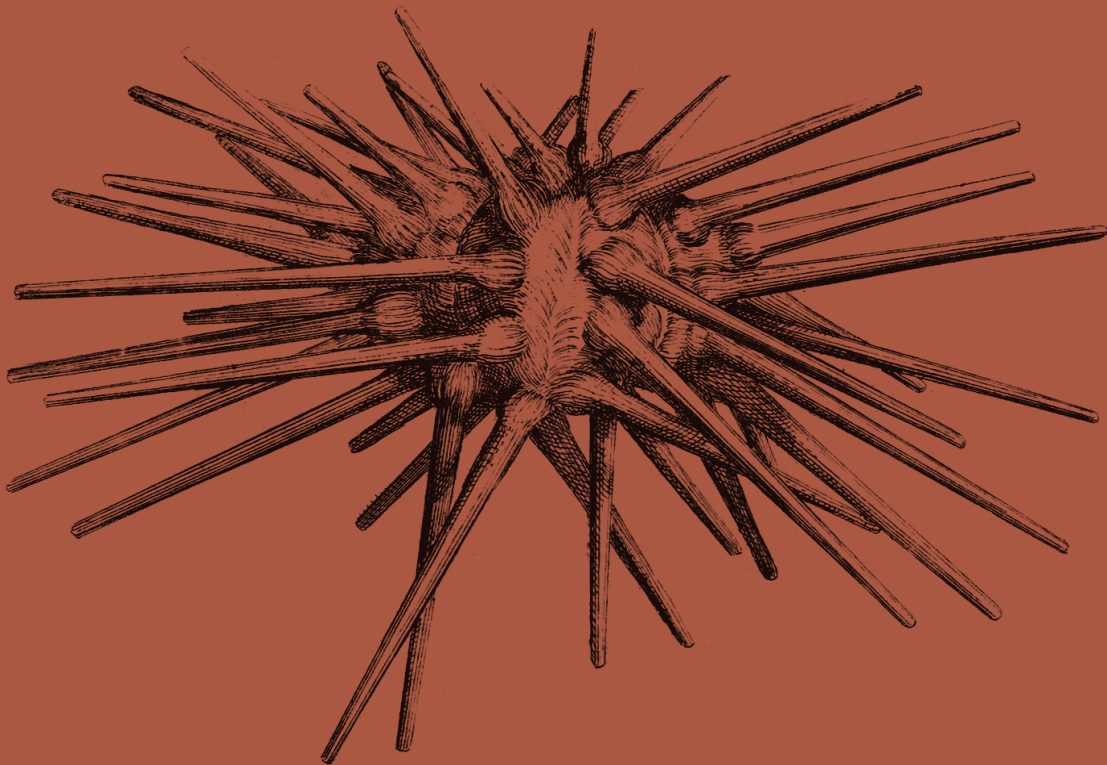


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LXI. BAND — 2019
HEFT 3



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Dislocazione, musealizzazione e ricezione dei reperti pompeiani: il caso delle colonne a mosaico



1 Mattia Preti, *Madonna della Lettera*
or *The Messinese embassy to the Virgin*, 1664.
Messina, Museo Regionale Interdisciplinare

MATTIA PRETI'S *MADONNA DELLA LETTERA* PAINTING, CULT, AND INQUISITION IN MALTA, MESSINA, AND ROME

Chiara Franceschini

Quando Monsignore entrò la cappella era illuminata dal sole del pomeriggio calante; e al di sopra dell'altare il quadro veneratissimo dalle signorine si trovava in piena luce: era un dipinto nello stile di Cremona e rappresentava una giovinetta esile, assai piacente, gli occhi rivolti al cielo, i molli capelli bruni sparsi in grazioso disordine sulle spalle seminude; nella destra essa stringeva una lettera spiegazzata.

(Giuseppe Tomasi di Lampedusa, *Il Gattopardo*)

Preserved in the Museo Regionale of Messina is a large painting with a *Madonna della Lettera*, or *The Messinese embassy to the Virgin*, generally considered to

have been executed by Mattia Preti after his definitive move to Malta in 1661 (Fig. 1).¹ Though scholars believe it was intended to be sent to Sicily, both the exact date of the painting – sometime between 1660 and 1675 – and its original context are unknown.² Following the earthquake of 1908, the work was transferred to the museum from the church of San Giovanni Decollato in Messina; however, it is not mentioned in any previous document, nor in the early sources describing San Giovanni Decollato.³ The recent spate of studies on the Calabrian painter repeat the above-mentioned information, leaning to-

¹ The altarpiece is painted in oil on canvas and measures 261 by 166 cm. See Claudio Strinati, in: *Mattia Preti: il Cavalier Calabrese*, exh. cat., ed. by Roberta Rinaldi et al., Catanzaro 1999, p. 188, no. 55; Federico Zeri/Francesca Campagna Cicala, *Messina: Museo Regionale*, Palermo 1992, p. 132, no. 115; John T. Spike, *Mattia Preti: catalogo ragionato dei dipinti*, Taverna 1999, p. 180, no. 93. First proposed by Roberto Longhi, *Scritti giovanili: 1912–1922*, Florence 1956, I, p. 322 (“primo periodo”) and p. 412 (after 1665), the attribution to Preti was confirmed, after restoration, by Giuseppe Consoli, in: *Opere d'arte restaurate (1965–1969): XIII Settimana dei Musei Italiani*, exh. cat., ed. by idem, Messina 1970, p. n. n., no. 12, and idem, *Museo Regionale di Mes-*

sina, Bologna 1980, p. 50, respectively with the date “avanti il 1660” and 1650–1656. For Gioacchino Barbera, in: *Dal golfo allo stretto: itinerari seicenteschi tra Napoli e Messina*, exh. cat., ed. by idem/Nicola Spinosa, Messina 2004, p. 57, no. 15, “pure bisogna ammettere il contributo di qualche collaboratore”.

² Vincenzo Abbate, “Appunti per la committenza siciliana di Mattia Preti”, in: *Bollettino d'arte*, V (1980), pp. 65–74: 65f. (with a date after 1660); Spike (note 1), p. 180 (1675); Donatella Spagnolo, “La Madonna della Lettera”, in: *Mattia Preti: con lo sguardo verso Caravaggio*, exh. cat., ed. by Rosalba Panvini/Franco La Fico Guzzo, Siracusa 2016, pp. 48f.

³ Antonino Salinas/Gaetano Maria Columba, *Terremoto di Messina: ope-*



2 *View of Messina*, in: *Spiegazioni di due antiche mazze di ferro ritrovate in Messina nell'anno MDCCXXXIII*, Venice 1740, between pp. 168 and 169

re d'arte recuperate, ed. by Franca Campagna Cicala/Giovanni Molonia (= *Quaderni dell'attività didattica del Museo Regionale di Messina*, VIII [1998]), pp. 39, 133, no. 156.

⁴ Keith Sciberras, *Mattia Preti: The Triumphant Manner. With a Catalogue of His Works in Malta*, Valletta 2012, pp. 65, 119f.

⁵ [Giacomo Francesco Quingles/Paolo Agliota], *Spiegazioni di due antiche mazze di ferro ritrovate in Messina nell'anno MDCCXXXIII*, Venice 1740,

wards a later dating and an unspecified Messinese commission.⁴

This article argues that the painting was executed in Malta in 1664 for an altar dedicated to the Madonna della Lettera in the church of San Francesco in Valletta; the altar was subsequently dismantled in 1668. Evidence for this emerges from a set of unpublished documents in a volume containing cases of indulgences kept in the archive of the Sant'Uffizio in Rome. Although they do not mention the name of the artist directly, the documents are useful in reconstructing the brief life of the altar and in establishing the date of a painting which, on the basis of iconographical and material considerations, can reasonably be identified with the one we see today in the museum of Messina.

The painting described in the inquisitorial sources, like the one in Messina, depicted the Messinese embassy to the Virgin in 42 AD, a legendary episode probably invented in the first half of the sixteenth century. A print from 1740 allegedly reproducing a woodcut from 1522 (Fig. 2) explains how the letter written by the Virgin Mary that was venerated in Messina first arrived there.⁵ The conversion to Christianity of the population of Messina was thought to have been the work of Saint Paul, who was asked to come from Reggio to preach in that city; when the apostle informed the people that Mary was still living in Jerusalem, in 42 AD the town sent a delegation, headed by Saint Paul himself, to ask for her protection. Mary, according to the story, confirmed the blessing of her protection by signing and handing them a letter, the original of which, according to eighteenth-century reconstructions, disappeared after 430.⁶ While the

between pp. 168 and 169. See Giovan Giuseppe Mellusi, "Dalla lettera della Madonna alla Madonna della lettera: nascita e fortuna di una celebre credenza messinese", in: *Società Messinese di Storia Patria*, XCIII (2012), pp. 237–261; 239f. and fig. 1; Placido Samperi, *Iconologia della gloriosa Vergine madre di Dio Maria Protettrice di Messina*, Messina 1644, I, pp. 71–73; Placido Reina, *Delle notizie istoriche della città di Messina*, Messina 1688, II, pp. 2–151.

⁶ Maria Pia Fantini, "La lettera della Madonna ai messinesi: apocrifa,

original in Hebrew was supposedly already lost at that time, a version of the letter in Greek was allegedly found, according to supporters of its authenticity, in the fifteenth century and translated into Latin by the humanist Constantine Lascaris (1434–1501).⁷ The Greek version was also reported to have been lost in the following century. The oldest known version of the letter is in Latin and appeared in a printed book by Francesco Maurolico in 1556, while the earliest known manuscript transcription is included in a 1599 register of privileges of the town of Messina.⁸ This is also the period in which the cult of the Holy Epistle and its festivities were first attested in Messina: the first painted and printed images including representations of this relic started to appear from around the same time.⁹ However, in 1598 a decree by the Congregation of the Holy Office in Rome condemned the text of the letter as apocryphal.¹⁰ Interestingly enough, this condemnation did not prevent the spread of the cult, which was defended by Jesuits in Europe and beyond. On behalf of the Senate of Messina, the Austrian Jesuit father Melchior Inchofer wrote a defensive treaty in 1629, which, following a series of complaints and denunciations from the Senate and the archbishop of Palermo, was subsequently censored by the Congregation of the Index: the frontispiece of the first edition displays a curtain bearing the text of the letter hanging above a view of Messina, surmounted by a blessing figure of the Virgin Mary and flanked by the Saints Paul and Luke in side niches (Fig. 3).¹¹ Another Jesuit



3 Melchior Inchofer, *Epistolae B. Virginis Mariae ad Messanenses veritas vindicata*, Messina 1619 [1629], frontispiece

vera o verisimile? Il dibattito tra il 1562 e il 1632”, in: *Per il Cinquecento religioso italiano: clero, cultura, società*, conference proceedings Siena 2001, ed. by Maurizio Sangalli, Rome 2003, pp. 523–555: 523 and 546; Agostino Giuliano/Maurizio Scarpari, “La Lettera della Madonna ai Messinesi in lingua cinese di Metello Saccano: un manoscritto inedito del XVII secolo”, in: *Archivio storico messinese*, 98 (2017), pp. 35–73, note 16; *idem*, “The Letter of the Madonna to the People of Messina in Chinese by the Jesuit Metello Saccano: An Unknown Seventeenth-Century Manuscript”, in: *Journal of Jesuit Studies*, V (2018), pp. 631–641: 634.

⁷ *Ibidem*.

⁸ See *ibidem*, p. 634, note 5, and *idem* 2017 (note 6), p. 43, note 16.

⁹ I cannot discuss here the early examples, which mostly include the Madonna and Child holding the letter and to which I intend to devote another article. On the iconographic history see at least Francesca Campagna Cicala, “La Madonna della Lettera nelle arti figurative”, in: *Arte, storia e tradizione nella devozione alla Madonna della Lettera*, ed. by Giovanni Molonia, Messina 1995, pp. 25–35, and below, pp. 342, 345–349 (for some of the images produced in the seventeenth century).

¹⁰ Fantini (note 6), p. 526, note 23. The decree of 30 July 1598, however, was not published and the condemnation was repeated on 4 January 1606 and 19 May 1612 (*ibidem*, p. 531).

¹¹ Melchior Inchofer, *Epistolae B. Virginis Mariae ad Messanenses veritas vin-*

father, Metello Saccano (1612–1662), created a Chinese version of the letter in 1646–1648.¹² In other words, the letter of the Virgin was a prominent ‘lost’ relic whose existence and cult were transmitted and propagated by printed texts, manuscript copies in various languages, and images.

As I will suggest in this essay, the role of the visual arts in establishing this cult and in the recreation of the relic is particularly relevant. Since a comprehensive study of the role of images in visualizing this controversial relic and establishing its cult in different media and places would require more space, this article is limited to reconstructing the context of the altarpiece attributed to Mattia Preti in the Museo Regionale in Messina and connecting its genesis, iconography and history to the multi-directional attempts put in place by the Messinese elites active in Rome and in the Mediterranean to spread the cult beyond their hometown. In this framework, I will also discuss a precedent Roman episode, which so far has also remained unexamined: the removal of a different image of the Madonna della Lettera which took place in Rome in 1642. A combined examination of these two cases will, it is hoped, prompt some initial considerations on the geography and normativity of the images of the Madonna della Lettera in the various centres of her cult (Messina, Rome, Malta), thereby anticipating some of the themes of a vaster research project I am at present conducting.¹³

dicata, Messina 1619 [1629]. On the censorship of this treaty and on the second, ‘corrected’ edition from 1632, see Fantini (note 6), pp. 547–551.

¹² Giuliano/Scarpari 2017 and 2018 (note 6).

¹³ The specific role of images in shaping cults forms an important part of my current book project, provisionally entitled *Archipelagoes of Images: The Normativity of Sacred Images in Sicily and Mediterranean Europe*, where the material published in this article will be further developed. The notion of ‘image normativity’, which is explored in this project, concerns not so much the central attempts put in place by the Roman Curia and other religious institutions to regulate art (for which see the recent intervention, with previous bibliography, by Opher Mansur, “Censure and Censorship in Rome, c. 1600: The Visitation of Clement VIII and the Visual Arts”, in: *The Sensuous in the Counter-Reformation Church*, ed. by Marcia B. Hall/Tracy E.

Malta 1667/68

On 5 November 1667, the zealous Angelo Ranuzzi, inquisitor in Malta between 1667 and early 1668,¹⁴ wrote to Monsignor Girolamo Casanate, *assessore* of the Congregation of the Holy Office in Rome, to point out that in the church of the Friars Minor in Valletta “since three years an altar has been built by a religious person that has been dedicated to Our Lady of the Letter, where every year on 2 June this feast is celebrated, following the custom of the people of Messina”. Since he was aware that the congregation had declared this letter to be apocryphal, Ranuzzi thought it his duty to inform them of the introduction of the feast, so that he should know how best to deport himself.¹⁵ There followed a series of exchanges between the Sant’Uffizio, another Maltese inquisitor called Alessandro Bologna, who took over from Ranuzzi after 6 May 1668 as his deputy (pro-inquisitor), Lucas Bueno, archbishop of Salonica and bishop of Malta since 15 December 1666, and the knights of Messina on the question of the altar erected by the latter. The reason we know about this episode, which resulted in the removal of the painting that had been commissioned for the altar built three years earlier (1664), is because of the conflict between the bishop, the pro-inquisitor, and the knights of Messina, who, as we will see, were supported by the grand master of the Order of Malta, Nicolas Cotoner. Both the pro-inquisitor and the

Cooper, New York 2013, pp. 136–161) but rather the active role of images in establishing cults, traditions, and norms, in connection with artistic geography. For an initial introduction to this project see Chiara Franceschini, “Volti santi e Trinità triforimi: ricerche in corso sullo statuto delle immagini nei procedimenti del Sant’Uffizio”, in: *L’Inquisizione romana e i suoi archivi: a vent’anni dall’apertura dell’ACDF*, conference proceedings Rome 2018, ed. by Alejandro Cifres, Rome 2019, pp. 279–301.

¹⁴ Herman H. Schwedt, *Die römische Inquisition: Kardinäle und Konsultoren 1601 bis 1700*, Freiburg/Basel/Vienna 2017, p. 667; Francesca Boris, s.v. Angelo Ranuzzi, in: *Dizionario biografico degli italiani*, LXXXVIII, Rome 2016, pp. 460–462.

¹⁵ Appendix, no. I.3. Casanate, for his part, had been inquisitor in Malta until 7 June 1663.

bishop had written to the Roman cardinals asking them to intervene in order to solve this dispute: data on the setting up and removal of the altar and painting emerge as secondary information from the material, which was collected in Rome in two separate phases.

A first report was prepared for the plenary meeting of the congregation on 25 July 1668 held, as customary, on the *feria quarta*, i.e. Wednesday, at the convent of Santa Maria sopra Minerva. This brief account¹⁶ was based on five letters, all of which were attached either in the original or as a copy: the above-mentioned letter by Ranuzzi; two letters written by Lucas Bueno, addressed respectively to the cardinals of the congregation and, in Spanish, to Casanate (2 June 1668);¹⁷ two letters written by Bologna, one to Casanate (30 May 1668) and the other to Cardinal Francesco Barberini (3 June 1668).¹⁸

Bishop Bueno reported that, once Inquisitor Ranuzzi had left Malta (6 May 1668),¹⁹ the chancellor of the pro-inquisitor had read to him the contents of a letter sent by the congregation to Ranuzzi in December 1667.²⁰ Ranuzzi had instructed Bologna to inform the bishop about the feast and the altar erected in the church of San Francesco, asking that he remove the latter and prohibit the former. In order to execute the decrees from Rome and manage the inevitable protests of the patrons of the altar and the larger Messinese community, the bishop had requested a copy of the original letter from the Sant'Uffizio; however, the chancellor answered that this had been "expressly" forbidden. Feeling certain that he would obtain this copy because orders that were to be executed in public "do not fall under the secret of the

Holy Office", the bishop nevertheless advised the father guardian of the convent that he should execute the orders. Although it seemed "harsh" to give notice of the prohibition one day before the feast, especially since the Messinese had already paid for everything ("se bene pareva duro l'haver aspettato a dar questa notitia sì pochi giorni prima della festa, dovendosi celebrarla dimane domenica 3. del corrente e dopo fatta per celebrarla da' divoti Messinesi la spesa"), the father guardian proceeded to remove from the altar the painting that had been placed there. Bueno specified that the painting depicted the Madonna in the act of giving the alleged letter to the Messinese: "il postovi già quadro della Madonna dipinta in atto di consegnare agl'ambasciatori messinesi la sopradetta asserta lettera". In its place another painting of the Virgin was hung above the altar.²¹

According to the bishop, the pro-inquisitor's failure to deliver a copy of the letter with the orders from Rome had delegitimized the order itself; furthermore, Bologna had managed things so badly that the bishop appeared to have sole responsibility for a removal that the Messinese judged "fuera de rason".²² Bologna defended his conduct by stating that it stemmed from a desire to respect inquisitorial secrecy, and especially to ensure that the indignation of the grand master, who contributed to the expenses, should not fall on the Sant'Uffizio ("per sfuggir lo sdegno del Signor Gran Maestro che ha contribuito nella spesa di detto altare").²³ Lastly, writing to Cardinal Barberini, Bologna accused the bishop of attributing the order to the Sant'Uffizio, without explaining that the feast was being forbidden "perché era stata dalla Santa Sede Apostolica dichiarata apocrifa detta lettera".²⁴

¹⁶ Appendix, no. I.2.

¹⁷ Appendix, nos. I.4, I.5.

¹⁸ Appendix, nos. I.6, I.7.

¹⁹ An inventory of his returned goods, including a few paintings (among which a *Nativity* and an image of *San Carlo Borromeo*), is preserved in ACDF, Stanza Storica, HH 3 c, fol. 9 (10 March 1668).

²⁰ Not preserved in the file, which retains only a reference to it in an annotation of 14 December 1667: Appendix, no. I.3.

²¹ Appendix, no. I.4.

²² Appendix, no. I.5.

²³ Appendix, nos. I.6, I.7.

²⁴ Appendix, no. I.7.



4 Broadsheet with the *Epistola Beatæ Mariæ Virginis ad Messanenses*, Messina 1636

The pro-inquisitor was referring to the fact that, as already mentioned, the Virgin's letter to the Messinese had been declared apocryphal – a judgment first expressed by the Sant'Uffizio in 1598.²⁵ This condemnation did not mention the *images* of the Madonna della Lettera, but exclusively the *text* of the letter, which

²⁵ Fantini (note 6), pp. 523–555.

²⁶ Two examples are reproduced *ibidem*, pp. 552f. (figs. 1, 2); the frontispiece of a pamphlet with a medallion with the standing Virgin and Child below twelve stars and one *folgio volante* from the Biblioteca Casanatense (Fig. 4: the original is not traceable at present) with the text of the letter framed

however was by then widely circulating in and beyond Messina as it had been reproduced in many manuscript and printed formats, which were used for public and private devotion and sometimes included visual elements (Fig. 4).²⁶ In light of both the 1598 condemnation and the documents that had been assembled, on 25 July 1668 the congregation agreed on their preliminary conclusions: first Bishop Bueno should be reminded that the letter to the Messinese was declared to be apocryphal; second, he was to forbid festivities for the Madonna della Lettera as well as any altar dedicated to her cult; third, the pro-inquisitor should be informed that his conduct had met with disapproval; and finally, Domenico Maria Pozzobonelli, the commissary general of the Sant'Uffizio, was to be directed to extend to the superiors of the church of the Sicilians in Rome the order that the feast of the Madonna della Lettera should not be celebrated in the city of Rome either.²⁷

This last decision, which the inquisitors in Rome had reached during their examination of the events in Malta, extends the geography of the problem: the Maltese case raised a larger issue, which involved other potential centres of the Messinese cult. The events not only determined the cardinals' decision to have the Valletta painting removed, but led them to extend their vigilance to what might take place closer to the centre of their power: in Rome, in the church of the Sicilian community of Santa Maria in Costantinopoli. A further note explains that, on 30 July 1668, Pozzobonelli communicated the decree to the Camerlengo Salvatore degli Oddi, who swore before two witnesses (Isidoro Pantanello from Rieti and Generoso Meliorio from Tivoli) that the feast had never been celebrated in Rome and that he would not allow it to be celebrated in the future.²⁸ Such

by an adornment of foliate elements and putti supporting a cartouche with the image of God, and, below the title, an image of the standing Virgin Mary carried by two angels in an oval frame. See Samperi (note 5), p. 599.

²⁷ Appendix, no. I.8.

²⁸ *Ibidem*.

an answer, however, may well have been given in order to draw attention away from an episode that had involved this very same church twenty-six years earlier.

Rome 1642

In 1642 similar circumstances had led to the removal and censorship of a painting of the Madonna della Lettera in the church of Santa Maria in Costantinopoli; papers relating to this earlier case are attached to a file on Inchofer's *Epistolae* held among a series of documents relating to cases of book censorship.²⁹ An anonymous denouncer had informed the Sant'Uffizio that on 3 June 1642 the Messinese had celebrated "la festa della Lettera della Madonna" with great pomp and two vespers in music. Furthermore, "having brought forth a new painting of the Madonna holding the said letter in her hand, they planted it in the said church and there they want it to stay, and they say they wish to pursue the celebration of this feast and indeed campaign for the cult of this letter to be introduced" ("havendo fatto comparire un quadro novo con la Madonna e detta lettera in mano, lo piantorno nella chiesa detta e vogliono che stia sempre, e dicono volere continuare a fare detta festa, e spingono ad introdurre l'adoratione di detta lettera").³⁰

According to the denouncer, the purpose of hanging the painting had been to introduce forcefully

both the feast and the devotion to the letter of the Virgin Mary. This clearly shows how, at least in the eyes of those who were critical of it, the image could be crucial in the advancement of a cult that was as dear to the Messinese as it was controversial for the inquisitors (because of its apocryphal status), as well as being opposed by other Sicilians, especially by the rivals of the people of Messina, that is, the Palermians. Since at least the beginning of the seventeenth century, Messina and Palermo had been opposed in a long-standing struggle over primacy in Sicily, vis-à-vis the Spanish Crown – a struggle concerning precedence and privileges, in which the 'privilege' of a letter handed by the Virgin to the Messinese ambassadors also played a primary role.³¹

Unlike the Maltese case, here we know the name of the author of the installation: Cavalier Benedetto Salvago, a Messinese politician, man of letters and author in 1634 of an *Apologia* for the *epistola*.³² Finding himself in Rome on Messinese business, he had the painting displayed in the church of the Sicilians on the occasion of the feast. Later described by Placido Samperi as "deputato della festa" in Messina³³ and by Placido Reina and the Jesuit Domenico Arganzio as the person responsible for the ephemeral *apparati* and their iconography in 1657 and 1659,³⁴ Salvago was himself a knight of Malta and was proudly portrayed as such in a print by Francesco Donia com-

²⁹ Appendix, no. II.

³⁰ Appendix, no. II.I.

³¹ It is not possible to refer here to all the relevant bibliography on this point. See at least Sara Cabibbo, *Il Paradiso del Magnifico Regno: agiografi, santi e culti nella Sicilia spagnola*, Rome 1996, pp. 60–65, 74, 88. For one episode of this conflict in 1612 see Francesco Benigno, "Messina e il duca d'Osuna: un conflitto politico nella Sicilia del Seicento", in: *Il governo della città: patriziati e politica nella Sicilia moderna*, ed. by Domenico Ligresti, Catania 1989, pp. 173–207, quoting (p. 190) Gregorio Leti, *Vita di Don Pietro Giron, Duca d'Ossuna, Vicere di Napoli e di Sicilia*, Amsterdam 1699, II, p. 219: "Successes che condotto [il duca di Osuna] un giorno da quel magistrato nella chiesa cathedrale [...], mentre l'Arcivescovo con li suoi abiti pontificali aperto il ricchissimo reliquiario, e presa la Santa Lettera, così chiamata, la dava a baciare al Vicerè questo dopo haverla baciata in ginocchioni nel levarsi

disse: 'Se la Madonna ci avesse inviato una buona lettera di cambio, ci havrebbe fatto maggior servitio.'" A Spanish translation of the letter was included in a manuscript addressed to Philip II of Spain in 1591 with the justification that it was necessary to show the king the ancient privileges of the city of Messina: the passage is quoted in Fantini (note 6), p. 545.

³² Benedetto Salvago, *Apologia pro pietate Messanensium ex traditione reprobissae protectionis in Epistola B. M. Virginis adversus Rocchum Pirrum*, Messina 1634; on Salvago, see Reina (note 5), pp. 68, 71, 509, and Florinda Ciaramitaro, "Messina, 3 giugno 1657: gli apparati festivi realizzati in onore della Madonna della Sacra Lettera", in: *Lexicon*, I (2005), pp. 21–30.

³³ Samperi (note 5), p. 61.

³⁴ Reina (note 5), p. 509; Domenico Arganzio, *Pompe festive celebrate dalla nobile ed esemplare Città di Messina nell'anno 1659 per la solennità della Sagratissima Lettera*, Messina 1659, pp. 5f.



5 Francesco Donia, *Portrait of Benedetto Salvago*, 1669, in: Francesco Bracciolini, *La Sacra Lettera scritta da Maria Vergine a' Messinesi [...]*, ed. by Francesca Dini Salvago, Messina 1726

memorating his death in 1669 (Fig. 5).³⁵ In his own defence, Salvago declared in 1642 that he had been in good faith, having previously obtained “il breve della indulgenza per detta festa” (the indulgence brief for the feast): though he succeeded in having his painting returned, he was unable to prevent it from being removed and censored.³⁶

³⁵ On Francesco Donia and his family, see Gioacchino Barbera, s.v. Donia, in: *Dizionario biografico degli Italiani*, XLI, Rome 1992, pp. 170–174, esp. pp. 170f.

³⁶ Appendix, no. II.3.

The “quadro novo” in Rome did not depict the theme of the Messinese embassy. The inquisitorial documents mention only the figure of the Madonna showing the letter, which would suggest that the altarpiece was similar to a model visible, for example, in a late sixteenth-century detached fresco in San Pietro in Montorio (Fig. 6). However, Domenico Arganzio, in his 1659 publication on the Messinese feasts of the Holy Letter promoted by Salvago, also including those previously organized by him in Rome in 1642, 1643 and 1644, gives a much more detailed description of what must be the same painting. Placed over the main altar (“su ’l maggiore degli Altari”), the image of the Madonna is described as holding up in her left hand the “sacred envelope” on which the characters of the letter were readable, while with her right she blessed the town of Messina: “tenendo colla sinistra l’invoglio sagro, ove legeansi registrati i caratteri della gloriosissima lettera”. A veduta of the city and its nine patron saints, including Saint Paul, appeared below.³⁷ Although at present it is impossible to identify this work, the whole altarpiece may have been similar – to give just one example – to the painting by Nunzio Rossi for the chapel of the Padri Cruciferi in Messina (Fig. 7), which includes the cityscape but features only the Saints Peter and Paul.³⁸

An exceptionally detailed record survives of the inquisitors’ inspection and of the censorship ordered with respect to the painting in Rome. On 6 July 1642 the commissary general of the Sant’Uffizio, Giovanni Battista da Martinengo, went to Santa Maria in Costantinopoli: to the left of the high altar (and not “su ’l maggiore degli Altari”, as later described by Arganzio) he saw “a painting with an image of the Virgin Mary holding the letter, which it is claimed she wrote to the Messinese” (“et in ipsa a cornu evangelii Altaris Maioris

³⁷ Arganzio (note 34), pp. 144–146, under the heading “Festa solenneggiata nell’alma città di Roma” and Appendix, no. III.

³⁸ Francesca Campagna Cicala, *Un’antologia di frammenti: dipinti secenteschi inediti o poco noti delle collezioni del museo di Messina*, exh. cat., Messina 1990,



6 Niccolò Circignani called Il Pomarancio or Giovan Battista Lombardelli, *Madonna della Lettera*. Rome, San Pietro in Montorio



7 Nunzio Rossi, *The Madonna della Lettera on clouds with the Saints Peter and Paul and a view of Messina*. Messina, Museo Regionale Interdisciplinare

invenit parieti affixam imaginem Beatae Virginis Mariae in tabulis depictam cum Epistola ut pretenditur ab ipsa Messanensibus scriptam”). He therefore ordered the image to be removed and taken to the palace of the Sant’Uffizio, as he had not found in the church any suitable place to store it without it being visible and especially since he had discussed the matter with the sacristan, Giacomo Colodio Lucente, who confirmed that

the feast was celebrated as corresponding to the anonymous complaint.³⁹ Three days later it was decided that the painting could be returned once the hand showing the letter and the letter itself had been removed.⁴⁰

If, as appears to be the case, the censored painting is the same object later described by Arganzio, it is relevant to note that both the anonymous denouncer and the inquisitorial report ignore the complex ico-

pp. 129–131; Donatella Spagnolo, in: *Dal golfo allo stretto* (note 1), p. 72, no. 24.

³⁹ Appendix, no. II.2.

⁴⁰ Appendix, no. II.3.

nography of the altarpiece to focus only on the central image of the Virgin Mary displaying the letter. In fact, as we know from Arganzio, the text of the letter was intended to be readable on this painting: “tenendo colla sinistra l’invoglio sagro, ove legeansi registrati i caratteri della gloriosissima lettera”. The fact that the painting was given back after censorship of this detail (that is, the hand showing the letter and the letter itself) means that, at least for the inquisitors, the crux of the matter was not the whole altarpiece but only the fact that it displayed the letter with its readable text: once the hand of the Virgin showing the letter and the letter itself had been removed, the image no longer posed any problem and could be returned (“Dictam imaginem restitui deletis dispositione manus eiusdem imaginis Beatae Virginis nec non literis eiusdem”).

The case severely tested Salvago’s reputation; so much so that, after the painting was returned to him, he tried in vain to obtain a certificate from the Sant’Uffizio stating that the congregation had not attempted to undermine the ancient devotion, feast, and tradition of the Messinese people (“farli concedere una fede o dichiarare secondo è già stata l’intentione della Sacra Congregatione che per quel ch’è seguito in Roma non hann’inteso pregiudicare la pietà, festa et tradizione antiquissima de’ Messinesi”).⁴¹ The congregation decided that no answer should be sent: “non esse rescribendum”.⁴² However, the brief from 30 May 1642 with which Urban VIII had granted the indulgences to the feast of 3 June of the Holy Virgin “called of the letter” (“festivitas beatae Mariae Virginis de litera nuncupata”), which Salvago claimed he had previously obtained, was later proudly published by Arganzio.⁴³ Eschewing any reference to the censorship episode, Arganzio praised the success of Salvago’s

management of the feast in Rome not just in 1642, but also in 1643 and 1644, specifying that not only had many of the cardinals come to visit the church but also “l’Eccellentissimo Signor Ambasciador di Spagna don Giovanni Chiomazero intervenne alla solennità della messa cantata”. Furthermore, the flanks of the main arch (“l’arco maggiore”) were allegedly hung, on the right, with a portrait of Urban VIII and, on the left, with a portrait of Philip IV of Spain.⁴⁴

Since we know that, after the censorship in 1642, the painting was given back to Salvago, we must suppose that the Messinese tried to display the same censored altarpiece in the two following years. In fact, the story as documented by the inquisitorial files ends with a further complaint from “la maggiore parte de’ nazionali di Sicilia” denouncing the year after (1643) that the Messinese were about to celebrate the feast again:

A 3. di giugno l’anno passato [1642] fecero li Messinesi la festa nella chiesa della Madonna di Constantinopoli della Lettera di Maria Vergine scritta a loro et esposero un quadro con quell’historia, ma perch’era apocrifia partorì scandalo et fu stimata temerità di quelli fare tal festa in faccia del Papa et della Sede Apostolica che l’haveva dichiarata apocrifia. Fu da questa Sacra Congregatione fatto levare il quadro sudetto e risoluto che non si facesse più tal festa, né se le concedessero l’indulgentiae.⁴⁵

The weapon used by the “greatest part of the Sicilians” against the Messinese was always the same: that the letter was condemned as an apocryphal text and therefore the respective cult and image were to be forbidden. Under the pressure of the denouncers, the inquisitors, notwithstanding the existence of the brief of 30 May 1642 and although they had previously re-

⁴¹ Appendix, no. II.4.

⁴² *Ibidem*.

⁴³ Arganzio (note 34), p. 145.

⁴⁴ *Ibidem*, pp. 144–146. “Giovanni Chiomazero” refers to Juan Chumacero Carrillo y Sotomayor (1580–1660), who was sent as an ambassador

to Urban VIII in 1633 and remained in Rome until 1643. Unfortunately, the church of Santa Maria in Costantinopoli, or Santa Maria Odigitria al Tritone, was rebuilt in the nineteenth century; further research is required on the seventeenth-century setting of this church.

⁴⁵ Appendix, no. II.5.

turned the censored altarpiece, with a decree of 27 May 1643 prohibited the feast altogether.⁴⁶ The attitude of the Holy Office was rather ambiguous, as the cardinals adapted their measures not to decisions from above, but rather to the contingencies of the micro-conflicts among different groups within a nationality. In any case, the painting was the targeted element.

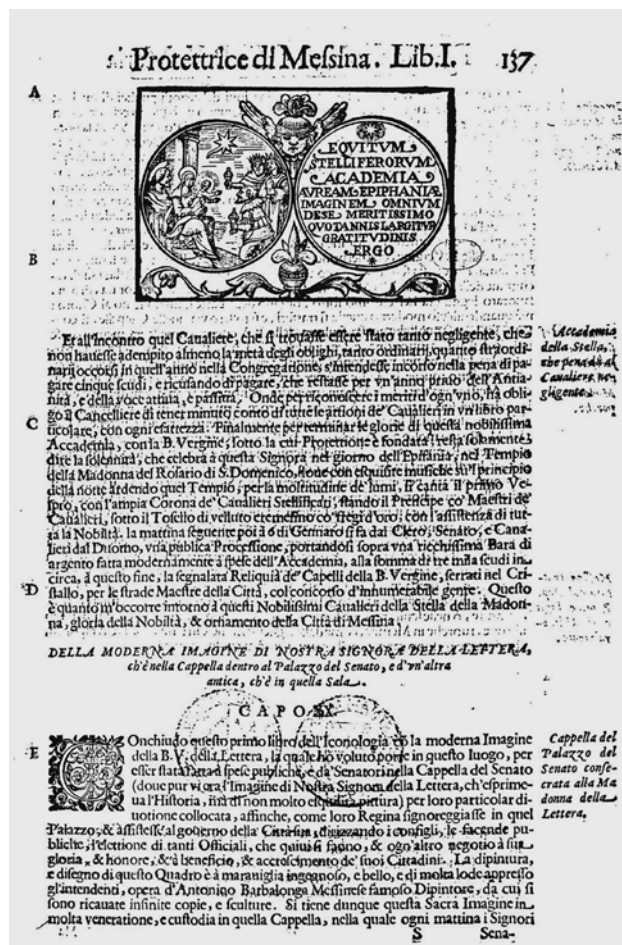
The Maltese Altarpiece

While the painting displayed in Rome in 1642 is still unknown, the one later removed in Valletta can be identified. Up to this point, the following information may be garnered from the Maltese file: first, the altar, and presumably the painting, had been set up in 1664 “da persona pia” in the church of the Friars Minor in Valletta; second, the painting was described by the bishop as a “quadro della Madonna dipinta in atto di consegnare agl’ambasciatori messinesi la sopra-detta asserita lettera”.⁴⁷ the visibility of the letter was therefore the characterizing element of the painting, which certainly depicted the Messinese embassy; third, the painting was removed between 28 May and 2 June 1668, just before the feast of 3 June, and replaced by a different painting of the Madonna; fourth, the “persona pia” was probably one of the Messinese knights; fifth, the only person explicitly mentioned as being financially involved in the building of the altar and therefore publicly thanked by the Messinese knights – of whom he was also the protector – is the Mallorcan Nicolas Cotoner, grand master of the Order of Malta between 1663 and his death in 1680.⁴⁸

Taken together, these data support the hypothesis that the painting in question was in fact the canvas attributed to Mattia Preti and now in the Museo Regionale at Messina (Fig. 1). This painting, just like the contested work in Malta, depicts the Messinese embassy to the Virgin. In his *Iconologia della gloriosa*

⁴⁶ *Ibidem*.

⁴⁷ Appendix, no. I.4.



8 Placido Samperi, *Iconologia della gloriosa Vergine madre di Dio Maria Protettrice di Messina*, Messina 1644, I, p. 137

Vergine madre di Dio Maria, published in 1644 (Fig. 8), Placido Samperi described a picture, with the same iconography, painted by the Messinese artist Antonio Barbalonga for the Cappella del Senato as “la moderna imagine” of Our Lady of the Letter. According to him, from this painting, showing “dipintura, e disegno [...] à maraviglia ingegnoso, e bello”, innumerable copies and “sculptures” (engravings?) were derived (“si sono

⁴⁸ Appendix, no. I.7. For Cotoner’s relationship with Preti, see the documents in *Mattia Preti: i documenti*, ed. by John T. Spike, Florence 1998, pp. 171f.



9 Antonio Barbalonga, *Madonna della Lettera* or *The Messinese embassy to the Virgin*, 1630s. Messina, Municipio, on loan from the Museo Regionale Interdisciplinare



10 After Antonio Barbalonga, *Madonna della Lettera*, in: Placido Samperi, *Iconologia della gloriosa Vergine madre di Dio Maria Protettrice di Messina*, Messina 1644, I, after p. 140

ricavate infinite copie, e sculture”).⁴⁹ This likely refers to the painting, dating from the 1630s and originally in the duomo, which is now preserved in the Municipio of Messina (Fig. 9).⁵⁰ The canvas shows the two ambassadors introduced from the left by Saint Paul to the Virgin. By presenting a view of their city, they ask the protection of the Virgin, who is depicted sitting in the act of writing the letter with the help of an angel.⁵¹

⁴⁹ Samperi (note 5), p. 137. On Samperi’s *Iconologia* see Francesca Mangiola, “L’arte incisoria a Messina nel Seicento: il caso dell’*Iconologia* di Placido Samperi”, in: *Grafica d’arte*, XX (2009), 29, pp. 12–17.

⁵⁰ The painting from the duomo (Salinas/Columba [note 3], p. 32, no. 79) is the property of the Museo Regionale and is now on loan to the Municipio.

In his book, however, Samperi includes an engraved version of this “disegno [...] ingegnoso” (Fig. 10) which differs from the preserved painting: not only the orientation of the scene is reversed (like in Preti’s painting), but also the iconography differs. The Virgin is handing over the letter to the ambassadors and Saint Paul now stands in profile preaching to the people of Jerusalem, while the map of the city is shown to them

In 1626–1629, Antonio Barbalonga had been an assistant in Domenichino’s workshop in Rome: *Alla ricerca di “Ghiongrat”: studi sui libri parrocchiali romani (1600–1630)*, ed. by Rossella Vodret, Rome 2011, pp. 32–37, 159.

⁵¹ This iconographic detail opens up a larger question, which I cannot address here, concerning the discussion of the Virgin’s ability to write, which

rather than to the Virgin.⁵² The ‘modern’ iconography of the embassy, as opposed to older images of the Madonna della Lettera, had however already been introduced earlier, at least from 1629 in a painting by Antonio Catalano for the female Benedictine monastery and church of San Paolo – hence the centrality of the figure of the apostle in this painting (Fig. II).⁵³ It is highly likely that the creation of this new iconography giving centrality to the figures of the Messinese ambassadors was linked to the above-mentioned political conflict with the city of Palermo, which involved a prominent role of Messinese diplomacy at both the courts of the viceroy and of the king of Spain.⁵⁴

However, these Messinese prototypes were radically transformed by Preti, whose painting presents a simplified composition with fewer figures. Because of the way the Virgin is portrayed, not sitting but standing on the threshold of her house as she hands the letter to the ambassadors, the scene is somewhat reminiscent of Caravaggio’s *Madonna of Loreto* (Fig. 12). If we suppose that Preti in Malta had access to Samperi’s *Iconologia*, a more immediate source might have been a small engraving of a medal appearing on the same page where Samperi introduces “la moderna imagine” of the Madonna della Lettera by Barbalonga (Fig. 8): the image, which represents “la Madonna dell’Epifania” from a golden medal created for the members of the Messinese Accademia della Stella, seems to have provided some ideas for the organization of Preti’s painting, especially for the scenic close-up and the re-

was also mentioned in debates about the authenticity of the letter (Fantini [note 6], p. 544).

⁵² The difference in iconography between the printed version and the surviving painting, which is considered to be the original (see above, note 50), deserves further investigation. According to Mangiola (note 49), p. 16, the engraving reproduces another painting.

⁵³ Salinas/Columba (note 3), pp. 54 and 152, no. 346; Campagna Cicala (note 9). Samperi (note 5), p. 340, describes this painting as another “quadro della Madonna della Lettera” dating from 1629: “non potendo quelle madri più contenere quel pio, e religioso affetto dentro a pareti della privata clausura, fecero istanza appresso l’abbadessa Domitilla Marullo, acciò s’esponeesse in una delle cappelle della chiesa il quadro della Madonna della



11 Antonio Catalano il Giovane, *Madonna della Lettera* or *The Messinese embassy to the Virgin*, 1629. Messina, Museo Regionale Interdisciplinare

spective positions of the Virgin and the ambassadors, who have taken the place of the Magi, while the figure of Saint Joseph in the engraving becomes a different figure behind the Virgin in Preti’s painting. The Child is virtually substituted by the letter, while the figure of Saint Paul is added to the composition.

Lettera, et ella nell’anno 1629, sotto l’artificioso disegno, o vaga dipintura d’Antonio Catalano, espose l’immagine di Nostra Signora, che porge l’epistola a gli ambasciatori messinesi, alla presenza di alcuni angioli e di San Paolo apostolo, come qui si vede” (a reference to the engraving of the painting on the following page). A few lines below, Samperi mentions “un’antichissima imagine alla maniera greca, della Madonna che tiene nelle braccia il Bambino, il quale ha nelle mani una epistola, come si soleva dagli antichi mandare in invoglio, et alcuni sono di parere che fosse delle antiche imagini della Madonna della Lettera”.

⁵⁴ Warm thanks to Manuel Rivero Rodríguez for this observation, which opens a further line of investigation that I hope to return to in the near future.



12 Caravaggio, *Madonna of Loreto*, 1604-1606. Rome, Sant'Agostino in Campo Marzio

At the centre of Preti's altarpiece, the whiteness of the letter stands out against an imposing column,⁵⁵ which, combined with the poorly legible (due to the painting's state of conservation) architectural structure behind the figure of the Virgin and the threshold on which she stands, places the scene at the entrance to Mary's house in Jerusalem, a setting that echoes the doorpost and threshold of her house in Nazareth in Caravaggio's painting. The Virgin, behind whose back there appears the half-figure of what seems to be an angel, is handing the letter to two ambassadors with portrait-like features, the elder of whom is kneeling before her, while the other (with fashionable glasses and accompanied by a younger boy) is standing. Although no specific person has been identified so far, this individual characterization of the ambassadors strengthens the hypothesis of a contemporary reference intentionally bestowed on the image.⁵⁶ Leaning out from behind the imposing column is Saint Paul, who led the embassy to the Virgin. By including this element of the legend in a central position, the composition strengthens the connections between the painting, its patrons, and the island of Malta, on whose shores, according to the Acts of the Apostles, Saint Paul was shipwrecked.⁵⁷ The imposing architecture of the Virgin's house in Jerusalem reinforces the geographical reference to the original see of the Order of Malta. The centrality of the letter, whose text is entirely displayed and perfectly legible (Fig. 13), is accentuated by the white diagonal connecting the luminous face of the Virgin, the paper itself, and the white beard of the kneeling ambassador.⁵⁸

The full depiction and readability of the text of the letter distinguishes this altarpiece from its

⁵⁵ Spagnolo (note 2), p. 48, draws convincing parallels with similar columns in two other altarpieces by Preti in Malta.

⁵⁶ Spagnolo (*ibidem*) suggests that the kneeling Messinese ambassador could be a portrait of the altar's patron.

⁵⁷ Acts, 27-28; Mellusi (note 5).

⁵⁸ The depicted text runs as follows: "MARIA VIRGO / IOACHIM FILIA /

DEI HUMILLIMA / Christi Jesu Crucifixi Mater, ex / Tribu Iudae, Stirpe David, / Messanensibus omnibus salutem, et Dei Patris / Omnipotentis benedictionem. / Vos omnes fide magna Legatos, ac Nun/cios per publicum documentum ad Nos mi/sisse constat: Filium nostrum Dei gentium / Deum et Hominem esse fatemini, et in Celum / post suam Resurrectionem ascendisse, Pauli Apo/stoli electi praedicatione me-

Messinese prototypes, which portray the letter as an object in various arrangements, but *never* display the full text. In the version by Antonio Catalano the letter is depicted as a folded letter (Fig. II). In both versions attributed to Barbalonga (Figs. 9, 10) the text of the letter is not fully readable, although the canvas shows the Virgin's act of writing, which, in its exceptionality, is a way to emphasize the letter's status as a contact relic. In the altarpiece by Nunzio Rossi (Fig. 7), which does not show the episode of the embassy but, as already noted, a different iconography, namely the Madonna della Lettera floating on clouds and supported by angels above a view of Messina and the Saints Peter and Paul, the text of the letter is not readable either. While the letter as an object recalling the lost relic is present in all these paintings, different representational strategies are deployed to avoid the complete depiction of the text, which must have something to do with the already mentioned condemnation of the letter as an apocryphal text.

In Preti's painting, on the other hand, the letter is clearly and intentionally reproduced as a formal document and similar to the printed editions of the letter, such as those that circulated as *fogli volanti* (Fig. 4).⁵⁹ Furthermore, the words and fonts of the letter in the altarpiece are painted in such a way that one wonders whether they were actually painted by Mattia Preti or rather by a specialist in depicted writings.⁶⁰ As a whole, just as in the paintings described in Malta, Preti's altarpiece specifically captures the Madonna "in atto di consegnare agl'ambasciatori messinesi la [...] lettera": it foregrounds the *gesture of handing the letter* as well as the display of the text itself.

diante viam verita/tis agnoscentes. Ob quod Vos et ipsam Civi/tatem benedicimus, cuius perpetuam Prote/ctricem Nos esse volumus. Anno Filij nostri / XLII. Ind. .I. .III. Nonas Iunij Luna .XXVII. / Feria .V. Ex Hierosolymis. / Maria Virgo, quae supra hoc Chirographum / approbavit." The text corresponds to the Latin version published in 1556 by Francesco Maurolico, except for the final "approbavit", against



13 Mattia Preti, *Madonna della Lettera* (detail from Fig. 1, slightly rotated)

The iconological identity between the two paintings constitutes corroborative but not definitive evidence to prove that the two works are in fact the same. Additional details, however, as well as what may be reconstructed of the original context of the Valletta painting, provide further elements that strengthen the hypothesis, pointing to the involvement of Mattia Preti. In this specific time frame, Preti was the most active painter in Malta. A member of the Order of

Maurolico's "approbamus": cf. Giuliano/Scarpari 2017 (note 6), pp. 47f.

⁵⁹ For the suggestion that the format and fonts of the depicted letter recall the format of the official documents of the chancery of Messina I must once again thank Manuel Rivero Rodríguez.

⁶⁰ Cases in which the hand that painted the inscriptions differs from that

Malta since 1641/42, he became, at least from 1661, the order's official painter.⁶¹ Though he never spent a long period of time in Sicily, he entertained close artistic and patronage relationships with the town of Messina, the see of the Grand Priory of the Order of Malta, as well as with some Messinese noblemen, particularly Don Fabrizio Ruffo.⁶² In the absence of documentation, these relationships have so far formed the basis for the supposition that the *Madonna della Lettera* was painted in Malta for a Messinese destination perhaps linked to the order.

Most relevant is the direct involvement in the affair of the Grand Master Nicolas Cotoner. Preti was very close to Cotoner: during the latter's governorship he continued his work in the co-cathedral of Saint John, which he had started under Nicolas' brother Rafael Cotoner.⁶³ The grand master is mentioned by Bologna in his two letters to Casanate and Barberini, in which Bologna explains that he wished to defend the congregation against the "grand master's indignation, who, I understand, is resentful of the above-mentioned order because he contributed to the installation of the altar and the jurors of Messina thanked him for having erected the altar" ("per non addossare al Santo Offitio lo sdegno del Gran Maestro, che intendo si risente dell'ordine suddetto perché ha contribuito nella spesa dell'altare e li giurati di Messina li resero grattie per haver fatto erigere detto altare").⁶⁴ Considering the financial involvement of Cotoner, who in this last quotation almost appears as the principal patron, it is plausible

that he should have chosen to bring in his favourite painter.

The fact that the painter's name is never mentioned in the Roman documents might depend on several factors. If we consider that the name of the principal patron (the "persona pia") also remains obscure, such reticence could be linked to the desire not to reveal either painter or patron to the Sant'Uffizio. It should be borne in mind that these sources exist only because of specific conflicts between different authorities: there was no need to indicate the names of the persons involved, except in the case of the grand master, mention of whom is instrumental to Bologna's strategy.

One final element that must be considered in relation to Nicolas Cotoner's certain involvement, as well as to Mattia Preti as the probable author of the incriminated painting, concerns the original setting and design of the altar. We do not know the exact internal layout of the church and the convent of Saint Francis in those years, that is, before the 1681 reconstruction under the patronage of the subsequent grand master, Gregorio Carafa. According to a document published in 1953, the convent of the Friars Minor in Valletta was built in either 1597 or 1598 and the construction of the church started between 1604 and 1605.⁶⁵ Two early descriptions, one, dated 1644, by the Maltese Filippo Cagliola, father guardian of the convent of San Francesco of Messina and historian of the order (d. 1653), and the other from 1647 (revised in 1780), furnish us with a sense of the internal layout of the

of the main painter are not unknown: for earlier instances in which a specialist in depicted writings was paid to paint inscriptions (in the Cappella Paleotti and in the Palazzo Magnani in Bologna) see Samuel Vitali, *Romulus in Bologna: Die Fresken der Carracci im Palazzo Magnani*, Munich 2011, pp. 82f. My thanks to the author for having pointed out these examples to me.

⁶¹ Cf. Cynthia De Giorgio, *Mattia Preti: Saints and Heroes for the Knights of Malta*, Valletta 2014, p. 25.

⁶² Abbate (note 2), p. 65, and Bernardo De Dominicis, *Vite de' Pittori, Scultori ed Architetti napoletani*, Bologna 1971 (reprint of the ed. Naples 1742), II, pp. 314–388: 371. Vincenzo Ruffo, *La Galleria Ruffo in Messina nel secolo*

XVII [offprint from *Bollettino d'Arte*, X (1916)], Rome 1916, *passim*; *Mattia Preti* (note 48).

⁶³ Sciberras (note 4), *passim*, and *Mattia Preti* (note 48), pp. 171f.

⁶⁴ Appendix, no. I.6.

⁶⁵ Bonaventura Fiorini, "Le relazioni tra l'Ordine dei Frati Minori Conventuali di Malta e l'Ordine Gerosolimitano", in: *Melita Historica*, I (1953), pp. 68–74: 69, note 7. See also Sante Guido/Giuseppe Mantella, *Mattia Preti e il San Luca che dipinge la Vergine con il Bambino per la chiesa di San Francesco d'Assisi a La Valletta: un dipinto per "li virtuosi dell'academia, pittori scultori et indoratori"*, Soveria Mannelli 2014, p. 40, no. 35.

building in 1644.⁶⁶ In addition to the high altar dedicated to Saint Francis, there were four chapels: one honouring the Immaculate Conception (whose altar was still standing in 1667);⁶⁷ opposite this, another dedicated to Saint Anthony of Padua; and close to the entrance the chapels of the Saints Cosmas and Damian and the Blessed Catherine of Bologna. In 1671, Nicolas Cotoner assigned one of these altars to the recently founded Congregation of Painters, Sculptors, and Guilders, which dedicated it to Saint Luke; that very year Preti produced his *Saint Luke painting the Virgin* for this altar (Fig. 14).⁶⁸ The chapel that was dismantled and then ceded to the painters has been identified with that of the Blessed Catherine of Bologna: this altar was described in 1644, but disappeared from later sources.⁶⁹ If this was the altar assigned by Cotoner to the painters in 1671, could it have also been the one he had given a few years earlier to the Messinese and for which he had invested a considerable sum?

A comparison between the shape and size of the Messina painting (261 × 166 cm) and the *Saint Luke* still in Valletta confirms this hypothesis: the two works have the same, very particular shape terminating in an elliptical arch at the top and almost exactly the same dimensions.⁷⁰ Furthermore, we know that the chapel of the Blessed Catherine of Bologna had been decorated at the expense of Salvatore Imbroll from Malta, former general of the Jerosolimitan clergy (d. 1650);⁷¹ this establishes a prior connection with the knights, which would explain why the altar was at Cotoner's disposal. It is therefore entirely plausi-



14 Mattia Preti, *Saint Luke painting the Virgin*, 1671. Valletta, Saint Francis of Assisi

⁶⁶ Filippo Cagliola, *Almae siciliensis provinciae Minorum Conv. S. Francisci manifestationes novissimae*, ed. by Filippo Rotolo, Palermo 1984 (reprint of the ed. Venice 1644), pp. 120f.; Giovanni Francesco Abela/Giovannantonio Ciantar, *Malta Illustrata*, Malta 1772–1780, II, pp. 257–260.

⁶⁷ On the same date, 5 November 1667, on which Ranuzzi wrote to the Holy Office in Rome with reference to the Messinese altar, the inquisitor suspended another practice which was promoted by the Friars Minor in the same church: the therapeutic swallowing together with the host (“inghiottiti involti nell’hostia, over cialda, come una pillola”) of small pieces of paper printed (“certi bollettini stampati”) with an invocation

to the Immaculate (ACDF, *Dubia Varia*, 1754–1760, 8, fol. 277r–279v).

⁶⁸ Guido/Mantella (note 65), p. 40.

⁶⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 44.

⁷⁰ I am most grateful to Dr Agostino Giuliano from the Museo Regionale di Messina for double-checking the measurements of the altarpiece. In the literature, the measurements of the painting in Malta vary between 261.5 × 166.3 cm (according to Vittorio Sgarbi, *Mattia Preti*, Soveria Mannelli 2013, p. 282, no. 104) and 265 × 166 cm (according to Sciberras [note 4], p. 273, no. 68).

⁷¹ Guido/Mantella (note 65), p. 45.

ble that the operation carried out by the Messinese knights with Cotoner's help was facilitated by this bond. In the otherwise detailed reconstruction by Sante Guido and Giuseppe Mantella there is a documentary gap in the sequence of events surrounding the altars, precisely between 1651 – the year in which one of these, probably that of the Blessed Catherine of Bologna, was associated with the cult of Carlo Borromeo, following the will of one Ascanio Surdo – and 1671, when the same altar was likely ceded to the Congregation of Painters, Sculptors, and Guilders.⁷² These are the precise years in which the events under discussion took place. Moreover, as Ascanio Surdo died in 1663, it is reasonable to suppose that a new plan for the altar was devised under the initiative of the Messinese knights.

As regards the altar of Saint Luke, which is still *in situ*, we know that during the 1681 refurbishment the decorative structure above the altar table was adapted to suit Preti's new altarpiece.⁷³ The Saint Luke altar and altarpiece, therefore, still preserve their original size, coinciding with that of the Messina painting; in fact the two paintings present a similar scenic construction – a clean cut at the sides bringing the foreground close up to the viewer.

The size and monumental layout of Preti's *Madonna della Lettera* strongly suggest that it was commissioned for an important location.⁷⁴ The hypothesis that such a work was painted for an altar in Messina that received no attention whatsoever is difficult to support. This was a time when all the ephemera, images, and altars dedicated to the *Madonna della Lettera* were meticulously described and depicted by local authors, as in the case of the "macchina" built in 1657 to exhibit the Byzantine icon that was considered the oldest

image of this Madonna.⁷⁵ Roberto Longhi went as far as to suggest that the painting by Preti was originally conceived for the altar of the Cappella del Senato ("in luogo di quella ordinata al Guercino"); no documents, however, support this hypothesis.⁷⁶ On the other hand, it seems logical to suppose that, following the uproar in Malta, the expensive painting should have been returned to its hometown by one of the Messinese knights to be quietly placed in the church of San Giovanni Decollato (or in some other location before this one). The absence of information on the presence of this painting *ab antiquo* in San Giovanni Decollato may have been due to a wish to cast a veil of silence over such a contested work of art.⁷⁷

Relic or Attribute?

In both the attacks and defence of the Maltese painting, the status of the depicted letter, which is fully readable in the painting by Mattia Preti, tended to shift: was the represented object (the letter) to be considered as a reproduction of the supposed textual relic or rather a mere 'attribute' simply recalling a title of the Virgin? A further document preserved in the archive of the Holy Office helps us to refine our questions on this specific point.

The 1668 Maltese file contains a note with a list of indulgences, which was enclosed in a new document sent from Malta, a *memoriale* addressed personally to Pope Clement IX by the knights of Messina. Complaining about the prohibition of the feast and the order to remove the painting of the Virgin from the chapel ("che una tal solennità si proibisse e si togliesse dalla cappella il quadro della Beatissima Vergine"), the Messinese stated that the feast had always been celebrated both in Messina and Malta and that just

⁷² *Ibidem*.

⁷³ *Ibidem*, p. 51.

⁷⁴ This point was made, among others, by Strinati (note 1), p. 188.

⁷⁵ Image in Alberto Guazzi, *Entusiasmi d'affetto* [...], Messina 1657, p. 53; Ciaramitaro (note 32), p. 28.

⁷⁶ Longhi (note 1), p. 412; in *Mattia Preti* (note 48) no reference to such a work for Messina is to be found.

⁷⁷ The only reference to a work by Preti in Messina is in De Dominicis (note 62), pp. 695f.: this is the lost *San Francesco Saverio* recorded in San Giovanni di Malta by Lione Pascoli, *Vite de' pittori*, Rome 1730–1736, II, p. 108.

as the cult and its fame had spread in Messina, in Malta too it had “progressed towards some degree of visibility” (“e da molti anni in qua, crescendo in Messina il culto e la celebrità, si è anche in Malta avanzata a qualche grado di apparente dimostrazione”). Contrary to the false information supplied by their adversaries, the feast was not a “novità pernicioso”: it had been promoted and confirmed by the Apostolic See, which had granted, by means of a writ by the Congregation of Rites, that “la messa comune della Madonna” be celebrated using the customary office of Santa Maria ad Nives on 3 June, without any alteration.⁷⁸ The Messinese were referring to the indulgences granted by Paul V to the Cappella della Madonna in the duomo of Messina and other subsequent privileges.

The most relevant part of the Messinese report regards the legitimization of the painting against the claim that the celebrations deviated from ecclesiastical customs, their aim thereby being to justify the rite, beginning with the lawfulness of displaying the image in Messina as well as in Malta:

As for the rite of celebrating it, that either Messina or the Messinese knights in Malta deviate from the common customs of the Holy Church is a very false assumption: on occasion, the painting of the Madonna with a letter in her hand and the inscription *Santa Maria della Lettera* is displayed in order that such a depiction may prompt in the people the memory of the favour received; but the Holy See commonly allows individual churches [“chiese particolari”] to show their devotion to images of the Virgin Mary holding a ladder, or a flag, or sitting on a chest, standing on a pillar, or under an arch, to recall the benefit received, without the Apostolic See ever insisting on backing with its authority uncertain matters. And indeed this

⁷⁸ Appendix, no. I.I0. However, the date of 3 June for the feast was only established in I636: Mellusi (note 5), p. 258, note 58.

employment of a title and of a painting was praised and confirmed by Your Holiness’s predecessors in the above-mentioned indulgences which they desired to grant to the Chapel of the Madonna referred to, as we have said, by this particular title of the letter, just like those granted to the devotion of other churches and chapels consecrated to the Madonna of the Arch, of the Ladder, of Victory, etc.⁷⁹

This subtle line of reasoning is of extraordinary importance in any investigation concerning the value of images for the establishment of a cult, and in particular of the manifold cults of Mary. In the first place, it equates the “letter in her hand” to any other denomination, or ‘title’, of the Virgin by arguing that all particular images of the Madonna might run the risk of encountering scepticism: the most diverse iconographic traditions (the Madonna with a ladder, with a flag, etc.), it states, are customarily accepted without this implying any confirmation of the veracity of these traditions, which are regarded as “uncertain matters”. This assimilation of the letter to the Messinese to any other *attribute* aims to skirt the issue of the apocryphal status of the text as well as the question of the authenticity of the *textual relic*, which is indeed the specific element that distinguishes this cult. The status of the letter – the crucial element for both of the debating sides – is downplayed by the Messinese, who try to accord it the same standing as any other depicted attribute. In this way, its textual quality can be ignored. According to the Messinese, “il quadro della Madonna con una lettera in mano” and, in Messina, “con l’iscrizione *Santa Maria della Lettera*”, would only serve “per eccitare con una simil pittura la memoria del beneficio ricevuto” – not to prove the letter’s authenticity. In reality, the visual prominence and readability (at least for those who could read) of the

⁷⁹ Appendix, no. I.I0. The “Chapel of the Madonna” refers to the Cappella del Senato in Messina.

letter as depicted in what I suggest was the Maltese altarpiece testifies to the intent to expose the ‘distant’ relic in all its power. In this sense, it would be possible to state that the painting operates a normative re-affirmation of the existence and visibility of a (lost) local relic in a distant context.

The knights’ report and defence made it necessary to discuss the case once more during the Wednesday meeting of 31 October 1668 in Rome. The cardinals reviewed the submitted list of the earlier indulgences granted to altars and chapels dedicated to the Madonna della Lettera, both in Messina and elsewhere, since the time of Paul V: the list, which included the indulgences granted by Urban VIII both to the Cappella della Madonna in Messina in 1642 and to Santa Maria in Costantinopoli in Rome (1642 and 1643), was, interestingly, taken from the above-mentioned 1659 book by Arganzio.⁸⁰

The clever plea of the Messinese did not help to keep the altar. The inquisitors asked to see the original indulgence briefs and the decree of the Congregation of Rites; the whole file was later forwarded to the Congregation of Rites, whose answer is unknown to us.⁸¹ Nevertheless, the details yielded by these documents allow us to identify the painting removed in 1668. In between the lines of the argument put forward by the Messinese knights in their letter to the pope, it may be possible to hear the voice of the painter himself, in the passage defending the iconography of the work based on a comparison with other Marian images, including the Madonna of the Arch: from 1662 Mattia Preti began paying a yearly sum for the celebration of masses at the altar of the Madonna of the Arch in the church of Saint Barbara in his hometown of Taverna.⁸²

A Local Madonna with Global Ambitions

Though the respective files are preserved in two different documentary series, the cases of Rome and Malta are closely connected. In 1642, Benedetto Salvago tried to introduce the Messinese cult into Rome, encountering opposition from the other resident Sicilians; in 1664, the Messinese knights in Malta attempted a similar endeavour. In both cases, the success of the cult and the protests of those who opposed it pivoted around an image that had been especially painted for the occasion and had been displayed on a dedicated altar.

In both cases, the letter was clearly visible and readable. The problem for the inquisitors, unlike that of the adversaries of the Messinese who opposed the cult more generally, did not lie so much in the celebration of the feast or in the two paintings per se, but rather in the fact that the letter – that is an apocryphal text (since only a text can be apocryphal) – was depicted and displayed. Furthermore, in both cases the painted representation of the alleged relic and its legend became controversial because they appeared outside Messina – first in the normative centre of power of the Church of Rome and then in Malta, namely one of the most important commercial and diplomatic centres of the Mediterranean.

The question of indulgences granted in various places (not only in Messina but also in Rome) to the appellation of the Madonna della Lettera, a crucial element in Salvago’s and the Messinese knights’ defence as well as in the judgments expressed by the inquisitors, raises the broader issue of a clearly detectable tension between the validity and acceptability of a civic cult (here linked to the alleged existence of a relic consisting of a letter written by the Virgin) and the resistance on the part of various actors (the Sicil-

⁸⁰ Appendix, no. I.II. The reference to Arganzio’s publication is arguable from a comparison between the lists and from an autograph annotation by the officer of the Holy Office Cornelio Virgili, specifying that he fetched “il libro sopra *La lettera di Messina*, stampato l’anno 1659” (Appendix, no. I.I2).

⁸¹ Appendix, no. I.I2. I was unable to consult the Archivio della Congregazione dei Riti before the publication of this article.

⁸² *Mattia Preti* (note 48), p. 157. It is also possible that the Messinese knights had at their disposal the *Iconologia* by Placido Samperi, where all the different Marian cults of their town were listed.

ian adversaries of the Messinese, on the one hand, and the different religious authorities, including the cardinal inquisitors, on the other) against the universal advancement of a local cult which was controversial precisely because it was connected to an apocryphal text.

It is not possible here to explore all the political, religious, and visual implications of the two episodes. However, three elements emerge. First, that the question of the authenticity of the text of the letter was different from the question of the acceptability, or validity, of the related cult and its images: the latter could survive, notwithstanding the condemnation of the text as apocryphal.⁸³ Second, that the image censorship did not originate from a top-down will to control religious images on the part of the Inquisition or other central institutions of the Roman Church. Rather, in 1642 and in 1667/68 the censorship actions were provoked by local conflicts and by an inter-Sicilian competition regarding primacy on the island, combined with tension among local religious authorities. Third, that, once the question had reached the level of the Roman Holy Office, first, in 1598, as regards the status of the letter and, subsequently, in 1642 and in 1667/68, in relation to the painted images, the course of action decided in Rome signalled that, even if the cult, images, and festivities of the Madonna della Lettera were tolerated in Messina (as well as in other small villages in Sicily and Calabria) this may not be always valid for other places.⁸⁴ While the cult and its images were permitted locally, attempts to establish them outside Messina through solemn feasts and new works of art

(first in Rome and then in Malta) were quashed by the adversaries of the Messinese, who, in a sense, were able to exploit the Holy Office to their ends. However, as already mentioned, a translation in Mandarin Chinese of the *Lettera della Madonna*, that is a Chinese re-creation of the Messinese relic, was made in 1646–1648 by Metello Saccano. While we have no secure information on the actual diffusion of this text and cult in China, a small linen canvas with two painted inscriptions, respectively of the Chinese version of the letter and a title in Italian, was later preserved in a gilded frame among the relics of the cathedral of Messina: in the absence of the real relic, the version in Mandarin Chinese, now in the Museo Regionale and recently published and translated by Agostino Giuliano and Maurizio Scarpari,⁸⁵ once again reveals the global ambitions of a local cult, which persisted and endured not only in space but also in time.

The complex story of the creation, veneration, and contestation of images of the Madonna della Lettera outside Messina, which this article has started to unfold, might end with a further supposed cult image of the Madonna della Lettera, which appears in the final chapter set in 1901 of the novel *Il Gattopardo* by Giuseppe Tomasi di Lampedusa (1963). In the private chapel of their palace in Palermo, the old Signorine Salina venerate “una immagine miracolosa” representing for them the Madonna della Lettera; however, the religious authorities coming to inspect their chapel and relics following an order of Pius X are sure that the painting is nothing but a portrait of a girl with a letter of her lover.⁸⁶ The caustic attitude of Tomasi di

⁸³ On this point see Fantini (note 6), p. 524.

⁸⁴ The fact that “il culto locale entro certi limiti veniva permesso” was already noted by Fantini (*ibidem*). A broader study on the different normativities of local and ‘universal’ cult images in Catholicism is still lacking. As regards liturgy and historiography, see Simon Ditchfield, *Liturgy, Sanctity and History in Tridentine Italy: Pietro Maria Campi and the Preservation of the Particular*, London/New York 1995. The Madonna della Lettera was venerated in other towns in Sicily and in Calabria, for example in Palmi.

⁸⁵ Giuliano/Scarpari 2017 (note 6), who provide an accurate study of

the object, including a transcription of the relative entry from a 1728 *Inventario delle reliquie*: “in un quadro di legno con sua cornice dorata sotto un cristallo conservarsi la copia della sagra lettera scritta in lingua cinese mandata dal M. R. P. Metello Saccano della Compagnia di Gesù messinese che fu missionario nella Cina, e visse, e morì con fama di santità” (*ibidem*, p. 57, n. 47); and *idem* 2018 (note 6).

⁸⁶ Giuseppe Tomasi di Lampedusa, *Il Gattopardo*, Milan 24 1976, ch. VIII, pp. 171–178: 174–176 (from which the excerpt in the epigraphy of this article has been taken).

Lampedusa in this chapter can be taken as a sarcastic epilogue of the long story concerning not only the power of art and images in the establishment of this peculiar cult, but also the multi-layered levels of vigilance and contestations that such images underwent in different places over the course of their long history.

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Appendix

I. Inquisitorial documents regarding the prohibition of the feast of the Madonna della Lettera and the removal of the altarpiece dedicated to her in the church of San Francesco at Valletta, Malta, 1667/68.

Vatican City, ACDF, St. st. H 3 b, positio 21, fol. 681r–722v.

I.1. Guard sheet: eighteenth-century Latin summary of the positio.

1668, XXI.

Inquisitor Melitensis exponit in ecclesia Patrum Franciscanorum Melitae erectum fuisse altare dedicatum Beatae Virgini della Lettera, in quo in singulis annis celebratur festivitas, eo modo quo practicatur in Messaniae, die 2. Junii, verum cum ipse sciat Sacram Congregationem olim declarasse aprocrifam praefatam epistolam, petit quomodo se gerere debeat.

Decretum Sacrae Congregationis sub die 25. Julii 1668 statuens rescribendum, quod alias a Sacra Congregatione Sancti Offitii fuit declarata apocryfa epistola, quae supponitur scripta Messanensibus a Beata Virgine, qua propter impediatur, ne in dicta Civitate celebretur Festivitas huiusmodi epistolae nequaquam eidem sit dicatur aliquod altare.

Per Patrem Comisarium intimetur superioribus ecclesiae Messanensis de Urbe, ne in posterum celebretur in eadem ecclesiam dicta festivitas.

I.2. Fol. 681r–v: first summary of the positio based on five enclosed letters received from Malta and compiled for discussion in the session of 25 July 1668.

Malta.

Avisò Monsignor Inquisitore con sua de' 5 novembre 1667 che nella chiesa de' Padri Franciscani è stato fabricato un altare tre anni fa da persona pia dedicato alla Madonna della Lettera dove ogn'anno alli 2. di giugno si celebra la festa all'uso de' Messinesi e sapendo che altre volte la Sacra Congregazione haveva dichiarata apocryfa detta lettera, attendeva come doveva comportarsi tale introduzione.

17 Decembris. Gli fu risposto che dovesse far sapere a quel Monsignor Vescovo esser dalla Santa Sede stata dichiarata altre volte apocryfa la detta lettera e perciò esser mente della Sacra Congregazione che egli con la sua prudenza impedisse che colà non se ne celebri la festa, né ve ne sia altare, come si ha notizia essersi fabricato, e rispettivamente celebrata da 3 anni in qua.

Hora sopragionge lettera di Monsignor Vescovo delli 2. Giugno 1669 che alli 29 maggio il cancelliere del Santo Offitio d'ordine del signor Proinquisitore Bologna li lesse la detta lettera della Sacra Congregazione consegnatali da Monsignor Inquisitore prima della sua partenza, acciò ne facesse consape-

vole esso Monsignor Vescovo ad effetto che procurasse si levasse detto altare, et impedisse il celebrarne la festa et essendosi esibito pronto ad eseguire, ma per meglio farlo e poter dar sodisfattione in caso di repugnanza, ne domandò la copia al detto cancelliere ma li rispose esserli stato espressamente prohibito [fol. 681v] il dargliela, li replicò a reppresentare al detto signore Proinquisitore che gli ordini che si devono eseguire in publico non cadono sotto il silentio del Santo Offitio, massime quando quelli che devono obedire non dependono dalla giurisdizione ordinaria.

Il giorno seguente, incontratosi col detto Cancelliere credendo che li portasse la copia, gli disse che il Signor Proinquisitore era sempre d'opinione di non darla e che voleva sapere quello che sopra di ciò haveva da scrivere; li rispose Monsignore che haveva detto al Padre Guardiano che mettesse in esecuzione il contenuto della lettera e, se bene pareva duro l'haver aspettato a dar la notitia sudetta sì pochi giorni prima di detta festa che si celebra a 3. di giugno e dopo fatta la spesa da' divoti Messinesi, gli avisò subito, e levorno via il tutto con molto loro dispiacere per havere il Signor Proinquisitore a loro ed ad altri assicurato, che non haveva notitia alcuna di simile ordine. Fu levato il quadro dipinto con la Madonna in atto di consegnare agli Ambasciatori messinesi la detta lettera, e messovi un altro differente dalla medesima.

Per tanto supplica a dar ordine, che quando si mandano simili lettere per eseguirsi in publico, si dia copia all'Ordinario per servirse[ne] opportunamente e farsi obedire.

I.3. Fol. 682r–v and 691r–v: Angelo Ranuzzi, inquisitor of Malta, to Monsignor Casanate from Malta, 5 November 1667, with summary on the verso (691v) compiled in Rome at reception, followed by two other annotations from different hands.

[fol. 682r] Eminentissimo e Reverendissimo Signore e Patron Colendissimo.

Nella Chiesa de' Padri Francescani di questa città è stato sin da tre anni fabricato da una persona pia un altare dedicato alla Madonna della Lettera, dove ogn'anno a 2. di giugno si celebra la festa all'uso de' Messinesi. E perché so che la Sacra Congregatione altre volte ha dichiarato apocrifia detta lettera, ho creduto esser mio debito il dedurle a notitia l'introduzione di detta festa, e supplicare humilmente Vostra Eminenza se habbia da darmi ordine alcuno sopra di ciò. E le bacio con profondissimo inchino humilmente le sacre vesti. Malta 5 novembre 1667.

Di Vostra Eminenza Illustrissima Humilissimo et Obbligatissimo Servitore

Angelo Ranuzzi.

[fol. 691v]

[hand 1] Malta 5. novembris 1667

Monsignor Inquisitore. Dà conto che nella chiesa de' Padri Franciscani di quella città sia stato fabricato da persona pia tre anni sono un altare dedicato alla Madonna della Lettera, dove ogn'anno a dua di giugno si celebri la festa all'uso de' Messinesi, e sapendo che la Sacra Congregatione altre volte habbia dichiarata apocrifia detta lettera attende l'ordine di come havrà da comportarsi in tal introduzione.

[hand 2] La detta lettera della Madonna ai Messinesi è stata dichiarata apocrifia.

[hand 3] Die Mercuris 14 decembris 1667. Inquisitori cum episcopo Meliten. qui provideantur: littera fuit declarata apocrifia.⁸⁷

I.4. Fol. 683r–v: Bishop Lucas Bueno to the Congregation of the Holy Office, from Malta, 2 June 1668 (original subscription).

Eminentissimi e Reverendissimi Signori, Signori miei Patroni colendissimi.

Lunedì a 28 del decorso il cancelliere di questo Santo Offitio mi lesse d'ordine del Signor Proinquisitore Bologna una lettera di cotesta Sacra Congregatione scritta nel mese di novembre prossimo passato a Monsignor Inquisitore Ranucci, e mi disse che prima della partenza di esso monsignore, che fu alli 6. del medesimo, gliel'ha egli consegnata, acciò me ne facesse d'essa consapevole, per la quale viene ordinato mi dovesse avisare come si tiene notitia che da alcuni anni in qua s'era eretto qui un altare sotto titolo, o pretesto, d'un'asserta lettera della Madonna Santissima alli Messinesi scritta, e che di questa con sollemnità si celebrava la festa, ad effetto che io procurassi si levasse quello e che s'impedisse questa; et havendomi esibito pronto (come devo) d'eseguirlo, per meglio farlo, e poter dar sodisfattione in caso di repugnanza, massime ritrovandosi detto altare nella chiesa de' Padri minori conventuali, domandai d'essa copia al sudetto cancelliere, qual mi rispose esserli stato espressamente prescritto di non darmila, et all'hora li pregai dovesse da parte mia rappresentar' al sudetto Signor Proinquisitore che gl'ordini che si devono eseguir in publico non cadono sotto il secreto del Santo Offitio, particolarmente quando quelli che hanno d'obedire non dependono dalla giurisdizione ordinaria, ed incontrandomi il giorno seguente col medesimo cancelliere quando credevo mi portava la copia, mi disse che detto Signor Proinquisitore era sempre d'opinione di non darmila, e che voleva saper quello che sopra di ciò haveva da scrivere, et all'hora io li soggioksi che havea già

⁸⁷ Cf. ACDF, Decreta, 1667, 14. December 1667, fol. 273r–v: "Rescribatur Inquisitori, ut notificet Episcopo fuisse alias a Santa Sede declarata apocrifia Epi-

stola [...] et propterea sua prudentia impediatur, quod amplius illic non celebretur festivitas, neque existat altare, sic ut ad notitiam devenit fuisse fabricatum [...]"

fatto chiamare il Padre Guardiano di detto Convento, e dettoli che mettesse [fol. 683v] in esecuzione tutto quello che nella sudetta lettera si conteneva, quale, desiderando sapere perché e come gli ordinava io questo, li dissi quanto m'havea fatto vedere il sopradetto signor Proinquisitore e, se bene pareva duro l'haber aspettato a dar questa notitia si pochi giorni prima della festa, dovendosi celebrar dimane domenica 3. del corrente e dopo fatta per celebrarla da' divoti Messinesi la spesa, dede subito a questi l'avviso e lui, con prontissima obediienza, ha fatto levar via (sebene con loro pianto e dispiacere, non potendosi di nissun modo acquietare per haver il sopradetto Signor Proinquisitore a loro, et ad altri con bocca propria assicurato, che non haveva notitia alcuna di simil ordine) da detto altare il postovi già quadro della Madonna dipinta in atto di consegnare agl'ambasciatori messinesi la sopradetta asserta lettera e mesovi un altro differente della medesima.

Tutto ciò ch'in questo particolare ha seguito stimai bene il rappresentarlo all'Eccellenze Vostre acciò si come io qui con profonda humiltà supplico si degnino dar ordine, che quando si mandano lettere simili per eseguirsi il publico si dii copia all'ordinario acciò con essa in mano (se sarà necessario) si facci obedire da quelli, che credendo esser cosa propria ricalcitrano, il che mentre spero dalla benignità dell'Eccellenze Vostre resto per fine facendole humilissimo inchino. Malta 2. giugno 1668. Dell'Eccellenze Vostre Reverendissime Humilissimo e devotissimo servitore Fr. Lucas Archiepiscopo, Episcopo de Malta.

I.5. Fol. 684r-v: Lucas Bueno to Monsignor Casanate, from Malta, 2 June 1668.

Illustrissimo y Reverendissimo Señor

Recebirá Vuestra Señoria Illustrisima con la presente una que escrivo a essa Sacra Congregatione del Santo Officio dandole aviso, como aqui puntualmente se ha exequitado su orden acerca de non hacer fiesta, ni tener altar dedicado a la Madonna que los Messineses llaman de la Letera, pero non puedo dexar de lamentarme con Vuestra Señoria Illustrisima deste Signor Proinquisidor Bologna, que haviendome hecho ver por medio del Cancellero la carta a fin que pusiera en exequucion lo contenido en ella, recurriendo despues a el algunos que pensavan que esto provenia de mi poca devocion a saber si havia, como yo decia alguna prohibicion de dicha Sagrada Congregacion, se mostro muy ageno de esto, diciendo que d'ella no tenia ninguna noticia, graduandome por este camino por auctor voluntario de una cosa que (si bien es justissima) los Messineses que aqui habitan con otros muchos sus seguaces la publicavan fuera de razon. Io creo que este hombre nacio, o se engendro debaxo de algun planeta cabilloso, y amigo de dissensiones, y que el las fomentara en qualquiere parte que se hallara para verificar el justo concepto que d'el

tenia Vuestra Señoria Illustrisima cuya Illustrisima y Reverendissima persona guarde Dios muchos años.

De Malta, Junio 2 de 1668

Cappellan de Vuestra Señoria Illustrisima

Que su mano besa

Fray Lucas Archiepiscopo, episcopo de Malta.

I.6. Fol. 685r-v: Pro-inquisitor Alessandro Bologna to Monsignor Casanate, from Malta, 30 May 1668. Copy.

Illustrissimo e Reverendissimo Signor Patron Colendissimo

Essendosi avvicinata la festività che nella Chiesa di Minori Conventuali di questa città Valletta suole celebrarsi da tre anni in qua ho fatto vedere a Monsignor Vescovo la lettera della Sacra Congregatione perché dasse gl'opportuni rimedii secondo il tenore di detta lettera, della quale havendo voluto copia autentica prima d'eseguire cosa alcuna, gl'ho fatto intendere che non si danno fuori copie delle lettere della Sacra Congregatione che a lui per esser vescovo gli si è mostrata. Ma, si bene in questo negotio io mi sia deportato con ogni segretezza, egli non di meno palesò l'ordine, in modo che li Messinesi che qui si trovano sono venuti a sapere se fosse vero che Monsignor Vescovo havea havuto dal Santo Offitio tal'ordine e come che la Sacra Congregatione per detta lettera ha ordinato a Monsignor Vescovo, e si ad altri, che dasse gl'ordini, e provedesse che detta festività non fosse più celebrata, ho però risposto che a Mons. Vescovo, e non al santo Offitio, appartenea il negotio di che si tratta e del quale io non havea altra scienza che quella essi mi davano; ciò io feci per il secreto del santo Offitio e per non addossare al Santo Offitio lo sdegno del Gran Maestro, che intendo si risente dell'[fol. 685v]ordine sudetto perché ha contribuito nella spesa dell'altare e li giurati di Messina li resero gratie per haver fatto erigere detto altare, io ne do parte a Vostra Signoria Illustrissima in adempimento delle mie obbligazioni supplicandola compatirmi, mentre io per fine humilissimamente la riverisca, e bagio devotissimamente le mani. Malta, 30 Maggio 1668.

Di Vostra Illustrissima Reverendissima.

I.7. Fol. 686r: the same to Cardinal Barberini, from Malta, 3 June 1668.

Eminentissimo e Reverendissimo signor Patron Colendissimo

Havendo fatto vedere a Monsignor Vescovo la lettera dell'Eminenze Vostre in data delli 17. dicembre passato conforme m'havea incaricato di dover fare Monsignor Ranuzzi prima che partisse acciò che Monsignor Vescovo con la sua prudenza provedesse che l'altare eretto ultimamente nella Chiesa di Minori Conventuali di San Francesco sotto titolo della Madonna della Lettera

si rimovesse e la sua festività non si celebrasse, benché prima di eseguire avesse voluto la copia di detta lettera, non di meno fattoli intendere che non si danno fuori copie di lettere della Sacra Congregazione che per esser vescovo se li era mostrata, restò di dover dare gl'ordini opportuni sì come intendo che gl'ha dati; vero è che eseguendo, invece di dirlo che proibiva la festività suddetta perché era stata dalla Santa Sede Apostolica dichiarata apocrifa detta lettera, disse che havea fatto tal prohibitione per ordine di questo Santo Offitio, onde sono venuti qui li Messinesi che si trovano in quest'isola per sapere se ciò fosse vero; e per sfuggir lo sdegno del Signor Gran Maestro che ha contribuito nella spesa di detto altare, et è protettore, e riportò dalli giurati di Messina rendimento di grattie, mi è parso di dire che a Monsignor Vescovo appartenea il provvedere circa le festività che devono celebrarsi, conformandomi con quello l'Eminenze Vostre hanno scritto senza palesarlo, né dir altro; se altrimenti comandano starò aspettando i loro cenni e fra tanto riverente all'Eminenze Vostre porto questa notizia con farli humilmente riverenza. Malta, 3 giugno 1668. Humilissimo e devotissimo servitore. Alessandro Bologna.

I.8. Fol. 692v: last folio of the first file prepared for the session of 25 July 1668, containing the transcription of the decisions (corresponding to ACDF, Decreta, 1668, I, 25 July, fol. 269r-v)

Die 25. Julii 1668: Rescribatur Episcopo Melit. quod alias a Sacra Congregatione Sancti Officii fuit declarata apocrifa Epistola, quae supponitur scripta Messanensibus a Beatissima Virgine: quapropter impediatur ne in dicta civitate celebretur festivitas huiusmodi epistolae neque eidem sit dicatum aliquod altare. Proinquisitori rescribatur Sacrae Congregationis non placuisse quin dederit copiam dictae epistolae episcopo et aliis etc.

Per Patrem Commissarium intimetur superioribus Ecclesiae Messanensis de Urbe ne in posterum celebretur in eadem ecclesia dicta Festivitas.

Die 30 eiusdem Reverendissimus Pater Comisarius Sancti Officii avertito D. Salvatori de Oddis, Camerlengo Ecclesiae Beatae Mariae Constantinopolis de Urbe, intimavit et notificavit supradictum decretum quibus auditis respondit nunquam fuisse celebratam in dicta Ecclesia talem festivitatem, nec permittet quod celebretur in posterum, presentibus Isidoro Pantanello Rheatin, et Generoso Meliorio Tiburtinus testibus etc.

I.9. Fol. 717r-v: second summary prepared for the session of 31 October 1668, following the reception of new documents from Malta.

Malta

La Sacra Congregazione sotto li 30 di luglio 1598 dichiarò che la pretesa lettera della Beata Vergine scritta a' Messinesi è

apocrifa, e di gennaio 1606 ne proibì l'impressione et ordinò che se ne raccogliessero gli esemplari stampati.

Di luglio pros(simo passa)to si scrisse a Monsignor Vescovo di Malta che era stata dichiarata apocrifa dalla Sacra Congregazione e gli ordinò che impedisse il celebrare la festa in detta città, e che non se gli dedicasse alcun altare.

Hora i Cavalieri Messinesi Gerosolimitani con un prolioso memoriale espongono che con gran rammarico udirono la prohibitione di detta festa in Malta e si levasse dalla Cappella il quadro della Beata Vergine e perché tal ordine è proceduto inaudita parte da falsa informatione degli emoli contrarii alla loro patria dando alla festa titolo di novità contraria a' riti e usanze di Santa Chiesa, espongono che è stato in uso in Malta di sempre celebrarla a 3. di giugno dalle origini crescendo in Messina il culto e la celebrità.

Per autenticar l'usanza di tal festa con dimostrazione di divotione dicono che molti anni fa fu confermata dalla Sede Apostolica con memoriale presentato [fol. 717v] sotto nome della Città di Messina acciò la festa si facesse celebre [sic] il detto giorno e la Congregazione de' Riti fece provvista *celebretur die non impedita festo novem lectionum* et in questo secolo tutti i sommi pontefici han concesso indulgenze alla Cappella della Madonna con espressione, sotto titolo della lettera, e così si è celebrata senza scostarse punto dall'usanze comunissime di Sancta Chiesa.

Il quadro che si espone è la Madonna con la lettera in mano, con l'iscrizione *Santa Maria della lettera* e così da' sommi pontefici è stata lodata e confermata nelle suddette indulgenze concesseli.

Quanto al celebrar la messa è la commune della Madonna senza mutatione alcuna, quando non vi sia impedimento d'altra festa.

L'officio di detto giorno è l'istesso di Sancta Maria ad Nives conceduto dalla Sacra Congregazione de' Riti.

Si fa anco la comunione di tutti i cittadini in Malta et in Messina che ascendono a 100.000 coi forastieri che vi concorrono, e concludono che riuscendo di tanto beneficio etc. suppliscano a voler rivocare l'ordine della prohibitione.

I.10. Fol. 718r-721v: copy of the memoriale sent from the Messinese knights in Malta to Pope Clement IX (undated).

Beatissimo Padre

I cavalieri Messinesi della Santa Religione Gerosolimitana umilissimi oratori della Santità Vostra espongono umilmente a Vostra Santità ch'essendo solita celebrarsi in Malta ogn'anno da quei Cavalieri Messinesi che ivi si trovano la festa della Madonna sotto titolo *della lettera* all'uso della loro Patria, con rammarico incredibile di tutti, giunse in quest'anno ordine dalla Santa Congregazione del Santo Officio che una tal solennità si proibisse e si togliesse dalla cappella il quadro della Beatissima Vergine; onde con sentimento universale fu forza che si lascias-

se di celebrare la festa che sempre è stata di grandissimo profitto spirituale di quelle anime.

E perché, Beato Padre, il predetto ordine della Santa Congregazione è proceduto inaudita parte da falsa e surrettizia informazione degli emoli e contrarii alla lor patria dando alla festa titolo di novità pernicioso e contraria ai riti et alle usanze della Santa Chiesa, espongono umilmente alla Santità Vostra essere stato sempre uso in Malta di celebrarla i Cavalieri Messinesi a 3. di giugno con qualche dimostrazione d'ossequio e di divozione; e da molti anni in qua, crescendo in Messina il culto e la celebrità, si è anche in Malta avanzata a qualche grado di apparente dimostrazione quella che sempre più o manco secondo la possibilità in qualche modo s'è festegiata, in riguardo del beneficio di particular protezione ricevuto dalla Beatissima Vergine nel giorno predetto; essendo stata una tal lodevolissima usanza e commendata e promossa e confermata dalla Sede Apostolica, la quale molti e molti anni fa, nel memoriale presentato in nome della Città di Messina, in cui si supplicava [fol. 718v] che la festa si potesse celebrare in ogni giorno nel quale cadesse per via della Sacra Congregazione dei Riti fece provvista *celebretur die non impedita festi novem lectionum* e in questo secolo tutti i predecessori della Santità Vostra hanno animato i fedeli ad una tal celebrità con la concessione delle Sante Indulgenze alla Cappella della Madonna soggiogendovi espressamente *sotto titolo della lettera* delle quali sta godendo al presente la loro patria Messina.

Quanto poi al rito di celebrarla, che o Messina o i Cavalieri Messinesi in Malta si discostino punto dalle usanze comunissime della Santa Chiesa è falsissimo presupposto: s'espone alle volte il quadro della Madonna con una lettera in mano e con l'iscrizione *Santa Maria della Lettera* per eccitare con una simil pittura la memoria del beneficio ricevuto; ma si sogliono ancora dalla sede apostolica permettere alla divozione delle chiese particolari le pitture della Madonna con una scala in mano, o con una bandiera, sopra una cassa, sopra un pilastro, e sotto un arco in memoria del beneficio che pensano avere dalla Beatissima Vergine ricevuto, senza che in questo pretenda mai la Sede Apostolica giungere autorità alle cose dubie. Et una tale usanza di titolo e di pittura è stata lodata e confermata dai predecessori della Santità Vostra nelle sopradette indulgenze ch'esprimono concedersi alla Cappella della Madonna sotto questo titolo particolare della lettera come s'è detto, al pari delle concesse alla divozione dell'altre chiese particolari et alle cappelle della Madonna dell'Arco, della Scala, della Vittoria etc.

Quanto al rito di celebrar la messa, questa è senza mutazione di sorte alcuna la messa comune della Madonna con la orazione commune, e la messa della Madonna si dice solamente in giorno che sia di feria semplice senza concorso o di altro santo o di ottava perché in un tal concorso la messa si dice della festa [fol. 721r] che corre e non della Madonna: uso che, se si concede in tutte le ferie dell'anno ad ogni semplice sacerdote, si può concedere agli esponenti in una feria dell'anno quando non vi sia impedimento d'altra festa.

L'ufficio parimente che in quel giorno si recita è quell'istesso di Santa Maria ad Nives senza nessuna alterazione e con l'orazione commune, come anche le lezioni del secondo notturno son de' communi. E tanto la messa in quel giorno, quanto l'ufficio son stati conceduti dalla Sede Apostolica nell'accennata provvista della Sacra Congregazione dei Riti *celebretur die non impedita festo novem lectionum*.

Per ultimo s'aggiunge che, accompagnandosi con l'apparato esterno anche l'interno dell'anime con la santa comunione di tutti i cittadini tanto in Malta quanto in Messina dove le particule consumate in quel giorno ascendono a più di centomila coi forastieri che vi concorrono, pare che una tal festa venga accompagnata da tanto profitto dell'anime, che meriti dalla Sede Apostolica d'essere ingrandita delle sue grazie, come è stata per lo passato. Mentre dunque nella santissima mente della Santità Vostra non può una tale antica usanza e si lodevole apparire una novità pernicioso e contraria ai riti et alle usanze della Santa Chiesa, havendo per surrettizio e proceduto da falsa informazione il decreto della Sacra Congregazione, supplicano umilissimamente Vostra Santità tanto inclinata a promuovere la pietà dei fedeli, a volere ordinare che s'abolisca; oppure essendo l'ordine uscito inaudita parte e senza piena informazione, si ordini che i ministri della Sede Apostolica residenti in Malta o in Messina informino, perché su l'informazione possa la Sacra Congregazione pigliare quello spediente che più stimerà convenevole. Che il tutto etc.

I.11. Fol. 719r: note included in the letter above with list of indulgences granted to the Madonna della Lettera in various places.

Paolo V concede l'Indulgenza alla Chiesa di Messina a chi visita il giorno solenne della festa delli 3. di giugno la Cappella della Madonna sotto titolo *della lettera*. Lo dice il Padre Lezzana e si riferisce in questo libro [Arganzano, note 34], foglio 110.

Urbano VIII nel 1642 concede nell'istessa forma, fol. III.

Urbano VIII nel 1642 concede l'Indulgenza d'un anno a Santa Maria di Costantinopoli nella festa della Madonna sotto titolo *della lettera*, fol. 145.

Urbano VIII concede all'istessa chiesa di Santa Maria di Costantinopoli l'indulgenza per 7 anni sotto titolo *della lettera*, fol. 146.

Nel 1643 e nel 1644 si fa la festa in Santa Maria Maggiore, fol. 147.

Innocenzo X concede l'Indulgenza alla Congregazione o Confraternita della lettera in Messina sotto titolo *della lettera*, fol. 134.

Alessandro VII l'ha concesso due volte sotto titolo della lettera. Si può circa questo interrogare il Marchese don Cesare Colonna allora residente di Messina.

I.12. Fol. 722v: last folio of the second file with transcript of decisions taken on 31 October 1668.

[hand 1] Die 31 octobris 1668. Audiantur partes, et exhibeant dictum assertum decretum Sacrae Congregationis Rituum et indulgentias originales

[hand 2] Die mercurii 14 octobris 1668

[hand 3] Ad Sacram Congregationem Rituum cum decretis alias emanatis per Sanctum Offitium et scripture tradantur eminentissimo Celsio [one of the Cardinal Inquisitors]

[hand 4: Cornelio Virgili] Io Cornelio Virgilio ho ricevuto il libro sopra *La lettera di Messina*, stampato l'anno 1659.

II. Inquisitorial documents regarding the feast of the Madonna della Lettera held at the church of Santa Maria in Costantinopoli in Rome and the confiscation and censorship of the altarpiece dedicated to her, 1642/43.

ACDF, Censura Librorum, 1626–1640 (21), fol. 592–610.

File with ancient numbering (fol. 381–398) and ancient title (“Messan. 1630”). The 1642/43 papers are attached to a file prepared in 1630, perhaps by Giovanni Antonio Thomatius, notary of the Inquisition (whose signature appears on the cover), concerning censorship of the 1629 edition of Melchior Inchofer, S.J., *Epistolae B. Virginis Mariae ad Messanenses veritas vindicata, ac plurimis gravissimorum scriptorum testimoniis, et rationibus erudite illustrata*.

III.1. Fol. 602r–v and 605r: anonymous denunciation to the Sant’Uffizio, received on 17 June 1642 (see no. II.2).

Eminentissimi e Reverendissimi Signori

Nella chiesa della Madonna di Costantinopoli di Roma alli 3. del presente mese di giugno li messinesi celebrorno la festa della Lettera della Madonna con bello apparato et invito e doi vespri con la messa in musica. Poi, havendo fatto comparire un quadro novo con la Madonna e detta lettera in mano, lo piantorno nella chiesa detta e vogliono che stia sempre, e dicono volere continuare a fare detta festa, e spingono ad introdurre l’adoratione di detta lettera.

Dal che ne sono nati scandali grandi perché molti sanno che la Sacra Congregatione del Santo Offitio di Roma l’ha dichiarata apocrifia e la Sacra Congregatione dello Indice ha proibito li libri che trattano asseverantemente e dicono essere vera detta lettera. E cossi l’hanno pubblicato a buona parte del popolo, il quale stupisce di tal festa, e quadro [fol. 602v] esposto in chiesa et invito che

fanno ad adorarlo, per gabbare li catolici e vincere de fatto quello che non hanno potuto difendere in iure e disprezzare li decreti del Santo Offitio e congregationi di Cardinali, et in faccia del Papa e di detti tribunali canonizare tal lettera con festa publica, e gridano che l’hanno fatto [sic] dichiarare per vera, e perciò hanno fatto tutta questa solennità.

Si supplica all’Eminenze Vostre a riparare a detti inconvenienti di introdurre novi culti et illeciti e contro le determinationi di questa Sacra Congregatione, e far levare il quadro, e proibire a questa chiesa tal festa ne il tutto perché si introdurrà scisma di adoratione e nasceranno maggiori scandali. 1642.

[fol. 605r] La medesima festa fanno da molti anni in Messina, doppo che hanno saputo li decreti contrarii et anco ivi diventa favola e riso detta festa perciò rimediino: anzi loro dicono che hanno fatto in Roma detta festa perché potessero persuadere al popolo in quella città che si deve fare, mentre in Roma si contentano che si facci.

III.2. Fol. 605v: transcript of reception of denunciation; transcript of decreto (corresponding to ACDF, *Decreta*, 1642, 25 June, fol. 90r–v); report of execution of decree.

[hand 1] Roma. De incerto ricevuto a 17 di giugno 1642.

[contents of anonymous denunciation reported above summarized]

[hand 2] Fiat diligentia et prohibeatur. [follows difficult reading]

[hand 3] 25. junii 1642 fiat diligentia et prohibeatur.⁸⁸

[hand 4] Die dominico 6. julii 1642

In excutionem antescrpti decreti, Dominus Reverendus Pater Johannis Baptista a Martinengo Sacrae Romanae et Universalis Inquisitionis Commissarius Generalis una mecum etc se contulit ad Ecclesiam Sanctae Mariae Constantinopolis de Urbe et in ipsa a cornu evangelii Altaris Maioris invenit parieti affixam imaginem Beatae Virginis Mariae in tabulis depictam cum Epistola ut pretenditur ab ipsa Messanensibus scriptam, quare mandavit illam inde amoveri et ad Sanctum Officium afferri, cum factis omnibus diligentibus non potuerit penes custodes ipsius Ecclesiae reperiri locus aptus ad imaginem ipsam custodiendam ne publice pateret et eo magis quia habito colloquio cum Reverendo Domino Jacobo Colodio Lucente dictae Ecclesiae sacrista intellexit in expositione eiusdem imaginis fuisse factas omnes solemnitates contentas in retroscripto memoriali actum Romae in Ecclesia prefata presentibus fratre Dominico de Brixia converso ordinis Predicatorum et Augustino Cacciaguerra Alexandrino huius Sancti Offitii mandatario testibus.

⁸⁸ Cf. ACDF, *Decreta*, 1642, 25 June 1642, fol. 90v–r: “Lectis literis incertis auctoribus datis sine die 1642 et sine loco, quibus significat in ecclesia Sanctae Mariae Constantinopolis Urbis die 3. presentis mensis junii Mes-

sanenses celebrasse festum literarum apocrifarum eiusdem Beatae Virginis scriptarum ad Messanensibus. Decretum ut fiat diligentia pro veritate, et prohibeatur”.

II.3. Fol. 603r–604v: copy of memoriale written by Benedetto Salvago to the cardinals, enclosed by the office in the previous denunciation, with transcription (fol. 604v) of decreto (corresponding to ACDF, Decreta, 1642, 9 July, fol. 98v).

Eminentissimi e Reverendissimi Signori

Don Benedetto Salvago residente della città di Messina humilmente espone all'Eminenze Vostre, che havendo voluto per sua particolar divotione ritrovandosi qui in Roma far la festa della Madonna che sempre s'ha soluto fare in Messina procurò d'impetrarsi il breve della indulgenza per detta festa, che havendosi fatta consideratione gli fu concesso; e l'esponente bona fede fece la festa. Hora havendo inteso che il commissario del Santo Offitio per ordine della Congregatione fece levare dalla chiesa il suo quadro che l'esponente non s'havea ancora ripigliato, dice all'Eccellenze Vostre ch'esso è figlio di obbedienza e che non farà mai festa mentre non è gusto della Congregatione e se restano servite potranno ordinare che se li restituisca il suo quadro et ita supplicat quam Deus etc.

[fol. 604v]

[hand 1] [names of recipients and sender of letter].

[hand 2] 9. Julii 1642. Dictam imaginem restitui deletis dispositione manus et litterarum eiusdem imaginis Beatae Virginis nec non literis eiusdem, moneri sacristam Ecclesiae Sanctae Mariae Constantinopolis Urbis, nec non significari Secretariae Brevium, ne in futurum concedantur Indulgentiae super hoc particulari.⁸⁹

II.4. Fol. 606r–607v: copy of second memoriale from Benedetto Salvago, with annotation from office on the back (fol. 607v).

Eminentissimi et Reverendissimi

Don Benedetto Salvago Residente di Messina humilmente espone alle Eccellenze Vostre che havendo esso, con la dovuta licenza et indulgentia plenaria che haveva ottenuto, per una volta tanto, fatto in Roma nella Chiesa Nationale di Santa Maria di Costantinopoli la festa della Madonna della Lettera che per immemorabili tempi et antiquissima traditione si suole celebrare in Messina, non solo con straordinaria magnificentia ma con ammirabil devotione e comunione universale de' populi. Però essendo stato o da emoli d'esso o della sua città anteposto che avesse proceduto senza la dovuta licenza

⁸⁹ Cf. ACDF, Decreta, 1642, 9 July, fol. 98v: "Facta relatione quod iuxta ordinem huius Sacrae Congregationis fuit amota [sic] Imago Beatae Virginis cum Epistola, ut praetenditur, ab eadem Virgine Messanensibus scripta, ab Ecclesia Sanctae Mariae Constantinopolis Urbis, Eminentissimi Domini mandarunt dictam imaginem restitui deletis dispositione manus eiusdem Beatae Virginis, necnon literis eiusdem; moneri sacristam dictae Ecclesiae, ne permittat dictam Imaginem cum praefatis literis imprimi in dicta Ecclesia;

la Sacra Congregazione, per il santo zelo che tiene, fece qualche dimostrazione, e se bene havendo esso chiarito la sua innocenza e sincerità, si determinò che li fosse restituito il quadro. Nondimeno, essendo stato interpretato in Sicilia il successo sinistramente contra di esso oratore, havendo anco la città di Palermo scritto lettere di condoglienza al Senato di Messina, ne sono seguiti danni notabili alla riputatione et interesse di esso esponente. Perciò humilmente supplica l'Eccellenze Vostre si degnino farli concedere una fede o dichiarare secondo è già stata l'intentione della Sacra Congregatione che per quel ch'è seguito in Roma non hann'inteso pregiudicare la pietà, festa et traditione antiquissima de' Messinesi: et ita supplicat quam deus etc.

[fol. 607v]

[hand 1] Agli Eminentissimi e Reverendissimi Signori Cardinali della Sacra Congregation del Sancto Officio. Memoriale D. Benedetto Salvago Residente di Messina.

[hand 2] [summary of Salvago's letter compiled by the office at reception]

[hand 3] 17 feb. 1643: non esse rescribendum.

II.5. Fol. 608r–609v: letter from "the greatest part of the Sicilians" in Rome to the cardinals, with transcription of decreto (corresponding to ACDF, Decreta, 1643, 27 May, fol. 79r).⁹⁰

Eminentissimi e Reverendissimi SS.ri

A 3. di giugno l'anno passato fecero li Messinesi la festa nella chiesa della Madonna di Constantinopoli della Lettera di Maria Vergine scritta a loro et esposero un quadro con quell'istoria, ma perch'era apocrifa partorì scandalo et fu stimata temerità di quelli fare tal festa in faccia del Papa et della Sede Apostolica che l'haveva dichiarata apocrifa. Fu da questa Sacra Congregatione fatto levare il quadro sudetto e risoluto che non si facesse più tal festa, né se le concedessero l'indulgentiae.

S'intende ch'habbino supplicato li Messinesi all'Eminenze Vostre acciò le dasseto licenza di potere fare detta festa e non havendo avuto l'intento vogliono adesso farla non obstante l'ordine in contrario e la dissensione dell'altri nazionali di Sicilia, che non la vogliono permettere nella chiesa loro.

Pensano fare parare la chiesa quel giorno sotto altro pretesto et fare invito di messe etc. onde è necessario per non nascere maggiore scandalo in cosa tanto importante che si dii ordine

nec non significari Secretariae Brevium, ne in futurum concedantur Indulgentiae super hoc particulari."

⁹⁰ Cf. ACDF, Decreta, 1643, 27 May, fol. 79r: "Lecto memoriale exhibito nomine maioris partis Nationalium Siciliae, quo exponitur Messan. velle die 3. Junii celebrare in Urbe festum litterarum B. Virginis eisdem Messanensibus scriptarum, prohibitum ab hac Sacra Congregatione anno superiori, Eminentissimi etc. mandarunt eis prohiberi ne celebrent dictam festivitatem appellatam della Lettera".

con precetto penale alli guardiani e sagristani della chiesa che in quel giorno delli 3. di giugno non mettano apparati in chiesa, né numero maggiori di lumi, né altro segno di straordinario culto. Et humilmente le fanno riverenza. La maggiore parte de' Nationali di Sicilia.

[fol. 609v]

[hand 1] 27 maij 1643: Prohibeatur Messanensibus ne celebrentur festum appellatum della lettera

[hand 2] Prohibeatur ne celebrentur festivitatem Beatae Virginis appellatam 'della lettera'

[hand 3] Super literam Beatae Virginis Mariae

III. Description of the altarpiece which was displayed in Santa Maria in Costantinopoli in 1642/43, from Domenico Arganzio, Pompe festive celebrate dalla nobile ed esemplare Città di Messina nell'anno 1659 per la solennità della Sagratissima Lettera, Messina 1659, pp. 145f.

Impetrata dunque da' Superiori una tal licenza, s'ornò sontuosamente la Chiesa con ricchi apparati <d>i bei ricami, e s'espose su 'l maggiore degli Altari la Venerabile Imagine di Nostra Signora della Lettera, che assisa in candida nube, era corteggiata da un choro d'angeli, e faceva segno di benedire colla destra la città di Messina, ivi di sotto al naturale dipinta, tenendo colla sinistra l'invoglio sagro, ove legeansi registrati i caratteri della gloriosissima lettera; si miravano intorno intorno effigiati i Santi Tutelari di Messina, che genuflessi dinanzi al suo cospetto additandole con gentil maniera la sua amata Città, pareva la supplicassero a confermar sopra di lei le benedizioni della sua perpetua, ed inviolabile protezione: ottenea tra questi il luogo più debole il Dottor delle genti Paolo, che fu il primo Maestro della fede Messinese, e cagion principale, perché da questa città si godesse il prezioso tesoro della sagrosanta Pistola; eravi nella sinistra San Leone Papa per la dignità Ponteficale il secondo; appresso a questi sant'Eleuterio Vescovo di Messina, i Santi Martiri Vittore, Ampelo, Caio, Placido e Compagni; San Bartolomeo Abate del gran Monistero del Santo Salvatore de' Reverendi Padri Basiliiani, e Sant'Alberto Confessore dell'Ordine de' Reverendi Padri Carmelitani, onde per espressione del sudetto, un Angelo che posto sotto la nube la quale serviva da trono alla protettrice regina, esprimea in bel scartoccio il seguente detto: IN PLENITUDINE SANCTORUM.

Abbreviations

ACDF Archivio della Congregazione
per la Dottrina della Fede, Vatican City

Abstract

On the basis of previously unpublished inquisitorial documents, this article reconstructs and discusses the genesis, iconography, functions, and removal of two altarpieces dedicated to the Messinese Madonna della Lettera, respectively in Rome (1642) and in Malta (1668). While the first painting is lost at present, it is possible to identify the latter with the *Madonna della Lettera* attributed to Mattia Preti and now preserved in the Museo Regionale Interdisciplinare di Messina. The essay demonstrates that this painting – whose provenance and date were previously unknown – was executed in 1664 for an altar in the church of Saint Francis in Valletta, which was dismantled in 1668. In both instances, the contestation and censorship of the altarpieces arose as a reaction to the multi-directional Messinese attempts to spread their hometown cult through the creation of new images that prominently visualized the letter, which is a lost and controversial contact relic. The combined examination of these two new cases offers material for a discussion of the normative role of painting and the visual arts in establishing a local cult in distant places – from Messina to Rome, Malta, and as far as China.

Photo Credits

Museo Regionale Interdisciplinare di Messina (su concessione della Regione Siciliana, Assessorato dei Beni Culturali e della Identità siciliana – Dipartimento dei Beni Culturali e della Identità siciliana – divieto di ulteriori riproduzioni o duplicazioni): Figs. 1, 5, 7, 10, 11, 13. – From Mellusi (note 5): Fig. 2. – Public domain: Figs. 3, 8. – From Per il Cinquecento religioso italiano (note 6): Fig. 4. – Mauro Coen, Rome: Fig. 6. – Archivio Alessandro Mancuso, Messina: Fig. 9. – DeA Picture Library, licensed by Alinari: Fig. 12. – From Spike (note 1): Fig. 14.

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Agostino Scilla, *La vana speculazione disingannata dal senso*, Napoli 1670, tav. XXII
Bayerische Staatsbibliothek München, Res/4 Lith. 165, urn:nbn:de:hbz:5:1-274-Abb-I-p-274-fig-1

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