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Sicilian Sweets.
The Fanciful Frauds of Wily Father Vella

Abstract: Father Giuseppe Vella was a Maltese clergyman who wrote counterfeit Arabic texts on the history of Sicily at the end of the eighteenth century. This article looks at the texts that Vella produced, analysing them both in terms of their form – written in a sort of limping Maltese Arabic – and in terms of their content, particularly the preposterous claim of being authentic historical sources on the relationship between the rulers of Sicily and the Fatimid territories in North Africa and Egypt. The general story of the counterfeit texts has been known ever since the meticulous detective work done by Bartolomeo Lagumina more than a century ago, and more recently it has also been covered in several publications by Thomas Freller. The grammatical and lexical nature of the counterfeit texts is less well known, however. This is examined in this article. Even though the texts are not genuine, they are nevertheless products of their time and a particular place, namely late eighteenth-century Palermo. The article concludes with a short survey of the modern literary afterlife of the Vella affair.

The story that follows is not entirely unknown. In a nutshell, it goes like this.\(^1\) From 1788 onwards, the Maltese abbot Giuseppe Vella (1749–1814), who lived in Palermo,\(^2\) allowed two Arabic or quasi-Arabic texts of his own invention to be distributed.\(^3\) These texts were meant to illustrate the early Arab history of Sicily. Vella published a work in six volumes called *Codice diplomatico di Sicilia sotto il "Comprehensively taken from Lagumina 1882, Freller 2001, 2004, and 2005.
\(^2\) His grave is located in the Chiesa di San Matteo al Cassaro in Palermo; see Bonnici 2015, who also provides a portrait of Vella and states 1749 as the year of his birth, as opposed to other sources that mention 1740.
\(^3\) I first came across Abbot Vella and his counterfeit documents while sorting the manuscripts of the Juynboll family in Leiden. I lectured about Vella’s fakes a few years ago (at the conference entitled ‘Documents & Histoire. Session III. Le faux, le simulacre et la copie. Islam vii/xx e s.’, Paris, 14 November 2013) and did so in Hamburg as well a few years later (2018). This presentation can be found here: <http://www.islamicmanuscripts.info/files/Vella-falsifications-Hamburg-2018-complete.pdf>. It was the point of departure for the present article.
governo degli Arabi (Palermo, 1789), first in Latin and Italian (in parallel) and then primarily in Italian (but not in Arabic). The Codice diplomatico is a collection of documents purportedly coming from the rulers of the Aghlabid dynasty in Tunisia (184–296/800–909).

Vella’s patron, Archbishop Alfonso Airoldi (1728–1817), believed in the authenticity of the documents, however, and signed the title-page of the Codice diplomatico as if he himself was the learned editor and translator. This spurious action cannot have been entirely alien to Airoldi, as his bishopric was one of the cities called ‘Heraclea in Europe’, a diocese that had ceased to exist after the Ottoman conquest several centuries earlier. Along with the ‘translated text’, the Codice diplomatico provided a specimen of the ‘original’ manuscript, the ‘Codex Martinianus’, paleographically a hard nut to crack. Its near-illegibility did much to contribute to the Codex’s aura of authenticity. That authenticity was further enhanced by numismatic evidence also provided in the Codice diplomatico.₄

The long Italian text created a furore in learned Europe. In 1791, a German translation of the Italian text was begun by Philipp Wilhelm Gottlieb Hausleutner. The Danish Orientalist Olaus Gerhard Tychsen (1734–1815), who worked at the University of Rostock, did not hesitate to stake his great reputation as a palaeographer and numismatist on the authenticity of Vella’s faked documents. He was able to ‘decipher’ and publish the Arabic text of the specimen of the ‘Codex Martinianus’ that Vella/Airoldi had put at the beginning of the Codex diplomaticus. However, this Codex was written in such a way – no doubt at Vella’s instigation – that nobody would be able to decipher it. In fact, Vella had given Tychsen the key to his graphical labyrinth.₅ Not everybody was as naïve (or vain) as Tychsen, however, and serious doubts emanated from other quarters, the French Orientalist Joseph de Guignes (1721–1800) being just one of the critics.

Encouraged by this general success, as of 1793, Vella started to publish another set of Arabic source materials that he called the Kitāb Diwān Miṣr, or ‘The Council of Egypt’, containing documents that, it is assumed, were exchanged between the Norman rulers of Sicily and the Fatimid caliphs of Egypt – documents that were also fakes. This time, the documents were in both an Arabic and an Italian version. While this project was still underway, Vella started a third masquerade: he pretended to have discovered the sixtieth Book of Roman History

₄ For a numismatic perspective of Vella’s counterfeit work, see Travaini/D’Ottone Rambach 2019.
₅ The irony of the brazen insolence of the Lucretian motto on the title-page of Airoldi 1788, ‘E tenebris tantis tam clarum extollere lumen’, i.e. ‘to take out of so much darkness so clear a light’, will not be lost on the modern reader.
by Titus Livius in Arabic translation. Vella manufactured a mystification in which fact and fiction were cleverly interwoven. A contemporary described it as follows:

Abbot Vella is the owner of the manuscript of the sixtieth book of Titus Livius, which was lost and which he received from Pinto,\(^6\) the Grand Master of the Maltese Order. Chevalier Favray\(^7\) had found this manuscript and several others as well in part of the roof construction of the Aya Sophia in Constantinople. He took these to Malta and gave them as a present to the Grand Master, who presented the Titus Livius manuscript to Vella.\(^8\)

The Latin text of the missing work had been lost since Antiquity. This important discovery, however, proved to be a step too far, and shortly after he made this claim, Vella’s house of cards fell apart – one still wonders what words he would have put into Livius’ mouth. The ongoing publication of the bilingual Kitāb Dīwān Miṣr was halted\(^9\) and Vella was summoned before a criminal court and convicted of fraud. During the trial, Hager’s report was used against Vella, and after the latter’s conviction yet another expert was invited to make a report on the matter: Germano Adami, the Melkite archbishop of Aleppo, wrote a detailed analysis of Vella’s counterfeit documents.\(^10\) Vella received a prison sentence, but the verdict was subsequently commuted to house arrest. In the following, I shall concentrate on the two Arabic texts that he created.

1 The ‘Codex Martinianus’

We only have a facsimile of the first text page of this seemingly non-existent manuscript. However, a ‘Codex Martinianus’ really does exist. It is MS Palermo 18, which contains a ‘Life of the Prophet Muḥammad’ according to the five canonical collections of al-Bukhārī, Muslim, Abū Dawūd, al-Tirmidhi and al-Nasāʾī, and also according to other classical authors mentioned at the end of the volume. Vella ravaged that volume, renamed it ‘Dīwān Siqilliyya’ and added his illegible

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\(^6\) Manuel Pinto de Fonseca (1741–1773), the 68th Grand Master of the Maltese Order.

\(^7\) Chevalier Antoine de Favray (1706–1798) was a French painter noted for his portraits of personalities of the Ottoman Empire as well as paintings of Grand Masters of the Sovereign Military Order of Malta. See Degiorgio/Fiorentino 2004.

\(^8\) My translation from Hager 1799, 58. As Pinto died before Vella came up with his story, it was impossible to verify the spurious provenance of the Livius manuscript.

\(^9\) The Bavarian State Library in Munich (Bayerische Staatsbibliothek) owns a copy of the very rare second volume (2 A.or. 138-2); see <http://daten.digitale-sammlungen.de/0007bsb00076612/images/index.html> (last consulted on 13 February 2020).

\(^10\) Dated 1 September 1796. Fully quoted in Lagumina 1882; see the footnotes on pp. 13–15.
specimen page to it. When his empire of counterfeit writings collapsed, he had wanted to destroy that manuscript, but the time constraint caused by the subsequent criminal proceedings made this impossible.  

The facsimile of the spurious sample page, which was attached to MS Palermo 18, was printed on paper 24.4 × 17.1 cm in size with a visible mould of the printing plate measuring 22.1 × 14.3 cm. The name of the engraver is given as Melchior de Bella (a signature on the bottom line). There is some text in Latin script on the recto side, and the facsimile is on the verso side. The latter shows the opening page of an unusual Arabic manuscript with a heading in Latin: Specimen Characteris Codicis Martiniani, i.e. ‘a sample of the script of the Martinian codex’. This presumed manuscript, the ‘Codex Martinianus’, was said to originate from the Monastery of San Martino not far from Palermo, an establishment considered to be Sicily’s most important Benedictine abbey. The Latin and Italian translation of this forged text was distributed by Giuseppe Vella’s protector, Bishop Alfonso Airoldi, who put his name on the title-pages of the six volumes of the Italian translation of the Codex diplomaticus, not without gratefully acknowledging the work of ‘our Vella’.

The Specimen was originally published in 1788 and served as an illustration in Archbishop Airoldi’s bilingual (Italian and Latin) edition of the beginning of the Codex diplomaticus of 1788 and was used again in 1789 as the opening passage of the first volume of the Italian edition of the Codice diplomatico di Sicilia. Apart from the pages inserted in the 1788 and 1789 editions of the Codex diplomaticus, I consulted the loose leaf of the facsimile that was formerly part of a collection belonging to the Juynboll family in Leiden, now MS Leiden, University Library Or. 26.731 (27), which I extensively described in 2012. It is one of the copies distributed among European Orientalists by Vella. It served as bait, and

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11 Lagumina 1888, 16–17. Lagumina ordered and selectively edited and summarised the Arabic text of this ‘Life’ as contained in MS Palermo 18; see Lagumina 1882, 37–46, 47–60, 61–85 respectively. Lagumina’s real scholarly interest was not in Vella’s fraud, but in the original ‘underlayer’ of the Codex Martinianus.

12 Airoldi 1789. I consulted the much shorter 1788 edition, Airoldi 1788 [Leiden class mark: 913 A 13]. Apart from vol. I/1 (1789), I also consulted volumes I/2 (1789), II/2 (1790) and III/1 (1792) of Airoldi’s Codice diplomatico, as found in the internet archive. All in all, the work comprises three volumes in six parts. More volumes were supposed to come, but these were never published. As regards the Latin translation, only the pages in the 1788 edition were published. A modern facsimile edition of the entire six-volume work seems to be available from Nabu Publishers in Charleston, South Carolina, USA.

13 Witkam 2012, 68–75.
Tychsen snapped at it. I did as well, in fact, though in a different way, as discovering this document was how I first became acquainted with Vella and his work.

We are familiar with four different versions of the introduction of the Codex Martinianus (which, to be frank, never existed as such), and ultimately, they all come from Giuseppe Vella. The illegible facsimile (Fig. 1) and the Latin and Italian translations were published by Bishop Airoldi in 1788, but came directly from Vella. The German translation by Hausleutner was based on the Italian text and was published from 1791 onwards. Last but not least, the Arabic text of the Specimen was published by Tychsen in 1792. As all the versions were supplied by Vella, we can ignore the facsimile page, which was not intended to be legible anyway, and concentrate on the original versions that were typographically published in Arabic, Latin and Italian. I also examined Hausleutner’s German version, of course, if only because my knowledge of Italian is not very extensive.\footnote{14}

Secretly assisted by Vella, Tychsen ‘deciphered’ the Arabic text of the Specimen and published it in an Arabic grammar with an anthology in 1792. Vella must have believed that the illegibility of the Arabic text would increase its authenticity, and it is indeed quite hard to read. After making a few attempts at it, I desisted from ruining my eyes on the Specimen itself and decided to work with Tychsen’s ‘Arabic’ text instead. This is much more legible, but an incomplete version of Vella’s text. The preface tells us that the text was written in 375 (the Islamic lunar year beginning on 29 May 985) and 162 years after the Arab conquest of Sicily (Fig. 2).

\textbf{‘Codex Martinianus’, Arabic text}\footnote{15} \begin{center} ﷲ ﻻ ﺍﻟﻪ ﺍﻻ ﻣﺤﻤﺪ ﺭﺳﻮ ﻟﻪ \newline ﻓﻲ ﺳﻨﺖ ثﻠﺚ ﻣﺎﻱ ﻭﺧﻤﺲ ﻭﺳﺒﻌﻴﻦ ﺑﺘﻊ ﻣﺤﻤﺪ \newline ﺑﻠﻚ ﺑﺘﻊ ﺍﻟﻜﺒﺮ ﺑﺘﻊ ﺍﻻﻣﻴﺮ ﺍﻟﻜﺒﻴﺮ ﻋﺒﺪ ﷲ ﺑﻦ ﻣﺤﻤﺪ ﺑﻦ ﺍﺑﻮ ﺍﻟﺤﺴﻦ ﺍﻟﻌﻤﻞ ﻫﺬ ﺍﻟﻜﺘﺎﺏ \end{center} 

\textbf{‘Codex Martinianus’, translation}\footnote{16} \begin{center} [75] In the name of God. There is no God except God. Muḥammad is the messenger of God. By command of His Greatness al-Amīr al-Kabīr ʿAbdallāh b. Abī-Ḥasan this book has been made, in the year three hundred and seventy-five of Muḥammad and a hundred

\footnote{14} I here gratefully acknowledge the help I received from Dr Lucia Raggetti (University of Bologna) to help me to better understand, and when necessary translate for me, the Italian sources used for this article. She also identified the remains of the engraving in Fig. 6 for me and translated lines of Giovanni Meli’s poetry about Vella.\footnote{15} From Tychsen 1792, 75–78.\footnote{16} Made after the Arabic text in Tychsen 1792: 75-78, the Latin and Italian texts in Airoldi 1788: 1-2, and the German translation in Hausleutner 1791: 3-6.
وما تبين وسنين والخلاص بطبع الله لي هوم المسلمين في أمستلبي;
[76] وياسم الله محمد بنيا أنكتب هذ\\nالأكتاب,

عبد الله ابن محمد ابن أبو الحسن والخلاص
بطبع الله أمير الكبير بطبع سقله ؛لتأتي الأمر
لي لي اب نغفت مصطفى ابن حاني والخلاص
بطبع الله ابن رجل دينين بطبع أسقلي ونجمع
الأبرات كلها من مت حفوف بعط عند الموئل
بطبع عيون أفرءه ابن علي لزيدي العيون
بطبع الكن نم الموئل ونبي يأخذ هذا البلد
كله ورباح لما كان بطبع حفوم الول
ابرهيم ابن علي بطبع في أسقلي القوا بطبع
الشخص بطبع عدل القوم الكبير بعط بعسكر
كبير وسق بيش غلب أسقلي كيف نعمل لي
عدالقوم الكبير كان الأول أخذ أسقلي،

[76] And in the name of God and Muḥammad, our Prophet, this book has been written.

‘Abdallāh b. Muḥammad b. Abī al-Ḥasan, by the grace of God al-Amīr al-Kabīr of entire Sicily, has given the order to me, the Muftī Muṣṭafā b. Ḥānī, by the grace of God, the first man of the Diwān of Sicily, to bring together all letters, from the time when Euphimius has demanded help from His Greatness the Mawlā of Qayrawān, Ibrahim b. ‘Albī, … (?)20 to obtain the cities and villages there, that were not subject to the rule of Euphimius. Then the Mawlā Ibrahim b. ‘Albī sent the courage man, the Great ‘Adālqūm with a huge army in order to conquer Sicily. And thus was done, so it happened that the Great ‘Adālqūm was the first conqueror of Sicily.

As I had thus received the order of His Greatness al-Amīr al-Kabīr, I collected all letters that the Mawlā had sent to Sicily and those that the Amīr Kabīrs of Sicily sent to the Mawlā, and those that the Amīr Kabīrs sent to the Amīr and the governors [77] of the country of entire Sicily. All these letters were kept in a chest made of cypress wood, kept in a house in Palermo where the Diwān was held. This chest was always closed with three different keys. One was kept by al-Amīr al-Kabīr, one by the Grand-Muftī, as the first man of the Diwān al-Arḍ, the land council, and one by the Grand-Qāḍī, as the first man of the Diwān al-Bahr, the sea council.

Thus, when while opening that chest, either in order to deposit one of the letters, or in order to take out a letter in order to be read, so that one would know what should be written, then al-Amīr al-Kabīr, the Grand-Muftī and

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17 In Tychsen, a typo for ﻛﻢ ﻟﻴﻦ.
18 In Tychsen, a typo for ﻓﻞ ﻣﺎ ﻛﺎﻧﻮ ﺑﻴﺶ ﻣﺎ ﻛﺎﻧﻮ 
19 In Tychsen, a typo for ﻗﻮم
20 From here till the end of the paragraph, several passages in the Arabic text remain unclear to me and the translations by Vella and Hausleutner were no more helpful.
We actually have five versions of this introduction. First there is the alleged facsimile of the manuscript, which is written in such a way that it cannot be deciphered. The rest of the Arabic text does not exist in manuscript, except for a fake
title-page (Fig. 2);\textsuperscript{24} the ‘Codex Martinianus’ is a phantom manuscript. Four of the five versions of the introductory text directly originate from Giuseppe Vella:
1. The facsimile of the non-existent manuscript, which Vella somewhat savagely added to a genuine volume, MS Palermo 18.
2. The Arabic text, which was published with Vella’s help by Gerhard Olaus Tychsen in 1792.
3. and 4. The Latin and Italian texts, which were published with Vella’s help by Bishop Alphonsus Airoldi in 1788.
4. The German translation by Philipp Wilhelm Gottlieb Hausleutner, which was based on the Italian text and published in 1791.

Looking at this tableau, it is as if one is examining an avant la lettre version of the Rosetta stone, whereby Father Vella provided all the sources from scratch. As will be apparent from the Arabic text, my literal translation and my tentative glossary hereafter, the Specimen is couched in strange language. Tychsen devised a special name for this linguistic variant of Arabic, namely lingua plebeia, or ‘lower-class language’, whereas he called the non-classical or spoken Arabic lingua vulgaris, ‘common language’.\textsuperscript{25} While reading this and other examples of Vella’s Arabic, Michele Amari (1806–1889) wrote the following:

In such a misery appeared in Palermo the Maltese Giuseppe Vella, chaplain friar of the Hierosolymitan Order, with his dialect that was a mixture of corrupted Arabic and awful Italian. He could understand the Arabic language the same way that a Roman peasant can understand Cicero or Titus Livius without having studied Latin. Moreover, Vella was not aware of the script, which he only learnt many years later from a Muslim slave who used to live in Palermo. Lacking any erudition, but being a cunning, bold trickster (who used to sell numbers for the lottery), he started a new trade: he forged two manuscripts in Arabic, so he said, but he only showed the Italian version. To the first, he gave the title ‘The Council of Sicily’,\textsuperscript{26} and in it he faked the correspondence of the Muslim rulers of the island with the Aghlabids and Fatimids in Africa. [...].
In these codices, the ignorant fraud collected annals, geography, statistics, civil law from two different periods, the wealth of aristocracy, together with all the lies that he somehow found profitable. This in addition to the false legends that he connected with real coins and

\textsuperscript{24} Airoldi 1789, vol. 1, between p. 52 of the introduction and p. 1 of the text of the Codex diplomaticus. It must have been made by the same artist who also produced the title-page of the Kitāb Diwān Mişr (Fig. 3).
\textsuperscript{25} Tychsen 1792: 75, 79.
\textsuperscript{26} Diwān Şiqiliyya. The Codex diplomaticus is meant here.
seals. He [even] reached the point of faking coins, it is said; together with the 17 lost books of Titus Livius, which he boasted he had in an Arabic version kept in a safe.\footnote{Translated from the Italian of Amari 1854, x–xi.}

Already in or before 1788 Vella must have had the help of someone with at least some basic knowledge of the Arabic language and script. The specimen of the \textit{Codex Martinianus}, as shown in Airoldi’s/Vella’s bilingual Latin–Italian edition, was produced in such a way that it could never be deciphered, but the language revealed is Arabic, not just an Arabicised graphic fantasy, which can sometimes be found in inscriptions on objects. With some effort, one can read the beginning of Tychsen’s edition in the first two lines of the specimen. The illegibility is exacerbated by the profuse use of vowel and reading signs, so it is clear that this is Arabic, albeit an untenable version. Moreover, Vella did everything possible to promote this text.

2 \textbf{Tentative glossary of the \textit{Codex Martinianus}}

Some of Vella’s wildest orthographical extravagancies (and a few lexical ones) in his work on the \textit{Codex Martinianus} are explained hereunder.

\begin{itemize}
  \item [\textit{ัสدوﻕ}] \textit{al-ṣandūq}, the chest.
  \item [\textit{اسقﻠﻲ}] Sicily.
  \item [\textit{البرﺕ}] ‘the letters’, from \textit{barā’}, document. Also written as \textit{البرﺕ}. The singular is written براء.
  \item [\textit{الخﻠﺺ}] ‘by the grace of ...’.
  \item [\textit{الديون}] \textit{al-Dīwān}, the Council.
  \item [\textit{الرض}] \textit{al-Ard}, the land.
  \item [\textit{الرحﻮﻝ}] \textit{al-Ruḥūl} = ?
  \item [\textit{العندﻬﻢ}] \textit{ellī ʿandahum}, ‘which are with them; which they have’.
  \item [\textit{العینﻮﻥ}] \textit{al-ʿaynūn}: if not a typo, then possibly a contamination of \textit{ʿaynān} and \textit{ʿuyūn}, the dualis and the plural of \textit{ʿAyn}, eye, spring.
  \item [\textit{المول}] \textit{al-Mawālī}, the master; plural: \textit{الموﻝ}, \textit{al-Mawlā}.\footnote{Palermo (?). Also see the skeleton version of this word in \textit{Kitāb Dīwān Miṣr}: بلیر.}
  \item [\textit{الاﻴﻤﺮ}] \textit{ellī yaʾmur}, ‘who gives the order’.
  \item [\textit{الكوﻛن}] \textit{ellī yakān}, ‘who is’.
\end{itemize}
3 ‘The Council of Egypt’

Vella’s next counterfeit work, the Kitāb Dīwān Miṣr, or ‘The Council of Egypt’, was published in 1793. It is assumed to be a collection of Arabic documents (as Vella suggests to his readership) and purportedly comes from Cairo. It provides details of the relations between Sicily and Fatimid Egypt. On the title-page, Vella men-

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28 Vella 1834, 190–198.
29 Tychsen 1792, 93.
31 Tychsen 1792, 96.
32 Aquilina 1999–2000, vol. 1, 121, where the etymology from Arabic bi-ayyi shay‘ (بأي شيء) is also given.
tions himself as the editor and translator. It is a bilingual publication with texts in Arabic and Italian. Vella must have realised that the Arabic of the *Codex diplomaticus* was far from convincing, even in Tychsen’s edition of the introduction. The ‘Council of Egypt’ shows that Vella had learnt a great deal in just a few years, although it is unlikely that he wrote the Arabic text alone. Lagumina mentions the names of his possible accomplices: Camilleri, La Barbera and Drago.\(^3^4\) The contrast between 1788/1792, when he was a mere ghost writer for Bishop Airoldi and Professor Tychsen respectively, and 1793 is striking. Vella’s name is now on the title-page and it is clear that he has gone up in the world: a professor of Arabic at the Royal Academy of Palermo and a member of the Royal Academy of Sciences, Literature and Arts of Naples, all thanks to his ground-breaking work on the *Codex diplomaticus*. Looking at the Arabic of the *Kitāb Dīwān Miṣr*, one must concede that Amari’s bitter judgement of Vella’s Arabic was only applicable to the *Codex*. By a lucky coincidence, Vella’s manuscript, on which the 1793 edition is based, has been preserved. Rather than following the sloppy edition\(^3^5\) of it in the *Consiglio di Egitto* of 1793, I shall present my transcript of the title-page and the first page of the manuscript here together with my translation:

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**The ‘Council of Egypt’, the Arabic text in Vella’s manuscript\(^3^6\)**

| بسم الله الرحمن الرحيم وصلى الله على نبينا محمد واله | 
|----------------|-----------------|
| كتاب ديوان مصر | 
| بسم الله الرحمن الرحيم وصلى الله على | 
| سيدنا و نبينا ومولاانا محمد وعلى اله وسلم | 
| تسليما | 
| المستنصر بالله الحمد الحلم خليفة وامير | 
|ｄويميين امر الي اب الموافقين وزير | 
| استعمل هذا الكتاب لديوان مصر حتى أن | 
| فيه ينسخوا هن المكاتب كله ان الخليف | 
| وامير الدويميين باشخ من بز الغرب فمن | 
| صقلية وان مازال ينسخوا هن المكاتب كله | 

**The ‘Council of Egypt’, my translation**

In the name of God, the Merciful, the Compassionate. May God bless our prophet Muḥammad and his family. The book of the Council of Egypt. In the name of God, the Merciful, the Compassionate. May God bless our lord, our prophet and our master Muḥammad and his family, and grant him peace. Al-Mustanṣir billāh, praise be to God, Caliph and Prince of the Believers, commanded me, Vizier Abū al-Mūqarīm, that I make this book of the ‘Council of Egypt’, so that all these letters are copied in it, the letters that the Caliph and Prince of the Believers has

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34 Lagumina 1882, 23, 26 (footnote, sub III). These people signed the pages of the manuscript.
35 A complete line of the manuscript is missing in two cases in this edition. As the Italian translation is complete, though, the mistakes may have been the work of the typographer, forever the token scapegoat.
36 Now MS New York, Columbia University, Smith Or. 388, pp. 1–2 (Fig. 4). Lagumina 1882, 23, mentions a bookseller, Agostino Russo, as having a Vella manuscript for sale.
received from the Land of the West and from Sicily, and also all these letters that the Prince of the Believers sent to the Land of the West and to Sicily.

And in the name of God alone, (here) begins the copying of the letters in this book on this day, 20 Ǧumādā I of the year 467 [January 17, 1075].

On 20 Ǧumādā I of the year 467 arrived from Tunis a ship from Tunis to Cairo in which there was a letter with this text:

Al-Mustanṣir billāh, God be praised, Caliph and Prince of the Believers, I, Amīr Yaḥya b. Ismāʿīl with my face on the ground kiss the hands of Your Greatness, and inform you, o lord, that on 20 Rabīʿ II of the year 467 [December 19, 1074] a ship arrived in Tunis with fifty sailors, all Muslims, which ship was sent by Robert, the Prince of Palermo, who sent me a letter, a copy of which Your Greatness finds herewith, so that you may study it and that Your Greatness tells me what I should answer to Robert. Further I have nothing to tell you. With my face on the ground I kiss the hands of Your Greatness, and I sign as follows:

The copy of the letter that was kept inside the sheet that the Amīr of Tunis sent to us, has the following text:

Robert, praise be to God alone, Prince of Palermo and Great Calabria, salutes you and says to you: O Amīr Yahyā b. Ismāʿīl, I am writing this letter from Palermo, written on 14 Rabīʿ II [December 13] of the year 1074 after the incarnation of Jesus the Messiah, so that it be known to you, o Amīr, that the Muslim population of Palermo asked me to send you this letter, so that we let you know that it is a good thing to keep the pact, since the pact opens up the co-operation between the Land of the West and Sicily. And equally the Muslim population that is in Palermo...
As with the *Codex diplomaticus*, Vella put several versions of the text of the *Kitāb Dīwān Miṣr* at the disposal of his readership:

1. The original manuscript that is now in New York.
2. A purported facsimile from the manuscript of the beginning of the text, published just before the edition and translation of 1793, but which is quite dissimilar from the manuscript.

In view of the entirely fictitious character of the ‘Council of Egypt’, the Italian text must be considered as the point of departure of all the other versions. The so-called facsimile (‘Prima Faccia del Manoscritto’) is an imprecise transcript from the manuscript (Fig. 5).

The Arabic of the *Kitāb Dīwān Miṣr* is not as suspicious as the linguistic hotchpotch of the *Codex diplomaticus*, and despite it being opaque in places, it is still proper Arabic, something that cannot be said of the *Codex*. There is evidence of some Maltese influence, though, especially regarding the morphology of the passive voice of the verb.\(^\text{37}\) The manuscript itself has evidently been written by a Maghribi scribe, but it is unclear who the author of the Arabic work was. I take it that Vella’s new informant had a better education than his former one, but he must have been an Italian or Maltese. Two examples of a curious Italianism may suffice as proof. The Arabic conjunctive \(\text{اَن} (an, \text{anna} or \text{inna})\), Italian *che*, is used as a relative pronoun in the same way that the polyvalent *che* works in Italian (especially in its spoken variants), as can be seen here:
'The copy of the letter *that* was kept inside the sheet *that* the Amīr of Tunis sent to us has the following text.

And equally the Muslim population *that* is in Palermo.

The other curiosity is Vella’s use of the Maltese hinn (vocalised by Vella as hunna). It could also be the Arabic hunā, meaning ‘here’, or, more probably, the feminine plural of the third person of the pronominal suffix. Vella uses it as a demonstrative pronoun:

‘... so that all these letters are copied in it, ...’

‘... all these letters that the Prince of the Believers sent to the Land of the West and to Sicily.’

Even if Vella’s counterfeit manuscripts are worthless and misleading as objective historical sources, they do tell us what sort of fakes were credible in the Palermo of his time. Over time, many questions have been answered, but several issues still remain unclear. I have asked myself a number of such questions:

What exactly was the relationship between Vella and Airoldi? To what extent was Vella himself the maker of the *Specimen*? What about the similarity of the names of Vella and the engraver of the *Specimen*, Melchior de Bella? Was Melchior de Bella also from Malta? What would have been the example from which the engraver worked to reproduce the *Specimen*? What about the numismatic evidence in the *Codice diplomatico* and the *Kitāb Dīwān Miṣr*? Which originals did the engraver of these coins, Raffaele Aleja, work from? The long text of the *Codice diplomatico* (which spans several thousand pages) may not have been the product of Vella’s fantasy alone; he must have used some sources as well, and probably a great many of them. Indeed, he mentions a few of them in his annotations on the *Codex diplomaticus*. What were they and how did he use them? These questions are enough for a further study of Vella’s life and works.

To the modern reader, Vella’s choice of texts may seem somewhat abstruse. Why revive an imaginary past in such a complex way? However, that past was
very much alive in Sicily and still is today, not as a reality, but as art. The form it has taken is entirely imaginary, of course. The battles and skirmishes of the past with the Moors became the stock-in-trade of popular literature, visual art and the theatre: the *Opera dei Pupi*. While I was travelling in Sicily in 2014, I was struck by the ubiquity and popularity of the theme of the Paladins of Charlemagne fighting against the Moors (Fig. 7). In Palermo, I watched a performance of the Sicilian Puppet Theatre called ‘Mimmo Cuticchio’, which presented the tragic episode of Tancredi and Clorinda backed by the music of Monteverdi and set within the former Arab presence on the island. Such stories inspired by the Carolingian cycle had all taken the form in which we know them by the end of the eighteenth century, and suddenly Vella’s fakes, which date from about the same time, made more sense to me than I had ever thought when first reading the texts he wrote in his tortuous Arabic.

## 4 An Afterlife

Vella’s trickery produced several literary echoes. Poetry by his contemporary Giovanni Meli (1740–1815) is quoted by Lagumina. In modern times, the history of the *Kitāb Dīwān Miṣr* was an inspiration for the Sicilian novelist Leonardo Sciascia’s (1921–1989) book *Il Consiglio d’Egitto*. To Vella’s scholarly fantasies Sciascia added an environment of political intrigue. Sciascia makes his story extra shocking by letting an innocent man (not Vella!) lose his life. In 2002, Sciascia’s novel inspired film director Emidio Greco to make a film with Silvio Orlando in the role of Vella. Greco brought yet another dimension to Vella’s fakes, the element of romance.

More recently, the Italian actor Giorgio Sparacino produced a theatrical version of *Il Consiglio d’Egitto* with himself in the role of Vella. Sciascia’s novel has been translated into at least ten languages. The Italian novelist and crime writer Andrea Camilleri (1925–2019), a namesake of Vella’s accomplice, wrote ‘Le

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42 Lagumina 1882, p. 21, n. 1: ‘Gazetta problematica relativa all’imposture di lu codici arabu di l’abbati Vella: | Sta Minsogna Saracina | Cu sta giubba meda misa | Trova cui pri concubine | L’accariza, adorna e spisa. | E cridennula di sangu, | Comu vanta, antica e puru, | D’introdurla in ogni rangu | Si fa pregiu non oscuru’. [Problematic gazette concerning the fraud of the Arabic codex perpetrated by Abbot Vella: | This Saracen lie, | Badly clad in its jacket, | Becomes the concubine of the one | Who caresses, adorns and pays for her. | And believing that she is made of (flesh and) blood | an ancient and pure blood, as he boasts, | derives pride from introducing her in every rank of people.] English translation by Dr Lucia Raggetti.
“Croniche” di uno scrittore maltese’, published in *Romanzi storici e civili*. In this prequel to Sciascia’s novel, he created his eighteenth-century literary ancestor, who helped Vella with his fraud.

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Figures

Fig. 1: Alleged facsimile of the first text page of the *Codex Martinianus*. Source: *Codex diplomaticus*, Palermo, 1788. Leiden University Library, 913 A 13. Photograph by Jan Just Witkam, 2019.
Fig. 3: Title-page of Vella’s manuscript of the Kitāb Diwān Miṣr, ‘The Council of Egypt’, possibly made by the artist who also made the title-page of the Codice diplomatico. MS New York, Columbia University Library, Smith Or. 388, p. 1. Photo Columbia University Library, 2017.
Fig. 4: First text page in Vella's manuscript of the *Kitāb Dīwān Miṣr*, 'The Council of Egypt', MS New York, Columbia University Library, Smith Or. 388, p. 2. Photo Columbia University Library.
Fig. 5: Vella’s facsimile of the first text page in the Kitāb Diwān Mişr ['The Council of Egypt'], vol. 1, Palermo, 1793, with some variant readings when compared to the manuscript. The Bayerische Staatsbibliothek in Munich supplied the photograph digitally (2 A.or. 138-1 <http://daten.digitale-sammlungen.de/bsb00085173/image_24>).
Fig. 6: Beginning of Vella's bilingual edition of the *Kitāb Dīwān Miṣr* ['The Council of Egypt'], vol. 1, Palermo, 1793. The Bayerische Staatsbibliothek in Munich supplied the photograph digitally (2 A.or. 138-1 <http://daten.digitale-sammlungen.de/bsb00085173/image_25>). The stone in the lower left-hand corner of the engraving by R. Aleja identifies the ruin as the Castle of Maredolce, a medieval building in Palermo dating from the Siculo-Norman era <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Castello_di_Maredolce>.
Fig. 7: The wars against the Moors in popular Sicilian imagination. A Sicilian sweet seller’s tent as seen in Via Dante, Milan, on November 12, 2013. Photograph by Jan Just Witkam.