

***The Destruction and Preservation of Hebrew Books.  
New Sources and Methodologies for Studying Catholic Censorship  
and Other Forms of Dismemberment and Rescue of Hebrew Texts  
in Late Medieval and Early Modern Italy***<sup>1</sup>

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Certain aspects of the history of power are intertwined with the history of knowledge. The history of power also concerns the history of the most widespread vehicle of knowledge: the book.<sup>2</sup> As a result, it involves the production, dissemination, and availability of books, but also their destruction and preservation. This is true in particular of the history of the Hebrew book, both in its printed form and as a manuscript. The Hebrew book is a container of ideas and a vehicle for knowledge, but it is also an artefact—in other words, an object with economic value. The aim of the international conference *The Destruction and Preservation of Hebrew Books. New Sources and Methodologies for the Study of Catholic Censorship and Other Forms of Dismemberment and Rescue of Hebrew Texts in the Late Medieval and Early Modern Italy*,<sup>3</sup> held virtually on 15 November 2021, was to run the gamut of topics concerning the fascinating history and vicissitudes of the Hebrew book and its relationship to the Catholic world, in which it was produced, disseminated, controlled, censored, confiscated, and retained. This thematic section, which presents the conference proceedings, aims to describe a range of topics including the Catholic censorship and expurgation of Hebrew texts, books, and documents, their reuse in book bindings and notary files, and the way Digital Humanities allows us to retrieve otherwise-lost manuscripts or printed books. The methodology adopted here is aimed less at presenting a series of events and more at interpreting specific historical moments to shed new light on the socio-historical context in which they occurred. This approach will enable us to analyse the dialectic between events and protagonists and thus consider the development of censorship

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<sup>1</sup> The first section of this introduction was written by Miriam Benfatto (1–3) and the second part by Elena Lolli (4–7).

<sup>2</sup> ROBERT DARNTON, *The Case for Books: Past, Present, and Future* (New York: Public Affairs, 2009).

<sup>3</sup> The conference was hosted by the Department of History and Cultures at the University of Bologna, with the support of the Books within Books – Hebrew Fragments in European Libraries research cluster and the Italian Association for Jewish Studies (AISG), which we thank again for the opportunity they have given us. The organisers were supported in their research projects by Rothschild Foundation Hanadiv Europe.

part of the institutionalisation of new measures of control over Hebrew texts in late medieval and early modern Italy. A further objective is to assess how Catholic censorship changed the possibility of producing or destroying culture through the creation, distribution, and destruction of Hebrew books in Italy. Hebrew and non-Hebrew books owned by Jews are considered here not only as objects, but as the protagonists of a particular interaction between readers, book owners, censors, and producers.

The Italian Peninsula assumed a pivotal role in this context, having been the leading centre for Hebrew book production since the fifteenth century and remaining one of the most important centres of Jewish printing up to the eighteenth century. Almost half of the medieval Hebrew manuscripts have Italian provenance and were either copied in Italy or introduced in the Peninsula by immigrants.<sup>4</sup> In Italy, the first Hebrew books were printed (Rashi's commentary on the Pentateuch, Reggio Calabria, 1475) and trade in them developed; Hebrew texts also became standardised, often thanks to Hebrew publishing houses operated by Christians.<sup>5</sup> The Catholic Church has a long history of altering and destroying Hebrew books, starting in the thirteenth century if not earlier.<sup>6</sup> It was believed that banning Jewish texts would facilitate the conversion of Jews who were still 'blinded' by their erroneous doctrines and superstitions. The regulation of Hebrew books was clearly associated with other anti-Jewish measures taken in the same period, such as ghettoization and attempts to bring about their conversion.<sup>7</sup>

In the mid-sixteenth century, assaults on the Talmud had the most extensive effects in Italy, although the Church's attitude towards it was fluctuating and ambivalent.<sup>8</sup> As is well known, Pope Julius III issued a decree in August 1553 condemning the Talmud for being blasphemous and ordering its destruction. This destruction took place about a month later, on 9 September 1553, when a huge pyre of Hebrew books—including copies of the Talmud—was set up in the Campo de'

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<sup>4</sup> BENJAMIN RICHLER, 'The Dispersion of Medieval Jewish Manuscripts and Its Significance for Understanding the Phenomenon of Hebrew *membra disiecta*,' in "*Fragmenta ne pereant*": *Recupero e studio dei frammenti di manoscritti medievali e rinascimentali riutilizzati in legature*, ed. MAURO PERANI and CESARINO RUINI (Ravenna: Longo Editore, 2000), 75–83.

<sup>5</sup> JOSEPH R. HACKER and ADAM SHEAR, eds, *The Hebrew Book in Early Modern Italy* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011).

<sup>6</sup> MAURO PERANI, 'Censura, sequestri e roghi di libri ebraici,' in *Dizionario storico dell'Inquisizione*, eds ADRIANO PROSPERI, VINCENZO LAVENIA, and JOHN TEDESCHI, 4 vols., vol. 1 (Pisa: Edizioni della Normale, 2010), 319–23.

<sup>7</sup> KENNETH STOW, *Catholic Thought and Papal Jewry Policy 1555–1593* (New York: The Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 1977); DOMENICO ROCCIOLO, 'Documenti sui catecumeni e neofiti a Roma nel Seicento e Settecento,' *Ricerche per la storia religiosa di Roma* 10 (1998): 391–452; MARINA CAFFIERO, *Battesimi forzati. Storie di ebrei, cristiani e convertiti nella Roma dei papi* (Roma: Viella 2004); MARINA CAFFIERO, 'Tra due fuochi. Ebrei, Inquisizione e Case dei catecumeni,' in *L'Inquisizione e gli ebrei. Nuove ricerche*, ed. MARINA CAFFIERO (Roma: Edizioni di Storia e Letteratura, 2021), 83–110.

<sup>8</sup> KENNETH STOW, 'The Burning of the Talmud in 1553, in the Light of Sixteenth Century Catholic Attitudes toward the Talmud,' *Bibliothèque d'Humanisme et Renaissance* 34, no. 3 (1972): 435–59. See also: KENNETH STOW, 'The Fruit of Ambivalence. Papal Jewry Policies Over the Centuries,' in *The Roman Inquisition, the Index and the Jews*, ed. STEPHAN WENDEHORST (Leiden: Brill, 2004), 3–17.

Fiori in Rome to be burnt and destroyed.<sup>9</sup> The same treatment was later given to Hebrew books in other cities of the Papal States. Over time, more or less systematic confiscations of Hebrew books have taken place, followed by ritual processions, bonfires, and destruction, along with the persecution of the people who produced them.<sup>10</sup>

The ecclesiastical body in charge of controlling Hebrew books was not the Congregation of the Index, which controlled books in general, but the Holy Office. The role of the Holy Office's Congregation of Cardinals was to protect the purity of the Catholic faith and thus to take action against heresy and heretics. Theoretically speaking, Jews were not part of this category, but they ended up falling under the Inquisition's purview if their views or actions were considered detrimental to Christianity, for example the reading or storage of books deemed heretical and blasphemous.

The Roman Archive of the Holy Office has been open to the public for about twenty-five years; scholars were first allowed to consult the documents stored there in 1998. The then-Prefect of the Sacra Congregatio pro Doctrina Fidei, Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger (future Pope Benedict XVI), ordered the official opening of the Archive of the Holy Office following the indications of Pope John Paul II (pope from 1978 to 2005).<sup>11</sup> The archive is made up of an extraordinary variety of documents that have allowed scholars to investigate issues regarding the Catholic expurgation and regulation of Hebrew texts and the impact that these interventions have had on Italian Jewish culture and Jewish social life.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> FAUSTO PARENTE, 'La Chiesa e il "Talmud": l'atteggiamento della Chiesa e del mondo cristiano nei confronti del "Talmud" e degli altri scritti rabbinici con particolare riguardo all'Italia tra XV e XVI secolo,' in *Storia d'Italia. Annali 11. Gli Ebrei in Italia*, 2 vols., vol. 1, *Dall'alto Medioevo all'età dei ghetti*, ed. CORRADO VIVANTI (Turin: Einaudi, 1996), 521–643.

<sup>10</sup> ABRAHAM BERLINER, *Censur und Confiscation hebräischer Bücherim Kirchenstaate* (Frankfurt: J. Kauffmann, 1891); WILLIAM POPPER, *The Censorship of Hebrew Books* (New York: Knickerbocker Press, 1899); MARVIN J. HELLER, *Printing the Talmud: A History of the Earliest Printed Editions of the Talmud* (Brooklyn, NY: ImHasefe, 1992); MAURO PERANI, 'Confisca e censura dei libri ebraici a Modena fra cinque e seicento,' in *L'inquisizione e gli ebrei in Italia*, ed. MICHELE LUZZATI (Roma: Laterza, 1994), 287–320; FAUSTO PARENTE, 'The Index, the Holy Office, the Condemnation of the Talmud and the Publication of Clement VIII's Index,' in *Church, Censorship and Culture in Early Modern Italy*, ed. GIGLIOLA FRAGNITO (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 163–93.

<sup>11</sup> Regarding the opening of the Archive, see *L'apertura degli archivi del Sant'Uffizio romano. Atti dei convegni lincei 142 (Giornata di studio, Roma 22 gennaio 1998)* (Rome: Accademia Nazionale dei Lincei, 1998); *L'Inquisizione e gli storici: un cantiere aperto. Atti dei convegni lincei 162 (Roma, 24–25 giugno 1999)* (Rome: Accademia Nazionale dei Lincei, 2000); *Le inquisizioni cristiane e gli ebrei. Atti dei convegni lincei 191 (Roma, 20–21 dicembre 2001)* (Rome: Accademia Nazionale dei Lincei, 2003); *A dieci anni dall'apertura dell'Archivio della Congregazione per la Dottrina della Fede. Storia e archivi dell'Inquisizione* (Rome: Accademia Nazionale dei Lincei, 2011); *L'Inquisizione romana e i suoi archivi. A venti anni dall'apertura dell'ACDF. Atti del convegno (Roma, 15–17 maggio 2018)*, ed. ALEJANDRO CIFRES (Rome: Gangemi, 2019). At the time of writing, the documents from the historical archives that had been deposited prior to the end of the pontificate of Pius XII (1939–1958) were accessible.

<sup>12</sup> MARINA CAFFIERO, *Legami pericolosi. Ebrei e cristiani tra eresia, libri proibiti e stregoneria* (Torino: Einaudi, 2012).

The relationship between the Catholic Church, Jews, and Judaism is intricate, and the papers collected in this thematic section deal with different aspects of this relationship. They try to integrate the newly discovered sources into the context of existing research by studying the vicissitudes of the Hebrew book. Over the last few years, the story of Hebrew books has sparked growing interest, and this thematic section can therefore offer a unique lens through which to view and analyse some aspects of the complex relationship between Judaism and Christianity.<sup>13</sup>

As has often occurred in the history of culture and circulation of knowledge, large quantities of books have not been destined to be preserved for posterity, having instead been neglected, destroyed or, in some cases, even dismembered and repurposed. Indeed, besides the various ways in which Hebrew books were persecuted, some particular circumstances paradoxically led to their rescue and conservation as well—albeit in a fragmentary form.

Despite the various decrees stipulating the confiscation and burning of Jewish books promulgated by the Catholic Church—especially after the notorious bull *Cum nimis absurdum*, issued by inquisitor-general Paul IV Carafa during the Counter-Reformation as a result of which thousands upon thousands of texts, including rare rabbinic writings, and other irreplaceable volumes were destroyed<sup>14</sup>—many Hebrew documents were miraculously saved due to the fact that, instead of being burned, they were stolen and recycled. A substantial quantity of book fragments were pulled from the flames, rescued, sold to bibliophiles or antiquarian book dealers, and reused as bookbinding material. Even today, therefore, we can still find surviving traces of medieval Hebrew texts, manuscripts, and *maculature* that have been recovered in many archival *chartularia* all over the world.

Judaic scholarship has termed this discovery of thousands of *disiecta membra* in recent decades as European Genizah, by analogy with the corpus of fragments recovered from old Cairo. The Hebrew root g-n-z, from which the word *genizah* is derived, is documented in Semitic languages with the meanings ‘hide,’ ‘store,’ and ‘bury,’ thus indicating the storage of worn religious texts or other Hebraica that contained references to God. Although the underlying assumptions connected to the two practices may be quite opposite—the aim of *bet genizah* is to avoid desecration, while recycling can be seen as maximum profanation—as a matter of fact they both

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<sup>13</sup> MAURO PERANI, ed., *Medieval Hebrew Manuscripts Reused as Book-bindings in Italy*, in collaboration with EMMA ABATE (Leiden: Brill, 2022).

<sup>14</sup> For information on the measures taken against Hebrew books in that period see MARCO MORTARA, ‘Die Censurhebräischer Bücher in Italien und der Canon purificationis,’ *Hebräische Bibliographie* 5, no. 28 (1862): 96–101; ISALAH SONNE, ed., *From Paul IV to Pius V* (Jerusalem: Mossad Bialik, 1954) [Hebrew]; MEIR BENAYAHU, *Copyright, Authorization, and Imprimatur for Hebrew Books Printed in Venice* (Jerusalem: Machon Ben Zvi and Mossad Harav Kook, 1971) [Hebrew]; KENNETH STOW, ‘The Proper Meaning of Cum Nimis Absurdum,’ *Jewish Quarterly Review* 71, no. 4 (1981): 251–52; SHIFRA BARUCHSON, *Books and Readers: The Reading Interests of Italian Jews at the Close of the Renaissance* (Ramat-Gan: Bar Ilan University Press, 1993) [Hebrew].

ironically achieve the same effect, namely the partial (but effective) conservation of thousands of fragments of ancient manuscripts.

Soon after the Gutenberg revolution, the shift from scribal production to printed books caused a collapse of the manuscript market.<sup>15</sup> Hand-written works gradually lost their value as texts and they were relegated to being sold as mere material to be recycled. Medieval manuscripts were bespoke, unique artisanal artefacts, individually hand-made using fine animal skin or other valuable materials, produced mostly upon the request of a patron as they were so expensive and time-consuming to create. For these reasons, from the fifteenth century onward many manuscripts were physically recycled and added to pre-existing texts in an effort to repair damaged books. In this way, old manuscripts were brought into an economisation process, no longer valued as carriers of text but rather for the physical qualities of the parchment on which they were written. Manuscript waste was repurposed in various ways according to the new needs of bookbinders, in the form of flyleaves, pastedowns, limp covers, or palimpsests.

The phenomenon of re-employing discarded book materials is also found in other European countries, but not as consistently as in Italy where over 16,000 fragments have been discovered.<sup>16</sup> The primary reason for this quantity is that the Peninsula has been the leading centre of scribal and print culture in the Renaissance and beyond. In the cities of Ferrara, Milan, Mantua, Parma, and Naples and in the Roman papal court, humanistic scholars promoted the production of written and illuminated works in an effort to recreate the aesthetic qualities of the book from classical times, while in the post-Gutenberg age, publishers—especially from Venice and Florence—played a crucial role in producing published texts. At the same time, a rich tradition of both written and printed Hebrew books flourished in many centres of the Peninsula, where the greatest breadth of materials and finest level of execution were achieved—virtuoso showpieces of such magnificence include the *Rothschild Miscellany*, arguably the most lavishly illuminated Hebrew manuscript produced in Renaissance Italy that combines an Ashkenazi expatriate home library with exquisite

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<sup>15</sup> Concerning the transition from the market for manuscripts to that for printed books, see GIOVANNI BONIFATI, *Dal libro manoscritto al libro stampato: sistemi di mercato a Bologna e a Firenze agli albori del capitalismo* (Turin: Rosenberg & Sellier, 2008).

<sup>16</sup> There is a vast bibliography on this subject. For the most comprehensive and updated survey on the Italian Genizah, see PERANI, ed., *Medieval Hebrew Manuscripts Reused as Book-bindings in Italy*; MAURO PERANI, 'A trentasette anni dal decollo della ricerca dei frammenti ebraici riusati come legature in Italia. Il tutto nel frammento,' in *Frammenti di un discorso storico. Per una grammatica dell'aldilà del frammento*, ed. CATERINA TRISTANO (Spoleto: Fondazione Centro Italiano di Studi sull'Alto Medioevo, 2019), 285–323.

Italianate decoration,<sup>17</sup> and the printed Hebrew bibles of the Soncino and Bomberg families which set the standard for the classical texts of Judaism.<sup>18</sup>

This picture assumes even more relevance if it is considered that, between the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, as a result of persecution or expulsion, Italy received a mix of Jews immigrating from other European countries who carried their manuscripts and scribal knowledge with them, endowing many Italian Jewish communities' libraries with fine collections composed of extensive and heterogeneous repertoires of texts. By the mid-sixteenth century, twice as many Jews resided in Italy as in Eastern Europe (and almost as many as in all of Europe outside the Peninsula), so it is no coincidence that Italy is often termed the 'breadbasket' of Hebrew manuscripts. This denomination is due to the fact that close to half of the extant medieval Hebrew handwritten texts have an Italian provenance, either because they were copied in Italy and belonged to local owners, or because they were brought to the Peninsula by Ashkenazi or Sephardi immigrants.<sup>19</sup> A microcosm of European Jewry in the heart of Western Christendom, Italy was an important centre of book production and therefore the primary setting for the development of an unparalleled intellectual environment that exerted a lasting influence on culture and politics, at the same time reflecting the finest traits of the Jewish intellectual tradition.

Some materials are presented here for the first time, benefitting from a renewed methodological approach that takes into consideration specific phenomena of late medieval and early modern Italy such as the deliberate destruction of Hebrew books, the impact of Catholic control over Jewish culture, and the ways in which it emerged as well as its implications. The methodology adopted here is intended not to merely present a series of events, but rather to interpret specific historical moments in order to shed new light on the socio-historical context in which they manifested. This approach will consider the development of censorship as part of the institutionalisation of new measures of control over Hebrew texts in this period by analysing the dialectic between events and protagonists. A further objective is to assess how Catholic censorship changed the relationship between the power to and possibility of producing

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<sup>17</sup> *The Rothschild Miscellany*, facsimile edition, 2 vols. (London: Facsimile Editions; Jerusalem: Israel Museum, 1989).

<sup>18</sup> HACKER and SHEAR, eds, *The Hebrew Book in Early Modern Italy*; GIULIANO TAMANI, ed., *L'attività editoriale di Gershom Soncino: 1502–1527. Atti del Convegno, Soncino, 17 settembre 1995* (Soncino: Edizioni dei Soncino, 1997); ABRAHAM MEIR HABERMAN, *The Printer Daniel Bomberg and the List of Books Published by His Press* (Safed: Museum of Printing Art, Safed & International Union of Printing Workers in Israel, 1978) [Hebrew]; BRIAN RICHARDSON, *Printing, Writers, and Readers in Renaissance Italy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

<sup>19</sup> For further information, see: BENJAMIN RICHLER, *Hebrew Manuscripts: A Treasured Legacy* (Cleveland-Jerusalem: Ofeq Institute, 1990), 66–67 and 76–77; COLETTE SIRAT, *Hebrew Manuscripts of the Middle Ages* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 8–11; BENJAMIN RICHLER, 'Lezione dottorale, *Materia giudaica* XV–XVI (2010–2011): 14–16; BENJAMIN RICHLER, 'Italy, the "Breadbasket" of Hebrew Manuscripts,' in *The Italia Judaica Jubilee Conference*, eds SHLOMO SIMONSOHN and JOSEPH SHATZMILLER, (Leiden: Brill, 2013), 137–41; MAURO PERANI, 'Italia "paniere" dei manoscritti ebraici e la loro diaspora nel contesto del collezionismo in Europa tra Otto e Novecento,' in *Il collezionismo di libri ebraici tra XVII e XIX secolo*, eds CHIARA PILOCANE and AMEDEO SPAGNOLETTI, supplement, *La Rassegna Mensile di Israel* 82, no. 2–3 (2016): 63–91.

or destroying culture through the creation, distribution, and disruption of Hebrew books. Hebrew or non-Hebrew books owned by Jews are considered not only as objects, but as participants in a particular interaction between readers, holders, censors, and producers.

A range of topics are covered by the essays, such as Catholic censorship and the expurgation of Hebrew texts, books and documents, their reuse in book bindings, and the way Digital Humanities allows us to retrieve otherwise-lost manuscripts or printed books.

The aim of this thematic section is to gather high-quality research papers that present new findings, scientific approaches, and the latest developments on topics related to the history of Catholic censorship, libricide, and the ways Hebrew books were preserved in late medieval and early modern Italy. The different chapters of the thematic section will address a variety of topics that covers the contents of the research presented and discussions held at the conference so as to assure overall coherence and completeness.

As explained by Kenneth Stow, the history of Jewish book control has often involved ignorant, converted censors who took action against their own former co-religionists. As mentioned above, alongside the various ways in which the Hebrew book was persecuted, specific conjunctures have also occurred that, paradoxically, determined its conservation. This peculiar phenomenon will be presented by Mauro Perani and Elena Lolli. Furthermore, Catholic control also included non-Hebrew books owned by Jews, as we will see in the case study outlined by Miriam Benfatto.