

STEFANOS G. DELLA ROCCA, THE FATHER OF BEEKEEPING

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Stefano Della Rocca, was a Greek Catholic priest from the island of Syros. He is called 'father' of beekeeping as he invented the first wooden hive with **movable comb**, in Syros back in 1780 (Fig. 1, 2). He also published his "Traité complet sur les abeilles" (Study on beekeeping) in France and created the first State Beekeeping school in Versailles with the generous support of the Queen of France, in 1794. Della Rocca is also regarded as the first historian of Syros due to the fact that in the first book of his "Traité complet sur les abeilles" he shortly refers in the history of his home land, Syros dated from the ancient years till the last decade of the 18th century.

Short biography

S. Della Rocca was born in Istanbul in 1738. His parents were Greeks from Syros Island. He finished the Cappuccinos monks' school in Galata area, and then he left for Rome, where he studied Theology and Philosophy for eight years in the Greek College of Rome, Ag. Athanasios. In 1774 he returns to Syros as a priest and at the same time he is practicing beekeeping, and starts writing "Traité complet sur les abeilles" (Fig. 3). In 1788, the local Municipality appointed him leader of a donating campaign in Europe, in order to collect money and to pay the heavy taxes imposed by the Turks to people from Syros. With this excuse he traveled to Italy and France and he collected much more evidences and facts for his study. Meantime he used the writing as a means to show to the rest of Europeans how much the people with the 'most glorious ancient civilization' were suffering under the Turkish occupation and that they had the 'right' to be free.

Finally, his "Traité complet sur les abeilles" was much greater than he thought, and it was published in a series of three books after been financed by the Queen of France. In the introduction of this book he says:

"When I arrived in France, I started studying all written works on beekeeping, as for example by Réaumur, Bonnet, Ducarne de Blancis, La Grenée, Pingeron, Duchet, Wildman with notes by Contardi. I also consulted the old and new encyclopedia and other French and Italian writers. I also read many parts of the 'Natural History' by Le Buffon, all in relation to bees. All this search and reading reinforce my idea that the people from Syros have a superior beekeeping practice! Every beekeeper I talked to agreed with me on this, and they suggested that I should write a book on this issue, that this book it would be well received in France, as beekeeping was not so well developed and the wax production was very low and important.

So I followed their advice mainly to show my appreciation to the State of France where I spent my youth years. My intention was to write a short book for the methods used by people from Syros to manage these insects. Therefore I studied everything that was written till then and I discovered many mistakes related to the natural and economical history of bees. My passion for beekeeping and truth, lead me further than I initially thought and finally I was confronted with a complete study on the subject without having the intentions to do so" (Fig. 4).

At the time Della Rocca was visiting France, the French revolution took place, and he was not then allowed to return to Greece. Therefore, he remained

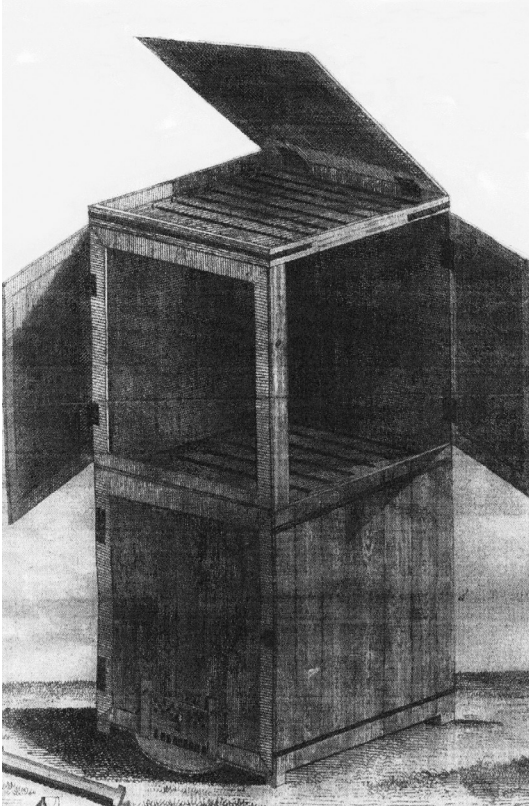


Fig. 1 The wooden hive build by Della Rocca in Syros island.

in France and managed to convince the Minister of Agriculture of France to create a state school for beekeeping. The school was established on the 21st of March 1794., at the small park of Versailles and it still exists. The aim of the school was not only the teaching of beekeeping but also the production of honey and wax, as the later was also very rare at that time. At the same time, wooden hives, beekeeping equipment and other tools were also made and many bee beneficial trees were planned around the park. The arrangement with the Ministry of Agriculture was for Della Rocca and his assistance to have a salary, but this seldom happened, due to the financial and political problems of the time. The income from honey and wax was returned to the state in order to cover the expenses of the school. However, the costs were almost equal to the income.

The 1798 was a catastrophic year for Della Rocca as he was accused by some beekeepers, and the Minister of Agriculture found a good excuse to close the school on the 12th of January. After that he could not receive his wages and till 1810 he lived from the support of charities. In 1810 then writes a letter to the Minister of External Affairs:



Fig. 2 The apiary site of Della Rocca in Syros.

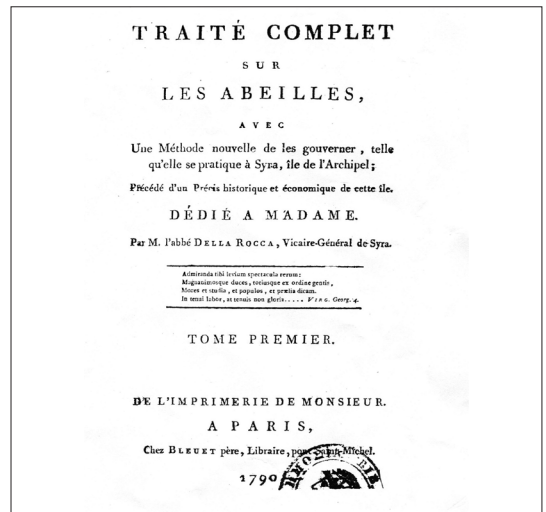


Fig. 3 The cover of the first tome of the "Traité complet sur les abeilles".

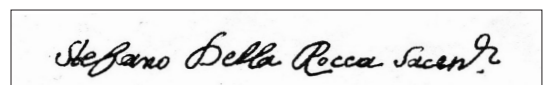


Fig. 4 Signature of Stefano Della Rocca.

"I am a Greek priest, forced to live in France because of the revolution. I am 72 years old and I had come to France with the task to collect money to help my fellow countrymen. I was working with the bees to support the French state, but I was not allowed to finish my work.

Stefano Della Rocca was given a pension of 300 francs, an amount determined by the Minister who had chosen for his sign the picture of a bee.