

The Curious Case of the Jew Who Married a Buffalo: An Alleged Blood Libel in Hamburg (1687)*

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While scrutinising chronicles and memoirs from the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries preserved in Roman and Vatican archives during my doctoral research back in 2015, I came across an intriguing text, involving a trial against a Jewish man from Hamburg who, according to the account, was executed by being burned at the stake on 22 July 1687 after being charged of having murdered a Christian child to perform a kabbalistic ritual. The curious writing that came to my attention—titled *Morte data ad un ebreo che si sposò con una bufala. Caso seguito in Amburgo alli 22 di luglio l'anno 1687* ('Death given to a Jew who married a buffalo. Case happened in Hamburg on 22 July 1687')—is contained in a miscellaneous volume of various chronicles, accounts, newsletters, and literary productions from the library belonging to the Roman count and passionate bibliophile Francesco Maria Cardelli (1715–1778), today preserved in the Historical Archives of the City Hall of Rome (ASC).¹ While the events described in the account

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¹ Rome, Archivio Storico Capitolino, Archivio Cardelli, Miscellanea II, Manoscritti della Libreria di Francesco Maria Cardelli, Relazioni di avvenimenti di cronaca, tomo 69, fols. 340r–349v (from now on: ASC). On the Cardelli library, see FIAMMETTA SABBA, 'La biblioteca Cardelli a Roma nel XVIII secolo. Notizie a partire da una memoria inedita della contessa marchigiana Giustina Pianetti Cardelli', in *Libri, biblioteche e società. Studi per Rosa Maria Borraccini*, eds ALBERTO PETRUCCIANI, VALENTINA SESTINI, and FEDERICO VALACCHI (Macerata: Edizioni Università di Macerata, 2020), 205–20, and MARIA CRISTINA FALCUCCI, MICHELE FRANCESCHINI, and ELISABETTA MORI, eds, *Rerum romanarum fragmenta. Viaggio*

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refer to Hamburg, the manuscript text is entirely written in Italian. No information regarding its author or the scribe who copied the text is known. This mysterious case is as obscure to historians of the Jewish communities of Hamburg (including those of Altona and Wandsbek) in the early modern period as it is to leading experts on Kabbalah and blood libels.²

Independently of my findings and without knowledge of each other's interest in this text, Luciano Allegra recently offered a reflection on this peculiar writing. In his engaging volume on falsehoods and depictions of Jews in the early modern period, he delves into the contents and structure of the text on the alleged blood libel in Hamburg, trying to make sense of obscure names and passages and proposing some hypotheses about the intended purpose of the text.³ Allegra's study draws on a different manuscript than the one I first consulted, relying instead on a specimen from the Central National Library of Florence (BNCF). I am not aware whether he discovered this manuscript independently or was guided by Francesco Donnini's earlier publication from 2009, which also references BNCF, Ms. Panciatichiano 228. In his chapter, Donnini mentioned the text related to the Hamburg case only briefly, situating it within the library thought to have belonged to a descendant of the Ximenes de Aragão family.⁴ While some members of the family remained in Portugal, other branches of this wealthy lineage of Portuguese merchants and *crístãos novos* likely escaped the 1506 Lisbon massacre due to their forced baptism in 1497.⁵ Some members of this notable family relocated to thriving commercial hubs such as Florence, Venice, Hamburg, and Antwerp, where their enterprises flourished.⁶ As other notebooks contained in the

tra le carte di una famiglia romana. L'Archivio Cardelli, 1473-1877 (Rome: Fondazione Marco Besso-Argòs, 1997).

² On the history of the Jewish congregations in Altona, Hamburg, and Wandsbek, see YOSEF KAPLAN, 'The Social Functions of the Herem', in YOSEF KAPLAN, *An Alternative Path to Modernity: The Sephardi Diaspora in Western Europe* (Leiden: Brill, 2000), 108–42; DEAN P. BELL, 'Jews, Ethnicity and Identity in Early Modern Hamburg', *TRANSIT* 3, no. 1 (2007): 1–16; and now HUGO MARTINS, *The Portuguese Jews of Hamburg: The History of a Merchant Community in the Seventeenth Century* (Leiden: Brill, 2023). On blood libels, see MAGDA TETER, *Blood Libel: On the Trail of an Antisemitic Myth* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2020).

³ See ALLEGRA, *L'ebreo che sposò una bufala*.

⁴ See FRANCESCO DONNINI, 'Ricerche su un manoscritto seicentesco intitolato *Commercio reciproco tra i paesi della dominazione di Portogallo e esiti delle mercanzie del suddetto paese nei paesi forestieri*', in *From Florence to the Mediterranean and Beyond. Essays in Honour of Anthony Molbo*, eds DIOGO RAMADA CURTO, ERIC R. DURSTELER, JULIUS KIRSHNER, and FRANCESCA TRIVELLATO, with the assistance of NIKI KONIORDOS, 2 vols, vol. 2 (Florence: Olschki, 2009), 695–709 (704). I thank Francesca Trivellato for forwarding the file of this publication.

⁵ Among the members who remained in Portugal and adhered to the Catholic faith, one could find Fernão Ximenes de Aragão, author of several polemical writings against the Jewish faith, such as *Doutrina catholica para instrucção e cõfirmacão dos fieis e extinção das seitas supersticiosas e em particular do Judaismo* (Lisbon: Pedro Craesbeeck, 1625) and *Extinção do judaismo, e mais seitas supersticiosas: e exaltação da só verdadeira religião christã, dada por Deos aos homes para por ella serem salvos* (Lisbon: Pedro Craesbeeck, 1628). On this, see CLAUDE STUCZYNSKI, 'Anti-Rabbinic Texts and Converso Identities: Fernão Ximenes de Aragão's *Doutrina Catholica*', in *The Conversos and Moriscos in Late Medieval Spain and Beyond*, 4 vols, vol. 3, *Displaced Persons*, eds KEVIN INGRAM and JUAN IGNACIO PULIDO SERRANO (Leiden: Brill, 2016), 69–94.

⁶ On this family, see ANA ISABEL LÓPEZ-SALAZAR, 'The Purity of Blood Privilege for Honors and Positions: The Spanish Crown and the Ximenes de Aragão Family', *Journal of Levantine Studies* 6 (2016):

Panciatichi fund, most likely commissioned within the entourage of the Ximenes of Tuscany, the text of our interest is connected to members of this family and is placed immediately after another manuscript (Ms. Panciatichiano 226) titled *Curiosità diverse sopra gli Ebrei di Portogallo & Regalia di Francia* ('Various curiosities about the Jews of Portugal and the kings of France').⁷ As Donnini observed, the presence of a text referencing a blood libel within the library of *converso* descendants is both striking and unsettling.

Apart from Allegra and Donnini's contributions, an excerpt of the story of the Jew who married a buffalo in Hamburg intriguingly appears in an esoteric book in Italian published some ten years ago.⁸

During the last few years, I have expanded my bibliographical search and was able to retrieve three additional manuscripts: one preserved at the Vatican Apostolic Library,⁹ one at the Library of the City Hall and Etruscan Academy in Cortona¹⁰ (about one hundred kilometres from Florence), and another one in the Municipal Library of Bordeaux.¹¹ Additionally, according to the Bodleian Libraries catalogue online, it seems that another copy of the text is preserved in the Rawlinson Manuscripts Collection.¹² The title of the text in the Florentine manuscript is slightly different from that included in the one I discovered in Rome in 2015 as it reads: *Relatione del caso seguito in Amburgo d'un'ebreo che si sposò con una bufala, e fù abbrugiato vivo li 12 luglio 1687* ('Report of the case happened in Hamburg of a Jew who married a buffalo, and was burned alive on 12 July 1687').¹³ The Cortona manuscript shares the same title as the Florentine version, while the Vatican and Bordeaux manuscripts bear similar titles with minor spelling variations: *Caso seguito in Amburgo di un ebreo, che si sposò con una bufala e fù abrugiato vivo li 22 luglio 1687* ('Case happened in Hamburg of a Jew, who married a buffalo and was burned alive on 22 July 1687'). In all five manuscripts (excluding the one from Oxford, which remains to be investigated), the text of interest is found within miscellaneous volumes comprising writings such as chronicles, curiosities, and related texts. Details surrounding the author, composition date, the geographical and socio-political context

177–201 and now FRANCISCO BETHENCOURT, *Strangers Within: The Rise and Fall of the New Christian Trading Elite* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2024). On the forced conversion of Jews in Portugal in 1497, see at least GIUSEPPE MARCOCCI, 'Remembering the Forced Baptism of Jews: Law, Theology, and History in Sixteenth-Century Portugal', in *Forced Conversion in Christianity, Judaism and Islam: Coercion and Faith in Premodern Iberia and Beyond*, eds MERCEDES GARCÍA-ARENAL and YONATAN GLAZER-EYTAN (Leiden: Brill, 2020), 328–53. On the ennoblement of the Ximenes of Tuscany, see LUCIA FRATTARELLI FISCHER, 'O processo de nobilitação dos Ximenes na Toscana', *Cadernos de estudos sefarditas* 10–11 (2011): 269–80.

⁷ See DONNINI, 'Ricerche su un manoscritto seicentesco', 704.

⁸ See DARIO F. ATENA, *I figli del tuono. Biografia di una iniziazione solare* (Borgo Valsugana: Fontana, 2013), accessible via Google Books. How the author learned about this case is not clear.

⁹ Vatican City, Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, Urb.lat.1696, fols. 111r–114v (from now on: BAV).

¹⁰ Cortona, Biblioteca del Comune e dell'Accademia Etrusca di Cortona, Ms. 348, fols. 277r–288v (from now on: BCAE).

¹¹ Bordeaux, Bibliothèque municipale, Ms. 1018, fols. 241–247 (from now on: BM).

¹² Oxford, Bodleian Libraries, Ms. Rawl. C. 916, fols. 14, 15. I haven't examined this specimen yet.

¹³ Florence, Biblioteca Nazionale Centrale, Ms. Panciatichiano 228, fols. 311–318 (from now on: BNCF).

in which this curious text was composed as well as its circulation in early modern Italy (and beyond) are unknown. At a first glance, the five specimens do not present substantial variants but the Rome manuscript features some interesting additions that do not appear elsewhere. Regarding their dating, the only available details are derived from online descriptions and library catalogues: 1676–1725 for BAV, 1701–1750 for BNCF, 1715–1778 for ASC, and the eighteenth century for the manuscripts in BCAE and BM. A palaeographical and codicological analysis of these manuscripts, along with a more in-depth investigation into the history of the collections in which they are housed, may yield additional insights. A critical edition of the text is planned for the near future, aiming to compare variations among the six known manuscripts and shed light on their transmission and historical context.

While the author's identity and background and the actual circulation and reception of this text remain obscure, in this article I argue that this narrative belongs to genre of ephemeral literature on monstrous births in the early modern era. Unlike the more popular pamphlets of the time, which were primarily designed to entertain the public—particularly the less educated classes—this text never saw the light of the day and therefore did not reach a broad audience. However, it is possible that the original intention was to publish the text, but for reasons unknown, this never happened.¹⁴

By situating this work within the broader framework of early modern discourse on monstrosity, I aim to shed light on the fictional use of descriptions about Jewish rituals, customs, and events with an anti-Jewish goal. After presenting the content of the composition, I propose hypotheses regarding the sources accessed and employed by the anonymous author to construct their absurd and anti-Jewish narrative. Particular attention is given to the author's real or purported knowledge of Judaism, Kabbalah, and Sabbateanism. Finally, the significance of Hamburg as the location of the alleged blood libel is contextualised.

A Bloody and Bizarre 'Kabbalistic' Ritual in Three Phases

Although a brief composition spanning only a few folios, the storyline is remarkably intricate, presenting challenges in following it through several passages. The narrative centres on the trial of a murder of a Christian child that occurred in Hamburg in 1687. The narrative opens on 3 July 1687, when a rich Christian merchant named Noberto¹⁵ relocated from Groningen¹⁶ to Hamburg with his wife Radegonda¹⁷ and their seven-year-old child Ignazio.¹⁸ However, on 8 July, the boy mysteriously disappeared, prompting a three-day city-wide search. Eventually, a witness claimed to have seen the

¹⁴ On the influence of printing to spread monstrosity, see RUDOLF WITTKOWER, 'Marvels of the East: A Study in the History of Monsters', *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 5 (1942): 159–97 (193).

¹⁵ Sometimes also spelled Hoberto, Orberto, Noberto. The family name is Lladad (BAV, BCAE, BM), Clarad (BNCF) and Hilsch (ASC).

¹⁶ Spelled Groninga, Grovinga, Grovigna.

¹⁷ Variants of the name include Rodegonda and Badegonda.

¹⁸ Also spelled Ignatio.

boy conversing with a Jewish merchant named Zebedeo¹⁹ d'Uriel Gallo, who was arrested²⁰ and later confessed to having kidnapped and slaughtered the Christian child. Zebedeo was interrogated through indirect questions posed in the third person and responded in the first person.²¹ The Jewish merchant explained that the murder was justified as part of a kabbalistic ritual in multiple phases, intended to redeem Jews worldwide from their state of suffering and inferiority. He revealed that seven years earlier, in 1680, a certain Raffaele d'Hamai from Adrianople, renowned as a prominent kabbalist ('primo Gabbalista'), had visited Hamburg. The local rabbis impatiently asked Raffaele if and when the miserable state of the Jews would have ended.²² The kabbalist disclosed esoteric knowledge found in texts like the *Clavicola di Salomone* and a certain *Libro delle credulità* by Rabbi Saadia Assiano.²³ According to these writings, when a child, born to a Jewish man and a buffalo,²⁴ reached the age of fourteen, they would be able to cross the Jordan River and visit King Sabbatione.²⁵ After being asked about this king, Zebedeo said that he was a very powerful king who no Jews had ever seen due to the Jordan River casting stones throughout the week, except on the Sabbath when Jews are prohibited from traveling.²⁶ Following this first explanation, the perpetrator revealed that seven years before he agreed to fulfil the plan suggested by the kabbalist, who thoroughly instructed on the steps to perform the ritual. Firstly, Zebedeo had to find a young female buffalo, marry her following the usual Jewish wedding ceremony and take her as a 'true and legitimate wife' until she got pregnant in 1681. Before having a sexual union with her, all the rabbis and virgins observed a three-day fast in a solemn way 'as if one should pray to the Messiah to achieve a great grace and as is customary to do'.²⁷ After the sexual union, the buffalo was named Grazia ('Grace') and the child, born by the bestial union, Seth.²⁸ Possessing human features but buffalo feet, Seth underwent circumcision in accordance with Jewish tradition and was breastfed by a Jewish woman who just gave birth for the first time. After fulfilling her mission, Grazia was slain, her meat eaten by the members of the Jewish community of Hamburg, the remaining bones incinerated, and their ashes kept aside for the second phase of the ritual. As illustrated by Raffaele d'Hamai, when Seth reached the age of seven in 1687, Zebedeo had to find a Christian boy of the same age and, after the rabbi had cursed

¹⁹ ASC: Zodebeo.

²⁰ The arrest is not explicitly mentioned in ASC.

²¹ According to BCAE and BNCF, he confessed only under torture but then recognised the gravity of his actions and guilt.

²² According to BNCF, a certain Rabbi Morkain was ready to pay a large sum if a solution had been offered.

²³ BAV and BM: Sozadia Arriano; BNCF: Sozudia Ariano.

²⁴ Buffalo means both male and female. In this specific case, it refers to a female.

²⁵ Often spelled in different ways throughout the texts: Sabatione, Sabbatione, Sabathione.

²⁶ This legend is actually not related to the Jordan River but to the mythical Sambatyon River. We will return to this aspect in short. See DANIEL STEIN KOKIN, 'Toward the Source of the Sambatyon: Shabbat Discourse and the Origins of the Sabbatical River Legend', *AJS Review* 37, no. 1 (2013): 1–28.

²⁷ '[...] come se si avesse da pregare il Messia per conseguire da esso una Grazia grande, come si costuma'. Only BCAE and BNCF present this addition.

²⁸ ASC and BCAE: Seth.

him with the curse *Nimretzeth*,²⁹ killed him. The blood of the Christian boy was then used to completely cover Seth. Subsequently, Seth underwent another circumcision and was bestowed with a new name: Salute (which literally means ‘Health’ but, most likely, has to be interpreted as ‘Salvation’) or Settima Salute (‘Seventh Salvation’).³⁰ Zebedeo confessed to burying the Christian child beneath the doorstep of his house and explained that, according to the kabbalist’s instructions, after the body’s decomposition, he burned the child’s bones and mixed his ashes with those of the buffalo. This ashes mixture had to be used in a further step of the ritual. When Salute would have turned fourteen, he would scatter part of the ashes into the Jordan River, thereby ceasing the stone-throwing and enabling him to cross the river and reach the kingdom of King Sabbatione. The king would joyously receive Salute and bestow upon him numerous gifts, along with a formidable army to defeat both the Turks and Christians. The Sultan (‘l’Imperatore de’ Turchi’) would convert to Judaism, and Salute would marry his daughter. The Jewish people would finally obtain happiness and power ‘as it was in the ancient times’.³¹

According to the murderer’s confession, Jewish communities contributed funds to support the undertaking of Zebedeo in Hamburg and the trip of his child beyond the Jordan River. The community of Venice donated 3,000³² *zecchini*, Mantua 1,000 *scudi*,³³ Modena 1,000 *scudi*,³⁴ Buda 10,000 *ungari*,³⁵ Constantinople 10,000 *zecchini*, Rome 6,000 *scudi*, and various unspecified communities in France 30,000 *scudi*, for a total of ‘more than two millions’.³⁶ The donations from the ‘communities of these places’ (perhaps the German communities) are not specified but the text says the money was confiscated to finance the war, as it continues, ‘all the princes of the world should do’. Zebedeo then confessed that the correspondence with these Jewish communities, the money received from them, and other precious belongings were located in a box in his home. The Christian child’s body was found buried under the doorstep and the letters and money brought to the tribunal. The text concludes with Zebedeo being executed by burning at the stake on 22 July 1687, and his accomplices, as well as the rabbis in Hamburg, being imprisoned. After the execution, a tremendous storm ensued, with thunder and hail persisting until 20 or 22 in the evening, completely washing away the ashes and leaving no trace of the event. Despite being found innocent, the seven-year-old Salute was not exempted from punishment. The child was imprisoned and, to prevent word from spreading that he had buffalo legs and feet, it was initially decided

²⁹ BAV and BC AE: *Nimretzeth*; BNCF: *Himretzeth*; BM: *Himretzeth*.

³⁰ With the exception of ASC (‘Settima Salute’), all the other manuscripts bear ‘Salute’.

³¹ This addition appears in ASC only.

³² According to ASC: 30,000.

³³ ASC: ‘mille scudi romani’; BAV and BM: ‘mille e più scudi’; BC AE: ‘mille zecchini, o più scudi’. The *scudo* was primarily used in the Papal States.

³⁴ According to BAV: 2,000.

³⁵ In Italian, ‘ongari’ or ‘fiorini ungheresi’ (Hungarian florins).

³⁶ Currency is not specified in the final sum.

that he should be executed.³⁷ Eventually, however, given his innocence, the decision was revised to impose lifelong imprisonment instead.

Wisdom from Afar? Uncovering Real and Fictional Sources of Alleged Kabbalistic Knowledge

Throughout the description of the gruesome and odd rituals performed by Zebedeo, the anonymous author of the text pretends to be knowledgeable of Jewish customs, laws, and works but, in fact, he is not. He mentions Jewish ceremonies while talking about the marriage of the merchant Zebedeo to the buffalo Grazia, the solemn three-day fast of all the rabbis and virgins before their sexual union, and the ceremony of their son's double circumcision but he doesn't go beyond saying that everything was performed 'with a usual ceremony' or 'following the Jewish custom'. In only one instance does the author provide more details: before killing the Christian child, the rabbi of Hamburg first had to curse him with the 'maledizione pessima detta ebraicamente *Nimrezeth*' (the grievous curse called in Hebrew *Nimrezeth*). This curse is referenced in the Hebrew Bible, specifically relating to the curse that Shimei ben Gera, a member of King Saul's household, cast with stones against David, blaming him for Saul's death at the hands of the Philistines (1 Kings 2:8).³⁸ Although *Nimrezeth* could be simply translated as 'vigorous', it is far more likely that the anonymous author borrowed the curse description directly from an almost exact quotation of Tommaso Garzoni's encyclopaedic work on professions and crafts, *La piazza universale di tutte le professioni del mondo*.³⁹ Commenting the aforementioned biblical passage of King David instructing his son Solomon before approaching death, Garzoni wrote that the curse Shimei used against David 'explicates the strength of the execrable curse [maledittione], demonstrating the insult that Shimei hurled against David, as indicated by the letters in that malicious phrase, which is called *Nimrezeth* in Hebrew [la quale Hebraicamente è detta *Nimrezeth*].⁴⁰ The act of cursing, letter after letter, is intended

³⁷ This motivation appears in ASC. The other specimens simply say that it was decided he had to be executed.

³⁸ The curse is simply translated as 'a grievous curse'. The Talmud provides further insight into the contents and meaning of the curse received by David, explaining that the word *Nimrezeth* (root *NMRZTh*) is the acronym of adulterer [*noef*], Moabite [*Moavi*], murderer [*rotze'ab*], oppressor [*tzorer*] and abomination [*to'eva*] (Babylonian Talmud, Shabbat 105a).

³⁹ TOMASO GARZONI DA BAGNACAVALLLO, *La piazza universale di tutte le professioni del mondo e nobili e ignobili, nuovamente formata et posta in luce da Thomaso Garzoni da Bagnacavallo* (Venetia: Gio. Battista Somascho, 1585; *editio princeps*). After this, the book was reprinted many times throughout the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. The following quotations from Garzoni's work are taken from the 1638 edition (Venetia: Pietro Maria Bertano). On Garzoni, see the biographical entry by OTTAVIA NICCOLI, 'Garzoni, Tomaso', in *Dizionario Biografico degli Italiani* 52 (1999), 449–53. Other references to the *Nimrezeth* curse, based on Jerome's reading in the Vulgata, could be found in other popular works published in Italy between the end of the sixteenth century and the seventeenth century: see, for instance, GIULIO CESARE CARPACCIO, *Il segretario* (Venetia: Nicolò Moretti, 1597); RAFFAELLO DELLE COLOMBE, *Prediche della Quaresima con esposizioni di Scritture sacre, Varietà di traslazioni, Dottrine morali, diverse Erudizioni, e Similitudini* (Firenze: Bartolommeo Sermartelli, e Fratelli, 1622); FRANCESCO PANIGAROLA, *Gieremia dolente. Discorsi di mons.re Rev.mo F. Francesco Panigarola Minor Oss.te, vescovo d'Asti fatti da lui in Roma in S. Lorenzo in Damaso* (Bologna: Clemente Ferroni, 1626).

⁴⁰ [...] esaminando quelle parole di David moriente a Salomone, *Habes quoque apud te Semei filium, Gera filij Gemini de Baburim, qui maledixit mihi maledictione pessima*; esplica la forza di quella essecranda

by Garzoni and other authors as a kabbalistic performance, that is why he mentions this biblical passage in his *Discorso XXIX*, dedicated to kabbalists.

Regarding other instances of alleged knowledge of Jewish customs, as Luciano Allegra correctly noted, the ritual description contains two major absurdities. Firstly, according to Halakha (Jewish law), one can be considered Jewish only if born to a Jewish woman, making it difficult to regard someone born of a buffalo as Jewish. Secondly, the idea of performing a double circumcision is physically impossible.⁴¹ Although Joshua 5:2 states, ‘At that time the Lord said to Joshua, “Make flint knives and circumcise the Israelites again”’, this passage should not be understood literally as describing a second circumcision. Instead, an analysis of the Hebrew word *וְשָׁבַע*, which implies repetition, within the broader context of verses 2–8, suggests that it refers to the resumption of the circumcision ritual, which had been suspended during the Israelites’ forty years in the wilderness prior to their entry into the Promised Land.

The disclosure of secret teachings contained in some kabbalistic writings is also fictional. From Adrianople (today Edirne in Turkey) to the deep north of Europe, Raffaele d’Hamai would have brought the solution not only to end the miserable state of the Jews but to ‘subjugate Christianity’. The first writing consulted by the kabbalist is the *Clavicola di Salomone*, more commonly known as the *Clavicula Salomonis*, a pseudo-epigraphic grimoire traditionally attributed to King Solomon.⁴² While some of its components likely originated in an earlier period, the *Clavicula* garnered significant attention during the Renaissance and early modern era, spreading across Europe in over a hundred manuscripts, numerous variants, and multiple languages. The various versions of the *Clavicula* were already condemned by the Spanish Inquisition in 1551 and included in the first *Index librorum prohibitorum* issued by pope Paul IV Carafa in 1559, categorised under works attributed to unknown authors (*incertorum auctorum libri prohibiti*).⁴³ Despite censorship and prohibitions, the text remained extremely popular throughout the centuries. According to the *incipit* of Abraham Colorni’s version, which started circulating toward the end of the sixteenth century, the *Clavicula* was originally a Hebrew text translated into Latin.⁴⁴ This information led many, including Hermann

maledittione, dimostrando le villanie, che Semei raccolse, contra David, dalle lettere, che sono in quella ditione pessima, la quale Hebraicamente è detta Nimrezeth (GARZONI, *La piazza universale di tutte le professioni del mondo*, *Discorso XXIX. De’ cabalisti*, 112r).

⁴¹ See ALLEGRA, *L’ebreo che sposò una bufala*, 26.

⁴² Regarding the production and circulation of pseudo-Solomonic literature during the Middle Ages and early modern period, and the reception of the *Clavicula*, see FEDERICO BARBIERATO, *Nella stanza dei circoli. Chiave di Salomone e libri di magia a Venezia nei secoli XVII e XVIII* (Milan: Sylvestre Bonnard, 2002); ALESSIA BELLUSCI, ‘Un manuale di magia in ebraico ed italiano dalla collezione privata della famiglia Gross’, in *L’eredità di Salomone. La magia ebraica in Italia e nel Mediterraneo*, eds EMMA ABATE and SAVERIO CAMPANINI (Florence: MEIS-Giuntina, 2019), 279–313.

⁴³ See BARBIERATO, *Nella stanza dei circoli*, 37 and the bibliography cited there.

⁴⁴ Several manuscripts under the title *Claviculae Salomonis Haebraeorum regis translate in latinum idioma ex Hebreo, ex mandato Serenissimae Suae Celsitudinis Mantuae Ducis* are preserved in libraries today. This variant of the text has to be connected with Abraham Colorni (or Colorno), engineer, inventor, mathematician, and alchemist, who translated the *Clavicula* into Italian on behalf of the Duke of Mantua. On Colorni, see JOSEPH ADLER, ‘An Uncommon Jew in the Italian Renaissance’, *Midstream* 42, no. 7 (1996): 16–18;

Gollancz, to believe in the Hebrew origin of the text, associated with the legacy of King Solomon, astrologer, magician and philosopher (*magosopho*).⁴⁵ According to Gershom Scholem, however, *Mafteah Shelomoh* (the ‘Key of Solomon’) ‘is a version of the *Clavicula Salomonis* which, in contradiction to Gollancz’s own assumption evidently represents a very late Jewish adaptation of a Latin (or rather Italian) *Clavicula* text from the Renaissance period’.⁴⁶ This compilation ‘contains Christian, Jewish, and Arabic elements which either lie unmixed side by side or show in parts a mutual permeation’.⁴⁷ In the same years of Colorni’s version, another variant of the text under the obscure title *Lemegeton* or *Lesser [or Little] Key of Solomon the King* circulated in England and elsewhere.⁴⁸

It is hard to say whether the anonymous author of our bizarre writing actually read one of the variants of the *Clavicula* or rather learned of its existence through other authors like Garzoni. While reflecting on the category of ‘magic professionals’,⁴⁹ Garzoni associates the *Clavicula* with diabolic practices performed by ‘perverse magicians’ driving men to crazy loves and craziness at large.⁵⁰ In another passage of his work, he states the *Clavicula* is an evil book prohibited by the Church.⁵¹

The second work supposedly containing esoteric knowledge for the deliverance of the Jewish people, mentioned by Raffaele d’Hamaï, is a certain *Libro delle credulità* (literally the ‘Book of Credulities’) by Rabbi Saadia Assiano or Ariano. Allegra asserted that the work should be identified with the *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus* by Baruch Spinoza, but I find this interpretation unclear and unconvincing, especially since it seemed improbable that the anonymous author of our text had read Spinoza.⁵² The

ARIEL TOAFF, *Il prestigiatore di Dio. Avventure e miracoli di un alchimista ebreo nelle corti del Rinascimento* (Milan: Rizzoli, 2010).

⁴⁵ HERMANN GOLLANZ, *Mafteah Shelomoh. Clavicula Salomonis: A Hebrew Manuscript Newly Discovered and Now Described* (Frankfurt am Main – London: J. Kauffmann – D. Nutt, 1903), 12. See also GOLLANZ, *Sepher Mafteah Shelomo (Book of the Key of Solomon). An Exact Facsimile of an Original Book of Magic in Hebrew* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1914). Regarding King Solomon’s connection to magic, see YAACOV SHAVIT, ‘He was Thoth in Everything: Why and When King Solomon Became Both *Magister omnium physicorum* and Master of Magic’, in *Envisioning Judaism. Studies in Honor of Peter Schäfer on the Occasion of his Seventieth Birthday*, eds RA’ANAN BOUSTAN, KLAUS HERRMANN, REIMUND LEICHT, ANNETTE Y. REED, and GIUSEPPE VELTRI, with the collaboration of ALEX RAMOS, 2 vols (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2013), vol. 1, 587–606.

⁴⁶ GERSHOM SCHOLEM, ‘Some Sources of Jewish-Arabic Demonology’, *Journal of Jewish Studies* 16, no. 1–2 (1965): 1–13 (6).

⁴⁷ SCHOLEM, ‘Some Sources of Jewish-Arabic Demonology’, 6.

⁴⁸ See BARBIERATO, *Nella stanza dei circoli*, 49.

⁴⁹ The *Discorso XLI (De’ maghi, incantatori, o venefici, o malefici, o negromanti largamente presi, et prestigiatori, e superstiziosi, e strie)* is entirely devoted to magicians, enchanters, poisoners, sorcerers, necromancers, wizards, witches, and other sort of ‘superstitious’ people.

⁵⁰ ‘Et bene dimostrano questi maghi perversi di operare ogni cosa per arte diabolica, inducendo anco gli huomini per via d’incanti in pazzi amori, et odij disordinati, usando la profana clavicula detta di Salomone, battezzando empivamente, e sacrilegamente le pietre calamite e per tale effetto, servendosi d’imagini di cera abbrugiate, e di peci nefandissime, che fanno aricciare i capelli, ove fanno divenir egli huomini come pazzi, et freneticij, et arreticij propriamente, essendo da una più alta natura rubbati, et per forza levati fuori di se stessi’ (GARZONI, *La piazza universale*, 184v).

⁵¹ GARZONI, *La piazza universale*, 255r.

⁵² See ALLEGRA, *L’ebreo che sposò una bufala*, 14.

reason for Allegra's interpretation lies in the preface of Spinoza's work, mentioning *credulitas et prejudicia* ('credulity and prejudices').⁵³ While 'credulity' generally carries a negative connotation, implying the believers' naivety, we can also translate the Italian *credulità* (plural) as 'beliefs', highlighting a correspondence with the Hebrew term *emunot*. Several works under the title *Sefer ha-Emunot* can be found in Jewish literature. A *Sefer ha-Emunot* by Rabbi Shem Tov Ibn Shem Tov (c. 1380–c. 1441)—a polemical work against philosophy and defending Kabbalah—is extant in several manuscript specimens and was printed by Usque in Ferrara in 1556. I believe the text hidden under the Italian title should be identified with the *Sefer ha-Emunot ve-ha-De'ot* ('Book of Beliefs and Opinions') by Saadia Gaon (882–942), completed in Baghdad between 922–942 CE in Judeo-Arabic (*Kitāb al-Amānāt wa'l-I'tiqādāt*) and translated into Hebrew in the twelfth century by Judah Ibn Tibbon.⁵⁴ Despite the connection of Saadia Gaon's *Sefer ha-Emunot* to Kabbalah due to his formulation of *Kavod* ('Divine Glory'),⁵⁵ this work is far from being a kabbalistic writing as it constitutes the first major work of medieval Jewish philosophy, attempting to present Judaism as a rational *corpus* of beliefs related to theology and ethics.⁵⁶ Once again, it is safe to assume that our anonymous author never really came across Saadia Gaon's work, neither in Judeo-Arabic nor in other translations, but found it listed along with many other writings in Garzoni's *Piazza universale*:

Intorno à questa scienza cabalistica son citati molti auttori con l'opre loro da moderni [...] il libro delle credulità del Rabbino Saadia Astano (sic); il libro del misterio della legge del Rabbino Abraam Abenazra; il libro del Rabbino Homai (sic), ch'è chiamato Principe di eloquenza nella Cabala, et il libro della Speculatione del medesimo [...].⁵⁷

In the *Discorso XXIX* on kabbalists, Garzoni refers to the aforementioned *Libro delle credulità* by Rabbi Saadia Asiano, with 'Asiano' meaning 'Asian' or 'oriental'. The following works mentioned include *Yesod Mora ve-Sod ha-Torah* ('The Foundation of Reverence and the Secret of the Torah') by Abraham Ibn Ezra (c. 1093–c. 1167), and an unspecified book⁵⁸ by Rabbi Hamai, referred by Garzoni to as the 'prince of eloquence in the Kabbalah'. Garzoni also notes that this rabbi is also remembered for composing the *Book of Speculation*.⁵⁹ According to Gershom Scholem, the attribution of

⁵³ ALLEGRA, *L'ebreo che sposò una bufala*, 14, note 3.

⁵⁴ It was first printed in Constantinople in 1562. For its English translation, see *The Book of Doctrines and Beliefs*, eds ALEXANDER ALTMANN and DANIEL H. FRANK (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2002).

⁵⁵ In Kabbalah, *Kavod* is associated with the divine presence or the manifestation of God's glory. It is often linked to the idea of the *Shekhinah* ('Divine Presence'), one of the ten *sefirot*, meaning emanations or attributes of God.

⁵⁶ On the reception of *Sefer ha-Emunot* Hebrew translation and its influence on early Kabbalah, see RONALD C. KIENER, 'The Hebrew Paraphrase of Saadiah Gaon's *Kitāb al-Amānāt wa'l-I'tiqādāt*', *AJS Review* 11, no. 1 (1986): 1–25.

⁵⁷ GARZONI, *La piazza universale di tutte le professioni del mondo, De' cabalisti. Discorso XXIX*, 111r. In the *editio princeps* (1585), Asiano and Hamai are spelled correctly.

⁵⁸ Which should be identified as *Sefer ha-Yibud* ('The Book of Unity'), the only other work attributed to Rabbi Hamai. See GERSHOM SCHOLEM, *Origins of the Kabbalah*, ed. R. J. ZWI WERBLOWSKY, trans. ALLAN ARKUSH (Philadelphia – Princeton: The Jewish Publication Society – Princeton University Press, 1987), 311.

⁵⁹ GARZONI, *La piazza universale*, 111r.

Sefer ha-Iyyun (the ‘Book of Speculation’) to the legendary Rabbi Hammai is pseudo-epigraphic and based on ancient quotations from *Sefer ha-Bahir* (the ‘Book of Brightness’).⁶⁰ It is not hard to imagine where our anonymous author took inspiration for the name of the esteemed kabbalist of Adrianople. The choice of his provenance may also be intentional, as Adrianople holds a prominent place in the history of Sabbateanism—being the city where Sabbatai Zevi famously converted to Islam in 1666 after being threatened by the Sultan—a point to which we shall return shortly.

Regarding private and family names mentioned throughout the text, with the exception of Zebedeo di Uriel and Raffaele, most of the Jewish names are entirely fabricated, with no attempt to make them sound authentically Jewish.⁶¹ As observed by Allegra, also the couple of the Christian merchants from Groningen (Orberto/Norberto/Norbert and his wife Radegonda) are not Dutch names but German, while their child’s name (Ignazio) comes from Latin.⁶²

On the contrary, the name of the child born from the bestial union is interesting and related to esoteric knowledge. In Gnostic mythology, Seth (or Sethi in Latin) was often believed to be the first son of Adam and Eve, while in the Hebrew Bible was the third one, born after the killing of Abel (Genesis 4:25; 5). Moreover, in Gnosticism, Seth also had a salvific function ‘since he was the one who ‘recovered’ the glory that had been Adam and Eve’s before their fall’.⁶³ According to the *Zohar*, Adam would have transmitted kabbalistic knowledge to Seth from whom it passed to other generations until Abraham.⁶⁴ No trace of these speculations or other references to Seth’s secret wisdom could be found in Garzoni’s work and other early modern published sources.

Two Rivers, One Cow: Sabbatean Echoes in Early Modern Italy

Two additional elements of the story are worthy of some observations: the Jordan River, which was the obstacle that the ritual was meant to overcome and the buffalo, essential for this ritual. According to the instructions of Raffaele, based on the aforementioned *Clavicula* and *Libro delle credulità*, once Seth (later named Salute) reached fourteen years of age, he would have crossed the Jordan River to visit the powerful King Sabbatione. Prior visits to this king were impossible because of the need to cross the Jordan River, where stones were thrown every day of the week except on the Sabbath when it was calm. Since travel was prohibited on the Sabbath, this prevented

⁶⁰ See SCHOLEM, *Origins of the Kabbalah*.

⁶¹ Their corresponding Hebrew names are Zebadiah, Uriel, and Rafael.

⁶² See ALLEGRA, *L’ebreo che sposò una bufala*, 18.

⁶³ GUY STROUMSA, *Another Seed: Studies in Gnostic Mythology* (Leiden, Brill: 1984), 76.

⁶⁴ ODED YISRAELI, ‘Jewish Medieval Traditions Concerning the Origins of the Kabbalah’, *The Jewish Quarterly Review* 106, no. 1 (2016): 21–41 (33). The *Sefer ha-Zohar* (‘Book of Splendor’) is the foundational work of kabbalistic literature. It is traditionally attributed to Shimon Bar Yoḥai (second century CE) but its authorship is debated as it first appeared in thirteenth-century Spain. It was first printed in Mantua in 1558; see ANDREA GONDOS, *Kabbalah in Print: The Study and Popularization of Jewish Mysticism in Early Modernity* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2020).

any visits from taking place.⁶⁵ The specimens preserved in Florence and Cortona add that in a case deemed truthful someone attempted to cross the Jordan River in the middle of the week on the Day of Circumcision and was struck by a stone that resulted in his death.⁶⁶

By casting the mixture of ashes made from the bones of the buffalo and the murdered Christian child, the stones thrown by the river would cease, allowing Seth/Salute to finally cross the river and reach the lands of King Sabbatione. Meeting with this influential king might have ultimately brought an end to the ‘miserable state’ of the Jews. Seth/Salute would have been welcomed with universal jubilation, receiving infinite wealth and a mighty army from the king. Additionally, he would marry the daughter of the Sultan, who would convert to Judaism, providing him with more soldiers to subjugate not only Christianity but the entire world.

Besides the perplexing reference to the Day of Circumcision, the unidentified author of the narrative refers to the king as Sambatyon (‘Sabbatione’), whereas in Jewish and non-Jewish traditions, this name was associated with the mythical sabbatical river. Despite the messianic and sacred connotations of the Jordan River in Jewish tradition, Sabbateanism, and Christianity,⁶⁷ numerous sources—including the Targum Pseudo-Jonathan, the Talmud, Pliny the Elder, Flavius Josephus, and others—identify the Sambatyon, rather than the Jordan, as the river beyond which the Ten Lost Tribes of Israel were exiled in 721 BCE by the Assyrian king Shalmaneser V.⁶⁸ According to this legend,

six days each week [...] the river runs so powerfully that neither these tribes nor their seekers can cross it; on the Sabbath, either natural wonders or halakhic restrictions prevent them from doing so as well. Thus, whether showcasing the sheer power and

⁶⁵ ‘[...] nessuno di noi c’è potuto andare mai a trovarlo, poiché dovendosi passare il Giordano, questo in tutti li giorni della Settimana tira sassi, solo il Sabbato sta fermo, e nel Sabbato non potendo noi viaggiare, per lo che con giusta ragione non possiamo andare, e per tal effetto ci viene impedito’ (ASC, fols 341v–342r).

⁶⁶ ‘Si racconta per caso veridico successo il giorno della circoncisione, che uno volesse fare simil prova e fosse colto da una pietra, che lo atterò di fatto, e cadde morto’. No festivities of this name are known in Jewish tradition. Perhaps the author refers to the Feast of Jesus’s circumcision corresponding to 1st January (eight days after his birth) in the Christian calendar.

⁶⁷ Several texts related to Sabbateanism mention prophecies according to which the messiah was supposed to appear by the Jordan banks; see, for instance, GIUSEPPE LEVI, ‘Documenti inediti su Shabbatai Zevi’, *Il Vessillo Israelitico* 59 (1911): 511–16, 588–92 (515); SHLOMO SIMONSOHN, ‘A Christian Report from Constantinople Regarding Shabbetai Şevi (1666)’, *Journal of Jewish Studies* 12, no. 1–2 (1961): 33–58 (41). On Christian pilgrimage and tourism at the Jordan between the Middle Ages and the twentieth century, see the very recent volume by JEHUDA REINHARZ and YAACOV SHAVIT, eds, *The Blessed River: Selected Travel Accounts of the Jordan River* (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 2024). I thank Jehuda Reinharz for sending me a copy of the book.

⁶⁸ On the vast literature on this topic, see the rich bibliography cited in STEIN KOKIN, ‘Toward the Source of the Sambatyon’ and the entry ‘Sambatyon’, in *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, eds FRED SKOLNIK and MICHAEL BERENBAUM, 22 vols (Detroit: Macmillan, 2007), vol. 17, 743–44. The legend of the Sambatyon River continued to captivate scholars and writers in modern times, including renowned writers such as Shmuel Yosef Agnon (*A Guest for the Night*, 1938) and Umberto Eco (*Baudolino*, 2000). On the legends surrounding the Tribes of Israel, see ANDREW TOBOLOWSKY, *The Myth of the Twelve Tribes of Israel: New Identities Across Time and Space* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022).

solemnity of the seventh day or the piety of the isolated (or general) community, the Sambatyon legend certifies that only in the messianic age will this lost population be restored to the rest of the Jewish people.⁶⁹

Medieval legends highlight what Tobolowsky has defined as ‘the dynamic combination—and cross-pollination—of traditions about the tribes with other traditions [...] especially those concerning Prester John, the legendary Priest King of the East, and Alexander the Great’,⁷⁰ which greatly influenced the Christian society. Both Jewish and non-Jewish authors have attempted to identify the geographical location of the river, situating it between Syria, Judea, and other lands. The popularity of this legend led many to travel to the East, as testified by the travelogs by Eldad ha-Dani (ninth century), Abraham Abulafia (thirteenth century), Moses Basola (1480–1560), David Reubeni (1490–c. 1541), and Gershon ben Eliezer ha-Levi Yiddels of Prague (seventeenth century) among others.⁷¹

In the seventeenth century, and especially after Menasseh ben Israel’s publication of his *Esperança de Israel* (‘The Hope of Israel’) in 1650, the quest for the Sambatyon held great significance beyond mere curiosity as it was imbued with the messianic purpose to gather the Twelve Tribes of Israel to hasten the coming of the messiah.⁷² Christians were equally captivated by the finding of the lost tribes beyond the Sambatyon ‘since the restoration and conversion of all Jewry was seen almost universally as an unconditional prerequisite for the Second Coming of Christ’.⁷³

The association of the Sambatyon River with the self-proclaimed messiah Sabbatai Zevi (1626–1676) needs to be understood within this context. Nathan of Gaza, the prophet of Sabbatai Zevi, wrote to Rafael Yosef predicting that ‘within a year and a few months’, the messiah would peacefully overthrow the Turkish Sultan, and within ‘four or five years’ he would journey beyond the Sambatyon River, appointing the Sultan as his interim deputy. By the seventh year (the sabbatical year 1671–1672), he would return from the Sambatyon River to Palestine riding on a celestial lion alongside his spouse Rebecca, the thirteen-year-old daughter of the

⁶⁹ STEIN KOKIN, ‘Toward the Source of the Sambatyon’, 1–2.

⁷⁰ TOBOLOWSKY, *The Myth of the Twelve Tribes of Israel*, 110. On the elaboration of legends between the Middle Ages and the early modern period, see MOTI BENMELECH, ‘Back to the Future: The Ten Tribes and Messianic Hopes in Jewish Society during the Early Modern Age’, in *People of the Apocalypse: Eschatological Beliefs and Political Scenarios*, eds WOLFRAM BRANDES, FELICITAS SCHMIEDER, and REBEKKA VOB (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2016), 193–209, and now REBEKKA VOB, *Sons of Saviors: The Red Jews in Yiddish Culture* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2023).

⁷¹ See ALANNA E. COOPER, ‘Conceptualizing Diaspora: Tales of Jewish Travelers in Search of the Lost Tribes’, *AJS Review* 30, no. 1 (2006): 95–117. On Basola’s and Reubeni’s accounts, see MOSES BASOLA, *In Zion and Jerusalem: The Itinerary of Rabbi Moses Basola, 1521-1523*, ed. ABRAHAM DAVID, trans. DENA ORDAN (Jerusalem: C. G. Foundation Jerusalem Project Publications of the Martin (Szusz) Department of Land of Israel Studies of Bar-Ilan University, 1999); ALAN VERSKIN, *Diary of a Black Jewish Messiah: The Sixteenth Century Journey of David Reubeni through Africa, the Middle East, and Europe* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2023).

⁷² See DAVID STERN, ‘Mapping the Redemption: Messianic Cartography in the 1695 Amsterdam Haggadah’, *Studia Rosenthaliana* 42–43 (2010–2011): 43–63 (62) and the bibliography cited there.

⁷³ STERN, ‘Mapping the Redemption’, 62.

resuscitated Moses. At this sight, all nations and kings should prostrate themselves before him.⁷⁴

Before traveling beyond the Sambatyon, another goal of the mystical messiah, described by Nathan of Gaza, was to discover the exact location of the altar and the ashes of the red heifer to perform sacrifices, even though the Temple was not to be rebuilt.⁷⁵ This reference pertains to the ritual of the *parà adumà* ('red cow') as in Numbers 19:1–10. According to this ritual, a reddish-brown heifer without blemish, which had never been yoked or used for labour, was required for purification rituals associated with Temple service. These rituals were specifically aimed at purifying individuals who had come into contact with a dead body. The ashes of the red heifer were mixed with water and used to cleanse ritual impurity. Although there are discrepancies—such as our text mentioning buffalo instead of a cow, omitting the colour requirement, and using the ashes for a different purpose—it is clear that there is a connection between the fictional case of Hamburg and the biblical text. On the contrary, what is unprecedented and scandalous is the centrality of zoophilia, a practice forbidden and punished with death in the Hebrew Bible.⁷⁶ Unlike Queen Pasiphaë's irrational desire to engage in sexual acts with a bull, which led to the birth of the mythical Minotaur, Zebedeo's union with the buffalo is not only a rational and voluntary decision but also a 'moral' one. Driven by the sense of duty, after listening to Raffaele's instructions, the Jewish merchant decided to take up the task of taking a young buffalo, impregnating her, and following all the other commands for the success of the ritual leading to the end of the 'Jews' miserable state'.⁷⁷ In Greek and Roman mythology, numerous myths recount sexual encounters (including instances of rape) between women and both beasts and gods in disguise.⁷⁸ In medieval and Renaissance Europe and Italy, a plethora of chronicles and treatises circulated, detailing monstrous births, often attributed to the unions of women (not men) with animals and even the devil.⁷⁹

⁷⁴ The original Hebrew text was published in JACOB SASPORTAS, *Tzitzat Novel Tzvi*, ed. ISAIAH TISHBY (Jerusalem: Mossad Bialik, 1954), 11–12. English translations of this letter can be found in GERSHOM SCHOLEM, *Sabbatai Sevi: The Mystical Messiah, 1626-1676*, with a new introduction by YAACOB DWECK, trans. R. J. ZWI WERBLOWSKY (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016), 273, and PAWEŁ MACIEJKO, ed., *Sabbatian Heresy: Writings on Mysticism, Messianism, and the Origins of Jewish Modernity* (Waltham, MA: Brandeis University Press, 2017), 6 (trans. DAVID HALPERIN).

⁷⁵ SCHOLEM, *Sabbatai Sevi*, 273.

⁷⁶ See Exodus 22:18; Leviticus 18:23; 20:15–16.

⁷⁷ '[...] avendo inteso io quanto dal detto Raffaele veniva promesso, mi risolsi di dover io intraprendere l'impegno di ingravidare una bufola e conferito con detto Raffaele l'animo mio [...] Sentito tutto questo manifestai alli Rabini l'animo mio [...]' (ASC, fols 342r; 345r).

⁷⁸ See REBECCA AMSTRONG, *Cretan Women: Pasiphae, Ariadne, and Phaedra in Latin Poetry* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 72–73.

⁷⁹ See OTTAVIA NICCOLI, *Profeti e popolo nell'Italia del Rinascimento* (Rome: Laterza, 1987); OTTAVIA NICCOLI, '«Menstruum quasi monstruum»: parti mostruosi e tabù mestruale nel '500', *Quaderni storici* 15, no. 44 (1980): 402–28. On accounts of monstrous births in England, see LUCA BARATTA, «A Marvellous and Strange Event». *Racconti di nascite mostruose nell'Inghilterra della prima età moderna* (Florence: Firenze University Press, 2016). A famous case (although not linked to bestiality) involving the birth of Siamese twins to a Jewish woman from Venice is known through a pamphlet titled *Discorso sopra il significato del parto mostruoso nato di una Hebraea in Venetia, nell'anno 1575 adi XXVI di Maggio* (Venetia: Domenico Farri, 1575). On the classification and physical description and representation of monsters in the early modern period, see

These accounts reflect a cultural fascination with the supernatural and its condemnation, exploring the implications of such unions, often interpreted as stemming from women's sexual indulgence and moral transgressions. Among the most popular works of this kind in the seventeenth century is *De monstruorum causis, natura et differentiis* (first edition, 1616) by Fortunio Liceti, a physician and philosopher at the University of Padua. In this work, Liceti recounts a case that allegedly occurred in the Low Countries,⁸⁰ where an infamous man had intercourse with a female cow ('vacca'), resulting in its pregnancy. The cow gave birth to a male offspring—not a calf, but a boy ('non vitulum, sed puerum'). Witnesses present at the scene lifted the boy from the ground and entrusted him to a wet nurse. The child grew up, was baptised, and received a Christian education. As an adult, he performed works of penitence for his father's crime. Unlike Seth/Salute, who was born with buffalo feet, this child was entirely human in form. However, he exhibited certain bovine tendencies, such as an inclination to graze in meadows and chew grass.⁸¹ Undeniably, the two plots are strikingly similar.

The name attributed to the buffalo after copulation—*Grazia* ('Grace')—may be an allusion to the Hebrew *Hesed* ('kindness', 'mercy' or 'grace') or *Tifereth* ('beauty'), two of the ten *sefirot*, namely the attributes of the *En Sof* (the 'Infinite One'). In this case, I tend to exclude that the anonymous author read Garzoni as, in another of his works, he translated *Hesed* with 'clemency, that is to say the benignity of the soul and pleasantness', far removed from any explicit kabbalistic context.⁸²

On the contrary, it would not be impossible for this narrative to have been inspired by a Latin translation of Kabbalistic works produced by Christian Hebraists, which were known to circulate in Europe and Italy by the late seventeenth century.⁸³ While a comprehensive discussion of Kabbalistic knowledge in Italy in Christian circles exceeds the scope of this article, it is worth mentioning influential works such as the Latin anthology *Kabbala Denudata* (Sulzbach, 1677–1684) by the Hebraist Christian Knorr von Rosenroth. Despite the availability of earlier Latin translations of Kabbalistic texts, such as *Sha'are Orab* by Yosef Gikatilla (1516), and the numerous errors contained in *Kabbala Denudata*, the latter 'within a few years from its publication [...] became the best and most widely read source regarding the Kabbalah for all

ULISSE ALDROVANDI, *Monstrorum historia cum parapolytomenis historiae omnium animalium* (Bononiae: Typis Nicolai Tebaldini, 1642).

⁸⁰ Liceti's reference to 'in hoc ipso Belgico' could correspond to present-day Belgium, the Netherlands, or Luxembourg.

⁸¹ The account can be found in FORTUNIO LICETI, *De monstruorum causis, natura, et differentiis libri duo* (Patavii: Paulum Frambottum, 1634), 218–19.

⁸² TOMASO GARZONI DA BAGNACAVALLLO, *Il teatro de vari, e diversi cervelli mondani* (Venetia: Giacomo Antonio Somascho, 1595), 7v.

⁸³ The bibliography on this topic is truly extensive. In addition to FRANÇOIS SECRET, *Les Kabbalistes chrétiens de la Renaissance* (Paris: Dunod, 1964) and GERSHOM SCHOLEM, *Kabbalah* (New York: Meridian, 1978), 196–201, and many other publications by Scholem, see the recent Italian edition of GERSHOM SCHOLEM, *Cabbalisti cristiani*, ed. SAVERIO CAMPANINI (Milan: Adelphi, 2024), and also MARGHERITA MANTOVANI, *Il cabalista aristotelico. Paolo Ricci tra Rinascimento e Riforma* (Rome: Viella, 2024).

European Hebrew scholars'.⁸⁴ In several passages of this work, *Hesed* is rendered as a synonym for *gratia*.⁸⁵ By contrast, in the *sefirotic* tree presented in the second volume of Robert Fludd's *Utriusque Cosmi Historia*, which was also very popular, the *sefirah Tifereth* is associated with grace and beauty (*gratia, pulchritudo*), while *Hesed* is linked to clemency and kindness (*clementia, bonitas*).⁸⁶ That said, it also remains possible that the choice of the buffalo's name comes from an unidentified source or was purely arbitrary. For now, all hypotheses must remain open.

Without delving into debates about the Christological interpretations of the red heifer's sacrifice in medieval and early modern Christian theological writings,⁸⁷ it is evident that our author, in this instance as well, drew upon a variety of basic sources to piece together his absurd narrative, while simultaneously infusing it with his own creative flair.

Hamburg between History and Fiction

Lastly, similar to Adrianople, the choice to set the bizarre story in Hamburg may not be random but could be linked to its associations with Sabbateanism. Between 1665 and 1666, the city emerged as one of the most fervent hubs of the messianic movement, fuelled by letters from the Ottoman Empire that arrived via Venice and Livorno.⁸⁸ As testified by the extraordinary account by the businesswoman Glikl bas Judah Leib, also known as Glückel of Hameln (c. 1646–1724), after receiving the news, 'the young Portuguese men would don their best clothes with a wide sash of green silk—the costume of Shabtai Tzvi. In this way they all went to their synagogue *with timbrel and dance* as during *the rejoicing of Beit Ha-Sho'eva* and read the letters aloud'.⁸⁹ While prayers for Sabbatai Zevi were introduced in the Hamburg synagogue, Jacob Sasportas,

⁸⁴ CHRISTOPH SCHULTE, *Zimzum: God and the Origin of the World*, trans. COREY TWITCHELL (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2023), 107. On the importance of this work, see also WILHELM SCHMIDT-BIGGEMANN, *Philosophia Perennis: Historical Outlines of Western Spirituality in Ancient, Medieval and Early Modern Thought* (Dordrecht: Springer, 2004), 193–94.

⁸⁵ FREIHERR CHRISTIAN KNORR VON ROSENROTH, *Kabbala denudata seu Doctrina Hebraeorum transcendentalis et metaphysica* (Sulzbaci: Abrahami Lichtenthaleri, 1677), 91, 178, 357. In his exposition of the Kabbalah in his *Oedipus Aegyptiacus*, the Jesuit scholar and polymath Athanasius Kircher also associated *Hesed* (or *Gedulah*, 'greatness') with *gratia*; see ATHANASIUS KIRCHER, *Oedipus Aegyptiacus*, 3 vols, vol. 2 (Romae: Vitalis Mascardi, 1653), 294.

⁸⁶ See the *Arboris sephirotica descriptio* in ROBERT FLUDD, *Utriusque Cosmi [...] Historia*, 2 vols, vol. 2, *Tractatus Secundus, De praeternaturali utriusque mundi historia* (Francofurti: Erasmus Kempfferi, Joan. Theodori de Bry, 1621), 157. See also WILHELM SCHMIDT-BIGGEMANN, 'Robert Fludd's Kabbalistic Cosmo', trans. GEOFF DUMBRECK and DOUGLAS HEDLEY, in *Platonism at the Origins of Modernity: Studies on Platonism and Early Modern Philosophy*, eds DOUGLAS HEDLEY and SARAH HUTTON (Dordrecht: Springer, 2008), 75–92.

⁸⁷ In addition to being regarded as a messianic animal in Jewish eschatology, late antique and medieval exegesis offered typological interpretations of the red heifer's role in purification, drawing parallels to Jesus's role in spiritual purification and redemption through his sacrifice.

⁸⁸ On the spread of news regarding Sabbatai Zevi in Hamburg, see MICHAEL STUEDEMUND-HALÉVY, 'What Happened in Izmir Was Soon the Talk of Hamburg: Shabbetai Sevi in Contemporary German Press Reports', *El Prezente* 10 (2016): 155–72. On the impact of Sabbateanism in Hamburg in those years, see also MARTINS, *The Portuguese Jews of Hamburg*, 53–54.

⁸⁹ GLIKL OF HAMELN, *Memoirs, 1691-1719*, ed. CHAVA TURNIANSKY, trans. SARA FELDMAN (Waltham, MA: Brandeis University Press, 2019), 104.

rabbi of Hamburg from 1666 to 1673, vehemently criticised the false messiah, who converted to Islam in 1666.⁹⁰ If it is true that ‘as soon as the first news of his apostasy reached Amsterdam and Hamburg (by November of the same year at the latest), eschatological hopes sank almost instantly, giving rise to a spiritual and religious crisis of unprecedented proportions’,⁹¹ messianic expectations and tensions in the Hanseatic city persisted despite widespread condemnation and scepticism, as evidenced nearly a century later in the Emden-Eybeschütz controversy.⁹²

The fervour surrounding Sabbatai Zevi intensified anti-Jewish sentiments among the local Christian population, leading to the implementation of heightened security measures in the main streets where the Portuguese community resided.⁹³

If we look at the historical reality of Hamburg in 1687, when the ritual homicide should have taken place, two important sources—the *Dinstagische un Fraytagische Kuranten*, the world’s oldest Yiddish newspaper, and the outstanding memoir in Yiddish by Glikl of Hameln—testify to the climate of social unrest in Hamburg during the summer that year. Several issues of the *Kuranten* cover the killing of a High German Jew in Altona in July 1687 and the imprisonment of the murderer and his wife and maid until he was sentenced to be broken on the wheel alive in September of the same year.⁹⁴ Details of this murder and another one that happened in 1684, perpetrated by the same murderer, are revealed in great detail by Glikl, who lived in Hamburg during those years.⁹⁵ The murders of these two Jews (who were both money changers) were, according to Glikl, tied to economic issues and did not have anything to share with messianic expectations, Kabbalah, or any other religious reason. Considering the context in

⁹⁰ On this figure, see YAACOB DWECK, *Dissident Rabbi: The Life of Jacob Sasportas* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2019). On Sabbateanism in Hamburg, see MICHAEL STUEDEMUND-HALÉVY, *Sabbatai Zvi. Ein Messias für Hamburg* (Leipzig – Berlin: Hentrich & Hentrich – Centrum Judaicum, 2022); MARTINS, *The Portuguese Jews of Hamburg*, 53–56.

⁹¹ MARTINS, *The Portuguese Jews of Hamburg*, 56.

⁹² This controversy refers to the quarrel between Rabbi Jacob Emden (1697–1776) and Jonathan Eybeschütz (1690–1764), chief rabbi of the communities of Altona, Hamburg, and Wandsbek. Emden accused the latter of distributing Sabbatean amulets and being a Sabbatean believer himself. See MACIEJKO, ed., *Sabbatian Heresy*; SHNAYER Z. LEIMAN, ‘When a Rabbi is Accused of Heresy: The Stance of Rabbi Jacob Joshua Falk in the Emden-Eibeschuetz Controversy’, in *Rabbinic Culture and Its Critics: Jewish Authority, Dissent, and Heresy in Medieval and Early Modern Times*, eds DANIEL FRANK and MATT D. GOLDISH (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2008), 435–56.

⁹³ See MARTINS, *The Portuguese Jews of Hamburg*, 54.

⁹⁴ See HILDE PACH, ‘In Hamburg a High German Jew Was Murdered’: The Representation of Foreign Jews in the *Dinstagische un Fraytagische Kuranten* (Amsterdam, 1686–1687), in *The Dutch Intersection: The Jews and the Netherlands in Modern History*, ed. YOSEF KAPLAN (Leiden: Brill, 2008), 213–23.

⁹⁵ GLIKL OF HAMELN, *Memoirs, 1691–1719*, 226–35. The assassinated man was a money changer named Aaron ben Moshe, while the murderer was the son of a renowned innkeeper in Hamburg. According to Glikl’s account, thanks to the clever intervention of a woman named Rivka (Rabbi Lipman’s wife), the maid of the murderer confessed the killing of Aaron ben Moshe by her master. The Jew’s body was eventually found under the threshold of the tavern and transferred to be buried in Altona. Glikl informs us that the Christian perpetrator eventually confessed to have killed another Jewish money changer three years earlier, that is to say Abraham Metz (the husband of Glikl’s cousin, Sarah), in a cheese room at his father’s tavern and to have placed his corpse in a pit. Glikl confirms that the murderer was sentenced to death by being broken on the wheel, while his wife and maidservant were pardoned and exiled from Hamburg.

which these murders occurred, it is important to note that the economic conditions of Ashkenazic Jews in Hamburg were particularly dire, especially in contrast to the Sephardic community, and were further exacerbated by the Thirty Years' War.⁹⁶

The climate of fear observed by Glikl should also be emphasised: 'the lives of all Jews were in danger due to the great hatred that had been roused. In short, we were in great danger on the day the murderer was sentenced'.⁹⁷ The peril is substantiated by a decree issued by the Hamburg Senate, dated 19 September 1687. This order explicitly warned against any harm to Jews or their property on the day of the murderer's execution, emphasising that violators would face severe punishment.⁹⁸

If we accept that the reference to Hamburg is not entirely a product of the author's imagination, it seems, however, unlikely that he learned of this event through the *Kuranten* or Glikl's *Zikbroynes* ('Memoirs'), both in Yiddish, or local decrees. Therefore, he must have consulted other sources—yet to be identified—that were circulating in Italy toward the end of the seventeenth century. These could include chronicles, newsletters, gazettes, and pamphlets.⁹⁹ Among German chronicles detailing the Hamburg murders, one can find the twelfth volume of Matthaeus Merian's *Theatri Europaei Continuati* (Frankfurt am Main, 1691) and the *Historisches Labyrinth der Zeit* by Heinrich Anselm von Ziegler und Kliphausen (Leipzig, 1700). However, at this stage, nothing is known regarding their circulation in Italy or their translation into Italian or Latin.

Some Conclusions and Future Perspectives

Although no printed edition of the text is known to have circulated, the bizarre case presented here should be read and contextualised within the popular genre of ephemeral literature, which gained particular success following the invention of printing. This genre often intersected with contemporary societal issues, including the rise of anti-Jewish sentiments.¹⁰⁰ The early modern rise of popular pamphlets about monstrosities were employed for a multitude of purposes: 'prognostications, satire, political and religious propaganda and, above all, business, which always rely on the attraction of the horrible'.¹⁰¹ The content for these pamphlets was often drawn from the more

⁹⁶ See KAPLAN, *An Alternative Path to Modernity*, 64 and other places there.

⁹⁷ KAPLAN, *An Alternative Path to Modernity*, 234–35.

⁹⁸ On this decree preserved in the Staatsarchiv Hamburg, see MAX G. GRUNWALD, *Hamburgs deutsche Juden bis zur Auflösung der Dreigemeinden 1811* (Hamburg: Janssen, 1904), 17; PETER FREIMARK, 'Zum Verhältnis von Juden und Christen in Altona im 17./18. Jahrhundert', *Theokratisches Jahrbuch des Institutum Judaicum Delitzschianum* 2 (1970–1972): 255–58.

⁹⁹ See MATTHAEUS MERIAN, *Theatri Europaei Continuati*, vol. 12 (Frankfurt am Main: Johann Görllin, 1691), 987–88; HEINRICH ANSELM VON ZIEGLER UND KLIPHAUSEN, *Historisches Labyrinth der Zeit* (Leipzig: Johann Friedrich Gleditsch, 1700), 1214. Manuscript news from Hamburg are extant in several manuscripts preserved at the Vatican Apostolic Library; see, for instance, Urb.lat.1114.pt.3 for the year 1627, Barb.lat.9829 for 1640, Bar.lat.9833 for 1641, and Urb.lat.1727 for 1679–1680. So far, I have not been able to retrieve similar sources for the year 1687.

¹⁰⁰ See, for instance, the circulation of newsheets in the Iberian Peninsula as detailed in FRANÇOIS SOYER, *Antisemitic Conspiracy Theories in the Early Modern Iberian World: Narratives of Fear and Hatred* (Leiden: Brill, 2019).

¹⁰¹ WITTKOWER, 'Marvels of the East: A Study in the History of Monsters', 193.

refined realms of literature and adapted to fit the sensational style demanded by the audience.

Despite incorporating two central elements of early modern anti-Jewish literature—namely the blood accusation and the degradation of Jews to animals—the anonymous author of the *Case of the Jew Who Married a Buffalo* offers a unique reinterpretation of these themes. In this narrative, the blood ritual ordered by the kabbalist is entirely unrelated to the preparation of *matzah* (unleavened bread) for Pesach. Additionally, the dehumanisation of Jewish people through animal comparison bypasses the usual association with dogs or pigs, opting instead for a more unusual and grotesque juxtaposition.¹⁰²

With the exception of the mention of the *Nimrezeth* curse, no other Hebrew words appear in the text. This absence highlights the author's superficial understanding of the language—or more accurately, their complete lack of familiarity with it. Likewise, the author's purported knowledge of Kabbalah and Sabbateanism are entirely fictional. Kabbalistic elements and descriptions of alleged rituals do not stem from Jewish sources but likely from Italian popular literature, such as the works of Tomaso Garzoni, and possibly from the writings of Christian Hebraists in Latin. In contrast, Sabbateanism is invoked in veiled and incorrect references only (i.e. the crossing of the Sambatyon/Jordan River, the River/King Sambatyon, the red heifer/buffalo). In this case as well, the anonymous author most likely drew inspiration for these elements from an Italian milieu. In Italy, home to significant Sabbatean hubs, the circulation of Sabbatai Zevi's prophecies and news of his apostasy in 1666 reached Christian audiences, who often 'used the bizarre story of Sabbatai to arouse the public's curiosity and, apparently, to try to encourage Jews to convert to Christianity'.¹⁰³ Indeed, as per the famous Venice convert Giulio Morosini (born Samuel ben David Nahmias), 'many

¹⁰² On animal representations and associations with the Jews in the early modern period, see KENNETH R. STOW, *Jewish Dogs: An Image and Its Interpreters* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2006) and MARTINA MAMPIERI, 'When the Rabbi's Soul Entered a Pig: Melchiorre Palontrotti and His *Giudata* Against the Jews of Rome', *Jewish History* 33, no. 3–4 (2020): 351–75 and the bibliography cited there. On the association between Jews and pigs in the *longue durée*, see JORDAN D. ROSENBLUM, *Forbidden: A 3,000 Year History of Jews and the Pig* (New York: New York University Press, 2024).

¹⁰³ STEFANO VILLANI, 'Between Information and Proselytism: Seventeenth-century Italian Texts on Sabbatai Zevi, their Various Editions and their Circulation, in Print and Manuscript', *DAAT: A Journal of Jewish Philosophy and Kabbalah* 82 (2016): LXXXVII–CIII (LXXXVIII). A *Lettera mandata da Costantinopoli a Roma intorno al nuovo Messia degli Ebrei* ('Letter sent from Constantinople to Rome about the new Messiah of the Jews') was published in three editions in 1667 and reprinted in 1694 and 1700. On the Sabbatean movement in Italy, see ISAIAH SONNE, 'On the History of Sabbateanism in Italy' [Hebrew], in *Sefer ha-Yovel Alexander Marx: A Tribute to Professor Alexander Marx*, ed. DAVID FRANKEL (New York: The Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 1943), 89–103; ISAIAH SONNE, 'New Material on Sabbatai Zevi from a Notebook of R. Abraham Rovigo' [Hebrew], *Sefunot* 3–4 (1960): 41–69; ISAIAH SONNE, 'Visitors to the House of R. Abraham Rovigo' [Hebrew], *Sefunot* 5 (1961): 275–95; MATT D. GOLDISH, *The Sabbatean Prophets* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004); FRANCESCA BREGOLI, 'The Jews of Italy (1650-1815)', in *The Cambridge History of Judaism*, 8 vols, vol. 7, eds JONATHAN KARP and ADAM SUTCLIFFE (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 864–93 (878–79) and the doctoral thesis by RACHELE JESURUM, *Le développement du mouvement sabbatien en Italie: Binyamin ben El'azar Coen Vitale da Reggio et son 'Et ha-zamir (עת הזמיר), Il tempo del canto* (PhD diss., Università di Bologna – Institut National de Langues et Civilisations Orientales [INALCO], 2021).

individual converts from Judaism cited the messianic movement of Sabbatai Zevi as influential in their decision to convert to Christianity or to remain converted if they had earlier moments of misgiving'.¹⁰⁴ As discussed above, the choice of Hamburg as setting for the blood libel remains enigmatic. However, it is likely not coincidental, given the significance of Sabbateanism, Jewish intracommunal tensions, conflicts between Jews and Christians, and the broader social unrest of the seventeenth century.

The extension of the research in other libraries and archives will hopefully bring to the surface more manuscript specimens of this composition. An edition of the text that takes note of variants and additions may shed light on the evolution and dissemination of the narrative, providing valuable insights into its historical and cultural context. Additionally, a codicological and palaeographical examination of the existing specimens within miscellaneous volumes can offer details on the ownership, readership, and the circulation of the surviving manuscript copies. Together, these approaches will further enhance our understanding of the text significance and its place in literary history.

¹⁰⁴ ELISHEVA CARLEBACH, 'The Last Deception: Failed Messiahs and Jewish Conversion in Early Modern German Lands', in *Millenarism and Messianism in Early Modern European Culture*, 4 vols, vol. 1, *Jewish Messiahs in the Early Modern World*, ed. MATT D. GOLDISH and RICHARD H. POPKIN (Dordrecht: Springer, 2001), 125–38 (133). The mockery and disdain prevalent in the polemical literature frequently authored by neophytes during this period offer valuable insights into Sabbateanism and the broader messianic tensions in early modern Italy. Among these works, see for instance, GIULIO MOROSINI, *Derekh emunah. Via delle fede mostrata a'gli ebrei* (Roma: nella Stamparia della Sacra Congregazione de Propaganda Fide, 1683); LODOVICO MARRACCI, *L'ebreo preso per le buone overo discorsi familiari et amichevoli fatti con i Rabbini di Roma intorno al Messia* (Roma: eredi del Corbelletti, 1701); LUIGI MARIA BENETELLI, *Le saette di Gionata scagliate à favor degli Ebrei* (Venezia: Antonio Bortoli, 1703); LORENZO FILIPPO VIRGULTI, *La vera idea del Messia* (Roma: Gio. Battista de Caporali, 1730).