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The Forger as an Ambivalent Muse: Leonardo Sciascia's Novel *Il Consiglio d'Egitto* and the Mediterranean Memory of Sicily

Abstract: Leonardo Sciascia's novel *Il Consiglio d'Egitto* (1963) is unanimously read by scholars as historical metafiction reflecting the possibilities and difficulties of writing about history. Although this reading of the work is legitimate, it is problematic because it has pushed other noteworthy aspects of the novel into the background. First and foremost is the fact that Sciascia creates an unusual image of Sicily in the novel, one that differs significantly from the conventions that prevailed until the 1960s, some of which Sciascia himself cultivated with his famous formula of *sicilitudine*. In this novel, however, he invents a new idea of Sicily as an island connected to the rest of the world and especially of the Mediterranean.

My thesis is that the figure of the forger Vella functions as an ambivalent muse who, because of his Maltese origins, is virtually predestined to thematise Sicily's Mediterranean connections. By using Vella's word, the author Sciascia criticises the notion of a trans-historical Sicilian identity and replaces it with a more dynamic, open form of belonging to the Mediterranean. At first glance, this thesis may seem surprising; it may even meet with rejection, since Vella's historical and linguistic competences are narrowly limited such that his narratives of the Arab-Norman past rely not on knowledge but on fantasies. Thus, the question to be addressed here is whether an unreliable, even criminal, figure such as Vella should be considered the authority of a new, Mediterranean conception of Sicily.

1 Preliminary Remarks

Leonardo Sciascia's novel *Il Consiglio d'Egitto* (1963) is unanimously read by scholars as historical metafiction reflecting the possibilities and difficulties of writing about history (Cannon 1989; Springer 1989; Glynn 2005; Albanese 2019). This is undeniably a legitimate reading of the work, and it will not be challenged in this essay. Its dominance, however, is problematic because it has pushed other noteworthy aspects of the novel into the background. First and foremost is the fact that Sciascia creates an unusual image of Sicily in the novel, one that differs significantly from the conventions that prevailed until the 1960s, some of which Scias-

cia himself cultivated. In novels, novellas and dramas by the Sicilian classics, Verga, De Roberto, Pirandello, Brancati, Messina and, not in the least, Tomasi di Lampedusa, whose bestseller *Il Gattopardo* was published only a few years before the novel discussed herein, we are presented with a Sicily isolated not only from the rest of Italy but also from the rest of the Mediterranean. Its essence, consisting of a mixture of archaism and decadence, is seen as the result of thousands of years of historical traumatising by constantly changing conquerors from the outside. In particular, the national unification, which completely failed from the Sicilian point of view, was perceived as the annexation, subjugation or even colonisation of Sicily by the Piedmontese king and national government. It gave post-Unitarian Sicilian literature sufficient reason to interpret the entire history of the island in retrospect as a succession of foreign dominations that were merely suffered by the Sicilians and led to a lasting traumatising that precluded a differentiated view of the past for a long time. The fact that there was intermingling, pacts and mutual exchange with the so-called foreigners on the island remained unthinkable.¹

Sciascia, who himself fed this Sicilian myth through his reflection on the 'siculitudine', invents in *Il Consiglio d'Egitto* another Sicily, an island connected to the rest of the world, corresponding with scholars in Paris, Rostock or Vienna. Of particular importance is the Mediterranean context denoted by the two geographical and cultural reference points of Maghreb and Malta. The following reflections on *Il Consiglio d'Egitto* will deal with this Mediterranean Sicily of Sciascia. The thesis is that the figure of the forger Vella functions as an ambivalent muse who, because of his origins in Malta, is virtually predestined to thematise Sicily's Mediterranean connections. By using Vella's word, the author Sciascia criticises the notion of a trans-historical Sicilian identity and replaces it with a more dynamic, open form of belonging to the Mediterranean.² At first glance, this thesis may seem surprising; it may even meet with rejection, since Vella's historical and linguistic competences are narrowly limited such that his narratives of the Arab-Norman past rely not on knowledge but on fantasies. Thus, the question to be addressed here is whether an unreliable, even criminal, figure such as Vella should be considered the authority of a new, Mediterranean conception of Sicily. To answer this question, it is inevitable to first briefly discuss the relationship between fiction and history in the novel before the character of Vella can be examined from a new perspective in the sections that follow.

¹ From the extensive literature on this Sicilian myth, only the following may be mentioned here: Chu (1998), Rosengarten (1998) and Schwaderer (2000).

² Fascinating contributions to such a Mediterranean understanding of Sicily can now be found in Karagoz/Summerfield (2015) and Capecchi/Corrao (2021).

2 Fiction and history: Content and traditions of interpretation

The metahistorical reflection in *Il Consiglio d'Egitto* does not take place primarily at the level of the narrator but is already predefined by the novel's subject matter since it is the story of a historical forgery, and the interpretation and writing of history as well as the distinction between forgery and truth are negotiated by the novel's characters (Albanese 2019, 55). Narrated in broad agreement with the authenticated facts is a historically real case of document forgery centred on Giuseppe Vella, a native of Malta.³ Vella was a monk of the monastery of San Martino delle Scale in Monreale. One day, while looking at an Arabic manuscript from the monastery in the presence of a high-ranking diplomat from Morocco and some Sicilian dignitaries, he decides to commit fraud. He claims that the text is an important piece of writing about the Muslim period of Sicily, when, in fact, the codex contains only a widely circulated and therefore scientifically worthless biography of the Prophet Muhammad. Vella offers to translate the manuscript; when he receives it to work with, he begins to erase the existing text and overwrites it with freely invented content pretending to be an exchange of letters between the emirs of Sicily and Arab princes of North Africa. The entire project is encoded by Vella, written in Arabic-written Maltese, a language closely related to the Maghrebi variety of Arabic.

The enormous impact of this forgery, published in 1789–1792 under the title *Consiglio di Sicilia*, resonating throughout Europe, brings Vella not only prestige and prosperity but also the first chair of Arabic in Sicily in 1785, years before the completion of his work. Encouraged by his success, he continues his activities and writes the *Consiglio d'Egitto*, which contains the invented correspondence between the Norman rulers of Sicily and Arab princes of the Maghreb. The new forgery is, in a way, a continuation of the first one, since it deals with the Norman period in Sicily that followed the Arab domination and was characterised by a synthesis of Christian and Arab cultural elements. If the first forgery was motivated by a purely private interest, the situation is different in the case of the *Consiglio d'Egitto*, because both Vella's social environment and the political context have changed in the meantime. Vella has gained access to Palermo's high society and now possesses a keen awareness of the social and political developments of his time. These include the reforms of viceroy Caracciolo, who follows the political

³ Basic accounts of this case are as follows: Scinà (1827, 296–383); Amari (2002, 6–8) and Cederna (1999).

principles of the enlightened monarchy and strives to break the power of the Sicilian barons, who hold numerous privileges and most of the land. Vella follows these efforts with interest and decides to put the *Consiglio d'Egitto* at the service of this reform policy, although the novel depicts him as being driven less by his political convictions than by a desire for respect and authority (Sciascia 2012, 378). Be that as it may, the *Consiglio d'Egitto* has an even greater impact than the first codex. This is due to the fact that, in support of the aforementioned reforms, Vella provides 'proof' that the barons' claims against the monarchy are groundless:

Don Giuseppe avrebbe tirato fuori un codice arabo in cui le cose della Sicilia normanna sarebbero apparse, per testimonianza diretta e disinteressata degli arabi, per lettere degli stessi re normanni, in tutt'altro ordine: tutto alla Corona, niente ai baroni (Sciascia 2012, 380).⁴

Although the narrator seems to morally condemn Vella's motives, it is clear that the latter experiences a considerable intellectual development. To do justice to his subject, the forger begins to study the complex legal history of Sicily and therefore has contact with the historian and Enlightenment philosopher Francesco Paolo Di Blasi. The fact that this does not remain without consequences is particularly evident in the seventh chapter of the first part, which demonstrates how Vella now knows to assert himself within Palermo's aristocratic society as an astute participant in discussions. He joins a debate on the subject of feelings, which is an important topic for the Enlightenment, and earns Di Blasi's recognition with a clever contribution.

The discussion is triggered by the mockeries of Don Saverio Zarbo, a character of no further importance to the novel, who makes fun of the new fashion for sentimental speech. Don Saverio uses the word 'sentimento' in an entirely unsentimental and purely sexual sense to ironise the erotic flushes of aristocratic society, whose main pleasure is the cultivation of extramarital affairs. In contrast, the Enlightenment and Sensibility associated the term with values such as fidelity, friendship and sincerity. Quite deliberately, the bourgeois-enlightened discourse of sentiment is directed against the lifestyle of the aristocracy, which is perceived as immoral. This historical background to the discussion instigated by Don Saverio becomes extremely clear in the novel when, on a whim and with the intention of humiliating him, the latter addresses Giuseppe Vella with the following question: 'E

⁴ 'Don Giuseppe would bring to light an Arab codex in which the affairs of Norman Sicily would be shown in a quite different light by the first-hand, disinterested testimony of the Arabs and by documents of these same Norman kings; that is, his codex would establish the fact that everything belongs to the Crown and nothing to the barons' (Sciascia 2016, 41).

voi, abate Vella, avete sentimento?’ (Sciascia 2012, 385).⁵ The seemingly harmless question actually contains a double humiliation: since Don Saverio has previously used the word in the sense of sexual sensations, he is thus publicly attributing a dissolute lifestyle to the cleric Vella. In addition, there is a second, social humiliation because Don Saverio’s ironic speech insinuates the existence of a qualitative difference in value between people, since he cannot imagine that simple people are capable of differentiated feelings. Against such class conceits, the Enlightenment asserts the capacity of all people to feel, which is why this is an important basis for the principle of equality. This is precisely what Vella expresses when, after much hesitation, he answers Don Saverio:

Non sono sicuro del senso che voi date alla parola. Se vi riferite a una moda, a un insieme di cose che fanno moda, l’uomo di sentimento, il deliquio delle signore, I pecorai del nostro Meli, decisamente vi rispondo di no. Ma se vi riferite al sentimento come ad un elemento dell’uguaglianza, di cui anche la moda è inconsapevole frutto, allora vi dico che in qualche modo vi partecipo anch’io (Sciascia 2012, 388).⁶

For the metahistorical reflection of the novel, the critical consciousness, acquired by the forger over the years, possesses decisive importance. Indeed, Sciascia uses the character as an unmasking reflection of the strategies with which early modern Sicilian justice and historiography legitimised the social order that was so politically and socially unjust. The now enlightened Vella sees through this injustice no less than Di Blasi and the viceroy Caracciolo. When the latter calls the legislative effort with which noble privileges were constructed a (historical) forgery—‘Ora al viceré riformatore e al regnante avido quel massiccio corpo giuridico veniva rivelandosi come un’impostura’ (Sciascia 2012, 379)⁷—he finds an echo in Vella:

e don Giuseppe, che di impostura si intendeva, cominciava a capirne l’ingranaggio. E non ci voleva poi molto a rovesciarne i termini, a passare sottobanco le carte di una opposta impos-

5 ‘What about you, Abbot Vella, are you a passionate man?’ (Sciascia 2016, 47).

6 ‘I am not sure what you mean by the word. If you are referring to something fashionable, to a combination of things that, taken together, create a vogue—the man who affects passion because it is the stylish thing to do and becomes the cynosure of all the ladies or, in another way, one of Meli’s shepherds—I say I most definitely am not. But if by passion you mean a sense of human equality, of which the present fashion is an unknowing fruit, then I can say to you that I do in some manner share that’ (Sciascia 2016, 52).

7 ‘Now, in the eyes of a reforming viceroy and a greedy monarch, that massive body of legal opinion was coming to assume the aspect of an imposture’ (Sciascia 2016, 40).

tura al viceré, alla Corona: che certo le avrebbero avute a grado e con la concessione di una ricca prelatura, di un'abbazia, si sarebbero sdebitati (Sciascia 2012, 379).⁸

In the novel, the forger functions as a figure that can be used to expose the strategies of official, legitimising historiography: on the one hand, by criticising these strategies and, on the other hand, by using them himself. With his second forgery, Vella places himself in the service of the viceroy, albeit without his explicit request and without letting him in on his criminal activities. Nevertheless, even if the viceroy's political actions look more progressive from an enlightened point of view than those of the conservative aristocracy, he certainly uses means comparable to those of his opponents when he relies on the documents forged by Vella.

The novel's metahistorical reflection is thus based on how the past is used to legitimise present interests and on the willingness of historians and forgers to place their skills at the disposal of the powerful in exchange for the appropriate remuneration. Seeing through this, Vella develops a deep distaste for historiography. He declares the work of historians in general to be a tremendous fraud and claims that inventing history, as he and his assistant do, is far more meritorious than transcribing and interpreting sources that have long since yellowed. Although, on the one hand, this assertion can easily be understood as a mere attempt to appease a guilty conscience, on the other hand, the subsequent long diatribe against the historiographical practice of the time weighs more heavily because it exposes its blind spot. Vella invents a parable in which he represents humanity as a tree and the individuals as leaves. While the tree exists, the leaves fall off without ceasing and rot without leaving any trace. Only the powerful and great, whom Vella compares to the branches and twigs of the tree, remain. From his parable, Vella derives the principle that history is, in the end, only the history of the powerful because nothing remains of everyone else. He concludes with the following words:

'La storia! E mio padre? E vostro padre? E il gorgoglio delle loro viscere vuote? E la voce della loro fame? Credete che si sentirà, nella storia? Che ci sarà uno storico che avrà orecchio talmente fino da sentirlo?' (Sciascia 2012, 394).⁹

8 'Don Giuseppe, who understood a thing or two about imposture, was beginning to understand the workings of this one. It would not require too much to reverse the terms, surreptitiously to deal Viceroy and Crown the cards of a reversed fraud; surely they would willingly accept the cards and discharge their debt by the conferral of a rich prelacy or abbacy' (Sciascia 2016, 40).

9 'History! What about my father? What about your father? And the rumbling of their empty bellies, the voice of their hunger? Do you believe this will be heard in history? That there will be a historian with an ear keen to hear?' (Sciascia 2016, 59).

The passage is often read as a fundamental critique of historiography in general (Cannon 1989, 54, for example), but it seems more likely that Vella is implicitly calling for a different kind of historiography, one that deals with the common people and registers their lives. Certainly, however, the novel here again critically addresses the alliance of power and history.

Other important aspects of the novel's metahistorical reflection can be discovered if one includes the second protagonist, the philosopher Di Blasi. He is committed to an enlightened monarchy, as envisioned by the viceroy Caracciolo; he is committed to the ideals of the French Enlightenment but, simultaneously, loves the frivolous eroticism of the Rococo, as is made clear by the short passages in which his dealings with his mistress, the Countess of Regalpetra, are described. She appears, for example, in chapter nine of the first part in the pose of Marie-Louise O'Murphy, whom the French painter François Boucher elevated to a rococo icon in a perky nude portrait. He also loves the erotic tales from the *Arabian Nights* that he slips the countess. Nevertheless, despite these concessions to the spirit of the times, Di Blasi becomes radicalised after the failure of Caracciolo's reformist policies. When the reactionary viceroy Filippo Lopez y Royo (from 1794) makes it his goal to suppress all revolutionary activity in the viceroyalty, Di Blasi plans a revolt. Betrayed by a co-conspirator, he is tortured and finally beheaded. Shortly before his execution, he still has the optimistic thought that in a fully enlightened world, practices such as torture and executions would finally be obsolete; however, a long insertion by the narrator referring to atrocities of the twentieth century—explicitly mentioning the Shoa and the Algerian War—has a disillusioning effect (Sciascia 2012, 494).

At the same time, Vella's philosophical and political education finally takes a turn for the better in the face of the horrific crimes committed by the avenging judicial authorities against Di Blasi. Only now does he grasp what the Enlightenment's struggle for human rights and better justice is all about. Thus, the historical significance of Di Blasi's existence is revealed to him, even if he cannot decide to follow in his footsteps.

The previous reflections on Sciascia's metahistorical reflections in *Consiglio* can be summarised as follows: agents of reflection are essentially the two protagonists. In them, the tendencies of their time are embodied. In the course of their lives, both arrive at convictions concerning their relationship to history: Vella is decidedly sceptical about the reliability of historiographical accounts, and this scepticism is understandable given the extent to which official institutions manipulated historical sources to legitimise their interests. His criticism of the completely inadequate consideration of ordinary people in the historiography of his time is also not unfounded. Di Blasi shares Vella's scepticism, as he is a specialist in the feints with which the Sicilian judiciary knows how to manipulate documents. Un-

like Vella, however, he believes in the scientific and moral progress of humanity. The narrator's commentary, which relates Di Blasi's fate to crimes of the twentieth century, conversely, emphasises that there is no automatic progress of reason and no logic immanent in history but that progress requires endless work and effort.

Above all, the essential factor for the metahistorical discourse of the novel, apart from the reflections of the characters and the restrained comments of the narrator, is the plot construction. While Giuseppe Vella is in the foreground in the first part, the presentation in the third part constantly alternates the perspective between him and Di Blasi, which allows for a close interweaving of both characters and a mutual reflection of their positions. By contrast, the narrator's voice intervenes directly only in a few places to relate what is told to the present-day experiences of the author and his readers. Research positions that seek to read out of the novel a general questioning of the distinction between fiction and history based on Vella's history-sceptical statement seem less plausible (Cannon 1989, 55; Springer 1989), for if this were so, there would be a performative self-contradiction of the text, which adheres closely to the authenticated facts and hardly allows for fictional elements. Invented are only insignificant minor characters and, of course, the thoughts and speeches of the characters, which have not been handed down in this manner but can be successfully brought into line with what is known. This allows only one conclusion, namely, that Sciascia was extremely convinced of the narratability of history when he conceived the novel. Moreover, the text is highly respectful of the source material and historiographical works on the case, which also argues against a total relativisation of the difference between fiction and history. Sciascia is concerned with exposing the complicity between the forger and the powerful; however, the notion of exposure implies the assumption that literature is capable of demonstrating truth. The historical truth of the novel entails, among other things, an analysis of how various interest groups contend with representations of history. It describes how real or falsified documents are ascribed a cultural value regardless of their possible or impossible truth content and how the past is thus transformed into an interest-driven instrument.

3 Vella and the Mediterranean memory

Research on the novel rarely emphasises that the prerequisite for Vella's success was the extremely specific expectations of the Sicilian audience, which consisted of a mixture of complete ignorance of Arabic and considerable fascination. The enthusiasm of the Sicilian elites for the tales from the *Arabian Nights*, as described in the novel, also fits in with this Arabophile zeitgeist, which Vella cleverly managed to exploit for his own benefit. In the following paragraphs, it will be made plau-

sible that Vella can also be interpreted as a mediator: a figure who mediates between the Arab and the Sicilian worlds and enables a view of Sicily from a Mediterranean context.

Regarding the historically real figure of Vella, he was a highly unreliable intermediary who falsified documents, invented events and people and was unable to understand written Arabic. However, it is because of him that a chair of the Arabic language is established in Palermo, that Sicilians began to take an interest in their past and that, as a result of the exposure of his criminal activities in Sicily, a historical school emerged, with its most famous offspring being Michele Amari, whose *Storia dei Musulmani di Sicilia* (published in three volumes from 1854 to 1872) is still considered an unsurpassed classic. Vella's impact could be described with Hegel as a 'cunning of reason' because scientific progress could prevail in the process as an unintended consequence of falsification. For an excellent account of this connection, see Mallette (2011, 66). Vella thus functions as a catalyst of a collective desire for knowledge and memory, regardless of whether he is a profound connoisseur of Arabic.

Vella's historical ambiguity is demonstrated in the opening scene of the novel. The initial situation is as follows: Abdallah Mohamed Ben Olman, a Moroccan ambassador in Naples, lands in Palermo owing to a storm at sea and is received as the guest of viceroy Caracciolo. Vella, who is able to understand Moroccan Arabic to some extent because of his background, becomes his interpreter and accompanies him and Monsignor Airoidi, who has a sincere enthusiasm for Arab history, to the relevant monuments of Palermo. The novel begins at the moment when Ben Olman opens an Arabic codex in the monastery of San Martino:

'Il benedettino passò un mazzetto di penne variopinte sul taglio del libro, dal faccione tondo soffiò come il dio dei venti delle carte nautiche a disperdere la nera polvere, lo aprì con un ribrezzo che nella circostanza apparve delicatezza, trepidazione. Per la luce che cadeva obliqua dall'alta finestra, sul foglio color sabbia i caratteri presero rilievo: un grottesco drappello di formiche nere spiaccicato, secco. Sua eccellenza Abdallah Mohamed Ben Olman si chinò su quei segni, il suo occhio abitualmente languido, stracco, annoiato era diventato vivo ed acuto. Si rialzò un momento dopo, a frugarsi con la destra sotto la giamburga: tirò fuori una lente montata, oro e pietre verdi, a fingerla fiore o frutto su esile tralcio.

"Ruscello congelato" disse mostrandola. Sorrideva: ch  aveva citato Ibn Hamdis, poeta siciliano, per omaggio agli ospiti. Ma, tranne don Giuseppe Vella, nessuno sapeva di arabo: e don Giuseppe non era in grado di cogliere il gentile significato che sua eccellenza aveva voluto dare alla citazione n  di capire che si trattava di una citazione. Tradusse perci , invece che le parole, il gesto: "La lente, ha bisogno della lente"; il che monsignor Airoidi, che con emozione aspettava il responso di sua eccellenza su quel codice aveva capito gi  da s  (Sciascia 2012, 352).¹⁰

10 'The Benedictine whisked a brush of multi-coloured feathers over the top of the book, puffed

This carefully crafted and metaphorically charged scene already contains many significant motifs of the novel. The main theme is the act of interpretation, which causes an initial yet unintentional distortion of what is meant. Vella, in fact, does not understand the allusion to the Arabo-Sicilian poet Ibn Hamdis, with which the Moroccan ambassador, with friendly intentions, wishes to draw attention to the bond between the Arab and Latin worlds.¹¹ What Vella lacks, in this case, is the literary education that would have allowed him to recognise the quotation from one of the most important poets of Sicily. The failure to understand, however, is not the fault of the interpreter alone; it is representative of the collective oblivion to which the island's Arabic past has fallen.

The beginning of the novel thus presents the failure of a possible exchange or encounter between two close yet separate cultures: the outstretched hand and the friendly reference to a shared cultural heritage by the ambassador who does not speak the language of the country in which he lives and the failure to grasp the gesture by the interpreter who knows the colloquial language of the guest but has little education in that language dramatise the interplay of the desire for understanding and incompetence.

This still relatively harmless state of affairs intensifies as the conversation progresses. The readers learn that Vella had already decided in the days before to use the opportunity of the visit to the monastery for the purpose of a fraud:

L'idea di armare l'imbroglione al fracappellano Vella era venuta appena monsignor Airoidi aveva proposto la gita al monastero di San Martino: dove, si era ricordato monsignore,

out his plump cheeks like the god of the winds in an old nautical map, blew black dust from the leather cover and, with a shiver of what in the circumstances seemed delicate trepidation, laid the volume open on the table. The light fell slantingly from a high window onto the yellowed page, so that the dim characters stood out like a grotesque army of crushed dry black ants. His Excellency Abdallah Mohammed Ben-Olman leaned down to study them; his eyes, habitually languid, weary, incurious, were now sharp and alert. He straightened up after a moment, reached under his redingote with his right hand and drew forth a magnifying glass; the frame and handle were of gold, with green stones so set that the glass seemed a cluster of flowers or fruit on a slender stem. "The icebound brook," he said, displaying the glass. He smiled, for he had intended to compliment his hosts by quoting the Sicilian poet Ibn Hamdis. Except for Don Giuseppe Vella, however, no one present understood any Arabic, and Don Giuseppe was not qualified to grasp His Excellency's amiable intent in making the quotation, or even qualified to realize that it was a matter of quotation. Therefore, he translated not the words but the gesture—"The glass, he needs the glass"—which Monsignor Airoidi, who was eagerly awaiting His Excellency's pronouncement on the codex, had perfectly well understood' (Sciascia 2016, 3–4).

11 On Ibn Hamdis and Sciascia, see Pappalardo (2017) and Petruccianni (2021).

c'era un codice arabo che a Palermo aveva portato, un secolo prima, don Martino La Farina, bibliotecario dell'Escorial (Sciascia 2012, 353).¹²

Vella, for this reason, begins to mistranslate in order to incite Airolodi's desire: for the monsignor has no more urgent desire than that there should also exist significant Arabic sources in Palermo that could have similar importance to the *Cambridge Chronicle* or *de Rebus Siculis*.¹³ Vella, sensing that the lack of sources on the Muslim Middle Ages in Sicily offers him a unique opportunity, therefore responds accordingly to Airolodi's question to the Moroccan of what the text might be about: 'si tratta di una raccolta di lettere, di relazione ... Cose di governo, insomma' (Sciascia 2012, 352).¹⁴

As will become clear later, Vella not only exploits Airolodi's desire for knowledge but also deliberately fills in the gaps that exist between the *Cambridge Chronicle* and *de Rebus Siculis*, namely, the period of Arab rule after the year 1000 and the Norman era. In doing so, he suggests to an eager audience that a comprehensive documentation of the medieval history of Sicily will soon be available.

Misunderstanding and intent to deceive thus intermingle in this novel's opening, preparing the ground for what is to come. The forger appears as sufficiently communicatively skilled and manipulative to convince those who do not understand anything about the history and language of the Arabs and the Normans. All this demonstrates the difficulties that stood in the way of dealing with Arab-Sicilian relations.

The situation is different on the discourse level of the novel: the narrator seems to hover over everything and to have the knowledge that the characters lack. The metaphors and comparisons of the novel's opening are part of the narrator's speech, not the characters', and endow the text with significant connotations. For instance, the comparison between the chubby-cheeked Benedictine blowing the dust off the pages of the codex with the putti symbolising the winds in ancient sea charts is only seemingly marginal. Indeed, the narrator invokes the concepts of cartography and navigation, which can be related in ambig-

12 'The idea of contriving the fraud had occurred to Chaplain Vella the moment Monsignor Airolodi had proposed the visit to the Monastery of San Martino: the Bishop had remembered that the library there contained an Arabic codex brought to Palermo a hundred years before by Don Martino La Farina' (Sciascia 2016, 5).

13 The *Cambridge Chronicle* is a tenth-century Arabic record of events in Muslim-ruled Sicily. This chronicle was published in 1720 by Giambattista Caruso (Amari 2002, 5). *De Rebus Siculis* is the short title for the *Liber ad Honorem Augusti sive de Rebus Siculis* written by Pietro da Eboli around 1196, a paean to Henry IV of Staufien (Kölzer/Sträli 1994).

14 'This is a collection of letters, reports—affairs of state, in a word' (Sciascia 2016, 5).

uous ways to the passage quoted as well as to the novel as a whole. Thus, the medium of the map can be interpreted as a metaphor for the narrator's survey-like, seemingly infallible knowledge. The mention of seafaring evokes trans-Mediterranean mobility and Sicily's multiple contacts with North Africa through trade, war and individual travel. I will discuss this theme in more detail when analysing Vella's recollections of the port of Malta.

From all that has been said so far, the impression must be that Vella is an exceedingly unscrupulous schemer who maintains a purely purposeful and cold relationship with Arab culture. However, there are some passages in the text that demonstrate that he has a deeper and more personal relationship with the Mediterranean world. Although, as the beginning of the novel underlines, he has no literary education, he has another connection, based not on erudite knowledge but on imagination, to the hybrid character of Mediterranean cultures, which is a product of the decades-old encounters and crossings between the people of this geographical and cultural area. This aspect of his personality makes Vella a muse of Mediterranean memory—it paradoxically gives his forgeries a dimension of authenticity. This is undoubtedly a bold formulation to which there are weighty objections, for Vella's highly deficient knowledge of Arabic and his intention to deceive prohibit ascribing authenticity to his texts if one understands by this a correspondence to an original. In addition, the script invented by him out of incompetence concerning the true Arabic alphabet is only a simulacrum, a jumble of lines that even the experts can read only with great difficulty.

If the concept of authenticity is nevertheless invoked here, it does not refer to the level of mimesis, that is, to the relationship between the original and forgery, but to that of poesis in the sense of a creative force that can be seen as specifically Mediterranean. The text clearly points to Vella's productive connection with the memory of Sicily and the Mediterranean in two places. The first passage is found in the second chapter; it describes how Vella walks through the popular neighbourhood of the Kalsa, working out his forgery in his mind. The name of the neighbourhood itself reveals its Arab origin: al-Khālisa was the name of the fortress that the Muslim rulers built here and from which the neighbourhood takes its name. The cityscape and the street names preserve the memory of a past that is only dimly known to the inhabitants of the eighteenth century. The foreign visitor from Morocco, whom they call a Turk—perhaps because Morocco was part of the Ottoman Empire but perhaps only because they do not want to differentiate in their rejection of the foreigner—has something uncanny, even threatening, for them, and Vella, the priest who interprets their dreams, is virtually soiled by contact with Ben Olman:

‘Immerso nei pensieri, si avviò verso casa attraverso il popoloso quartiere della Kalsa: le donne se lo segnavano a dito, i bambini gli gridavano dietro “Il prete che stava col turco, il prete del turco” poiché come accompagnatore del marocchino era diventato popolare. Don Giuseppe non li sentiva nemmeno: alto e robusto, lento e solenne nel passo, grave il volto olivastro, gli occhi assorbiti, la gran croce di Gerusalemme sul petto camminava tra quel pulviscolo umano. Nella sua mente era il giuoco dei dadi, delle date, dei nomi: rotolavano nell’egira, nell’era cristiana, nell’oscuro, immutabile tempo del pulviscolo umano della Kalsa; si accozzavano a comporre una cifra, un destino; di nuovo si agitavano martellanti dentro il cieco passato. Il Fazello, l’Inveges, il Caruso, la *cronica di Cambridge*¹⁵: gli elementi del suo giuoco, i dati del suo azzardo. “Mi ci vuole soltanto del metodo” si diceva “soltanto dell’attenzione”: e tuttavia non poteva impedirsi che il sentimento ne fosse sollecitato, che la misteriosa ala della pietà sfiorasse la fredda impostura, che l’umana malinconia si levasse da quella polvere’ (Sciascia 2012, 359).¹⁶

At this point, it is easy to see how deeply Vella is rooted in the shared Sicilian-Arab past and how vividly and tirelessly his imagination works. The others appear to him—or to the narrator? it is unclear—as ‘pulviscolo’, as ‘dust’, while the past forms the material for his work. Here, it becomes particularly evident how closely Vella’s deception approaches a literary creative process: he selects from the accounts of Sicily’s Muslim history available to him the data and facts that he needs and that he must combine to form his narrative from them. The difference consists essentially in the different intention and status of the statement because

15 Fazello, Inveges and Caruso: these are Sicilian historians who had tried to shed light on the darkness of the Arab history of Sicily. Tommaso Fazello (1498–1570) wrote a geographical and historical account of Sicily under the title *De Rebus Siculis Decades Duae, Nunc Primum in Lucem Editae* (Palermo 1558). Agostino Inveges (1595–1677) was the author of several historical writings, including *Annali della Felice Città di Palermo*, published in three volumes in Palermo in 1649, 1650 and 1651. Giovanni Battista Caruso (1673–1724) was particularly notable for an edition of the sources of Sicilian history, which appeared in two volumes in 1723: *Bibliotheca Historica Regni Siciliae*. About these authors teaches Amari (2002, 4–5).

16 ‘Sunk in his own thoughts, he walked home through the crowded Kalsa quarter; women pointed to him, children ran shouting behind him—“That’s the priest who was with the Turk”—“The Turk’s priest”—for as the Moroccan’s companion, he had become a well-known figure. Don Giuseppe did not even hear them. Tall and vigorous of frame, slow and solemn in carriage, the great cross of Jerusalem lying on his chest, he strode through that human dust, his olive-complexioned face grave and his eyes abstracted. His mind was busy juggling dates and names: like dice, they rolled in the Hegira, down to the corridors of the Christian Era and through the obscure, immutable centuries of the human dust of Kalsa: now they rolled together to form a figure or a human destiny, now they bounced noisily along blind passages of the past. The historians Fazello, Inveges, Caruso, the *Cambridge Chronicle*—all elements of his gamble, the dice of his game. “All I need is a method,” he told himself, “and attention, close attention.” And yet he could not fend off a feeling that the mysterious wing of piety would brush against his calculated fraud, and that human pain would be born from the dust of the Kalsa’ (Sciascia 2016, 13).

while the literary text does not have to disguise its fictionality, this is indispensable for the text of the forger. In both cases, however, it becomes a matter of re-manifesting through writing a past that is only apparently lost and latent in the present.

Undoubtedly, this is paradoxical: one may ask how such a literary manifestation should be possible by a person who, as the opening chapter already demonstrates, has minimal knowledge of this past. The answer lies in the strong emphasis on a fantasy that participates in the Mediterranean, which has its roots in the protagonist's origins and earliest imprints. This is addressed late in the novel but all the more extensively for it, namely, in Chapter 15 of the third part, where Vella recalls his early years in Malta.

Poi, nella sera, le chitarre si accendevano come grilli, mentre dal porto giungeva il canto dei marinai siciliani, greci, catalani, genovesi: essenza della lontananza, della nostalgia. Di quei marinai che nei loro racconti di ubriachi aprivano il mondo come un ventaglio: e gli avevano rivelato la vasta e varia avventura che i luoghi offrono all'uomo anche il più miserabile, e che nello svariare dei luoghi è per il miserabile l'unica possibilità di cogliere le gioie della vita. E capitandogli a volte di sorprenderli, nei recessi della marina, in oscuri amplessi con le veneri del luogo, veneri sformate e grevi come quelle che da Malta avrebbero poi avuto nome, quei marinai gli avevano rivelato la donna: nausea ed ebbrezza da cui era sorta la sua ardente curiosità *en voyageuse* nei riguardi dei fatti erotici. In effetti, aveva cominciata dalla donna a falsificare il mondo: traendo da quel che di lei vedeva, intravedeva, indovinava gli elementi d'avvio a un fantasticare inesauribile e, con gli anni, perfetto. E attraverso la donna, decisamente era pervenuto a quella fantasia del mondo arabo cui il dialetto e le abitudini della sua terra, il suo sangue oscuramente, lo chiamavano. 'Solo le cose della fantasia sono belle, ed è fantasia anche il ricordo ... Malta non è che una terra povera e amara, la gente barbara come quando vi approdò San Paolo ... Solo che, nel mare, consente alla fantasia di affacciarsi alla favola del mondo musulmano e a quella del mondo cristiano: come io ho fatto, come io ho saputo fare... Altri direbbe alla storia: io dico alla favola' (Sciascia 2012, 485).¹⁷

17 'At evening, the guitars struck up like crickets, and up from the port floated the songs of the sailors—Sicilian, Greek, Catalan, Genoese—eloquent of far places and homesickness. As the boy listened to the drunken tales of the sailors, the world unfolded before him like a fan: he discovered the vast and varied adventures that new places offer to even the poorest men, and he saw that the only possibility for the poor man to pluck the pleasures of life lay in changing scenes. And it happened that sometimes he would surprise the sailors in secret places along the shore, locked in dark embraces with the Veneres of the waterfront, heavy women, abused like their prehistoric forebears from whom Malta was said to have taken its name; it was the sailors who also made women known to him; he responded with nausea and intoxication, from which sprang his burning voyeur's curiosity about all things erotic. Indeed, it was through women that he began to falsify the world; from what he saw, sensed and surmised about women he drew the materials that led him to an inexhaustible and, with time, flawless fantasticating. It was definitely through women, through the fantasy that he had conceived of women, that he had created his fantasy of the Arab world to which the language and customs of his country, and, obscurely, also his own blood, attracted him. "Only the things of fantasy are beautiful. And memory, too, is a fantasy ... Malta is nothing but a

The end of this extensive quotation expands the previous finding because it reveals the origin of Vella's imagination. The earlier passage had already demonstrated that Vella, by virtue of his imagination, participates in the common memory space that connects the Palermo of the eighteenth century with the multicultural Palermo of the Middle Ages. Maltese memory now establishes how this participation occurs. It has its origin in the early years that Vella spent in Malta. Of immense importance is the geographical position of the island: as with Sicily, Malta is located in the heart of the Mediterranean; however, unlike Sicily, it is small and barren and far more directly linked to the sea and seafaring because it has practically no inland. For this reason, sailors, along with sex workers, dominate Vella's memories. Here, the text develops a metaphoric of the sexes that is not free of orientalist clichés. The sailors who fascinated the young Vella with their songs all come from the Christian regions of the Mediterranean: the Greeks, Catalans, Sicilians and Genoese, as listed by the text. The women, however, are linked to an archaic, prehistoric cultural form: with their shapeless bodies, these women are reminiscent of famous figurative representations of the fourth millennium BC that were found on Malta. Sex with the women, to which the sailors introduced him (*'quei marinai gli avevano rivelato la donna'*), disgusted him, yet it was they who gave him the fantasy of the Arab: as Maltese women, they were Arabic by language and culture, like himself; like the Arab world, they were full of mysteries for him that he could only guess at but not reveal—and therefore provided ample material for his imagination. The male-Christian world of the northern Mediterranean and the female-Muslim world of the Arab south henceforth form two poles of his existence, the Christian of which is rationally accessible to him, while the other can only be conjured up with the help of memory and imagination. Vella's activity as a forger is a manifestation of suppressed and problematic memory work in which he feels increasingly trapped, preferring to enjoy the freedom of fictional writing and the glory of poetry.

4 Cultural heritage and shared memory

As we have seen, Giuseppe Vella takes on numerous different roles and functions in Sciascia's novel: he is a forger who educates himself and allies himself with the Enlightenment; he is a fraudulent interpreter and Mediterranean muse, failed au-

poor, harsh island and the people are as barbarous as when St. Paul was shipwrecked there. Only, being in the sea, it allows imagination to venture into a fable of the Muslim and Christian world, as I have done, as I have been able to do ... Others would say history, but I say fable" (Sciascia 2016, 178–179).

thor and fortune teller. For the author Sciascia, the character is so interesting because it makes it possible to deal with several important themes at once with the narrative about Vella: the relationship between history and power in Sicily in particular and in Italy in general as well as the dialogue between Muslims and Christians and between South and North in multi- and inter-cultural Sicily. It turns out that Vella's person only partially reflects on such questions; this is especially true of his reflections on history and power. Rather, insofar as his relationship with the Arabic world is concerned, he serves as an involuntary catalyst of an awakening serious examination regarding this subject while he himself is intellectually and educationally ill-suited to the related contexts. On the contrary, he almost emblematically represents a fantasy that is completely connected with the Mediterranean region, a fabrication that is fed by the earliest experiences, although it is by no means free of orientalist clichés.

These various aspects of the text are held together by their arrangement in the novel, which allows the paradoxes arising from the combination of contradictory roles to be de-paradoxed by being harnessed into the scheme of a character's personal development: Vella is first the dream-interpreting soothsayer who then evolves into a sophisticated forger, a self-thinker and, finally, a compassionate philosopher who regrets that he did not pursue a writing career.

As for the aspects of the novel regarding the cultural heritage of Sicily and the memory of the island shared with Arab culture, the figure of the forger serves the author as an agent that allows Sciascia to treat such issues for contemporary audience. This becomes clear at the beginning of the novel: whether the poet Ibn Hamdis was a household name to Airolti and Vella is an immaterial question in the context of the novel. However, by putting a quotation from the poet's work into the mouth of the ambassador's character, the narrator actualises for his readers the importance of the Arab poet for Sicilian literary history. Thus, if the dialogue fails on the content level of the novel, the narrator, sovereignly in command of the text, here gives his audience a clear indication of how important it would be to know Ibn Hamdis. Other passages in the novel can be read in much the same manner, such as the crossing of the Kalsa, which is also examined here: the importance of Arab traces in the cityscape may not have been apparent to most of the eighteenth-century population or, at least, may not have seemed important, but the narrator uses his character as a memory media – as a Muse – to remind his audience of this.

Through such strategies, the narrator's discourse moves beyond the historically conditioned consciousness of the characters to the island's cultural heritage and the shared memories between the North and South. In doing so, he at least implicitly criticises the outdated ideology of a rigid Sicilianity and inscribes the belonging of the Arab past to the Sicilian identity in the collective memory of the Sicilians.

The possible objection that the facts regarding the Arab presence in Sicily were already well known in Sciascia's time overlooks the reality that what is at stake here is not the facts but the form of their memory. This raises the question of the extent to which those Arabs, who were still for Tomasi di Lampedusa only a horde of conquerors, could now even be understood as part of one's identity. Sciascia does not go so far as to affirm this without hesitation; however, by shifting the view of the cultural geography of Sicily toward the Mediterranean, he prepares the groundwork for a reassessment of the relationships between the cultures on the island.

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