

Writing a Life

The “family book” by Bartolomeo Dal Bovo

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The Research

The object of this research is to understand the mechanism of cultural diffusion in the early modern age through a study of an enigmatic egodocument (a sort of family book) conserved at the Civic Library of Verona (Biblioteca Civica di Verona – BCVR) and finally its description (see the appendix) and the edition of memorial texts.¹ This egodocument (the main primary source) is very complex: to better understand the document we used an interdisciplinary method of research.²

Egodocuments and Family Books

In the mid-1950s, the Dutch historian Jacob Presser invented and introduced a new word in the vocabulary of history: egodocument. The term was used in order to indicate autobiographies, memoirs, diaries, personal letters and other texts in which an author writes about his or her own acts, thoughts and feelings. Initially, this word did not meet with success in the academic world; however, from the 1980s the new cultural history returned to egodocuments because they are ‘privileged sources’ to examine, for example, emotions, feelings, passions,

1 BCVR, manuscript ms. 827.

2 Among other primary sources, see two testaments by Bartolomeo Dal Bovo conserved in the Historical Archive of Verona (Archivio Storico di Verona – ASVR), *UR, Instrumenti*, mazzo 81, n. 12; m. 79, n. 27.

insights of persons and other important issues investigated by cultural and social history.

Family books are a particular type of egodocument: among them one can find peculiar elements from diaries, chronicles, travel writings or account books; all these texts were used by merchants during the latter half of Middle Ages. Merchants started to write personal information about their family in particular on the pages of the account books.³

From the Renaissance Age onward, these particular types of texts had a wide distribution due to the increased literary skills among the middle class population. A new era of literacy, started by notaries, secretaries, lawyers (the birth of humanism), begun to involve the middle-class in terms of cultural diffusion which egodocuments show to historians.

Some (pre)humanists lived and worked in Verona, a very important cultural center during the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, with its cathedral library (*Bibliotheca Capitularis Veronensis*) and its *scriptorium*. Here, for example, in 1345 Francesco Petrarca found a *codex* with unknown letters by Cicero (*Epistulae ad Atticum*).⁴

Not as many family books are preserved in the Veneto: we can find only one book in Padova and Belluno, five in Venice, none in Treviso and Rovigo, but there are ten books between Verona and Vicenza.

In 2002 James Grubb, an American historian, published his research on these books; he refuted the dominant hypothesis about the family books' diffusion in Veneto. According to Grubb, the poor diffusion was not caused by a bad diffusion of literacy in the north of Italy (in comparison with Tuscany where there were many of these books) or a poor fiscal policy by the Government of Venice; the overwhelming cultural difference is caused by the probative value of private documents in Florence/Tuscany.⁵ In controlling the private life of its citizens, the Venetian power reduced the space available for personal scriptures.

Another interpretation is focused on the city's élites; in the Veneto the élites were closed, stable and there was internal cohesion. For example, in 1478 lists

3 A famous case is that of Francesco Datini, a medieval merchant from Prato (near Florence); his archive is made by 150.000 texts. In this archive there are also 250 personal letters from him to his wife.

4 Other (pre)humanists in Verona include: Giovanni de Matociis, also known as Giovanni Mansionario, (middle XIII sec.-1337), Guglielmo da Pastrengo (1290-1362), Guarino Veronese (1370-1460). See e.g. DA PASTRENGO, 1991; SABBADINI 1885; SIMEONI, 1903-04.

5 GRUBB, 2002 and 2009.

of noble families (*zentilhomini e optimi zitadini*) appeared in Venice, Verona and Vicenza.⁶ These sumptuous memoirs and the solid power of government were sufficient to conserve the public interest, the memory and history of city. These few family books come from marginal families and are designed to build an artful image of them in order to enter in the élites (the books of Verità and Fracastoro, old noble families, are exceptions for Grubb).

In general, one has to agree with Grubb when he says: “compared to the better-known Florentine accounts, that is, the *libri di famiglie* of Veneto are laconic, sparse, short, without judgment, undefined in purpose, disinterested in genealogy, seldom overtly didactic, inclined to broad tropical horizons and not focused exclusively on the family”;⁷ but nevertheless, the family book by Bartolomeo Dal Bovo has a specific interest for its genealogy.

Bartolomeo’s Family Book – the Manuscript 827

In the Civic Library of Verona there is an interesting manuscript, a sort of notebook (though it most probably is a family book), which contains a mixture of different texts (literary miscellany).

There is no logical order in the succession or sections or notes; we can see a progressive numbering of the pages, though; in addition, a section of them is missing (from 87 to 110).

The texts are predominately religious (prayers, sermons, hymns, the lives of Saint Roch and Saint Agapitus Martyrs, apocryphal letters of Lentulus and Pontius Pilate, part of the Book of Psalms, a moral text by Pope Innocent III), but there are also medical prescriptions, calendars/almanacs, a magic ritual, and other heterodox texts, and at the end one finds memoirs about family history.

These kinds of texts are frequent in the Renaissance family books because they permitted a very important fund of knowledge to survive. In particular the religious text was expected to have an apotropaic power, allowing to lead a quiet life.

Three times Bartolomeo Dal Bovo addressed a long prayer to the image of a crucified Jesus; he particularly focused his prayer on the seven last utterances.⁸ These prayers cannot be associated with late medieval Christocentrism, though in fact, our writer had different intentions; Grubb says: “the Passion had

6 IBID., p. XX.

7 IBID., p. XXXVI.

8 Ms. 827, cc. 27^v; 28^r.

happened once and for all, and Christ was now dispenser of favor rather than model for imitation”.⁹ In fact Dal Bovo only desired relief from tribulations, persecutions, and the wrath of his enemies: “he asked protection from external threats rather than cure of his own vices”.¹⁰ A similar pragmatic spirit pervades his prayers to saints: for example he twice copied a poem on Saint Lucy that “stressed her healing of incurable illness”;¹¹ in the same way he recited Psalms and the Athanasian Creed (the *Quicumque vult*) over women in childbirth to protect them from death.¹²

A very interesting practice is recorded by Dal Bovo at the end of page 46: to keep away storms for a year, one should write down the Gospel for Ascension Day, slip the paper under the altar cloth before that day’s Mass, retrieve it afterward, and tie it to the clapper of the church bell. Thus, the power of the Mass was infused into a material object: “Jesus sacrificed combined with Jesus ascended (the Gospel text) to protect crops and town”.¹³

Bartolomeo wrote his family book to make sense of his world; Grubb says, in fact: “Memorialists wrote to give order to their world”.¹⁴ The memorialists found meaning and reassurance by sifting through temporal aspects of existence: history and genealogy taught right lessons from the past. Divination, prophecy and prognostication were highly developed in the family books of the Veneto.

The manuscript includes the ‘Egyptians Days’, copied by Dal Bovo:¹⁵ these numbers were two dozen unpropitious days for a long list of activities, for example bloodletting, building, planting, buying, selling, and the penalties were dire: “those who fell ill on these days would not rise from bed; an infant born then would not live, or would live in poverty; a man who took a wife would have no good thereby or would remain with her for a few days only or would live with her in poverty; anyone traveling to a foreign land would perish or not return”.¹⁶

Also almanacs and calendars were used to control the future and maybe an enigmatic mathematical game which is written near a calendar in the family book by Dal Bovo.¹⁷

9 GRUBB, 1996, p. 185f.

10 IBID., p. 186; see also NICCOLI, 2011.

11 IBID., p. 186.

12 See SHAHRAR, 1990, and in particular, p. 33-36.

13 GRUBB, 1996, p. 187.

14 IBID., p. 199.

15 Ms. 827, c. 4^v.

16 GRUBB, 1996, p. 200.

17 Ms. 827, c. 13^r.

The Making of the Book

The manuscript 827 is not a simple notebook (*zibaldone*) nor does it correspond to the model of family books. It has two ‘souls’ which produce a very strange complexity within the pages. In fact, there are some texts (or parts thereof) typical of family books but others are not.

For example, the sign of the Cross or the abbreviation of the name Jesus Christ (ICHS) in the headline is a typical form in family books: it is used to create a sacred ritual in the scripture, a sort of liturgical invocation of the Holy Spirit.¹⁸ Also the dating of events, the use of a strict formulary to remember the important family dates (births, deaths and marriages), and finally the use of merchant scripture (called *mercantesca*) are standard elements in all family books.

All of these elements are present in manuscript 827, but there are others which are not ascribable to the family books genre: calendars, almanacs and in particular many important religious texts.

A paleographical study on the making of this book can explain both natures of the book. In the beginning the book was composed of specific pages which created a sort of modern notebook for merchants (*agenda*). In fact the first page of the initial book’s binding (as page color confirms) is distinguished by a sort of time control scripture: for example, a Christian calendar, an almanac, or an enigmatic wheel used to determinate the day of the Jewish Easter.¹⁹

This first project, however, was abandoned; Bartolomeo Dal Bovo probably decided to create a prestigious book for his family with important religious texts written by professional scribes (*copisti*). In the meantime he decided to incorporate into these texts a fund of knowledge to be preserved, a sort of ‘household of knowledge’ (*masserizia di conoscenza*), and so he started to create a family book. Finally, when he was eighty, he started to write his memoirs in the second part of the book (page 51 of 119), and inserted a number of prayers and medical recipes in the first part. Thus, he created a particular second section for the memories; however, his son Antonio did not use this section: he simply wrote his formulary onto the first blank page he found.

18 See CICHETTI/MORDENTI, 1984, p. 1117-1159.

19 Ms. 827, cc. 7^v; 13^r; 14^v.

The Author(s)

As paleographical analyses proved, the texts are written by thirty different persons and we have been able to recognize only two of them: Bartolomeo Dal Bovo (a merchant) and his son Antonio (a notary). Certainly some persons responsible for the writing of other texts were professional writers (they probably worked in a *scriptorium*): they had beautiful handwritings, but remain unknown.

The main author of the book is Bartolomeo Dal Bovo: he wrote the major part of the texts and probably commissioned numerous others; but who was Bartolomeo?

Bartolomeo Dal Bovo was born in Verona in 1403; his family came from Bovo, a little village situated in the countryside of Verona (*campanea maior*). Here he had a country seat and probably a farm; in fact, he was also a medium-size landowner: his family possessed many lands in the province of Verona. His principal occupation, however, was dealing in wool and other textiles: he called himself a textiles merchant (*scapizzator*); he was related to Andrea da Garda, a very important merchant.

His family was a 'new comer' in the civic nobility; for example, a member of the family, the notary Celestino de Bovis, was implicated in Fregnano Della Scala's conspiracy in 1354.²⁰ From the XIV century, the family was settled in the center of Verona, in the quarter of San Pietro Incarnario; here, in a house near the church, Bartolomeo lived and worked with his family.

As his memoirs show, Bartolomeo wanted to enter into the city nobility but his profession was an impediment because trade was not considered to be a noble occupation. For this reason he initiated his son Antonio and Zenone into a notary career. At the same time he claimed the right to be a feudatory; he succeeded in snatching a fief from the hands of distant relations.

Bartolomeo's Memoirs

In the second part of the book an eighty-year-old Bartolomeo Dal Bovo noted down all the memories of his family. Only one memory is located in the first part, but "when Bartolomeo Dal Bovo traced a previous generation's service to the Scaligeri, he did so not to prove glorious antiquity but to set the context for the family's discovery of an excellent cure for dog bites."²¹

20 VARANINI, 1984, p. 9-66.

21 GRUBB, 2002, p. XXXIII.

His memoirs are written for the necessity of their time: he wanted to give (to) his family some instruments in order to enable them to reclaim the property of home, fief and Bovo's church.

For example he remembered when he bought his home in San Pietro Incarnario with all the changes of ownership from the first buyer (up) to him and showed us a view of real life in a Renaissance city (he remembered when he served on a three-person committee of *fabricadori* that oversaw the physical plant of the church).²²

Moreover, he also wanted to give nobility to his family through the memory of past public office: for example, he was a *vicario* in Soave, a town near Verona, in 1452. For this reason he described the story of his fief, changes of ownership and the approval by the bishop.²³ These memories represent the largest section of all texts in the book: Bartolomeo considered the fief as the most important means to becoming a nobleman.

For the same reason he re-founded the church of Bovo, from simple family chapel to church; he "was pleased when Verona's suffragan laid the first stone of a family chapel, and was further honored that Bishop Matteo remained to share a meal and chrismate neighborhood children."²⁴ Finally the church was decorated by an image of Saint Bovo on a horse with a flag.²⁵

In front of this church Bartolomeo built a monument to celebrate the history of Bovo and his family. In this monument, now repositioned near the church, two episodes from local annals are written (*Chronicon Veronense*), within which Bovo is nominated in two wartime notes.²⁶ In this monument there is also the Dal Bovo family's coat of arms: five waves and six stars.²⁷

Finally he wrote memoirs about his family (marriages, deaths, births, etc.), with the help of his father Antonio;²⁸ "these *Memorie* provided the genealogical, political and moral resources for future solidarity and survival."²⁹

22 Ms. 827, cc. 52^r-54^r.

23 IBID., cc. 65^v-69^r.

24 GRUBB, 1996, p. 212.

25 In the flag there is an ox (= bue/bove).

26 Ms 827, cc. 57^v; 64^v.

27 IBID., c. 55^r.

28 IBID., cc. 3^r-3^v; 67^r; 115^v-116^r.

29 GRUBB, 2002, cit., p. XXXIII.

Conclusion

Among the pages of this family book one can find a cross-section of the culture in middle-class Renaissance. Within the book there are texts which came from a high culture center (perhaps from the *scriptorium Veronensis*) associated with knowledge derived from popular culture. In order to explain such cultural hybridism there are two possible explanations: either the book travelled from hand to hand and eventually got back to its first owner, or it stayed in the house all the time and different guests wrote down their knowledge; the first hypothesis, though, is more probable.

Whatever the case, Bartolomeo and other authors of this enigmatic family book assigned their memoirs and knowledge to writing in order to make sense of their world; this cultural practice was reassuring: the future is less frightening if you allow the cultural background of your family to survive.

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