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Ilanot

Abstract

Ilanot (trees, sg. *ilan*) are a unique iconotextual genre, artifacts constituted by the wedding of parchment and the arboreal schema that represents the kabbalistically-construed divine world. Produced by kabbalists since the fourteenth century, they have been primarily used for study, performative contemplation and talismanic practices. Medieval and Renaissance *ilanot* visualize and introduce the sefirotic network; early modern Lurianic rolls present cosmogonic time-lines. Beginning in the nineteenth century, *ilanot* were increasingly produced to serve as apotropaic amulets.

Basic Information

Ilanot (trees, sg. *ilan*) are characterized by the inscription of an arboreal diagram representing the divine world on a parchment roll. Over the late medieval centuries, the tree gradually became the most common diagrammatic schema for depicting the ten *sefirot* (divine powers, instruments or emanations) of kabbalistic theosophy. As such, tree diagrams are also to be found within codex manuscripts, whether on oversized fold-out pages or scribbled in the margins. If the latter were largely intended as epistemic images to clarify the adjacent texts, the dedicated diagrammatic rolls were first and foremost visual artefacts. The large format of the *ilan* rotuli facilitated their inscription with location-relevant texts and additional iconographic elements. Early kabbalistic sources refer to these as *yeri'ot* (parchments); the generic term *ilanot* became standard around 1500. Kabbalists crafted *ilanot* for personal study and devotional performance. An *ilan* was at once a mnemonic précis that could be studied, and a map that could be enacted, by the practitioner. Capturing the image of the divine world as they did, they would naturally have been regarded as talismanic. Their arresting visual quality and their association with kabbalistic lore also contributed to their eventual redeployment as apotropaic amulets.

Kabbalists of different eras and contexts refer to the drawing of sefirotic diagrams as an important aspect of their study and devotional performance. Examples include the classical introductory works *Ša'arei orah*, composed by Joseph Gikatilla (1248–1305), and the anonymous *Ma'areket ha-elohut*; the commentary on the latter by the Spanish exile Judah Ḥayyat (c. 1450–c. 1510), and works by David ben Yehudah he-Ḥassid (14th cent.), Moses Cordovero (1522–1570), and Ḥayyim Vital (1542–1620). We may infer from some sources that the act of inscription, the “thinking with” the diagram, and the identificatory contemplation of texts and iconographic elements were all part of their ritual or performative use.

Typology, Sources

Early kabbalistic manuscripts depict the sefirotic world with a variety of schemata. The arboreal schema, which gradually assumed iconic dominance, closely resembles the diagrams employed in medieval philosophical works intended for logical demonstrations and division of the categories of knowledge, for example the Porphyrian *scala predicamentalis*. In typical kabbalistic tree figures of circa 1500 and later, we find ten interconnected roundels, each embedding a term associated with a *sefirah* (Fig. 1). The ten *sefirot* are ordered

hierarchically and vertically. The sefirotic roundels are connected by lines, the *šīnorot* (channels) through which the divine flux flows. Variations in the pathways, together with the endless replication and sequencing of the tree structure, connect the elements of the divine pleroma and the lower degrees of the Creation and form the infinite variety of the cosmos.

In the earliest extant dated sefirotic scroll (Vatican City, Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, MS Vat. ebr. 530 III), written by Solomon Astruc b. Elijah (Candia 1451), the diagram stretches vertically across the flesh side of a single sheet of parchment (Fig. 2). In parallel to the central axis, the *sefirot Hokmah* (Wisdom), *Gedullah* (Greatness) and *Neṣaḥ* (Victory/Eternity) stand aligned one after the other on the right, *Binah* (Understanding), *Gevurah* (Strength) and *Hod* (Splendor) on the left. *Malḳut* (Kingdom) is connected only to *Yesod* (Foundation). Thus, the author intended to distance the *sefirah* governing the lower levels of the Creation from the other elements of the divine pleroma. In other diagrams, *Malḳut* is linked by channels to *Neṣaḥ* and *Hod*; the former is therefore more integrated in the divine structure. The texts surrounding the roundels are taken from a late 13th-century commentary on the *sefirot* likely authored by Joseph Gikatilla.

Characteristic of such commentaries is the amassing of the alternative names and appellations of each *sefirah*, each inscribed *in loco*. The appellations of the *sefirot* in the *ilan* roundels include names of parts of the human body, divine and angelic names, planetary bodies, days of the week, biblical patriarchs and matriarchs, and colors. Like kabbalistic sources more generally, *ilanot* display a range of terms for the *sefirot*, for instance, *Ḥesed* (Mercy) instead of *Gedullah*, *Din* (Judgment) or *Paḥad* (Awe) instead of *Gevurah*. Additions to, and variations on the arboreal schema are also to be found in many artefacts. More than a few *ilanot* display *Keter* preceded by a roundel, the bottom half blackened and the top half inscribed with the name of *Ein sof* (No End). An additional roundel bearing the name of *Da'at* (Knowledge) is also occasionally depicted in the central axis directly under *Keter*.

The representation of heavenly and astral worlds as a “Great chain of being” is particularly evident in the tradition of Italian Renaissance *rotuli*. In some exemplars, for instance Oxford, Bodleian Library MS Hunt. Add. D (Neubauer 1949), the sefirotic diagram rises above a Ptolemaic concentric circle cosmogram of the planetary spheres, the fixed stars, and the signs of the zodiac (Fig. 3). In the liminal space between them are the so-called “Intellects” as well as representations of the Chariot of Ezekiel 1. In the aforementioned manuscript – one witness of a family of roughly a dozen, complete and fragmentary are extant – we also find a dazzling array of texts, a 33,000-word miscellany including selections from the writings of the kabbalists most popular in Italy circa 1500: Abraham Abulafia (1240–1291), Joseph Gikatilla, Menaḥem Recanati (1223–1290) as well as from *Sefer ha-Bahir* and *Ma'areket ha-elohut*. Other *ilanot* of this provenance include colorful images of Temple objects and scenes from the Garden of Eden (e.g. Oxford, Bodleian Library MS Hunt. Add. E; Firenze, Biblioteca Medicea Laurenziana, MS Plut. 44, 18).

Ilanot *rotuli* that visualize the doctrines of the Kabbalah of Isaac Luria (1534–1572) emerge in the first half of the 17th century. They are distinguished by their emphasis upon mapping the process known as *hitlabšut* (enclothing): the graduated attenuation of the infinite divine light through a series of transpositions into parallel lower registers. This process was visualized in these artefacts chiefly by means of kaleidoscopic sequential arrays of arboreal

diagrams. The Lurianic rotuli often greatly exceeded the length of their classical antecedents, reaching over ten meters in some cases. Over the many sheets of parchment, these rotuli traced the unfolding of divinity from *Ein Sof* and its first outward expression, *Adam Qadmon* (Primordial Adam), to the various *paršufim* (personae) of the divinity at lower registers. These personae were given anthropomorphic features for the first time in the *ilan* fashioned by Meir Poppers (1624–1662) for his disciples in Cracow around 1650. Extraordinary length and audacious anthropomorphism are found together in the series of *ilanot* fashioned by the artist and kabbalist Šasson ben Mordeḳai Shanduk (Baghdad 1747-1830; see, e.g. Gross Family Collection 028.012.009) (Fig. 4).

Editions

The first printed *sefirot* diagram appears on the frontispiece of *Portae Lucis* (Augsburg 1516), the Latin translation of Gikatilla's aforementioned classic. Lurianic *ilanot* were first printed as part of translation project as well: five *ilanot* diagrams were engraved over 16 fold-out pages in the first volume of Christian Knorr von Rosenroth's *Kabbalah denudata*, published in Sulzbach in 1677. For their part, Jews did not print an *ilan* rotulus until the second half of the 19th century, when the so-called "Great *Ilan* of R. Meir Poppers" was published in Warsaw in 1864.

Ilanot have only recently become subject to sustained research. Following the 1980 article by Gabrielle Sed-Rajna on a sefirotic parchment (Oxford, Bodleian Library MS Hunt. Add. E), kabbalistic diagrams remained unexamined until the pioneering survey by Giulio Busi, *Qabbalah Visiva* (2005). Since then, a number of publications have been devoted to kabbalistic diagrams and the *ilanot* genre. Among the scholars who have treated this material are Emma Abate, Daniel Abrams, Eliezer Baumgarten, Saverio Campanini, J. H. Chajes, Moshe Idel, Fabrizio Lelli, and Marla Segol. Chajes founded "The *Ilanot* Project" in 2011 with the express purpose of subjecting this corpus to systematic research. Under this rubric, a comprehensive database of extant kabbalistic diagrams and *ilanot* has been made available to the scholarly community, and digital and print editions of the great *ilanot* have been prepared for publication.

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