NOTE

THE LIBRARY OF ABRAHAM BEN DAVID PORTALEONE:
A NEWLY DISCOVERED DOCUMENT

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With the bull *Cum hebraeorum militia*, dated February 28, 1593, Pope Clement VIII forbade the possession and reading of the Talmud and kabalistic works both in the Papal States and in each other Christian country. These Jewish texts were considered erroneous and insulting the Christian religion: “*codices impios Thalmudicos saepe damnatos, vanissimos cabbalisticos.*”¹ In the last version of the bull there is no reference to the other Hebrew books except the Talmud, Kabbalah and their commentaries.² In a *breve* dated April 17, the pope specified that all other Hebrew works—“*impia Hebraeorum scripta et libros*”—had to be expurgated by the Jews themselves and then presented to the Inquisition.³

In Mantua the bull was enforced two years after its publication. On August 27, 1595, the Bishop of Mantua, Francesco Gonzaga, appointed three Jewish apostates: Lorenzo Franguello, Domenico Gerosolimitano and Alessandro Scipione. They were made censors of the books the Mantuan Jews had to take to the Inquisition. The censors soon realized that they were not able to examine the large number of all books which the Jews of

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Mantua had accumulated. On September 27, 1595 and to aid the censors efforts, the Bishop decreed that every head of household in Mantua had to compile lists of all the books in their possession. They were then supposed to submit those lists to the censors within one month.\(^4\) While the pontifical breve mentioned only “the Hebrew scripts and books,” the ordinance by the Mantuan Inquisitors included “tutti i libri et tratati,” “all the books and tracts,” without distinction between Hebrew and non-Hebrew works. Nevertheless, not all Jews followed this instruction carefully. Many book lists included only Hebrew works and manuscripts.\(^5\)

It is a question whether such lists are complete or are representative only for a part of the libraries of the Mantuan Jews. This is certainly the case for the physician Abraham ben David Portaleone. His list mentioned only Hebrew works: 102 books and 49 manuscripts.\(^6\) From his last will, however, we know that his library included many works on medicine, philosophy, and other different topic in the Hebrew, Latin and Italian—“volgare”—languages. Portaleone bequeathed his entire medical and philosophical library to his son David. David obtained the doctorate in philosophy and medicine at the University of Padua, and followed his father’s medical profession. While his other brothers, Eleazar/Lazzaro) and Yehuda, had no claim to this portion of the estate, the remainder of the Hebrew library, sifre ha-qodesh, was to be divided equally.\(^7\) The will offers no other information about Portaleone’s library. The specific reference to them among the goods of the estate and the desire to hold together the medical and philosophical library, suggest, however, that Portaleone’s library was considerable.

\(^4\) ACM filza 4 cartelle 42–43 and filza 27 cartella 26: “…comandiamo che gli massari d’essi hebrei debbano far pubblicare nelle sinagoghe che ogni hebreo capo di famiglia debba in termine di un mese doppo l’intimazione della presente portare al S.to Uffitio lista di tutti i libri et tratati che si trova haverne […].” See also Shlomo Simonsohn, History of the Jews in the Duchy of Mantua (Tel-Aviv: Kiryat Sepher, 1977), 690.


See also Simonsohn, “sefarim we-sifriyyot shel yehudey Mantova, 1595,” 117.

\(^7\) The last will has been published by David Kaufmann, “Jewish Ethical Wills: Texts and Addition: Testament of Abraham Sommo [sic] Portaleone,” The Jewish Quarterly Review 4 (1892): 333–341.