KARM SANT

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-żewg siltiet minn żewg ittri li kibeb minn Malta, wahda fid-29 ta’ Jannar 1823 u l-ohra fit-28 ta’ Marzu 1823, it-tejn indirizzati l-is-Segretarju tie-Church Missionary Society.

Fl-ewwel wahda jghid li kien qieghed jaḥdem fuq traduzzjoni gidda tal-Vangel flimkien ma’ Dr C. Naudi u juri x-xewwa tieghu li jkomplu bit-Testament il-Ġdid kollu: itda wara sitt snin esperienza mis-sena 1817 ‘il quddiem beda jħoss it-toqol ta’ xogħol ta’ din ix-xorta:

“Dr Naudi and myself are now preparing a complete New Version of the Gospels. 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-fifths.”

“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/MS/39/11).

L-ghajnuna Maltija li kien jistenna ma damitt ma ġietu, għax iltaqa’ ma’ Vassalli. Kif u meta ma jghidx, itda milli jdidhe ma damx, għax tliet xar wara f’din il-tieni ittra jghid li kien digħ tat 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 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. He has given me St Matthew’s Gospel and is now on St. Mark: I never incurred an expense with greater satisfaction than this. We shall need for the Maltese Gospels a new letter cutting viz. g. 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 it. 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/MS/39/17)

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


Malta 8 Agosto 1828

Reverendo Signore Stigmatizzato

Per la via del Sig. Schlienz 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. Capitol; onde all’arrivo di questa spero saranno terminati. La lunghessa e l’intensità del calore eccessivo e senza cessa dai primi Maggio finora m’ha cagionato delle malattie, ed un giovinefo ne’ pidi che m’impedisca di sortire da casa, e siamo ancora nel forte del bollente.

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

No. 96. Kemm kyu kyn a(h)jār (ghalia) e non Kyn jkun.

116. u jydfen (e non ydsen)

137. byb li (hr)rgyt (e non (h)rgyt)

161. Mahrub (e non ma(h)rüb) e casi 4 versi sotto

170. (gharνuq (non Gharνuq)

199. ... fuq ... rjus (non fųq rjus)

221. ...jmar...mgbqur (non ü)

387. ...yssir mdrorria

414. ... fa (b)xi, (si metta la virgola)

436. Saggjunge nel 2º verso byl hyna

440. (Xa(au)atu (si leverà l’è)

499. La yezzbla (h) (si mette (x))

512. loghob u (h)lyqa (leva via yl)

519. ...zymlek (coll’accento à)

521. Yi ma(gh)kds (non u)

525. ...chi dilapida (cioè s’aggiunge chi)

693. (h)mör (coll à)

709. jkûn (non u)
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 relics 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 relicts, 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 expense 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 impression 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 separate, we declined the offer.

As the poor orphans were next to naked, when we received them, we had to clothe 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 excercising 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 Package 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:

Michele Antonio 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 engraved. 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. STUDIJU U TRADUTTUR


Jidhrilla għalhekk li jirraq li l-lejla nghidu xi haqa fuq dan il-personaggi importanti fl-istorja ta’ Malta. L-ewwel nagħtu nota bijografika, imbagħad nghidu x’kien il-kontribut tieghu fil-qasam tat-Bibija.

Nota Bijografika


Vassalli miet il-Pjetà. Schlienz jghidilna li billi Vassalli qatt ma stqarr li hu Protestant, ried jifnu f'ċemitjeru Kattoliku. Il-kappillan qallu li, sa nikkwota lil Schlienz stess: “that Vassalli never had been legally married” u difnu f'ċemitjeru Protestant.

**Ix-Xoghol Linguistiku ta’ Vassalli**

Vassalli kien l-ewwel wiehel li poġġa l-istudju tal-Malti fuq is-sod. L-iskop tieghu kien li permezz ta’ kitba Maltija serja jkun jista’ jghalam u jeduka l-poplu; ta’ dan kellu quddimu l-esperienza tal-Knisija, ghax l-istruzjoni religjuża tal-poplu kien issir bil-Malti; xi hamsin sena qabel l-Iqsof Alpheran kien ippubblika Katekiżmu bil-Malti mpreparrat minn Wzzino.


Pubblikizzjonijiet oħra ta’ Vassalli ma nsibx oħra qabel fl-1827 meta ppubblika bil-għajnuna ta’ Frere u C.M.S. il-grammatica bit-Taljan, stampata hawn Malta; il-Proverbi fl-1828; u fl-1829, wara mewtu, il-Vangeli u l-Att ta’ l-Appostli stampati Londra.

**Vassalli Traduttur tal-Vangeli u l-Att**

Meta Vassalli rega’ lura minn barra fl-1828 Rev. W. Jowett kien qiegħed jithabat biex jirrevedi t-traduzjoni tal-Vangeli ta’ G.M. Canolo, anzi kellu f’rasu li flimmikx ma’ Dr C. Naudi jipperpara traduzjoni jgida mill-ewwel. Kien qiegħed ifittegx jistenna xi Malti kapaċi jgħixu sewwa: ghax li kien kuent b’Canolo u anqas b’Naudi. fl-ahhar iltaqa’ ma’ Vassalli: “In the meantime, jiktek 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 reeins (sic.). His style is so much superior to that of Canolo and Dr Naudi that I rejoice in having him…” (*C.M.S. — C/ME 39/17*). Dan kien ‘Marzu ta’ l-1823, u kien diġa tah San Mattew, igiżieri kien ilu mill-anqas xahrejn jew aktar li ittaqa’ mieghu.

Sentejn wara — sadanittan ma ssemma xejn iżjed fuq it-traduzjoni — Vassalli beda jghallem l-Università, u beda jinsisti li qabel l-istampa tal-Vangeli, jistampaw il-Grammatika tal-Malti, bit-Taljan. Jowett irassensja 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-Grammatika bherget f’Ssettembru ta’ l-1827, u l-Ktieb tal-Proverbi fl-1828. U hekk wasal il-waqt tat-traduzjoni. Jowett fuq suggeriment ta’ Frere, issuggexxli li jistampaw ix-xoghol Cambridge. Jowett insista li jekk Cambridge ma jaċċettaw “the Society (C.M.S.) should guarantee the expenses attendant on the work, which at the same time, it had better not come ostensibly the public least umbrage should be taken by Cambridge or religjuż by Malta.” Cambridge ma aċċettax ix-xoghol, ghalhekk Jowett tela’ Londra biex jieuh hsieb l-istampa ghand Watts; jaqra l-provi hu u mbaghad jibghathom lil Vassalli f’Malti biex jara l-ahhar provi. Jowett ma dherlux ru l-kella istampahom il-B.F.B.S., minhabba l-instabbillità tal-lingua; aktar tad tista’ tohdomhom hi.

F’Lulu ta’ l-istess sena Schlienz kibeb lil Jowett fejn qallu li kien qiegħed jirrevedi x-xoghol ta’ Vassalli li ma kienx f’siku. F’Awissu, Vassalli stess jiktek lil Jowett: io gja riveda gli Atti e sono al X capitolo: ando all’arrivo di questa speso saranno terminati. Fit-3 ta’ Jannar, disat ijjem qabel il-mewt, Schlienz igħarraf lil Jowett li Vassalli jrid jaqra l-provi hu; u ma ridux jirrevedi t-traduzjoni ta’ l-itra lir-Rumanu: “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.” Disatt ijjem wara Vassalli mit ma bla lahaq ra stampati l-Vangeli u l-Att. Il-volum kien lest fit xurara u hareg bid-data ta’ l?1-1829. Minn dan jidher ċar ukoll li Vassalli ma lahaqx lestata Testimont il-Gidid kollu; l-aktar li seta’ ghamel abbozza xi haqa ħafif ħafif u xejn aktar. Il-bqjja tat-T.G. kellu jghaddi f’idejn oħra.

**Il-Kwilalità tat-Traduzjoni**

Vassalli ta l-ewwel abbozzi tat-traduzjoni tieghu f’insqan minn xahrejn žmien; igiżieri li kellu f’idejn il-manuskritti u l-volum stampat ta’ Canolo; ghalhekk hemm rabta bejn il-więheb u l-iehor. Ċerti espruzzjonijiet ma titax tispiegahom hlied ta’ kuntatt direkt bejniethom. Idza Vassalli kien superjuri hafna ghal Canolo, u baqqa’ inklinat biex juża Malti semitiku u jwarrab il-kliem barrani.

V. TAHGRIF G'DID FUQ M.A. VASSALLI
Dr Cleardo Naudi u Giuseppe Canolo

Sa fejn naf jen s’issa qatt ma kellna dokument li jurina fejn kien joqghod sewwa M.A. Vassalli wara li gie mill-zejlu fil-1820.


L-aktar skoperta importanti hi r-registrazione ta’ l-1828, is-sena ta’ qabel il-mewt ta’ Vassalli li grat fit-12 ta’ Jannar 1829. Fit-taqsim tal-Pietà—dan ir-rahal kien jaghmel mal-Parroċca ta’ San Pawl tal-Belt—insibu din in-nota:

| Strada Misda detta tal-Guarda Mangia | No 2 – 2 Casa Sospetta
| Michele Vassallo (sic) sospetto(ò) | Caterina fig.
| Gabriele | Michele | Saverio


Dr Cleardo Naudi u Giuseppe Canolo


Dan it-tahgrif, żgħir kemmu hu żgħir, ikompil jixiżt dawn gdid fuq il-hidna lingwistiko-religijus ta’ l-ewwel nofs is-sektu tal-hakma Ingliza f’Malta, meta l-attività Protestanta kienet qawwija u aggressiva³.

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2. Ibid., p. 66.
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 Rome. 1

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 preface, I consulted the archives of the College of the Propaganda Fide; those of the University known at the same time as Archigymnasion 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 1931. Nor did the Maronite Fathers in their own archives at the college. 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 University.

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 Syrochaldiac and Oriental Christian Liturgy. Each of them lectured for one period daily, in the morning or in the afternoon, throughout the week.

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 evolvitsem atique perlegissem) Vassalli’s Meliten Grammar (1790) and recommended its publication (....at in publicam lucem quam ciusus prodeat, dignissimam censeo). He refers to Vassalli as an erudite man, (eruditus vir). 2

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’. 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 Meliten(ensis) 3


Vassallo Michael Antonio, Maltese, resides in the buildings of S. Panteleone in Monti, in the parish of St. Salvatore. Studies Arabic language. 4

In 1789 he registered again in the fifth class of languages: Michael Antonius Vassallus Meliten (sic) hab(itat) in aedibus S. Panteleonis ad Montes Parociae S. Salvatoris.

Michael Antonio Vassallus, Maltese resides in the buildings of S. Pantaleo in the Mountains of the Parish S. Salvatore. 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 declination in his petition to open a school of Maltese in 1792. 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. 5 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 1824. 6
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 became 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 abroad. 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 calendario of his daily Mass at the Tarxien Parish Church.

1. A. Cremona, M.A. Vassalli and His Times, Malta 1940, p. 12.
10. Ibid.
11. Ibid.
13. Ibid., p. 20.
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 N-Ħaqdla tal-Kittiebla 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 Schlienz 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 right-hand man was Rev. C.F. Schlienz, 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 ages 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 Celleja 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 Napeleon 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 Celleja, 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 Cledro Naudi and Giuseppe Canolo, both friends of Vassalli, from the Archives of the Parish of Porto Salvo, Valletta (Lehen il-Malt 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 (Saghtar, March 1979). Finally Rev E. Fenech published the first leaflet announcing the publication of Lexicon (In-Nazzjon Taghna, 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. Schlienz, 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.