

Between Andalusia and Sicily. New light on some famous politically motivated Arabic forgeries

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Resumen: En 1588 y 1595 se descubren en Granada un número de textos, llamados *Los libros plúmbeos*, que demostraban aparentemente una contribución más o menos islámica en la temprana historia de la cristiandad en general y de la historia de España en particular. Basándonos en las fuentes con las que contamos se puede inferir claramente que los acontecimientos de Granada sirvieron como base a la posterior creación de nuevas falsificaciones en árabe. Después de 1783, las traducciones basadas en fuentes árabes sobre la historia de Sicilia que hizo el abad Vella fueron tan aclamadas que amenazaron con cambiar muchas de las nociones históricas establecidas. La finalidad de este artículo es arrojar una nueva luz sobre los acontecimientos que proporcionaron a Vella la base de sus actividades y algunas de sus consecuencias.

Abstract: In 1588 and again in 1595 a number of texts, the so-called 'books of lead' (*Los libros plúmbeos*), were discovered at Granada which seemingly threw a more or less Islamic light on the early history of Christianity in general and on the history and role of Spain in particular. From the sources it might be safely inferred that these events in Andalusia served as a backdrop for another spectacular forgery of Arabic documents: after 1783 the Maltese abate Giuseppe Vella's 'translations' of Arabic sources of the history of Sicily were so highly acclaimed that they threatened to change many a cherished historical notion. This paper aims to throw fresh light on events which provided the backdrop for Vella's activities and some of their consequences.

Palabras clave: Abad Giuseppe Vella. Falsificaciones en árabe. Granada. Historia de Sicilia.

Key words: Abate Giuseppe Vella. Arabic forgeries. Granada. History of Sicily.

It is interesting to observe that in the last decades of the 18th century a similar development of a cautious 'discovery' of Arabic roots did take place in Andalusia as well as in Sicily. Even more curious is the fact that both in Andalusia and in Sicily the new fascination with Arabic history and culture resulted in some notorious forge-

ries. Almost at the same time of the activities of some anonymous forgers at Granada and of the Spanish 'scholar' Conde, 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 the activities of Vella 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 what had been going on in Andalusia. This was already indicated by the most obstinate detective on the trails of the *abate* Vella, the professor from Vienna Joseph Hager. In his book *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 court¹, 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 1790² 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. As is well-known, the Moriscos were Moors who stayed on and had been baptized against their free will after the fall of Granada in 1492. Their forced conversion had 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 1614³.

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 18th March 1588 workers discovered a leadbox 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 Castilian⁴. The interpreter of the Spanish king, Miguel de Luna⁵, and the scholars Luis Farjado, Francisco López Tamarid, and Alonso del

1. 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.

2. Cf. Joseph Hager. *Reise von Wien nach Madrid*. Berlin, 1792.

3. On the Moriscos` cf. the classic book by A. Dominguez Ortiz y B. Vincent. *Historia de los moriscos. Vida y tragedia de una minoría*. Madrid, 1975.

4. 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.

5. On Miguel de Luna cf. Darío Cabanelas Rodríguez. "Cartas del morisco granadino Miguel de Luna".

Castillo⁶ 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 Don Juan 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 authenticity. But more mysterious things were to come. In February 1595 twenty-two 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 his disciples among whom the above mentioned St. Cecilio⁷.

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 16th century these findings found a considerable echo in Spain as well as in other European countries. The subject of the finding of the ‘books of lead’ was taken up by Cervantes in his *Don Quijote*. Cervantes had visited Granada in 1594. Also the great poet Góngora in 1598 wrote a sonet *Al monte santo de Granada* which recalls the findings. Even 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 Muslimis are portrayed as the true liberators from barbarism. This book was highly successful and by 1650 seven editions of the *Historia*

Miscelánea de Estudios Árabes y Hebraicos, 14-15 (1965-1966), 31-47.

6. On Alonso del Castillo cf. Darío Cabanelas Rodríguez. “El morisco granadino Alonso del Castillo”. *Miscelánea de Estudios Árabes y Hebraicos*, 5 (1956) 19-42.

7. 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, 1979; Miguel Asín Palacios. “Los Mss. árabes del Sacro-Monte de Granada”. *Revista del Centro de Estudios Históricos de Granada y su Reino*, 4 (1911); Darío Cabanelas Rodríguez. “Intento de supervivencia en el ocaso de una cultura: los libros plúmbeos de Granada”. *Nueva Revista de Filología Hispánica*, XXX, 2 (1981), 335-358, 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), 59-79. The fabulous *libros plúmbeos* returned to Granada from Rome in June 2000, cf. also vols. 2002 and 2003 of *al-Qanṭara*, dedicated to the subject of the ‘libros plumbeos’, and also Zoilo Royo Campos. *Reliquias martiriales y escudo del Sacromonte*. Granada, 1949, re-edited by the Universidad de Granada, 1995, with a learned introduction by Miguel L. López Muñoz.

*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*⁸ were printed. In 1660 the book was translated into Italian, while in 1671 a French translation was published⁹.

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 Islam¹⁰. The original but lost Gospel could then be made to pass as a predecessor of the Qur’ân. That is why Jesus returns to earth to assign to Barnabas, his most reliable disciple, the task to write down what he manages to recall. Jesus somewhat 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 the Curia in Rome passed negative judgement on these documents because of Islamic ideas found in them. History repeated itself: also in Granada, this time in the Alhambra, in 1764 another sensational discovery was made, consisting of ‘numerous inscriptions written on ore, lead and stone’¹¹. The discovery roused great interest all over Europe, although many, ‘tried

8. 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), 359-395; Ramón Menéndez Pidal. *Floresta de leyendas heroicas españolas. Rodrigo, el último godo*. Madrid, 1942-1944, II, XLIII-XLVIII.

9. Cf. Ali Abençufian [i.e. Miguel de Luna]. *La Vie du Roy Almansor*. Amsterdam, 1671.

10. 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, 133-188. On the Barnabas-Evangelium cf. also Safiyya M. Linges. *Das Barnabas Evangelium*. Bonndorf, 1994.

11. Joseph Hager, *Nachricht von einer merkwürdigen litterarischen Betrugerey*. Leipzig, 1799, 39.

in vain to decipher these rare and unknown script like Court de Gebelin found no clue to read the inscriptions at Mount Sinai; finally in 1777, these Granada inscriptions were classified as having been falsified¹².

But other forgeries were already in the making. Then the Spanish scholar Conde compiled some 'authentic' Arabic documents. Most of his contemporaries believed they were authentic. Only a few decades later suspicion arose. In the middle of the 19th century Adolf Friedrich von Schack, who more or less out of Romantic motives interested himself in everything Arabic in Spain and Sicily, commented thus on the works of Conde in his book *Poesie und Kunst der Araber in Spanien und Sicilien*: "If one considers that until very recently even the political history of the Arabs in Spain was hardly known, one tends to question many things. As the great Dutch Oriental scholar Dozy has proven, Conde, who for so long was regarded as the main authority on this field, presented just fragments of Latin chroniclers as translations of Arabic historians. Where Conde had to rely on authentic Arabic texts, he did not understand them at all. Sometimes he even made two or three individuals out of one name or misunderstood infinitives as personal names. In his so-called translations some personalities die several times over or die before their official birth. He also invented people who never existed. Still his book was until recently the authoritative source for everything written about the Arabs in Spain. In every university in Europe this medieval period was read according to the work of Conde. All studies on Spain written by Germans, Englishmen, Americans, Frenchmen or Spaniards have taken their information on this splendid period of the Iberian peninsula from Conde. That means that these false facts and information are to be found in universal histories, in studies on the medieval times, and in travelogues"¹³.

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 Vella¹⁴. 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

12. Hager. *Nachricht*, 39 *et seq.*, 78.

13. Adolf Friedrich von Schack. *Poesie und Kunst der Araber in Spanien und Sicilien*. Berlin, 1865, V *et seq.*

14. 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.

some basic events and place them in the framework of their period. Early in 1783 the news spread in Palermo that an ambassador from Marocco, Ibn Uthmân¹⁵, 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*¹⁶ 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 also the *Codex Martinianus* originally had 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 to his native Sicily¹⁷. 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'¹⁸. 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 to his disposal. He became even more famous when he announced to have discovered an Arabic translation of 17 lost books of Livy¹⁹ and to have translated the official correspondence between the Norman rulers of Sicily and the caliphs in Cairo. This correspondence, which was published under the name of *Libro del Consiglio di Egitto* contained several documents which seemed to confirm the absolute power of medieval rulers over the rights

15. On the person of Ibn Uthmân and his tour cf. in detail Thomas Freller. "'The Shining of the Moon' – The Mediterranean Tour of Muhammad Ibn Uthmân, envoy of Morocco, in 1782". *Journal of Mediterranean Studies*, XII, 2 (2002), 307-326.

16. The manuscripts which were described by Vella as Kufic and which supposedly contained important information on Arabic Sicily –including a life of the prophet Mohammed– are today preserved in the Biblioteca Comunale of Palermo.

17. Here quoted from the German translation by Philipp Wilhelm Gottlieb Hausleitner in *Geschichte der Araber in Sicilien. (...) In gleichzeitigen Urkunden von diesem Volke selbst. Aus dem Italienischen mit Anmerkungen und Zusätzen von Philipp Wilhelm Gottlieb Hausleitner*. 4 vols. Königsberg, 1791-1793, I, introduction, XLVIII *et seq.*

18. Joseph Hager. *Nachricht von einer merkwürdigen litterarischen Betrügerey*. Leipzig, 1799, 3.

19. Cf. Thomas Freller. "The Abate Vella and the Lost Books of Livy. An elaborate fairy-tale?". *Treasures of Malta*, IV, 3 (summer 1998), 59-63.

and prerogatives of the nobility. It therefore 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 finally unveiled as forgeries.

The details of the events read like a detective story: In 1788 Vella and his benefactor bishop Alfonso Airoidi reported that Ibn Uthmân's brother had sent them a new manuscript from Fez on medieval Sicily. This manuscript covered 45 years of official correspondence between the sultans of Egypt and the Norman princes Robert Giscard, Count Roger, and his son King Roger II of Sicily²⁰. This codex (*Kitāb dī-wān Miṣr*) contained exact information on the prerogatives of the Norman rulers and kings, the right to keep mills, enfeoffment of rivers and land²¹, decrees on salt pans, fishing, and hunting and the rights over the county of Benevent: "After a while Mustapha ben Ausman (sic), in a most gentle manner, also sent us information on the period of the Normans. He presented to Abate Vella the whole manuscript which contains numerous copied letters of the Egyptian Divan and of the business reports and orders of the government of the sultans directed to the African dynasties. It also contains many other things which refer to the history of our Sicily"²². Important documents ('tutto epistolare, tutto diplomatico, tutto originale') 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 fragmentaric chronicles ('sospette cronache di alcuni po-
c h i ') ² ³ , a s V e

20. 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, 40.

21. For these subjects cf. in detail Jeremy Johns. *The Muslims of Norman Sicily, c. 1060-c. 1194*. 2 vols., Diss. Oxford, 1983; Fardella Enrico Mazzares. *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. 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. Still useful to consult is the older work by A. Kehr. *Die Urkunden der normannisch-sizilischen Könige*. Innsbruck, 1902.

22. Here quoted from the German translation by Philipp Wilhelm Gottlieb Hausleitner in *Geschichte der Araber in Sicilien*, I, introduction, XLVI *et seq.* 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, 1824-1827, III, 332 *et seq.* Johann Gottfried Eichhorn (Ed.). "Actenmässige Relation vom Vella Process". *Allgemeine Bibliothek der Biblischen Litteratur*. Leipzig, 1799, IX, 193 *et seq.*

23. So Vella writes in the preface of the *Libro del Consiglio di Egitto tradotto da Giuseppe Vella cappe-*

lla describes them. Joseph Hager sums up: “[Vella] maintained he had received from Morocco a manuscript which contained the correspondence between the Norman princes Robert Guiscard and Roger and their African neighbours Almostanser Billah (sic). He called this manuscript *Kitabü Divani Misri* or *Book of the Council of Egypt* because in those days the Fatimides ruled over this country”²⁴.

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 (1738-1795, viceroy 1786-1795)²⁵. Caramanico was a Freemason and a widely-travelled man. Before he took up his post in Palermo, he had served as ambassador of the kingdom of Naples in London and Paris. His vision of politics was influenced by physiocratism, secularism, and reformism just like that of his predecessor Domenico Caracciolo (1715-1789, viceroy 1780-1786)²⁶. However, he adapted more to the factual Sicilian situation in his political actions and he was therefore more diplomatic and cautious than Caracciolo²⁷. 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 even more difficult when the court of Naples, after the events in France in July 1789, followed up 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 *refeudalisation* 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 1274 *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 monarchy and government. In subsequent years

Ilano del sacra ordine gerosolimitano, abate di S. Pancrazio. Palermo, 1793.

24. Joseph Hager. *Nachricht*, 56 *et seq.*

25. Adelaide Baviera Albanese, Domenico Scinà. *L’arabica impostura*. Palermo, 1978, 115 *et seq.*; Cederna. *Imposture littéraire*, 35 *et seq.* On the political dimension of the Vella case cf. also the same author 50 *et seq.* Cf. also Eichhorn (Ed.). *Actenmäßige Relation*, 193 *et seq.*

26. On Viceroy Caracciolo cf. F. Catalano. “Il viceré Caracciolo e la Sicilia alla fine del sec. XVIII”. In *Illuministi e giacobini del ’700 italiano*. Milano-Varese, 1959, 7-26.

27. On the background of the then political events in Sicily is still useful to consult I. Rinieri. *Della rovina di una monarchia*. Torino, 1901.

there appeared a series of treatises and pamphlets on state law fully in accordance with Caramanico's vision. The authors included such personages as Marino Guarani²⁸, Angelo Masci²⁹, Giacinto Dragonetti³⁰, Saverio Simonetti³¹, and Francesco Rossi³². Even the lawyer Francesco Paolo Di Blasi, who for some time was suspected of being a Jacobine, was commissioned to edit a new series of *Prammatiche*. In 1785 the French traveller Charles Dupaty commented: "The barons are, especially in Sicily, real tyrants. A couple of years ago it was preached from the pulpit that the barons were the true lords of the country. The 'Marchese Caraccili' (*sic*), the actual viceroy of Sicily, works with considerable success to transfer the old power of the nobility to the domain of the government. This undertaking is not without some danger and trouble"³³.

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 should refute 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'³⁴. The documentary 'treasures' of the historians, therefore, became treasures for the politicians and the leaders. 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

28. Marino Guarani. *Ius feudale neapolitanum ac siculam*. Naples, 1792.

29. Angelo Masci. *Esame politico legale de' diritti e delle prerogative dei baroni del Regno di Napoli*. Naples, 1792.

30. Giacinto Dragonetti. *Origine dei feudi nei regni di Napoli e Sicilia*. Naples, 1788.

31. Saverio Simonetti. *Rimostranza sulle cause feudali in Sicilia*. Naples, 1788. On Simonetti's participation in the Vella affair cf. Cederna. *Imposture littéraire*, 120 *et seq.*

32. Francesco Rossi. *Conspectus iuris publici feudalis communis ac siculi*. Naples, 1792.

33. Charles Dupaty. *Briefe über Italien vom Jahr 1785*. Mainz, 1790, II, 200.

34. Here quoted from the German translation by Philipp Wilhelm Gottlieb Hausleitner in *Geschichte der Araber in Sicilien*, I, introduction, LXI.

informed his successor Caramanico in great detail about the momentary situation of the historic research on Arab Sicily³⁵.

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 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. (...) The king has given his permission and even wanted to pay the printing but Caracciolo interfered and stopped the whole process. Most likely the printing will not be continued until there is a new viceroy"³⁶. On the other hand, the Sicilian nobility was also not shy to suppress information which did not fit in their vision. Very often old documents and sources simply disappeared. Münter quotes the example of the private library of the *Marchese Giaratana*: "The reason [for the disappearance of documents] lies in the general distrust of the nobility of the government of the Kingdom of Naples. Marchese Giaratana is afraid that the government might use some manuscripts which are in his possession which might show some new light on the rights of some Sicilian noble families. In fact, some families think that, by means of old tradition and the transfer of prerogatives, they are in a position to call some pieces of land their own as if they possessed this land through medieval legal enfeoffment. (...) Don Francesco Daniele, the royal historiographer in Naples, who has long worked on a history of the family of the Hohenstaufen tried in vain to consult this codex (with the letters of Petrus de Vineis). It is denied that the codex is still there, although it is known that this is not true"³⁷.

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. The sensible and delicate reactions to these subjects in those times of emerging central

35. Here quoted by Giuseppe Giarrizzo a. o. (Eds.). "Illuministi italiani...". In *La Letteratura Italiana. Storia e Testi*. Milano-Naples, 1965, XLVI, part VII, 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), 266 *et seq.*

36. Friedrich Münter. *Aus den Tagebüchern Friedrich Münters. Wander- und Lehrjahre eines dänischen Gelehrten*. Ed. by Ojvind Andreasen. 3 vols. Copenhagen-Leipzig, 1937, II, 56.

37. Friedrich Münter. *Nachrichten von Neapel und Sicilien, auf einer Reise in den Jahren 1785 und 1786*. Copenhagen, 1790, 199 *et seq.*

power of the state is also shown in the comments of foreign observers. It is exactly the political implication of the *Norman Codex* which interested from the beginning several European intellectuals and travellers. Count Carl Ulysses von Salis und Marschlin, who in the summer of 1788 undertook a tour of Sicily with his uncle who was a general in the army of Naples, discussed this subject quite deeply: “To get the correct impression of the situation of the Sicilian nobility one has to see its roots in the old times. When Roger distributed the land to his warriors to reward them for their brave services, he never granted them prerogatives or rights over the inhabitants of this land. Therefore the lords promised to everyone who wanted to settle in their lands, fields or pieces of arable lands against payment of rent. This rent was sometimes fixed for a certain period of time sometimes in perpetuity. If the local Moors or Saracens had quarrels or disputes, they had to turn to a royal judge who was placed in every big town. The barons saw that their power was considerably limited by this situation and their authority suffered as a result. So they keenly waited for the time when the power of the kings was weakened and then forced them to allow to act as judges over their respective lands. But de facto their legal power never went so far and the right to appeal was always open to everyone who wanted to use it”³⁸. So already in 1788 amateurs could foresee the importance of the documents which had allegedly been sent from Fez to Palermo. 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”³⁹.

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 1788⁴⁰. Carelli who had come to Palermo with Caracciolo’s administration was a learned *dilletante* with a special interest in legal history⁴¹. Count Friedrich Leopold von Stolberg who had paid Carelli a visit in sum

38. Carl Ulysses von Salis und Marschlin. *Beiträge zur natürlichen und ökonomischen Kenntniß des Königreichs beider Sicilien*. 2 vols. Zurich, 1790, I, 133.

39. Hager. *Gemälde*, 154.

40. On the career of Francesco Carelli cf. Baviera Albanese. *L’arabica impostura*, 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), 3.

41. Friedrich Leopold von Stolberg. *Reise in Deutschland, der Schweiz, Italien und Sicilien*. 2 vols.

mer 1792 in his private diary had even written that Vella is supposed to have told him that the translation of the *Libro del Consiglio di Egitto* had been carried out as a royal commission⁴². Another learned visitor to Palermo, Johann Heinrich Bartels from Hamburg, accused Vella's critics of having 'political purposes' in their attacks of the *Norman Codex*⁴³. 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. To go more deeply in the matter Carelli had asked for sources and documents from Naples. Together with his friends and colleagues, he discussed how to harmonize the historical features and structures with the modern treatises of Guarani and Dragonetti⁴⁴. Significantly the almighty Neapolitan minister John ('Giovanni') Acton was always very well informed about the outcome of this historical research in Palermo⁴⁵. The eyewitness Léon Dufourny documents in his private journal that Vella and Carelli met often between 1791 and 1792⁴⁶. Even another of Vella's acquaintances, the poet Giovanni Meli, is convinced that the lawyers and officers Saverio Simonetti and Francesco Carelli had their share behind the idea of the *Libro del Consiglio d'Egitto*⁴⁷.

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 work⁴⁸. Vella dedicated his work to the king. How far the *abate* himself was aware of the political implications of his 'translations' is documented by his introduction to the *Libro del Consiglio di Egitto*: "Grandi cose ed assai rilevanti notizie a me parve che questo codice contenesse (...) ma diffidando del mio giudizio ben mi avvisai di sottoporli all'alto discernimento del principe di Caramanico (...) ed egli conosciuto il pregio dell'opera (...) mi incoraggiò al compimento della medesima (...). ma quel che più mi fa sperare che debba renderlo meritevole della Vostra Augusta protezione egli è, o Sire, che i supremi diritti della Regalia non altrove quanto in esso ampiamente rilucono; conciossiachè nelle due legislazioni che vi sono inserite

Mainz, 1877, I, 207.

42. Stolberg. *Reise in Deutschland*, I, 205.

43. Johann Heinrich Bartels. *Briefe über Kalabrien und Sizilien*. 3 vols. Göttingen, 1787-1791, here III, 673.

44. Cf. Baviera Albanese. *Imposture littéraire*, 133.

45. So John Acton was immediately informed in 1795 when there was definite proofs of Vella's forgeries. Cf. Carlo Castone della Torre di Rezzonico. *Opere de Cavaliere Carlo Castone Conte della Torre di Rezzonico*. Ed. by Francesco Mocchetti. vol. 5. Como, 1817, here V, 99 annotation.

46. Dufourny is here quoted by Cederna. *Imposture littéraire*, 137.

47. Cf. Giovanni Meli. "Gazzetta problematica relativa all'impostura di lu codici arabu di l'abbati Vella". In *Opere*. Palermo, 1838, I, 195.

48. Cf. also Hager. *Gemälde*, 154.

(...) tutto ciò che al fiero ed inalterabile dominio dei reggitori di questa Monarchia fu riservato partitamente si legge⁴⁹. 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’⁵⁰.

It is doubtful if Vella was aware of the whole dimension and long-term consequences of this ‘collaboration’ with some members of the viceroy’s administration. With this new step he moved on to the stage of a political game which was so different from scholarly discussions and the silent atmosphere of monastic studies to which he had been used to. But it seems that the *abate* with the *Libro del Consiglio di Egitto* really wanted to change his ‘monastic’ environment for a place in the distinguished circles of the *theatrum politicum*. After he finished the translation of the *Norman Codex*, he was granted an audience at the court of King Ferdinand IV in Naples, ‘salutò il re, come faceano i suoi Emiri scrivendo a` Califi, baciando cioè colla fronta per terra le mani alla sua grandezza’⁵¹.

If the version of the events around the genesis of the *Libro del Consiglio di Egitto* as presented by Vella 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 cossì comanda. –Dunque –rispose il segretario– bisogna rendere un servizio al nostro padrone. Bisogna che tu scrivessi ciò che ti detto io”⁵². This sta-

49. *Libro del Consiglio di Egitto tradotto da Giuseppe Vella capellano del sacra ordine gerosolimitano, abate di S. Pancrazio*. Palermo, 1793, IV-VI.

50. *Libro del Consiglio di Egitto*, VII. Cf. also Baviera Albanese. *Imposture littéraire*, 132: “Questo aspetto della personalità del segretario ci induce a credere che tra lui e l’abate maltese dovettero intercorrere dei rapporti più o meno stretti (...) e rende verosimile l’affermazione del Vella sulle monete da lui date in pegno al Carello e sullo scambio di libri in prestito”. On Carelli and Vella cf. also Cederna. *Imposture littéraire*, 133 et seq.; Eichhorn (Ed.). “Actenmässige Relation”, 200.

51. Scinà. *Prospetto della Storia*, III, 335.

52. Here quoted by Baviera Albanese. *Imposture littéraire*, 121.

tement 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’: “Il confitente [Vella] gli rispose che trattandosi di servire il padrone faceva tutto (...) Soggiunse il Carelli: –Io dunque ti do queste carte; le dovrai trascrivere al tuo stile e quando saranno terminate le porterai in palazzo insieme con quelle che tu scriverai per io farle leggere al Vicerè. –Il confitente obbedì al Carelli a fare ciò che gli ordinò perché gli fece credere che non si faceva pregiudizio a persona alcuna che anzi del bene e che le di lui fatiche erano molto giovevoli alla nazione e se non l’avrebbe obbedito avrebbe incontrata l’indignazione del detto Carelli. (...) Dopo alcuni giorni (...) le consegnò al Carelli il quale dopo due giorni andò a ritrovare il confitente dicendogli che il Vicerè ne restava contento, animandolo ed avvertendolo di non farne motto con persona alcuna. Il confitente continuava le sue fatiche nella trattazione delle carte che gli venivano sommistrate da Carelli (...) e nel tempo che (...) faceva quella fatica gli andava in casa di sera don Giovanni Battista Fidotta mandato da Carelli per osservare se il confitente traslava bene le seconda legislazione”⁵³.

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. What is strange is 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 abbate Vella per questa cosa non ti dovrai turbare. Portami tutti li manoscritti al Palazzo; parleremo al Vicerè e si accomoderà tutto”⁵⁴. To the public these deeper coherences and connections were of course unknown. The European gazettes and journals kept on announcing that the *Norman Codex* would be published soon⁵⁵.

As discussions went on in Europe, Vella kept on working to finalize the ‘translation’ of the codex. 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 treasury⁵⁶. Before it had been planned to use this money for the publication of the 12

53. *Ibid.*, 121 *et seq.*

54. *Ibid.*, 123.

55. Cf. Salis und Marschlin. *Beiträge zur natürlichen und ökonomischen Kenntniß*. I, 119.

56. *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

volumes of Rosario Gregorio's history of Sicily. Now this project was abandoned in favour of Vella's. In all the royal treasury estimated a cost of 1,600 Neapolitan ounces or 8,000 guilders⁵⁷. Despite of all the hidden criticism the first volume of the *Libro del Consiglio di Egitto* was published in folio in Palermo in 1793. It was announced as 'tradotto da Giuseppe Vella cappellano del sacra ordine gerosolimitano, abate di S. Pancrazio, professore di Lingua Araba nella Reale Accademia di Palermo, e Socio nazionale della Reale Accademia delle Scienze, Belle Lettere, ed Arti di Napoli'. 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"⁵⁸. The publication of the first volume was followed by several announcements and reviews in European scientific magazines⁵⁹. The publication of the second volume was announced for the spring 1794⁶⁰.

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

Vella from 1 February 1790; Note on the costs of the printing of the *Libro del Consiglio di Egitto* carried out by the royal chamber dated 12 December 1790; Ibid. note of President Paternò and Councillor Dragonetti, dated 17 December 1792.

57. Cf. Hager, *Nachricht* 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. Further details of the costs and difficulties of the printing of the *Norman Codex* are explained in a note of the *Consiglieri Patrimoniali* (amongst them Giovanni Gioeni, Antonio di Napoli, Gaetano Montalto, Giacinto Dragonetti, Francesco Chirigo, Michele Perremuto), dated 11 July 1792. Cf. also the letter from Giovanni Battista Paternò to Giacinto Dragonetti dated 17 December 1792. The special paper on which the book should be printed was ordered in Genoa. Because of difficulties with the customs the arrival of the paper was delayed. Cf. the note in the files made by a secretary of the *Tribunale de' R. Patrimonio*, dated 11 July 1792.

58. 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.

59. Cf. *Magasin Encyclopedique*, year 5, VI, 330-356.

60. 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. After Hager had pointed out that the *Norman Codex* was a pure forgery in the autumn of 1794, the printing of the second volume was stopped.

work by the Dutch scholars Schultens and Meerman and by Professor Olaus Gerhard Tychsen from Rostock⁶¹. Vella maintained he had provided these scholars with excerpts and passages of the manuscript himself for their opinion long before the publication was in the pipeline⁶². 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. But in the explosive contents of the *Libro del Consiglio di Egitto* there were the seeds which would soon cause the *abate*'s fall. Vella's career up till then was never really harmed by the critical comments of learned sceptics. It is the political element of the *Libro del Consiglio di Egitto* which would lead to the disaster. The administration was very much 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 Langobardian and Norman feudal rights but Vella's 'documents' seemed to place such rights entirely in the hands of the Sicilian Monarchy⁶³. Even more than the curia, the Sicilian nobility was embittered over the publication of the *Norman Codex*. This discussion had started before 1793. 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 codex⁶⁴. 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

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

62. *Libro del Consiglio di Egitto* 'Avviso del Traduttore al Lettori', IX.

63. 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 d'Egitto* cf. also Cederna. *Imposture littéraire*, 75.

64. Donato Tommasi. *Della nullità delle alienazioni de Beni, delle Chiese, delle Badie, e de Benefici di Real Padronato, mancanti di Regio assenso...* Palermo, 1791, 19. Cf. also Hager. *Nachricht*, 60. Cf. also Eichhorn (Ed.). "Actenmäßige Relation", 194.

of the contents aimed for students of law and history⁶⁵. As d'Angelo's work was published, the star of Giuseppe Vella 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 to speak out. Even at this stage now Zarillo only kept referring to grave mistakes in Vella's translations but he never went so far to accuse the *abate* as a forger⁶⁶. The anonymous author of a review of the *Libro del Consiglio di Egitto* in the *Gazetta di Mantua* used some irony when he commented on the sequence of the *Norman Codex*: "We voluntarily would like to know (...) if there is another man in all of Europe who has the talent to develop a historical novel which contains the history of centuries carefully listed day for day and week by week and interlinked so artistically that the reader has a full picture of the time of the Saracens in Sicily from their arrival to their disappearance?"⁶⁷ In the spring 1794 the Oriental scholar from Vienna Joseph Hager arrived in Naples and later travelled to Palermo full of curiosity to 'throw a glance on the newly found books of Livy' – or at least so he said⁶⁸. 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 the Arabic or the Kufic⁶⁹. In Palermo Hager also met with Vella's old enemy Rosario Gregorio and seemed to have discussed with him how the *abate* could be unmasked⁷⁰. Hager and Gregorio however found great difficulties to communicate the results of their research.

65. Cf. Hager. *Nachricht*, 64.

66. Cf. *Voyage en Italie de M. l'Abbé Barthélemy de l'Académie Française*. Paris, 1802, XXII *et seq.*

67. Here quoted by Joseph Hager. *Nachricht*, 65.

68. Hager. *Nachricht*, 61.

69. On Hager cf. Constant von Wurzbach (Ed.). *Biographisches Lexikon des Kaiserthums Oesterreich*. Vienna, 1861, VII, 196-199; On the life of Hager cf. also *Biographie des hommes vivants*. Paris, 1817, III, 356. In Wurzbach's *Biographische(m) Lexikon* Hager's involvement in the Vella case is described wrongly. The Austrian professor was not called to Naples and Palermo to examine the so 'lost books of Livy' but because of the documents on the Arabic history of Sicily. For a list of the works Hager had published up to 1809 cf. Georg Christoph Hamberger a. o. (Ed.). *Das Gelehrte Teutschland oder Lexikon der jetzt lebenden Teutschen Schriftsteller*. Lemgo, 1810, XIV (=Supplement, II), 18 *et seq.*; XVIII (1821) (=Supplement, VI), 20. In the latter volume the date of Hager's death is wrongly given as 1815.

70. 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, 50 *et seq.*

Not too surprisingly Viceroy Caramanico did not react to the –most unwelcome– heavy accusations against Vella. The viceroy just told Hager he should communicate his doubts to Minister Acton in Naples⁷¹. Hager did not hesitate to do so. Together with the historian Rosario Gregorio, the Austrian composed a detailed expertise⁷² which declared the *Libro di Consiglio di Egitto* and the *Codice diplomatico* as forgeries⁷³. 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 IV⁷⁴. Already on 31 May Acton sent a response to Caramanico and Airolidi. In his letter he reported how embarrassed the king had been when he had heard about Hager`s accusations against Vella⁷⁵. 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 policy⁷⁶. So Hager, who was on his way back to Vienna, was ordered by Ferdinand IV. to keep silent about the Vella case⁷⁷.

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 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

71. Cf. Scinà. *Prospetto della Storia*, III, 344.

72. Hager. *Nachricht*, 68. The French original of Hager`s memoire of May 1794 is preserved in the Archivio di Stato, Palermo, R. Segretaria di Sicilia; Incartamenti 5291, no pagination. In the same file there is also an Italian translation. For a German translation cf. Hager. *Nachricht*, 68-78.

73. 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, 359.

74. Cf. Scinà. *Prospetto della Storia*, III, 344.

75. 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 calender and sequence of years in Vella`s works and the parallel text of the books of Inveges and Caruso, `sono tutti fondamenti secondo i quali crede il Sig. Hager (di poter asserire) che manchino i detto codici di autenticità...`. All these news `ha posto in qualche inquietudine il suo Real animo`. Archivio di Stato, Palermo, R. Segretaria di Sicilia; Incartamenti 5291, no pagination. Cf. also Scinà. *Prospetto della Storia*, III, 344 et seq. For this letter of Acton cf. Baviera Albanese. *L`arabica impostura*, 119, who gives a wrong date.

76. 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.

77. In his *Nachricht von einer merkwürdigen literarischen Betrügerey* Hager indicates this censorship `durch deren Sorgfalt er [sein Reisebericht von 1795] noch um ein merkliches kürzer ward`. Hager. *Nachricht*, 66. Cf. also Archivio di Stato, Palermo, R. Segretaria di Sicilia; Incartamenti 5291, no pagination; letter from Acton to Caramanico dated 31 May 1794.

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'⁷⁸. Secretary of state Carelli is accused of instrumentalizing the codex against the nobility and threatening the internal peace of the kingdom⁷⁹.

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 say⁸⁰. 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 case⁸¹. 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 anticlerical 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 Palermo⁸². Hager became 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*⁸³. On 27 July Hager communicated his agreement

78. Hager. *Nachricht*, 60.

79. Cf. *ibid.*, 60 *et seq.*

80. Cf. Baviera Albanese. *L'arabica impostura*, 134.

81. Scinà. *Prospetto della Storia*, III, 345 *et seq.*

82. Cf. Scinà. *Prospetto della Storia*, III, 346; Hager. *Nachricht*, 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.

83. Bartolomeo Lagumina. "Il falso codice arabo-siculo". *Archivio Storico Siciliano*, new series, year V (1880), 233-314, here 242. On the payment of Hager cf. Archivio di Stato, Palermo, R. Segretaria di Sicilia; Incartamenti 5291, no pagination. Hager had to remind the administration in Palermo several times to receive the promised money. On 23 and 27 January he had to write again to Viceroy Caramanico's successor archbishop Lopez y Rojo to ask for his payment. At this moment his travel expenses from Naples to Palermo were still not refunded to him. On 2 February it was not Lopez y Rojo but Airoidi who ordered the officers to pay Hager. Cf. also Hager's note from 3 March 1795. On 21 March 1795 Minister Acton confirmed that Hager should be payed 100 *scudi* monthly. The travel expenses were calculated '24 once, 12 carlini'. Cf. also the letter from the Palermitan chancery to the principe di Castelcicala dated 13 October 1796.

to Acton⁸⁴. On 13 September Acton secretly informed Viceroy Caramanico and Airoldi about Hager's coming mission⁸⁵.

Of course it had been planned that Hager's return to Palermo should be kept secret from Vella and his friends. That, however, did not seem to have succeeded. Already in October, Hager has not yet arrived in Naples Vella and his 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 secret⁸⁶.

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 what Vella had presented as translations of Arabic originals were forgeries. Vella's falling from grace was complete when in the night from 8th to 9th January 1795 unexpectedly Viceroy Caramanico died. This was surely a disaster for the *abate*. Who else would now protect him against the growing number of critics? Minister Acton would surely willingly sacrifice the *abate* to restore peace and quiet to the hot atmosphere of Sicily. 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. Vella's other conspirators, Carelli and Fidotta, did not have the power to keep the oncoming trouble away from the *abate*.

After Caramanico's death, the government duties were provisionally taken over by Lopez y Rojo who was 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. President Lopez y Rojo had been instructed by Naples to investigate the Vella case. Up to then the *Corte Capitaniale* officers were in charge of the investigations. At the

84. Letter from Hager to Minister Acton dated 27 July 1794. Archivio di Stato, Palermo, R. Segretaria di Sicilia; Incartamenti 5291, no pagination.

85. Letter from Acton to Airoldi dated 13 September 1794. Archivio di Stato, Palermo, R. Segretaria di Sicilia; Incartamenti 5291, no pagination.

86. Cf. Scinà. *Prospetto della Storia*, III, 346 *et seq.*

end of January 1795, responsibility was transferred to the *Tribunale del Real Patrimonio*⁸⁷. 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 confiscated⁸⁸. 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 Giuffrida⁸⁹.

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...')⁹⁰. Talking about the Vella case in the intellectual salons of Palermo, Gregorio was very clear in his comments. In his *Nachricht von einer merkwürdigen literarischen Betrügerey*, Joseph Hager more diplomatically just indicated that Carelli was 'held as the mastermind behind this political novel'⁹¹ 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'⁹². In his opinions and comments sent to the Neapolitan court, Joseph 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 fa-

87. Cf. the report of the robbery 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*. This report later was reworked and augmented and on 5 February sent to Minister Acton in Naples. It contained a list of all the fragments of the *Codex Martinianus* and the *Norman Codex* which had up to this moment come to light. On 16 February 1795 the *Consiglieri Patrimoniali* Michele Perramuto, Domenico Grassellino, Giovanni Gioeni, Antonio di Napoli, Ignazio Lucchesi, Vitale Massa, Tommaso Mazzola, Gaspare Vanvitelli, Francesco Chirigi and Girolamo Pugliese confirmed they had received the order that from then onwards the *Tribunale Patrimoniale* should be responsible for the investigation. On the same day a report on the ongoing investigations was sent to the royal chancery in Naples.

88. 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, 351.

89. Scinà. *Prospetto della Storia*, III 352.

90. Here quoted by Caruana. *Frammento Critico*, 46.

91. Hager. *Nachricht*, 61.

92. Biblioteca comunale di Palermo, Marchese di Villabianca, (Diarii inediti), Qq E 110. Here quoted by Baviera Albanese. *L'arabica impostura*, 153. Cf. also Biblioteca comunale di Palermo, Qq D 111, t. XIX.

mous Vella trial started⁹³. 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* ('in considerazione dell'interesse, che vi ha il Regio erario'). 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 treasury⁹⁴. 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 case⁹⁵. 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'⁹⁶. Pressure by the Sicilian barons may also have made the lawyers hesitate to take on this case. Finally D. Michele Terilli took over Vella's defense⁹⁷.

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 forgeries⁹⁸. On 29 August 1796 the verdict was read. Vella was condemned to 15 years imprisonment⁹⁹ and made to resign as *abate* of San Pancrazio. His belongings were sequestrated and he also lost the pension granted to him by the

93. On the trial cf. F. Parlavecchio. "Il processo dell'abate Vella". *La voce giudiziaria*, 15 April 1953.

94. 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. Segreteria 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. Adelaide Baviera Albanese. *L'arabica impostura*, 135.

95. 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. Segreteria 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. Segreteria 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.

96. Archivio di Stato, Palermo, R. Segreteria, Incartamenti 5291, no pagination. Letter from Francesco Baldanza dated 3 October 1795. Cf. also the undated *Memoriale di Francesco Baldanza*. On the defense 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.

97. Cf. Archivio di Stato, Palermo, R. Segreteria di Sicilia; Incartamenti 5291, no pagination; Vella's supplication from 22 May 1796.

98. Archivio di Stato, Palermo, R. Segreteria di Sicilia; Incartamenti 5291, no pagination. Here quoted by Baviera Albanese. *L'arabica impostura*, 136.

99. Here quoted by Scinà. *Prospetto della Storia*, III, 367.

archbishop of Palermo¹⁰⁰. But the fallen hero did not give up. 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 Caracciolo and Caramanico. These latter two might have had a good word for the *ex-abate*, but they were both dead now. Vella's former collaborator and *Spiritus rector* of the *Libro del Consiglio di Egitto*, Francesco Carelli had long disappeared into anonymity in Naples. So Vella wrote most of his supplications directly to the King of Naples¹⁰¹. In 1798 the supplications asking for his release from prison because of bad health showed some results. Bishop Airoidi, 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. 1799 was a very turbulent year 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 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. This, however, was no official act of mercy. Vella was only unofficially released. A few months later, a royal order stipulated that Vella should be kept in his former country house in the near of Mezzomonreale. On 4 January 1803 his sequestrated goods and belongings were officially restituted. On 16 June 1803 even his income as *abate* of San Pancrazio was

100. E. Orlando. *Il feudalesimo in Sicilia*, II, Note 21, 22; Di Blasi. *Storia della Sicilia*, Lib. VII. Here quoted by Paolo de Bono. *Sommario della Storia della Legislazione in Malta*. Malta, 1897, 95, annotation. Cf. also Caruana, *Frammento critico* 48.

101. 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. Segreteria 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. When Vella's income as *abate* of San Pancrazio was restituted in June 1803 these supplications were compiled in one volume.

restituted and he could resume reading mass in the church of San Carlo in Palermo¹⁰². In May 1814 Vella died at the age of 65 years. The cause of the death is unknown¹⁰³.

102. Cf. Scinà. *Prospetto della Storia*, III, 367, annotation 1. Cf. also Caruana. *Frammento critico*, 49.

103. Cf. also Scinà. *Prospetto della Storia*, III, 367.