

EVIDENCE FROM THE HOLY OFFICE: TOWARDS A HISTORY OF JEWISH MAGIC IN EARLY MODERN ITALY

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Abstract

In this article, I propose a new methodology for reconstructing Jewish culture and Jewish-Christian relations in early modern Italy based on the combined analysis of Jewish magical sources and inquisitorial records and materials. I do so by focusing on a medallion engraved with Hebrew inscriptions and the effigy of Christ, which was confiscated by the Holy Office in Parma in 1713 and is today preserved among the holdings of the Archive of the Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith (ADDF) in the Vatican. When considered in relation to other Hebrew medallions of a similar nature that have been subjected to analysis within the context of Jewish magical tradition, this remarkable object serves to illustrate the potential for inquisitorial material and studies on the Inquisition(s) to facilitate research on Jewish magic, and vice versa. Furthermore, it demonstrates how the exchange of ideas between these two academic fields may contribute to a deeper comprehension of Jewish culture in Renaissance and Baroque Italy.

Introduction

I first became acquainted with Professor Shaul Shaked during my undergraduate studies at the Sapienza University of Rome. During a class on Zoroastrianism, it was emphasized how he had successfully bridged two distinct, though fundamentally intertwined, academic fields: Iranian studies and Jewish studies. Until the conclusion of my studies in Rome, I was undecided between these two disciplines. Ultimately, however, I elected to pursue Jewish studies and was gratified to have the opportunity and honor to meet Professor Shaked in Jerusalem. On this occasion, he was introduced to me as one of the foremost scholars in the field of Jewish magic. Although I never had the privilege of being one of his students, I like to think that my

research follows the path he forged with his outstanding work. Professor Shaked's scholarship has unveiled the immense potential of magical sources in the historical reconstruction of encounters between different cultural worlds. In my own research, the poles of this cross-cultural discourse are pre-modern Jewish tradition and Italian Renaissance culture. Although the historical context and many of the related research questions have inevitably changed, Shaked's approach remains fundamental to my work. In what follows, I too present a study that re-evaluates evidence that has previously been overlooked in scholarship, that integrates the analyses of manuscript and documentary sources stemming from different religious, cultural, and linguistic systems, and that seeks to trace shared local traditions and reconstruct a more nuanced history of the Jews, taking into consideration dynamics of cultural appropriation, adaptation, and transformation. In particular, I will present a case study focusing on a Hebrew medallion currently housed in the Archive of the Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith (ADDF) in the Vatican, through which I hope to draw attention to a novel methodological approach for reconstructing Jewish culture and Jewish-Christian relations in Renaissance Italy. This approach integrates the analysis of Jewish magical sources with the data derived from textual and material evidence provided by Italian local inquisitions and the Holy Office. In the following sections, I will introduce my approach (§1), provide an overview of the production of Hebrew pseudo-coins in the Renaissance and their possible amuletic use (§2), and focus especially on a type of medallion known as *Maghen David et Abraam* (§3). Subsequently, I will examine the medallion in the ADDF, proposing that it is an additional example of the same magical tradition (§4). I will edit, translate and provide commentary on the inscriptions and iconography of this remarkable material object, which has survived thanks to the meticulous work of the functionaries of the Holy Office. In doing so, I will demonstrate the significance of this discovery for the reconstruction of the history of this particular amuletic tradition, and more broadly, of Jewish magic and Jewish-Christian relations in early modern Italy. Finally, I will conclude with a summary of my findings (§5).

1. Magic, the Inquisition, and Jewish-Christian Relations in Early Modern Italy

Research on Jewish magic has grown exponentially in the last decades.¹ Among many different topics pursued within this relatively new field, the study of Jewish-Christian relations in antiquity and the Middle Ages has also received some attention.² Surprisingly, although the fervent cultural encounter between Jews and Christians in Renaissance Italy has enjoyed remarkable popularity in scholarship, it has seldom been investigated in light of Jewish magical direct evidence.³ Notwithstanding their potential value for achieving a more

¹ Gideon Bohak, *Ancient Jewish Magic* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008); Yuval Harari, *Jewish Magic before the Rise of Kabbalah* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2017). The majority of published Jewish magical texts date to late antiquity; for an overview of these sources, see Gideon Bohak, "Prolegomena to the Study of the Jewish Magical Tradition," *Currents in Biblical Research* 8 (2009): 107–50.

² For example, Ra'anan Boustán and Joseph E. Sanzo, "Christian Magicians, Jewish Magical Idioms, and the Shared Magical Culture of Late Antiquity," *Harvard Theological Review* 110 (2017): 217–40; Gideon Bohak, "Catching a Thief: The Jewish Trials of a Christian Ordeal," *Jewish Studies Quarterly* 13 (2006): 344–62; Ortal-Paz Saar, "A Genizah Magical Fragment and Its European Parallels," *Journal of Jewish Studies* 65 (2014): 237–62; Katelyn Mesler, "The Latin Encounter with Hebrew Magic: Problems and Approaches" in *The Routledge History of Medieval Magic*, ed. Sophie Page and Catherine Rider (London: Routledge, 2019), 85–98; Katelyn Mesler and Kati Ihnat, "From Christian Devotion to Jewish Sorcery: The Curious History of Wax Figurines in Medieval Europe" in *Entangled Histories: Knowledge, Authority, and Jewish Culture in the Thirteenth Century*, ed. Elisheva Baumgarten, Ruth Mazo Karras, and Katelyn Mesler (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2017), 134–58.

³ For studies on Renaissance Italian Jewry, see, among others, Robert Bonfil, *Jewish Life in Renaissance Italy*, trans. Anthony Oldcorn (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1994); David B. Ruderman, ed., *Essential Papers on Jewish Culture in Renaissance and Baroque Italy* (New York: New York University Press, 1992); Ruderman, ed., *Cultural Intermediaries: Jewish Intellectuals in Early Modern Italy* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004); Ruderman, *Early Modern Jewry: A New Cultural History* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2010); Chaim Wirszubski, *Pico della Mirandola's Encounter with Jewish Mysticism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998); Moshe Idel, *Kabbalah in Italy (1280–1510): A Survey* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2011); Alessandro Guetta, *Italian Jewry in the Early Modern Era: Essays in Intellectual History* (Boston, MA: Academic Studies Press, 2014); Giulio Busi and Silvia Greco, eds., *The Renaissance Speaks Hebrew* (Milan: Silvana Editoriale, 2019); Giuseppe Veltri, *Il Rinascimento nel pensiero ebraico* (Turin: Silvana Editoriale, 2020); Pierre Savy, *Les*

nuanced and realistic portrait of Jewish culture in Renaissance Italy, the vast majority of the numerous manuscripts of Jewish magic that were penned and circulated in medieval and early modern Italy have been largely neglected and remain unpublished.⁴ In contrast, the majority of scholars have based their investigations of the Jewish-Italian synergy on the philosophical and autobiographical writings of individual Jews, primarily from an upper-class background, including rabbis, physicians, kabbalists, and bibliophiles. Alternatively, they have focused on the correspondence between exceptionally enterprising Jews and their Christian patrons.⁵

princes et les Juifs dans l'Italie de la Renaissance (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 2023). On the relationship between the Jewish magical tradition and Christian Kabbalah, see Emma Abate, "Elias Levita the Lexicographer and the Legacy of *Sefer ha-Shorashim*," *Sefarad* 76 (2017): 289–311; Abate, "Raziel a Roma, le copie di Egidio da Viterbo (1469–1532)," in *L'eredità di Salomone: La magia ebraica in Italia e nel Mediterraneo*, ed. Emma Abate (Florence: Giuntina; Ferrara: Edizioni Fondazione Meis, 2019), 119–42; Abate, "Hebrew Divine Names into Latin and Italian, *Shi'va Shemot* and Other Samples from Egidio da Viterbo's Workshop," in *Magic and Language: Perspectives on Jewish and Christian Magic in Early Modern Europe*, ed. Yuval Harari, Gerold Necker, and Marco Frenschkowski (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2024), 62–81; Emma Abate and Maurizio Mottolese, "La *Qabbalah* in volgare: Manoscritti dall'atelier di Egidio da Viterbo," in *Umanesimo e cultura ebraica nel Rinascimento italiano*, ed. Stefano Baldassarri and Fabrizio Lelli (Florence: Angelo Pontecorboli, 2016), 15–40; Flavia Buzzetta, "Adaptations de thèmes magico-cabalistiques juifs médiévaux par le Quattrocento italien: Étude des manuscrits *Commentum Sefer Iesire* (Vat. Ebr. 191 ff. 1r–12r) et *Liber de homine* (Vat. Ebr. 189 ff. 398r–509v) traduits par Flavius Mithridate pour Jean Pic de la Mirandole (v. 1485–1486)," <https://shs.hal.science/halshs-01001691v1>; Saverio Campanini, "Dal sacco di Roma alla fine del mondo: Profezie cabbalistiche fra le carte di Egidio da Viterbo," in *Rinascimento plurale: Ibridazioni linguistiche e socioculturali tra Quattro e Cinquecento*, ed. Giulio Busi and Silvana Greco (Castiglione delle Stiviere: FPBP, 2021), 71–99.

⁴ For the few exceptions, see Mark Verman, "Signor Tranquillo's Magic Notebook," in *Studies in Jewish Manuscripts*, ed. Joseph Dan and Klaus Herrmann (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1999), 231–37; Alessia Bellusci, "Un manuale moderno di magia in ebraico ed italiano dalla Collezione di Lisa e William Gross," in Abate, *L'eredità di Salomone*, 279–313; Bellusci, "Jewish Magic in Renaissance and Baroque Italy: Preliminary Notes on Ms. GFC 325," *Cahiers d'Accademia* 11 (2018): 23–42; Bellusci, "Jewish Magic in the Syncretic Renaissance: Baking a Pizza for the Bogeyman," *I Tatti Studies* 24 (2021): 125–59.

⁵ David B. Ruderman, *Kabbalah, Magic and Science: The Cultural Universe of a Sixteenth-Century Jewish Physician* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988); Edward Goldberg, *Jews and Magic in Medici Florence: The Secret World of*

Since the opening of the archives of the Sant'Uffizio (Holy Office) in 1998, the study of the history of the Roman Inquisition has made significant advancements, touching on many important juridical, social, and cultural aspects.⁶ This has also encompassed the everyday life of Italian Jews and Jewish communities, as well as their interactions with the Christian majority culture.⁷ Although the status of the Jews was not initially within the purview of inquisitorial tribunals, in the second half of the sixteenth century and particularly from 1581 onward, the Holy Office began to extend its authority over the Jewish population.⁸ In the first instance, the inquisitors were interested in Jews involved in matters of suspected Judaizing, or in cases that implied an exchange with the Christian population, neophytes, and converted Jews.

The inquisitorial scrutiny of Jewish practices and beliefs intensified concurrently with the growing perception of Judaism as a heretical threat.⁹ The analysis of the records of the Sant'Uffizio pertaining to trials against Jews is enlightening for understanding their relations with Christians, as well as for reconstructing the beliefs and lived religion of Italian Jews of different socio-cultural levels. The inquisitorial files indicate a significant exchange of magical

Benedetto Blanis (Toronto: Toronto University Press, 2011); Goldberg, *A Jew at the Medici Court* (Toronto: Toronto University Press, 2011); Daniel Jütte, *The Age of Secrecy: Jews, Christians, and the Economy of Secrets, 1400–1800*, trans. Jeremiah Riemer (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2015); Alessia Bellusci, “There Once Was a Frog: A Seventeenth Century Dried Frog in ms. ROS 77,” *Magic, Ritual, and Witchcraft* 15 (2020): 336–60.

⁶ For an overview of the historiography on the Inquisition in Italy, see Adriano Prosperi, *Tribunali della coscienza. Inquisitori, confessori, missionari*, 2nd ed. (Turin: Einaudi, 2009); Prosperi, *Inquisizioni* (Macerata: Quodlibet, 2023); Andrea Del Col, *L'inquisizione in Italia. Dal XII al XXI secolo* (Milan: Mondadori, 2006).

⁷ Brian Pullan, *The Jews of Europe and the Inquisition of Venice 1550–1670* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1983); Pietro C. Ioly Zorattini, ed., *Processi del S. Uffizio di Venezia contro ebrei e giudaizzanti*, 14 vols. (Florence: Olschki, 1980–1999); Prosperi, *Inquisizioni*, 223–75.

⁸ On June 10, 1581, Gregorius XIII (Ugo Boncompagni) promulgated by *motu proprio* the papal bull *Antiqua Iudaeorum Improbitas*, a detailed codification of the Jewish behaviors and actions against which inquisitorial tribunals could act with diligence and alacrity.

⁹ Serena Di Nepi, “Dall’astrologia agli Astrologo. Ebrei e superstizioni nella Roma della Controriforma,” in *Le radici storiche dell’antisemitismo. Nuove fonti e ricerche. Atti del seminario di studi, Roma, 13–14 dicembre 2007*, ed. Marina Caffiero (Rome: Viella, 2011), 41–70 (esp. 49–52); Marina Caffiero, *Legami pericolosi: Ebrei e cristiani tra eresia, libri proibiti e stregoneria* (Turin: Einaudi, 2012), esp. 5–20.

traditions—on both a theoretical and a practical level—between Jews and Christians. Additionally, there is evidence of a fusion of magical practices, particularly in the case of apotropaic amulets, charms, and forms of prayer aimed at achieving mundane objectives. Christian clients, including laymen and members of the clergy, purchased amulets and magic-related services from Jewish experts. Concurrently, Christian magical practices were integrated into Jewish culture.¹⁰

Both Jewish magic and the history of inquisition are relatively sectorial academic fields. Perceived as distant and apparently unrelated, they have seldom been examined together. This is regrettable, given that Jewish magical sources and inquisitorial records—and, more broadly, Italian archival sources—are complementary. On the one hand, ecclesiastical and governmental deliberations, judicial and inquisitorial files, legal contracts, letters, and Christian penitential manuals, and anti-Judaic polemical literature stem from a Christian milieu. Therefore, they mostly reflect the cultural attitudes of the predominant Christian culture. On occasion, they elucidate the ways Jews presented themselves to their Christian neighbors and patrons, and the degree to which they chose to share their ancestral lore.¹¹ In particular, the records of inquisitorial trials, depositions, admonitions, regulations, lists of confiscated objects and books, and confiscated items themselves preserved in local Italian archives and the ADDF reflect the specific socio-cultural context in which a certain belief or behavior—including specific magical techniques—emerged and circulated. These documents clarify the circumstances in which specific magical practices were used, inform us about the contingent motivations that possibly urged individuals to turn to magic, and preserve the names of those involved in magical activities and exchanges, enabling us to reconstruct, at least in part, the identities and everyday lives of historical persons who—as part of their quotidian piety, or at a certain point in their existence—engaged in magic. On the other hand, Italian manuscripts of Jewish magic mostly stem from and reflect a Jewish milieu. They are the product of Jewish professionals, including rabbis,

¹⁰ Caffiero, *Legami pericolosi*, 122–23.

¹¹ Naturally, all information on the Jews and Jewish culture is biased by a general prejudicial attitude of the majority Christian culture, or of the newly embraced faith in the case of sources penned by Jewish converts.

physicians, and kabbalists, who were active in Italy and profoundly embedded in Italian culture. This is evident from their use of a Hebrew heavily influenced by Italian vernaculars, from the adoption of Italian in the glosses and in certain passages, and from their integration of the ancient Jewish magical tradition with local Christian elements.¹² These sources mainly take the form of anonymous recipe books and rarely give us information about *ad hoc* users and their specific goals. Yet these texts are instrumental for the historian seeking to anchor a particular magical technique to a specific textual tradition.

By establishing a dialogue between Italian archival sources and Jewish magical texts, we gain a more comprehensive understanding of the culture and lived religion of the Jews who engaged in magical activities, produced and circulated magical texts, traded or exchanged them with Christians, and collaborated with their Christian neighbors to enhance or save their own lives. I have recently tested this approach in a couple of studies. For instance, based on an integrated analysis of a selection of manuscripts of Jewish magic copied in Renaissance Italy and the data derived from textual and material inquisitorial evidence from the State Archive of Venice and the ADFF, I studied a divinatory technique known as *inghistara* or *operazione della caraffa* (“operation of the saucer”) that was often used for the retrieval of stolen objects.¹³ It has become evident that the Jewish magical recipes and the inquisitorial material gathered in my study are mutually reinforcing and complementary. Despite the differences in their nature and production contexts, all the sources indicate the use of the same set of angelic names and prayers among Jews and Christians alike. This includes the use of the same Italian spell, which is copied in Hebrew characters in Hebrew manuscripts. This evidence demonstrates an intense cross-cultural and religious exchange in everyday practice. In contrast to the impersonal instructions preserved in the Hebrew manuscripts, the inquisitorial reports concerning cases of *inghistara* provide detailed accounts of the circumstances of use of this specific technique, as well as the identities and social status of those performing it. While the recipes for *inghistara* in the Hebrew manuscripts reflect male authorship and

¹² Bellusci, “Jewish Magic in the Syncretic Renaissance.”

¹³ Alessia Bellusci, “L’«operazione della caraffa» tra documenti inquisitoriali e manoscritti di magia ebraica,” *Revue des études juives* 184.3-4 (2025): 395-436.

transmission, the Italian archival sources also document consistent female use of the technique, which implies an oral/local circulation of technical knowledge. Furthermore, my combined analysis of the sources has shown that the earliest manuscript attestations of the Christian *inghistara*—perhaps the most common form of divination that recurs in early modern inquisitorial depositions—can be identified in medieval Italian codices of Jewish magic. Similarly, in another study, I demonstrated how anti-Judaic polemical literature—texts that originated from the same cultural milieu in which inquisitors were trained and operated—can also be utilized to enhance the study of manuscripts of Jewish magic.¹⁴ Anti-Judaic treatises sometimes preserve references to Jewish magical lore that have left no trace in written traditions. This is the case, for instance, for a magical technique described in the work of the seventeenth-century Jewish convert Giulio Morosini, according to whom Italian Jewish women would facilitate challenging births by holding a coin engraved with the image of the Virgin Mary in their hand.¹⁵ This anti-Judaic polemical writing enabled me to ascertain how Italian Jewish women appropriated the early medieval Christian childbirth practice of gazing at and holding images of the Virgin through a process of local, cross-cultural, and oral-aural exchange, reshaping it according to their own cultural and everyday experiences and continuing to disseminate it orally.

In this contribution, I will present a further case study that illustrates the benefits of a joint analysis of Jewish magical sources and inquisitorial evidence. This article will examine a medallion confiscated by the Sant'Uffizio in Parma in 1713, along with the accompanying inquisitorial report. By juxtaposing this textual and material evidence with other known sources on Hebrew pseudo-coins and medallions, it will be demonstrated that the inquisitorial documentation provides proof that the medallion known as *Maghen David et Abraam* was utilized as an amulet in early modern Italy and offers a concrete and specific example of its use and circulation.

¹⁴ Alessia Bellusci, "Childbirth Amulets against Lilith in Early Modern Italy," *Arcana Naturae. Revue d'histoire des sciences secrètes* 3 (2022): 47–82.

¹⁵ Giulio Morosini, *Derekh Emunah: Via della Fede mostrata agli Ebrei* (Rome, 1683).

2. Hebrew Pseudo-Coins and Their Amuletic Use

Together with the revaluation and study of ancient texts and manuscripts, humanism soon gave birth to new disciplines based on the analysis of material remains: epigraphy, archaeology, and numismatics.¹⁶ The latter had already been inaugurated by Petrarch, who directly engaged in the collection and study of Roman coins and recognized not only their fine artistic value, but also their pregnant historical meaning.¹⁷ Yet it was not until the fifteenth century that coin collectors emerged on a large scale and robust numismatic collections began to be assembled. Collectors were particularly attracted by coins and medallions made of precious materials or with noteworthy artistic iconography. The search for these rare and valuable objects also inspired the production of numismatic catalogues and reproductions.¹⁸ Sculptors and graphic artists produced accurate woodcuts and casts of the original pieces. Yet they also invented new models and altered existing iconographies to imbue them with new interpretations and meanings: these products can be referred to as pseudo-coins or imaginary coins, a type of coin that never circulated as currency.¹⁹

A considerable number of Renaissance pseudo-coins and medallic artistic products have been preserved for posterity, often presenting a misleading and puzzling array of characteristics to modern collectors.²⁰ Some of them were engraved with Hebrew

¹⁶ Arnaldo Momigliano, "Ancient History and the Antiquarian," *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 13 (1950): 285–315; Roberto Weiss, *The Renaissance Discovery of Classical Antiquity* (Oxford: Humanities Press, 1969).

¹⁷ Ernest Babelon, *Traité des monnaies grecques et romaines*, vol. 1 (Paris: Leroux, 1901), 81–84; Weiss, *The Renaissance Discovery*, 30–39.

¹⁸ The first printed book of this genre is Andrea Fulvio, *Illvstrivm imagines* (Rome, 1517); for an overview of this Renaissance literary and artistic production, see John Cunnally, *Images of the Illustrious: The Numismatic Presence in the Renaissance* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999).

¹⁹ For a useful terminological and introductory overview of pseudo-coins, imaginary coins, fakes, etc., see Ira Rezak, "Genuine Imitations: Jewish Use of Pseudo-Coins," *Israel Numismatic Journal* 15 (2003–2006): 152–69 (esp. 153–54).

²⁰ Scholarly interest in this material began as early as the seventeenth century, particularly in the context of cautioning collectors and numismatists to distinguish between Renaissance imitations and authentic pieces from antiquity; see Babelon, *Traité des monnaies grecques et romaines*, 166–87. Recent scholarship has revalued the study of late medieval and early modern pseudo-

characters and symbols and enjoyed ample circulation among Christians and Jews alike.²¹ The majority of Hebrew pseudo-coins display an iconography markedly based on Judeo-Christian sacred texts, and thus became instrumental in reinforcing the belief systems of Catholics, Protestants, Jews, and even secular organizations such as Freemasons in various ways.²² A case in point is the so-called false shekel, which imitates the coin minted by the Jews during the First Judean Revolt against Rome in 66 to 70 CE.²³ As was the case with the original first-century shekels, which were utilized as currency among the rebels with the intention of fostering religious and cultural adherence, the Renaissance false shekels featured an iconography specifically rooted in biblical tradition.²⁴ With the exception of a few specimens that were specifically created to fool collectors, the

coins *per se*, recognizing the historical value inherent in these material objects; for an overview, see Weiss, *The Renaissance Discovery*, 167–79.

²¹ For Jewish coinage and pseudo-coinage, see Johann Heinrich Hottinger, *Cippi Hebraici [Tombs of the Hebrews]*, 2nd ed. (Heidelberg, 1662), 89–188; Frederic W. Madden, *History of Jewish Coinage and of Money in the Old and New Testament* (London, 1864); Max Kuchler, *Geschichte der jüdischen Numismatik—Band 1: 2.–16. Jh.: Historisches Vergessen—Jüdische Bewahrung—Europäische Entdeckung* (Göttingen: V&R Academic, 2021); and the studies by Ira Rezak cited throughout this essay.

²² Ira Rezak, “Matters of Faith: Numismatic Extrapolation of Biblical Traditions,” in *Médailles*, ed. Marie-Astrid Pelsdonk (Lisbon: FIDEM, 2013): 51–58 (esp. 52).

²³ George Francis Hill, *The Medallion Portraits of Christ: The False Shekels, the Thirty Pieces of Silver* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1920), 78–116; Mordechai Narkiss, “Imaginary Jewish Coins” [Hebrew], *Mizrach-ve-Ma’arav* 2 (1928): 103–14; Bruno Kisch, *Shekel Medals and False Shekels* (New York: Historia Judaica, 1941) (reprinted from *Historia Judaica* 3); Ya’akov Meshorer, “False Shekels from the Renaissance Confuse Many,” *Coin World* 20/1023 (1979): 73–76; Haim Gitler, “The Thirty Pieces of Silver: A Modern Numismatic Perspective,” in *Valori e disvalori simbolici delle monete. I Trenta denari di Giuda*, ed. Lucia Travaini (Milan: Edizioni Quasar, 2009), 63–78.

²⁴ Compared with first-century CE shekels, Renaissance false shekels exhibit a different iconographical program that derives from a misinterpretation of the originals: on the obverse, the original chalice surmounted by two letters referring to the date of coinage has become smoke/incense rising from an altar/brazier; on the reverse, the original three branches of pomegranates have been transformed into a rod with several branches of leaves, understood as the sacerdotal rod of Aaron, and the paleo-Hebrew alphabet used for the inscriptions on the original coins was replaced by square Hebrew fonts; see Rezak, “Matters of Faith,” 52–53, where the author also refers to the discovery of an original shekel by the Jewish exegete Nachmanides (1195–1270), who had to consult Samaritans in order to understand the obsolete paleo-Hebrew script featured on the ancient coin.

majority of Hebrew imaginary coin-like objects had a celebrative, memorial, or educational purpose. Some coins functioned as relics, faith tokens, and souvenirs for pilgrims, and this was also the case for false shekels, which largely circulated among Catholics and Protestants and were often believed to be the same coinage that Judas used to betray Jesus.²⁵ Similarly, Hebrew pseudo-coins were adopted to express religious identity or secular membership. Within the Jewish world, these objects were primarily utilized as ritual paraphernalia, particularly in the context of the redemption of the firstborn and during the festivities of Purim.²⁶ Alternatively, they were employed as educational tools or school prizes.²⁷

One of the natural evolutionary paths taken by relics and religious identity tokens is a transformation into amuletic objects. It is therefore reasonable to posit that on certain occasions, Hebrew coin- and medallion-like artifacts were employed as or adapted into apotropaic devices among Jews and Christians alike. As is typical of material evidence unearthed prior to the advent of modern archaeology, the majority of Hebrew pseudo-coins and medallions were amassed by collectors who regrettably did not document any background information about the objects and their recovery and who frequently altered them during the process of collection and collation. In the absence of clear archaeological and contextual data, it is not possible to ascertain with certainty the function of these artifacts. For example, the hypothesis that the false shekel worn as a pendant by Landgraf Georg I of Hessen-Darmstadt in his sculptural representation at his tomb site served him as an apotropaic device remains a mere speculation.²⁸ By contrast, the recent identification of a seventeenth-century false shekel in a private collection as a medical amulet is a much more certain proposition: the object presents, in fact, an unparalleled inscription in German reading “VOR

²⁵ Consider especially the false shekels or Goerlitz shekels associated with the shrine of the Holy Sepulcher at Goerlitz, active from the sixteenth century onwards as a Catholic and later Lutheran pilgrimage site: Ira Rezak, “A Goerlitzer Shekel as a Medical Amulet,” *Jahrbuch für Numismatik und Geldgeschichte* 72 (2022): 301–13 (at 309).

²⁶ Rezak, “Genuine Imitations,” 157.

²⁷ Consider, for instance, a false shekel today preserved in the Israel Museum that features the abbreviation ת"ת כ' אלף (תלמוד תורה כחה אלף), “Torah school, first class,” thus implying that it was deliberately created for a Jewish school; Rezak, “A Goerlitzer Shekel,” 309–10.

²⁸ Rezak, “A Goerlitzer Shekel,” 310.

FLVSS.v.KRAM.PFE” (“against discharge and cramps”).²⁹ The addition of a formula in German that undeniably bears a medico-magical charge to the regular Hebrew text implies that someone—presumably a Christian, based on the epigraphic features of the object—crafted a new model of the traditional pseudo-coin with the precise aim of using it for medico-magical purposes. Unfortunately—and in contrast to other Renaissance amulets—the majority of Hebrew pseudo-coins and medallions do not present these textual additions.³⁰ The only vague indication of their probable amuletic use can be found in the traces of an original loop, later removed by collectors, and in the fact that many specimens have indeed come down to us mounted on rings or pierced to allow them to be worn as pendants.

The Hebrew medallion studied in this article—which I will refer to as *Maghen David et Abraam*—is one of those rare cases in which we can confidently assert that a pseudo-coin functioned as an amulet. This is not due to the presence of *ad hoc* additions on the object itself, but rather to the documentary sources with which it has been preserved in the ADDE. Before going into the analysis of this fascinating object (§4) and its remarkable contribution to the study of Jewish magic, in the next section (§3), I will discuss this particular type of Hebrew pseudo-coin in light of previously examined evidence.

3. The *Maghen David et Abraam* according to Anguissola and Numismatic Evidence

A medallion of relatively small dimensions, the *Maghen David et Abraam* features an iconography in which a portrait of Jesus, depicted on the obverse as a bearded face under a halo, is inserted into an elaborate graphic arrangement of Bible verses, permutations of the Tetragrammaton, and the name of Jesus and those of the four archangels.³¹ The obverse presents a circle containing a pentagon. The

²⁹ Rezak, “A Goerlitzer Shekel,” 301.

³⁰ A fine example of a Renaissance amulet is the talisman of Catherine de’ Medici, today lost or possibly in a private collection; a reproduction of the object is published and discussed, for instance, in Rebekah Compton, *Venus and the Arts of Love in Renaissance Florence* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021), 173–74.

³¹ For a detailed description of the features of this medallion, see Ira Rezak, “Engaging Mystery: A Late Medieval Hebrew-Christian Kabbalistic Medal,” in

circular band created between the external border and the circle features three quotations from Jer. 23:6, Ps. 72:17, and Isa. 9:5. In the five semi-lunar spaces created between the circle and the pentagon, there are five names associated with Jesus. The pentagon contains three concentric inner circles and is divided into five sections with lines departing from each angle and extending to the innermost circle. In the space between the pentagon's external borders and the first circle, there is a verse from Exod. 3:15, inscribed in such a way that each word is inserted into one of the five sections. Each of the five circular sections formed by the first and second circles is inscribed with a word that can be connected with the idea of filiation. In contrast, each of the five circular sections formed by the second and third circles is inscribed with a word that refers to a young sacrificial animal. The innermost circle in the pentagon is engraved with Jesus's face and the inscription "Bread of Presence" (cf. Lev. 24:9; Matt. 12:4). The reverse features two squares, one inside the other. The four spaces between the medallion's external border and the first square contain the names of the four archangels. The band formed by the two squares is engraved with four Bible verses containing different names of God: Ps. 135:13, Isa. 47:4, Exod. 3:15, and Isa. 42:8. The inner square is divided into twelve rectangular sections, each of which contains a permutation from the Tetragrammaton (see Figs. 1 and 2). The complexity of the inscriptions and their iconographical arrangement implies that—at least originally—this object was designed and fabricated by an individual well trained in Hebrew, and possibly in kabbalistic traditions.

The first dated record of the medallion is a brief kabbalistic treatise published in Milan in 1617, in which the author, the canon Angelo Gabriello Anguissola, analyses the object in depth.³² The

Windows on Jewish Worlds: Essays in Honor of William Gross, Collector of Judaica on the Occasion of His Eightieth Birthday, ed. Shalom Sabar, Emile Schrijver, and Falk Wiesemann (Zutphen: Walburg Pers, 2019), 191–202. This type of pseudo-coin should not be confused with another type of Hebrew medallion featuring the image of Christ, which circulated in Europe from at least the sixteenth century onward. This other type is much simpler, and on the reverse it carries the inscription משיח מלך בא בשלום ואור מאדם עשוי חי ("The messiah, the king, come in peace, and light from a man resurrected"); see Rezak, "Genuine Imitations," 57–58 and fig. 12 on 55; Hill, *The Medallion Portraits of Christ*, 48–55.

³² Angelo Gabriele Anguissola, *Della hebraica medaglia detta Maghen David et Abraam. Dichiaratione di don Angelo Gabriello Anguissola canonico regolare del Salvatore*

volume—which is dedicated to Ranuccio Farnese, duke of Piacenza, Parma, and Castro, and contains some sonnets by other canons—features a drawing of the medallion object with its original Hebrew inscriptions, followed by three other drawings providing a transliteration into Latin characters, a Latin translation of the text, and an Italian translation (Figs. 1a–d). The inclusion of these drawings in the book implies that Anguissola had one or more copies of the medallion at his disposal and that this particular object had begun to circulate in Italy in the sixteenth century at the latest, but probably earlier.³³ Anguissola’s treatise is then divided into five short chapters, in which he speculates about the origins and effects of the object, revealing the “occult mysteries and profound meanings of this Hebrew medallion, which has probably been penetrated by few, and misunderstood by many.”³⁴ Anguissola specifies that “nothing will be said according to his will, or knowledge, but everything will be seasoned with the salt of the most authoritative writers and according to the rules of the aforementioned secret theology, called Kabbalah, and of Christian truth.”³⁵ Indeed, the volume is full of quotations from the Bible, the Mishnah, and Maimonides, as well as non-Jewish philosophical authorities such as Aristotle and Duns Scotus. Similarly, Anguissola emphasizes the efficacy of the use of divine names, not only by recollecting episodes in Jewish and early Christian history—for example, the use of the medallion by the Maccabees, or by Saint Paul—but also by arguing that Zoroaster, Pythagoras, Plato, Trismegistus, Iamblichus, and Plotinus attached great importance to the names. Anguissola traces the origins of the medallion to King Solomon, who wore it to protect himself and ensure peace in his

Lateranense (Milan, 1617). All English translations of this work in this essay are mine.

³³ It is noteworthy that the image of Jesus’s face in the drawing of the medallion with the original Hebrew characters corresponds perfectly with the drawing of the medallion translated into Italian but differs from the other two drawings with the Latin transliteration and the Latin translation. These two, however, are analogous; compare Figs. 1a–d.

³⁴ “Li occulti misteri, e profondi significati di questa Hebraica Medaglia forse da pochi penetrati, e da molti non così ben intesi”; Anguissola, *Della hebraica medaglia*, 6.

³⁵ “Che niente si dirà di voglia, ò di proprio capo; ma il tutto sarà condito col sale dell’autorità de’ più approvati scrittori; e conformemente alle regole della secreta Teologia detta, Cabala, e della christiana verità”; Anguissola, *Della hebraica medaglia*, 6.

kingdom. In fact, the name “shield (*maghen*) of David and Abraham” was chosen by Solomon himself to commemorate the miracles performed by God on behalf of his father and ancestor.³⁶ According to Anguissola, the value of the medallion was in its combination of the Tetragrammaton, i.e., the name of God, and the Pentagrammaton, i.e., the name of Jesus: “But if this mighty name of YHWH is so virtuous and powerful, then still more will this revered name of the Messiah will make YHWH more terrible and formidable; and Jesus more lovable and desirable?”³⁷ Throughout the volume, Anguissola insists on the apotropaic effect that Solomon attributed to the medallion, arguing that whoever wears it will be helped “in every spiritual and

³⁶ “E però dicono questi Cabalisti non esser gran fatto difficile il credere, che l’Rè Salomone inventasse questa Medaglia, in perpetuo memoriale delle divine grandezze, e continuo essaltamento delli santissimi nomi di Dio, e del Messia: e che anco la portasse in petto per scudo, e difesa della sua Real persona; acciò in virtù di quella divinità, che per quelli nomi si rappresentava e si protestava, fusse egli da’ fuori emuli ed avversarij guardato custodito, e mantenuto il suo Regno in pace, così come dallo stesso Dio, David suo Padre, & Abraam suo Arcavolo, erano stati protetti, e difesi, e l’affermare anco, che perciò giusta, e ragionevolmente la chiamasse, e nominasse Scudo di David, e d’Abraam. Così piaccia all’alta Maestà di Dio, ch’il suo Santissimo nome Iehova tetragrammaton, e Iesus pentagrammaton, ci sia sempre scudo e difesa, da ogni impetuoso incontro de’ nostri infernali nemici: e che altresì poi noi siam sempre di quello devoti e pij, à lode, e gloria di lui, che vive sempre in gloria. Amen” (“And so, these kabbalists say, it is not particularly difficult to believe that King Solomon designed this medallion in eternal remembrance of the divine greatness and in unceasing exaltation of the holy names of God and the Messiah; and that he himself [King Solomon] wore it on his breast as a shield and defense for his royal person, so that by virtue of the divinity revealed in those names, he might be protected and preserved from external adversaries and enemies, and his kingdom might be maintained in peace, as David his father and Abraham his ancestor had been protected and defended by the same God; and to affirm this, he [King Solomon] rightly and reasonably called it ‘the shield of David and Abraham.’ So may it please the high majesty of God that His holy name, Iehova tetragrammaton and Iesus pentagrammaton, may always be our shield and defense against any impetuous encounter with our infernal enemies; and that we may always be devoted to and pious toward it, to the praise and glory of Him who lives forever in glory. Amen”); Anguissola, *Della hebraica medaglia*, 20–21. Continuing the well-known Jewish-Christian magical and kabbalistic Solomonic traditions, Anguissola also briefly discusses Solomon’s ring and provides a drawing of it; *ibid.*, 16–17.

³⁷ “Ma se è tanto virtuoso, e vigoroso questo tremendo nome di Iehova, quanto non farà per altrettanto questo reverendo nome del Messia non più Iehova terribile, e formidabile; ma Iesus amabile, e desiderabile”; Anguissola, *Della hebraica medaglia*, 46.

physical need they may have” (*ed in ogni suo spirituale, e corporal bisogno*).³⁸ In particular, the medallion can be used by the faithful:

to be cured of infirmities, whatever they may be; to be saved from the persecutions of the enemy; to be rescued from the dangers of the present; to be supported in good fortune; to be confirmed in greatness; to be sustained in riches; to be honored with a lineage; to be protected from attacks by demons; to be made prosperous in every one of their affairs; and, finally, to be saved from death.³⁹

Although Anguissola does not give specific examples of contemporary use, he clearly implies that the medallion was mainly used for concrete and mundane purposes. Of course, according to him, the efficacy of the object was directly proportional to the real intention and faith of the users, who also had to inscribe the divine names engraved on the medallion onto their hearts.⁴⁰

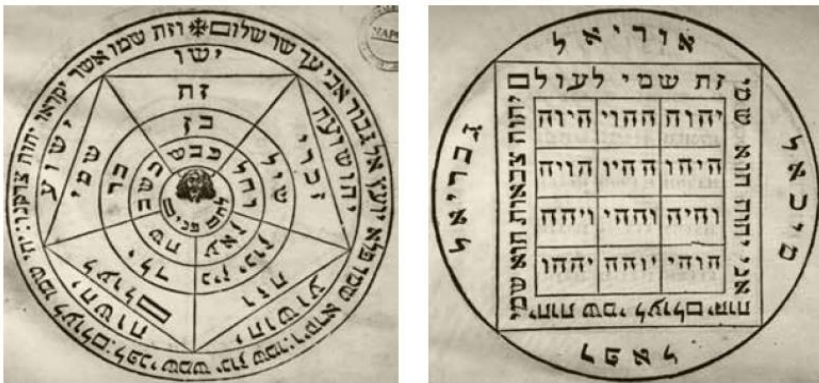


Fig. 1a Medallion with Hebrew transcription, in Angelo Gabriello Anguissola, *Della Hebraica medaglia detta Maghen David et Abraam* (Milan, 1617).

³⁸ Anguissola, *Della hebraica medaglia*, 3.

³⁹ “D’essere nelle sue infirmitadi, comunque siano, sanato. Nelle persecutioni de’ nemici salvato. Nelli sovrastanti pericoli soccorso. Nelle prosperitadi guardato. Nelle grandezze confermato. Nelle ricchezze mantenuto. Nella descendenza honorato. Ne gl’assalimenti de’ demonij difeso. Ed in ogni suo affare prosperato, ed ultimamnte in morte salvato”; Anguissola, *Della hebraica medaglia*, 49.

⁴⁰ Anguissola, *Della hebraica medaglia*, 49.

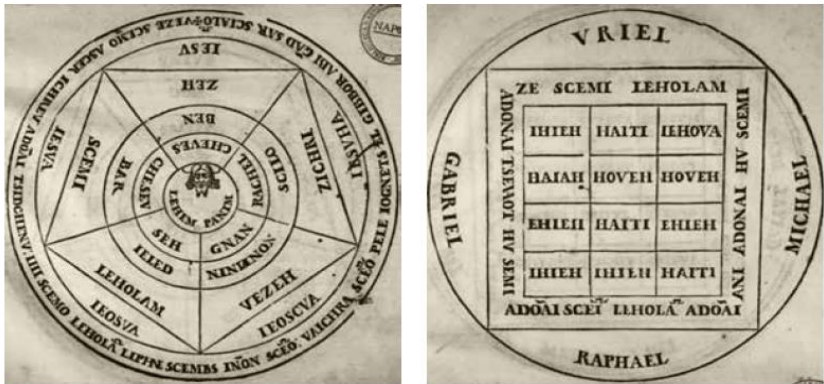


Fig. 1b Medallion with Hebrew transliterated into the Latin alphabet, in Angelo Gabriello Anguissola, *Della Hebraica medaglia detta Maghen David et Abraam* (Milan, 1617).

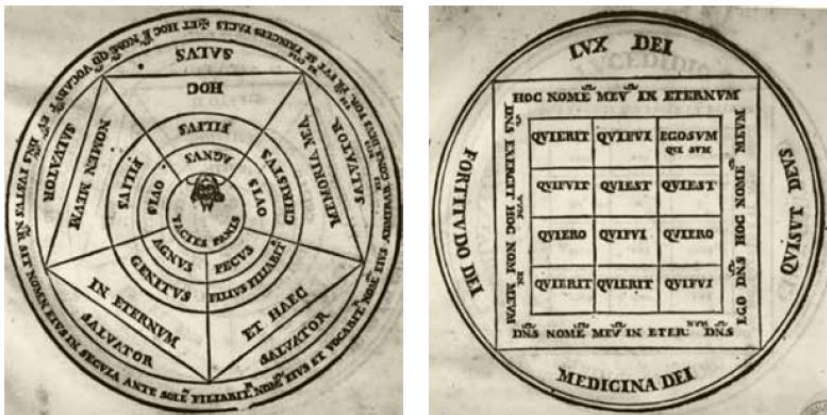


Fig. 1c Medallion with Hebrew translated into Latin, in Angelo Gabriello Anguissola, *Della Hebraica medaglia detta Maghen David et Abraam* (Milan, 1617).

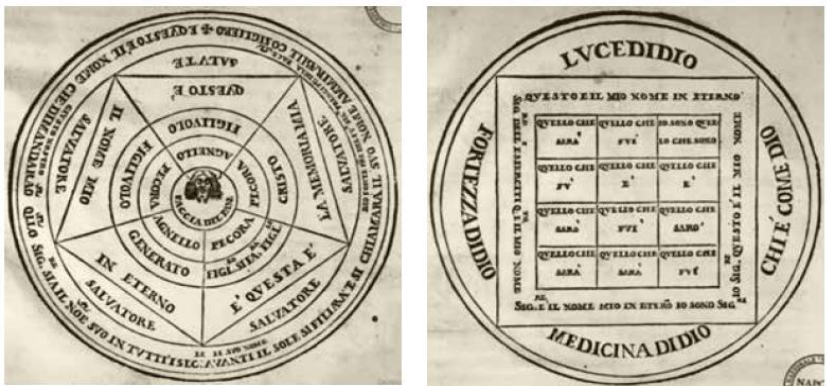


Fig. 1d Medallion with Hebrew translated into Italian, in Angelo Gabriello Anguissola, *Della Hebraica medaglia detta Maghen David et Abraam* (Milan, 1617).

Anguissola's treatise was published with an *imprimatur*. Yet, on March 16, 1621, the Holy Office included Anguissola's volume, and even extracts from it, in the *Index librorum prohibitorum*:

Anguisciola Angelo Gabriello. *Della Hebraica Medaglia, detta Maghen David, et Abraham* Declaration, Decree of March 16, 1621—Every medallion of this kind is also forbidden, and it is commanded that those who have one should bring it to the Holy Office. Decree of March 16, 1621.⁴¹

"*Maghen David and Abraham*": Statement by Mr. Angelo Gabriello Anguisciola, and the essay entitled *Maghen David and Abraham: Brief Discourse, and Comprehensive Examination of the Nature and Properties of This Very Ancient Medallion*, extracted from the above-mentioned book by Mr. Angelo Gabriello Anguisciola. Decree of March 16, 1621—Every medallion of this kind is also forbidden, and it is commanded that those who have one should bring it to the Holy Office. Decree of March 16, 1621.⁴²

From the point of view of the Holy Office, the threat posed by the medallion, and consequently by a detailed treatise on it, was clearly the abuse of sacred things, words, and objects. The medallion implied the improper use of the image of Christ and the divine names of God and Jesus, as well as a dangerous mixture of Christian and Jewish motifs, including the Hebrew alphabet. However, it seems likely that the prohibition was also aimed at the amuletic potential of the pseudo-coin, already hinted at in Anguissola's commentary. It is noteworthy that later Christian texts discussing the medallion take its amuletic properties for granted. For instance, in his monumental work on Jewish literature, the German Hebraist Johann Christoph Wolf (1683–1739) refers to it under the entry on Raphael Aquilino, a

⁴¹ "Anguisciola Angelo Gabriello. *Della Hebraica Medaglia, detta Maghen David, et Abraham* Dichiarazione, Decr. 16 Martii 1621.—*Prohibetur etiam omne hujusmodi Numisma, et mandatur, ut qui illud habent, ad S. Officium deferant.* Decr. 16 Martii 1621"; Église catholique. Congregatio Sancti Officii, *Index librorum prohibitorum* ss.mi D. N. Benedicti XIV. pontifici maximi jussu recognitus, atque editus. Cum appendicibus (Rome, 1770), 10. "Anguisciola" is a variant of the author's Patrician family name, "Anguissola" or "Angusuola," which is clearly related to the Latin word *anguilla* (eel).

⁴² "*Maghen David et Ahraham*, breve discorso, e compendiosa esaminatione della natura e proprietà di questa antichissima medaglia, estratto dal Libro sopra ciò di Don Angelo Gabrielle Anguisciola. Decr. 16. Martii 1621.—*Prohibetur etiam omne hujusmodi Numisma, et mandatur, ut qui illud habent, ad S. Officium deferant.* Decr. 16. Martii 1621"; *Index librorum prohibitorum*, 167–68. "Gabrielle" should read "Gabriello"; "Ahraham" is a typo for "Abraham."

Jewish convert active around the year 1571, who apparently wrote in Italian.⁴³ Citing previously published writings and manuscript sources—including the work of the Hebraist Giulio Bartoluccio da Celleno (1613–1687)—Wolf discusses the Church’s prohibition of both the medallion and Anguissola’s treatise, emphasising that the additional essay on the medallion (*impressum folium super eandem Medalliam*)—also published in Anguissola’s volume and listed as banned in the *Index*—was probably a commentary by Raphael Aquilino.⁴⁴ In the passage, Wolf refers to the medallion by the term “shield” (*clypens*, from Latin *clypeus*), but also “amulet” (*amuleto*), reporting that “the Jews boast that they can, first of all, stop fires with this amulet” (*De amuleto hoc, quo in primis incendia se sistere posse Judaei gloriantur*).⁴⁵ Therefore, according to Wolf and the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century scholars who preceded him, the medallion was used by Jews for magical purposes, particularly for self-protection in concrete situations such as fires. Moreover, if Wolf is to be believed, the *terminus post quem* for the medallion’s circulation can be dated from 1617, the year of publication of Anguissola’s treatise, to until at least the second half of the sixteenth century, when Raphael Aquilino was active.

When we turn to the material evidence—that is, to the actual medallions of the *Maghen David et Abraam* type—we find only undated specimens that bear no trace of their provenance or use. However, a detailed examination of these objects has allowed Ira Rezak to identify three different variants and to reconstruct the evolution and function of the medallion.⁴⁶ According to Rezak, a first type of the medallion

⁴³ Johann Christoph Wolf, *Bibliotheca Hebraea*, vol. 3 (Hamburg, 1727), 992–97. Wolf’s work was based on the manuscript collection of Rabbi David ben Abraham Oppenheim, which at the time was stored in Hamburg.

⁴⁴ *Hec ille, qui ibidem suspicatur, Raphaelis nostri commentationem esse, quam Anguisciola iste ediderit*; Wolf, *Bibliotheca Hebraea*, 3:997. The essay titled “Breve discorso, e compendiosa essaminatione della natura, e proprietà di quella antichissima Medaglia,” also cited in the *Index librorum prohibitorum*, occupies pages 1–4 in Anguissola, *Della hebraica medaglia*.

⁴⁵ Wolf, *Bibliotheca Hebraea*, 3:997, where the author refers to the work by the German philologist David Theodor Lehmann, *De Māgēn Dāwīd seu clipeo Davidis. Disputatio prior* (Wittenberg, 1708).

⁴⁶ Today, most of these items are held in private collections: see Rezak, “Engaging Mystery.” For examples preserved in museums, see, for instance, the amulets published in Jona Salomone, *Due amuleti del Museo Civico Modenese* (posthumously published by Vittorio Finzi) (Sassari: G. Dessi, 1905). See also a

developed within a late fifteenth- or early sixteenth-century Christian kabbalistic milieu, possibly in Spain, southern France, or Italy. A second variant appeared in the mid-sixteenth century, with the major innovation of a small Latin cross in the outer circle with Hebrew inscriptions, at the twelve o'clock position, on the obverse. Also, in light of the Church's condemnation of the medallion in 1621, Rezak interprets the addition of the cross as a reflection of the Counter-Reformation, suggesting that "in the kabbalistic environment that engendered and reproduced this form in the Early Modern period, it may have been intended primarily if not exclusively as an *ilan* or tree of knowledge, as an object of contemplation for seekers of a fuller communion with divine truth."⁴⁷ The third later variant developed in France and was characterized by a much more elaborate fleury cross and by less refined Hebrew characters, with some of the Bible quotations on the reverse being completely corrupted. The permutation of the Tetragrammaton in the second and third types is analogous and differs from that of the first type. However, the first and second types—which, according to Rezak, represent the first two stages in the development of the medallion—are closer and more neatly separated from the third type: all surviving examples of the first and second types are in fact smaller and designed to be worn through loops and holes. According to Rezak's reconstruction, with the third type, the medallion lost its contemplative function and was instead used as an amulet. This change occurred in a later period and mostly in France, when the inscriptions became illegible due to

sixteenth-century bronze amulet today preserved in the Musée d'art et d'histoire du Judaïsme in Paris, Inv.D.96.04.015.MHL (previously Cl. 12316, Don Rothschild, collection Strauss n° 101), which can be viewed online at <https://www.mahj.org/fr/decouvrir-collections-betsale/amulette-14556> (accessed October 2024); it was originally published in Moïse Schwab, "Médailles et amulettes à légendes hébraïques conservées au Cabinet des médailles [et antiques de la Bibliothèque nationale]," *Revue numismatique* 10 (1892), 241–58 (at 254) and, more recently, in Victor A. Klagsbald, *Catalogue raisonné de la collection juive du Musée de Cluny* (Paris: Éditions de la Réunion des musées nationaux, 1981), 21–22, where the author considers the object to have been derived from a Renaissance Christian kabbalist context, possibly that of Giovanni Pico della Mirandola (*ibid.*, 22). Consider also the medallion preserved in the Israel Museum in Jerusalem, catalogued as "Jewish amulet" under accession number 71.449, which can be viewed online at <https://www.imj.org.il/en/collections/539507-0> (accessed October 2024); I thank Gideon Bohak for the latter reference.

⁴⁷ Rezak, "Engaging Mystery," 201.

copying errors and frequent re-casting.⁴⁸ In the next section (§4), I will analyze the *Maghen David et Abraam* medallion preserved in the ADDF and show how this new evidence slightly challenges the reconstruction proposed by Rezak.

4. A *Medaglia vocata Maghen David et Abraam* in the Holdings of the Holy Office

Among the forbidden books and artifacts appropriated by the Sant'Uffizio, there is a copy of the *Maghen David et Abraam* from the early eighteenth century, which has been completely overlooked in scholarship on Jewish magic.⁴⁹ In what follows, I will show how this item sheds important new light on the history of this specific kabbalistic-magical tradition. As direct evidence in an inquisitorial case, the medallion has long been kept in the archives of the Sant'Uffizio, in a voluminous folder titled *Processi* ("Trials"), which contains the summaries and deliberations of a selection of early modern trials.⁵⁰ On November 13, 2000, the medallion was moved by Monsignor Alejandro Cifres to the exhibition room of the ADDF. The medallion is made of copper and possesses a loop, by which it is still tied a rope (see Figs. 2a and 2b). The presence of a small cross on the obverse and the specific features of the table of permutations of the Tetragrammaton on the reverse indicate that the medallion belongs to the second type described by Ira Rezak. In contrast to the specimens reproduced in Rezak's study, however, the border of the ADDF medallion is not decorated by punching but is delimited by continuous circular lines. Noteworthy, the style in which Jesus's face is carved differs from that adopted in the known specimens of the medallion, including those reproduced in Anguissola's treatise. Rather than a frontal portrait, the ADDF medallion features a three-quarter portrait of Jesus. There is no trace of his facial features, and the beard is not evident and may not have been carved at all. Of course, the absence of fine lines may be the result of daily use, or of

⁴⁸ Rezak, "Engaging Mystery," 201.

⁴⁹ The object is briefly discussed in Alejandro Cifres and Marco Pizzo, eds., *Rari e preziosi: Documenti dell'età moderna e contemporanea dall'archivio del Sant'Uffizio/Rare & Precious: Modern and Contemporary Documents from the Archives of Holy Office* (Rome: Gangemi, 2009), 85; and in Caffiero, *Legami pericolosi*, no. 77 on 155.

⁵⁰ ADDF, S(ant')O(fficio), S(tanza) S(torica), CC 2 c, vol. 2738. I am grateful to Daniel Ponziani for his generous guidance during my visit to the ADDF in December 2022.

several recastings. Yet the physiognomy of Jesus on the ADDF medallion is also quite different than the most corrupted specimens published in Rezak's study, such as those of the third type. Below, I have edited and translated the text of the inscriptions on the ADDF medallion:



Fig. 2a. *Medaglia vocata Maghen David et Abraam* from the Holy Office, obverse. Vatican City, ADDF, SO, SS, CC 2 c, vol. 2738 (now in the exhibition room of the ADDF), © [2025]. Archivio del Dicastero per la Dottrina della Fede. Published by kind concession of the Archivio del Dicastero per la Dottrina della Fede, all rights reserved.

Quotations from Jer. 23:6, Ps. 72:17, and Isa. 9:5

וזה שמי אשר יקראו יהוה צדקנו יהי שמו לעולם לפני שמש ינון שמו ויקרא שמו פלא
יועץ אל גבור אבי עד שר שלום

And this is my name whereby he shall be called ‘YHWH is our righteousness’” (Jer. 23:6); “May His name endure forever; may His name continue as long as the sun” (Ps. 72:17); “And his name will be called ‘Wonderful Counselor,’ ‘Mighty God,’ ‘Everlasting Father,’ ‘Prince of Peace’ (Isa. 9:5)

Five names of Jesus

ישו—ישוע—יהשוה—יהושוע—יהושועה
YŠW—YŠW‘—YHŠWH—YHWŠW‘—YHWŠW‘H

Verse from Exod. 3:15

זה שמי לעולם וזה זכרי
This is my name forever and this is my memorial⁵¹

Five words connected to the idea of filiation

בן—בר—ילד—ניזנין—שיל
Son—son—child—infant⁵²—young⁵³

Five words related to young sacrificial animals

כבש—כשב—שה—צאן—רחל
Lamb—lamb—lamb—sheep—ewe

Engraving of Jesus

לחם פנים
Bread of Presence⁵⁴

⁵¹ Victor A. Klagsbald considers the orthography לעלם (rather than לעולם) to be intentional, interpreting the word as עלם, i.e., “man in the prime of life.” He therefore translates the entire sentence as “My Name destined to man”; Klagsbald, *Catalogue*, 22.

⁵² I am following Klagsbald, who proposes “nourrisson”: Klagsbald, *Catalogue*, 22.

⁵³ Klagsbald transcribes the fourth and last word of the sequence associated with the idea of “son” as טיל, translating it as “young” based on Targum Pseudo-Jonathan on Lev. 15:2; Klagsbald, *Catalogue*, 22. He argues that the words בן, בר, ילד derive from biblical references that were interpreted by the Church as passages prefiguring the arrival of Christ. Specifically, בן and ילד are derived from Isa. 9:5 and בר from Ps. 2:12; see *ibid.*, 20.

⁵⁴ From a Christian perspective, it can be interpreted as “offering bread”; for this interpretation, see Klagsbald, *Catalogue*, 22.



Fig. 2b *Medaglia vocata Maghen David et Abraam* from the Holy Office, reverse. Vatican City, ADDF, SO, SS, CC 2 c, vol. 2738 (now in the exhibition room of the ADDF), © [2025]. Archivio del Dicastero per la Dottrina della Fede. Published by kind concession of the Archivio del Dicastero per la Dottrina della Fede, all rights reserved.

Archangels

אוריאל—מיכאל—רפאל—גבריאל
Uriel—Michael—Raphael—Gabriel

Quotations from Ps. 135:13, Isa. 47:4, Exod. 3:15, and Isa. 42:8

זה שמי לעולם—יהוה צבאות הוא שמי—יהוה שמי לעולם יהוה—אני יהוה
הוא שמי

This is my name forever (Ps. 135:13)—YHWH ŠB'WT is my name (Isa. 47:4)—YHWH this is my name forever YHWH (Exod. 3:15)—I am YHWH, this is my name (Isa. 42:8)

Table with the permutations of the Tetragrammaton

היהוה	ההוי	יהוה
הויה	ההיו	היהו
ויהה	וההי	והיה
יההו	יוהה	הוהי
YHWH	HHWY	HYWH
HYHW	HHYW	HWYH
WHYH	WHHY	WYHH
HWHY	YWHH	YHHW

Exceptionally, and in contrast to the other specimens of the *Maghen David et Abraam*, the example preserved in the ADDF reappeared in a specific historical context, giving us a rare opportunity to learn some details about the cultural environment in which it was produced and circulated, as well as regarding its material use. In March 1713, Vincenzo Maria Mazzoleni da Bergamo, the *inquisitor generalis* (chief inquisitor) in Parma,⁵⁵ sent the medallion to the headquarters of the Holy Office in Rome, together with the documentation of the original court case. While the latter was lost during the Napoleonic campaigns,⁵⁶ a memorandum summarizing the case and the deliberations issued by the Congregation is still preserved in the ADDF.⁵⁷ It reads as follows:⁵⁸

⁵⁵ Mazzoleni was active as the *inquisitor generalis* in Venice from 1704 to 1710, in Parma from 1710 to 1718, and in Bologna from 1718 to 1727; in 1728, he became the archbishop of Corfù, a title he held until his death in 1731.

⁵⁶ On the appropriation of Italian archival material by Napoleon's functionaries, see Maria Pia Donato, *Les archives du monde. Quand Napoléon confisqua l'histoire* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 2020).

⁵⁷ The memorandum, which originally belonged to volume 2736 (*positio extant in volume 2736*), is preserved in a miscellaneous volume created by the functionaries of the Congregation at a later time; see ADDF, SO, SS, CC 2 c, vol. 2738, file 21, case D. Brief notes on the case are given in Latin in a sort of table of contents at the beginning of the volume. The main text is in Italian on f. 306r.

⁵⁸ "Parma. Feria 4^a die 29 Martii 1713. Come dixerunt quod per Inquisitor transmittat numisma. Feria IV die 30 Maii. 1713. come decreverunt, quod Hebreus acriter moneatur. Posit. extat in volume 2738. Dal P. Inquisitore con sua iva delli 14 Marzo 1713 si manda una denuncia di Francesco Mazzi mercante contro Aron Rabeno hebreo di Regio, che in occasione d'una licenza straordinaria concessali dal Denunciante come rettosre de Merziari, lo regalò d'una medaglia con dirli ch'era buona per

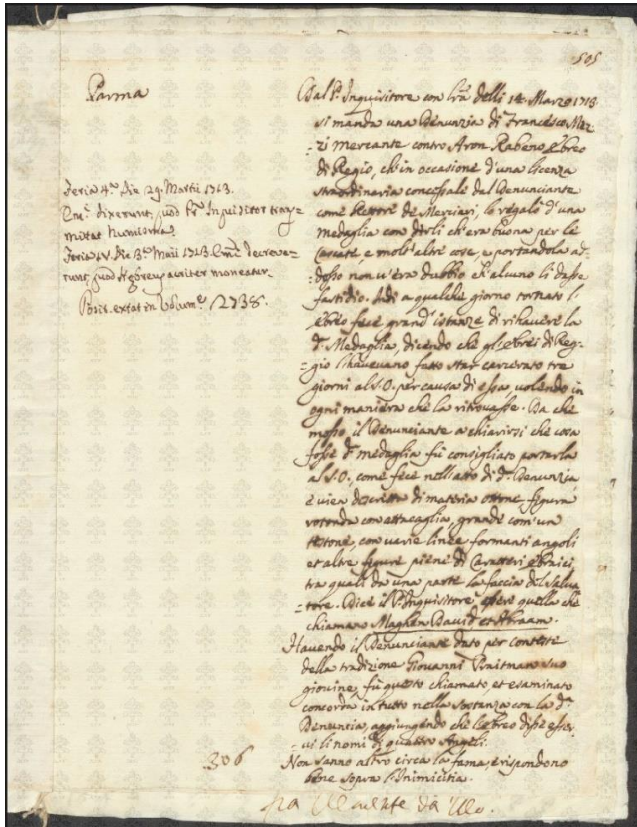


Fig. 3. Memorandum which summarizes the case relating to the confiscation of the medallion and the Congregation's deliberations. Vatican City, ADDF, SO, SS, CC 2 c, vol. 2738 file 21, case D, f. 306r, © [2025] Archivio del Dicastero per la Dottrina della Fede. Published by kind concession of the Archivio del Dicastero per la Dottrina della Fede, all rights reserved.

le cascate, e molt' altre cose, e portandola addosso non v'era dubbio ch'alcuno li dasse fastidio. Indi a qualche giorno tornato l'hebreo fece grand'istanza di rihavere la detta Medaglia, dicendo che gli ebrei di Reggio li havevano fatto star carcerato tre giorni al S.O. per causa di essa, volendo in ogni maniera che la ritrovassero. Da che mosso il Denunciante a chiarirsi che cosa fosse detta medaglia fù consigliato portarla al S.O., come fece nell'atto di detta denuncia, e vien descritta di materia ottone, figura rotonda con attaccaglia, grande com'un testone, con varie linee formanti angoli et altre figure piene di caratteri ebraici, tra quali da una parte la faccia del Salvatore. Dice il S. Inquisitor essere quella che chiamano *Maghen David, et Abraam*. Havendo il Denunciante dato per contare della tradizione Giovanni Praitman suo giovine, fù questo chiamato, et esaminato concorda in tutto nella sostanza con la detta Denuncia, aggiungendo che l'hebreo disse esservi li nomi di quattro Angeli. Non sanno altro circa la fama, e rispondono bene sopra l'Inimicitia." Since seventeenth-century Italian juridical prose is rather rambling, I have split the long sentences in my English translation.

Parma

Wednesday, March 29, 1713⁵⁹

As they said that the medallion was transmitted through the inquisitor.

Wednesday,⁶⁰ May 30, 1713

As they decreed that the Jews shall be severely warned.

The position is in volume 2738.

The Perfect⁶¹ Inquisitor, with his letter⁶² of March 14, 1713, sent an accusation made by the merchant Francesco Mazzi against Aaron Rabeno, Jew of Reggio Emilia. On the occasion of a special permit granted by the person pressing charges [i.e., Francesco Mazzi] in his capacity as leader of the merchants,⁶³ he [i.e., the Jew Aaron Rabeno] gifted him with a medallion. [When he gave him the object, Aaron Rabeno] told him that it was good against falls and many other things, and that if he wore it no one would harm him. After a few days, the Jew returned and insisted on having the medallion back. He said that the Jews of Reggio Emilia had allowed him to be detained at the Holy Office for three days because of it [i.e., the medallion] and that they wanted him to find it at any cost. For this reason, the person pressing charges [i.e., Francesco Mazzi] wanted to clarify what this medallion was, and he was advised to take it to the Holy Office, as he did in his statement when pressing these charges. And it [i.e., the object] is described as being made of brass, round in shape with a loop, the size of a *testone*,⁶⁴ with several lines forming corners and other figures full of Jewish characters, among which, on one side, the face of the Savior. The aforementioned⁶⁵ Inquisitor says that it [i.e., the medallion] is the one called *Maghen David, et Abraam*. The person pressing charges [i.e., Francesco Mazzi] deferred to his young [employee] Giovanni Praitman⁶⁶ to give information about the tradition. [Therefore] this [Praitman] was called and examined: he agrees with everything in substance with the aforementioned denunciation [i.e., by Mazzi]; he adds that the Jew said that there are the names of four angels. They [i.e., Mazzi and Praitman] do not know any more about the reputation [of

⁵⁹ This was added at a later time by the person who ordered the file by subject.

⁶⁰ The text reads "IV," therefore Wednesday, but May 30, 1713 was actually a Tuesday.

⁶¹ I have interpreted the abbreviation "P." in the Italian text as an attribute of the inquisitor, i.e., *perfetto* ("perfect").

⁶² I have interpreted the abbreviation "iva" in the Italian text as *missiva* ("letter").

⁶³ The form *merziari* appears for *mercieri* ("merchants").

⁶⁴ A large Italian coin that circulated from the end of the fifteenth century.

⁶⁵ I have interpreted the abbreviation "S." as *suddetto* ("aforementioned") but another option is *Santo* ("holy").

⁶⁶ The reading of the surname "Praitman" is not entirely clear.

the medallion] and they answered appropriately in relation to such hostility.

According to the memorandum drafted by the Congregation and based on the documents obtained from the local inquisitor, Francesco Mazzi was a Christian merchant working in Parma. He was of a similar status to his fellow merchants, and possibly higher, as he had at least one employee, enjoyed the title of “leader of merchants” (*rettore de merzieri*), and exercised his right to grant commercial licences to others. Aaron Rabeno, on the other hand, was a modest merchant from another city—specifically, “a Jew from the ghetto of Reggio” (*hebreo Ghetus Regii*)—who at some point obtained a license from Mazzi and repaid him with a medallion, either as a mere token of gratitude or as an actual pledge “for the service bestowed to him” (*ob servitum ei prestitum*).⁶⁷ By its very nature, the memorandum is scant (the lost records of the trial would have been much more revealing!) and the information is filtered according to the specific agenda of the person pressing charges—namely, the Christian merchant Mazzi, who wanted to protect himself—as well as that of the local inquisitor and the Roman Congregation, who presumably wanted to prove that Rabeno made improper use of sacred matters. For this reason, all the nuances that might have characterized the business and personal relationship between Mazzi and Rabeno remain hidden from us. It is possible that Mazzi actively sought the medallion out of personal interest and offered Rabeno the license precisely in exchange for this magical object. Mazzi himself may have had an interest in occult matters, or he may have planned to resell the object to Christian clients who would have appreciated its occult value. Certainly, Mazzi’s involvement with the Jews did not end with his relationship with Rabeno. It seems likely that his young employee, a certain Praitman, was also a Jew or a Jewish convert. In fact, Praitman had some understanding of the medallion, recognizing the names of the four angels, which means that he knew some Hebrew, or at least was familiar with the specific tradition of the medallion. This must also have been the reason why Mazzi named Praitman to the inquisitor during the trial: the young Jew may even have been the point of contact between Mazzi and Rabeno. Unfortunately, all these details have been lost with the original records of the case and we are left

⁶⁷ ADDF, SO, SS, CC 2 c, vol. 2738, from the Latin notes at the beginning of the volume.

with pure speculation. What the memorandum does document is that at a certain point, Mazzi realised the potential danger of possessing such an object and made use of the legal institution of the *spontanea comparitio* ("spontaneous appearance").⁶⁸ In other words, he preferred to present himself to the local inquisitor and hand the medallion over to him rather than face the possibility of denunciation by a third party. In his testimony, Mazzi made every effort to appear completely unaware of the medallion and uninvolved in its use. Whether this lack of knowledge was genuine or a strategy to avoid further questioning and possible condemnation is impossible to determine. Nor can we be sure whether Mazzi denounced Rabeno to get rid of him because he considered him a rival, or to take revenge for something he had done. What is certain is that by naming Rabeno to the inquisitor, Mazzi did not help his Jewish comrade.

The memorandum does not contain information about Aaron Rabeno's testimony, and we do not know what eventually happened to him. However, the document reports that he had already been denounced by his own people. The Jews of Reggio Emilia must have been worried that the accusations about the circulation and use of this particular Hebrew medallion could fall on the Jews indiscriminately, with dangerous repercussions for their community. This datum, which is unfortunately not entirely clear from the memorandum, suggests that the medallion came from a Jewish background. In

⁶⁸ The summary legal proceeding and the *spontanea comparitio* were juridical procedures that guaranteed that in cases of auto-denunciation, the trial would be shorter and the punishments more lenient; Prosperi, *Tribunali della coscienza*, 95–96; Del Col, *L'inquisizione in Italia*, 125–26 and 768–69; Elena C. Brambilla, "Il segreto e il sigillo: Denunce e comparizioni spontanee nei processi inquisitoriali," in *I tribunali della fede. Continuità e discontinuità dal medioevo all'età moderna. Atti del XLV Convegno di studi sulla Riforma e sui movimenti religiosi in Italia. In collaborazione con il Centro di ricerca sull'Inquisizione dell'università degli studi di Trieste (Torre Pellice, 3–4 settembre 2005)*, ed. Susanna Peyronel Rambaldi (Turin: Claudiana, 2007), 111–61. Of course, the institution of the *spontanea comparitio* often gave rise to further denunciations of third parties. The juridical benefits of the *spontanea comparitio* were well known to both Christians and Jews, and most of the known cases of Jews involved in magical and divinatory practices were of this type. In fact, the Jews would denounce themselves to the local inquisitors, who, before proceeding, would often write to the Congregation in Rome to inquire whether Jews could also be extended the privilege of this institute. Therefore, while most of the files of the local tribunals have been lost, the requests sent to Rome are still preserved in the ADDF. On the Jews and the *spontanea comparitio*, see Caffiero, *Legami pericolosi*, 129–31; 143–48; 150–54.

particular, it implies that the Jews of Reggio Emilia knew that Aaron Rabeno was its owner, that he had circulated it among Christians, and that he may have given it specifically to Francesco Mazzi. Furthermore, their anxiety about the loss of the object proves that they were fully aware that the production and use of this medallion was forbidden by the Church.⁶⁹ The memorandum therefore suggests that Rabeno acted imprudently: Why did he give a Christian an object that he knew to be forbidden? If the local Jews knew about the Church's condemnation of the medallion, Rabeno himself would have known. The dissemination of the forbidden object outside the Jewish community was even more reckless; it was particularly inappropriate as it was not accompanied by any form of compensation.⁷⁰ Did Rabeno give the medallion to Mazzi to get rid of it, hoping that the Inquisition would not be able to find him? Or did he genuinely believe in the properties of the object and want to give a precious token to a trusted friend? Once again, the real reasons for this Jewish-Christian exchange remain unknown, but it is noteworthy that we can trace the transfer of the Hebrew medallion from a Jewish party to a Christian end. This calls into question the hypothesis generally held by scholars that the *Maghen David et Abraam*-type medallion was produced and used in a Christian environment, especially at a later stage and in cases of corrupted or unpolished specimens. As for the local inquisitor's familiarity with the incriminating medallion, the memorandum reflects only basic knowledge of the object and its tradition. Vincenzo Maria Mazzoleni recognized that it was a medallion of the *Maghen David et Abraam* type, but—at least according to the document preserved in the ADDF—he did not give any further information, failing to identify the correct material of the object and mistaking the copper medallion for a brass one. Similarly, no reference is made to Anguissola's volume—apparently well known to

⁶⁹ In addition, they may not have liked the object itself because it combined holy names with that of Jesus.

⁷⁰ Occasionally, Italian Jews traded forbidden books and objects with Christians, but not for free. On the Jewish trade in arcana and secrets, see, for example, the case of Leon Modena, discussed in Jütte, *The Age of Secrecy*, 49; and in Mark R. Cohen, *The Autobiography of a Seventeenth-Century Venetian Rabbi: Leon Modena's "Life of Judah"* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1988), 162; see also the case of Abraham Joel Conegliano mentioned in Federico Barbierato, *Nella stanza dei circoli. Clavicula Salomonis e libri di magia a Venezia nei secoli XVII e XVIII* (Milan: Bonnard, 2002), 309; and discussed in Bellusci, "There Once Was a Frog."

the Congregation's officials—or to the kabbalistic or meditative function of the object.

The most interesting information to emerge from the medallion preserved in the ADDF and from the related inquisitorial report concerns the nature of its use. Traditionally, scholars have considered the *Maghen David et Abraam* medallion to be a sophisticated product of Christian Kabbalah, used for contemplation and ultimately to attain the *unio mystica*. In particular, it has been argued that only the third type of medallion—which has a corrupted text and was probably developed later, in France—clearly developed an amuletic value. However, the ADDF specimen plainly demonstrates that the second type of medallion also functioned as an amulet in eighteenth-century northern Italy. This is clear both from the material characteristics of the object appropriated by the Sant'Uffizio and from the memorandum. Not only does the medallion have a loop—a feature also noted in the Congregation's summary—but the string that is tied to it has also been preserved, an unprecedented discovery, since the collectors removed the hooks from most of the other specimens. The presence of a loop and a thread suggests that the object was worn around the neck. Based on the material from which the object was cast—namely, copper—and especially the type of thread used to tie it—a simple fiber string rather than a metal chain—the medallion was not worn for aesthetic purposes. In other words, it was not a valuable object, aside from the apotropaic and magical charge attributed to it. The memorandum confirms the hypothesis put forward on the basis of the material data. According to Rabeno's words reported in the inquisitorial summary, the medallion offered general protection against trouble and distress and was “formidable to avoid danger” (*optimam esse ad evitanda pericula*).⁷¹ This multipurpose apotropaic nature characterized most of the many different Jewish charms described in contemporary Jewish magical literature.⁷² The statement that no one would bother the wearer of the medallion may indicate that the magical object worked specifically against thieves, bandits, and enemies of all kinds. Indeed, many of the recipes and amulets in Jewish magic are intended for protection on the road and against all

⁷¹ ADDF, SO, SS, CC 2 c, vol. 2738, from the Latin notes at the beginning of the volume.

⁷² See many examples in Gideon Bohak, *A Fifteenth-Century Manuscript of Jewish Magic: MS New York Public Library, Heb. 190 (Formerly Sassoon 56); Introduction, Annotated Edition and Facsimile* [Hebrew], 2 vols. (Los Angeles: Cherub, 2014).

sorts of villains.⁷³ So, even if the medallion itself does not say precisely what it was used for, it would have been logical for the Jew Aaron Rabeno to present it to his Christian colleague Francesco Mazzi as a multipurpose protective amulet, based on his own knowledge of Jewish magic and occult traditions.

5. Concluding Notes

In this contribution, I have discussed an early modern medallion of the *Maghen David et Abraam* type, engraved with Hebrew inscriptions and the effigy of Christ, which resurfaced in the holdings of the Archive of the Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith in Rome. I have shown how the material and textual data that emerge from and accompany this object can lead us to a better reconstruction of its history, improving our knowledge of Jewish magic in early modern Italy as well as of Jewish-Christian relations in the realm of the occult in this historical context. Although several specimens of the *Maghen David et Abraam* medallion have survived, most are part of numismatic collections and no archaeological record exists for them. The ADDF medallion, on the other hand, has not only been kept and carefully preserved as it was at the time when it was taken from its *live* use in everyday life, but is also correlated with a contemporary report detailing the circumstances of its recovery in 1713, as well as its origin, whereabouts, and use. Significantly, the Sant'Uffizio medallion challenges two hypotheses put forward in previous scholarship: namely, that the *Maghen David et Abraam* medallion was mainly produced and used by Christians, reflecting the culture of Christian Hebraists and kabbalists, and that it was mainly used for mystical-contemplative purposes. The ADDF documentation published and commented upon in this article proves that at least in early modern northern Italy, specimens of the medallion were owned by Jews and worn for apotropaic purposes. Unfortunately, we cannot determine whether Aaron Rabeno, an early modern Jewish merchant from Reggio Emilia, manufactured the medallion himself, inherited it from his family, or acquired it—and, in the latter case, where and how he acquired it. What is certain, however, is that some Jews in early modern Italy owned, used, and circulated the object. As in Aaron

⁷³ For examples of spells of this type, see Alessia Bellusci, "Going Unseen in the Jewish Magical Tradition," *Numen* 69 (2022): 258–86.

Rabeno's case, they were aware of the potential interest that this religiously hybrid object—written entirely in Hebrew, but bearing the image of Jesus, the Son of God and the Savior—might attract among Christians, and thus of its potential commercial value. Ultimately, the Holy Office evidence discussed in this article documents the exchange of magical objects and traditions between individual Jews and Christians—in this case, the merchants Aaron Rabeno and Francesco Mazzi—as well as larger groups and communities—that is, the Jewish community of Reggio Emilia, Mazzi's working environment, the local inquisitor Vincenzo Maria Mazzoleni, and the Roman Congregation.

The case study presented here demonstrates the complementarity between the amulets and manuscripts of Jewish magic written and circulated in medieval and early modern Italy, on the one hand, and the inquisitorial records and the material confiscated during inquisitorial inspections on the other. Taken together, these two bodies of sources help the historian to sketch a better portrait of Judeo-Christian magical and occult traditions in medieval and early modern Italy—both learned and popular—revealing dynamics of religious-cultural exchange, cooperation, assimilation, differentiation and transformation. These diverse but complementary sources bring to light important and nuanced aspects of the everyday lives of Italian Jews, who lived—both intellectually and practically—in a world governed by their ancestral tradition, but constantly reshaped by fragments of Italian Renaissance culture.

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