

I. VASSALLI'S STEP-FATHER IN PRISON

With very minor exceptions, Vassalli's early years are still shrouded in mystery. This is most unfortunate since the experiences of adolescence bear very much on one's character later on in life. Fortunately, quite unexpectedly, I explored such a piece of valuable information. By now I have come to expect such unlooked-for discoveries. The most desirable findings are not necessarily those which are unearthed consciously. It is the least expected documents that sometimes satisfy your intellectual curiosity most.

As far as I am concerned, knowledge about Vassalli has always cropped up that way. My first published article about him was back in 1983 when I described his winning prize for Arabic at the school which the *Propaganda Fide* had in Malta¹. Such a valuable piece of information I had kept in my possession for seven years. I never imagined that the young man whom the manuscript described as *Michel'Angelo* was none other than the worthy *Michel'Antonio*². It was only after the publication of Mgr C. Sant's article about Vassalli's stay in Rome³ that I drew my conclusions. My point is that in most cases it is wrong to taunt the historian with implications that had never entered his head. The writer of history does not, generally speaking, delve into the archives with *a priori* conclusions, or even with a theme in mind. It is most unscholarly, not to say defamatory, then, to ascribe to him ulterior motives and to claim that he is selective in his choice of material. To use a metaphor, the conductor does not execute his own work, but the music written by others.

On Sunday, 28 July 1776 between 9/10 a.m. were leased by auction at the civil chancery of the Inquisition, Vittoriosa, the plots of land *Gran Fontana* (Għajn il-kbira) and *l-Għars*, beneath Boschetto gardens. The highest bidder was Gaetano Mifsud. Internal evidence proves that he must have been Vassalli's step-father. Not only was he of Zebbug, and the son of Giuseppe;⁴ but he is also mentioned in conjunction with his wife, Catarina⁵, Vassalli's mother, whom he had married on 19 June 1770⁶. He offered the substantial sum of 901 scudi annually. The rent was to be paid in three equal instalments, while the lease was for eight continuous years. The deed was signed in the presence of the Tribunal's assessor, Fr Pietro Francesco Gristi, and the two witnesses Fr Vincenzo Abela and Fr Ignazio Abela. The sureties presented by Gaetano were Francesco Busuttill of Valletta and Angelo Fenech of Zebbug.

No sooner, however, had Gaetano become a *gabelotto*, or tenant farmer, of the Inquisition, than he started being pestered by his creditors. He failed to pay the rents⁸, the fodder⁹, the *decime* or tithes¹⁰, the price of a cow¹¹, the manure, and the *mischiato*¹². He did not even present the four capons he had to donate to the Inquisitor annually¹³. On 30 January 1778 he had a bull confiscated by the Captain of the Holy Office¹⁴. On 20 August of the same year another mandate was issued

against him. Four oxen of Susa, two calves, a roomful of hay, all the fruit on the trees, the cotton not yet collected, three *salme* of *mischiato*, the manure, and all the farming implements were to be sold by auction¹⁵.

On 26 June 1779 Gaetano presented a petition to the Inquisitor, Mgr Zondadari. He reminded him that three years previously he had taken the lease of *Ghajn il-kbira* for hundreds of scudi. This proved to be such a financial burden that he had become debtor of about 300 scudi, and found himself daily plagued by creditors. At the moment he could pay none of his debts, chiefly because his lands were still under cotton cultivation. He, thus, humbly asked Mgr Zondadari to give him a respite till the following November by which time he would have gathered his products. Unfortunately, we do not know what sequel there was to this petition, except that the creditors were to be notified, *intimetur creditoribus*¹⁶

The following month, July, Gaetano was made to pay 75 scudi for a cow¹⁷; while at the end of the year it was the turn of Fr Pietro Zammit to ask for 55 scudi¹⁸. Another creditor was Antonio Camilleri who had already demanded on 8 August 1778 32 scudi for fodder¹⁹. In September 1779 Antonio claimed that he was still owed 21 scudi; but, as Gaetano denied the charge, he produced three witnesses who were examined at the instance of the Tribunal's chancellor by notary Filippo Amato of *Città Rohan*. They were not sure what sum Gaetano still had to pay, but they knew for certain that he had truly bought the *forraina*. They had seen his mare and young she-mule eating the said fodder, which they had even seen the accused transporting to the *Gran Fontana*. Another witness was Pasquale Galea, the captain of the Holy Office, who made his deposition in front of notary Paolo Vittorio Giammalva on 1 March 1780. He testified that Mifsud had paid another 7 scudi of the remaining 21 scudi: but, though he had succeeded in earning a respite, he continued to procrastinate from week to week²⁰.

Eventually Gaetano ended up in the prisons of the Inquisition. On 23 February 1779 he had been given two days' time in which to pay 150 scudi to Francesco Borg;²¹ by February of the next year he still had not paid his debt. On the 16th of the same month at the instance of Francesco he was incarcerated²². On 10 March 1780 Gaetano asked the Inquisitor to let him stay outside the prison cell, though in the limits of the Sacred Palace²³. He was suffering, as the prison doctor, Angelo Pace, testified, from hydrocele in the right testicle—*ernia nel testicolo destro*²⁴. Francesco Borg was notified of this petition, and had to answer within twenty-four hours if he would consent to Gaetano's request. Since Borg replied in the affirmative, Gaetano had his wish granted on 13 March 1780²⁵. Then, on 20 April 1780 the *Gran Fontana* and *l-Ghars* were leased for the next six years to Michele Gambin of Siggiewi²⁶.

This incident is of paramount importance to the understanding of Vassalli, who at that time was a lad of sixteen. Firstly, it shows that his connection with the Inquisition began much earlier than 1785 when he was a student at the School of Arabic. Secondly, his step-father's imprisonment must have left a deep scar on him.

This psychological hardship drove him on irresistibly to the role of the revolutionary he was to become later on. To describe Vassalli as a scholar living in an ivory tower is only a figment of the imagination. He was a revolutionary at heart, who dreamed of turning medieval Malta upside down. The orphan whose step-father knew what the dungeons of the Holy Office meant, and who even experienced the stigma that this entailed, avenged himself on a retrograde society.

It is only through such research that a good biography of Vassalli must ultimately and painstakingly emerge. Facile assumptions must be disregarded not only because—to repeat J.S Mill—the infidels demand your proofs, but also, and largely, because statements call for elaboration.

1. F. Ciappara, 'M.A. Vassalli wins a prize for Arabic', *The Sunday Times*, 19 June 1983, 12.
2. A(rchives of the) I(nquisition) M(alta), R(egistrum) A(ctorum) C(ivilium), C7 (1782–1787), ff. 174r–v. See also *AIM, Corr(ispondenza)* 96, f. 399v.
3. C. Sant, 'M.A. Vassalli's Sojourn in Rome (1788–1790),' *The Sunday Times*, 3 April 1983, 9.
4. *AIM, RAC*, C6 (1776–1782), f. 39r.
5. *AIM*, A(tti) C(ivilii) 551(i), ff. 119 r–v. *AIM, AC* 553 (i), ff. 189r, 190r, 192r.
6. Parish Archives, Zebbug. Liber Matrimoniorum IV (1762–1814), 103–4
7. *AIM, RAC*, C6, ff. 38r–42v.
8. See for instance, *AIM, AC* 553 (i), ff. 223–229v; *AIM AC*556 (i) ff. 9r–14v; *AIM, RAC*, C6, f. 247r; N(otarial) A(rchives) V(alletta), R 138/1, ff. 178r–180v.
9. *AIM, RAC*, C6, ff. 175r–v.
10. *AIM, AC* 556 (i) , ff. 98–103v.
11. *AIM, AC*, 554, ff. 4r–12v.
12. *AIM, AC* 551 (i) ff. 198r–207v.
13. *AIM, AC* 553 (i), ff. 217r–218v.
14. *AIM, RAC*, C6, f. 148r.
15. *Ibid.*, ff. 179v–180r.
16. *AIM, AC* 556 (i) ff. 35r–36v.
17. *AIM, AC* 554 ff. 4r–12v. See also *NAV, RS/23*, ff. 508r–v.
18. *AIM, RAC*, C6, f. 281v. *NAV, R328/36*, f. 407r.
19. *AIM, RAC*, C6, ff. 175r–v.
20. *AIM, AC* 555 (i) ff. 404r–417v.
21. *AIM, AC* 561, f. 77r.
22. *AIM, AC* 555 (i), f. 215v.
23. *Ibid.*, f. 211r.
24. *Ibid.*, f. 212r. I would like to express my thanks to Prof. Dr R. Ellul Micallef for translating this term to me.
25. *Ibid.*, f. 211v: *Praesentata fuit, et est praesens supplicatio per Gaetanum Mifsud et recept, notif, de ea Francisco Borg cui etiam fuit praefixus terminus horarum viginti quatour ad respondendum ut constitit per Aloysium Damato cursorem. Die II Martii. Atena partis contumacia fiat ut petitur. Datum ex Palatio Apostolico. Die XIII Martii 1780. A Zondadori.* Thanks are due to Canon John Azzopardi for helping me transcribe this Latin text. It may be noted that in a previous article Canon Azzopardi had produced a document describing the selling of two heifers by Gaetano to his step-son, Michael Antonio. See '5 Dokumenti Godda fuq Mikiel Anton Vassalli' , *Saghtar* 62, March 1979, 20.
26. *AIM, RAC*, C6, ff. 290r–294v.

II. VASSALLI WINS A PRIZE FOR ARABIC

In his article on “M.A. Vassalli’s sojourn in Rome” Mgr. Professor Sant assumed that before going to that city Mikiel Anton “*was already grounded in Arabic in Malta, most probably by Fr Joseph Calleja of Tarxien*” Otherwise, he could not have registered in the fifth class at the *Sapientia*. Nor could he have produced his scientific work on the Maltese Language after only a two-year course at that University¹.

This most logical assumption² is only too true. But we must add that not only did Vassalli attend the School of Arabic at Valletta, he even won a prize as one of the best four pupils in the language in 1785.

I succeeded in tracing this piece of worthy information in the volume entitled *Registrum Actorum Civilium Sancti Officii*, C7 (1782–1787), ff. 174 r–v., at the Cathedral Museum, Mdina³. The only difficulty that had to be overcome was that the second name of this our most notable ancestor is put down as *Angelo* and not *Antonio*. But this could only have been a slip of the pen, surely, as he is described as the son of the late Gabriele of Città Rohan.

On June 15, 1761 Gabriele Vassallo married Catarina Magro, both of Zebbug⁴ and three years later, on March 5, 1764 Fr Francesco Grima⁵ baptised their child *Michele Antonio*, who had been born that same day⁶. Unfortunately, he lost his father when only two years of age⁷, since Gabriele died on June 20, 1766, aged 32⁸; but on June 19, 1770 his mother married Gaetano Mifsud of Zebbug⁹.

In 1785, when Vassalli was 21 years of age, he was a student of Fr Joseph Calleja. School lasted from October till August and exams, which consisted in reading and explaining the text, were held twice a year—following the February and the August semesters. The worthiest student received 22 *scudi*, 4 *tari*, and 10 *grani*, the equivalent of 10 Roman *scudi*¹⁰.

Owing to lack of students, no exams were held in August 1783; and the school remained closed even for the scholastic year October 1783/August 1784. Hence on May 11, 1785 there were 40 Roman *scudi* available, which were distributed to the best four students in Arabic. Besides our great patriot Michele Antonio, these were Fra Giuseppe Simone Borg, *Cappellano d’Ubbidenza Magistrale*, and Fra Giuseppe ‘Tanti,’ Deacon of the Order of St John—both of Valletta; and Giovanni Schembri, the son of the late Dr Andrea of Mqabba, and who later became a canon lawyer.

We do not know whether Vassalli attended the school just for this one term, since he is mentioned only at this instance. One thing is sure, however. His grand idea to study his own language scientifically, by first examining other Semitic tongues, had begun in earnest. Thus, he could later boast that *O sistemato la lingua con sudore e dispendio, o rilevato l’origine ed il pregio... della nazionale favella*¹¹.

In 1788 he was in Rome, where he indulged not only in academic studies, but was also a fervent follower of the Enlightened ideas then doing away with the “shadows of ignorance” and breaking the “fetters of prejudice”. As one of these who “dared think”, he was a disciple of those spirits who were shaking the soul

of the eighteenth century to its very foundations. Among these was Cesare Beccaria, whose epoch-making *Dei Delitti e Delle Pene* Vassalli cited (though for obvious reasons suppressing the author's name) in his own Lexicon's *Discorso Preliminare*¹².

1. Mgr. Prof. C. Sant, "M.A. Vassalli's sojourn in Rome (1788–1790)", *The Sunday Times*, April 3, 1983, p.9.
2. Cp.A. Cremona, *Vassalli and His Times* (Malta, 1940) p. 159: "Vassalli it seems, had begun teaching Arabic here in Malta likely after learning it in one of the schools of Arabic which had been opened by the funds of the "Propaganda Fide". This might have been between 1784 and 1787." See also D.A. Agius, *Malta, Ċentru għat-Tagħlim ta' l-Għarbi fil-Mediterran* (Malta, 1980) pp. 14–15: "Vassalli, probabli, studja l-Għarbi taht Dun Gużeppe Calleja bejn is-snin 1780 u 1787 fis-Seminarju l-Imdina."
3. See also Archives of the Inquisition, Malta. *Correspondence* 96, f. 399v.
4. P(arish) A(rchives, Zebbug), *Liber Matrimoniorum*, Vol III (1711–1762), f. 612v.
5. A. Cremona, inaccurately, states this was the Parish Priest who, in fact, was Fr Felice Borg (1762–1799). *Op cit.*, p. 5.
6. P.A. *Liber Baptizatorum*, Vol. VII (1756–1786), p. 161.
7. Cp. A. Cremona, *op cit.*, p. 8; "Vassalli lost his father when he was about six years old."
8. P.A. *Liber Defunctorum*, Vol. IV (1740–1820), p. 115.
9. P.A. *Liber Matrimoniorum*, Vol. IV (1762–1814), pp. 1031104.
10. A comprehensive study of the School of Arabic in the late 18th century, was published by the present author in *The Sunday Times*, July 3, 1983.
11. M.A. Vassalli, *Kryb yl Klym Malti mfysser byl-Latin u byl-Talyan – Lexicon Melitense-Latino-Italum* (Romae, 1796), p. XLII.
12. *Ibid.*, p. XXV.

III. VASSALLI'S SACRED PATRIMONY

It was Ninu Cremona who brought to life Mikiel Anton Vassalli¹ from the dustbin of history where his detractors had dumped him. This was not a complete biography by any means; and various scholars have painstakingly, especially during recent years, filled many of the *lacunae* in this pioneer work.

One of the most difficult riddles to solve has always been whether Mikiel Anton studied for the priesthood. His biographer hints that he had, but bases his assertion only on hearsay, and brings no documentary evidence². This was not the only reason which led me to peruse the *Status Animarum* of Mdina. The School of Arabic, which Vassalli attended, was especially open to seminarians³. But my high hopes of tracing his name among them proved to no avail⁴. My luck, however, struck at the Notarial Archives in Valletta, where I came across his Sacred Patrimony⁵.

As in the manuscript relating to his prize for Arabic⁶, Vassalli's second name is, put down as *Angelo*. But internal evidence, and the similarity of his signature in this patrimonial title to other examples of his hand-writing in other documents⁷, prove beyond any shadow of doubt that he is the worthy Mikiel Anton. Besides, it does not seem that this name had much importance. It could even be left out⁸, or added only later⁹.

The Council of Trent had decreed that no cleric was to receive Holy Orders unless he had the necessary means to live according to his station¹⁰. This was confirmed by the diocesan Synod of Bishop Cocco Palmieri in 1703, which established the sum of 45 *scudi*¹¹. Pius VI, then by his *Motu Proprio* of June 25, 1777, nearly doubled it to 80 *scudi*¹².

On April 17, 1785 two deeds were drawn up by Notary Giuseppe Bonavita at Qormi, which constituted the Patrimonial Title of Vassalli. Mikiel Anton assigned to himself the plot of land called ta' *Harram*, which he had inherited from his father¹³, and which was leased for 9 *scudi*, and 3 *tari*. Saverio Camilleri his paternal aunt's husband¹⁴, gave him 20 *scudi*, part of the lease of the field ta' *Tellu* in the region of San Rocco.

Another relation of his, Maria Delicata, his father's step-sister¹⁵, donated to him the plot of land tal-*Hacba*, leased for 51 *scudi*. Their bequest was made "out of the sincere love and affection" they had for him, so that he could be tonsured and become a secular priest. Two conditions were attached to these donations. If Mikiel Anton became a regular priest, or a Conventual Chaplain, they were to become null and void; while after his death they were to revert to the donors, or to their heirs.

A week later, on April 23, Vassalli presented this notarised act in the Bishop's Curia, so that formal proceedings could start, and statements contained in it verified. That same day, the Curia's chancellor, Ignazio Saverio Bonavita, asked Notary Giuseppe Bonavita to examine the witnesses Vassalli was to produce. On April 29, Francesco Saliba, Salvatore Xiriha and Filippo Abela, all of Zebbug, testified to the quality, capacity, and value of each plot of land. Saverio Camilleri was childless, while 60 year-old Maria was a spinster and past her childbearing years. Moreover, both had enough property left for their maintenance.

On May 10, two agricultural experts, Petruzzo Xerri and Petruzzo Callus, drew up a report under oath of the three holdings. On June 2, Fr Michele Camilleri the *Promotor Fiscale Generale* recommended that Mikiel Anton's application be accepted, as he had the necessary 80 *scudi*. On July 7, Bishop Labini issued his sentence: *...dicimus et declaramus supradictum Michaelam Angelum Vassallo ex Civitate Rohan sufficiens habere patrimonium sub cuius titolo prima clericali tonsura initiari possit, et successive ab Sacros Ordines promoveri valeat...*¹⁶.

Vassalli, hence, was intended for the priesthood. But did he study at the Seminary of Mdina? Which orders did he take? As in 1788, he was in Rome, can we bridge the gap between this date and 1785 when he was still in Malta? What was his relation with the *Propaganda Fidei*, whose School of Arabic he attended here? Why did he print his works at Fulgoni's? Did he know Assemani before he registered at the *Sapienza*? These and other queries, I will tackle in another article.

1. The popular impression that Mikiel Anton started writing his surname in the genitive with the publication of his Maltese Grammar in 1791 must now be abandoned. In 1788 he was already using this form. See A(rchiepiscopal) A(rchives), M(alta), Corr(ispondenza) XX, f. 112r.

2. A. Cremona, *Vassalli and His Times* (Malta, 1940), p. 8.

3. A(rchives of the) I(nquisition) M(alta), R(egistorum) A(ctorum) C(ivilium), C6, f. 25v.
4. See C(uriae) E(piscopalis) M(elitense), *Status animarum* Vol 17, No. 9, f. 5r; Vol. 18, No. 5, ff. 5v–6r; Vol. 19, No. 5, pp. 7–8; Vol. 20, No. 9, ff. 5v–6r.
5. N(otarial) A(rchives) V(alletta), 579/5, ff. 441–444v.
6. *A.I.M., R.A.C.*, C7, f. 174v.
7. *C.E.M., Acta Originalia*, March 1822 unnumbered; *A.A.M., Corr.* XX, f. 112r;
8. P(arish) A(rchives), *Zebbug, Libro dei Confermati* (1686–1829), May 8, 1774 unnumbered.
9. *N.A.V.*, 579/5, f. 422r.
10. *Concilium Tridentinum, sess. XXIX, de reform, cap. 11.*
11. *Synodus dioecessana Ab Illustris, et reverendiss. Domino Fratre Davide Cocco Palmerio Episcopo Melitensi 1703* (Malta, 1842), p. 42, parag. V.
12. *National Library, Malta, Misc 226: Moto Proprio della Santità di Nostro Signore Pio VI* (Malta, 1782), p. 5.
13. *N.A.V., R21*, Vol. 8, f. 179v.
14. Saverio's wife, Grazia, was Mikiel Anton's father's sister. They were married on January 24, 1761, that is nine days after Grabiell's wedding to Catarina. *P.A., Zebbug, Liber Matrimoniorum* 111, ff. 612v, 613v–614r.
15. Grazia was the daughter of Baldassare Delicata and Domenica. *P. A., Zebbug, Liber Baptizatorum* VI. p. 504. When her husband died on August 23, 1726 (*P.A. Zebbug, Liber Defunctorum*, 111, p. 216) Grazia married Michele, Vassalli's grandfather. *P.A. Zebbug, Liber Matrimoniorum* 111, p. 337–338.
16. *A.A.M. Patrimonio Sacro* Vol. 69A. No. 3.

IV. VASSALLI STUDIED FOR THE PRIESTHOOD

My last article on M.A. Vassalli's sacred patrimony established from documentary sources his intention to become a priest¹. Fortunately I came across two letters of his at the Archiepiscopal Archives which confirm his vocation. Besides, they solve many doubts about some of the still hidden parts of his life—though they raise as many.

Vassalli was born on March 5, 1764². Two years later his father, Gabriele, fell sick and disposed of his wealth the best way he could to provide for his wife, Catarina, and three young children, the eldest of whom, Marcella, was only 4½ years old³. On April 28, 1766 he sold a black mule for 95 *scudi* to Giuseppe Debono of Casal Attard⁴. On May 8, two fields, one sown with corn, the other with cotton, were leased to Paolo Faenza for 70 *scudi* and 10 *tari*⁵ while another field of cotton at Hal-Mula went to Salvatore Sciriha for 9 *scudi*⁶.

The next day were leased to Giovanni Magro his brother-in-law, a holding with a stockyard in the same region, as well as another plot *Ta' Wzzino*. A condition was attached to this lease; if he recovered his health before the cotton in it was gathered, Gabriele would get back this property after paying any expenses incurred by the tenants⁷.

On May 11 were drawn the last deeds. Giacobbo Camilleri paid 26 *scudi* for the plot at *Tal-Hlas*⁸ while Giuseppe Sammut of Siggiewi bought for 250 *scudi*⁹ the house Catarina had brought as dowry¹⁰.

Gabriele died that same year, when Mikiel Anton was only two years old¹¹. In 1770 his mother married another farmer, Gaetano Mifsud¹² who brought with him a cow, two calves, and a black horse—besides 50 *scudi* and two suits¹³.

On May 8, 1774 the young Vassalli received the Sacrament of Confirmation from the hands of Bishop Pellerano¹⁴ during a Pastoral Visitation¹⁵. In 1785 his parents were living in the vicinity of the parish priest's residence; but he was not living with them¹⁶.

Desire for the priesthood

His desire was to become a priest—“*desideroso d'iniziarsi nello stato ecclesiastico*” But he had not been admitted to the Seminary as a day student, and he was unable to pay 120 *scudi* annually as a boarder. It was then that he decided to go to Rome, with the understanding that the Bishop send him the dimissorials¹⁷.

In July 1785 he was already in that city¹⁸. Three years later, in 1788, he applied to lecture on Oriental Liturgy and Syro-Chaldaic at the University of the *Sapienza*. The interview was to be held in July in the presence of the Chancellor and the *Signori Avvocati Concistoriali*. But he had one great obstacle to surmount, since only an ecclesiastic could get the appointment. So on April 30, he wrote a pathetic letter to Bishop Labini to “have mercy on me”, and send him the letters dimissory to have conferred first tonsure and Minor Orders. Otherwise, if successful, as he hoped he would be, he would still not be eligible¹⁹

Bishop Labini answered that the applicant lacked one important qualification—which had been laid down by Pius VI's *Motu Proprio* of June 25, 1777²⁰—to have served in a church for three years. Hence, in November, Mikiel Anton addressed a memorial to the Pope for a dispensation. The *Sacra Congregazione dei Vescovi e Regolari* as usual referred this petition to the Bishop for his comments²¹.

Did Mgr Labini send the required documents? Unfortunately all correspondence after this entry relating to Vassalli comes to an abrupt end. But circumstantial evidence comes to our help. As present research now stands, it was only in 1792 that he was first called an *abbate*²² What does this term signify? Fr C.F Schlienz, a friend of his, affirmed that he had taken the “four first Orders”²³. Giovanni Fava of Gharghur was also known by that name, which in his own words meant *un Chierico in minoribus*²⁴. Are we to conclude, then, that Vassalli, unlike other applicants²⁵, had first to conform to the requirements of the *Motu Proprio*?

And did he get the appointment in 1788? The interview was to be held in *July*: but in his appeal to the Holy See in *November* he makes no mention of it. Moreover, that same year he registered as a student at the University, where he remained till 1790²⁶. That year he was called a Professor of Oriental Languages²⁷. Was it now that he got the job? And, if he did, what position did he occupy at the *Sapienza*? His subjects were the same as those taught by A.S. Assamani.

Vassalli's was a late vocation. To enter the seminary boys had to be about 12 years old, of legitimate birth, of honest parents, and of good moral character; while a schoolmaster had to testify to their academic ability²⁸. Mikiel Anton could not fulfill this last condition at that early age, since, till he was 17, he understood and spoke only Maltese²⁹. He was refused entry not because he was past his boyhood, but because *essendo pieni tutti i posti*³⁰.

This must mean that other applicants had better qualifications than him — *più atti ed idonei* — which is not surprising at all in his case. The Bishop would have liked to admit a greater number of students, proportional to the needs of the diocese; but the Seminary lacked the necessary funds to provide of their schooling³¹.

Which school did Vassalli attend after 1781? Was it one of those classes spread all over the Island³², among which was that run by Fr Giuseppe Sciberras of his own village?³³ The fact is that in 1785 he was a most worthy student at the School of Arabic³⁴. This had not been set up as Vassalli later claimed in the Introduction to his *Lexicon* “to preserve and cultivate the national language”³⁵, but as a training-ground for missionaries among Muslims. His teacher was Fr Giuseppe Calleja — “skilled not only in Arabic, but also in Hebrew, Chaldaic, Syriac, and Greek”³⁶.

If Vassalli could not afford to pay for his expenses at the Seminary, how did he find the means to maintain himself at Rome? Can it be that he was sent by the *Propaganda*, as a promising student, to further his studies at the *Collegio Urbano*? This seems to be the most plausible answer. Otherwise, where could he have studied Dogmatic and Moral Theology, Canon Law, and Holy Scriptures, for the better understanding of which he applied himself to the three principal Oriental languages — Hebrew, Arabic and Syriac? This was before he entered the University.

Intimate relation

His relation with the *Propaganda* must have been intimate. It was its Rector who counselled him to go as a *Missionary* in the East, in case he did not get the appointment at the *Sapienza*. Mikiel Anton who had even joined the *Congregazione dei Chierici* at the *Casa della Missione*, refused the suggestion, but he made it a point to offer his services as an interpreter of Oriental Languages³⁷. Besides it was at the *Propaganda* that he printed his works.

His course at the *Collegio Urbano* must be another reason why Vassalli registered at the fifth class of Arabic at the *Sapienza*. His presence at this University, where he studied *materie sacre, filosofia, e lingue* was first revealed, though unobtrusively, in 1941, by Domenico Spadoni. The article was entitled “*Maltesi nell’ateneo Romano dalla fine del ‘600 alla metà dell’800*”, which he published in the *Archivio Storico di Malta*³⁸. But it was just a name in a list, which escaped the attention of scholars. It was only Mgr Prof. C. Sant who resuscitated it from this limbo and brought it forcefully, among other seminal information, to our attention.

Another point. How could Vassalli have applied to lecture at the *Sapienza* if he was not well-grounded in his subjects? His studies at the School of Arabic in Malta did not give him, for sure, the necessary credentials. Moreover, he was sure he would get the post, which implies he had the necessary backing. This must have been Assemani's. This great authority taught Arabic at the *Collegio Urbano*³⁹, and he knew the candidate's mettle only too well.

To conclude, Vassalli did study for the priesthood, and was a cleric in Minor Orders; but he never attended the Seminary at Mdina. He went to Rome just after finishing his studies in Malta: and thus the gap between 1785 and 1788 has now been bridged. He must also have been a student at the *Collegio Urbano*, where he furthered his studies of Oriental languages. His familiarity, hence, with Syro-Chaldaic and Hebrew he did not pick up informally from the Maronite Fathers; but had a sound knowledge of them at academic level. Here he must also have met Professor Assemani, whose friendship and mutual esteem continued later at the *Sapienza* where Vassalli was a student, and then, possibly, a member of the staff.

1. F. Ciappara, "M.A. Vassalli's Sacred Patrimony". *The Sunday Times*, March 2, 1986, p. 21.
2. P(arish) A(rchives), *Zebbug, Liber Baptizatorum*, vii, p. 161.
3. She was born on December 21, 1761, *Ibid.*, p. 102. The youngest was Saverio, born on November 26, 1765. *Ibid.*, p. 206.
4. N(otarial) A(rchives) V(alletta), R. 21, Vol. 10, f. 391v.
5. *Ibid.*, ff. 411v–412r.
6. *Ibid.*, f. 413r.
7. *Ibid.*, 414v–416r.
8. *Ibid.*, f. 418r.
9. *Ibid.*, f. 419r.
10. *N.A.V.*, R 21, Vol. 8, f. 178r.
11. *P.A. Zebbug Liber Defunctorum* IV, p. 115.
12. *P.A. Zebbug Liber Matrimoniorum* IV, pp. 103–104.
13. *N.A.V.* 962/3A, ff. 59r–60r.
14. His godfather was Dominus Michael Apap. His brother, Saverio, was confirmed two days later. *A.P., Zebbug, Libro dei Confermati (1686–1829)*, unnumbered.
15. A(rchiepiscopal) A(rchives) M(alta), *Visitatio Pastoralis* XXXVIII, f. 432r.
16. C(uriae) E(piscopalis) M(elitensae), *Status Animarum* Vol. 19, f. 6r.
17. *A.A.M. Corr(spondenza)* XX, f. 112r.
18. *A.A.M. Corr.* XXI, f. 289r.
19. *Ibid.*, ff. 290r–291r.
20. N(ational) L(ibrary) M(alta), *Arch.* 273, f. 161v. See also Ph. Callus, *The Rising of the Priests* (Malta, 1961), p. 109.
21. *A.A.M., Corr.* XX, f. 111r.
22. *N.L.M.*, Arch. 2063, f. 8v.
23. C. Sant. "L-Ahħar Jiem u l-Mewt ta' Vassalli", *Sijon*, Vol. 7, Nos. 3–4 (1975), p. 85.
24. *C.E.M., Acta Originalia* 672, f. 25r.
25. *A.A.M., Corr.* XX, ff 403–403Av.
26. C. Sant, "M.A. Vassalli's Sojourn in Rome (1788–1790)", *The Sunday Times*, April 3, 1983, p. 9.
27. M.A. Vassalli, *Mylsen Phoenico-Punicum Sive Grammatica Melitensis* (Romae, 1791), pp. 54–55.
28. *A.A.M. Editti* Vol. 12, ff. 24r-v.

29. M.A. Vassalli, *Ktyb yl Klym Malti mfysser by l-Latin u byt-Talyan*—Lexicon Melitense-Latino-Italum (Romae, 1796), p. XIV.
30. *A.A.M.*, *Corr.*, XX, f. 112r.
31. *A.A.M.*, *Corr.* XXIII, f. 2r.
32. V. Borg, "Developments In Education Outside The Jesuit 'Collegium Melitense'", *Melita Historica*, Vol. VI. No. 3 (1974), pp. 215–254.
33. *A.A.M.*, *Suppliche* Vol. 8, f. 562r.
34. F. Ciappara, "M.A. Vassalli Wins A Prize for Arabic", *The Sunday Times*, June 19, 1983, p. 12.
35. M.A. Vassalli, *Ktyb yl Klym Malti*, *op. cit.*, p. XLI.
36. Gaetano Pisani, *Lettera Di Un Maltese* (Vercelli, MDCCLXXXIII), p. 55.
37. *A.A.M. Corr.* XXI. 290v.
38. Domenico Spadoni, *Maltesi nell'Ateneo Romano dalla fine del '600 alla metà dell'800*", *Archivio Storico di Malta*, Anno XII, *Fasc. 1, Nuova Serie*, Gennaio-Aprile 1941, p. 70.
39. M.A. Vassalli, *Mylsen Phoenico-Punicum*, *op. cit.*, p. 57.

V. VASSALLI IN THE CORRESPONDENCE OF INQUISITOR CARPEGNA

Mgr. Inquisitor Giovanni Filippo Gallarati Scotti did not relish his stay in Malta. On December 15, 1797, just two years after his arrival here, he wrote to the Papal Secretary of State that he was leading a life "more retired and austere than a Carthusian monk's", to the detriment of his health¹.

On February 20, 1789 he again asked to be relieved of this "boring confinement". Perhaps a new Inquisitor would succeed better in his dealings with the secular Government, though he himself had done his utmost to overcome difficulties². Scotti made his representations again in 1791³; but it was only on July 29, 1792 that his wishes were fulfilled. He was appointed *Nuncio* in Florence⁴, and was to be succeeded in Malta by Mgr Giulio Carpegna, a Roman⁵, who entered the Grand Harbour on January 24, 1793, about midnight⁶.

It was during Carpegna's term of office that Vassalli tried to overthrow the government of the Order of St. John; and the Inquisitor's letters to the Papal Secretary of State reveal interesting information hitherto unknown⁷. On May 18, 1797 he informed Cardinal Busca that eight persons had been arrested on Thursday night, the 11th of May⁸. This followed the consultations the *Avvocato del Principato* had had with three Councillors of the *Supremo Magistrato di Giustizia* and the two *Fiscali* of the *Castellania*.

The Inquisitor sent this report to avoid any misunderstanding. He claimed that various other accounts of the event would be published, which could convey a picture of distorted facts. As these could give the impression that the public peace had been really in danger, and that there had been a fatal attempt against legitimate Sovereignty, it was better to send his own version. Indeed, there had immediately risen among the public the fear that even here some rebellion was being hatched. And the apprehension increased later in the following days as a result of the arrest of another four accomplices⁹.

Low-Class Maltese

In fact, Mgr. Carpegna was ignorant of the facts, and did not imagine what the conspirators, whom he criticised harshly with his pen, had in mind. No striking success, so he stated, was to be expected from these “lowclass Maltese, without any means, and unknown for any remarkable talents” — *nazionali di basso ceto, di niuna fortuna; ne cogniti per alcuna singolarità di talenti*. They also included ill-bred and idle young ruffians, who were arrested because of their imprudent talking, whose significance they did not even understand. This was not only for their own punishment, but as well as to curb, with such a show of force, the temerity of many a worthless youth, who, presumptuously, did not use the necessary caution when referring to these disturbances.

Those of any note among the detained were two young sergeants of the *Corpo delle Galere*, another two low-ranked officers of the *Reggimento dei Cacciatori*, and one who lately had published a Grammar and a Dictionary of Maltese — *uno che ha ultimamente dato alla luce una Grammatica, ed un Dizionario di Lingua Maltese*. The rest were sons of small merchants. Imprisonment or exile was believed to be their lot; but the Inquisitor closed the letter by again emphasizing that the public peace was in no way affected¹⁰.

He realised the seriousness of the attempted rebellion only when he went to see the Grand Master. Some of the criminals arrested, so De Rohan revealed to him, were indeed fomenting wicked designs; but they did not have the proportionate means to carry them out — *effettivamente taluni dei giovanastri arrestati fomentavano delle cattive intenzioni, ma senza alcun mezzo proporzionato a potere realizzare*¹¹.

Carpegna even sent to Cardinal Busca a copy of the sentence against Vassalli and his partners for plotting against the State. In case those exiled made their way to the Pontifical State, he would have a list of their names¹². By July 18, 1797, these had already left Malta. The only exception concerned Salvatore Bartolo, and his brother, Angelo, who, at the instance of their father were to remain confined in one of the castles here¹³.

Escape

Vassalli was sentenced to life-imprisonment. But whether he escaped from goal¹⁴ or — as Mr J. Cassar Pullicino opines — he was set at liberty when the French conquered Malta¹⁵ is still a bone of contention among historians. Only one thing we can be sure of. In December, 1797 various Maltese, including the cleric Giorgio Grugnet — who wore the French cockade in his hat — fled from the Island on two French frigates¹⁶. Vassalli may well have been one of these fugitives, in which case the phrase *la valeur française*¹⁷ to which he owed his freedom (as he stated in his supplication for the Chair of Arabic) would refer to this incident, and not to the arrival of Napoleon in 1798.

Return

Mikiel Anton was banished on January 15, 1801. He went on Tunis on board the brigantine *San Nicola* commanded by the Greek captain Angelo Patriccio¹⁸. According to A. Cremona¹⁹ the first ray of light on the return to Malta of this “*uomo di lettere...ridotto ad una continua fame e nudità*”²⁰ is to be found in an advertisement in the *Malta Government Gazette* dated November 1, 1820. This notified that he was giving lessons to “those gentlemen who are desirous of learning the French language grammatically”.²¹ In fact, “*Antonio Vassallo nativo Maltese del Zebug*” had arrived much earlier, on June 19, on board the 129-ton English brigantine, the *Saint Francis*, after a journey of five days from Marseilles²². His wife, Catarina, together with their three children, returned on October 2, on the same ship²³.

Sospetto

In 1828 Vassalli was residing at no. 2, *Strada Misida detta tal Guarda Manga*, Pietà and was described by the parish priest of St. Paul’s, Valletta, as *sospetto*, and his house as *casa sospetta*²⁴. What did this term signify? Mgr Prof. C. Sant, who unearthed this piece of much longed for information, at first believed it referred to his “*irregular marriage*”²⁵. But that is not probable since if that is true the term used would have been *concubinato*²⁶. There are instances, too, when only one of the partners is described by the term *sospetto*²⁷, or *sospetta*²⁸, which would not be the case if a couple were living in concubinage. Again, while the man is described as *sospetto*, his partner is *concubinata*²⁹. Hence, the incumbent who drew such lists of inhabitants distinguishes between the two terms, which could not be coterminous.

Can it refer to “*non-practising persons*”, as the same writer later made it out to be?³⁰ Internal evidence proves that this is not likely, either. In another document for 1822–1825, where the term *sospetto* is also used, non church-goers must be those who did not fulfil their Easter duties—*non hanno adempito il precetto*³¹. Vassalli’s marriage must not have been religious³², nor did he frequent church, his place being “*among the dishonest*”³³—as the parish priest, Rev. Canon Michele Cilia, unkindly put it when Vassalli died. Why was he not, then, described as such in the *Liber Status Animarum*?

The most plausible interpretation is that *sospetto*, which term is not used before the British period, marked out those suspected of being *Protestants*. The beginning of the 19th century was particularly aggressive on the part of Protestant propaganda³⁴; and Catholic authorities were on the watch for any possible apostates. Vassalli, with his close association with these English missionaries, though he “never made profession of being a Protestant”, must have been particularly watched with suspicion³⁵.

The points raised in this article, with all the queries left unanswered, are a demonstration of a healthy interest in this “unfortunate patriot”³⁶. Gone are the days, for instance, of such gross prejudice as that exhibited by *PIDP*.³⁷ But those who wish to assess his personality and his achievements must build their historical houses on the bones of the dead, and not on those of bigotry and unfounded impressions.

1. A(archives of the) I(nquisition), M(alta), Corr(ispondenza) 101, f. 216v.
2. *Ibid.*, ff. 252v–253v.
3. AIM, Corr. 78, ff. 92r–v.
4. AIM, Corr. 79, f. 166r.
5. *Ibid.*, ff. 164r–165r.
6. AIM, Corr. 102, f. 57r.
7. It was Prof. A. Vella who first referred to this part of Carpegna's correspondence; but he did not give it the attention it deserves, and relegated it to a footnote. See A.P. Vella, *Malta and The Czars* (Malta, 1965), p. 42.
8. This date was ascertained by counting forward from 22 Feb. 1796, which was a Monday. AIM, Corr. 83, f. 26r.
9. In the sentence of 12 June, 1797 only ten were convicted N(ational) L(ibrary) M(alta) Library 1020, pp. 136–139.
10. AIM, Corr. 102, ff. 180r–v.
11. *Ibid.*, f. 181r.
12. *Ibid.*, f. 182r.
13. *Ibid.*, f. 185v.
14. G.A. Vassallo, *Storia di Malta Raccontata in Compendio* (Malta, 1854), p. 730.
15. J. Cassar Pullicino, "M.A. Vassalli in 1798–99", *The Sunday Times*, 12.ii.1982, p. 15.
16. AIM, Corr. 102, f. 203r.
17. NLM, Arch(ives) 6524C, no. 337.
18. N(ational) A(rchives), R(abat), *Gran Corte della Valletta. Registrum Patentarum*, 1800–1801, Vol. 1, unnumbered.
19. A. Cremona (trans. May Butcher), *Vassalli and His Times* (Malta, 1940), p. 84.
20. This is how he described himself in his petition of 1822 to Bishop Mattei. See J. Azzopardi, "5 Dokumenti Ġodda fuq Mikiel Anton Vassalli". *Saġtar*, No. 62 (March, 1979), pp. 19–20.
21. *Malta Government Gazette*, 1 Nov. 1820, No. 1635, p. 2421.
22. The other passengers were Mr Manley Porver: Colonel Balneavis, his wife, and son; Dr Hume; and Saverio Schembri. See *NAR Arrivals XI*, unnumbered.
23. *NAR, Arrivals XII*, unnumbered.
24. P(arish) A(rchives) St. Paul's Valletta; S(tatus) A(nimarum) 1828, f. 115r.
25. Mons. Dun Karm Sant, "Tagħrif Ġdid Fuq M.A. Vassalli", *Lehen il-Malti* (1980), No. 22, p. 5.
26. PA (St. Paul's Valletta), SA (1828) ff. 36r, 38r, 45r.
27. *Ibid.*, f. 28r.
28. *Ibid.*, f. 78v.
29. *Ibid.*, f. 59r.
30. See the interview given by Mgr Prof. C. Sant to Prof. J. Aquilina in *The Sunday Times*, 15 July, 1984, p. 20—"The house of Vassalli is marked as *casa sospetta* a term which meant either the house of two persons cohabiting together, or just non-practising persons."
31. PA (St. Paul's Valletta), SA (1822–1825), f. 15r.
32. See Rev. C.F. Schlienz's letter to the Secretary of the Church Missionary Society published in *Sijon*, vol. 7 (1975), p. 83—"Vassalli had never been legally married".
33. *Ibid.*, p. 83.
34. For a good book on this topic see Mgr Prof. C. Sant's *It-Traduzzjoni tal-Bibbja u l-Ilsien Malti*, 1810–1850 (Malta, 1975). See also Bianca Fiorentini, *Malta Rifugio Di Esuli E Focolare Ardente Di Cospirazione Durante Il Risorgimento Italiano* (Malta, 1966), pp. 89–92.
35. *Sijon*, p. 83.
36. NLM, Arch. 6523C, p. 128.
37. See the invective signed PIDI addressed to Mgr Dun Karm Psaila—"Lo sa, Monsignore, che il pioniere, della parlata maltese—quello che voi tutti venerate, il Vassalli—era al saldo delle Società protestanti? Che fu uno dei fondatori di una Reformed Church of Malta e che morì fuori della Chiesa cattolica?"—*Malta*, 29.ix.1934.

VI. VASSALLI AND PROTESTANTISM

The Protestants who followed the British flag to Malta had a grand idea: to protestantize the Maltese. As the Bible is “the religion of the Protestants”, it had to be translated into Maltese and the people taught to read their own language. In this they received the help of Mikiel Anton Vassalli. First, however, the Maltese orthography had to be stabilized.

The first step in this direction was the appointment of Vassalli as Professor of Maltese at the University. In confiding this news to his friends in London, Jowett, an Anglican priest of the Church Missionary Society, put in the margin the words “Not to print”. The aim had to be kept secret since “to break such an idea might be the blast of death to the Maltese professorship”.

The missionaries, however, knew that the University experiment was doomed to failure. The Government was lukewarm towards the project; the Maltese, jealous: Vassalli “is now 63, though hearty”, while Mr Hookham Frere, who was paying the professor’s salary out of his own pocket, could decide to leave¹.

The Church Missionary Society then hit upon two clever expedients—to publish Vassalli’s lectures on Maltese grammar and to appropriate his orthography and even his characters. In this way not only would the “excellency of Scripture” be guaranteed, but the Maltese would become acquainted with Vassalli’s work.

For this purpose Fr Schlienz, another missionary, started writing an English grammar in Maltese using Vassalli’s orthography. This was the only way to make the inhabitants study a language they so wished to learn through their own language, but written by one they hated so much: “... in order to induce the people if possible to read in Vassalli’s characters must be held out to them something according to other calculation beneficial or profitable. And what else can look more profitable to a great part of them than the acquaintance of the English language? By giving them a Maltese-English grammar with useful exercises we confer a benefit on the Maltese which they will be likely to receive although in the characters of Vassalli”².

Under suspicion

Vassalli even helped Jowett prepare a Maltese selection of Parables, Miracles and Discourses of Our Lord. But above all he translated the Gospels and the Acts of the Apostles. Such a commitment was known only to his intimate friends, but his association with the missionaries, whose visits must have been both frequent and regular, was enough for the parish priest of St Paul’s Valletta, to dub him *sospetto*³, that is *suspected* of being a Protestant.

Vassalli died of dry gangrene on January 12, 1829 after a “severe struggle for the immortal spirit to be liberated from his earthly ties.” However, as the parish priest would have put him “among the dishonest, at the wayside, without any ceremony”, his Protestant friends themselves put him to rest “in a private and honest manner”⁴. Since his name is not included among those buried at the Msida Bastion Cemetery, this must have been on the site where the Hotel Excelsior was later built—the Quarantine Bastion Cemetery.

This was only a part of the high price Vassalli paid for his daring. Now his enemies' worst suspicions were proved right; and if he had suffered no persecution while still alive, now, according to Schlien, "Vassalli's cursed among the greater part of the people through the priests. Since his death not one copy both of the *Proverbs* and of the *Grammar* was sold to the Maltese: and we understand that the priests' curse has extended even so far that the landlord whose house Mr Vassalli occupied before his death cannot get any person to dwell in it".

Vassalli was one of the greatest agents of Protestantism in Malta. Surprisingly enough, however, his friend, Fr Schlien, claimed that he "never made profession of being a Protestant". This could not be said of his sons and wife, who were convinced Protestants⁵.

1. Letter dated 20 May, 1825.

2. Letter from Schlien to the Secretaries of the Church Missionary Society, dated 23 April, 1829.

3. Parish Archives, St Paul's Valletta, *Status Animarum* 1828, f. 115r.

4. See Schlien's letter published by Mgr. C. Sant in *Sijon*, Vol. 7 (1975), p. 83.

5. For a fuller treatment of the subject see F. Ciappara, 'Mikiel Anton Vassalli, his children and Protestantism', *The Sunday Times*, 27 September, 1992, p. 43.