

VASSALLI AND THE VELLA CASE

It may seem an outrage to couple two men like the worthy lexicographer M.A. Vassalli and the forger Vella. They were however contemporaries, and, as we shall show a most unfortunate confusion by Simone Assemani of the two names, both beginning with the same letter, was largely responsible for the misleading of O.G. Tychsen with such disastrous results to European scholarship.

Vella had left Malta as a penniless priest in 1780. A few years later the learned world was startled by reports of wonderful discoveries in Sicily of long-lost Arabic manuscripts. There was first the Martinian Codex with the history of Sicily under the Arabs; then the Norman Codex dealing with Norman times; then the lost books of Livy in Arabic. Vella's success was due to his being able from the very first to impose on a few influential Sicilians, particularly Archbishop Airoldi, and then using them as means for further conquests. It was through these Sicilian patrons that Vella's work was brought to the notice of Semitists elsewhere, particularly of *O.G. Tychsen* the *Rostock* professor. The preliminary fly-sheet containing a specimen of the 'Arabic' from the Martinian Codex was received with polite scepticism in France. De Guignes, writing in the "Journal des Scavans", August, 1786, said: "En rapprochant le style de cet Auteur, avec celui d'un petit Catechisme imprimé à Rome en 1752 pour l'instruction du peuple et des paysans de Malte qui parlent encore un Arabe très corrompu, nous avons appercu beaucoup de ressemblance avec l'Arabe de notre Auteur, en sorte que nous ne pouvons conclurre autre chose que le texte qu'on imprime actuellement n'est point en véritable Arabe mais en Arabe corrompu qui étoit apparemment en usage en Sicile". Tychsen himself expressed some doubts but these were promptly set at rest by his Sicilian correspondents who pointed out that the Maltese look of the Codex was due to the olden Sicilians having used a language much like that of the Maltese.

As a reward for his transaction of the first Codex, Vella was made Professor of Arabic at Palermo. This post had been coveted by Rosario Gregorio, a man certainly far better qualified for it, who with the assistance of Tychsen was to publish in 1790 his *Rerum Arabicarum... ampla Collectio*. Gregorio, furious at being superseded by a foreign adventurer, published broadcast a screed called *Lettre à M. De Guignes*, signed *Le Veillant* and dated from Malta. It was written in very faulty French and everybody except Tychsen at once detected that *Le Veillant* was simply the French translation of the Greek *Gregorius*.

This diatribe was answered on Vella's behalf in the same year 1788 by Di Blasi, writing under the pen-name Aganippeo. The opponents of the Codex Martinianus had been at pains to show that the preface (which was the only part of the book in 'Arabic', all the rest being merely an Italian translation) was written in Maltese and not in regular Arabic at all. Their conclusion was right but, as is often the case, their arguments were wrong. Had they only picked out such expressions as *Taqrahom*

ahjar (you will read them better) or *wisq kbir* (very great) they would have been on firm ground, but they chose to concentrate on the use of the word *btagh*. Now as it happens, this is just a word which Vella had chosen to use because of its Maltese look. *Btagħ* is common enough in other dialects, but Maltese always uses *tagħ*. This point is laboured by Di Blasi, who of course was simply the mouthpiece of Vella. Speaking of Vella's earlier life Di Blasi says: "Passando poi in Roma per meglio istruirsi sotto la direzione del vecchio Mons. Assemani ne divenne il migliore de suoi scolari attestandolo il nipote di questo valente prelato in una lettera. &c". Needless to say this was the merest bluff, and the letter of Simone Assemani says nothing of Vella's ever having been in Rome.

Tychsen, who was in constant communication with Sicily, was persuaded by Airoidi and his other friends there that the attack upon Vella and his discovery was due only to a spiteful clique, and, with characteristic energy, for eight years, devoted himself to defending Vella against all comers. But among Tychsen's friends was also Simone Assemani. From the beginning he was persuaded, that the Codices were fraudulent. On the other hand he looked upon Vella as merely the accidental discoverer not as the actual forger. For years he remained a believer in the personal integrity of Vella. In an early letter to Tychsen he wrote: "Io ho conosciuto a Malta personalmente il Sign. Abbate Vella; certamente è un uomo incapace d'impostura". Tychsen promptly made known this favourable opinion to Archbishop Airoidi, who of course informed Vella of it and we have just seen how this testimonial, under the warmth of Vella's fertile imagination, grew into something quite different. Later on, in August, 1789, Assemani again wrote to Tychsen: "Puo darsi che l'autore di essa sia veramente un Maltese, nemeno del nostro Sign. Abbate Vella che io sempre defenderò la sua innocenza perché l'ho conosciuto per un uomo onestissimo." It was only much later after Vella's trial and sentence to fifteen years' confinement in a fortress, that Assemani found out that he had all along been guilty of a confusion of identity. On the 22 April, 1798 he wrote to Tychsen acknowledging that he had mixed up the egregious Vella with poor M.A. Vassalli: "Io sinora ho creduto che questo Vella sia quello che insegnava la lingua Arabica in Malta mentre io mi trovo in quell'Isola, ma ora vedo che mi sono ingannato, ed io ho confuso il Sig. Vassalli che è attale Profes. di LL.00. in Malta e ben intende la lingua Arabica ed è un uomo assai onesto e di somma probità."

Too late, Tychsen became aware that the sole authority outside of Sicily on whose testimonial to Vella's character he had reckoned had failed him. Tychsen was horrified. He wrote to his old friend Silv de Sacy: "Ich will in meinem Leben deu Worten eines Abts und Erzbischofs nicht mehr trauen—I will never again take the word of an Abbot or Archbishop". The 'Abbot' was Vella who had got S. Pancrazio for his service to Sicilian history, and the 'Archbishop' was Airoidi who had himself been duped before being used by the astute Vella to dupe Tychsen. Tychsen had not only laboured publicly and privately on Vella's behalf but he had published the preface to the Martinian Codex in the *Elementale Arabicum* (Rostock 1792) as a

specimen of “Morrish-Sicilian”. The same Codex had been most painstakingly translated into German by Hausleutner and published in three fat volumes. In Italy a large number were hoaxed, among them Pope Pius VI whose letter to Vella imploring the impostor to spare his poor eyes and not, spend all his time poring over intricate manuscripts, is not without its amusing side.

The German scholar Hager (called in the Italian accounts Ager, and Agher) was in Palermo in 1794 and in his narrative (*Reise*, 1795) had spoken disparagingly of Vella’s “Livy”. On the last page of his little book he gives a specimen from this Arabic “Livy” in which the Sardinians are described as *very* perverse and where the Arabic equivalent of ‘very’ is our old Maltese friend ‘*wisq*’. His strictures in the formal Report, which he was later called upon to make, only confirmed the doubts already expressed by other scholars. Suspicion had already become general about the bona fides of all translations that purported to be from the Arabic. In 1793 M. A. Vassalli had published his *Triq Monumenta Lapidea*. We may surmise that it was some misgiving about Vassalli’s transliteration that led Angelino the Librarian at Palermo, in October of the following year, to send copies of the inscriptions to Tychsen to see what HE could make of them. In a later letter to Tychsen, Angelino mentions that, before sending the inscriptions to Tychsen, he had given them to Vella who however had been utterly at a loss, for any explanation. “Antequam vero ad te mitterem Arabica monumenta V. Kal. Octobris tuis illustrationibus illustranda qua in re mihi humanissime morem gessisti Vellam adii ut obscurarum inscriptionum mihi esset Interpres” (5 April, 1795). Tychsen’s answer to the previous letter, dated 13 Jan., 1794 is presumably the letter alluded to by Mich. Amari, *Le Epigrafi Arabiche*; 1879, p. 35 when speaking of M. A. Vassalli’s rendering of these olden tombstones.

The sources to be consulted are Hager, *Nachricht von einer merkwürdigen Literarischen Betrügerey*, Leipzig, 1799; Eichhorn, the great Bible critic *Allgemeine Bibliothek*, 1799; and Hartmann, *Beilage zu den C. C. Tychsen’s Verdiensten*, Bremen, 1818. Eichhorn, ib. p. 144, p. 213 has a passing allusion to M. A. Vassalli’s works but it was Hartmann who showed the dire consequences of Assemani’s mistake in confusing him with Vella.