

Chapter 13

THE “CALENZIO DEAL” AND THE AUCTION OF THE OLDEST VALLICELLIANA CODICES, 1874–1916

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ON JULY 21, 1916, the Sammartini auction house in Via Ripetta in Rome, “by legacy of the important Library of Fr. Generoso Calenzio,” proposed to auction “Rare books—Ancient and Modern Manuscripts on parchment—Codices of the Vallicelliana Library—Papal bulls—Parchments—Prints—Engravings—Engraved copper plates and more.”¹ The date on the cover of the auction catalogue was corrected from July 17. The cover also declared that “The auction will take place in Rome, in Via della Chiesa Nuova, n. 14,” which was Calenzio’s private house, in the street that runs along the east side of Borromini’s Oratory Complex that houses the Vallicelliana Library. The explicit reference to the “Codices of the Vallicelliana Library,” is surprising, raising the question of whether their sale, along with the other possessions of the late Calenzio, was due to the shamelessness or ignorance of the heirs or seller. They may have been unaware that the Vallicelliana Library had been owned by the Italian State since 1874 and that the manuscripts, even though held in the personal library of this Oratorian father, could certainly not be alienated.²

The news of the auction caused a scandal in the Roman press. On July 21, 1916 (the intended date of the auction), the *Messaggero*, one of the capital’s most popular newspapers, published an article in defence of Umberto Sammartini, legal expert, owner of the auction house, and major suspect, and of Raffele Rizzacasa, who was managing the estate. The paper assigned all responsibility to “those who should have supervised the patrimony of the State.”³ The author claimed:

1 “Libri rari—Antichi e Moderni Manoscritti in pergamena—Codici della Biblioteca Vallicelliana—Bolle pontificie—Pergamene—Stampe—Incisioni—Plance in rame incise ed altro. La vendita si eseguirà in Roma, in Via della Chiesa Nuova, n. 14.”

2 The Vallicelliana Library, before being forfeited to the Italian state in 1874, belonged to the Congregation of the Oratory of St. Philip Neri founded in 1575 by the church of Santa Maria in Vallicella, better known to Romans as Chiesa Nuova. The Library was established, for public use, in 1581 with the testamentary bequest of Portuguese humanist Achille Stazio (Vidigueira, 1524–Rome, 1581). Generoso Calenzio (Naples, 1836–Rome, 1915) was admitted to the Congregation of the Oratory of St. Philip Neri in 1863.

3 “I codici antichi e gli oggetti dello Stato messi all’asta pubblica,” *Il Messaggero*, July 21, 1916, 3.

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The news we disclosed produced no small impression, also because investigations made by various parties would have revealed obvious negligence attributable to those who should have been guarding the state's assets. It is not necessary to say that on our behalf we have made some precise researches; and we have been able, this way, to establish the truth of this serious matter. Meanwhile, we hasten to mention that Mr. Umberto Sammartini, the well-known court expert who lives in Via Ripetta 153 has no fault in all this business. Mr. Sammartini proceeded with great caution, he did not fail to warn the Directorate of Fine Arts, when he was commissioned to direct the public auction to offer the items for sale, the paintings, the rich library and all other valuable objects belonging to the legacy of Father Generoso Calenzio.⁴

The article also stated that: "the heir and Mr. Sammartini had no knowledge of the origin of the books."⁵ This is a remarkable claim, given that the sale catalogue declared that the codices had belonged to the Vallicelliana Library. Indeed, it seems that the article was prompted, and perhaps even commissioned, by Sammartini, whose innocence is proclaimed repeatedly, as the conclusion states: "Mr Sammartini, for his part, wrote us a letter proclaiming his complete lack of responsibility—something that no one doubted—in all this business, in which he appeared only as an expert."⁶

The next day, the Director General of Fine Arts, Corrado Ricci, who denied Sammartini's good faith, responded in the same newspaper:

Distinguished director, out of respect for the truth, please publish that it is false that the Directorate General of Fine Arts was informed by the experts Sammartini of the auction they were going to do, and that it has got from them those catalogues (thin and inaccurate) on which he ordered the first halt. As for the appropriateness of the second stoppage, requested following further research, it should be noted that it has served to retain almost all the objects on which the definitive verification will be carried out.

Believe me, with respect, your most devoted Corrado Ricci.⁷

4 "La notizia da noi divulgata ha prodotto non poca impressione, anche perché da indagini da varie parti compiute sarebbe risultata una evidente negligenza imputabile a coloro che averebbero dovuto vigilare sul patrimonio dello Stato. Non occorre dire che per conto nostro abbiamo fatto delle ricerche precise; e abbiamo potuto, in tal modo, stabilire la verità su questo grave fatto. Intanto ci affrettiamo ad accennare che il Signor Umberto Sammartini, il noto perito giudiziario che ha la sua casa in Via Ripetta 153 non ha in tutto questo affare alcuna colpa. Il signor Sammartini ha proceduto con grande cautela, non ha mancato di avvertire la Direzione delle Belle Arti, quando venne incaricato di dirigere l'asta pubblica per offrire in vendita gli oggetti, i quadri, la ricchissima biblioteca e tutti gli altri oggetti di valore appartenenti all'eredità di padre Generoso Calenzio."

5 "l'erede e il Signor Sammartini erano ignari della provenienza dei libri."

6 "il signor Sammartini, da parte sua, ci ha scritto una lettera per proclamare—cosa di cui del resto nessuno dubitava—la sua completa irresponsabilità in tutto questo affare, nel quale egli non figurava che come perito."

7 "Ill.mo direttore, la prego, per rispetto alla verità, di pubblicare esser falso che la Direzione

However, in the journalist's preface to the letter, the insinuation about the lack of state protection was not dropped:

They are trying to ascertain how it has been possible for so many years, that no one noticed the disappearance of the precious codices of the Vallicelliana. Note that some of these codices are of truly outstanding value, and of absolute rarity, such as one belonging to the ninth century that has unfortunately been lost.⁸

These, briefly, are the facts reported by the newspapers. However, the archives of the Vallicelliana Library allow us to nuance this story with additional documentation and details of the manuscripts knowingly selected for the public auction. This essay examines this additional information and the circumstances of the recovery of most of the valuable manuscripts.

The Return of the Manuscripts

The most useful document for the reconstruction of the final phase of the "Calenzio deal" is the detailed report to the Ministry of Education that the Director of the Vallicelliana Library, Giacomo Cordella, wrote on July 24, 1916.⁹ The story began a few months earlier, when Cordella gave the manager of Calenzio's estate a formal warning to open the house in Via della Chiesa Nuova that contained the library, presumably believing it to contain volumes belonging to the Vallicelliana Library. The manager did not comply. After more than a month, the manager finally answered, promising Cordella that he would notify him as soon as he received authorization to sell the property, to allow him to do the inspection. Cordella recorded: "While I waited confidently, the bomb exploded. It had happened that the heirs appeared, and the expert Sammartini acting for them, and the manager had delivered the property, forgetting the commitment made to me." On July 11, the Director obtained an administrative block on the transfer of assets in order to proceed with the inspection. In his report, Cordella noted that it was easy to

Generale delle Belle Arti sia stata informata dai periti Sammartini dell'asta che stavano per fare, e che essa abbia avuto da loro quei cataloghi (meschini ed imprecisi) sui quali ordinò il primo fermo. Quanto poi all'opportunità del secondo fermo, chiesto in seguito a ulteriori ricerche, è da notare che esso è valso a trattenere quasi tutti gli oggetti sui quali dovrà compiersi la verifica definitiva. Cosciché, da lamentare non è che la vendita di alcuni vetri cimiteriali, la cui cornice, però, anziché 'mirabile', è priva di qualsiasi valore. Mi creda, con rispetto, dev.mo Corrado Ricci." Corrado Ricci's Letter in "Come sparirono i codici della Vallicelliana e i preziosi vetri cimiteriali," *Il Messaggero*, July 22, 1916, 4. Corrado Ricci, Director General of the Superintendency of Galleries and Museums, was among the creators of L. l. 364 (June 10, 1909) "For antiquity and fine arts," the first true national law of protection; it was followed by the Regulation issued with R.D. 363 of 1913. See also Chapter 14 in this volume.

8 "Si sta cercando di accertare in che modo sia stato possibile per tanti anni, che nessuno si accorgesse della sparizione dei preziosi codici della Vallicelliana. Si noti che alcuni di questi codici sono di valore veramente rilevante, e di assoluta rarità, come uno appartenente al IX secolo, e che purtroppo è perduto."

9 Biblioteca Vallicelliana, Archivio Storico, Faldone 28 "Miscellanee varie."

recognize several Oratorian bound volumes belonging to the library, and he was pleased by the collaboration of Salvatore Domenicano, representative of the heirs (the Troisi sisters), and of Sammartini, who spontaneously gave him five old Vallicelliana codices; perhaps too “spontaneously.” These were none other than codices marked B7, B8, D38, E15, and E26, some of the oldest and rarest volumes of the original core of the library (see appendix).

Having obtained five priceless books without needing to search, the next day Cordella continued his inspection, helped by the bookseller Attilio Nardecchia, who is a key character in this story. Nardecchia was the founder of Nardecchia Stampe e Libri Antichi, which is still active in Via di Monserrato, Rome. He began trading in 1895, abandoning the medical profession, and soon devoted himself to ecclesiastical books. This was the era of the suppression of religious confraternities and the consequent state confiscation of ecclesiastical collections caused serious losses of books, alongside the development of a flourishing antiquarian market. In Nardecchia’s case, commercial luck and his growing bibliographical skills intertwined, making him a valuable consultant for an educated and efficient official like Cordella. Nardecchia was well-respected in the Italian scientific and academic world, and even by Pope Pius XI, who “esteemed him and held him dear.”¹⁰ It should also be noted that Pius XI played a not insignificant role in the Calenzio affair: when he was prefect of the Vatican Library the refusal to accept Calenzio’s legacy was due to him. That is a subject for another occasion, but the non-acceptance of the bequest inadvertently caused its exposure to the private trade.

Let us return to the inspection. On the second day:

In the afternoon of the second day the Greek codex B16 was found on top of a shelf, from whose cover the signatures had been scraped. Made a load of these six parchment codices, a group of ancient bulls and diplomas, several paper manuscripts of the sixteenth century related to the oratory, and many printed books, which I reserved to make comparisons in the library, I took my leave by issuing Domenicano a summary receipt, and declaring that on my behalf I no longer thought it necessary to stop [the sale]. I would need a great dialectical effort to prove that I was not in a hurry: but I noticed it two days later, when, rummaging through this archive, I deduced that other manuscripts might be in the same house.

The codex marked B16, datable to the tenth to eleventh centuries (later owned by Achille Stazio) is a Chrysostomic miscellany, composed of four sections (the first three of the eleventh century, the fourth datable between the tenth and eleventh centuries) containing a collection of texts of the most famous of the sacred orators.¹¹ Cordella was a trusting person and he persuaded himself of the good faith of Sammartini and Domenicano

¹⁰ Cf. La storia [della famiglia Nardecchia], <http://web.tiscali.it/nardecchia/>, accessed September 14, 2023.

¹¹ John Chrysostom (344/354–407). The hand of Achille Stazio appears in every section of the codex identifying the works or recording which texts are already published.

thanks to the spontaneous delivery of the five codices already mentioned and their "repeated protests of complete ignorance," even despite the accidental discovery of the sixth manuscript. However, from the moment that Cordella realized more manuscripts might be in the house and requested a new halt to the sale his attitude changed radically. From trusting he became suspicious of those involved.

During the period of the administrative block, we must imagine Cordella frantically consulting the old catalogues of Vallicelliana manuscripts, which did not always include key identifying details, and the records of different inventories. During this inspection, he discovered another precious codex marked D53 at the bottom of a shelf, hidden behind a large folio. This was a composite volume in four sections of the eleventh to sixteenth centuries, containing patristic texts, annotated by the humanist Achille Stazio. However, Cordella attributed this theft not to Sammartini, Domenicano, or Calenzio's heirs, but rather to an earlier loss, dating back, at least, to the 1890s as there are several inventories in which the seven magnificent codices were already missing.

The Removal of the Manuscripts

At this point we turn to an earlier story, which led to the events of 1916. The chronological extremes of the Calenzio affair can be defined as 1874, when Vallicelliana manuscripts were concealed by Calenzio during the application of the so-called "subversive" laws of the Church Estate, and 1916 when his estate was offered for auction. The sale of the unique Vallicelliana books was not Calenzio's intention. Instead the theft of the foundation manuscripts of the collection was designed to "save" the Oratorian treasure from state forfeiture, seen by the clergy at the time as an abuse and ruin, and denounced as such.¹²

The state forfeiture was undoubtedly a historical, social, cultural, human, as well as political and patrimonial trauma for men like Calenzio. Its outcome (and the even more serious one it could have had if the books had been sold), demonstrates the jealousy, destructive and self-destructive passions aroused. The concept of "cultural heritage" as we understand it today, was obviously alien to the uncompromising Catholic Calenzio.¹³ As Salvatore Settis has observed:

12 A file of the dossier "Calenzio" kept in the historical archive of the Vallicelliana Library bears the hand-written note, probably by Calenzio, on the front: "Biblioteca Vallicelliana," and on the back: "Biblioteca Vallicelliana – Documenti per la storia del vandalismo italiano durante il secolo XIX" (Vallicelliana Library—Documents for the history of Italian vandalism during the nineteenth century).

13 He was the author of a *Vita e apologia di Bonifacio VIII* (Naples: Pelella, 1862); of three works on the Council of Trent: *Saggio di storia del Concilio generale di Trento sotto Paolo III* (Rome: Sinimberghi, 1869); *Esame critico letterario delle opere riguardanti la storia del Concilio di Trento* (Rome: Sinimberghi, 1869), and *Documenti inediti e nuovi lavori sul Concilio di Trento* (Rome: Sinimberghi, 1874); of a *Dissertazione intorno alle varie controversie di storia e archeologia ecclesiastica* (Rome: Poliglotta, 1869); a *Vita di Martino Lutero* (Rome: Poliglotta, 1873); of a rebuttal to historical memoirs of secular tendency against any form of juspatronate: *Metropolitanae Ecclesiae Neapolitanae provisiones concistoriales a saeculo XV ad XIX ex authenticis documentis in*

The designation patrimony, or national patrimony, emerged then [in nineteenth-century Europe] as a radical innovation, the attribution of a legal personality to the Nation, that is, to the people, to the collectivity of citizens, and corresponded to the acute awareness of the centrality of heritage in promoting culture and defining national character.¹⁴

Calenzio's behaviour was also in opposition to the spirit of the edicts of Chamberlain Pacca, which aimed to prioritize public cultural interests over private profit.¹⁵ Calenzio's biographer, Francesco Malgeri portrayed him as a "lively and witty spirit," emphasizing his originality and sometimes his oddity.¹⁶ He was described as "typically Oratorian," with the traits of the original, and partly anecdotal, eccentricity of St. Philip Neri (founder in 1575 of the congregation of the Oratory, which is the birthplace of the same Vallicelliana library). In contrast, the *Messaggero* balanced an account of his "vast culture" with the claim of an "unbalanced mind."¹⁷

In the papers of the historical archive of the library (in particular, folder "miscellaneous 28"), Calenzio's work is characterized by messy and nervous writing, with thick pen strokes, frequent erasures and deletions, corrections, and additions. There are often multiple copies of the same text, and particularly relevant for this study are his lists, made on several occasions, of the Vallicellianan books considered most valuable by him.

luce editis (Rome, 1878); and of *La vita e gli scritti del cardinale Cesare Baronio* (Rome: Vatican, 1907), his most important historical work.

14 "La denominazione di *patrimoine*, o *patrimoine national*, germogliò allora [nel secolo XIX in Europa] su una radicale innovazione, l'attribuzione di una personalità giuridica alla Nazione, cioè al popolo, alla collettività dei cittadini, e corrispose all'acuta consapevolezza della centralità del patrimonio per promuovere la cultura e per definire il carattere nazionale," Salvatore Settis, *La tutela del patrimonio culturale*, in *Dizionario di Storia* Treccani, (2011) ([www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/la-tutela-del-patrimonio-culturale_\(Dizionario-di-Storia\)/](http://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/la-tutela-del-patrimonio-culturale_(Dizionario-di-Storia)/), accessed September 14, 2023).

15 "Particularly relevant were Pacca's initiatives in the area of cultural and artistic heritage, which were among the camerlengo's attributions and for which he had among his collaborators Carlo Fea and Antonio Canova. As early as 1814 the establishment of the post of inspector of paintings, entrusted to Vincenzo Camuccini, inaugurated a campaign of restoration in a long-neglected area. An edict regulating sales of archives and manuscripts came out in March 1819, which was followed on April 7, 1820, by the better-known 'Pacca edict' on antiquities and excavations. Resuming a legislation of 1802 in light of the French administrative experience, it established a territorial administrative network under the Roman Fine Arts Commission, and subjected both the trade in antiquities and works of art and archaeological excavations to strict control. The document, described as an 'affirmation of public cultural interests over private profit' in which 'scientific insight and administrative policy' were welded together for the first time in Italy...still inspired unified legislation," David Armando, "Pacca, Bartolomeo," in *Dizionario Biografico degli Italiani* (Rome: Istituto della Enciclopedia Italiana, 2014), vol. 80, www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/bartolomeo-pacca_%28Dizionario-Biografico%29/, accessed September 18, 2023. See also Chapter 14 in this volume.

16 Francesco Malgeri, "Calenzio, Generoso," in *Dizionario biografico degli italiani* 16 (Rome: Istituto dell'Enciclopedia Italiana, 1973).

17 See "I codici antichi," 3.

The lists do not include anything more than the historical catalogues of the Vallicelliana manuscripts (the "Giustiniani"¹⁸ of the seventeenth century and the "Vettori"¹⁹ of the eighteenth century, from which Calenzio extracts basic data). However, the content and execution of the lists suggest an irrepressible attachment to those texts he considered sacred. These were the constitutive manuscripts of the Oratory's history, and working tools of the educated fathers, who had dedicated their lives to religious study and the writing of ecclesiastical history, above all Cesare Baronio, to whom Calenzio seems to have been devoted and with whom he may have identified as a writer.

In discussing Calenzio, inevitably we come to the terms "to steal" and "to hide" in order to describe his actions. However, "to smuggle" might be a better description, meaning to stealthily and deftly subtract, with the intention of securing the books. In Calenzio's case his theft was without profit, but not without consequences. Calenzio believed so firmly in the idea of "saving" the Oratory's bibliographic treasure that he went so far as to engineer a fake overseas shipment of the books. However, in this, paradoxically, he made actions blatant. On April 4, 1871, he wrote to the brothers of the Oratory in London, begging them to pretend that they had received sixty-eight codices on his list:

Most esteemed Father, the House is now almost all lost: the Sacristy and the Oratory will become courtrooms. For the Library, of which we are still masters, there is nothing else but to save the oldest and most precious codices: I have hidden them: however, the Provost is pleased to pretend that he has sent them to them in London: therefore a mock receipt should be made from them stating that the following codices have been delivered to them: [there follows an extremely scanty list, of signatures only, corresponding to sixty-eight medieval codices dated between the ninth and thirteenth centuries]. Let the letter be signed by the Provost, and if necessary also by the Deputies, and addressed to me as Librarian, pretended sender. This is the greatest benefit they can render us in such mournful times for the Congregation of Rome mother of all Congregations. Servant of His Reverence Generoso Calenzio of the Orat[ory] of Rome, and Librarian of the Vallicelliana.²⁰

18 Fabiano Giustiniani, *Index Universalis Alphabeticus Materias in omni facultate consulto pertractatas, earumque Scriptores, & locos designans, Appendice perampla locupletatus. ... Fabiani Iustiniani Genuensis Congregationis Oratorii Presbyteri* (Rome: Ex Typographia Reverendæ Cameræ Apostolicæ, 1612).

19 Vincenzo Vettori, "Inventarium omnium codicum manuscriptorum graecorum et latinorum Bibliothecae Vallicellanae digestum anno domini MDCCXLIX" (topographical, in three volumes) and "Index alphabeticus universalis cognominum, nominum auctorum sanctorum et virorum illustrium, auctorum vitarum et monumentorum quae in codicibus manuscriptis grecis et latinis Bibliothecae Vallicellanae continentur digestus anno domini MDCCXLIX" (alphabetical, in two volumes).

20 "Stimatissimo Padre, la Casa è ormai quasi tutta perduta: la Sacrestia e l'Oratorio diventeranno Corti di Tribunali. Per la Biblioteca, di cui siamo ancora padroni, non c'è altro che salvare i più antichi e preziosi codici: io li ho nascosti: però il Preposito ha piacere di fingere di averli mandati a loro in Londra: perciò dovrebbero fare da loro una finta ricevuta di essere stati a loro consegnati

We do not know whether this letter was sent and we have no answer from the London community, but fortunately, despite the unknown number of volumes that disappeared in those dramatic years, none of the codices selected for the fake London export are missing today.

In 1886 the monumental complex of the Girolamini in Naples, with its adjoining library, was declared a national monument by the new Italian State. Generoso Calenzio wanted the same treatment for the House of Oratorians, which had been designed and built by Francesco Borromini, especially since the Girolamini had later become affiliated with the Congregation of the Oratory of St. Philip Neri. The fate of the Girolamini library in recent years, with its spoliation leading to the arrest of its director in 2012, raises the question of whether regime changes in themselves are a cause of devastation.²¹ However, sad though it is to relate, such devastation is caused by failure to oversee the laws of the state, which the Italians, in contrast, were able to do in the case of Calenzio and the Vallicelliana codices, despite being in the midst of the First World War.

i seguenti codici: [segue un elenco estremamente scarno, di sole segnature, corrispondenti a 68 codici medievali databili tra il IX e il XIII secolo]. La lettera sia firmata dal Preposito, e se occorre anche dai Deputati, e diretta a me come Bibliotecario, finto mittente. Questo è il più gran beneficio che ci possono rendere in tempi sì luttuosi per la Congregazione di Roma madre di tutte le Congregazioni. Servo di Sua Riverenza Generoso Calenzio dell'Orat.[orio] di Roma, e Bibliotecario della Vallicelliana." Draft letter, Vallicelliana Library, Calenzio Dossier.

21 See Sergio Luzzatto, *Max Fox o le relazioni pericolose* (Turin: Einaudi, 2019).

APPENDIX

Manuscripts found in Generoso Calenzio's home in July 1916

See also <https://manus.iccu.sbn.it/web/manus>, accessed September 11, 2023.

- B7**, a thirteenth-century Bible, with contemporary and later annotations. These include a title added by the librarian Vincenzo Vettori (1740–1749): “Biblia sacra vulgate versionis, una cum alia interpretatione librorum Baruch et Esther, nuper edita in vindiciis vulgate editionis a presbytero Iosepho Blanchino veronensi congreg. orat. romani presb.” In the centre of the front cover, Vettori himself notes: “Codex saeculi XI.”
- B8**, an eleventh-century Benedictine missal, containing texts for year-round celebrations: one of the few manuscripts that preserve the Roman liturgy prior to the Gregorian Reform, from the monastic community of Saint Eutizius, one of the oldest monastic complexes in Italy and most important for Western monasticism.
- D38**, the Decretals of Pseudo-Isidore, the false decretals of an Isidore Mercator (also a false name not to be confused with Isidore of Seville), which includes letters of popes, mostly apocryphal, and authentic conciliar canons. The work, entitled *Isidori Mercatoris Collectio epistolarum Decretalium Summorum Pontificum et Conciliorum*, was compiled between 847 and 852 in France. This example is dated to the tenth century.
- E15** is a manuscript in three parts: the first contains a Sacramentary and a Penitential of the first half of the eleventh century, originally from the Basilica of St. Lawrence in Damasus in Rome; the second is of the second half of the century; the third is composed of five pieces belonging to a Sacramentary of the end of the eleventh century.
- E26** is a ninth-century collection of *libelli* with works by Bede (from the cosmographic and chronological works) in Caroline minuscule with autograph notes of Agobardo (Bishop of Lyon d. 840) in Visigothic; other notes are attributed to Florus of Lyon who studied the codex, dated between 840 and 848. Perhaps the same hand drew the monogram of Charlemagne. The manuscript, of Lyonesse origin, which survived the fire of the abbey of Saint-Martin de l'Île-Barbe caused by the Huguenots (1562) and came into the possession of the monk Jean Dubois, was donated by the latter to the Oratorians in 1605–1607, which were the golden years of Oratorian acquisitions, when the congregation reached its highest prestige.

