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THE HEBREW REPUBLIC

Carlo Sigonio

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Carlo Sigonio (1520/24-1584), Italian historian, taught at the San Marco School in Venice and at the Universities of Padua and Bologna. He wrote several works on Roman and Greek history, focusing especially on political institutions, and on the history of Italy in the Middle Ages. His book on the Hebrew Republic was one of the first analyses of the political and religious institutions of the Ancient State of Israel and one of the most read works on this topic in Europe.

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INTRODUCTION

IN 1582, CARLO SIGONIO, a historian of Greek and Roman antiquity, published *De republica Hebraeorum* (*The Hebrew Republic*), on the institutions of the ancient state of Israel.¹ The book was initially published in Bologna, the second city of the papal states, and was reprinted several times, becoming the most famous work on its topic in all of early modern Europe.² The cultural and historical context of Sigonio's work has posed something of a problem for scholars seeking to recover its meaning and historical significance: while the study of the Hebrew polity and its employment as a model for politics was not uncommon in Calvinist countries, Sigonio was writing in a Catholic environment and dedicated his book to the pope. Furthermore, like some of his Calvinist contemporaries, Sigonio presented the Hebrew state as a possible model for the separation of powers between the religious and secular realms, which would effectively neutralize the papacy's secular authority.

The implications of Sigonio's work for contemporary political studies have not been given sufficient consideration by scholars. Sigonio is usually characterized as an objective historian and a champion of antiquarianism, and his book on the polity of the ancient Hebrews has been seen as a collection of source texts devoid of meaningful ideas that could be applied to his own context. Yet, as we shall see, the matter is far more complicated. To determine the meaning of Sigonio's work in its time, one must take into account a wide array of issues, including his relationship with the archbishop of Bologna, his interest in historiography, his knowledge of contemporary European political debates, and his long-running quarrel with the Catholic censors. Ultimately, Sigonio will be shown to have had mixed motivations, writing at some times for political purposes and at others out of a commitment to objective history. In this respect, he was no different from his contemporaries researching the ancient Hebrew state, in Italy or abroad.³

One reason scholarship has failed to see Sigonio as part of the greater phenomenon of *Respublica Hebraeorum* study in early modern Europe has to do with how scholars have accounted for the increased interest in the ancient

Jewish polity during the period.⁴ Some have identified the primary stimulus as the study and dissemination of the fourth book of Josephus Flavius' *Jewish Antiquities* during the second half of the sixteenth century. Others have pointed to the progressive "secularization" of biblical history, which permitted scientific analysis of the Jewish political model.⁵ This model then became—as classical political models had been for some time—a means of legitimizing specific political positions (although "secular" here is something of a misnomer, since the model was used in religious debates).⁶

This assessment that the "secularization" of Bible study is fundamental to the political study and use of scripture has resulted in modern-day historians', with few exceptions, concentrating on the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries and studying works published in countries such as England and the Netherlands. The concurrence of political strife, advanced Bible study, and a ruling Calvinism (in all its variations) explained the presence of works devoted to the Hebrew republic.⁷ Accordingly, scholars have focused on the works of Cunaeus, Grotius, Selden, and Harrington, disregarding the founders of this genre, such as Bonaventure Corneille Bertram and Carlo Sigonio (authors of *De politia Iudaica* [1574] and *De republica Hebraeorum* [1582], respectively), since their works were deemed to be of less political relevance.⁸

A more careful analysis may show that Bertram, a sixteenth-century Calvinist theologian and Hebraist, could also be included in the aforementioned group.⁹ But Sigonio is different: an eminent historian of Greco-Roman antiquities and professor at the *Studio* (or university) in the papal city of Bologna, he resists the mold scholars have constructed to account for political Hebraism. His omission is particularly problematic when we consider that of all the works on the polity of the ancient Hebrews published in early modern Europe, Sigonio's was the most frequently cited. In fact, all subsequent authors even remotely interested in Jewish political institutions referred to the work of our Modenese historian. Nonetheless, *The Hebrew Republic* has been considered "mere erudition," dismissed as a curiosity, or viewed as the product of the political-religious agenda of Sigonio's patron, Cardinal Gabriele Paleotti. In other words, Sigonio's work has always been isolated from others in its genre and from both the Italian and broader European cultural context in which he lived.¹⁰

CARLO SIGONIO IN CULTURAL AND POLITICAL CONTEXT

Carlo Sigonio was born in Modena (ca. 1520–1524) and moved, over the course of his life, between the most important cultural centers of northern Italy.¹¹ His cultural gestation took place in Modena, where his teachers included Francesco Porto and Ludovico Castelvetro, and where he replaced Porto as Greek lector. He taught at the St. Marco school in Venice between 1552 and 1559, then in Padua until 1563, when he moved to Bologna to hold the chair of humanities at the *Studio*. From the beginning, Sigonio divided his interests between Greek and Roman antiquities and Aristotle's *Rhetoric*. In the first field of research, he concentrated on different magistracies throughout Roman history and later on Livy's history of the Roman republic. He also analyzed Roman law and the history of Athenian institutions.¹² As for his other field of investigation, Sigonio had lectured on Aristotle's *Rhetoric* while teaching at St. Marco and had published a translation of it.¹³ During this period, Sigonio developed some of his cardinal ideas, which ultimately shaped all his activity as a historian.

Venice

In Venice, Sigonio wrote *Oratio de laudibus historiae*, which is enormously helpful in understanding his historical method within the cultural context of his time. In this work, Sigonio finds history to be the noblest of the humanities, writing that those who overlook the passage of time and past events cannot really be considered men; they are rather like inexperienced boys unable to distinguish one thing from another. Grammarians, rhetoricians, poets, and philosophers must resort to the art of history in order to truly understand their own disciplines,¹⁴ since history—the analysis of particulars with the aim of reaching universals—lies at the foundation of every science.¹⁵ After further explaining how grammar, rhetoric, and philosophy are indebted to history, he adds that this discipline is of capital importance in understanding civil institutions. Philosophers who wrote on the state had to investigate and compare the different kinds of constitutions and determine which forms survived, which degenerated, and which turned into tyranny.¹⁶ Sigonio ends the *Oratio* with the remark that philosophers draw their conclusions not by means of the secrets of their discipline but rather by direct observation of

the history of the particular states whose description they find in the works of the ancients.¹⁷

The *Oratio* addresses—in embryonic form—two fundamental issues that illuminate the subsequent scholarship of our author. The first is his method of historical inquiry, whereby universal conclusions are reached by analyzing and comparing particulars. This approach had its foundations in Italian humanism and had been employed, for example, by Guillaume Postel in his study of languages and religions. During the second half of the sixteenth century, it became a cornerstone of the new historiography, whose most prominent exponent was none other than Jean Bodin. The second issue is Sigonio's defense of the study of history. He argues that historical research should be regarded not just as a "cult of antiquities" but as an effort to reconstruct the evolution of certain foundations of human society, particularly those of juridical and civil institutions. Humanism had attacked traditions using philology. Sigonio considers himself part of this historical-philological trend and applies it with full force.

Sigonio's library held several French works, namely Bauduin's *De institutione historiae universae et eius cum iurisprudencia coniunctione*; the works of Hotman, among them the *Francogallia*; and probably Bodin's *Methodus (Method for the Easy Comprehension of History)*.¹⁸ His reflections on the ancient states of Rome and Athens belong to the same Venetian period in which he wrote the *Oratio* and developed his historical form in the greater European context. Already in his lectures on Aristotle's *Rhetoric*, where he lauds the mixed-constitution model of Cicero's *Scipio*, Sigonio reveals his predilection for the form of the Venetian republic that hosted him and which for his audience was formed mainly by the ruling class of the Lagoon republic.¹⁹ His praise for the mixed model of government accorded with the Aristotelian concept of the six types of state.

A similar dependence on Aristotle can be found in one of Sigonio's most important works, *De Antiquo Iure Civium Romanorum*, where he analyzes the Roman state from its origin to the end of the republican period.²⁰ The first of several ideas on which Sigonio dwells is Aristotle's analysis identifying the three just forms of government (monarchy, aristocracy, and democracy) and the three corrupt ones (tyranny, oligarchy, and ochlocracy). He adds that what distinguishes the two groups is not the number of people taking part in the administration of the state but rather the purpose they set for themselves: the rulers of just forms always govern for the sake of the common good, whereas the rulers of degenerate forms govern in pursuit of their own interests.²¹ Interestingly, Sigonio offers an additional type of government:

the *respublica temperata*, which combines all three just forms and which he considers the best.²²

Bologna

Sigonio's time in Bologna, where he taught from 1563 until his death in 1584, was a turning point in his career. This period was characterized by a shift in his interests, which had heretofore centered on history from the late Roman empire until medieval Italy. Paolo Prodi has dwelt on Sigonio's collaboration with Gabriele Paleotti, archbishop of Bologna from 1566, during this period, pointing out that Sigonio became the instrument of Paleotti's attempt at cultural and religious reform.²³ But there was life in the papal city of Bologna beyond the presence of Paleotti and his ecclesiastical policy, which sought to reform the Church according to the principles of the Council of Trent. The city was also imbued with strong political tensions between the central government of Rome, on the one hand, and the Bolognese aristocracy, with its aspirations of autonomy, on the other.

Sigonio was torn between these two positions. While he collaborated with the bishop, being involved in 1569 in the reformation of the liturgical office of St. Petronius, he also showed interest in the history of Bologna and in its longstanding autonomous tradition, and the city's senate even asked him to write on the subject.²⁴ In the resulting tract, when he described events closer to his own time—particularly the birth and development of the Roman Church—Sigonio was forced to step into the contemporary historiographical debate and take a stand in the controversy between Catholics and Protestants. At this point he had to deal with a conflict between his historical-philological method and the Church's need to legitimize its positions against attacks originating in transalpine Europe.

Beginning in 1569, Sigonio became a target of ecclesiastical censorship. The first criticisms were directed at his *Historia Bononiensis* and accused him of doubting the privilege granted to Theodosius and of questioning the veracity of other historical documents, to the detriment of the Church of Rome.²⁵

Sigonio's works following this period reflect a continuous conflict between Rome, represented by Cardinal Sirleto, and Bologna, home of Sigonio's greatest advocate, Paleotti. *De regno Italiae* is another work which was to cause numerous problems for its author. In a memorandum written in 1569, Sigonio states that he was asked to write a history of Bologna, adding that he intends to extend his research to other Italian cities, particularly in Lombardy and Romagna.²⁶ This is the basis of Sigonio's history of the Italian peninsula,

