if not artistic. Thus, for example, Eliezer bar Sh’muiel, the scribe of the JTS Mahzor Vitry, who completed his task presumably in France in