

CHAPTER 1

Pfefferkorn and the Battle against Judaism¹

Josef Pfefferkorn, who changed his name to 'Johann' when he converted to Christianity in 1504, was a Moravian Jew. He lived for a while in Prague, then moved to Nürnberg, and finally settled in Cologne. Information about his life is sketchy and comes primarily from incidental remarks in his own writings and those of Reuchlin. The polemical context of these remarks makes them suspect, but external evidence is scant and equally problematic. There are a number of official documents, safe-conducts and testimonials, but they contradict each other, some attesting to Pfefferkorn's good character, others accusing him of criminal activity. In 1514 a broadsheet was circulating that identified him with a Jew by the name of Pfefferkorn who had been convicted of theft and executed.² Pfefferkorn, who was alive and well, complained that 'two Jews wanted to sully my reputation with a charge of theft ... I cited them before the imperial court, and they were obliged to pay thirty gold florins to cover my expenses and had to retract the accusations in public.'³ The episode illustrates the unreliability of the extant sources.

It is not clear what Pfefferkorn did for a living before his conversion. One document suggests that he was a butcher; he himself denies it without specifying his profession.⁴ Modern historians speculate that he was a moneylender. After his conversion Pfefferkorn earned his living as a missionary among Jews, travelling in the central and southern regions of the Empire between 1504, when he is documented at Dachau, and 1509, when he settled in Cologne. His success appears to have been modest, however. In 1516 he declared that he had converted fourteen Jews, claiming that five more would have been baptized