

Figlia, Nicolò: Il Codice Chieutino, edizione critica e concordanza a cura di Matteo Mandalà. Mezzoiuso: Comune di Mezzoiuso 1995. xcv + 606 pp.

The Codex of Chieuti, dating from approximately 1736, is one of the earliest literary manuscripts in Albanian and, with the exception of the *E mbsuame e krështerë* (Christian doctrine, 1592) by the Sicilian priest Luca Matranga (Alb. *Lekë Matrënga*), is the earliest substantial work of Arbëresh (Italo-Albanian) literature known to date. As such, it is of fundamental linguistic, historical and literary significance, both for the culture of the Albanian minority in southern Italy and for Albanian culture in general.

Long known of and cited, but never subject of a sound philological study, this manuscript has now been published in a 700-page (and 1.5 kilo!) critical edition by Arbëresh scholar Matteo Mandalà of the University of Palermo.

The Codex of Chieuti was first discovered in 1901-1902 by Michele Marchianò during his 'literary voyage' through the Arbëresh villages of Capitanata: Chieuti (Alb. *Qeuti*), Campomarino (Alb. *Këmarini*), and Portocannone (Alb. *Portkanuni*) in northern Apulia and neighbouring Molise. It later fell into the hands of the Arbëresh scholar Giuseppe Gangale (1898-1978) who scoured southern Italy in the sixties in search of Albanian manuscripts for the creation of an Albanological Institute in Copenhagen. Gangale, though unsuccessful in his endeavours towards the creation of such an institute, fortunately made a photostatic copy of the manuscript, which forms the basis of the present edition. The original manuscript, which seems to have been in the possession of Prof. Namik Ressuli (1908-1985) of the Institute of Oriental Studies in Naples, later (1975-1981) head of the Albanian studies department at the University of Rome, has since disappeared, as apparently have other manuscripts once in Ressuli's possession.

The author, or at least compiler and owner of the Codex of Chieuti, was one Nicolò Figlia (1682?-1769), an Arbëresh priest from Mezzoiuso (Alb. *Munxifsi*) in Sicily. Figlia served for many years as an archpriest in distant Chieuti, until 1727 when he resolved to return to his native Mezzoiuso, and it is here that the venerable codex of 105 folios (210 pages) was compiled in the local dialect.

The codex was divided by Marchianò into five sections: 1.) an Albanian catechism or Christian Doctrine called *I Cristèu i Arbrésc mbësuar në mistiriet kliscese scëite* (The Albanian Christian instructed in the mysteries of the Holy Church); 2.) the 324-line *Kënkëzë e Venecjanit* (Song of the Venetian); 3.) three short poems entitled *Kënkëzë t'Arbreshja nxjerrë kaha Monsinjur Nili* (Albanian Songs produced by Monsignor Nilo); 4.) eighteen *Kënkëzë të tjera të pleqrisë* (Other songs of old age); and 5.) thirty-three other religious songs. Figlia was probably the author of the catechism and some of the poems, but we also find verse by Nilo Catalano (1637-1694) of the Messina region and Nicolò Brancato (1675-1741) of Piana degli Albanesi. The poems in the codex are of no particular literary refinement, nor could such be expected of the first attempts at writing in the rustic Sicilian Albanian dialect of the early eighteenth century. As a linguistic and cultural monument, however, the codex is of inestimable value (the dialect of Mezzoiuso is now extinct).

In his ninety-five page introduction, Mandalà presents the codex and its author to the reader, placing them in their proper cultural perspective: biographical profile of the author (p. xxi-xxiv), composition of the manuscript (p. xxv-xxx), description of the manuscript and of the Cosenza copy (p. xxx-xxxii), the contents of the codex (p. xxxiii-xxxix), the codex and the Italo-Albanian cultural context of the 18th century (p. xxxix-lxxvii), the alphabet question and the writing system of the codex (p. lxxviii-lxxxiv), the faithful reproduction of the codex (p. lxxxv-lxxxvi), criteria for the transcription (p. lxxxvii-xciv), critical apparatus, translation, concordance (p. xcv). Then follow the faithful reproduction (p. 1-42), the transliteration (p. 43-144), the Italian translation (p. 145-229), the concordance (p. 231-582), various

appendices (p. 583-598), and a bibliography (p. 599-606).

Particularly useful for a manuscript of essentially linguistic interest is the concordance. It has been Arbëresh scholars like Mandalà who in recent years have been introducing more rigorous methods of textual criticism to Albanian studies, including computerized concordances of important texts. Francesco Altimari's recent edition (Rende 1994) of Naim Frashëri's *Bagëti' e bujqësija* (Bucolics and Georgics, 1886) is, for instance, the first Albanian book to come complete with a computer disk.

If one had to criticize anything in this excellent edition of the Codex of Chieuti, then perhaps only that the translation comes after the transliteration and is not *en face*, but this is a minor point. For anyone interested in early Arbëresh culture or in Albanian dialectology, the Codex of Chieuti is a must.

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