

M.A. VASSALLI'S COMMERCIAL ACTIVITY

Vassalli's biographers express doubts as to how he was able to procure enough money for his stay in Rome, for his travels, and even to publish his books. Ninu Cremona, believes that Mikiel Anton might have been helped by his mother or some other close relative.¹ Fortunato Panzavecchia says that "although the resources of Vassalli's fortune were small, this man found means to publish in Rome a Maltese grammar in Latin and a Maltese lexicon translated into Latin and Italian."² Carm Sant, when discussing Vassalli's sojourn in Rome, asks a direct question, "Did he indulge in some other gainful occupation?"³

Some years ago, whilst researching on Vassalli at the Palace Archives (now transferred to the *Banca Giuratale* in Mdina) I came across a court case which may offer a partial answer to the above questions.

Vassalli was involved in litigation with Giuseppe Caruana and they appeared in front of the Supreme Court of Justice in 1797.⁴

The Case

The case was more of a commercial nature. It started in 1793 when Vassalli who at the time was living in Rome, ordered two chests of cotton yarn from a general merchant. Giuseppe Caruana from Vittoriosa. The goods were ordered through Gioacchino Camenzuli, Caruana's partner and *padrone* of the galley *San Luigi*.

The goods arrived at Civitavecchia on September 4, 1795. Three days later these two boxes were freed from customs by Matteo Tolomoni, a relative of the Maltese Ambassador in Rome, at the request of Felice Attard, an acquaintance of Caruana and a frequent visitor to Rome.

However, when the contents of these two boxes were weighed by a public weigher at Vassalli's residence, they were found to be short of the expected weight. They weighed only 49½ pounds instead of 50. Besides, according to Vassalli, the cotton yarn received was of an inferior quality and had to be sold at a cheaper price—between 45 and 62 *baiocchi* per pound instead of 70. He also submitted a claim of 19 *piastre a colonna* and 29½ *baiocchi* to Caruana.

After a detailed study of the claims put by both parties, the Court accepted Caruana's claim that instead of 50 pounds, the cases contained 59½. Vassalli naturally appealed from this sentence delivered on March 7, 1797, maintaining that the amount to be paid, at 18 *paoli* per rotolo, was too heavy considering the precarious state he was living in at the moment.

Vassalli and the Cotton Industry

Vassalli had a long and strong connection with cotton cultivation, its spinning, weaving and trading. He came from Żebbuġ, one of the most important centres of cotton growing and processing. His family owned fields and lands sown with cotton. At the time many farmers were abandoning other crops to grow cotton which was yielding good profits.⁵

Vassalli knew of all the steps in the process of treating cotton, from sowing to the manufacture of linen. He knew of the best quality and the defects in the product.

While compiling his *Lexicon*, he visited his homeland several times to find the exact and detailed meaning of no fewer than 97 words connected with the cotton industry. In his *Discorso Preliminare* to the *Lexicon* he said he was “well versed in this art of spinning and weaving”, and that he “even practised it in Malta and Italy”.

During Vassalli’s times, cotton was one of Malta’s chief exports. There was a great demand for Maltese cotton on the Continent; in Spain, France and along the Adriatic coast. There was even a demand for Maltese cotton seed. In fact, Sicilian farmers used to renew their seeds every five years with Maltese ones. To protect this industry, laws had to be enacted to control exports, standard and quality.⁶

Vassalli knew all this and to raise money for a living and to publish books, he tried his lot at cotton trading knowing well that he could communicate directly with so many foreigners through the languages he possessed.

His books

In 1790, when Vassalli was just 26 years old, he published his first work, *Alfabet Malti Mfysser byl Malti u byt-Talyan* in 24 pages. A year later he published his first Maltese grammar in Latin, *Mylsen Phoenico-Punicum sive Grammatica Melitensis* comprising 236 pages. Three years later he launched the translation of the three Kufic inscriptions he saw the previous year while passing through Palermo.

After the years of study, travelling and research, in 1796 he managed to raise enough money to publish his *magnum opus*, *Ktyb Yl Klym Malti 'Mfysser Byl-Latin u Byt-Talyan or the Lexicon*, comprising 385 pages with 681 columns, quite an expensive book to print at the time. All these books were printed in Rome by Antonio Fulgoni, the *Propaganda Fidei* printer. Thirty-two years unfortunately had to pass before Vassalli published another book.

Agent in Rome

To raise funds for these publications Vassalli, acted as agent and traded in a number of commodities.

The documents attached to the court case under study yield a mine of information about a number of social topics, concerning trade, communications, monetary transactions with a variety of currencies and the transmission of post. But what is special about these documents is the new perspective in which Vassalli is projected.

At that time Malta had a lot of *entrepot* trade, and Vassalli tried to find markets for a number of goods, in this case sugar, which was scarce in Naples.

His submissions show that he had French, Swiss, Jewish and German customers. He sold yarn to a Swiss who lived in a palace in Monte Cavallo (now the Quirinale); to a cloth dealer named Depedibus living in Piazza di San Carlo dei Cattinari, to a woman draper dealing in linen whose husband had an adjoining shop for ribbons.

Another customer mentioned in this case was a German lady, Catherina Melini, who was his neighbour when living in Via della Scrofa in 1793, on top of the Mononi public house or inn. He also had some customers among the French *émigrés* living near the Church of San Carlo de Borgognoni and others in the vicinity of the Jewish ghetto.

Finance

The details and the way he argued with Giuseppe Caruana show that Vassalli was well versed in matters concerning money, currencies, rates of exchange and other financial matters. He must have been an efficient agent in securing good prices at the right time and place. It would be most interesting to discover other merchants who used Vassalli as their agent.

In this case besides cotton, mention is made of trading sugar. In his letter of August 30, 1793, Vassalli wrote to Gioacchino Camenzuli, Caruana's partner, that he had just arrived from Naples where sugar was scarce and the little available fetched very high prices.

Vassalli told Camenzuli that if he had a sample with him, he would have done good business. In fact Vassalli exhorted Camenzuli to send a sample by a courier without loss of time. Vassalli was eager to have some yarn because, he said, he had a very good demand for it, meaning, good profits.

However, Vassalli explained that the main drawback was the scarcity of liquid cash. The highest price he could get for cotton was 70 *baiocchi* per pound (*libbra*) or 18 *paoli* per rotolo which was equivalent to 4 *scudi* (?) *grani*. To avoid a premium on the rate of exchange and make good profit, one had to order some merchandise from the Papal States or Naples.

His Residence

This case gives some indication of where Vassalli lived or could be contacted in Rome. In his letter to Camenzuli of August 30, 1793, he told him to address all items to *Abbate Michelantonio Vassalli alla scrofa dalla tedesca sopra Mononi*. He had already been using the title "*Abbate*" for some years. On the other hand, in these documents, he is qualified as *Professore di Lingue Orientali* only once, when he signed his submissions of September 4, 1795.

During the proceedings he is referred to by others as *Signor Vassallo*. During the period of this dispute, Caruana or Camenzuli chased him everywhere he moved. Most probably either Camenzuli himself or Felice Attard, their courier, tried to trace the man.

Felice Attard testified that in September 1795 he called on Vassalli to collect the balance due to Caruana. Vassalli replied that within a short time he would depart for Malta and settle himself the account with Caruana.

Critical Time

This was a very critical time for Vassalli. He was then seeing his *Lexicon* being printed by Fulgoni. He could not leave for Malta before revising the printed sheets for any errors and an eventual *Errata Corrigenda*. It was important for him to return to Malta, bringing with him as many copies as possible of the Vocabulary which had already been subscribed to.

Vassalli was fully aware of what was to face him as soon as he arrived here. In fact he brought with him all papers and documents relative to this dispute, customs policy and details of the sale of the yarn to prove his point. He returned to Malta in the first half of December, 1796. The first summons were served to him on 13th December 1796 by the Court marshal Salvatore Savona in the presence of Giuseppe Gatt and Francesco Borg.

Piazza Colonna

Vassalli's original letter ordering cotton carries at least two addresses. One tells us that he lived in "*Piazza Colonna in casa con l'avvocato Pace*" and "*nel Palazzo Spinelli nella Piazza di Venezia*".

These addresses, although somewhat vague, give us an indication of where Vassalli used to live.

From *Via della Scrofa*, Vassalli moved to *Piazza Colonna*. This square underwent little changes since the end of the 18th century. The column of Marcus Aurelius (Colonna Antoniana) still dominates the open space surrounded by rich palaces built by the noble families and Cardinals of Rome. Many of these Roman Palaces, besides being furnished with rich furniture and paintings, were also the holders of vast libraries. Some of these libraries were open to students and the public.

Palazzo Chigi, built by the former Inquisitor in Malta, Fabio Chigi and later elected to the Chair of Peter as Alexander VII, stocked thousands of books and codices, all accessible to the public. Vassalli might have availed himself of this service and consulted learned linguistic works at the Chigi Library.

L'Avvocato Pace

In Piazza Colonna Vassalli lived "*in casa con l'avvocato Pace*". Here again we have new light on Vassalli's close friendship and connections with persons with open tendencies towards ideals inspired by the French Revolution.

Giuseppe Elia Pace was a Maltese lawyer practising the legal profession in the very heart of Rome. He was a very active Jacobine and a staunch francophile. In fact, as soon as the French troops arrived at the gates of Rome on 15th February, 1798, under General Berthier, Pace led a small group of Jacobines and planted the first three Liberty Poles; one on the Campidoglio, one in Piazza del Popolo and another in Piazza di Spagna. After the Proclamation of the Roman Republic, Pace was appointed a civil judge and later to the high post of Minister of the Interior. His two great tasks were restoring order and solving the precarious food problem within the City. The first he achieved but the second only partially.⁷

This friendship between Vassalli and Pace, brought Mikiel Anton closer to a circle of Jacobines and other supporters of the French Republican ideas. Vassalli might have become an active member of the Jacobine Club of Rome and as soon as he returned to Malta, he joined the local Club. He eventually headed the group and led the conspiracy against the Order.

Palazzo Spinelli

Just before returning to Malta in 1796, Vassalli was residing in *Palazzo Spinelli nella Piazza di Venezia*. This palace was not so easy to trace and locate.

Piazza Venezia and its surrounding buildings suffered major changes since Vassalli's times. The Piazza, proper, was smaller, about a third of its present size. During the period 1885–1911, when the project for the erection of the Vittorio Emanuele II Monument was in progress, some old palaces and blocks of buildings were demolished to afford space and open areas for a better view of the Monument. The buildings opposite Palazzo Venezia were pulled down and even the slope of the Capitoline Hill was altered to suit the project.

Among these buildings there were the Chapel of Our Lady *presso San Marco*, Palazzo Parracciani, the Hospital of the Università de' Fornari Italiani, Palazzo Bolognetti and the Church of San Romualdo and Ospizio de' Camaldolesi. Palazzo Spinelli was also in this area, where to-day stands the Prefecture of Rome. In the space created, the Palazzo delle Assicurazioni Generali di Venezia was built in 1907. The Palazzetto di Venezia was however pulled down but reconstructed with the same material on the present site in 1911.

Palazzo Spinelli changed hands and its name during its three-centuries of life. It was built in 1585 on the design and plans of Padre Maestro Domenico Paganelli, a Dominican Friar. It was then the property of Cardinal Renato Imperiali who bequeathed his enormous library for public use. Later this palace passed into the hands of the Dukes Bonelli, and became known as Palazzo Bonelli. Later, in about 1750, it was acquired by Cardinal Spinelli who restored it, enhanced the already rich library and made it available to the public.⁸ Vassalli might have also availed himself of this library to consult dictionaries and other linguistic works of reference which he mentions in his *Discorso Preliminare* of the *Lexicon*, pages XXXVIII and XXXVII.

During Vassalli's stay in Rome about sixteen privately owned large libraries were open to students.⁹

The note "Palazzo Spinelli nella Piazza di Venezia" tends to suggest that Vassalli was living in the rear part of the Palazzo Spinelli.

The main entrance to this palace overlooked Piazza SS. XII Apostoli. The rear part, presumably used by the household and some accommodation let to individuals, like Vassalli, faced the square of Our Lady of Loreto. Gianbattista Nolli's *Nuova Pianta di Roma*, dated 1748 illustrates all this.¹⁰

This was Vassalli's residence before returning to Malta, in December 1796, ready to face all odds.

He did in fact face all sorts of trouble, including proceedings for the balance due to Caruana. But this was nothing like the serious trouble he faced about conspiring against the state, imprisonment, poverty, hunger and finally dying in extreme poverty.

The details in this case make one think strongly that this was not an isolated commercial activity by Vassalli. It may be the first to come to our attention, but surely others may lie in oblivion, with layers of dust on them.

Fortunately this is a fully documented case; others which have been transacted without any disagreement will most probably remain unrecorded.

This case shows beyond any doubt that Vassalli was no amateur agent or trader. He had experience and was able to handle merchandise, trade, explore new markets and secure the best prices for goods from Malta. Apart from its legal interest, it casts a new light on the activities of Vassalli whilst in Rome.

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3. Sant, C., *M.A. Vassalli's sojourn in Rome (1788–1790)*, *The Sunday Times*, April 3, 1983, p. 9.
4. National Archives (Rabat), *Supremum Justitiae Magistratum*, March, 1797, Vol. 238, no pagination.
5. Pace, Pawlu, *Vassalli u l-industrija tal-qoton*, unpublished thesis, University of Malta, 1968.
6. Price, Charles A., *Malta and the Maltese*, Melbourne, 1954, pp. 2, 3.
7. Gladiamagna, D., *Maltesi nella Repubblica del 1798–99–Un Ministro dell'Interno* in "Archivio Storico di Malta," Fasc. III, 1936, pp. 341–347.
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9. Anon, *Roma Antica e Moderna, ossia nuova descrizione*, Roma, Nicola Roisecco, 1765, Vol. 1, p. 255.
10. Nolli, Gianbattista, *Nuova Pianta di Roma*, Roma, 1748.

I wish to acknowledge here the research in this respect carried out in Rome by my brother Fr Silvester Bonavia.