New document reveals Wassali was never married

Mikiel Anton Wassali (1764-1829) is widely considered as the ‘father of the Maltese language’. Since his first biography by Ninu Cremona in 1937, researchers have been conjecturing about his ‘marriage’ to Caterina Formosa de Fremeaux. Mark A Sammut, following a recent crucial find in France, tells CHARLES XUEREB how this question may be put to rest once and for all.

Many agree that research on the life of Maltese patriot Mikiel Anton Wassali, especially during the years he spent in exile mostly in France in the early 19th century, works in progress. Following his refugee years on Corsica (1803-1807) and a brief decisive visit to Paris in September 1807, Wassali appears to have settled in Marseilles with apparent valid economic prospects. What new opportunities drew him there?

Early 19th-century France aimed to expand its cotton-spinning industry. Wassali was one of the few who succeeded in convincing the French government that they could start producing cotton on French soil. Alain Blondy tells us that Wassali started out as government agent for the cultivation of cotton in La Ciotat, a small town close to Marseilles.

Who was Wassali’s long life partner? Caterina Formosa de Fremeaux? Was she his father’s long-time companion? Caterina appears to have been the daughter of Agostino Formosa de Fremeaux and his wife Paolica nee Mano. The Mansos were wealthy, well-connected slave merchants. Agostino was the consular representative of a number of countries, the representative of the Leghorn Jews, the Comptroller of the Order’s Customs and the Treasurer of a Masonic lodge of which numerous Knights and important Maltese were members.

“We have to ask if we have the right to ‘pry’ into the private life of a national symbol!”

Many details about Caterina are still shrouded in mystery. She was buried in 1851, aged 66, by the Protestants. I haven’t found her birth registration, and she doesn’t appear either in Gauci’s books on the genealogy of the Maltese nobility or in Agostino’s and Paolica’s common will.

How did Caterina encounter Wassali?

We aren’t yet in a position to answer such questions. As you yourself have established, there’s no mention of her during Wassali’s refugee years on Corsica.

However, there is one important, ethical issue that many of us ask ourselves: why should we seek answers or are these trivial pursuits that detract from the real significance of Wassali as a national symbol?

Did you come across any documentation that could throw light on Wassali’s quest for financial assistance to repel his family’s economic scant conditions when he resettled in Malta in 1820?

Wassali had started two cotton cultivation enterprises, one in France, the other in Spain, and both went bust. So he returned to Malta as an impoverished man and sought help. I’ll quote three instances that give me thinking.

First, he wrote to Bishop Mattei to ask the prelate to intervene on his behalf in a land-related dispute. If indeed Caterina was Agostino’s daughter, then one of her sisters was married to a cousin in the first degree of the bishop’s.

Second, the Protestants hired Wassali to translate the Gospels for them (he did so, but from the Catholic version). It seems that Wassali was introduced to the Protestants by Cleardo Naudi, a first-degree maternal cousin of Caterina’s.

Third, when Wassali issued a public notice for subscriptions for his new publication, he did this through Notary Ignazio Molinos, whose baptism’s godfather had been Caterina’s maternal grandfather Melchiorre Mamo.

It is crystal clear that upon returning to Malta, Wassali sought the help (also) of his in-laws, as any reasonable man would have done. Did he approach Caterina’s father? I don’t know.

My only question in this context is: why did Wassali’s second son Michelantonio sign his book on emigration to North Africa as ‘M A Vassali Formose de Fremeaux’? His brothers Gabriele and Saverio referred to themselves only as ‘Vassali’.

There are still many mysteries surrounding Wassali. The point now is: should we seek answers or are these trivial pursuits that detract from the real significance of Wassali as a national symbol?

A verisimilous image of Mikiel Anton Wassali from details in police description of Wassali in 1807 when he visited Paris (found by Charles Xuereb in 2013).

Did you come across any documentation that could throw light on Wassali’s quest for financial assistance to repel his family’s economic scant conditions when he resettled in Malta in 1820?

Wassali had started two cotton cultivation enterprises, one in France, the other in Spain, and both went bust. So he returned to Malta as an impoverished man and sought help. I’ll quote three instances that give me thinking.

First, he wrote to Bishop Mattei to ask the prelate to intervene on his behalf in a land-related dispute. If indeed Caterina was Agostino’s daughter, then one of her sisters was married to a cousin in the first degree of the bishop’s.

Second, the Protestants hired Wassali to translate the Gospels for them (he did so, but from the Catholic version). It seems that Wassali was introduced to the Protestants by Cleardo Naudi, a first-degree maternal cousin of Caterina’s.

Third, when Wassali issued a public notice for subscriptions for his new publication, he did this through Notary Ignazio Molinos, whose baptism’s godfather had been Caterina’s maternal grandfather Melchiorre Mamo.

It is crystal clear that upon returning to Malta, Wassali sought the help (also) of his in-laws, as any reasonable man would have done. Did he approach Caterina’s father? I don’t know.

My only question in this context is: why did Wassali’s second son Michelantonio sign his book on emigration to North Africa as ‘M A Vassali Formose de Fremeaux’? His brothers Gabriele and Saverio referred to themselves only as ‘Vassali’.

There are still many mysteries surrounding Wassali. The point now is: should we seek answers or are these trivial pursuits that detract from the real significance of Wassali as a national symbol?