



Malta  
Classics  
Association

# MELITA CLASSICA

Vol. 2  
2015

*Journal of the  
Malta Classics Association*

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## Book Reviews

### ***Il-Prefazju Storiku tal-Mylsen Feniċju-Puniku jew Il-Grammatika tal-Malti ta' Mikiel Anton Vassalli***

*Klabb Kotba Maltin, 2014, pp. 157.*

*ISBN*

Edizzjoni ġdida u traduzzjoni b'daħla storika u filoloġika, noti u kummenti ta' Horatio Caesar Roger Vella.

(A new edition and translation including a historical and philological introduction, with notes and comments by Horatio Caesar Roger Vella)

Much has been written about our very own unfortunate patriot since Ġuzè Gatt's contributions and Ninu Cremona's *Mikiel Anton Vassalli u żminijietu* (translated by May Butcher as *Vassalli and his times – a biography* in 1940). Following Oliver Friggieri's *Journal of Maltese Studies – Essays on Mikiel Anton Vassalli* (1993), historians and researchers continued to delve deeply into his life and times, throwing new light on his basic thoughts, his vision of a future modern and sovereign nation, encapsulating his political and cultural activities.

Mikiel Anton Vassalli (1764-1829) was the first to teach Maltese at the University and today he is acknowledged as the Father of the Maltese Language. His vision and endeavour for Maltese statehood caused him hardship, jail and exile. Always a controversial figure, after his death his name remained buried for a long time and much prejudice was heaped upon it. It was through persons of fame such as Dun Karm and Ġorġ Pisani whose praises in their sonnets *Lil Mikiel Anton Vassalli* together with Ġuzè Aquilina's novel *Taħt Tliet Saltniet* that finally turned the tide.

Vassalli was close to and familiar with the currents of European enlightenment and followed Johann Gottfried Herder's theory that

every vernacular can be developed into a written language for the use of society. The scientific comparative study of languages caused a revolution in Europe. It meant that the old sacred languages – Latin, Greek and Hebrew – now had a great diversity of vernaculars to rival with.

As acclaimed by Prof. Frans Ciappara in *M.A. Vassalli – An Enlightened Maltese Reformer* – “there is no question that Vassalli was a first class philologist”. Vassalli’s *Mylsen Phoenico-Punicum sive Grammatica Melitensis*, published in Rome by Antonio Fulgoni in 1791 follows his *Alfabeto maltese spiegato in lingua maltese ed italiana – Alfabet Malti mfyссер byl Malti u byt-Taljan* (Rome, Antonio Fulgoni, 1790). Throughout its pages, Vassalli laid the foundation stones of the Maltese language. Thirty-six years later, in 1827, he would revise and publish it as *Grammatica della Lingua Maltese*, considering it as the second edition of the *Mylsen*.

When Mikiel Anton started lecturing at the university in 1825, he was still referring to Maltese as ‘the noble remains of the great language spoken by the brave enemies of ancient Rome’, a thesis which we find both in the *Mylsen* and in his *Lexicon* (1796) where he states that Maltese is derived from Punic, an offspring of Chaldaic, the mother of oriental languages. He may or may not have moved away from this theory, but in the *Mylsen* we find a crucial statement: “... our language has an Arabic form but truly is not Arabic” (“...*qua idioma nostrum Arabismi audit, revera autem Arabicum non est*”).

Since then, the general public had its first glimpse of Vassalli’s *Mylsen* through a Maltese translation by Mons. Lawrenz Cachia in 1991 (*Edizzjoni Studia*). It was a good attempt but sadly incomplete: the Historical Preface was left out since, according to the translator, it was irrelevant to the *Mylsen*. Some alterations to the original were also implemented to render the text user friendly.

This new edition (Klabb Kotba Maltin, 2014) incorporates a new revised translation of the Latin original and much to the delight of Vassalli’s scholars and researches, it also includes Vassalli’s philological *Praefatio Historica*. Prof. Horatio C.R. Vella’s work is not only a most erudite labour of love, but also user friendly since both texts, i.e. Latin and Maltese, are spread in front of the reader, with the

text in Latin presented on the verso and Maltese on the recto. Another important addition is Prof. Vella's revision and translation of the *ad instituendam Orthographiam Melitensem* – the foundation stones of Maltese orthography – which one finds at the end of the Historical Preface and the beginning of the *Grammatica*.

A short biography of Vassalli features after the introduction and this includes a bibliography of Vassalli's works. The book is furnished with a critical commentary and explanatory notes and *the Prefazju Storiku* is followed by more annotations, a bibliography and index. For the benefit of the reader, pages 83 to 141 are dedicated to a facsimile of Vassalli's *Mylsen*.

Prof. Vella's edition is also supplemented with an original genealogical table of M.A. Vassalli's ancestors and even traces them to his son Jerome.

Together with Ciappara's biography, this new revised translation of the *Mylsen* is a deep and profound homage to "the pioneering figure in the establishment of a system of a national education in the native language".

Joseph P. Borg