

# The Abate Vella and his Forgeries

## Some notes on the background of his works

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**Abstract:** *In 1793 the Maltese Abate Giuseppe Vella published the Libro del Consiglio di Egitto containing several Arabic and Norman documents which seemed to confirm the absolute power of medieval rulers over the rights and prerogatives of the nobility. It became an important matter in the efforts of Francesco Maria Venanzio d'Aquino, principe di Caramanico, the viceroy of Sicily, and his lawyers and civil servants to justify and legitimize the pruning of the rights and power of the mighty Sicilian barons. In a spectacular trial, most of Vella's works were revealed as forgeries. This paper tries to trace the motives behind this forgery and shows how the abate was most likely inspired by similar frauds in Andalusia.*

**Keywords:** *History of Sicily, Malta, Andalusia / Giuseppe Vella / literary frauds / refeudalization / political reformism of Enlightenment.*

In the last decades of the eighteenth century a similar development of a cautious 'discovery' of Arabic roots took place in Malta and Sicily as well as in Spain. Even more curious is the fact that both in Malta and Sicily and in Southern Spain, the new fascination with Arabic history and culture resulted in some notorious forgeries. Almost at the same time of the activities of some anonymous forgers at Granada and of the Spanish 'scholars' Cristóbal Medina Conde and Juan de Flores y Oddouz, the Maltese cleric Giuseppe Vella rose to fame as translator of Kufic medieval texts which were aimed to have a considerable impact on the restructuring of the contemporary legal and political system of the Kingdom of Naples.

When one delves deeper into Vella's activities, one wonders whether the Maltese chaplain and his Sicilian supporters and 'benefactors' were not encouraged or inspired by the events in Granada and Andalusia. As will be shown later on, it can be taken for granted that some of the main actors of the Vella affair knew perfectly well what had been going on in Andalusia. This was already indicated by the most obstinate detective on the trails of Abate Vella, the professor from Vienna Joseph Hager. In his *Nachricht von einer merkwürdigen litterarischen Betrügerey* (1799) and the expert report on Vella's translation of Kufic and Arabic documents

which he presented to the Neapolitan court,<sup>1</sup> Hager compares Vella's works with the Arabic documents which had been found at Granada. In fact Hager had a profound knowledge of this subject as the Austrian scholar had been in Madrid in 1790<sup>2</sup> to study Arabic manuscripts in the library of the Escorial and in other Spanish archives. He assumed that the masterminds of the Sicilian forgeries were influenced by what had happened in Andalusia, namely in the circles of some Morisco scholars. The Moriscos were Moors who had stayed on and had been baptized against their free will after the fall of Granada in 1492. Their forced conversion started after 1500. Many of them had continued, however, to adhere secretly to Islam. The last of these crypto-Muslims (as they were also called) were eventually expelled from Spain between 1609 and 1614.<sup>3</sup>

Thus, to unravel the underlying forces which led to these forgeries in Palermo in the 1780s, it is imperative to keep in mind significant events which date from earlier centuries. On 18 March 1588 workers discovered a leaden box under the ruins of a minaret in Granada, containing relics of St Stephen, a painting, and a parchment supposedly written by the patron saint of Granada, St Cecilio. The parchment contained a text in Latin, Arabic, and Castillian.<sup>4</sup> The interpreter of the Spanish king, Miguel de Luna,<sup>5</sup> and the scholars Luis Farjado, Francisco López Tamarid, and Alonso del Castillo<sup>6</sup> were asked to translate the Arabic text. The archbishop of Granada, Don Juan Méndez de Salvaterra, was immediately thrilled because the discoveries would increase the prestige of his see. Archbishop Méndez de Salvaterra and his successor Pedro de Castro ignored warnings regarding the involvement of the Moriscos Miguel de Luna and Alonso del Castillo as possible forgers. Pope Sixtus V gave permission to continue the investigations on the documents' authenticity. But more mysterious things were to come. In February 1595 22 so-called 'books of lead' (*Los libros plúmbeos*) were found at the Sacromonte at Granada. The documents recount the arrival of St James in Spain with the above mentioned St Cecilio among his disciples.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Cf. the examination report which Hager sent to King Ferdinand IV on 7 February 1795, Archivio di Stato, Palermo; R. Segretaria di Sicilia; Incartamenti 5291, no pagination.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Joseph Hager, *Reise von Wien nach Madrid* (Berlin, 1792).

<sup>3</sup> On the Moriscos, cf. the classic book by A. Dominguez Ortiz, B. Vincent, *Historia de los moriscos. Vida y tragedia de una minoria* (Madrid, 1975).

<sup>4</sup> On the scenery of these events, cf. Luis de la Cueva, *Diálogos de las cosas notables de Granada y lengua española y algunas cosas curiosas* (Sevilla, 1603).

<sup>5</sup> On Miguel de Luna, cf. Dario Cabanelas Rodríguez, 'Cartas del morisco granadino Miguel de Luna', *Miscelánea de estudios Árabes y hebraicos* 14–15 (1965–66), pp. 31–47.

<sup>6</sup> On Alonso del Castillo, cf. Dario Cabanelas Rodríguez, 'El morisco granadino Alonso del Castillo', *Miscelánea de Estudios Árabes y Hebreos* 8 (1966).

<sup>7</sup> On the findings in Granada cf. Miguel de Luna, Alonso de Castillo, *Los libros plúmbeos del Sacromonte*. Ed. by Miguel José Hagerty (Madrid, 1980); José Alcántara Godoy, *Historia de los falsos cronicones* (Madrid, 1868); Carlos Alonso, *Los Apócrifos del Sacromonte (Granada). Estudio histórico* (Valladolid,

Only many generations later it was found out that these documents were forgeries. Miguel de Luna's and Alonso del Castillo's activities had political and ideological motives. The Morisco Miguel de Luna and his friends wanted to 'prove' an uninterrupted line of guarantee of the rights of the Moorish Christians – the 'Mudejars' – in the kingdom of Granada. The 'books of lead' were meant to show that the Arabs were the first real Christians in Andalusia.

At the end of the sixteenth century these discoveries caused a considerable echo in Spain and in other European countries. The subject of the finding of the 'books of lead' was taken up by Cervantes in his *Don Quixote*. Cervantes had visited Granada in 1594. Also the great poet Góngora in 1598 wrote a sonnet 'Al monte santo de Granada' which recalls the findings. The mapmakers Braun and Hogenberg in 1598 in their map of Granada included an illustration of them. A few years later Miguel de Luna made up a life of the legendary Visigoth King Roderich from 'old Arabic manuscripts'. In this work the Muslims are portrayed as the true liberators from barbarism. This book was highly successful and by 1650 seven editions of the *Historia verdadera del Rey Don Rodrigo, en la qual se trata la causa principal de la perdida de España, y la conquista, que della hizo Miramamolin Almansor, Rey que fue de Africa, y de las Arabias, y vida. Compuesta por el sabio alcalde Abulcacim Tarif Abentarique, de nacion Arabe*<sup>8</sup> were printed. In 1660 the book was translated into Italian, while in 1671 a French translation was published.<sup>9</sup>

At about the same time of the finding of the 'books of lead' an anonymous Morisco author compiled the so-called 'Evangelio de San Bernabé'. This document shows how cleverly the author had combined Christian and Muslim notions about what makes a true gospel. In fact, modern scholars, like Luis F. Bernabé Pons, have analysed this text, and have concluded it to be a Spanish endeavour to invent an 'evangelical' text which conforms to Islam.<sup>10</sup> The original but lost gospel could then

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1979); Zótico Royo Campos, *Reliquias martiriales y escudo de Sacro-Monte. Estudio preliminar por Miguel L. López Muñoz* (Granada, 1995); Miguel Asín Palacios, 'Los Mss. árabes del Sacro-Monte de Granada', *Revista del Centro de Estudios Históricos de Granada y de su Reino*, 4 (1911); Dario Cabanelas Rodríguez, 'Intento de supervivencia en el ocaso de una cultura: los libros plúmbeos de Granada', *Nueva Revista de Filología Hispánica*, xxx, 2 (1981), pp. 335–58, and most recently L.P. Harvey, G.A. Wieggers, 'The translation from Arabic of the Sacromonte tablets and the archbishop of Granada. An illuminating correspondence', *Qurtuba. Estudios Andalusies* (1996), pp. 59–79. The fabulous 'libros plúmbeos' were returned to Granada from Rome in June 2000.

<sup>8</sup> On Miguel de Luna's book on King Rodrigo, cf. Francisco Márquez Villanueva, 'La voluntad de leyenda de Miguel de Luna.', *Nueva Revista de Filología Hispánica* xxx, 2 (1981), pp. 359–95; Ramón Menéndez Pidal, *Floresta de leyendas heroicas españolas. Rodrigo, el último goda* (Madrid, 1942–44), ii, pp. XLIII–XLVIII.

<sup>9</sup> Cf. Ali Abençufian [i.e. Miguel de Luna], *La Vie du Roy Almansor* (Amsterdam, 1671).

<sup>10</sup> Cf. in detail Luis F. Bernabé Pons, 'Zur Wahrheit und Echtheit des Barnabasevangeliums', in R. Kirste (ed.), *Wertewandel und religiöse Umbrüche. Religionen im Gespräch* (n. pl., 1996), iv, pp. 133–88. On the Barnabas-Evangelium, cf. also Safiyya M. Lingés, *Das Barnabas Evangelium* (Bonndorf, 1994).

be made to pass as a predecessor of the Qur'ān. That is why Jesus returns to earth to assign to Barnabas, his most reliable disciple, the task of writing down what he manages to recall. Jesus is reduced to the status of a forerunner and messenger, and is assigned the role of John the Baptist, who disappeared from the gospel. The anonymous forger of the 'Evangelio de San Bernabé' opts for a 'Christian' solution. The form of his gospel tallies with the traditional Christian one. The message is clear: by choosing a Christian model and retouching a great part of the material drawn from the four gospels, and describing it from the Islamic point of view, the author tried to demonstrate how close the Christian church and Islam are. So the text was meant to help Moriscos to find a legitimate place next to Christians in Spain.

In the meantime the Curia had ordered an investigation of the authenticity of the discoveries at Granada. In 1642 the 'books of lead' were transferred to Rome. The commission was headed by the great Jesuit scholar Athanasius Kircher. However, no definite conclusion was reached. Only in 1682 did the Curia in Rome pass negative judgement on these documents because of their Islamic ideas. History repeated itself: even in Granada, this time in the Alhambra and the Acazaba, between 1754 and 1764 other sensational discoveries were made, consisting of 'numerous inscriptions written on ore, lead, and stone'.<sup>11</sup> The discovery roused great interest all over Europe, although many, 'tried in vain to decipher these rare and unknown script, like Court de Gebelin who could not read the inscriptions at Mount Sinai; finally in 1777, these Granada inscriptions were classified as having been falsified'.<sup>12</sup>

But other forgeries were already in the making. The Spanish scholar Conde compiled some 'authentic' Arabic documents. Most of his contemporaries believed they were authentic. Only a few scholars noticed their defects and refuted them as 'fantasies'.<sup>13</sup>

Only a few years after the 'sensational' discoveries at the Alhambra in 1764, Palermo became the scene of another famous 'Arabic' forgery. As in the case of the activities of Miguel de Luna, the scene was also set by the hard facts of politics. The main protagonist of the events in Palermo was the Maltese chaplain Giuseppe Vella.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Joseph Hager, *Nachricht von einer merkwürdigen litterarischen Betrügerey* (Leipzig, 1799), 39; Cristobal Medina Conde, *Cartas del sacristán de Pinos de la Puente, D. Tiburcio Cascales, el autor del Caxón de Sastre acerca de una conversación de Domingo de Carnestolendas de 1761 sobre los descubrimientos de la Alcazaba de Granada* (Granada, 1762); Anon, *Paseos por Granada y sus contornos....*, 2 vols. (Granada, 1814).

<sup>12</sup> Hager, *Nachricht*, 39 *et seq.*, 78. Cf. also A. Vegue y Goldini, 'Para la Historia de la Arqueología en España. El canónigo Pérez Bayer y los Nuevos Monumentos de Granada', in *Homenaje a Mérida* (Madrid, 1934), ii, pp. 369 *et seq.*

<sup>13</sup> Adolf Friedrich von Schack, *Poesie und Kunst der Araber in Spanien und Sicilien* (Berlin, 1865), V *et seq.*

<sup>14</sup> On the person Giuseppe Vella, cf. Thomas Freller, *The Rise and Fall of Abate Giuseppe Vella. A story of forgery and deceit* (Malta, 2001), chapters 2 and 3.



The archival sources housed in the Archivio di Stato of Palermo, the Biblioteca Comunale of Palermo, and the National Library of Malta (Valletta) allow us to throw some light on Vella's involvement in contemporary politics. To understand better the complicated story of Vella's fantasies and false trails, one has to start by outlining some basic events and place them in the framework of their period. Early in 1783 the news spread in Palermo that an ambassador from Morocco, Ibn Uthmān,<sup>15</sup> who had spent a couple of weeks in the city had found a Kufic codex which contained most precious first-hand information about the hardly-known Arabic period of Sicilian history and which became known as 'Codex Martinianus' because of the place where the manuscript had been discovered.

That Vella and his patron, bishop Alfonso Airoidi, must have been well-informed about the archival situation in Spain is shown by their claim that the 'Codex Martinianus' originally had also come to Sicily from the Iberian peninsula. According to them, around 1640 Don Martino La Farina, Marchese di Madonia, the librarian of the Escorial, had brought many Arabic manuscripts on his return from Spain to his native Sicily.<sup>16</sup> One of Don La Farina's heirs is supposed to have sold these Arabic manuscripts in 1744. A few years later five of these Arabic manuscripts were bought by the librarian of the monastery of San Martino, 'amongst which there was also a manuscript in quarto size with 279 linen sheets'.<sup>17</sup> This was supposedly the so-called 'Codex Martinianus'.

The Maltese chaplain Giuseppe Vella subsequently translated these documents. The ambitious publication of the manuscript in six volumes entitled 'Codice diplomatico di Sicilia sotto il governo degli Arabi dall'anno DCCCXXVII al MLXXII' brought Vella not only great local fame and styled him as an absolute expert in Kufic and medieval Arabic script but also a great social reputation and considerable financial benefits. Vella was promoted to an abbot with a huge villa at his disposal. He became even more famous when he announced to have discovered an Arabic translation of 17 lost books by Livy.<sup>18</sup>

But Vella did not stop here. In 1788 he and his benefactor bishop Alfonso Airoidi reported that Ibn Uthmān's brother had sent them a new manuscript from Fez on medieval Sicily. This manuscript covered 45 years of official correspondence

<sup>15</sup> On the person of Ibn Uthmān and his tour, cf. in detail Thomas Freller, '“The Shining of the Moon” – The Mediterranean Tour of Muhammad Ibn Uthmān, envoy of Morocco, in 1782', *Journal of Mediterranean Studies*, xii, 2 (2002), pp. 307–26.

<sup>16</sup> Here quoted from the German translation by Philipp Wilhelm Gottlieb Hausleutner in *Geschichte der Araber in Sicilien. .... In gleichzeitigen Urkunden von diesem Volke selbst. Aus dem Italienischen mit Anmerkungen und Zusätzen von Philipp Wilhelm Gottlieb Hausleutner*, 4 vols. (Königsberg, 1791–93), i, introduction, pp. XLVIII *et seq.*

<sup>17</sup> Joseph Hager, *Nachricht von einer merkwürdigen litterarischen Betrügerey* (Leipzig, 1799), 3.

<sup>18</sup> Cf. Thomas Freller, 'The Abate Vella and the Lost Books of Livy. An elaborate fairy-tale?', *Treasures of Malta* iv, 3 (Summer 1998), pp. 59–63.

between the sultans of Egypt and the Norman princes Robert Giuscard, Count Roger, and his son King Roger II of Sicily.<sup>19</sup> This codex ('Kitab diwan Misr') contained exact information on the prerogatives of the Norman rulers and kings, the right to keep mills, enfeoffment of rivers and land,<sup>20</sup> decrees on salt pans, fishing, and hunting and the rights over the county of Benevent.<sup>21</sup> Important documents on the Norman period of Sicily, Southern Italy, and Malta which were regarded by the locals as so prestigious for their country were bound to attract even more attention than unknown material on the Arabic period. Until then the Norman history of these regions was known only through some fragmentary chronicles ('*sospette cronache di alcuni pochi*'),<sup>22</sup> as Vella describes them.

Vella's work on this so-called 'Norman Codex' coincided with a general change in his company and personal horizons. The background of this metamorphosis requires a more detailed investigation. While the *abate* worked on the material of the 'Norman Codex', he had drifted closer to leading representatives of the administration of the new viceroy of Sicily, Francesco Maria Venanzio d'Aquino, *principe* di Caramanico (viceroy 1786–95).<sup>23</sup> Caramanico was a Freemason and a widely-travelled man. His vision of politics was influenced by physiocracy, secularism, and reformism just like that of his predecessor Domenico Caracciolo (viceroy 1780–86).<sup>24</sup> However, he adapted more to the factual Sicilian situation in his political actions and he was therefore more diplomatic and cautious than Caracciolo. When Caramanico arrived in Sicily in 1786 the strong antagonism between the government and the powerful feudal Sicilian barons who owned most of the lands still existed. His position became

<sup>19</sup> For the sending from Fez to Palermo, cf. also Joseph Hager, *Gemälde von Palermo* (Berlin, 1799), 154. Cf. also Camilla Maria Cederna, *Imposture littéraire et stratégies politiques: Le Conseil d'Égypte des Lumières siciliennes à Leonardo Sciascia* (Paris, 1999), p. 40.

<sup>20</sup> For these subjects, cf. in detail Jeremy Johns, *The Muslims of Norman Sicily, c.1060–c.1194*, 2 vols., Diss. (Oxford, 1983); Fardella Enrico Mazzaresè, *I feudi comitali di Sicilia dai Normanni agli Aragonesi* (Milano, 1974); Hans Niese, *Die Gesetzgebung der Normannischen Dynastie im Regnum Siciliae* (Halle, 1910) (on the Norman sources, cf. pp. 9–13.); Dietlind Schack, *Die Araber im Reich Rogers II*, Diss. (Berlin, 1969); Hiroshi Takayama, *The administration of the Norman Kingdom of Sicily* (Leiden, 1993).

<sup>21</sup> On the background of the 'discovery' of the 'Norman Codex', cf. also in detail Domenico Scinà, *Prospetto della Storia letteraria di Sicilia nel secolo decimottavo*, 3 vols. (Palermo, 1824–27), iii, 332 *et seq.* Johann Gottfried Eichhorn (ed.), 'Actenmässige Relation vom Vella Process.', *Allgemeine Bibliothek der Biblischen Litteratur*, ix (Leipzig, 1799), pp. 193 *et seq.*

<sup>22</sup> So Vella writes in the preface of the *Libro del Consiglio di Egitto tradotto da Giuseppe Vella cappellano del sacra ordine gerosolimitano, abate di S. Pancrazio* (Palermo, 1793).

<sup>23</sup> Adelaide Baviera Albanese, Domenico Scinà, *L'arabica impostura* (Palermo, 1978), pp. 115 *et seq.*; Cederna, 35 *et seq.* On the political dimension of the Vella case, cf. also *id.*, pp. 50 *et seq.* Cf. also Eichhorn (ed.), 'Actenmässige Relation', pp. 193 *et seq.*

<sup>24</sup> On Viceroy Caracciolo, cf. F. Catalano, 'Il viceré Caracciolo e la Sicilia alla fine del sec. XVIII', in *Illuministi e giacobini del '700 italiano* (Milan-Varese, 1959), pp. 7–26.

even more difficult when the court of Naples, after the events in France in July 1789, started following an increasingly conservative and anti-liberal policy. Caramanico's primary aim was the diminution of the rights and prerogatives of the Sicilian aristocrats. A look at the numbers is enough to give a brief impression of the phenomenon of 'refeudalization' which Sicily had underwent in previous generations. At the end of the eighteenth century, there were 142 *Principi*, 95 *Duchi*, 788 *Marchese*, 59 *Conti*, and 1,274 *Baroni* in Sicily. An important aspect of Caramanico's policies was the legal struggle against the feudal rights. He established new professorships for state law and civil law at the universities of Palermo and Catania where he only employed lecturers who had proven their loyalty towards the monarchy and government. In subsequent years there appeared a series of treatises and pamphlets on state law fully in accordance with Caramanico's vision.

Many of these loyal lawyers tried to document the prerogative power of the state and the monarchy over the Sicilian nobility by historic documents. Giacinto Dragonetti, for example, based his treatise *Origine dei feudi nei regni di Napoli e Sicilia* (1788) on Caruso's *Anonymi historia Sicula, a Normannis ad Petrum Aragonensem, ex bibliotheca Vaticana* (1723), the chronicle of Abulfeda, and the first volume of Vella's *Codice diplomatico*. These sources refuted both the idea that there had been a feudal system in Sicily under the Arabs and that, later, with the Norman conquest, the land had been distributed to the barons as *commilitones*. Already Vella's *Codice diplomatico* therefore – most probably unintentionally – provided the loyal lawyers and historians with good material in their fight against the barons. Vella's patron, bishop Airoidi, in his preface to the *Codice diplomatico*, had made some references with regards to this when he indicated that the book contained some material 'for those wise and distinguished men' who 'are responsible for the political rule of our country'.<sup>25</sup> A letter from the former Viceroy Caracciolo to his successor Caramanico of 9 September 1786 documents how well the political leaders of the country were informed about the activities of the historians. Caracciolo informed his successor Caramanico in great detail about the momentary situation of the historic research on Arab Sicily.<sup>26</sup>

The importance the viceroys attributed to the historians' research and the strict policies they followed are documented in a contemporary description of some of Caracciolo's measures. In December 1785 the Danish scholar Friedrich Münter

<sup>25</sup> Here quoted from the German translation by Philipp Wilhelm Gottlieb Hausleutner in *Geschichte der Araber in Sicilien*, i, Introduction, p. LXI.

<sup>26</sup> Here quoted from Giuseppe Giarrizzo *et al.* (eds.), 'Illuministi italiani...', in *La Letteratura Italiana. Storia e Testi* (Milan–Naples, 1965), xlvi, part VII, pp. 1074 *et seq.* Cf. also E. Pontieri (ed.), 'Lettere del Marchese Caracciolo viceré di Sicilia al ministro Acton', *Archivio storico per le provincie di Napoli*, 57 (1932), pp. 266 *et seq.*

wrote: 'The reason why the viceroy did not give his permission for the printing of Abate Di Blasi's first part of his history of Sicily which covers the period until the beginning of the Arabic rule is presumably caused by fears it would do harm to the government's policy.'<sup>27</sup> So it was only too understandable that Vella's announcement of being in possession of new material on the history of Sicily under Roger I and II created great interest and also preoccupations among many. The first indications of the contents of the letters, diplomata, bulls and orders of the so-called 'Norman Codex' made the representatives of the government rejoice for the news fitted their programme exactly.<sup>28</sup> In the spring of 1794 Joseph Hager discussed the contents of the 'Norman Codex' at the court in Naples. He observed that: '[King] Ferdinand, who was very enthusiastic about this discovery, showered Vella with gifts. He ordered that the Italian translation of this African manuscript should be published in a most prestigious way. He even thought this manuscript had the same importance as the discoveries of Herculaneum and Pompeii.'<sup>29</sup>

Is the appearance of the 'Norman Codex' and its obvious relevance to the visions of the viceroy's policy a coincidence or part of a clever plan? Who are the people of the court of the viceroy and the royal administration with whom Vella had contact after 1788? The key figure in the story seems to have been Francesco Carelli, '*segretario di questo Governo di Sicilia*', since 1788.<sup>30</sup> Carelli who had come to Palermo with Caracciolo's administration was a learned *dilletante* with a special interest in legal history.<sup>31</sup> The historian Adelaide Baviera Albanese has shown that Carelli had really studied the legal history of the feudal system in Sicily during his service at the court of the viceroy. Together with his friends and colleagues, he discussed how to harmonize the historical features and structures with the modern treatises of Guarani and Dragonetti.<sup>32</sup> The eyewitness Léon Dufourny documents in his private journal that Vella and Carelli met often between 1791 and 1792.<sup>33</sup> Even another of Vella's acquaintances, the poet Giovanni Meli, is convinced that

<sup>27</sup> Friedrich Münter, *Aus den Tagebüchern Friedrich Münters. Wander- und Lehrjahre eines dänischen Gelehrten*. Ed. by Ojvind Andreasen, 3 vols. (Copenhagen–Leipzig, 1937), ii, p. 56. Cf. also id., *Nachrichten von Neapel und Sicilien, auf einer Reise in den Jahren 1785 und 1786* (Copenhagen, 1790), pp. 199 *et seq.*

<sup>28</sup> Cf. the eyewitness Carl Ulysses von Salis und Marschlin, *Beiträge zur natürlichen und ökonomischen Kenntniß des Königreichs beider Sicilien* (Zurich, 1790), i, 133.

<sup>29</sup> Hager, *Gemälde*, p. 154.

<sup>30</sup> On the career of Francesco Carelli, cf. Baviera Albanese, 130 *et seq.* On his role in the Vella case, cf. also M.E. Alaimo, 'Gli ineffabili codici del Vella non si trovano a San Martino', *Giornale di Sicilia* 12 May 1963, p. 3.

<sup>31</sup> Friedrich Leopold von Stolberg, *Reise in Deutschland, der Schweiz, Italien und Sicilien*, 2 vols. (Mainz, 1877), i, p. 207.

<sup>32</sup> Cf. Baviera Albanese, p. 133.

<sup>33</sup> Dufourny is here quoted by Cederna, p. 137.



the lawyers and officers Saverio Simonetti and Francesco Carelli had their share behind the idea of the *Libro del Consiglio d'Egitto*.<sup>34</sup>

That the monarchy was immediately only too ready to offer generous funds for the prestigious edition of Vella's *Consiglio d'Egitto* is another indication that this was a joint work.<sup>35</sup> When the book came out in 1793 Vella explicitly refers to the good 'collaboration' with Carelli, expressing his gratitude for the '*gentilezza che accompagna la molta dottrina e l'indefesso studio di don Francesco Carelli ... che io vanto per mio singolare amico, come egli lo è volentieri di tutti quelli che negli studi e nelle arti singolarmente si affaticano*'.<sup>36</sup>

Whether Vella's version of the events around the genesis of the *Libro del Consiglio di Egitto* as presented by him during his trial is close to reality or not is difficult to find out. In this protocol drawn up during the trial Carelli appears as the actual instigator behind the fraud:

*Quel manoscritto [the Norman codex] era scritto in modo epistolare; il confitente cominciò a tradurlo per la premura che gliene faceva don Francesco Carelli .... Quando il confitente tradusse la prima legislazione ... la presentò al riferito Carelli il quale ... gli disse che quella legislazione era necessario che si fusse accomodata; il confitente gli rispose che non si poteva accomodare giacché il manoscritto così diceva e che portando qualche pregiudizio non si avrebbe data alla stampa. A tal proposizione gli rispose il detto del Carelli in questa maniera: – Senti, abate Vella, tu ami il nostro sovrano? – e il detto confitente gli rispose: – Quanto me stesso perché Iddio così comanda. – Dunque – rispose il segretario – bisogna rendere un servizio al nostro padrone. Bisogna che tu scrivessi ciò che ti detto io.*<sup>37</sup>

This statement alleges that Carelli soon involved a discrete expert in medieval law and old literature, Giovanni Battista Fidotta, in the proceedings. Together Carelli and Fidotta developed the ideas of the contents which Vella had to 'translate'.<sup>38</sup>

That Carelli or one of his confidants had already noticed some 'irregularities' in Vella's work on the 'Codex Martinianus' and had used this information to force the *abate* to support their political aims is an interesting hypothesis. It fits in this picture that Carelli was not surprised at all when Vella later confessed to him that the Arabic letter chronicle which he published as *Codice diplomatico* is not identical with the San Martino codex. Carelli answered: '*Senti abate Vella per questa cosa non ti dovrai turbare. Portami tutti li manoscritti al Palazzo; parleremo al Vicerè e si accomoderà tutto*'.<sup>39</sup> To the public these deeper coherences and connections

<sup>34</sup> Cf. Giovanni Meli, 'Gazzetta problematica relativa all'impostura di lu codici arabu di l'abbati Vella.', in *Opere* (Palermo, 1838), i, p. 195.

<sup>35</sup> Cf. also Hager, *Gemälde*, p. 154.

<sup>36</sup> *Libro del Consiglio di Egitto* vii. On Carelli and Vella, cf. also Cederna, pp. 133 *et seq.*; Eichhorn (ed.), 'Actenmässige Relation', p. 200.

<sup>37</sup> Here quoted by Baviera Albanese, p. 121.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.* pp. 121 *et seq.*

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.* p. 123.



were, of course, unknown. The European gazettes and journals kept on announcing that the 'Norman Codex' would be published soon.<sup>40</sup>

Without further consulting the experts, the viceroy and the court in Naples gave permission for the printing of the *Libro del Consiglio di Egitto* in three folio volumes on 18 January 1790. The costs were to be footed by the royal treasury.<sup>41</sup> In all the royal treasury estimated a cost of 1,600 Neapolitan ounces or 8,000 guilders.<sup>42</sup> Despite of all the hidden criticism the first volume of the *Libro del Consiglio di Egitto* was published in folio in Palermo in 1793. Once again the importance of the sources which were brought to light for the first time is stressed in the preface:

Never before had the legitimacy of the royal prerogatives been better documented than here. In the two law codes which are included in this manuscript, one finds all that what created and creates the basis of the legal power of the rulers of this monarchy: The direct and permanent patronship over all churches in the kingdom and the right to elect bishops. This was acted out in those days without any opposition. The bitter conflict of the supreme rule over the county of Benevent and so many other discussions and antagonism will be solved on the basis of this codex.<sup>43</sup>

The publication of the first volume was followed by several announcements and reviews in European scientific magazines.<sup>44</sup> The publication of the second volume was announced for the spring of 1794.<sup>45</sup>

Vella knew his enemies. To counteract the expected criticism from the barons and some European experts, he included in the preface some positive comments on his work by the Dutch scholars Schultens and Meerman and by Professor Olaus Gerhard Tychsen from Rostock.<sup>46</sup> Vella maintained he had provided these scholars

<sup>40</sup> Cf. Salis und Marschlin, *Beiträge zur natürlichen und ökonomischen Kenntniß*, i, p. 119.

<sup>41</sup> *Libro del Consiglio di Egitto* 'Avviso del Traduttore al Lettori', IX. Cf. also Archivio di Stato, Palermo, R. Segretaria di Sicilia; Incartamenti 5291, no pagination; letter from Acton to Caramanico dated 18 January 1790 referring to the permission of the printing of the 'Codice arabo colla traduzione italiana, che ha per titolo 'Libro del Consiglio d'Egitto' ... a regie spese'; Communication from Caramanico to Vella of 1 February 1790.

<sup>42</sup> Cf. Hager, *Nachricht*, p. 52. The librarian Joseph Sterzinger and Cavaliere Gregorio Speciale were responsible for the supervision of the printing. For the costs of the printing of the first volume, cf. also ASP.; R. Segretaria di Sicilia; Incartamenti 5291, no pagination; communications from Sterzinger and Speciale to the royal chancery dated 7 February 1791; 18 May 1792, 26 November 1792, and 5 February 1793.

<sup>43</sup> Hager, *Nachricht* 59. Cf. also Archivio di Stato, Palermo, R. Segretaria di Sicilia; Incartamenti 5291, no pagination. Letter from Carlo Demarco to Viceroy Caramanico dated 27 November 1793.

<sup>44</sup> Cf. *Magasin Encyclopedique*, year 5, vi, pp. 330–56.

<sup>45</sup> The printing of the second volume was originally delayed because of financial problems. Cf. Archivio di Stato, Palermo, R. Segretaria di Sicilia; Incartamenti 5291, no pagination; Note from Joseph Sterzinger and Gregorio Speciale to president Rojo y Lopez, dated 1 April 1794.

<sup>46</sup> Tychsen's answer (in Latin) dated 4 February 1793. The letter from Johan Meerman dated from 28 April 1793. Professor Schultens 'Professore delle lingue orientali in questa Università [Leiden]' because

with excerpts and passages of the manuscript himself for their opinion long before the publication was in the pipeline.<sup>47</sup> Vella after the publication of the first volume of the *Libro del Consiglio di Egitto* was at the peak of his fame, financial wellbeing, and social position. The administration was very pleased with the work of the Maltese *abate* but now Vella had made bitter enemies: the mighty Sicilian magnates and the Church. Was it not Vella himself – although surely instructed by Carelli – who had pointed out that the publication of the translation of his ‘Norman Codex’ would solve the century-old conflict of the prerogatives over the county of Benevent? For centuries the Roman Curia had struggled with the Kingdom of Naples over the possession of this county. The Curia always believed itself to be the legal successor of the Longobardian and Norman feudal rights but Vella’s ‘documents’ seemed to place such rights entirely in the hands of the Sicilian monarchy.<sup>48</sup>

Even more than the curia, the Sicilian nobility was embittered over the publication of the ‘Norman Codex’. Long before publication, Vella or Carelli must have delivered information from the codex to loyal lawyers and councillors who made use of it for their own purposes. Already in his treatise of 1791 the royal officer and lawyer Don Donato Tommasi had referred to the invalidity of Church property sold without the permission of the crown on the legal basis promulgated in the codex.<sup>49</sup> In 1794 after the publication of the first volume of the *Libro del Consiglio di Egitto*, Don Giovanni d’Angelo, a member of the Palermitan *Accademia del buon gusto*, edited a summary of the contents aimed for students of law and history.<sup>50</sup> As d’Angelo’s work was published, Vella’s star was, however, in decline. His enemies had started their direct attacks.

One of these critics was the director of the cabinet of coins at the court of Naples, *abate* Zarillo. For years he had been kept informed about Vella’s translations through his correspondence with the French philologist and member of the *Académie Française*, Abbé Barthélemy. Zarillo shared Barthélemy’s scepticism but never dared speak out. Even at this stage, Zarillo only kept referring to grave mistakes in Vella’s translations but he never went so far to accuse the *abate* of being a forger.<sup>51</sup> In the spring of 1794 the Oriental scholar from Vienna Joseph Hager arrived in Naples

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of a grave sickness however was not anymore in the position to write an opinion himself. The subject then was taken up on behalf of Schultens by Vella’s friend Johan Meermann. Cf. *Libro del Consiglio di Egitto*, preface.

<sup>47</sup> *Libro del Consiglio di Egitto*, ‘Avviso del Traduttore al Lettori’, p. IX.

<sup>48</sup> On the feudal claims of the curia over Southern Italy, cf. in detail Antonino Trombetta, *La sovranità pontificia sull’Italia meridionale e sulla Sicilia. Studio sulle sue origini e sulle sue vicende* (Casamari, 1981). On this aspect of the ‘Libro del Consiglio di Egitto’, cf. also Cederna, *Imposture littéraire*, p. 75.

<sup>49</sup> Donato Tommasi, *Della nullità delle alienazioni de Beni, delle Chiese, delle Badie, e de Benefici di Real Padronato, mancanti di Regio assenso ...* (Palermo, 1791), p. 19.

<sup>50</sup> Cf. Hager, *Nachricht*, p. 64.

<sup>51</sup> Cf. *Voyage en Italie de M. l’Abbé Barthélemy de l’Académie Française* (Paris, 1802), p. XXII *et seq.*

and later travelled to Palermo full of curiosity to ‘throw a glance on the newly found books of Livy’ – or at least so he said.<sup>52</sup> In Sicily, he also took a keen interest in the Arabic period of the country. Before he had arrived in Palermo, Hager had studied Vella’s *Codice diplomatico* and the first volume of the *Libro del Libro di Egitto*. He was of the opinion that both works were not authentic translations from Arabic or Kufic.<sup>53</sup> In Palermo, Hager also met with Vella’s old enemy Rosario Gregorio and seemed to have discussed with him how the *abate* could be unmasked.<sup>54</sup>

Together they composed a detailed expertise<sup>55</sup> which declared the *Libro di Consiglio di Egitto* and the *Codice diplomatico* as forgeries.<sup>56</sup> But for more exact proofs and details, a more thorough investigation of the original manuscripts was required. Minister Acton, then possibly the most powerful man in the court of Naples, received this opinion on 22 May 1794 and presented it soon after to King Ferdinand IV.<sup>57</sup> Already on 31 May, Acton sent a response to Caramanico and Airoldi.<sup>58</sup> But Carelli and Caramanico could for the moment prevent an open action against Vella and his *Libro del Consiglio di Egitto* which was so useful for their policy.<sup>59</sup> So Hager, who was on his way back to Vienna, was ordered by Ferdinand IV to keep silent about the Vella case.<sup>60</sup>

But the circle around Gregorio, encouraged and supported by the Sicilian barons, in the meantime had become too powerful to be ignored. Indeed the *Libro*

<sup>52</sup> Hager, *Nachricht*, p. 61.

<sup>53</sup> On Hager, cf. Constant von Wurzbach (ed.), *Biographisches Lexikon des Kaiserthums Oesterreich* (Vienna, 1861), vii, pp. 196–9; On the life of Hager, cf. also *Biographie des hommes vivants* (Paris, 1817), iii, p. 356.

<sup>54</sup> For Gregorio’s notes on the unveiling of Vella, cf. Biblioteca comunale di Palermo, Qq F. 60. Partly published in V. Di Giovanni, *Rosario Gregorio e le sue opere* (Palermo, 1871), p. 50 *et seq.*

<sup>55</sup> Hager, *Nachricht*, 68. The French original of Hager’s memoir of May 1794 is preserved in the Archivio di Stato, Palermo, R. Segreteria di Sicilia; Incartamenti 5291, no pagination. In the same file there is also an Italian translation. For a German translation, cf. Hager, pp. 68–78.

<sup>56</sup> Cf. Gregorio’s ‘Carteggio’ in the Biblioteca comunale di Palermo, Qq F. 60; Cf. also V. Di Giovanni, *Rosario Gregorio e le sue opere* (Palermo, 1871), 52 *et seq.*; Scinà, *Prospetto della Storia* iii, p. 359.

<sup>57</sup> Cf. Scinà, p. 344.

<sup>58</sup> Cf. Acton’s letter to Caramanico dated 31 May 1794 in which he refers to Hager’s doubts concerning the medieval origin of the Arabic documents in Vella’s possession, the wrong calculations of the calendar and sequence of years in Vella’s works and the parallel text of the books of Inveges and Caruso. Archivio di Stato, Palermo, R. Segreteria di Sicilia; Incartamenti 5291, no pagination. Cf. also Scinà, *Prospetto della Storia* iii, pp. 344 *et seq.*

<sup>59</sup> Cf. also A.A. Caruana (*Frammento Critico della Storia Fenicio-Cartaginese, Greco-Romana e Bisantina, Musulmana e Normanno-Aragonese delle Isole di Malta* (Malta, 1899), 45) who mainly follows the text of Scinà.

<sup>60</sup> In his *Nachricht von einer merkwürdigen literarischen Betrügerey*, Hager indicates this censorship (‘durch deren Sorgfalt er [his travelogue from 1795] noch um ein merkliches kürzer ward’). Hager, *Nachricht*, 66. Cf. also Archivio di Stato, Palermo, R. Segreteria di Sicilia; Incartamenti 5291, no pagination; letter from Acton to Caramanico dated 31 May 1794.

*del Consiglio di Egitto* threatened to become too explosive for the political situation in the kingdom. The members of the Sicilian nobility protested strongly against the use of the 'Norman Codex' in the actual law. In the November 1794 session of the Sicilian parliament, the barons applied to 'your majesty that the Norman Codex should not be incorporated into the legal codex of the kingdom before its absolute authenticity is proven and attested'.<sup>61</sup> Secretary of state Carelli is accused of instrumentalizing the codex against the nobility and threatening the internal peace of the kingdom.<sup>62</sup>

The Neapolitan court, especially the active and clever Acton, decided to take the things in hand. To calm the situation down, the whole affair around the activities of the *abate* had to be cleared. What effect Acton's resentments against Caramanico had on this development is difficult to say.<sup>63</sup> According to Domenico Scinà, it was Bishop Airoidi himself who had proposed to the government in Naples to commission Hager for a thorough investigation of the case.<sup>64</sup> It seems that Airoidi now found the whole affair as too politically dangerous to be kept quiet under the table. Furthermore, with the unmasking of the *Libro del Consiglio di Egitto* as a fake, even its anticurial contents could be declared invalid. The aim of Acton and King Ferdinand IV was to silence the protests and to calm down the nobility and the clergy of the kingdom. In a letter of 19 July 1794 which was handed over to Hager by the *Marchese* di Gallo, the Neapolitan ambassador at the imperial court in Vienna, the Austrian scholar was invited to return to Naples and Palermo.<sup>65</sup> Hager was even more ready to obey to the call from Naples when it was announced to him that he also was to expect a monthly salary of 100 *scudi*.<sup>66</sup> On 13 September, Acton secretly informed Viceroy Caramanico and Airoidi about Hager's coming mission.<sup>67</sup>

Of course it had been planned that Hager's return to Palermo would be kept secret from Vella and his friends. That, however, did not seem to have succeeded. Already in October, when Hager had not yet arrived in Naples, Vella and his

<sup>61</sup> Hager, *Nachricht*, p. 60.

<sup>62</sup> Cf. *ibid.*, pp. 60 *et seq.*

<sup>63</sup> Cf. Baviera Albanese, p. 134.

<sup>64</sup> Scinà, iii, pp. 345 *et seq.*

<sup>65</sup> Cf. Scinà, iii, p. 346; Hager, *Nachricht*, pp. 67 *et seq.*; Archivio di Stato, Palermo, R. Segretaria di Sicilia; Incartamenti 5291, no pagination; Letter from Acton dated 19 July 1794 (with a copy of the invitation of Hager addressed to Viceroy Caramanico). On 22 July 1794 Acton informed the court of the viceroy in Palermo and Bishop Airoidi officially about Hager's invitation. Archivio di Stato, Palermo, R. Segretaria di Sicilia; Incartamenti 5291, no pagination.

<sup>66</sup> Bartolomeo Lagumina, 'Il falso codice arabo-siculo', *Archivio Storico Siciliano*, new series, year V (1880), pp. 233–314, here 242.

<sup>67</sup> Letter from Acton to Airoidi dated 13 September 1794. Archivio di Stato, Palermo, R. Segretaria di Sicilia; Incartamenti 5291, no pagination.

confidant, the Maltese monk Giuseppe Camilleri, discussed what to do when Hager arrived in Palermo. Some manuscripts were carried to a secret place, some pages of an original codex were rewritten, and this time not ornamented with additions. Vella made Camilleri swear to keep their secret.<sup>68</sup>

The subsequent unmasking of Vella's forgeries is too complicated to be discussed in this short paper. In short, it did not take Hager long to discover that nearly everything that Vella had presented as translations of Arabic originals were forgeries. Vella's falling from grace was complete when in the night between 8 to 9 January 1795 Viceroy Caramanico died unexpectedly. This was surely a disaster for the *abate*. Who else would now protect him against the growing number of critics? It was only too obvious that Acton had estimated the position of Vella and the Sicilian followers of a progressive *filo-assolutismo* as too weak to be supported by the monarchy. The effects of the French Revolution in Italy were a clear warning. It was no use risking a deep conflict between the social classes. Supporting Vella meant a permanent legal and intellectual struggle between the party of the barons and that of the progressive circles. Although the full background of the Vella case was surely known in Naples, it was decided to abandon the *abate* for the benefit of the country.

After Caramanico's death, the government duties were provisionally taken over by Lopez y Rojo who was the archbishop of Palermo and president of the viceroyalty. He had a much more moderate progressive policy and most of all he did not want a clash with the magnates of Sicily. That he, as a cleric, was sceptical of the *Libro del Consiglio di Egitto* does not need to be pointed out. Before long Carelli left Palermo. Up to then the *Corte Capitaniale* officers were in charge of the investigations. At the end of January 1795, responsibility was transferred to the *Tribunale del Real Patrimonio*.<sup>69</sup> The president of the *Tribunale del Real Patrimonio* Grassellini now personally took over. Grassellini, who cannot be called a friend of Vella's, immediately ordered an investigation of the villa of the *abate* and a new thorough interrogation of Vella and his confidant Camilleri. All Arabic manuscripts in their hands were confiscated.<sup>70</sup> Further studies revealed that most of these 'medieval' manuscripts were written on a paper which could be bought in Palermo! The nicely-ornamented titles of these manuscripts had actually been produced by the Palermitan designer and engraver Gioacchino Giuffrida.<sup>71</sup>

<sup>68</sup> Cf. Scinà, pp. 346 *et seq.*

<sup>69</sup> Cf. the report carried out by the officers of the *Corte Capitaniale* signed by Airoidi and sent to Naples on 31 January 1795. Archivio di Stato, Palermo, R. Segretaria di Sicilia; Incartamenti 5291, no pagination. On the same day a report of the Vella case was handed over by the officers of the *Corte Capitaniale* to the *Ministro Patrimoniale*.

<sup>70</sup> Cf. the instructions to the *Tribunale del R. Patrimonio* from end of January 1795. Archivio di Stato, Palermo, R. Segretaria di Sicilia; Incartamenti 5291, no pagination. Cf. also Scinà, 1827 iii, p. 351.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 352.



For the insider Rosario Gregorio and finally also for Hager, the role of Caramanico's secretary Carelli was no secret any more ('...*la magagna del Vella e del Carelli fu messa in chiaro...*').<sup>72</sup> In his *Nachricht von einer merkwürdigen literarischen Betrügerey*, Hager more diplomatically just indicated that Carelli was 'held as the mastermind behind this political novel'<sup>73</sup> by many. The Marchese Villabianca in 1795 even knew about rumours in Naples, '*che il Vella fosse stato indotto a fingere quel libro dal segretario del governo d. Francesco Carelli il quale come nemico giurato dei baroni siciliani volea con un colpo abbatterli e farsi un merito presso la Corte*'.<sup>74</sup> In his opinions and comments sent to the Neapolitan court, Hager, of course, did not dare touch this subject.

After the Neapolitan court had examined of Hager's opinion and assessments, Minister Acton decided that Vella should be delivered to the lawcourts. So the famous Vella trial started.<sup>75</sup> That the lawcourts had some problems with this affair from the beginning is shown by the fact that the case was transferred from the *Corte Capitaniale* of Palermo to the higher *Tribunale del Patrimonio*. This was explained by the national interest in the case and by the fact that Vella's career and the printing of the *Libro del Consiglio di Egitto* had been financed by the royal treasury.<sup>76</sup> Finally it was decided by royal order that the *Tribunale di Monarchia* with Vella's old patron Alfonso Airoidi as one of its heads (!) should take over the case.<sup>77</sup> But the officers of the *Tribunale di Monarchia* were also not very enthusiastic to be involved in this fishy and complicated affair. It was just as difficult to find an advocate for Vella. The highly-reputed lawyers Paolo Leone and Francesco Baldanza refused the brief, '*in coscienza e contro l'interno ... sentimento*'.<sup>78</sup> Pressure by the

<sup>72</sup> Here quoted from Caruana, *Frammento Critico*, p. 46.

<sup>73</sup> Hager, *Nachricht*, 61.

<sup>74</sup> Biblioteca comunale di Palermo, Marchese di Villabianca, (Diarii inediti), Qq E 110. Here quoted from Baviera Albanese, *L'arabica imposture*, 153. Cf. also Biblioteca comunale di Palermo, Qq D 111, t. XIX.

<sup>75</sup> On the trial, cf. F. Parlavacchio, 'Il processo dell'abate Vella', *La voce giudiziaria* 15 April 1953.

<sup>76</sup> The confusion as to which lawcourt should take over the case was already indicated in a report by the *Consiglieri Patrimoniali* sent to Naples on 16 February 1795. Archivio di Stato, Palermo, R. Segretaria di Sicilia; Incartamenti 5291, no pagination. Similar difficulties cropped up when the robbery of the Arabic documents was investigated. Cf. Airoidi's letter to the royal chancery dated 21 February 1795. Cf. Baviera Albanese, *L'arabica imposture*, p. 135.

<sup>77</sup> The confiscated documents were already in the hands of the officers of the *Tribunale del R. Patrimonio* by mid-February 1795. Cf. the note of 16 February 1795. Archivio di Stato, Palermo, R. Segretaria di Sicilia; Incartamenti 5291, no pagination. On the transfer of Vella's papers and Arabic manuscripts to the *Tribunale della Monarchia*, cf. the report of the *Corte Capitaniale* dated 30 March 1795. Archivio di Stato, Palermo, R. Segretaria di Sicilia; Incartamenti 5291, no pagination. On the competence of the *Tribunale della Monarchia*, cf. Airoidi's letters to Naples dated 7 and 31 March 1795.

<sup>78</sup> Archivio di Stato, Palermo, R. Segretaria, Incartamenti 5291, no pagination. Letter from Francesco Baldanza dated 3 October 1795. Cf. also the undated 'Memoriale di Francesco Baldanza'. On the

Sicilian barons may also have made the lawyers hesitate to take on this case. Finally D. Michele Terilli took over Vella's defence.<sup>79</sup> One of the primary aims of the lawcourt was to keep the government of Sicily and the royal court clean from any suspicion that they had been involved in Vella's manipulations and forgeries.<sup>80</sup> On 29 August 1796 the verdict was read. Vella was condemned to 15 years imprisonment<sup>81</sup> and made to resign as *abate* of San Pancrazio. His belongings were sequestered and he also lost the pension granted to him by the archbishop of Palermo.<sup>82</sup> From his prison cell, Vella kept actively fighting for his reputation. From the new provisional ruler of the kingdom of Sicily Archbishop Lopez y Rojo, Vella, however, could not expect any mildness or special treatment. Lopez y Rojo was keen to close this embarrassing case. The last thing he wanted to do was to resurrect the ghosts of the past and provoke again the tense atmosphere between the government and barons experienced under Viceroy's Caracciolo and Caramanico. These latter two might have had a good word for the *ex-abate*, but they were both dead now.

So Vella wrote most of his supplications directly to the king of Naples.<sup>83</sup> In 1798 the supplications asking for his release from prison because of bad health showed some results. Bishop Airoldi, in his function as *Giudice dell'Apostolica Legazione e della Regia Monarchia nel Regno di Sicilia*, gave permission for a two-month stay in the monastery of the Capuchins or Benfratelli on a deposit of 400 Neapolitan ounces. Vella was indeed fortunate and subsequent events turned matters into his favour.

The year 1799 was a very turbulent one for the kingdom of Naples. The French army's successes in Italy and the threats of a conquering of Naples forced King Ferdinand IV to transfer his court temporarily from Caserta to Palermo. Vella used the presence of the king in Palermo to draw more attention on his case. He

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defence of Vella cf. the note from 28 October 1795, Vella's supplication from 12 December 1795, the 'Memoriale dell'Abbate Giuseppe Vella', dated 8 October 1795 and the 'Memoriale del Rev. Abb. D. Giuseppe Vella dell'isola di Malta', dated 9 May 1796.

<sup>79</sup> Cf. Archivio di Stato, Palermo, R. Segretaria di Sicilia; Incartamenti 5291, no pagination; Vella's supplication from 22 May 1796.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid., no pagination. Here quoted from Baviera Albanese, p. 136.

<sup>81</sup> Here quoted from Scinà, p. 367.

<sup>82</sup> E. Orlando, *Il feudalesimo in Sicilia* ii, Note 21, 22; Di Blasi, *Storia della Sicilia* Lib. VII. Here quoted from Paolo de Bono, *Sommario della Storia della Legislazione in Malta* (Malta, 1897), p. 95, annotation. Cf. also Caruana, *Frammento critico*, p. 48.

<sup>83</sup> For Vella's supplications and justifications, cf. the files in the Biblioteca comunale di Palermo, 3Qq.E.15 and 2Qq.C.159. Cf. also the 'Memoriale' of the Vella case, compiled on 7 August 1798 and 29 June 1799. Archivio di Stato, Palermo, R. Segretaria di Sicilia; Incartamenti 5291, no pagination. On 5 September 1795 and 16 March 1799 the *Rappresentazione del Tribunale del Patrimonio* discussed the Vella case. Ibid. Further supplications of Vella date to 15 November 1797, 24 May 1798, 11 January 1799, and 10 March 1799. Vella's income as *abate* of San Pancrazio was restituted in June 1803.

again sent several supplications to the court in which he styled himself as innocent and a victim of slander and blackmail. Surely Ferdinand had been well informed about the political background of the case. Otherwise it is hardly explicable why he now permitted Vella's release from prison. A few months later, a royal order stipulated that Vella should be kept in his former country house near Mezzomonreale. On 4 January 1803 his sequestered goods and belongings were officially restituted. On 16 June 1803 even his income as *abate* of San Pancrazio was restituted and he could resume reading mass in the church of San Carlo in Palermo.<sup>84</sup> In May 1814 Vella died at the age of 65 years. The cause of the death is unknown.<sup>85</sup>

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<sup>84</sup> Cf. Scinà, iii, p. 367, annotation 1. Cf. also Caruana, p. 49.

<sup>85</sup> Cf. also Scinà, iii, p. 367.