The Gonzagas' great passion for horses, reflected in the studs they created, began with Ludovico II, Marquis of Mantua, in the fifteenth century. Federico I carried on his father’s activities but it was under his own son, Francesco II Gonzaga, the fourth marquis, that breeding activity and imports reached their apogee. If Federico II, Francesco II’s son, lacked much of his father’s passion and knowledge, he nonetheless achieved good results and, in addition, proved to be a better trader. He improved his father’s links with England, for example, one which benefited both parties. Like his father, he was aware of the diplomatic benefits of sending him – and other rulers – superb horses from his studs, even from among his favourite strain of barbari. In fact, successive Marquises and Dukes of Mantua regularly used horses as a means of acquiring or exerting diplomatic leverage. They certainly possessed a much sought-after product, their studs being widely acclaimed as among the best in Renaissance Europe. As Jacob Burckhardt, the nineteenth century historian, wrote,

A practical fruit of these zoological studies was the establishment of studs, of which the Mantuan, under Francesco Gonzaga, was esteemed the first in Europe. All interest in, and knowledge of the different breeds of horses is as old, no doubt, as riding itself, and the crossing of the European with the Asiatic must have been common from the time of the Crusades. In Italy, a special inducement to perfect the breed was offered by the prizes at the horse-races held in every considerable town in the peninsula.1

The sheer volume and range of material in the Gonzaga Archive in Mantua is daunting but for someone wishing to research the history of the family’s studs, Carlo Cavrani’s Le razze Gonzaghese di cavalli nel Mantovano (1909)2 offers an excellent guide to the documentation

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1 Burckhardt J., La Civiltà del Rinascimento in Italia (Florence: 1996) 268.
deposited there. Apart from making public hitherto unpublished material, it presents the evidence clearly and in a well-ordered way. Cavriani belonged to a Mantuan family, several of whom had served as Secretaries of State to the Gonzagas, and was a horseman and breeder himself. He could therefore accurately assess the significance of the material he was examining. For a filtered account, Giancarlo Malacarne’s book, *Il mito dei cavalli Gonzagheschi: alle origini del purosangue*, written in 1995, provides a useful résumé of the Mantuan archive for someone approaching the archives for the first time. Hubert Reade’s *Sidelights on the Thirty Years War*, published in 1924, contains information on the Gonzagan and Savoyard studs, taken directly from the Italian archives. Reade shows particular sensitivity towards and knowledge of Italian history and his ideas, in some measure, reflect the ones expressed in this essay. He emphasizes the importance of diplomacy and the value of the ‘silken ties of common pleasures’ established between the European rulers. Thus, an alliance between two kings or politicians could be built on a common interest in horses, shooting or racing. For an essay with a cultural theme like this one, Federico Tesio’s historical introduction to *Il Purosangue Animale da Esperimento* is essential reading. There, the reader will gain an understanding of the esteem in which contemporary rulers and elite held the Mantuan studs, presented by a great thoroughbred breeder and a scholar with a humanist and scientific background. C.M. Prior’s *Royal Studs of the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries* is still incomparable as a source of information on early English studs, especially, as in this case, their connection with early modern Italian and Mediterranean horses. Tesio relied to a considerable extent upon his English counterpart, a researcher and breeder of thoroughbred horses at Adstock Manor in Buckinghamshire.

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5 Reade, *Sidelights* 209.