

I. REV. W. JOWETT U M.A. VASSALLI

Se naraw kif kien jahsibha r-Rev. W. Jowett fuq Canolo, Naudi u Vassalli f'dawn iż-żewġ siltiet minn żewġ ittri li kiteb minn Malta, wahda fid-29 ta' Jannar 1823 u l-oħra fit-28 ta' Marzu 1823, it-tnejn indirizzati lis-Segretarju ta-Church Missionary Society.

Fl-ewwel wahda jghid li kien qieghed jahdem fuq traduzzjoni ġdida tal-Vangeli flimkien ma' Dr C. Naudi u juri x-xewqa tieghu li jkomplu bit-Testament il-Gdid kollu: iżda wara sitt snin esperjenza mis-sena 1817 'il quddiem beda jhoss it-toqol ta' xoghol ta' din ix-xorta:

“Dr Naudi and myself are now preparing a complete New Version of the Gospels¹. Except when prevented by indisposition or other inevitable causes, we daily sit together for two hours correcting this version. St. Matthew and St. Mark and half St. Luke are done. The *limae labor* is not spared. The style of the printed edition of St. John is a shade too high. I regularly read to my two Maltese servants what we are now preparing. If the Old Version was nine-tenth Arabic the new one will be four-fifths².

“We may certainly reckon, by God's assistance, upon perfecting that four Gospels and the Acts in two or three months. How happy should I be could we add an equally perfect version of the Epistles and Apocalypse! But upon criticising the version which Canolo has already given and examining the more difficult theological terms which occur in the Epistolary writings, I am not encouraged. I think at least a year more (which might afford scope for inviting other hitherto unknown Maltese assistance) would be requisite for bringing this part of the sacred volume to good state; but (to speak as a fair critic) I doubt the propriety of printing the whole N.T. before the historical part has passed another ordeal.” (C/MO/39/11).

L-ghajnuna Maltija li kien jistenna ma damitx ma ġietu, għax iltaqa' ma' Vassalli. Kif u meta ma jghidx, iżda milli jidher ma damx, għax tliet xhur wara f'din it-tieni ittra jghid li kien diġà tah il-Vangelu ta' San Mattew u kien beda San Mark:

“In the meantime I have at length been able to engage a new Maltese translator, incomparably the best in the Island, both for ability and fame, viz, the learned Antonio Vassallo, author of the Maltese Lexicon³, living in great poverty. The way in which his services came to me, was curious: at present it will not do to *print* his name: as to stipend, I am paying him somewhat less than one quarter of what he asked—a specimen how needful it is to draw in the reins (sic). His style is so much superior to that of Canolo and Dr Naudi that I rejoice in having him. He has given me St Matthew's Gospel and is now on St. Mark⁴. I never incurred an expence with greater satisfaction than this. We shall need for the Maltese Gospels a new letter cutting viz. g⁵ I hope should I come to print in London this will be ready: otherwise I may spend, as I know by past experience, a month in waiting for it⁶. It should be of the body of this type of St. John's Gospel. By omitting Italian and making a less handsome margin, we may print the four gospels and Acts in a neat volume of 200 pages.” (C/MO/39/17)⁷

Jowett kellu jistenna sitt snin oħra biex it-traduzzjoni tal-Vangelu u l-Atti ta' Vassalli tara d-dawl fl-1829 wara l-mewt tat-traduttur.

1. Il-Vangeli ta' San Ġwann ta' Canolo kien diġà stampat fil-1822. Kull paġna kien fiha żewġ kolonni, fuq naha kien hemm il-Malti u fuq l-oħra t-traduzzjoni Taljana tal-Martini (Kattoliku). Dan għamluh biex jiżguraw iċ-ċirkolazzjoni, iżda ma rrexxilhomx kemm xtaqu.

2. Dan hu l-problema lingwistiku li għadna ma għelibniex għal kolloxx. Meta l-Malti kien għadu fil-bidu tiegħu bħala l-sien miktub, il-kittieba kienu jhossu li għandhom inaqquh mill-kliem barrani, iġifieri Taljan jew Sqalli, biex jew jiżvillupaw sewwa l-egħruq li diġà kienu jeżistu fil-Malti, għalhekk kien jorqom kitbietu fuq dawn il-prinċipji. Oħrajn kienu marru fit-tarf l-ieħor, bi skuża jew oħra. Ir-rizultat ta' dan kollu kien li nholqu żewġ "stili" diversi li ma kellhom ebda għeruf fil-qalb tal-poplu. Din is-sitwazzjoni baqgħet issaltan sa lejlet l-aħħar gwerra. Issa milli jidher qegħdin bil-mod il-mod insibu l-livell u t-triq tan-nofs.

Minhabba din il-kontroversja, it-traduzzjoni tal-Bibbja batiet mhux f'it, l-aktar għaliex it-tradutturi, tista' tghid kollha, dejjem qiesu ruħhom aktar bennejja u litterati tal-Malti milli tradutturi tal-Bibbja, bla ma qiesu sewwa l-qarrejja tagħhom. Jalla din il-mentalità tispicċa darba għal dejjem u nitraduċu l-Bibbja b'mod li tkun għodda ta' evanġilazzjoni tal-Kelma ta' Alla aktar milli ta' haġa oħra.

3. Jowett għall-ewwel kellu ideja oħra tal-Lexicon u l-grammatka ta' Vassalli. F'nota f'qiegħ l-ittra bid-data 6 ta' Settembru 1817 lill-Prof. Lee jikteb:

"Not less surprising it is, that there should be so few printed specimens to the language. I know only five: two grammars of small (sic) merit; one, a quarto lexicon, in which, however, the ingenious author has formed an alphabet which offends (sic) the eye and does not mark analogy to the Arabic..." F'nota ma' l-istess ittra jzid: "The lexicon (I possess a copy) is of so late a date as Rome 1796. The grammar earlier." (CMS-C/ME2/83). Il-grammatka kienet stampata fl-1791 f'Ruma. Il-grammatka l-oħra hi ta' De Soldanis, ippubblikata fl-1750.

4. Dan ifisser li Vassalli ttraduċa l-Vangeli ta' San Mattew kollu u biċċa minn San Mark fi tliet xhur biss, jekk mhux anqas. Iżda milli jidher l-esperjenza wriet li dan ix-xogħol jitlob iż-żmien, is-sabar u l-attenzjoni. Mill-ittra li diġà ippubblikajna (Sijon 6(1973/4)96) jidher li Vassalli f'Awissu 1828 kien għadu jirrevedi l-ktieb ta' l-Atti, u dam ma spicċah sa Jannar 1829, lejlet mewtu.

5. Din l-ittra ma stajt nistampha kif inhi fl-originali; hi speċi ta' g, b'sinjal mindud fuqha u ma tinsab fl-ebda kitba stampata ta' Vassalli; għandu mnejn li biddel l-ideja qabel ma beda jistampa.

6. Jowett fl-entuzjażmu tiegħu ma basarx li kellu jistenna hames snin oħra biex jitla' Londra u kif kien hemm jiehu hsieb l-istampa tal-Vangeli u l-Atti ta' l-Apostli (cfr. Ittra ta' Rev. Sclienz lis-Segretarju CMS tas-26 ta' Marzu 1828 CMS-C/MO39b/109).

7. Il-volum hareġ fis-sena 1829, wara l-mewt ta' Vassalli, b'280 paġna, Latin u Malti f'żewġ kolonni hdejn xulxin f'kull paġna, taht it-titlu: *Quator Evangelia et Actus Apostolorum juxta Vulgatum Romae A.D. M.D. XVII. Editam necnom corundem Versio Melitensis. Londini Typis excudebat R. Watts, M.DCCC.XXIX.*

II. WAĦDA MILL-AĦĦAR ITTRI TA' M.A. VASSALLI

Fil-librerija tal-British and Foreign Bible Society, Londra, hemm kopja tal-ktieb *Motti, Aforismi e Proverbi Maltesi* ta' M.A. Vassalli, ippublikat bil-Malti fl-1828. Fl-aħħar tal-ktieb ma' dahar il-qoxra wara l-aħħar paġna vojta hemm inkullata ittra awtografa ta' M.A. Vassalli, miktuba fit-8 ta' Awissu 1828, iġifieri hames xhur qabel miet fit-12 ta' Jannar 1829.

L-ittra kitbha lir-Rev. William Jowett, li kien missjunarju Protestant mibgħut f'Malta miċ-Church Missionary Society bl-uffiċċji ċentrali tagħhom f'Malta. Meta kiteb Vassalli, Jowett kien l-Ingilterra u, fost xogħol iehor, kien qiegħed jiehu hsieb l-istampa tal-Vangeli u l-Atti bil-Malti ta' Vassalli. Dawn kienu ippubblikati fl-1829 wara l-mewt ta' Vassalli.

Minn din l-ittra jidher li Vassalli kien għadu qiegħed jirrevedi l-Atti ta' l-Appostli b'inkejja tas-shana tas-sajf u l-mard; it-tieni, li Jowett kellu l-hsieb li jittraduċi l-Proverbi bl-Ingliż. Minn dokumentazzjoni oħra, li bi hsiebni nipubblica aktar 'il quddiem, jidher li l-Missjunarji Ingliżi kellhom f'rashom li jinqdedw bil-Malti bħala introduzzjoni għall-istudju ta' l-Għarbi mill-Ingliżi biex inkunu mbagħad jistghu jaħdmu fost il-popli ta' l-Afrika ta' Fuq u l-Lvant kollu. Terġa' wkoll il-Proverbi riedu jużawhom bħala speċi ta' ktieb tal-qari għat-tfal Maltin.

Skond din l-ittra Vassalli ried jagħmel xi korrezzjonijiet, il-bičċa l-kbira żbalji ta' l-istampa, fil-Ktieb. Hawn kollox 23.

Jidhirli li din l-ittra hi dokument importanti għall-istorja tal-Knisja f'Malta u traduzzjoni bil-Malti tal-Bibbja u għall-istudju tal-Malti, barra li tixhet dawl qawwi fuq l-aħħar jiem ta' Vassalli.

Malta 8 Agosto 1828

Reverendo Signore Stimatissimo

Per la via del Sig. Schlienz¹ ho appreso con sommo mio piacere il vostro felice arrivo costi unitamente colla famiglia. Credo a quest'ora avrete dato mano all'impressione del S. Vangelo: io già rivedo gli Atti, e sono al X. Capitolo; onde all'arrivo di questa spero saranno terminati. La lunghezza e l'intensità del calore eccessivo e senza cessa dai primi Maggio finora m'ha cagionato delle malattie, ed un gionfiore ne' piedi che m'impedisca di sortir di casa, e siamo ancora nel forte del bollore.

Sapendo che presto intraprenderete la traduzione in Inglese die miei proverbi, c'invio la correzione seguente:

- No. 96. Kemm kyku kyn a(h)jâr (gh)alia (e non Kyn jkun)²
 116. u jydfen (e non ydsen)³
 137. Byb li (hr)rygt (e non (h)rgyt)
 161. Mahrub (e non ma(h)rûb) e così 4 versi sotto
 170. (gharnuq (non Gharnûq)
 199. ... fuq ...rjus (non fûq rjûs)
 221. ...jmur...maghQur (non û)
 387. ...yssir mdorria
 414. ... fa (h)xi, (si metta la virgola)
 436. S'aggiunge nel 2° verso byl byna
 440. ...(X)a(u)atu (si leverà l'è)
 499. La yzzebla (h)x (si mette (x))
 512. Loghob u (h)lyqa (leva via yl)
 519. ...zymlek (coll'accento â)
 521. Yl ma(gh)kûs (non u)
 525. ...chi dilapida (cioè s'aggiunge chi)⁴
 693. (h)môr (coll' â)
 709. jkûn (non u)

- 713. yduur (non ù)
- 748. verso sesto si farà n(h)allûha (non n(h)alliha)
- 754. Sanduq ma (gh) luq (x)hin fih (4 accenti)
- 757. jduqu (non jduqu)
- 813. jnyssulek...

Gli errori di più sono corretti in fine nell'errata.

Altro non ho che dirvi: vi saluto e sono il

Vro. aff. mo. Servitore
Michelantio Vassalli

1. Christoph Friedrich Schlienz kien Luteran mill-Kulleġġ ta' Bażilja li mbagħad sar qassis Anglikan. Dam Malta hmistax-il sena mill-1827–1842, bħala direttur ta' l-istamperija taç-Church Missionary Society.
2. Fl-alfàbetti li fassal Vassalli nsibu karattri (konsonanti, vokali u aċċenti) li bħal issa ma nsibux bħalhom. Għalhekk il-konsonanti ta' din ix-xorta ttraskrivejthom fil-forom ta' lllum u għalaqthom f'parentesi e.g. (h); il-vokali fl-originali għandhom fuqhom aċċent f'forma ta' aċċent mkarkar jew ċirkunfless (â) bil-maqlub issibuhom stampati korsiv e.g. *u*.
3. Fl-edizzjoni stampata ydfen.
4. Fl-original qiesha 523, iżda skond il-Ktieb stampat 525.

III. L-AĦĦAR JIEM U L-MEWT TA' VASSALLI

Dan li ġej hu estratt minn ittra ta' Rev. C.F. Schlienz lis-Segretarju taç-*Church Missionary Society*

Malta 27 January, 1829

We would have found much pleasure in sending to Mr Jowett by this packet Mr Vassalli's corrections of the Maltese; or if from weak constitution a temporal suspense had been occasioned—in doing so hereafter; but by a mournful event we are deprived of the pleasure for ever. Vassalli is no longer among the living on this earth. The Lord was graciously pleased to summon him, we trust, into a better world. He ended his earthly life the 12th of January 1829 at 5 o'clock in the morning. From the statement of his sister and the distressed relict it appears that he had to meet a severe struggle until the immortal spirit was liberated from his earthly ties.

The dangerous disorder from which he had to suffer last summer and which terminated fatally to him was the dry gangrene. The long feared menace by reaching the heart seems to have exercised the summit of his destroying power upon the deceased. Three days previous to his death Vassalli was in our house, telling me that the physician had advised him to change air and therefore he had already taken on other lodging in the country. I did not think that I had then to see him for the last time; but so it was. If I had thought him in so dangerous a state I would have given him advice to consult a better physician. But such considerations are now at

an end. Vassalli's death caused me to pay a visit to the distressed family. I soon perceived that they were in great distress indeed. Vassalli was exceedingly poor and left to his family not even the means to defray the expenses of burial. In consequences of this and the utterly deserted state of their family in respect to the assistance of relatives or friends we took it upon ourselves to execute the burial of the reliques of the deceased. As Mr Vassalli never made profession of being a protestant we would have had him buried in a Catholic burial place. However, when we presented him, from reason that Vassalli had never been legally married and ought therefore to be put among the dishonest, at the wayside, without any ceremony. To this we would not consent and with the consent of the relict and the sister of the deceased applied to Government for a licence to bury him in the Protestant burial place; and as his Excellency, the Lt. Governor was pleased to grant us a licence thereto, the reliques, in a private and honest manner, were conveyed into the protestant burial place. With 10 scudi subscription, your own and 20 scudi, as donation from Mr Frere, we raised among our friends so much by subscription as to defray the burial expenses; SC 34 T 3 Gr 4 remained in Cash for the support of the distressed family. After the death of Vassalli I was honoured with some interviews with Mr Frere, the main result of which was, that he took the eldest of the young Vassallis into his care. As the boy showed taste for drawing Mr Frere has given him into charge to Mr Dimech, Sculptor; a fine artist, although not of Bacon's Christian Principles, nor under Papa's Antichristian delusion. The two younger boys, with the consent of the mother, we have taken into our charge and intend to educate them at the expence of the Society and for their purpose, considering the great distress and misery to which the children were reduced by the death of their father, when in the service of the Society; the benevolent plans which the Society has hitherto formed as much as circumstances admitted, executed for the spiritual welfare of this benighted spot.

The fairly flourishing abilities of mind and affection in the children, the good impresson which it might produce at least upon some of the Maltese, together with the beneficial consequences which are likely to spring from it at large, were the chief reasons which induced us to take this step.

The American missionaries made us the liberal offer to take the youngest of the boys into their care: but partly from the same reasons, which induce us to take both of them, partly from the persuasion that being together, the boys might sooner and surer reach the destination which both societies would probably endeavour to lead them to, than would when separate, we declined the offer.

As the poor orphans were next to naked, when we received them, we had to cloth them quite afresh; they stay in our house, dwell and sleep in the little room where Mrs Jowett was accustomed to read the Gospel to the Maltese women, eat in our dining room at a separate small table; in the forenoon Mr Brenner gives them instruction in writing, I read with and explain to them the Gospel translated by their father and give them passages for committing them to memory; in the afternoon; in the afternoon (sic) from one o'clock till five o'clock they will be occupied in the

office; in the evening George Hunter gives them lessons to learn the English language and I amuse myself with them in exercising their memory and judgement. As soon as they understand the English language they will be soon become monitors (I should be happy to learn from you how far we were allowed to go in respect to schools here—how far we could reckon for support from the Society in taking up deserted and poor children to educate them). We do not fully know what age the two boys have, the eldest of them was born in France and the younger in Spain; it will be difficult to find out their birthday. The mother says that she thinks the eldest be 14, the younger 12 years of age, but she does not know it to full assurance. As Mr Vassalli had already taken the four first orders of a Roman Catholic Priest, I was told that it was indeed not possible for him at his time to be legally married in the Catholic Church. Now as to print of the Maltese Gospels and Acts, Mr Jowett, of course, will now not send here any more for being corrected. The Acts are not copied as yet but Mr Brenner will have the goodness to copy them, so that, most probably by the next Packet they will be sent.

Mr Jowett may then, according to his discretion, print them or not. I should be in strait what to do. Mr Frere requested me to provide for a small monument on Vassalli's tomb with an inscription. Mr Dimech will make one. The kind of inscription which I compiled for it, thus runs:

Michealantonio Vassalli
Born in this Island (Month & Year)
Meritoriously distinguished for cultivating
The Maltese Language and
reducing it to Grammatical System.

I have aimed at being simple, true and concise. However I do not know whether this inscription will be engraven. I have submitted it to Mr Frere's inspection and he was pleased to let me know that the subscription should not be sent to the sculptor before he had spoken with me about it. C/MO65)11.

IV. STUDJUŻ U TRADUTTUR

Fit-12 ta' Jannar 1829 miet il-Pjetà M. A. Vassalli fl-età ta' 65 sena, meta kien għadu jaqra l-provi tat-traduzzjoni tiegħu tal-Vangeli u l-Atti ta' l-Appostli bl-inkarigu ta' Rev. W. Jowett, ir-rappreżentant tač-*Church Missionary Society*, li kellha hawn Malta stamperija u residenza uffiċjali biex ixxerred l-Anglikaniżmu fil-Mediterran u l-artijiet ta' madwaru.

Din l-attività fil-qasam tat-traduzzjoni Biblika kellha importanza kbira sew għall-evangelizzazzjoni sew għall-iżvilupp tal-kitba Maltija, li fil-fatt fil-gzejjer tagħna, bħal ma nistgħu nġhidu għal hafna pajjiżi ohra, imxiet pass pass mat-tixrid tal-Bibbja u l-hidma biblika li ġiet wara.

Jidhrilna għalhekk li jixraq li l-lejla nġhidu xi haġa fuq dan il-persunaġġ importanti fl-istorja ta' Malta. L-ewwel nagħtu nota bijografika, imbagħad nġhidu x'kien il-kontribut tiegħu fil-qasam tal-Bibbja.

Nota Bijografika

Dwar it-trobbija tieghu ma nafux wisq. Hu jghid li sa ma kellu 17-il sena ma kienx jaf hlief bil-Malti. Izda meta kellu 30 sena kien imharreg sewwa fl-ilsna, filosofija, teologija, letteratura, u ilsna Orjentali. Ikollna nghidu li kien ghall-qassis u ordna sa l-erba' ordnijiet minuri, izda ma kienx ordnat sacerdot. Nafu wkoll li dan l-istudju ghamlu hawn Malta, is-Seminarju u komplieh Ruma, mnejn gie lura fl-1795. F'din is-sena talab il-permess li jiftah skola biex jghallem il-Malti, u fil-fatt qala' dan il-permess, izda ma nafux jekk din l-iskola bdihex; jekk iva ma dametx wisq.

Fl-1796 sab ruhu mdahhal f'kongura kontra l-Ordni ta' San Gwann. Meta gie minn Ruma, fejn ir-rivoluzzjonarji Francizi waslu bl-ideat liberali taghhom, Vassalli deherlu li kien wasal iz-zmien ghar-riforma fil-gvern tal-gzira: ghall-ewwel ipprova jipperswadi l-Kavallieri jdahhlu xi riformi radikali, bhall-kummerc mal-Lvant, u t-twaqqif ta' Lingwa ghall-Maltin; izda meta ra li ma rnexxilux, sab ruhu b'mexxej ta' kumplott kontra l-gvern. Inqabdu, u wara process nistghu nghidu sommarju, kienu kkundannati min ghall-habs, u min ghall-ezilu. Fit-12 ta' Gunju 1977 Vassalli kien ikkundannat ghall-habs, izda wara ftit harab mir-Rikasoli, u sbarka f' Salerno. X'sar minnu f'dan l-ewwel ezilju ma nafux.

Gie lura Malta mat-truppi Francizi sena wara. Insibuh Ajjutant fil-Milizja Maltija mwaqqfa mill-Francizi. Meta qamet ir-rewwixta kontra l-Francizi sab ruhu maghluq fil-Belt Valletta. Sena wara hareg ma' 200 Malti iehor fil-kampanja. Arrestawh fuq suspett ta' spjunagg. Fl-ahhar il-gvern ta' Ball eziljah darba ghal dejjem fl-1800 f'Tunez. Minn hemm mar Marsilja, u rritorna Malta fil-1822, 21 sena wara, bniedem fqir, b'mara u bi tlitt itfal.

Meta gie Malta ma sab ebda ghajnuna minn ghand hadd. Hu pprova jiftah skola tal-Franciz. Taghrif fuq din l-iskola ma ghandna xejn. F'supplika li kien kiteb lill-Arcisqof Malti jistqarr kemm kien fqir u li ma kellux biex ighajjex il-familja. Ir-rizultat ta' din is-supplika s'issa ghadna ma nafuhx, minhabba n-nuqqas ta' dokumenti.

Il-bniedem li ghen hafna lil Vassalli fl-ahhar snin ta' hajtu kien Sir John Hookham Frere, bniedem diplomatiku Ingliz u lingwista. Dan ha interess fil-koltivazzjoni tal-Malti u l-edukazzjoni tal-poplu in generali. Ghalhekk ma setax ma jiehuq interess f'Vassalli, lingwista mill-aqwa. Frere ghenu biex sar l-ewwel Professur tal-Malti fl-Universita', bi spejjez ta' Frere stess. Beda jghallem fl-1825, ma nistghux nghidu jekk damx sa l-ahhar.

Bniedem iehor li kien interessat f'Vassalli kien Rev. W. Jowett u warajh C.F. Schlienz, it-tnejn missjunarji Anglikani, u agenti ta' *Church Missionary Society*. Jowett jghidilna li ltaqa' mieghu fl-1823 "in a curious way" u li kien "comparably the best in the Island". Ikolli nghid li introducihulu Frere stess, billi kien qieghed ifittex traduttur Malti; Schlienz baqa' jassistih sa ma miet. U sa ha hsieb il-funeral u d-difna. Jowett qabdu jitraduci l-Vangeli u l-Atti, kif hu fil-fatt ghamel.

Vassalli miet il-Pjetà. Schlienz jghidilna li billi Vassalli qatt ma stqarr li hu Protestant, ried jidfnu f'çimiterju Kattoliku. Il-kappillan qallu li, sa nikkwota lil Schlienz stess: "that Vassalli had never been legally married" u difnuh f'çimiterju Protestant.

Ix-Xoghol Lingwistiku ta' Vassalli

Vassalli kien l-ewwel wiehed li poġġa l-istudju tal-Malti fuq is-sod. L-iskop tiegħu kien li permezz ta' kitba Maltija serja jkun jista' jgħallem u jeduka l-poplu; ta' dan kellu quddiemu l-esperjenza tal-Knisja, għax l-istruzzjoni reliġjuża tal-poplu kienet issir bil-Malti; xi hamsin sena qabel l-Isqof Alpheran kien ippubblika Katekiżmu bil-Malti ppreparat minn Wzzino.

L-ewwel ma għamel Vassalli ppubblika 'pamphlet', *Alfabet Malti Mfisser bil-Malti u bit-Taljan*, 1790, stampat Ruma; kellu 26 sena meta kitbu. Imbagħad sena wara ppubblika l-grammatika: *Mylsen Pheonico-Punicum sive Grammatica Melitensis*, Roma 1791; hames snin wara: *Lexicon Melitense*, Roma 1796; barra l-lista tal-kliem kellu *Discorso Preliminare* li fih espona l-ideat tiegħu dwar l-importanza tal-Malti bhala mezz ta' edukazzjoni, u l-idejat patrijottici tiegħu, li swewlu l-eżilju u hafna nkwieta iehor kif rajna. Inżidu wkoll it-traskrizzjoni u traduzzjoni ta' tliet Lapi di Sepolcrali li nstabu f'Palermo fl-1792. Dan ix-xoghol kollu għamlu sa meta kien għadu ta' 35 sena.

Pubblikazzjonijiet oħra ta' Vassalli ma nsibux oħra qabel fl-1827 meta ppubblika bil-għajnuna ta' Frere u C.M.S. il-grammatka bit-Taljan, stampata hawn Malta; il-Proverbi fl-1828; u fl-1829, wara mewtu, il-Vangeli u l-Atti ta' l-Apostli stampati Londra.

Vassalli Traduttur tal-Vangeli u l-Atti

Meta Vassalli reġa' lura minn barra fl-1828 Rev. W. Jowett kien qiegħed jithabat biex jirrevedi t-traduzzjoni tal-Vangeli ta' G.M. Canolo, anzi kellu f'rasu li flimkien ma' Dr C. Naudi jipprepara traduzzjoni ġdida mill-ewwel. Kien qiegħed ifittex u jistenna xi Malti kapaçi jghixu sewwa: għax la kien kuntent b'Canolo u anqas b'Naudi. fl-aħhar iltaqa' ma' Vassalli: "In the meantime, jikteb Jowett, I have at length been able to engage a new Maltese translator, is comparably the best in the Island, not for ability and fame, viz. the learned Antonio Vassallo (sic.) author of the Maltese Lexicon, living in great poverty. The way in which his services came to me, was curious: at present it will not do to *print* his name: as to stipend, I am paying him somewhat less than one quarter of what he asked – a specimen how needful it is to draw in the reins (sic.). His style is so much superior to that of Canolo and Dr Naudi that I rejoice in having him..." (C.M.S. – C/MO 39/17). Dan kien f'Marzu ta' l-1823, u kien diġà taħ San Mattew, iġifieri kien ilu mill-anqas xahrejn jew aktar li ltaqa' miegħu.

Sentejn wara – sadanittant ma ssemma xejn iżjed fuq it-traduzzjoni – Vassalli beda jgħallem l-Università, u beda jinsisti li qabel l-istampa tal-Vangeli, jistampaw il-Grammatka tal-Malti, bit-Taljan. Jowett irrassenja ruhu: "this fixing of the language

cannot but, if successful, tend to give additional guarantee to the excellency of the Scriptural version. We are, however, still and for some time to come shall be, on the very fluctuating waters of literary experiment.”

Il-Grammatka haġġet f'Settembru ta' l-1827, u l-Ktieb tal-Proverbi fl-1828. U hekk wasal il-waqt tat-traduzzjoni. Jowett fuq suggeriment ta' Frere, issuġġerixxa li jistampaw ix-xogħol Cambridge. Jowett insista li jekk Cambridge ma jaċċettawx “the Society (C.M.S.) should guarantee the expenses attendant on the work, which at the same time, it had better not come ostensibly before the public least umbrage should be taken by Cambridge or by Malta.” Cambridge ma aċċettax ix-xogħol, għalhekk Jowett tela' Londra biex jiehu hsieb l-istampa għand Watts; jaqra l-provi hu u mbagħad jibgħathom lil Vassalli f'Malta biex jara l-aħħar provi. Jowett ma deherlux li kellha tistampahom il-B.F.B.S., minhabba l-instabilità tal-lingwa; aktar tard tista' tohodhom hi.

F'Luġu ta' l-istess sena Schlienz kiteb lil Jowett fejn qallu li kien qiegħed jirrevedi x-xogħol ta' Vassalli li ma kienx f'siktu. F'Awissu, Vassalli stess jikteb lil Jowett: io già riveda gli Atti e sono al X capitolo: ando all'arrivo di questa speso saranno terminati. Fit-3 ta' Jannar, disat ijiem qabel il-mewt, Schlienz iġharraf lil Jowett li Vassalli jrid jaqra l-provi hu; u ma ridux jirrevedi t-traduzzjoni ta' l-ittra lir-Rumani: “because he said that this epistle had been translated by him very imperfectly without the aid of critical help; also Mr Jowett had been absent the time of his translating it.” Disat ijiem wara Vassalli miet bla ma laħaq ra stampati l-*Vanġeli* u l-*Atti*. Il-volum kien lest f'tit xhur wara u haġġ bid-data ta' l-1829. Minn dan jidher ċar ukoll li Vassalli ma laħaqx lesta t-Testment il-Ġdid kollu; l-aktar li seta' għamel abbozza xi haġġ hafif hafif u xejn aktar. Il-bqija tat-T.Ġ. kellu jgħaddi f'idejn oħra.

Il-Kwalità tat-Traduzzjoni

Vassalli ta l-ewwel abbozzi tat-traduzzjoni tiegħu f'inqas minn xahrejn żmien; iġifieri li kellu f'idejgħ il-manuskritti u l-volum stampat ta' Canolo; għalhekk hemm rabta bejn il-wieħed u l-iehor. Ċerti espressjonijiet ma tistax tispjegahom hliet ta' kuntatt dirett bejniethom. Izda Vassalli kien superjuri hafna għal Canolo, u baqa' inklinat biex juża Malti semitiku u jwarrab il-kliem barrani.

It-traduzzjoni ta' Vassalli sew Jowett u sew Vassalli kienu jqisuha, barra bhala mezz pastorali, anki mezz tat-trawwim tal-Malti u ta' edukazzjoni letterarja tal-poplu. It-traduzzjoni, stampata flimkien mat-test tal-Latin, li minnu ttraduċa, nistgħu nġhidu li hi traduzzjoni Kattolika; tant hu hekk li meta Ġ.M. Camilleri rrevedieha, irreveda anki sostanzjalment, skond il-King James Version. B'dana kollu ma qabditx art fost il-poplu għal hafna raġunijiet: l-ewwelnett kienet ippublikata bla *imprimatur*; kienet imqassma mill-missjunarji Protestanti; l-alfabett użat kien stramb, u jistona sewwa ma' l-alfabett tat-Taljan jew l-Ingliz; l-istil kien maqtuġħ mil-lingwaġġ mitkellem; u fuq kollox il-ftit nies li kienu jaqraw kien ta' 9% biss, li kellhom f'idejgħom it-traduzzjoni Taljana tal-Martini.

Madankollu nistgħu nġhidu dan: li t-traduzzjoni ta' Vassalli baqgħet fundamentali fl-istorja tat-traduzzjoni Maltija tal-Vangeli u l-Atti: Richard Taylor inqeda biha; Ġ.M. Camilleri inkorporaha fit-traduzzjoni tiegħu fl-1847; l-istess Camilleri kompli rrevedieha fl-1870/72; fl-1912 Temi Zammit irrevedieha fil-Vangeli ta' S. Mark u G.M. Azzopardi kkonsultaha meta kien qiegħed jaħdem fuq tiegħu bejn l-1893 – 1924.

Minn dan li għedna wieħed jista' jiehu ideja ta' l-importanza tax-xogħol ta' Vassalli fil-qasam tat-traduzzjoni biblika; din il-hidma hajret lill-Kattoliċi Maltin jittraduċu l-Bibbja – u l-filologi jistudjaw il-Malti, u dan l-interess baqa' nieżel sa żmenijietna.

Għalhekk, għalkemm għadda dan iż-żmien kollu, inpattu għat-tbatija li bata Vassalli minhabba l-idejat tiegħu – idejat li ż-żmien wera l-valur tagħhom, u llum aħna neħduhom bhala minn ewl-id-dinja billi nirrikonoxxu l-kontribut tiegħu fil-qasam ta' l-istudju tal-Malti u t-traduzzjoni tal-Bibbja, żewġ oqsma u hidmiet u movimenti li fil-fatt imxew flimkien fl-istorja tal-kultura nazzjonali u kristjana f'Malta.

V. TAGHRIF ĠDID FUQ M.A. VASSALLI Dr Cleardo Naudi u Giuseppe Canolo

Sa fejn naf jien s'issa qatt ma kellna dokument li jurina fejn kien joqgħod sewwa M.A. Vassalli wara li ġie mill-eżilju fl-1820.

Skond avviz fl-1820 fil-Gazzetta tal-Gvern Vassalli kellu jagħti l-lezzjonijiet tiegħu fid-dar Numru 347, Triq San Pawl il-Belt¹; iżda ma nafex jekk din kinetx ir-residenza tiegħu. Ninu Cremona jgħid li fl-aħħar ta' hajtu kien joqgħod il-Pietà, iżda xejn aktar, u ma jgħidx mnejn ġieb l-informazzjoni².

Kien ilu jberren il-hsieb ġo rasi li nara nistax insib xi haġa mir-registri ta' li Status Animarum tal-Parroċċa tal-Belt; fl-aħħar irnexxieli nsib it-tagħrif li xtaq bl-għajjnuna tal-Kappillani u ta' Dun Ġwann Azzopardi.

Fis-Status Animarum tal-Parroċċa ta' San Pawl (1822 – 25) insibu li fid-dar Nru 347 kienet toqgħod Giachina Campanello (29 sena), Rosa (10 snin) u Bartolomeo (8 snin). Jekk Vassalli kellu residenza hawn, ma tantx dam wisq fiha; ta' min jinnota li d-djar Nri 341, 342, 346, 348, 349 kienu mġhamra minn familji Protestanti. Isem Vassalli f'dan ir-registru ma jidher imkien.

L-aktar skoperta importanti hi r-registrazzjoni ta' l-1828, is-sena ta' qabel il-mewt ta' Vassalli li ġrat fit-12 ta' Jannar 1829. Fit-taqsimha tal-Pietà – dan ir-raħal kien jagħmel mal-Parroċċa ta' San Pawl tal-Belt – insibu din in-nota:

Strada Misida detta tal
Guardia Mangia
No 2 – 2 Casa Sospetta
Michele Vassallo (sic) sospet(to)
Catarina
fig.
Gabriele
Michele
Saverio

Jidher ċar li Vassalli kien joqgħod f'daqsejn ta' dar fit-telgħa tal-Gwardamanga fl-inhawi tal-Villa ta' Hookham Frere, il-habib u protettur tiegħu u li ma kienx f'kuntatt mal-Kurat ta' San Pawl. Il-kelma "sospetto" kienet tffisser li wiehed ma kellux żwieġ regolari; milli jidher l-informazzjoni ttiehdet minn terzi persuni, għax ma nsibux l-etajiet tal-membri tal-familja, bħalma nsibu fil-bqija tal-familji l-oħra u anqas eżattezza fl-isem ta' Vassalli stess; li ma kinux l-ismijiet tal-mara u ta' wliedu fl-ordni ta' l-età tagħhom, anqas konna nkunu ċerti li din kienet id-dar tiegħu.

Dan jikkonferma dak li qal Schlienz, jiġifieri li l-Kurat ta' San Pawl ta' dik il-habta ma tahx difna Kattolika, minhabba ż-żwieġ irregolari tiegħu. Lanqas nistgħu nġhidu li dan ġara għax hasbuh Protestant, għax kieku kien inizzel "protestant" hdejn in-numru tad-dar bla ma jnizzel l-ismijiet, bħalma nsibu f'kazi oħra fl-istess reġistru. Milli jidher il-Kurat kellu tama li jirrangaw l-affarijiet, għax kieku ma kienx inizzlu fir-reġistru, imma jqisu Protestant u ma jnizzlu xejn.

Dr Cleardo Naudi u Giuseppe Canolo

Dawn it-tnejn min-nies kienu midhla sewwa taċ-*Church Missionary Society* (CMS), li kellha d-dar tagħha fi triq San Ġwann, kantuniera ma' Strada Stretta. Dan ikkonfermajtu mir-reġistru ta' li Status Animarum tal-parroċċa tal-Portu Salv tal-Belt fejn taht in-numru 75, hemm imnizzel "Inglesi".

Cleardo Naudi skond l-istess reġistru kien joqgħod fi Strada Stretta Nru 84; miegħu kellu l-familja Spinelli (1820 – 1833). Naudi kien Protestant iddikjarat u kien intimu ma' hafna mill-għaqdiet jew setet Protestanti li kienu jahdmu hawn Malta. Ikollna nġhidu għalhekk li nsibuh f'dan ir-reġistru minhabba l-familja Spinelli li kienet iddur bih. Din il-familja kienet tikkonsisti mir-raġel Michele u Katerina, il-mara. Fl-1831 tissemma wkoll "Elisabetta moglie di Ferdinando Tedesco" fl-istess dar.

Giuseppe Canolo, li kien isinn is-skieken, kien l-ewwel traduttur tal-Vangelu ta' San Ġwann bil-Malti. Jowett jgħidilna li kien joqgħod qrib id-dar tagħhom (CMS). Fir-reġistru (1818 – 1833) tal-Parroċċa ta' Portu Salv insibu li kien joqgħod f'kamra Nru 30 fi Strada Stretta; miegħu kellu l-mara Maria Assunta li wara s-sena 1833 insibuha l-Ospizio tax-xjuħ, naturalment il-Furjana. Canolo kien fqir, u skond Jowett kien jaqlagħha u jiekolha, u qatt ma kellu flus żejda.

Dan it-tagħrif, żgħir kemm hu żgħir, ikompli jixhet dawl ġdid fuq il-hidma lingwistiko-religjuża ta' l-ewwel nofs is-seklu tal-hakma Ingliza f'Malta, meta l-attività Protestanta kienet qawwija u aggressiva³.

1. A. Cremona, *Mikiel Anton Vassalli*, Malta: KKM, 1975, p. 50.

2. *Ibid.*, p. 66.

3. K. Sant: *It-Traduzzjoni tal-Bibbja u l-Ilsien Malti 1810–1850*, Malta: Royal University of Malta, 1975.

VI. M.A. VASSALLI'S SOJOURN IN ROME (1788 – 1790)

“...But this is a matter into which I am still enquiring and, therefore, his sojourn in or his going backwards and forwards in Rome are still somewhat obscure.” With these words Dr A. Cremona, the pioneer biographer of M.A. Vassalli, closed his treatment of Vassalli's sojourn in Rome¹.

Fifty years have passed since then and no shred of documentary evidence in this respect has ever turned up. I was always of the conviction that a thorough research in the archives of the College of the *Propaganda Fide* and other academical institutions in Rome of the late eighteenth century would give some positive results.

Taking the cue from the commendation of Vassalli's first grammar by Professor A.S. Assemani printed in the same grammar after the author's preface², I consulted the archives of the College of the *Propaganda Fide*; those of the University known at the same time as *Archigymnasium Sapientiae*, and the relevant *Status Animarum* records at the Vicariate of the Diocese of Rome. In addition I consulted the Maronite Fathers who had their college *within the limits of Vassalli's parish* as we shall see.

I did not find anything about Vassalli in the records of the *Propaganda Fide* nor did Professor S.M. Zarb in 1931³. Nor did the Maronite Fathers in their own archives at the college⁴. Some information was gleaned from the Vicariate of the Diocese of Rome with respect to Vassalli's parish. Substantial evidence, though scanty, was discovered at the *Sapientia*.

The *Sapientia* was founded by Pope Boniface VIII in 1303. It was a pontifical university until it was taken over by the Italian State in 1870 and continued to function up to 1935, when the *Città Universitaria* in Rome was inaugurated. It was housed in a magnificent palace built by Giacomo della Porta in today's *Corso del Rinascimento*; in this place are preserved the archives of the former Pontifical State, including those of the University⁵.

When Vassalli was in Rome the *Sapientia* ran courses in Sacred Sciences, Jurisprudence, Medicine and Oriental Languages; Hebrew, Syrochaldiac and Arabic. The professors in the faculty were Joseph Titus Romanus for *Elementary Syro-Chaldaic* (up to 1785) and *Hebrew and Chronology and History of Israel*; Fabritius Gaetanus Milani, Minor Observant, for *Arabic*; Antonius Simonius Assemani, Syromaronite father, for *Syrochaldaic and Oriental Christian Liturgy*. Each of them lectured for one period daily, in the morning or in the afternoon, throughout the week⁶.

This Assemani was the last in the line of the four Assemanis, related to one another, all of them prominent scholars in Oriental Languages. He was not the teacher of Arabic during those two years, hence not the teacher of Vassalli in this language, but he was intimate with him. In the order of the Master of the Apostolic Palace, Assemani read carefully and diligently (*diligenter evolvissem atique perlegissem*) Vassalli's Maltese Grammar (1790) and recommended its immediate publication (*...ut in publicam lucem quam citius prodeat, dignissimam censeo*). He refers to Vassalli as an erudite man, (*eruditus vir*)⁷.

In August 1789 he knew Vassalli (mixing him with Abate Vella, whom he had never known personally) as “*un uomo onestissimo*”; and again in April 1798, when Vassalli was in prison, as “*un uomo assai onesto e di somma probità*”⁸. This means that Assemani most probably met Vassalli much before 1788 when the latter registered at the University.

Registration at the University

The name or rather autograph signature of Vassalli appears three times in the list of matriculated (registered) students for the two academic years (1788/89 and 1789/90).

In 1788 he registered for Sacred Sciences, Class I, and for Arabic, Class V:

*Classe Ia: Michael Antonius Vassallus Melit(ensis)*⁹

A Classe quinta: Lingue (sic): Vassallus Michael-Antonius Meliten (sic) hab(itat) in aedib(us) S. Pantaleonis Montic. Paroec (iae) S. Salvatoris—Arabica lingua vacat.

Vassallo Michael Antonio, Maltese, resides in the buildings of S. Pantaleone in Monti, in the parish of St. Salvatore. Studies Arabic language¹⁰.

In 1789 he registered *again* in the fifth class of languages:

Michael Antonius Vassallus Meliten (sic) hab(itat) in aedibus S. Pantaleonis ad Montes Parociae S. Salvatoris.

Michael Antonio Vassallus, Maltese resides in the buildings of S. Pantaleo in the Mountains of the Parish S. Salvatore¹¹. Note his latinized family name, whence the genitive *Vassalli*.

From this we deduce that he was definitely in Rome for the biennium 1788/90 at the age of 24, and that he studied theology and related subjects at least for one year. This confirms his declaration in his petition to open a school of Maltese in 1795¹². It is reasonable to conclude also that his registration in the fifth class (and this in both years) for Arabic—and if this was the first year in Rome—shows that he was already grounded in Arabic in Malta, most probably by Fr Joseph Calleja of Tarxien, teacher of Arabic, appointed for the purpose by the Sacred Congregation de *Propaganda Fide*¹³. Vassalli's personality is reflected in his bold signature, standing out prominently among those of his colleagues to the number of 27 in the class of Theology, and 7 and 13 in the two classes for Arabic respectively. His professors are listed above.

Be it stated here that through Assemani, Vassalli must have come into contact with the Maronite Fathers, whose college was, and still is, within the limits of the Parish of S. Salvatore, today of the Madonna dei Monti.

His residence

Vassalli declares that he had his residence (presumably board and lodgings) in the building of S. Pantaleo ad Montes in the Parish of S. Salvatore. This Parish below the North of the Esquiline Hill included within its borders S. Pietro in Vincoli and the College of the Maronite Fathers; the street names are the same as today, but the S. Salvatore Church, to *La Madonna dei Monti*'s Church in 1824¹⁴.

San Salvatore's was a rather modest church. Attached to it was a hostel for Catechumens coming from non-Catholic religions, including Moslems and another one for Neophytes, that is newly converts from other faiths. An impressive conventual palace comes next, followed by the Church of *La Madonna dei Monti*, the present parish church. Here Vassalli found hospitality. He had a good chance to mix with the Maronite Fathers at a stone's throw distance, with Arab speaking Moslems, and with the French parish priest Franciscus Rovira Bonet Perpimanensis (?)¹⁵.

Deductions and open queries

This *documentary* evidence scanty as it is, proves for certain that Vassalli was in Rome for the two academic years 1788/90 as a matriculated student of the Pontifical University, run by prominent ecclesiastics, studying Theology and Oriental Languages. Here he met the Orientalist Antonius Simon Assemani and other Maronite Fathers through whom, one can reasonably assume, he become familiar with Syro-chaldaic and Hebrew, which he used profusely in his works. All this goes to prove and explain his solid academic training and cultural interests, which he was keen to share with his countrymen. Through contacts with his parish priest he had a chance to become acquainted with French current political and social thought, which was already rearing its head in Rome at the time.

Still this same evidence raises more questions than it solves. Vassalli was 24 years old in 1788. He published his first work on the Maltese Alphabet in 1790 on which he had been working for two years since 1788, his first grammar in 1791 to be followed by the massive *Lexicon* in 1796. Certainly this work in the space of four years, or eight years if one includes the *Lexicon*, needed much more than a period of two years' systematic study, the more so since, as he himself states in the preface to the *lexicon*, he did not know any language until he was 17¹⁶.

One would much conclude that either he went much earlier to Rome, of which so far there is no documentary evidence, or he had well grounded himself in basic subjects, especially in Arabic at the *Propaganda* School run by Fr Joseph Calleja, himself a linguist of good standing.

Vassalli styles himself as *Abate*, which seems to indicate that he was a cleric at least in minor orders, or even a subdeacon with the vow of celibacy. So far despite the research of Fr J. Azzopardi and myself in the archives of the Archbishop's Curia in Mdina and of the Vicariate at Rome no evidence in this regard has come to light. What then, did *abate* indicate? Further research is needed in this regard. No matter how we answer this question, one can realise and appreciate what Vassalli owes to the Church Institutions for his scientific training and with what ease at this time he could move within ecclesiastical circles, and of this he was certainly conscious and appreciative¹⁷.

Another question comes to mind. Wherefrom did he get funds for his sojourn and studies abroad? It seems that he was well provided. It seems that he was well provided since he was able to shoulder the expense for the printing of his grammar — *sumptibus*

auctoris—and later his *lexicon*. Was he maintained by his relatives in Malta? Did he engage himself in some gainful occupation whilst he was studying and writing? If this is so, his reputation for hard and intensive work would be substantially enhanced.

Even with all these queries on the agenda, one cannot but admire the scholarly achievement of this man by the age of 34 years within a span of six years, which surely presupposes a long period of sound preparation. It is a pity that for one reason or another such substantial work had to come to a sudden end in 1797, just one year after the publication of the dictionary.

Far from reflecting badly on his predecessors work such as De Soldanis's, another ecclesiastic, his achievement redounds to their credit, especially to Fr J. Calleja, his most probable tutor in Malta, about whom so little is known. The latter's signature stands out prominently in the *calendazione* of his daily Mass at the Tarxien Parish Church.

1. A. Cremona, *M.A. Vassalli and His Times*, Malta 1940, p. 12.
2. M.A. Vassalli *Mylsen phoenicopunicum, sive grammatica melitensis*, Rome 1791, pp. 55–57.
3. S.M. Zarb, P. *Grabiell Fabricy O.P. u M.A. Vassalli*, "Il-Malti", 7 (1931) 43–45.
4. Father L. Sfejr, personal communication dated 10.10.1982.
5. *Guida di Roma e dintorni*. Touring Club Italiano Milano 1977, p. 191.
6. *Archivio dell'Università*: Vol. 213 fol. 103–174.
7. M.A. Vassalli, *Mylsen etc.*, p. 55–57.
8. C.L. Dessoulavy, *Mich. Ant. Vassalli and the Vella Case* in *Journal of the R.U.M. Literary Society* 2 (1931) 404–407.
9. *Archivio dell'Università*: Vol. 276 unpaginated.
10. *Ibid.*
11. *Ibid.*
12. A. Cremona, *op. cit.*, p. 12–13.
13. *Ibid.*, p. 20.
14. Gabriele Alterio–Franco Rocchi, *La Chiesa Madonna dei Monti a Roma*, Rome 1979, p. 16.
15. *Archivio del Vicariato di Roma Status Animarum Parr. S. Salvatoris 1788–1790*.
16. M.A. Vassalli, *Kryb yl Klym Malti mfysser byl-Latin u byt-Talyan – Lexicon, Melitense-Latino-Italum*, Rome 1796, p. xiv.
17. S.M. Zarb, *op. cit.*, p. 56.

VII. VASSALLI: A SCHOLAR AND A REFORMER

(Interview by Joseph Aquilina)

Question: You have been doing important research about the life and work of M.A. Vassalli. What induced you to take up this enquiry?

Answer: My interest in the person and work of M.A. Vassalli goes back to my student days at the Lyceum through my contact with Dr A. Cremona, my teacher of Maltese at the time. He was the man who brought back to life Vassalli through a series of articles in Il-Malti, the official organ of the :Għaqda tal-Kittieba tal-Malti, today known as L-Akkademja tal-Malti, in the thirties. These articles were published in book form in 1937, and then re-ordered and published by Miss Mary Butcher in 1940.

Q: Is it correct to say that you are interested in the work of Vassalli in so far as he contributed effectively to the promotion of the Bible in Maltese?

A: Yes, but not exclusively. I have been interested in the Maltese language, as you well know, since I was at the Lyceum and then still more when I was one of your first students at the University. Obviously, no one interested in the subject, both in itself and as a means of popular education and social communication, can ignore Vassalli as a scholar and promoter of Maltese as a means for the education of the masses.

Bible translation

Q: Vassalli was a translator of the Bible. Was it on his own initiative that he embarked on such a difficult work?

A: Of course no one can say what goes on in another's mind in the absence of some explicit declaration. We know, however, that he was commissioned by Rev William Jowett, the representative in Malta of the Anglican *Church Missionary Society* and agent of the *British and Foreign Bible Society*, both operating in Malta at the time. They were interested in Maltese Bible translation first as a means of spreading Protestant teaching amongst the Maltese and secondly as a help to English Missionaries in the area to learn Arabic, especially spoken Arabic through Maltese.

Up to that time they had published the Maltese version of St. John's Gospel in 1822 prepared by Mr Giuseppe Maria Canolo, a knife-grinder residing in the neighbourhood of the CMS in Valletta. Jowett was not completely satisfied with this translation, so he commissioned Vassalli for the job. In the words of Jowett: "The way in which his services came to me was curious". Vassalli had just returned from exile in financial straits. Jowett was convinced that Vassalli was a much better scholar.

Q: Bible translation presupposes a specialized preparation on the part of the translator. Do you believe that Vassalli had the proper qualifications for the work?

A: A simple yes or no would not be adequate. By today's standards he was not properly qualified; but in the circumstances of his days he was relatively so. Vassalli was fully conversant with Arabic and, to a lesser extent with Hebrew and Syriac. He did not know any Greek at all, and this is the language of the Gospels and the Acts which he translated. He was perfectly conversant with Latin and Italian.

He translated the *Gospel and Acts* (published after his death in 1829) from the Latin Vulgate; indeed both translations were published in parallel columns in the same volume. He felt the need for outside help, as Schlienzy reported to Jowett a few days before Vassalli's death with respect to the letter to the Romans, a surely difficult writing to translate.

Q: Surely this was one of the earliest attempts to make use of Maltese as a written language. How would you evaluate the work of Vassalli?

A: Vassalli translated from the Latin Vulgate: certainly he consulted the Italian translation of Bishop Martini, used also by Protestants in Malta and Italy. Vassalli followed faithfully, if not slavishly, his text; indeed in this regard his translation is objectively a Catholic one.

His style was conditioned by his avowal to purify the language and get it nearer to its semitic origins, and in this, to my mind, he succeeded. But this very character of his style rendered it a bit archaic and artificial, away from the spoken language. Add to this the use of strange and queer alphabetic characters, and one can understand why it was heavy to read and not easily followed by the uninitiated. In fact, when the *Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge* published its Maltese New Testament in 1847, Vassalli's vocabulary was revised and his script substituted by a simpler one. Mr M.A. Camilleri, an ex-Catholic priest, the author of this translation, brought the text of Vassalli in line with the King James' version.

Centre for Protestant missionary activity

Q: You mentioned Rev. William Jowett. What was his assignment in Malta?

A: Rev. W. Jowett was sent to Malta in 1816 by the *Anglican Church Missionary Society*, on the suggestion (or invitation) of Dr Naudi. He was still in the first years of his ministry and was sent to Malta with the express purpose of turning Malta into a centre for Protestant missionary activity in the Mediterranean and beyond on the principle that "Religion follows the flag". He was a dynamic character, absolutely committed to his mission. He travelled extensively around the Mediterranean and even beyond. His book, *Christian Researchers in the Mediterranean* (1824) is a masterly description of the religious situation in the area, including Malta.

He set up a printing press on the Island for the printing of tracts, books and leaflets in various languages for distribution in and outside Malta. He used to hold regular meetings for Bible study at the Society's headquarters in Strait Street, corner with St John's Street. His righthand man was Rev. C.F. Schlienzy, a keen promoter of Maltese as a means of popular education.

He returned to England in 1828: but later he was appointed Secretary of the CMS. In his correspondence he refrains to divulge how he met Vassalli; perhaps through the services of Sir John Hookham Frere who was the friend and patron of Vassalli.

Q: Vassalli describes himself as Professor of Oriental Languages. Did he follow any regular courses?

A: Yes. Vassalli styles himself, and others style him, *Professor* or *Magister* of Oriental languages. It is probable that he taught Oriental languages, or rather, say, Arabic in Rome. He studied Arabic first in Malta in the school of Arabic under the aegis of the *Sacred Congregation De Propaganda Fidei*, established in Malta by the Inquisitor Fabio Chigi (later Pope Alexander VIII) in 1630 for potential missionaries in the East and others working amongst Moslem slaves in Malta itself. At the time of Vassalli the school was in the charge of Father Joseph Calleja of Tarxien. He was responsible for the basic academic training of Vassalli. Vassalli seemed to be one of his outstanding students, as confirmed by a document from the Inquisitor's archives at Mdina, wherein it is stated that Vassalli qualified for an annual prize for his diligence. This document was published by Mr Frans Ciappara (*The Sunday Times*, June 19, 1983).

In 1788–1790 Vassalli was a registered student at the Pontifical University *Sapientia* in Rome. Here he studied Arabic, Syriac and Hebrew, and met several scholars of international repute such as Assemani, outstanding scholar of Oriental Languages and Cultures.

Q: Is it a fact that he pursued studies leading to the priesthood?

A: It is not unlikely that Vassalli attended the Seminary at Mdina with the idea of becoming a priest or at least a cleric, in view of the cultural setting of those times in Malta, when there were practically no other schools outside Church circles. He styles himself with emphasis as *Abate*, which may mean that he was at least in minor orders. But so far no official documentary evidence has turned up either in Malta or in Rome to prove this conclusively either way.

Vassalli's teacher

Q: You mentioned Father Joseph Calleja as the teacher of Vassalli. Can you give some information about him?

A: Unfortunately so far we have only scanty information about him. Certainly he was a highly cultured man with contacts abroad as far as Paris and Rome. Born on January 21, 1741, he belonged to an outstanding family at Tarxien; he died at the early age of 56 on May 19, 1798, three weeks before the landing of Napoleon in Malta. His house was ransacked after his death, and his books scattered. There remain only a manuscript copy of an Arabic-Turkish Dictionary at the National Library (Valletta.) He was interested in Arabic and other Oriental Languages, literary criticism, numismatics, archaeology and natural history. He was appointed teacher of Arabic at the School of Arabic of the *Propaganda Fidei* in 1793, a post which he retained up to his death. As one can judge from the Parish Records of Tarxien he was away from his home for several long intervals. He deserves to be known more than it is the case at present. Recently, my attention was drawn to an oil portrait of him with an inscription in the Sacristy of the Wardija Church.

Q: Dr A. Cremona published his biography of Vassalli in the 1930s in a series of articles and then in book form, first in Maltese, in 1937, and then in English in 1940. This was pioneer work. Has any new material come to light since then?

A: Yes, of course. In recent years important documents have come to light. Mr J. Cassar Pullicino has published some documents relating to Vassalli's application for the Chair of Arabic at the University, left vacant by his teacher Fr Calleja, and other matters during the French occupation of Malta. These documents exploded the romantic myth of Vassalli's mysterious escape from Ricasoli (*The Sunday Times*, February 21, 28 and March 1, 1983).

Mr Francis Ciappara published a list of prize-winners at the School of Arabic, including the name of Vassalli from the Archives of the Inquisition at the Mdina Cathedral Museum (*The Sunday Times*, August 19, 1983).

I published important documents from the Archives of the *Church Missionary Society* (London) relating to Vassalli's translation of the *Gospel and Acts*, *Maltese Grammar* and *Maltese Proverbs*. These included a complete autograph letter dated August 28, 1828, just five months before his death (*Sijon* 6, 1973, 96).

Next followed my publication of three notices from the Archives of the *Sapientia* (Rome) recording Vassalli's registration as student of Theology and Arabic for the years 1788–1790 (*The Sunday Times*, April 3, 1983).

Finally I published two short notices, one recording the address of Vassalli's house at Guardamangia Hill from the Archives of St Paul's Shipwreck Parish (Valletta) and that of Cleardo Naudi and Giuseppe Canolo, both friends of Vassalli, from the Archives of the Parish of Porto Salvo, Valletta (*Lehen il-Malti* 49 (1980) 22 p. 5).

Fr John Azzopardi published other important documents including Vassalli's supplication to the Archbishop for a share in his late aunt's estate and other transaction (*Sagħtar*, March 1979). Finally Rev E. Fenech published the first leaflet announcing the publication of *Lexicon* (*In-Nazzjon Tagħna*, August 9, 1977). These documents have enriched substantially the information collected so painstakingly by Dr Cremona. There is the possibility of further discoveries in the near future.

A political figure

Q: In recent times the figure of Vassalli as a political figure and reformer is coming to the fore. What is your opinion on the matter?

A: Certainly, Vassalli played an important part in the political life of the country, and found himself in serious trouble. He was a genuine reformer sensitive to the current thought and political movements abroad and in Malta.

First he wanted to educate the mass of the people, give them a national and social conscience and an international standing. After his futile attempts to induce the Knights to reform themselves and improve the lot of the Maltese, he found himself at the head of the pro-French party. I would say that he was the brain behind the activities. It may be that he got his ideas through his contacts in Rome—his parish priest where he had his board and lodging was a Frenchman. To my mind, he was the intellectual who gave ideas and prestige to the movement, but he was not the man to lead from the streets, as his compatriot Barbara was.

Notwithstanding Napoleon's praise of Vassalli as a scholar he does not seem to have played any decisive role during the French occupation. Indeed, he suffered hunger with so many others.

Q: What is your estimate of Vassalli as a scholar?

A: Vassalli was a man of outstanding ability, intelligence and determination. He states that at the age of 16 he did not speak any other language than Maltese. However, by the age of 26 he published the first project of his alphabet in 1790, the *Grammar* in 1791, and his *Lexicon* in 1796 at the age of 32. These works witness his scholarly conscience, method and industry.

Of course after 200 years not all his conclusions are valid today; but it is due to him that Maltese studies and literature were set on sound basis. One should not forget Vassalli's debt to G.F. Agius de Soldanis, a pioneer himself 41 years before Vassalli especially with respect to the *Lexicon* as the late Mr E. Serracino Inglott insisted.

Q: You are of the opinion that Vassalli was introduced to Rev. W. Jowett by Sir John Hookham Frere. How was this possible?

A: Sir John Hookham Frere was an outstanding scholar deeply interested in the Classics and Hebrew. It was practically impossible, in the small society of Malta of the time, for the two Englishmen not to meet. Vassalli surely attracted the attention of Sir John. Later we find Frere recommending Vassalli for the Chair of Maltese, and providing the necessary funds, and finally taking care of his funeral together with other friends.

Q: Certainly Vassalli had a troubled and adventurous life. Do we know anything of his last days and death?

A: In his last days he was busy with his lectures at the University and the translation of the *Gospels and Acts*, which were published posthumously in late 1829. He died on January 12, 1829. At the time, he was drafting the translations of Romans. In a letter dated August 8, 1828, he informed Rev. Jowett, then staying in England, that he could not stand the summer heat because of his illness. Six months later he died of gangrene in the leg, before he could see his *Gospels and Acts* published.

Q: How do you explain that he was not given a Catholic burial?

A: First of all, one must say that he was not given a Catholic burial not because of his scholarly work, his political views—he was politically dead at the time—his Biblical translation—published after his death—or his Protestant friends and he never renounced his faith as did his contemporary, Dr Naudi. But he was not a practising Catholic, as evidenced by the records of the parish of St Paul's Shipwreck, in Valletta.

C.F. Schlien, the Protestant Minister and friend of Vassalli, states that this happened because of Vassalli's invalid marriage in view of his minor orders. But minor orders did not invalidate marriage; moreover we have serious doubts as to Vassalli's actual status in the Ecclesiastical Establishment. He married—was it a civil marriage?—during his twenty years' exile. What is certain is that he was a non-practising Catholic. In the Parish records of St Paul Shipwreck in Valletta, which included Pietà within its borders at the time, the house of Vassalli is marked as *casa sospetta*, a term which meant either the house of two persons co-habiting together or just non-practising persons. This explains the refusal of Catholic burial in this case according to Canon Law prevalent at the time; moreover, the contemporary social climate did not help matters either.

Surely it is a sad episode, about which we all should be more understanding in passing judgement on the persons concerned. We hope information would be discovered to shed more light on this unfortunate incident, and indeed other aspects of the life of this unfortunate man who contributed so much to the advancement of his country.

Vassalli's message

Q: What do you think is the message of Vassalli to the Maltese people, especially the younger generation of today?

A: The first message of Vassalli to us today is that the key to progress is sound education both at the scholarly level, based on fundamental research, and at the popular level. Secondly, that we must have a sound national conscience, avoiding chauvinistic romanticism or self-destructive inferiority complex. On this firm basis one could build and plan for future progress in all fields of national endeavour. In such a climate there won't be any place for partisan, violent strife and narrow divisions. In Vassalli's *Discorso Preliminare* we note the complete lack of animosity against anyone, but severe, constructive criticism of his contemporary society.

We should look beyond our borders to live in peaceful co-operation with our neighbours near and far away. In all this there is no place for political and social confrontations leading to strife and self-destruction but discussion and dialogue in a sincere search for truth. Vassalli belongs to the nation, and not to any party in particular.

Finally, as an ecclesiastic myself, engaged in Biblical studies and Biblical pastoral activity, I cannot fail to note Vassalli's biblical work under the aegis of Protestants. In those days of aggressive confrontation one looks at such co-operation with suspicious eyes, but today we feel otherwise. Things have changed a lot on both sides. Hence there is place for co-operation in the search of truth and pastoral activity in a spirit of charity and reconciliation. In this regard such a will in Malta is being given concrete expression by our Bible Society joining as a full member of the *United Bible Societies*, a world wide federation of Societies from all non-Catholic denominations ready and disposed to work together in the world-wide distribution of the written Word of God. In the providence of God the printing of the Latin Vulgate and Vassalli's Maltese translation of *Gospels and Acts* in parallel columns in the same volume perhaps presaged such development.