

MARCO CALLEGARI

Museo “Bottacin” – Padova

A BIBLIOGRAPHICAL (AND NOT ONLY)  
CORRESPONDENCE: LETTERS OF SIMONE ASSEMANI  
TO GIOVANNI BERNARDO DE ROSSI (1788-1814)

*Abstract*

*Simone Assemani and Giovanni Bernardo De Rossi, the most famous and important Hebrew language scholar of his time in the Italian Catholic sphere, were in correspondence for about 25 years (1788-1814). The paper is focused on their letters, in particular on the main topics discussed by the two scholars: the controversy with Oluf Gerhard Tychsen over the so-called "Chair of St. Peter" (a marble seat located in the Basilica of St. Peter of Castello in Venice), the so-called "Arabic imposture" of Giuseppe Vella and the communication of literary news.*

*Keywords*

*Simone Assemani; Giovanni Bernardo De Rossi; Chair of Saint Peter, Venice; Oluf Gerhard Tychse; Giuseppe Vella*

Simone Assemani and Giovanni Bernardo De Rossi, probably the two most important experts and connoisseurs of Semitic languages in Italy between the 18th and 19th centuries, were in correspondence for about 25 years, from 22 February 1788 to 30 December 1814, even though they never met personally.<sup>1</sup> Today only the 46 letters written by Assemani can be consulted in the Biblioteca Palatina di Parma. De Rossi's important library, including his papers and letters received from his correspondents, was purchased by Maria Luigia Asburg-Lorraine, Duchess of Parma and Piacenza, on 13 June 1816 in exchange for a pension which was paid to him until his death on 23 March 1831. De Rossi was the most famous and important Hebrew language scholar of his time in the Italian Catholic sphere, but it is important to underline his mastery of other Semitic languages, in particular post-biblical Hebrew, Aramaic, Syriac, Samaritan, Coptic and Arabic.

Their common acquaintance, the abbot Matteo Luigi Canonici<sup>2</sup>, was used as a go-between by De Rossi to purchase the first volume of the *Catalogo de' codici manoscritti orientali della Biblioteca Naniana*, edited by Assemani, but published in 1787 by the Venetian patrician Giacomo Nani. The book was not for sale, because Nani had printed 200 copies only for distribution to friends and family members. Assemani told him that he would gladly ask for a copy, anticipating that also the second part of the work would be printed in a short space of time. The catalogue of the coins of the *Museo Cufico* was in fact published in the following July<sup>3</sup> and in his opinion it was "much more interesting than the first part".<sup>4</sup>

Simone Assemani's tone of correspondence – in line with his extrovert character – was always confidential and far from being excessively formal. One of his peculiar characteristics was to speak directly about the subjects that were of greatest interest to him at the moment. Since it is impossible, as well as unnecessary, to reproduce in this context the content of every letter only the most important subjects have been selected, while at the same time being aware that an overall picture is given that, although certainly not complete, is well representative of the correspondence.

The controversy over the so-called "Chair of St. Peter's Cathedra", a marble seat located in the Basilica of St. Peter of Castello in Venice, was the main subject discussed by Assemani in the first and subsequent letters.<sup>5</sup> According to tradition, it

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<sup>1</sup> About Giovanni Bernardo De Rossi see PARENTE 1991 About Simone Assemani see CALLEGARI 2005; CALLEGHER-PONTANI 2005; PONTANI 2007a; PONTANI 2007b; PONTANI 2008; D'OTTONE 2013; PONTANI 2013; PONTANI 2013-2014; PONTANI 2014; CALLEGHER 2015; D'OTTONE RAMBACH 2015; PONTANI 2015.

<sup>2</sup> About Matteo Luigi Canonici see VIANELLO 1975.

<sup>3</sup> BPPr, Padova 18<sup>th</sup> July 1788.

<sup>4</sup> BPPr, Padova 22<sup>nd</sup> February 1788.

<sup>5</sup> About the St. Peter's Chair see LUCCHI 2011, pp. 302-314; *Venice and the Islamic World*

was the original chair of the Apostle Saint Peter when he was Patriarch of Antioch. During the ninth century it was donated to a doge by a Byzantine emperor in return for the help offered by the Venetians against the Arab invasion of southern Italy. The *Chronicle* written by Andrea Dandolo between 1343 and 1354, but derived from more ancient sources, is the first document in which the presence of the Chair of St. Peter is reported. Until the 18<sup>th</sup> century, when the presence of Arabic language writings was noticed, the authenticity of the artifact was not called into question. This fact meant that the Chair could not be dated to before the 7<sup>th</sup> century. In fact, the chair is made up of several distinct parts: the most important is the marble backrest, with complex geometric figures and pseudo-vegetable designs engraved on both sides. There are also cufic inscriptions of Koranic verses dating from the 11<sup>th</sup>-12<sup>th</sup> century, which suggest that it is part of a funerary stele, or – but less likely – the backrest of a kind of throne or pulpit.

In 1787 Oluf Gerhard Tychsen, the most famous Arabist in Europe at that time, published a new reading and a new interpretation of the inscriptions (in Tychsen's opinion it was the throne of a Sicilian emir), criticizing the version of Giuseppe Simone Assemani, a great uncle of Simone, that appeared in Flaminio Corner's<sup>6</sup> *Ecclesiae Venetae*. Assemani wrote to De Rossi: "There was no need for Mr Tychsen, without that respect due to great men such as my great uncle, to take so much pride in illustrating his mordant character, or put simply, to commit another mistake".<sup>7</sup>

In October of the same year, while he was a guest of Giacomo Nani in Venice, Assemani wrote his own transcription and interpretation of the engravings:<sup>8</sup> he believed it was a tombstone slab of one or more Saracens who died in Sicily. Assemani had the intention of inserting his opinion in a note in the catalogue of Giacomo Nani's oriental manuscripts that he was composing at that time.<sup>9</sup> This note was never printed and it is not difficult to imagine the Venetian patrician undertaking this kind of preventative censorship. Obviously the problem of the relic being a fake was of a religious character (the feast of the Chair of Saint Peter is still included today in the liturgical calendar on 22 February) due to its great veneration by the Venetian population, but perhaps this was not the most important reason. As we know, there are two chairs of St. Peter: the oldest was that of Antioch, where the apostle had performed his magisterium after the death of Jesus, and then there is the one located in the Basilica of St. Peter in Rome. Until the reform of the calendar, the two holidays

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2007, p. 325.

<sup>6</sup> TYCHSEN 1787.

<sup>7</sup> BPPr, Padova 6<sup>th</sup> June 1788.

<sup>8</sup> BPPr, Padova 6<sup>th</sup> June 1788.

<sup>9</sup> LUCCHI 2011, pp. 302-303.

were celebrated on different days (January 18, the Roman one, on February 22, the Antiochene), signifying the importance that the single relics held in the Christian world. The Antiochene chair was linked to the period of pre-Roman Christianity and to the protector of the city, Saint Mark the Evangelist, a very close disciple and collaborator of Saint Peter. For this reason, it confirmed the prestige and moral strength of the Republic: The Cathedral of Venice kept the first chair of the first pope, while Dogal Basilica contained the body of the evangelist disciple of the first pope and the first evangelizer of the high Adriatic lagoons. The symbolic and political value of these relics is evident, also as a counterbalance to papal prerogatives in the jurisdictional field: this was the reason why Assemani could not publish his explanatory note in Venice. However, his interpretation was not unknown to scholars: and it was noted that Assemani had communicated it to Giovanni Cristofano Amaduzzi already in November 1787,<sup>10</sup> but now – thanks to what he wrote in his letters to De Rossi – it is confirmed that Cardinal Garampi was also aware of it already in 1784 when he met Assemani returning from Vienna at the end of the Nunciature<sup>11</sup> and the Sicilian canon Rosario Gregorio, to whom he had sent it in the same month of November.<sup>12</sup> The communication of his interpretation to De Rossi aimed to create further pressure on the German orientalist to change his mind and to adopt his own position. It can be said that the operation was successful. As early as 1788, Tychsen published an “editio secunda emendatio” of his *Interpretatio*,<sup>13</sup> in which he revised and corrected what he had previously written. He accepted to a large extent Assemani’s remarks, who however was not mentioned, but maintained the opinion that it was a throne of a Sicilian emir. De Rossi sent a copy of this second edition to Assemani in July of the same year and put the two scholars in direct contact with each other.<sup>14</sup> Assemani

<sup>10</sup> LUCCHI 2011, pp. 302-303.

<sup>11</sup> «Prima che il Tychsen stampasse la sua prima edizione, io già avea avvertito molti dell’inganno, anzi avvertii l’Ecc.mo cardinale Garampi allorché passò per Venezia quattr’anni fa, quando ritornò dalla Nunziatura di Vienna» (BPPr, Padova 4<sup>th</sup> July 1788).

<sup>12</sup> «Il sig. Tychsen ha fatto male di ristampare la sua illustrazione avanti di vedere la mia. Io non voglio supporre che abbia veduta la mia, e chi ne abbia fatto uso senza nominarmi, poiché io sin dal passato novembre l’ho spedita al sig. Canonico Rosario in Sicilia, e so che il suddetto signore carteggia con lui [...] Se m’ accorderò che il sig. Tychsen abbia fatto uso della mia fatica, non tacerò sicuramente tanto più che lui scrisse al sig. Giuseppe Vella professore di lingua arabica in Palermo in data 1 dicembre 1787 riguardo alle tre ultime parole dell’iscrizioni della così detta Cattedra queste precise parole “Pergratum mihi faceris, si super tribus ultimis inscriptionis, quem hic adiungo dictionibus, mentem tuam mihi explicaveris: utinam firmissimis argumentis probare posses, ad quem nam Emirorum Siciliae haec Cathedra praestantissima pertinuerit. Cathedra enim a Mauris Sicilis originem ducere nullum mihi dubium est” Dabam Butzovii ipsis Kalend. Decemb. MDCCLXXXVII» (BPPr, Padova 6<sup>th</sup> June 1788).

<sup>13</sup> Rostochii, ex officina libraria Koppiana, 1788.

<sup>14</sup> BPPr, Padova 4<sup>th</sup> July 1788. About the correspondence between Assemani and Tychsen see also D’Ottone Rambach 2015a, pp. 18-22, 24-25; D’Ottone Rambach 2015b, pp. 207-211.

immediately began an intense correspondence with Tychsen, warning De Rossi that he had written to him about the Chair stating that “I hope that he will be convinced and persuaded of my opinion”.<sup>15</sup> In the end Assemani reached his initial goal, to see printed – although not in Venice – his work on the Chair of St. Peter: in 1790 Tychsen published in Rostoch an *Appendix* containing Assemani’s report, his letters on the subject sent to Tychsen, and some opinions of other scholars.<sup>16</sup> As Piero Lucchi wrote, this booklet was practically unknown in Venice: there are not any copies in the city’s libraries and it is not even mentioned by Emmanuele Antonio Cicogna in his *Saggio di bibliografia veneziana* of 1847.<sup>17</sup> For the sake of completeness, I would also add that there is only one copy in SBN, the Italian national opac, specifically in Milan, in the Civic Archaeological and Numismatic Library, but within a miscellany published by Tychsen in 1794, *Opuscula quatuor, antiquitates orientales illustrantia, cum tribus tabulis aeneis*.<sup>18</sup>

In those first years of correspondence, Assemani kept De Rossi up to date on another topic, the so-called “Arabic imposture” of Giuseppe Vella, around which I will not expand as it is well known to all. Assemani’s letters to De Rossi do not bring any particular novelties compared to the existing bibliography, but allow a better understanding of Assemani’s position. As early as 15 November 1788, he wrote to De Rossi:

Maybe it be known to you that a letter of the Pope Marino, dated 3 April of the year 882 extracted from the famous Sicilian Saracenic Code and written with Arabic letters but Italian words, was published in Sicily. This letter gave cause for criticism and many scholars declared the code to be a solemn imposture, despite Mr Tychsen’s defence. I have been asked for my opinion; but I do not know what to say. Certainly, in the year 882 the Italian language was not spoken. You will certainly know more about this than I do.<sup>19</sup>

Also with his friend and correspondent Jacob Georg Christian Adler, Assemani expressed his doubts, which he then shared with De Rossi on 1 April 1789:

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<sup>15</sup> BPPr, Padova 15<sup>th</sup> November 1788.

<sup>16</sup> *Appendix ad inscriptionis Cuficae Venetiis in marmorea templi Patriarchalis S. Petri Cathedra conspicuae interpretationem*, Rostochii, ex officina libraria Koppiana, 1790.

<sup>17</sup> LUCCHI 2011, p. 309.

<sup>18</sup> Rostochii, ex officina libraria Stilleriana, 1794.

<sup>19</sup> «Forse vi sarà noto che in Sicilia si è pubblicata una lettera del Papa Marino tratta dal famoso Codice Saracenicico Siculo in data 3 Aprile dell’anno 882, scritta con lettere arabe ma parole italiane. Questa lettera ha dato motivo a varj critici di dichiarare il suddetto codice per una solenne impostura, non ostante la difesa che ne ha fatta il sig. Tychsen. Sono stato richiesto del mio parere; ma io non so cosa dire. Certamente nell’anno 882 non si parlava la lingua italiana. Voi certamente saprete più di me in tal proposito» (BPPr, Padova 15<sup>th</sup> November 1788).

I enclose a short answer to our common friend Mr. Adler, read it if you want to know what I think of the Sicilian Code. I long for Italy's decency that some erudite people demonstrate with luminous proofs the authenticity of it; since all appearances condemn it as being a fake. I do not know what to say. When you have read it, please give me your opinion. I imagine that Mr Tychsen is not even intimately convinced that the code and coins are genuine things. Although he defended it in response to the letter of the mordant French, Mr Tychsen's reply was supported by the Sicilian reports. Enough, I am afraid that the discussion of this code will be much greater than that of the Count of Cagliostro.<sup>20</sup>

Then in May 1790:

I quickly read the second volume of the Sicilian Diplomatic Code, and more and more I see the imposture.<sup>21</sup>

And in June of the same year:

I have read the other two volumes of the Codex Mauro Siculo, and I see more and more the imposture. I have written to the illustrious Monsignor Airoidi, and I have candidly told him my opinion.<sup>22</sup>

In 1792 the second part of the Adler's *Museum Cuficum Borgiaum Velitris*<sup>23</sup> offered to Assemani the historical-numismatic proof, which had been missing until then, to refute the falsehoods of Vella:

Very beautiful and rare is the collection of CXVI Cufic coins published by Mr. Adler. Among others, it is the 84th coin, which was minted by the conqueror of Sicily, Ziyad-Allah third Aghlabid prince, that decides the falsity of the Sicilian Diplomatic Code, written under the government of the Arabs and published in Palermo, and on the coins inserted in it. With the exception of Mr Tychsen, from the beginning all experts in Arabic matters had declared it to be a literary imposture, badly digested and worse written. Now I believe that our Tychsen will change his mind.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> «Vi accludo una piccola risposta al comune amico sig. Adler, leggetela se volete sapere cosa io penso del Codice Siculo. Io bramo per decoro dell'Italia che qualche erudito dimostri con luminose prove l'autenticità di esso; poiché tutte le apparenze lo condannano con le monete di falsità. Io non so cosa dire. Quando Voi l'avrete letto, vi prego di dirmi il vostro sentimento. Io m'immagino che né anche il sig. Tychsen sia intimamente persuaso che il suddetto codice, e le monete siano cose autentiche. Egli è vero che l'ha difeso, rispondendo alla lettera del mordace francese, ma la risposta del sig. Tychsen è appoggiata alle relazioni dei Siciliani. Basta, ho paura che si avrà molto più da discorrere di questo codice, che non si è fatto del Conte di Cagliostro» (BPPr, Padova 1<sup>st</sup> April 1789).

<sup>21</sup> BPPr, Padova 2<sup>nd</sup> May 1790.

<sup>22</sup> BPPr, Padova 12<sup>th</sup> June 1790.

<sup>23</sup> Hafniae, excudebat Fridericus Wilhelmus Thiele, 1792.

<sup>24</sup> «Bellissima e rara è la collezione di CXVI monete cufiche pubblicata dal sig. Adler. Fra le altre le 84 moneta, la quale fu battuta dal conquistatore di Sicilia Ziyad-Allah terzo principe Aglabita, e che decide della falsità del Codice diplomatico Siculo sotto il governo degli Arabi pubblicato in Palermo, e delle monete in esso inserite. Eccettuato il sig. Tychsen, tutti i periti nelle cose arabe l'avevano sin da principio dichiarato impostura letteraria mal digerata e peggio scritta. Ora credo che il nostro Tychsen si ricrederà» (BPPr, Padova 29<sup>th</sup> December 1792).

The net was inexorably closing around Vella, when in January 1795 an Assemani's correspondent – probably Rosario Gregorio – wrote to him from Palermo:

Since the arguments concerning the uncertainty of the authenticity of the Codes translated by Abbot Vella had reached the ears of the King, he wanted a German examiner from Vienna, his name is Giuseppe Hager, to observe the original codes and those which Vella said were transmitted from Morocco. Hager has already arrived, and when he saw the first page of the Martinian Codex and the famous papal letters engraved in copper, he was astonished and protested that these had never been Arabic characters, and now we will see if the Codex is whole, if there is new ink on the ancient, and I will report on this visual inspection at the time. In the code of the Council of Egypt, of which the first volume has already been published and the first sheet with the Arabic and Italian text was sent to you last year, Mr. Hager has recognized an Arabic language full of italics, and that the real text is Italian, ignorantly translated into Arabic. In this regard I made him read your letter, which said the same. We have certain arguments that this code is very recent and perhaps written in our times in Sicily. At the time I will explain everything to you. Mr Hager himself printed a report in Germany of the manuscript with the work of Tito Livio shown to him by Abate Vella, and it was seen that it is literally the epitome of a chapter of Floro, put in arabic characters and Maltese language. It will be my duty to send you the first printed report, which I have. We will see the unravelling of this comedy and the revelation of many mysteries. Palermo 10 January 1795.<sup>25</sup>

What emerges from the letters is that Assemani was not reticent in his judgments on Giuseppe Vella's imposture: he did not express his opinions in printed publications, but transmitted them to his correspondents in confidence. He used the same *modus operandi* that he was forced to put into practice in the case of the Chair of St. Peter for reasons of national politics, while in this case he probably self-limited himself in advance, because very high-level personalities were involved such as Archbishop Alfonso Airoldi, Lancillotto Castelli prince of Torremuzza, the viceroy of Sicily, Francesco d'Aquino prince of Caramanico, and even the King of the Kingdom of Naples, Ferdinando IV. It had become quite clear to Assemani that it was better to be "prudent" in his public expressions so as not to run into problems with the Venetian

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<sup>25</sup> «Essendo pervenuti all'orecchio del Re gli argomenti sull'incertezza dell'autenticità de' Codici tradotti dal sig. Abate Vella, egli ha destinato un esaminatore tedesco da Vienna, chiamato Giuseppe Hager, per osservare i codici originali e quelli che diconsi trasmessi da Marocco. Egli è già pervenuto, ed al veder la prima pagina del Codice Martiniano e le famose lettere papali incise in rame, rimase attonito e si protestò che questi non eran giammai stati caratteri arabici, ed ora vedremo se il Codice è intero, se avvi inchiostro nuovo sull'antico, e di questa ispezione oculare ve ne darò conto a suo tempo. Il codice del *Consiglio d'Egitto* di cui il primo volume è già sortito alla luce, e di cui il primo foglio col testo arabico ed italiano l'anno scorso vi trasmisi, egli il sig. Hager v'ha riconosciuto in esso un linguaggio arabico pieno di giaciture italiche, e che il vero testo è italiano, ignorantemente tradotto in arabo. A questo proposito io gli feci leggere la vostra lettera, che diceva lo stesso. Noi abbiamo certi argomenti che il detto codice è recentissimo, e forse scritto a nostri giorni in Sicilia. A suo tepo vi darò conto di tutto. Lo stesso sig. Hager ha stampata una relazione in Germania del *Livio* mostratogli dal sig. Abate Vella, e si è veduto che gli ha dato letteralmente la epitome di un capitolo di Floro, messo in caratteri arabici, e in linguaggio maltese. La prima stampa, che io avrò, sarà mio dovere di farvela capitare. Vedremo lo scioglimento di questa commedia e la rivelazione di tanti misterj. Palermo 10 gennaio 1795» (BPPr, Padova 25<sup>th</sup> February 1795).

authorities. In fact they preferred not to be involved also indirectly in quarrels – even if of an academic nature – with other states in difficult times such as those Europe were experiencing.

Despite the literary disputes, the main task of the Maronite scholar was always his work as a professor of oriental languages at the Seminary of Padua. In May 1788 he informed De Rossi of a new project: Assemani wanted to prepare, and publish at his own expense, works which he considered fundamental for teaching purposes and impossible to find on the book market.

I intend to print an Arabic grammar and the Dictionary of Golio with some additions, but I am afraid of the cost; as well as the Syriac grammar with the Ferrari dictionary, because what my predecessor Zannolini has printed is worth nothing. It is a great thing that nobody reprints the Dictionary of Buxtorfio: no more copies can be found.<sup>26</sup>

After two years Assemani was well on track with the preparation of a new revised and expanded edition of Golius' *Lexicon* (he wanted to start the impression with the coming year), but he was told that a new edition was about to be released in Leipzig.<sup>27</sup> The theologian and philologist Georg Christian Höpfner wrote a letter to him on 31 January 1790, in which he was asked not to publish the Golius' *Lexicon*: in April he would print the first volume and a new edition would have caused him considerable economic damage.<sup>28</sup> Assemani had decided to suspend printing for at least a couple of years. He did not imagine that he would no longer publish it, despite having prepared additions to increase the number of pages by about one third of the original.<sup>29</sup>

Another unsuccessful editorial venture was the printing of a Hebrew dictionary in 1794. The Seminar of Padua had initially entrusted the project to Assemani, who had decided to discuss it with De Rossi, asking him for advice:

I am therefore thinking about reprinting the *Lexicon* of Buxtorfio expanded by Fr. Domenican according to the last edition made in Rome, four years ago if I am not mistaken, in two tomes in 4°. I will reduce that edition to a single volume, which will have the same size as the *Lexicon* of Zannolini".<sup>30</sup>

However, at the end of the year, Assemani had to announce that the project would not be completed, presumably because it was not very remunerative due to high

<sup>26</sup> BPPr, Padova 16<sup>th</sup> May 1788.

<sup>27</sup> BPPr, Padova 23<sup>rd</sup> April 1790.

<sup>28</sup> BPPr, Padova 12<sup>th</sup> June 1790.

<sup>29</sup> BPPr, Padova 4<sup>th</sup> July 1810.

<sup>30</sup> BPPr, Padova 26<sup>th</sup> March 1794.

printing costs, even though he noted that in the Seminar “we are very poor in manual lexicons”.<sup>31</sup> The international political and economic conditions, and those of Venice in particular, underwent sudden and unthinkable changes in the space of a few years. The recession and lack of money affected the whole of European society and the book market also suffered an inevitable contraction in sales. In 1805 De Rossi asked Assemani to contact Padua booksellers for the sale of his books, which remained unsold in Parma. However, he had to warn him that unfortunately there were not even buyers of erudition books in Padua:

I talked to some booksellers about your learned productions, but I found them very cold and reluctant, because [not for any other reason that] they can't find buyers for lack of money, which is unfortunately true. I have also written to several of my correspondents, and I will receive the answers. The misfortune is general: little money and life is very expensive [...]. Your reflection is most correct: it is better to adjust to the circumstances of the times, otherwise the poor scholars will be very bad if they print books and do not find buyers. In Germany everything seems to be blocked, it has been more than a year that I have not received letters from our Tychem. In France there is protection, but except for our common friend De Sacy, I see only very superficial publications. In short, the letters are the last thing.<sup>32</sup>

Throughout any historical age it has always been necessary for any scholar – Assemani and De Rossi were certainly no exceptions – to have a well-equipped library available. However, their situation was very different, so much so that Assemani wrote to his friend with much admiration, and perhaps with some envy:

It seems impossible that a private individual with few means has arrived to collect such a large number of codes to form a library that has no equal in Italy.<sup>33</sup>

Indeed, Giovanni Bernardo De Rossi's private library had no equal in Italy for Hebrew manuscripts and four-15<sup>th</sup> century editions. It was in fact formed by 1432 Hebrew codes of the 11<sup>th</sup> to 16<sup>th</sup> centuries, many of which were beautifully illuminated, and 1464 printed Hebrew volumes, which were printed between the 15<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> century; in addition, 10 Greek manuscripts, 85 Latin, 31 in vulgar and various items in other languages. The collection included Bibles, numerous Salterians, philosophi-

<sup>31</sup> BPPr, Padova 6<sup>th</sup> December 1794.

<sup>32</sup> «Io ho parlato con alcuni libraj riguardo alle dotte vostre produzioni, ma l'ho trovati assai freddi e renitenti, non per altra ragione se non perché non trovano compratori per scarsezza di danaro, che pur troppo la cosa è vera. Ho pur scritto a varj miei corrispondenti, e sentirò la risposta. La disgrazia è generale: poco danaro ed il vivere carissimo [...] La vostra riflessione è ben giusta, che convien addattarsi alle circostanze del tempo, altrimenti i poveri letterati staranno assai male, se stamperanno libri e non trovano compratori. In Germania sembra tutto arrenato, è più d'un anno che non ricevo lettere dal nostro Tychem. In Francia vi è protezione, ma fuori del comune amico De Sacy, non veggio che cose assai superficiali. In somma le lettere sono nell'ultima azione» (BPPr, Padova 18<sup>th</sup> May 1805).

<sup>33</sup> BPPr, Padova 4<sup>th</sup> July 1810.

cal, juridical and kabbalistic texts, evidence of the intellectual and spiritual wealth of the Jewish groups of the Diaspora. Unlike many other private libraries, which disappeared after the death of their collectors, it was preserved in its entirety, because in 1816 it was purchased by the Grand Duchess of Parma and Piacenza, Maria Luigia of Austria to be gifted to the Royal Library of Parma, now the Biblioteca Palatina.

Assemani did not have a personal library, even though he said that he had tried to form one at least twice in his life:

Everyone tells me that your library is fit for a sovereign: I don't have anything good. I spent a lot of money on codes and books. When I took my trip to the East, I made a collection which could compete and even overcome any collection, but with tears in my eyes I had to leave it in many crates, because I had to flee in order to save my skin. In Vienna I made another collection of good oriental books and some manuscripts; these were sold by the landlord, where I was staying, for 100 florins in my absence. I then decided not to make libraries on my own. Some of those few books, which now I own, have been given to me, and some of them I bought here. The Library of this Seminary provides me with various books, so I am happy to stay here. This is the description of all my book affairs.<sup>34</sup>

Even if we do not give too much credit to his autobiographical tales, that are often rather implausible, it is certain that he never owned a remarkable collection of books. Assemani, however, was not fully satisfied even with the Padua Seminary Library, where he worked. The reason was the lack of Oriental language texts, which was attributable to past sales:

Not only here is there no saleable copy of the Arabic Psalter, but there is none in our library either. In a word, for a long time I have been looking for everything that you are looking for now, and especially to have an exact catalogue of all the oriental prints released by our typography. But no matter how much effort I put in, I didn't succeed. The best oriental books donated by Blessed Gregory have been removed from our library and sold at a low price, and when I came here I found everything in the utmost oblivion, so that I often had to go to Venice, not finding any support for my studies in Padua. My sensibility keeps me silent about the reason for such disorder, which, when it comes to my mind, alters my spirit.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> «Tutti mi dicono che la vostra biblioteca sia degna d'un sovrano: io non ho niente di buono. Ho speso moltissimo in codici ed in libri. Quando feci il viaggio d'oriente, feci una raccolta che poteva gareggiare ed anche superare qualunque collezione, ma dovetti colle lagrime agli occhi lasciarla in tanti cassoni, giacché dovetti fuggire come mi trovavo per salvare la pelle. In Vienna feci un'altra raccolta di buoni libri orientali e di alcuni mss e questi pure furono venduti in mia assenza dal padron di casa, dove alloggiavo, per 100 fiorini. Feci allora proponimento di non fare più biblioteche per conto mio. Quei pochi libri che possiedo al presente parte mi sono stati regalati, e parte me li sono provoduti qui. La Biblioteca di questo Seminario mi somministra varj libri, e perciò io sto volentieri. Eccovi descritte tutte le mie vicende in materia di libri» (BPPr, Padova 22<sup>nd</sup> June 1793).

<sup>35</sup> «Qui non solo non vi è alcuna copia vendibile del Salterio arabico, ma neppur esiste nella nostra biblioteca. In una parola, da molto tempo che io vado in traccia di tutto ciò che voi ora mi ricercate, e specialmente per avere un catalogo esatto di tutte le stampe orientali uscite da questa nostra stamperia, ma per quanto impegno ci abbia messo non ho potuto venirme a capo. Dalla nostra biblioteca sono stati distratti e venduti a vil prezzo i migliori libri orientali donati dal B. Gregorio, e

The lack of adequate bibliographic tools, which Assemani would have needed, only partially explains why he did not devote himself to larger works: probably he did not have a flair for this kind of study, as Giovanni Bernardo De Rossi did. However, he deserves credit for having tried to spread the interest in Arabic language and culture to a non-specialist audience. To achieve his goal, he had understood that, given the cultural changes of the time in which he lived, he had to use not Latin but Italian in his publications:

It is deplorable that our Italy has declined from its ancient splendor in sciences, and it is dedicated to novels, tales and capricious and bizarre inventions of heated heads. I wanted to write my works in the vernacular in order to try, if possible, to ignite the interest of oriental studies in the minds of the Italians, since I see that few people read books written in Latin, and prefer to read any French and English book, rather than Latin.<sup>36</sup>

Finally, in order not to fall short of what was stated in the title of this paper you can see the list of books mentioned in the letters. But books were not the core of their correspondence: very often Assemani complained that he had no literary news to transmit because of the absence of new publications in Italy and Europe. The bibliographic update was almost a pretext between the two scholars, who were instead bound by the love for the Oriental languages, which united them until the end, as the farewell phrase of the Assemani's last letter summarizes:

Goodbye my dear friend, I wish you many prosperous and happy years for our friendship and for the good of Oriental Letters.<sup>37</sup>

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quando io sono venuto qui trovai ogni cosa nel massimo oblio, cosicch  mi convenne spesse volte andare in Venezia per istudiare, non trovando in tutta Padova verun sussidio ai miei studj. La mia delicatezza mi fa tacere la ragione di tal disordine, che all'affacciarmisi alla mente mi altera lo spirito» (BPPr, Padova 3<sup>rd</sup> May 1800).

<sup>36</sup> «È cosa deplorabile che la nostra Italia abbia declinato dal suo antico splendore in materia di scienze, e siasi data ai romanzi, storielle e capricciose [sic] e bizzarre invenzioni di teste riscaldate. Io ho voluto scrivere le mie opere in volgare per tentare se sia possibile d'accendere nell'animo degli Italiani il gusto degli studi orientali, giacché veggo che i libri scritti in latino pochi gli leggono, ed amano piuttosto di leggere qualunque libro francese e inglese, che latino» (BPPr, Padova 14<sup>th</sup> March 1788).

<sup>37</sup> BPPr, Padova 30<sup>th</sup> December 1814.

## FONTES MANUSCRIPTAE

BPPr = Biblioteca Palatina di Parma, Ep. Parma 110, Simone Assemani to Giovanni Bernardo De Rossi

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## APPENDIX

## BOOKS MENTIONED IN SIMONE ASSEMANI'S LETTERS

22nd FEBRUARY 1788

Assemani Simone, *Catalogo de' codici manoscritti orientali della Biblioteca Naniana compilato dall'abate Simone Assemani*, In Padova, nella Stamperia del Seminario, 1787

Assemani Simone, *Saggio sull'origine culto letteratura e costumi degli arabi avanti il pseudoprofeta Maometto*, Padova, nella Stamperia del Seminario, 1787

16th MAY 1788

Adler Jakob Georg Christian, *Bibliotheca biblica serenissimi Württembergensium Ducis, olim Lorckiana*, Altonae, ex officina J. D. A. Eckhardti, 1787

*Hesychiou Lexikon. Hesychii Lexicon, cum notis doctorum virorum integris, vel editis antehac, nunc auctis & emendatis ... vel ineditis ... Ex autographis partim recensuit, partim nunc primum edidit, suasque animadversiones perpetuas adjecit Joannes Alberti ... Cum ejusdem prolegomenis, et adparatu Hesychiano*, Lugduni Batavorum, apud Samuelem Luchtmans, et filium, Academiae typographos, 1746-1766

*Pindari Carmina cum lectionis varietate*. Curavit Christian. Gottlob Heyne, Gottingae, apud Johannem Christianum Dieterich, 1773

*Pindari Carmina ex interpretatione latina emendatiore*. Curavit Christian. Gottlob Heyne, Gottingae et Gothae, apud Johannem Christian. Dieterich, 1774

Tychsen Oluf Gerhard, *Interpretatio inscriptionis Cuficae in marmorea templi S. Marci cathedra, qua S. Apostolus Petrus Antiochiae sedisse traditur*, Buetzouiii, typis Ioh. Gott. Fritzii, ser. duc. aul. et acad. typogr., 1787

4th JULY 1788

Tychsen Oluf Gerhard, *Interpretatio inscriptionis Cuficae in marmorea templi patriarchalis S. Petri Cathedra, qua S. Apostolus Petrus Antiochiae sedisse traditur. Editio secunda emendatior*, Rostochii, ex officina libraria Koppiana, 1788

18th JULY 1788

Assemani Simone, *Museo cufico Naniano illustrato dall'abate Simone Assemani professore di lingue orientali [...] Parte II*, In Padova, nella stamperia del Seminario, 1788

15th NOVEMBER 1788

*Daniel secundum editionem LXX interpretum ex tetraplis desumptam. Ex codice syro-estranghelo bibliothecae Ambrosianae syriace edidit, latine vertit, praefatione notisque criticis illustravit Caietanus Bugatus [Gaetano Burgati], Mediolani, ex typographio Monasterii Imperialis S. Ambrosii sumptu et typis Linguarum exoticarum Bibliothecae Ambrosianae 1788*

23rd APRIL 1790

‘Abd al-Latif al-Baghdadi, *Abdollariphi Compendium memorabilium Aegypti. Arabice. E codice ms.o Bodleiano edidit D. Joseph White [...] Praefatus est Henricus Eberh. Gottlob Paulus, Prostat Tubingae, apud Johann. Georg. Cotta, 1789*

Abū'l Farağ Gregorius, *Gregorii Abulpharagii sive Bar-Hebraei Chronicon Syriacum e codicibus Bodleianis descripsit maximam partem vertit notisque illustravit Paulus Iacobus Bruns [...] Edidit ex parte vertit notasque adiecit Georgius Guilielmus Kirsch, Lipsiae, apud Adamum Fridericum Boehmum, 1789*

2nd MAY 1790

Giorgi Agostino Antonio, *Fragmentum Evangelii S. Iohannis Graeco-Copto-Thebaicum saeculi IV additamentum ex vetustissimis membranis lectionum evangelicarum divinae Missae cod. diaconici reliquiae et liturgica alia fragmenta [...] ex Veliterno museo Borgiano nunc prodeunt in Latinum versa et notis illustrata opera et studio F. Augustini Antonii Georgii, Romae, apud Antonium Fulgonium, 1789*

*Terza appendice al catalogo de' libri latini, e italiani, e francesi, che si trovano vendibili appresso Carlo Scapino, Padova 1790*

23rd OCTOBER 1790

Assemani Simone, *Globus caelestis Cufico-Arabicus Veliterni musei Borgiani a Simone Assemano ... illustratus praemissa ejusdem De Arabum astronomia dissertatione et adjectis duabus epistolis cl. Josephi Toaldi, Patavii, typis Seminarii, 1790*

9th APRIL 1791

Abu al-Fida Ismail ibn'Ali, *Abulfedae Annales muslemici arabice et latine. Opera et studiis Io. Iacobi Reiskii [...] sumtibus atque auspiciis Petri Friderici Suhmii [...] nunc primum edidit Iacobus Georgius Christianus Adler, Hafniae, excudebat Fridericus Wilhelmus Thiele, veneunt apud Chr. Gottl. Proft, Vniv. bibliopol., 1789-1794*

*Quatuor Evangelia Graece, cum variantibus a textu lectionibus Codd. MSS. Bibliothecae Vaticanae, Barberinae, Laurentianae, Vindobonensis, Escorialensis, Havniensis Regiae, quibus accedunt lectiones versionum Syrarum, veteris, Philoxenianae et Hierosolymitanae*

*jussu et sumptibus Regiis edidit Andreas Birch*, Hauniae, excudebat J.F. Schultz, univers. Typographus, 1788

23rd APRIL 1791

Gregorio Rosario, *Rerum Arabicarum quae ad historiam Siculam spectant ampla collectio opera & studio Rosarii Gregorio*, Panormi, ex Regio Typographeo, 1790

Saadya ben Yossef Gaion, *R. Saadiae Phijumensis Versio Iesaiae arabica, cum aliis speciminibus arabico-biblicis, e mso. bodleiano nunc primum edidit atque [...] glossario perpetuo instruxit Henr. Eberh. Gottl. Paulus*, Ienae, apud C. H. Cunonis heredes, 1790-1791

21st NOVEMBER 1792

Gregorio Rsario, *De supputandis apud Arabes Siculos temporibus*, Panormi, ex Regio Typographeo, typis arabicis Airoidianis, 1786

29th DECEMBER 1792

Adler Jacob Georg Christian, *Museum Cuficum Borgianum Velitris. Pars II. Illustravit Iacobus Georgius Christianus Adler, th. doctor et prof. Hafniensis. Inserti sunt numi cufici editoris*, Hafniae, excudebat Fridericus Wilhelmus Thiele, 1792

22nd JUNE 1793

Assemani Simone, *Catalogo de' codici manoscritti orientali della biblioteca naniana compilato dall'abate Simone Assemani. Parte IV*, In Padova, nella stamperia del Seminario, 1792

Efrem <santo>, *S.P.N. Ephraem Syri opera omnia quae exstant Graece, Syriace, Latine in sex tomos distributa ad MSS. Codices Vaticanos aliosque castigata, multis aucta, nova interpretatione, prefationibus, notis, variantibus lectionibus illustrata opera et studio Josephi Assemani bibliothecae vaticanae praefecti*, Roma, ex Tipographia Pontificia Vaticana, apud Joannem Mariam Henricum Salvioni, 1746

23rd AUGUST 1793

Buxtorf Johann, *Lexicon Hebraicum et Chaldaeo-biblicum ordine alphabetico tam primigenia, quam derivata veteris testamenti Hebraica, et Chaldaica verba, et Latinas eorumdem interpretationes ex Johannis Buxtorfii aliorumque eruditissimorum virorum operibus exceptas; exhibens digessit, multisque auxit, atque illustravit Fr. Josephus Montaldi*, Romae, ex typographia Jo. Zempel., sumptibus Natalis Barbiellini bibliopolae in Foro Pasquini, 1789

Flavius Iosephus, *Flavii Iosephi hebraei opera omnia graece et latine excusa ad editionem lugduno-batavam Sigiberti Havercampii cum Oxoniensi Ioannis Hudsonii collatam curavit Franciscus Oberthür*, Lipsiae, sumtu E.B. Schwickerti, 1782-1785

6th DECEMBER 1794

Giorgi Agostino Antonio, *De miraculis Sancti Coluthi et reliquiis actorum Sancti Panesniv martyrum thebaica fragmenta duo alterum auctius alterum nunc primum editum. Praeit dissertatio eminentissimi Stephani card. Borgiae de cultu S. Coluthi M. Accedunt fragmenta varia notis inserta [...] deprompta et illustrata opera ac studio F. Augustini Antonii Georgii eremitae augustiniani*, Romae, apud Antonium Fulgonium, 1793

25th FEBRUARY 1795

Paulinus von Heilig Bartholomäus, *De Veteribus Indis dissertatio in qua cavillationes auctoris alphabeti tibetani castigantur. A p. Paulino a S. Bartolomaeo carmelita discalceato*, Romae, 1795

30th JULY 1798

Amarasimha, *Amarasinha. Sectio prima de caelo ex tribus ineditis codicibus indicis manuscriptis curante P. Paulino a S. Bartholomaeo*, Romae, apud Antonium Fulgonium, 1798

Zoega Georg, *De origine et usu obeliscorum ad Pium sextum pontificem maximum*, Romae, typis Lazzarini typographi cameralis, 1797

3rd MAY 1800

Baldi Francesco Antonio, *De apologia catholicae religionis a nova & maxime propria vaticiniorum psalmi quarti aliorumque declaratione ad Hebraeos, novatores, et incredulos dissertatio critica*, Venetiis, apud Justinum Pasquali Marii F., 1799

*Bibliothecae arabicae specimen... praeside Christiano Friderico Schnurrer*, Tubingae, 1799-1806

13th APRIL 1805

Assemani, Simone *Sopra una moneta fenicia dissertazione*, Padova 1805

De Rossi Giovanni Bernardo, *Mss. codices Hebraici biblioth. I. B. De-Rossi ling. Orient. prof. accurate ab eodem descripti et illustrati. Accedit appendix qua continentur mss. codices reliqui al. Linguarum*, Parmae, ex publico typographeo, 1803-1804

27th JULY 1806

‘Ali ibn ‘Abd al-Rahāmn Ibn Yunus, *Le livre de la grande table hakémitte*, ed. Caussin de Perceval, Paris, L’Imprimerie de la République, 1804

De Rossi Giovanni Bernardo, *De Corano arabico Venetiis Paganini typis impresso sub in. sec. XVI dissertatio*, Parmae, ex Imperiali typographeo, 1805

Marcus Graecus, *Liber ignium ad comburendos hostes, auctore Marco Graeco, ou Traité des feux propres à détruire les ennemis, composé par Marcus le Grec. Publié d’après deux manuscrits de la Bibliothèque nationale*, Paris, Delance, 1804

Silvestre de Sacy Antoine Isaac, *Chrestomathie Arabe, ou extraits de divers écrivains Arabes tant en prose qu’en vers, à l’usage des élèves de l’école spéciale des langues orientales vivantes*, Paris, Imprimerie Impériale, 1806

13th MAY 1807

Assemani Simone, *Ragguaglio storico-critico sopra la setta Assissana detta volgarmente degli Assassini*, Padova, nella Stamperia del Seminario, 1806

De Rossi Giovanni Bernardo, *Dizionario storico degli autori arabi piu celebri e delle loro principali opere*, Parma, dalla Stamperia imperiale, 1807

4th JULY 1810

Assemani Simone, *Discorso inaugurale alla cattedra di lingue orientali nella Regia universita di Padova detto nel giorno XX di dicembre MDCCCVII dal professor Simone Assemani*, Padova, nella Stamperia del Seminario, 1808

Assemani Simone, *Sopra le monete arabe efeigiate dissertazione*, Padova, per Nicolò Zanon Bettoni, 1809

Silvestre de Sacy Antoine Isaac, *Grammaire arabe à l’usage des élèves de l’école spéciale des langues orientales vivantes*, Paris, Imprimerie Impériale, 1810