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Holy ambassadors and false Epistles. From Savonarola's Florence to Messina?*

1. Introduction

«A forgery may speak the truth [...]. But to establish the fact of forgery is not enough. It is further necessary to discover its motivations»¹. Thus Marc Bloch invites the aspiring historian who is approaching the study of a forgery to search for the reasons behind its creation.

A genre of historical forgery which was profoundly widespread throughout the ages, but very important in the Middle Ages and still in the Modern Age, was the "missives", some of which related to the sphere of sacred. One need only think of the wide circulation, from the first centuries of the Christian Era, that the apocryphal letter written by Jesus to Abgar of Edessa had, in the East and West². Similarly, sacred missives were attributed to the Mother of God. Under the heading 'Marie' in the *Dictionnaire des Apocryphes* there are four instances in which the Virgin is said to have written to the faithfuls³.

In two cases, the missives date back to the time of the Virgin's life, while two others are messages sent from heaven. In the latter type, however, the *Dictionnaire* only includes the epistle to Friar Antonino of Villabasilica, who is said to have received it directly «ex caelo empyreo in die aeternitatis»⁴. Regarding the letters

* This paper constitutes the English translation of *Sacre ambascerie e false lettere. Dalla Firenze di Savonarola a Messina?* in GIAMPAOLO CHILLÈ, ROSARIA STRACUZZI (eds.), *L'idomito desio. Scritti dedicati a Federico Martino*, Società Messinese di Storia Patria, Messina 2023, pp. 71-83.

¹ MARC BLOCH, *The historian's craft*, Manchester, Manchester University Press, 1992, pp. 76-77.

² On this topic, see ERNST VON DOBSCHÜTZ, *Christusbilder: Untersuchungen zur christlichen Legend*, Leipzig, J.C. Hinrichs'sche Buchhandlung, 1899, pp. 102-196; JUDAH B. SEGAL, *Edessa: "The Blessed City"*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1970, pp. 62-82; pp. 218; CLAUDIA RAPP, *Holy Texts, Holy Men, and Holy Scribes: Aspects of Scriptural Holiness in Late Antiquity*, in *The Early Christian Book*, ed. by William E. Klingshirn, Linda Safran, Washington D.C., The Catholic University of America Press, 2007, pp. 218-219; PAOLO PRETO, *Falsi e falsari nella Storia. Dal mondo antico a oggi*, ed. by Walter Panciera, Andrea Savio, Roma, Viella, 2020, p. 31 and p. 65.

³ JACQUES-PAUL MIGNE, *Dictionnaire des Apocryphes, ou Collection de tous les livres Apocryphes relatifs a l'Ancien et au Nouveau Testament*, Paris, J.-P. Migne Editeur aux ateliers Catholiques, 1858, vol. II, pp. 499-504.

⁴ Ivi, pp. 502-504.

written during Virgin's earthly existence, the work mentions her reply to the Antiochian patriarch Ignatius and the epistle addressed to the city of Messina. At the same time, it succinctly mentions a text sent by the Mother of God to the Florentines⁵. The genesis of this last writing can be traced back to the preaching and political-religious project of Friar Girolamo Savonarola. Some parallels between the events of the letter to the Florentines and the one to the Messina are interesting, allowing us to propose some working hypotheses.

2. The Compendio di Revelazione: Savonarola, a Florentine Ambassador to the Virgin

On 23 May 1498, in Piazza della Signoria in Florence, the human story of an ascetic friar who, since 1494, had governed the fortunes of the city, was consummated along with his mortal remains. Friar Girolamo's adventure took place since June 1490, when, summoned by Lorenzo the Magnificent, he had come back to the convent of Saint Marco. Soon, however, his prophetic and apocalyptic homilies brought him into conflict with the city lord, whose death in 1492 opened the way for the Dominican's triumph. In 1494, the "descent" into Italy of Charles VIII, identified by Friar Girolamo as the «new Cyrus», led to the expulsion of the Medici family from Florence and the start of a republican government, of which the religious man became the uncontested arbiter. One element, in particular, characterised the whole story: the use of prophecy. A powerful and dangerous instrument, which he addressed to the inhabitants of a city for which prophesied – after having 'purified' it of vice and sin – the role of "holy" city, a new Jerusalem, which would lead the *renovatio* of Christendom. Soon, however, the interests of Florentine merchants residing in Rome, the internal attacks of the factions of the supporters of an aristocratic Republic (the *Arrabbiati*) and the supporters of the Medici family's return (the *Palleschi*) combined with the very harsh reaction of Alexander VI who, publicly attacked by the friar, excommunicated him in May 1497 and, the following year, managed to have him burnt as a heretic⁶.

⁵ Ivi, pp. 499-504.

⁶ For interesting considerations on Savonarola's last earthly years, see. ADRIANO PROSPERI, *1498. Savonarola dal falò delle vanità al rogo*, in Id., *Eresia*, Macerata, Quodlibet, 2021, pp. 111-137. Regarding the endless historiographic production on the Ferrara's friar, among others, see PASQUALE VILLARI, *La storia di Gerolamo Savonarola e de' suoi tempi narrata con l'ajuto di nuovi documenti*, 2 voll., Firenze, Le Monnier, 1859-1861; GIUSEPPE SCHNITZER, *Savonarola*, 2 voll., Milano, S.A. Fratelli Treves Editori, 1931; DONALD WEINSTEIN, *Savonarola and Florence. Prophecy and Patriotism in the Renaissance*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1970; ROBERTO RIDOLFI, *Vita di Girolamo Savonarola*, Firenze, Sansoni, 1974; TITO SANTE CENTI, *Girolamo Savonarola il frate che sconvolse Firenze*, Roma, Città Nuova Editrice, 1988; LORENZO POLIZZOTTO, *The Elect Nation. The Savonarolan Movement in Florence, 1494-1545*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1994; LORENZO TANZINI, *Dieci anni di studi savonaroliani. Tra celebrazione e ricerca*, «Archivio

The main argument of the accusations had been the gift of revelation, so much so that, in his confession, Girolamo had to admit that he had built his reputation as a prophet, his «great presumption», lured by the desire for success and greatness⁷. From the very beginning, prophecy had been the focus of the accusations levelled at Savonarola by his detractors. After the formation of the League against Charles VIII in March 1495, the criticism emerged with such importance that the friar had the most important of his prophetic sermons printed. It was the homily given on the octave of the Annunciation, which, in the edited text, was preceded by the summary of the revelations and followed by a speech addressed to the “*christianissimus* king”. Between spring and summer 1495, the *Compendio di revelatione*⁸ was first published in vernacular, then in Latin for Francesco Bonaccorsi’s types. This work circulated widely, crossing the borders of the city as well as those of the Peninsula, and reached the hands of European princes and scholars, also thanks to reprints in Ulm, in the imperial territories, and in Paris, by the printer of the Sorbonne⁹.

It is in the *Compendio* that, for the first time, we find the text of the blessing that the Virgin Mary is said to have bestowed on Florence. Savonarola states that shortly after the confrontation and approval of the so-called “recourse of six broad

Storico Italiano», CLXXIII (2005), pp. 761-780; LAURO MARTINES, *Fire in the City: Savonarola and the Struggle for Renaissance Florence*, Oxford-New York, Oxford University Press, 2006; ROBERTO FUBINI, *Savonarola riformatore. Radicalismo religioso e politico all’avvento delle guerre d’Italia*, «Archivio Storico Italiano», CLXVII (2009), pp. 489-520; ID., *Profezia e riforma nel pensiero di Girolamo Savonarola*, «Studi Slavistici», VII (2010), pp. 299-311; DONALD WEINSTEIN, *Savonarola. The Rise and Fall of a Renaissance Prophet*, New Haven-Londra, Yale University Press, 2011; TAMAR HERZIG, *Savonarola’s Women, Visions and Reform in Renaissance Italy*, Chicago, The Chicago University Press, 2008; MARCO PELLEGRINI, *Savonarola. Profezie e martirio nell’età delle guerre d’Italia*, Roma, Salerno Editrice, 2020.

⁷ See *I processi di Girolamo Savonarola (1498)*, ed. by Ida Giovanna Rao, Paolo Viti, Raffaella Maria Zaccaria, Firenze, Sismel-Edizioni del Galluzzo, 2001, p. 5; PROSPERI, *1498. Savonarola dal falò delle vanità al rogo*, pp. 132-133.

⁸ GIROLAMO SAVONAROLA, *Compendio di Revelazione dello inutile servo di Iesù Cristo frate Ieronimo da Ferrara dello Ordine de’ Frati Predicatori*, in *Compendio di Rivelazioni. Testo volgare e latino e Dialogus de Veritate Prophetica*, ed. by Angela Crucitti, Roma, Angelo Belardetti Editore, 1974, pp. 3-125.

⁹ On the events surrounding the settlement and the subsequent receipt of the *Compendio di Revelazione*, see: SCHNITZER, *Savonarola*, vol. I, pp. 353-354; AUGUSTIN RENAUDET, *Préréforme et Humanisme à Paris pendant les premières guerres d’Italie (1494-1517)*, Parigi, Librairie d’Argences, 1953; ANGELA CRUCITTI, *Nota Critica*, in *Compendio di Rivelazioni*, pp. 379-386; ROBERTO FUBINI, *Politica e profezia in Savonarola. Considerazioni di uno studioso profano*, in *Frate Girolamo Savonarola e il suo movimento*, Pistoia, Provincia Romana dei Frati Predicatori 1998, p. 573-590; STEFANO DALL’AGLIO, *Savonarola in Francia. Circolazione di un’eredità politico religiosa nell’Europa del Cinquecento*, Torino 2006; FUBINI, *Savonarola riformatore*, pp. 492-493.

beans”¹⁰, convinced that the Lord had not withdrawn his promises to the Florence, but only:

they were rather lost [...] I promised to be an ambassador to the great God to revoke the promised graces, and finally, continuing my prayers and fasts, on the day of the Annunciation, which for you is the beginning of the year, seeming to me a presumption to go *immediate* to the throne of that infinite Majesty, *sub qua curvantur qui portant orbem*, I presented myself to the glorious Virgin and Mother of God, begging her that she deigns to be our advocate before the Most Holy Trinity for the happiness of this day; and she graciously accepted. And this good news I gave you on that day by preaching in our [church of] Saint Marco's. And afterwards, persevering in prayer on that octave, I told you that I understood that on the eighth day of the feast we would have a good answer¹¹.

The friar then became an ambassador to The Virgin and, on the eve of the eighth day of the feast, accompanied by Simplicity, Faith, Prayer and Patience, he went to the gates of Paradise to obtain the expected response. Welcomed by Saint Joseph, Girolamo presented the crown that the Florentine people intended to give to the Mother of God «to implore the graces already promised to him»¹². After a detailed description of the Virgin's diadem and throne, the words she spoke are reported «in a clear and loud voice, to the ears of the entire heavenly court [...] “Florentia, Deo Domino Iesu Christo Filio meo et mihi dilecta, tene fidem, insta orationibus, roborare patientia: his enim et sempiternam salutem apud Deum, et apud homines gloriam consequeris”»¹³.

¹⁰ In Florence, state crimes and more serious crimes in general were judged by “Otto di guardia” and “di balia”. Savonarola wanted it to be possible to appeal against their sentence to a Council of eighty or one hundred people, chosen from among the citizens of the Major Council. The recourse against the judgement of the six broad beans (this was the name given to the judgement of the Eight because with six broad beans, i.e. with a majority of six votes against two, they could exile or damn a citizen offender) was approved; but instead of being referred to a small and select number of judges, as Savonarola wanted, it was referred to the Great Council. See note 6.

¹¹ SAVONAROLA, *Compendio di Revelazione*, pp. 28-29 (All the translations of *Compendio* in this paper are mine): «fussino piuttosto smarrite che perse [...] promisi di essere ambasciatore al magno Dio per revocare le grazie promesse; e *finaliter*, continuandosi le orazione e digiuni, el dì della Annunziazione, el quale a voi è principio dell'anno, parendomi presunzione andare *immediate* al trono di quella infinita Maiestà, *sub qua curvantur qui portant orbem*, mi presentai a la gloriosa Vergine e Madre di Dio, pregandola che si degnasse per lo gaudio di questo giorno di essere nostra avvocata appresso alla Santissima Trinità; e lei graziosamente accettò. E questa buona novella in quel giorno ti portai in Santo Marco nostro predicando; e di poi, perseverando noi nelle orazioni in quella ottava, ti dissi che io avevo inteso che lo ottavo giorno della festa aremmo buona risposta».

¹² Ivi, p. 79: «per impetrare le grazie già a lui promesse».

¹³ Ivi, p. 110: «con voce chiara e alta, alle orecchie di tutta la corte celestiale [...] “Florentia, Deo Domino Iesu Christo Filio meo et mihi dilecta, tene fidem, insta orationibus, roborare patientia: his enim et sempiternam salutem apud Deum, et apud homines gloriam consequeris”».

There follows a dialogue with the Virgin in which she assures greatness and power to Florence, the renovation of the Church, the conversion of Muslims and other infidels. All events, however, that would have occurred after the «great tribulation» of Italy, of which Florence would have been «the scourged among the scourged cities»¹⁴. Finally, Friar Girolamo declared that he had received the words of the blessing in writing. The Virgin, in fact, had given him a «ball, or sphere, small in size, in which were written those first words that she, as we said just now, said by letter formally»¹⁵.

We owe, therefore, the genesis of the tradition of the Marian letter to the Florentines to Savonarola. An epistle that, combined with the Virgin's declarations in dialogue with the Dominican, became functional to the friar's political-religious project. He obtained the legitimisation of the prophecies and his work directly from the Mother of God. However, in the Florence of the time, this text does not seem to have become an object of particular worship.

On the other hand, in Sicily, quite a different fortune, so much so as to become a true "civic cult", will have a Marian epistle whose genesis is surprisingly similar to the Florentine one and chronologically close to it.

3. «Vos et ipsam civitatem benedicimus». Messina and the ambassadorship to the Virgin

On a cold day in January 1518, on the Cathedral square of Messina, the two city factions of the *nobiles* and *populares* faced each other with blunderbusses and bombards. The murder of one of the exponents of *populares*, Cola Reitano, had rekindled a conflict that had been going on since the 1530s, amidst ups and downs, and to which the concord of 1516 had only apparently put an end¹⁶. In this climate

¹⁴ Ivi, pp. 111-112: «la manco flagellata tra le città flagellate».

¹⁵ Ivi, p. 113: «palla, ovvero sfera, piccolina, nella quale erano scritte quelle prime parole che lei, come dicemmo poco di sopra, disse per lettera formalmente».

¹⁶ Cfr. On the armed clash of January 1518, see CARMEN SALVO, *Giurati, feudatari, mercanti. L'élite urbana a Messina tra Medio Evo ed Età Moderna*, Napoli, Bibliopolis, 1995, pp. 171-182. On the general clash between the ruling classes in Sicily and Messina, see CARMELO TRASELLI, *La "Questione Sociale" in Sicilia e la Rivolta di Messina del 1464*, Messina, Intilla, 1990 (I ed., 1955); HENRI BRESCH, *Un monde méditerranéen. Économie et Société en Sicile 1300-1450*, Roma-Palermo, École Française de Rome-Accademia di Scienze Lettere e Arti di Palermo, 1986, vol. II, p. 738, tab. 181; GIUSEPPE GIARRIZZO, *La Sicilia dal Cinquecento all'Unità d'Italia*, in VINCENZO D'ALESSANDRO, GIUSEPPE GIARRIZZO, *La Sicilia dal Vespro all'Unità d'Italia*, Torino, Utet, 1989, p. 101; CARMELA MARIA RUGOLO, *Ceti sociali e lotta per il potere a Messina nel secolo XV. Il processo a Giovanni Mallono*, Messina, Società Messinese di Storia Patria, 1990; FEDERICO MARTINO, *Messana nobilis Siciliae caput: istituzioni municipali e gestione del potere in un emporio del Mediterraneo*, Roma, Il Cigno Galileo Galilei, 1994, pp. 97-103; SALVATORE BOTTARI, *Messina tra Umanesimo e*

of social turmoil, the recourse to sacred made headway and, as in the years of Vespers, Mary was called upon to quell passions. The existence in the Cathedral of a *Licterio* Chapel, an altar, perhaps dedicated to the cult of St Eleutherius or, according to other hypotheses, to the Virgin's Dormition, paved the way for a new mythical cult, linking the city to the preaching of Paul of Tarsus and the personal blessing of the Virgin Mary¹⁷.

According to legend, Messina's conversion to Christianity was propitiated by the catechesis of the Apostle of the Gentiles. Saint Paul, after having consecrated the first bishop, Bacchilo, is said to have boosted Marian devotion. As a result, the citizens would send an embassy to Jerusalem to inform the Virgin and receive a letter, bound by her hair, containing a special blessing and the promise of perpetual protection.

Between May and June 1518, a few months after the clashes on the Cathedral square, some Peloritan families decided to offer the chapel of the Holy *Licterio*, in the largest church in Messina, a quarter of a *soldo* for every *libbra* earned on goods they sent to Flanders, Brabant and England. At the same time, a large number of citizens pledged to preserve and propagate the cult of The Virgin of the Letter and to care for the altar in the Cathedral¹⁸.

According to the most widespread hypothesis, the tradition began to take stable form and was put down in writing by the learned humanist Costantino Lascaris, head of the Greek school at the monastery of *San Salvatore in lingua Phari*. This is evidenced by the attestation of an engraving dated 1522, which is the oldest document known containing the text of the Letter. The image depicts the Virgin pleading with Christ to save Messina from a plague epidemic and it is accompanied by the narration of the ambassadorship and the first version of the epistle that «written in Hebrew letters was translated into Greek letters by the Apostle Paul

Rinascimento. Il "caso" Antonello, la cultura, le élites politiche, le attività produttive, Soveria Mannelli, Rubbettino, 2010, pp. 156-161.

¹⁷ On the proposed identification of the *Licterio* Chapel with the altar of St. Eleutherius, one of the legendary first city bishops, and for interesting considerations on the pacifying role of the new cult, see GIOVAN GIUSEPPE MELLUSI, *Dalla Lettera della Madonna alla Madonna della Lettera. Nascita e fortune di una celebre credenza messinese*, in «Archivio Storico Messinese», 93 (2012), pp. 237-261. On the suggestion to recognise the chapel in the *Dormitio Virginis*, see DONATELLA SPAGNOLO, *Il Transito della Vergine di Salvo d'Antonio presso il "Sacro Litterio" del Duomo di Messina* (in the process of publication).

¹⁸ CAIO DOMENICO GALLO, *Gli annali della città di Messina. Nuova edizione con correzioni, note ed appendici del sac. Andrea Vayola*, Messina, Tip. Filomena, 1877, t. I, vol. II, lib. VII, pp. 471-478. See also MELLUSI, *Dalla Lettera della Madonna alla Madonna della Lettera*, pp. 243-246.

himself, and in our times by Messer Constantine Lascaris, said to be a very erudite man, it was translated into Latin letters»¹⁹.

The cult remained in an embryonic phase for at least three quarters of the 16th century, as appears from the very limited mentions of it in literary works and ecclesiastical documents of the time, and it was almost ignored by the greatest intellectual of the 16th century in Messina, Francesco Maurolico. However, as early as 1575, the epistle was used for political purposes. In September of that year, the jurors sent Philip II a request that the city affairs pending at the Iberian Court be resolved promptly and positively and enclosed the translation of the Marian missive, in which the “Prudent King” had shown particular interest²⁰. In 1599, after a temporary decline in attention due to the discovery of the alleged relics of Saint Placido and companions, the text was transcribed in the book of city privileges. This is sufficient to understand the consideration in which, even then, the ruling classes held the Marian missive, seen as a sort of letter patenting Peloritan political-religious supremacy over the rest of the *Regnum*.

However, it was not until the 17th century that devotion increased, thanks to the writings of Giuseppe Buonfiglio Costanzo, Alberto Piccolo, Placido Reina and the supporters of Messina’s hegemonic claims. It was decisive, in this case, the support given by the Jesuits, who composed apologetic works about the Letter and the pre-

¹⁹ «Scritta di littere hebraice fu traducta in littere grece da ipso Paulo apostolo, et a le tempe nostre da misser Constantino Lascari, ditto homo doctissimo fu tradocta in littere latine». The engraving is first reproduced in 1740, in one of the many apologetic texts that flourished between the 17th and 18th century (JACOPO FRANCESCO DE QUINGLES, PAOLO AGLIOTI, *Spiegazione di due mazze di ferro ritrovate in Messina nell’anno MDCCXXXIII*, Messina, nella Stamperia Accademica per il Lazzari, 1740), and reports the text of the Letter with some gaps. For some considerations on 16th century printing, see MELLUSI, *Dalla Lettera della Madonna alla Madonna della Lettera*, pp. 241-243. Concerning the text of the Letter I quote the one published in FILIPPO GOTHIO, *Breve raguaglio dell’invention e festa de’ gloriosi martiri Placido e compagni*, Messina, Fausto Bufalini, 1591, p. 101: «Maria Virgo, Ioachim filia, Dei humillima Christi Iesu Crucifixi Mater, ex Tribu Iudae, stirpe David Messanensibus omnibus salutem, et Dei Patris omnipotentis benedictionem. Vos omnes fide magna Legatos, ac Nuntios per publicum documentum ad nos misisse constat; filium nostrum Dei genitum Deum, et hominem esse fatemini, et in Caelum post suam Resurrectionem ascendisse; Pauli Apostoli electi praedicatione mediante, viam veritatis agnoscentes: ob quod vos, et ipsam Civitatem benedicimus, cuius perpetuam Protectricem nos esse volumus. Anno Filij nostri XXXXI. Indictione prima, IJ. Non. Iunij, Luna XXVIJ. Feria V. ex Hierosolymis. Maria Virgo».

²⁰ On the absence of references in the literary sources and ecclesiastical documentation of that period, see GIUSEPPE LIPARI, *La Madonna della Lettera nella cultura messinese*, in *Arte, Storia e Tradizione nella devozione alla Madonna della Lettera. Atti del Convegno* (Messina, 26 maggio 1993), ed. by Giovanni Molonia, Messina, Litografia Spignolo, 1995, pp. 69-79; MELLUSI, *Dalla Lettera della Madonna alla Madonna della Lettera*, pp. 237-261. On the letter to Philip II of 1575 (Simancas, ARCHIVO GENERAL, *Estado, Sicilia*, Leg. 1144, doc. 192) see MARIA LUISA TOBAR, *Prospetto delle controversie spagnole sulla lettera della Madonna ai messinesi*, in «Atti dell’Accademia dei Pericolanti», CCLXIX (1995), pp. 436-486 in particular pp. 434-435; MELLUSI, *Dalla Lettera della Madonna alla Madonna della Lettera*, p. 248.

eminence of the City of the Lighthouse: from this moment on, the two aspects were inseparably joined²¹.

In this way, the cult of the Virgin of the Letter was configured as an example of 'civic religion' which, combined with false 'secular' privileges and false chronicles, was used to give a strong foundation to Messina's aspiration to be *Prima Sedes et Regni Caput*. Desire that led the city to clash bitterly with Palermo, a long-standing rival in the struggle for supremacy²².

4. Concluding reflection

Between the end of the 15th century and the first decades of the 16th century, it is possible to highlight the appearance of a tradition of ambassadors to the Virgin and, at the same time, Marian letters sent respectively to Florence and Messina. Both texts, in fact, contain a blessing to the cities and are religious message and political instrument. The words addressed to Savonarola, and put in writing by him in a text with an obvious apologetic purpose, were intended to legitimise the project,

²¹ On scientific works linked to the Epistle in Messina, see GIUSEPPE LIPARI, *Cultura, politica e società nella Messina del XVII secolo, Introduzione* a PLACIDO SAMPERI, *Iconologia della gloriosa Vergine Madre di Dio Maria protettrice di Messina*, Messina, Giacomo Mattei, 1654, rist. anastatica, Messina, Intilla, 1990, pp. XXI-LVII; CALOGERO COSTANZA, *Il culto della Madonna della Lettera nelle opere a stampa del XVIII secolo*, «Atti della Accademia Peloritana dei Pericolanti», 262 (1991), pp. 247-262; MARIA PIA FANTINI, *La lettera della Madonna ai messinesi: apocrifa, vera o verisimile? Il dibattito tra il 1562 e il 1632*, in *Per il Cinquecento religioso in Italia. Clero, cultura, società*, ed. by Maurizio Sangalli, Roma, Edizioni dell'Ateneo, 2003, vol. I, pp. 523-555; LIPARI, *La Madonna della Lettera nella cultura messinese*, pp. 69-79; PAOLO PRETO, *Una lunga storia di falsi e falsari*, in «Mediterranea. Ricerche Storiche», VI (2006), pp. 11-38, in particular pp. 17-19; MELLUSI, *Dalla Lettera della Madonna alla Madonna della Lettera*, pp. 257-260; MARIA CONCETTA CALABRESE, *Reliques de famille, reliques de la ville. La lettre de la Vierge de Messine*, in *Reliques politiques*, ed. by Albrecht Burkardt, Jérôme Grévy, Rennes, PUR, 2020, pp. 47-55; PRETO, *Falsi e falsari nella Storia*, pp. 97-98.

²² On the use of Virgin of the Letter's cult as an example of "Civic Religion", see GIUSEPPE CAMPAGNA, *Ad decus et gloriam civitatis. Religione civica e lotta municipale nella Sicilia moderna*, Soveria Mannelli, Rubbettino 2022 and its bibliographic references. On the clash between Messina and Palermo for the role of *Caput Regni*, see GIARRIZZO, *La Sicilia dal Cinquecento all'Unità d'Italia*, pp. 248-269; FRANCESCO BENIGNO, *La questione della capitale: lotta politica e rappresentanza degli interessi nella Sicilia del Seicento*, «Società e Storia», 47 (1990), pp. 27-63; ID., *Conflitto politico e conflitto sociale nell'Italia spagnola*, in *Nel sistema imperiale. L'Italia spagnola*, ed. by Aurelio Musi, Napoli, Edizioni Scientifiche Italiane, 1994, pp. 115-146, in particular pp. 142-144; MAURICE AYMARD, *Palermo e Messina*, in *Governare il mondo. L'impero spagnolo dal XV al XIX secolo*, ed. by Massimo Ganci, Ruggiero Romano, Palermo, Società Siciliana di Storia Patria, 1991, pp. 143-164; 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, CUECM, 1990, pp. 173-207; LUIS ANTONIO RIBOT GARCÍA, *La rivolta antispagnola di Messina. Cause e antecedenti (1591-1674)*, Soveria Mannelli, Rubbettino, 2011 (I Spanish ed. 1982), pp. 53-60.

strongly desired by the Dominican, to reform the Church and Florentine institutions²³.

In the case of Messina, the initial aims of internal pacification, linked to the conflict between factions, were replaced by clear intentions of political promotion, aimed at achieving cultural and political supremacy in Sicily. The clash between classes (*nobiles* and *populares*), which had been troubling Messina since the 1530s, was “sublimated” (and rendered socially and politically harmless or less devastating) by identifying a common adversary to fight and beat together: first the ‘enemy’ Palermo, then the viceroy hostile to Messina people, and finally the Spanish monarchy of Charles II, “abandoned” in 1674 in favour of the “Sun King”. At least from 1518, all citizens of Messina, *nobiles* and *populares*, ‘enlisted’ an unbeatable ally: as at the time of the Vespers, albeit in new forms, the Virgin spread her mantle to protect the city that had been the first on the island to choose to follow the new faith²⁴. The tradition of ambassadorship linked Messina directly to the Virgin’s blessing, elevated her above all her island sisters, and provided new proof of the apostolic origins of her Christianity. This was the basis of the Messina tradition and, unlike other local religious stories, was able to transform it into a true civic cult.

In any case, the parallelism between the ‘models’ suggests a question: are influences of the slightly older Florentine case on the Messina one possible? At present, we may only formulate some hypotheses.

Some certain data are chronological, i.e. the year of publication of the *Compendio de Revelatione* (1495), in which the story of the Dominican’s ambassadorship to the Virgin is set down in writing, and the dates of 1518 and 1522, which establish Vergin’s tradition in Messina. It cannot be ruled out that what is in the *Compendio* reached the shores of the Straits through Florentine merchants who had settled in the city since the end of the 12th century, where they owned a *Loggia* and gave their name to a street, called *Ruga florentinorum*. On the other hand, it is unthinkable that the fame of an Friar Girolamo’s story, with European resonance, had not spread to Sicily, as evidenced by the possession by the Messina physician Giovan Gregorio Ismiridi of the book *Predichi de frati Ieronimo per quatragesime*²⁵.

²³ On the features of Savonarola’s text linked to prophecy and homiletics, see LETIZIA PELLEGRINI, *La profezia tra il pulpito e lo Stato: il caso di Girolamo Savonarola*, «Annali dell’Istituto storico italo-germanico in Trento», 25 (1999), p. 433-456 in particular p. 441-442.

²⁴ Cfr. MARTINO, *Messana nobilis Siciliae caput*, pp. 91-132; SALVATORE BOTTARI, *Post res perditas. Messina 1678-1713*, Edas, Messina, 2005, pp. 57-80; ID., *Messina tra Umanesimo e Rinascimento*, pp. 155-169.

²⁵ This is the vernacular edition of *Prediche per Quadragesima* of Savonarola, published in Venice in 1519. The volume, *coverto di pargamanina*, appears in the *post portem* inventory of Ismiridi, drawn up by the notary Pietro Amico on 7 October 1538, see PINA TUTTOCUORE, *I libri di Giovanni Gregorio Ismiridi*, in *In*

In this context, some exponent of Peloritan culture could have taken an inspiration from Savonarola's ambassadorship to create a legend of their own, easily spread in Messina, where Marian devotion was strongly rooted in the Byzantine past of the large Greek-speaking population. There were, in fact, local cults, such as that of Virgin of the High, dating back to the Vespers War, born out of obvious political needs²⁶.

What is more, the circulation of the works of Friar Girolamo in Sicily, between the end of the 15th century and the first decades of the 16th century, is part of the interest in apocalyptic-eschatological prophecy, which was also well rooted on the island. It has been demonstrated how Juraj Dragišić's works – a minor conventual friar known as Giorgio Benigno Salviati – were received in Sicily. This is a further, possible means of penetration of Savonarola's ideas. The Bosnian's writings include *Propheticæ solutiones*, published in 1497, in which he asserts the truthfulness of the prophecies of the Dominican of Ferrara and the divine choice to elect Florence as the New Jerusalem²⁷.

nobili Civitate Messanae. Contributi alla storia dell'editoria e della circolazione del libro antico in Sicilia, ed. by Giuseppe Lipari, Messina, Centro Internazionale di Studi Umanistici, 2013, pp. 79-119, in particular p. 97 e pp. 104-105. On the Peloritan physician's inventory also see ELISA VERMIGLIO, *L'inventario dei beni di Giovanni Gregorio Ismiridi*, in *ivi*, pp. 57-78. On the Florentines in Messina, see ROBERT DAVIDSOHN, *Storia di Firenze: le origini*, Firenze, G.C. Sansoni Editore, 1909, pp. 1221-1222; PIETRO CORRAO, *Uomini d'affari stranieri nelle città siciliane del tardo Medioevo*, in «*Revista de Historia Medieval*», XI (2000), p. 139-162; BOTTARI, *Messina tra Umanesimo e Rinascimento*, p. 98.

²⁶ On the cult of the Virgin in relation to the War of the Vespers, see CARMEN SALVO, *Monache a Santa Maria dell'Alto. Donne e fede a Messina nei secoli XV e XVI*, Messina, Società Messinese di Storia Patria, 1994, p. 13.

²⁷ It is interesting to note the presence of *Apocalypsis Nova*, attributed to the blessed Amadeo Mendes da Silva, in the Bosnian-edited version, in the library of the viceroy of Sicily Ettore Pignatelli, which, together with other apocalyptic-eschatological texts, postulated the advent of an angelic pope and an emperor bringer of peace. On this topic, see CARMEN SALVO, *La biblioteca del viceré. Politica, religione e cultura nella Sicilia del Cinquecento*, Roma, Il Cigno edizioni, 2004, p. 161-214; EAD., *Il profetismo in Sicilia tra Quattro e Cinquecento*, in *Gioachimismo e profetismo in Sicilia (secoli XIII-XVI)*, ed. by Cosimo Damiano Fonseca, Roma, Viella, 2007, pp. 93-101. Concerning the relationship with Savonarola's thought, which Salviati will retract in *De natura angelica* of 1499 while opposing the Dominican's condemnation for heresy during the Lateran Council V, and on his role in the elaboration of *Apocalypsis Nova*, see GIAN CARLO GARFAGNINI, *Giorgio Benigno Salviati e Girolamo Savonarola. Note per una lettura delle Propheticæ Solutiones*, in «*Rinascimento*», 29 (1989), pp. 81-123; CESARE VASOLI, *Giorgio Benigno Salviati e la tensione profetica di fine Quattrocento*, in «*Rinascimento*», 29 (1989), pp. 53-78; LOREDANA LUNETTA, *La figura del profeta in Angelo da Vallombrosa, Girolamo Savonarola e Giorgio Benigno Salviati*, in *Studi savonaroliani. Verso il V centenario*, ed. by Gian Carlo Garfagnini, Sismel-Edizioni del Galluzzo, Firenze, 1996, pp. 85-92; CESARE VASOLI, *L'immagine sognata: "il papa angelico"*, in *Storia d'Italia. Annali, XVI: Roma, città del papa*, ed. by Luigi Fiorani, Adriano Prosperi, Torino, Einaudi, 2000, pp. 73-109; JAMES W. NELSON NOVOA, *Imaginationas. Exegesis in the Apocalypsis nova Attributed to Blessed Amadeus da Silva*, in *Faith and*

Messina was, moreover, a city in which the ideas of apocalyptic prophetism must have had a strong hold, as demonstrated by Heinrich Alding's decision to print, between 1478 and 1479, *Epistula rabbi Samuelis de Fez de adventu Messiae missa rabbi Isaac*, which emphasises the eschatological significance of the conversion of Jews to the Christian faith²⁸.

Finally, the role of the Tuscans in the general spread of prophetic ideas in Sicily should not be underestimated. An interesting example is the "revelation" that the Pisan Bartolomeo is said to have made to Tommaso Bellorusso, prothonotary apostolic and member of the entourage of Viceroy Pignatelli, who "rediscovered" the "Byzantine" fresco of the seven archangels in Palermo and propagated the cult of them also in a political function. According to the Tuscan's prophecy, in fact, angelic veneration would be restored when «he miter» would «see through the glass», at the time of Leo X, who was obliged by myopia to constantly use glasses²⁹.

Fantasy in the Renaissance: Texts, Images, and Religious Practices, ed. by Ethan Matt Kavaler, Olga Zorzi Pugliese, Toronto, Center for Reformation and Renaissance Studies, 2009, pp. 71-83; MICHELE LODONE, *Migraciones y expectativas mesiánicas. Giorgio Benigno Salviati, el monje Teodoro y Paolo Angelo en la Italia del Renacimiento*, in *Visiones imperiales y profecía. Roma, España, Nuevo Mundo*, ed. by Stefania Pastore, Mercedes García-Arenal, Madrid, Abada Editores, 2018, pp. 81-101; EDUARDO FERNÁNDEZ GUERRERO, *Profetizar la Reforma. Paolo Angelo y el Apocalypsis nova*, in *ivi*, pp. 103-126; PROSPERI, 1498. *Savonarola dal falò delle vanità al rogo*, pp. 136-137.

²⁸ See CONCETTA BIANCA, *Stampa, cultura e società a Messina alla fine del Quattrocento*, Palermo, Centro di Studi filologici e Linguistici siciliani, 1988, pp. 185-196; GIUSEPPE LIPARI, *Incunaboli e cinquecentine della provincia dei cappuccini di Messina*, Messina, Sicania, 1995, p. 80.

²⁹ On the prophecy of the Pisan Bartolomeo, see ANTONINO MONGITORE, *Istoria del ven. monastero de' sette angeli nella città di Palermo*, Palermo, per Gio. Battista Aiccardo, 1726, p. 23; MARTINO, *Per la storia degli autografi di Tommaso Bellorusso*, pp. 369-370 e nota 46.