

THE USE OF WOOD AS A WRITING MEDIUM DURING THE PLAGUE OF MALTA OF 1813

by

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IN THE epidemiological history of the Maltese Islands, plague plays a very conspicuous part. At least three major outbreaks of this disease are on record, i.e. in 1592–93, 1675–76 and 1813. This last epidemic lasted from May 1813 to February 1814.¹ The preventive measures adopted by the sanitary authorities of the time to stem the spread of the disease were the subject of a controversy that continued to engage the attention of the medical profession and of the British Government for many years after the cessation of the epidemic.²

The aetiology of plague and its means of propagation were then completely unknown. Although the association of rodents with outbreaks of plague had been noted since Biblical times,³ no light had been cast on the connection between these animals and the appearance of the malady. In Malta the nearest approach linking plague with its animal reservoir was the observation made by ‘an old resident practitioner’ in 1813 that the disease ‘seldom went upstairs’;⁴ however, the real significance of this remark—that rats were more likely to inhabit cellars and groundfloors than the upper apartments of a house—escaped everyone. The causation of plague was not elucidated until the close of the nineteenth century when the plague bacillus was discovered in 1894. The suggestion that the rat was implicated and that the bacillus was transmitted from sick rodents to man by the bite of infected fleas was first made in 1897.⁵

In the absence of such knowledge in 1813, medical men tried to explain the appearance and spread of plague by the theories of miasma and of contagion. The former attributed plague to the exhalations in the atmosphere arising from decaying matter and from marshes; and the latter, to a poison originating in man himself and carried from person to person by contact with his body or his personal belongings. The contagion theory held sway in Malta in 1813 and various objects were singled out as being dangerous fomites of the disease. The seeds of plague were believed to lurk not only in food and hairs but also in paper; indeed the employment of paper for wrapping purposes was specifically prohibited by government. The people were cautioned against the introduction of paper into their homes and instructed to fumigate it before touching it when its introduction could not be prevented. They were also enjoined to search for small scraps of paper among coffee beans, grains of sugar, etc., and to burn them after removing them with pincers from these foodstuffs.⁶ It appears that even important documents were burned to get rid of paper; in fact Dr. W. H. Burrell complained in 1854 of the want of military medical records concerning diseases among the troops stationed in the island in 1813 because ‘like many public documents of the time, they were probably suspected and destroyed’.⁷ It is not surprising, therefore, that the use of paper as writing material, though not officially banned, was eschewed by some correspondents.⁸

The fear of paper as a vehicle of plague persisted for many years afterwards so much so that an elaborate system for the disinfection of foreign mail was in operation at the Malta Lazzaretto where letters from abroad were picked up by means of iron forceps and then slit and fumigated in specially constructed cupboards.⁹

In contrast to paper, wood was not considered to be an article susceptible to plague; it was, therefore, safe to handle and that was why pieces of wood were used as a writing medium during the epidemic. The existence of such wooden manuscripts seems to be unique to the Maltese Islands; however they had been totally forgotten until I happened to come across one of them in 1961 during my research work on the medical history of Malta. This discovery excited my curiosity as I had not met any evidence—literary or otherwise—pointing to the existence of such documents on wood. I set out to search for more and by the end of that year I had traced, in all, six such tablets an account of which has been given elsewhere.¹⁰ They consisted of: (1) a receipt dated 15 August, (2) a letter of 21 August, (3) a testament dated 9 September, (4) a power-of-attorney dated 19 September, (5) a letter of 5 October and (6) a receipt of 2 December 1813.

I have now found three other documents on wood belonging to the plague period. Like the previous ones they are written in Italian which was then the language of cultured people in Malta. They are: (1) a bill, with the relative receipt, dated 29 October 1813 for the sum of 67 'scudi' and 3 'tari'¹¹, being the cost of the various items of material (wood, nails, etc.) required for the manufacture of two pelmets, two chairs and a door. It is signed by Luigi Mifsud who was the carpenter who carried out the work. The tablet measures $4\frac{1}{2} \times 10\frac{3}{4}$ in. (11.5 x 27.5 cm.) and $\frac{1}{4}$ in. (6 mm.) in thickness (fig. 1). (2) A receipt for 50 'scudi' from the Baroness Damico Inguanez signed by the Rev. Saverio Vassallo. It is dated 23 September and measures $3 \times 2\frac{3}{4}$ in. (7.5 x 7 cm.) with a thickness of just over $\frac{1}{4}$ in. (6 mm.). (3) A letter from the Rev. Canon Francesco Borg of Zeitun village addressed to the 'Most Illustrious Baroness Maria Damico Inguanez' who lived at Notabile (or Mdina) the old capital city of Malta. It is written on two separate wooden tablets each of which is approximately 7 x 4 in. (18 x 10 cm.) and $\frac{1}{4}$ in. (6 mm.) thick (fig. 2). Translated freely in English it reads as follows:

'Jesus for ever.

I cannot express the supreme pleasure that I felt, together with my sister and Catherine, at the receipt of the good news concerning the very good state of health enjoyed not only by Your Most Illustrious Self but also by the Most Illustrious Teresa and Rosolea and Pasquale. We, too, by the grace of God, are in good health; we thank Him for preserving us and for delivering us, not only from the present scourge, but also from the many other ills to which we are prone. We always trust in Him and in the protection of the Holy Virgin to grant us the desired favours. We never cease praying. In spite of my unworthiness, I pray for you every day during the sacrifice of the Mass; indeed I have never failed to do so.

It was very sad to hear of the deaths of Dr. Gravagna and of Catherine. Alas! We must conform to the will of God.

In my last letter I did not mention the grain which you deigned to acquire for me. I wish, therefore, to let you know that we have already obtained our usual supply

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from Zeitun. We thank you and feel just as grateful to you as if we had received it.

The inhabitants of Zabbar village were in danger of being completely wiped out (by the plague) but thanks to the offerings they made to the Holy Virgin they were miraculously spared. It is said that the value of their gifts amounted to seven thousand 'scudi.'

As you are aware, we, at Zeitun, have been by the Grace of God quite free from the disease for a long time but the Parish Priest continues to expel from church anyone he finds there and has persisted in denying Holy Communion to those who ask for it. Indeed my sister and Catherine had to do an hour's walk to (the chapel of) Fort San Luciano to receive Holy Communion. The people of Zeitun miss their sacraments very deeply.

My sister, Catherine and I send you our best regards. May you all be well and cheerful and may the Grace of Our Lord Jesus Christ be always with us.

Your Most Humble and Grateful
Servant

Rev. Canon Francesco Borg.

Zeitun, 5th October 1813.'

A few comments are called for in order to clarify certain points raised in this letter and place them in their proper historical setting.

THE WRITER AND THE RECIPIENT OF THE LETTER

Nothing is known about the priest who wrote the letter other than is contained in the tablet.

The recipient was Donna Maria Damico Inguanez, Baroness of Bucana and of Djar-il-Bniet. In 1813 she was the head of the oldest noble family of Malta, her husband, Baron Alexander, having died in 1801.¹² The fief and title were originally granted by Louis, King of Sicily in 1350.¹³ The Inguanez were the hereditary governors of Malta from the Middle Ages until the advent of the Order of St. John to the Island in 1530. Their family escutcheon is still extant on the internal aspect of the Main Gate of Mdina where the family has had its seat for centuries.

DR. LEONE FRANCESCO GRAVAGNA

Dr. L. F. Gravagna was the physician who had examined and treated the first two cases of plague when the illness appeared in mid-April 1813. He did not see any further cases and when he died four months later from the plague, his death was ascribed to infection from handling money received from a cartman. He lived at 148 Merchants Street, Valletta, 'near the most infected part of the town'. At the time of his demise he was a member of the Board of Health and Acting Chief Government Medical Officer ('Protomedico') in lieu of Dr. Aloysius Caruana who was then detained in quarantine. His obituary in the official government gazette describes him as being renowned for his professional knowledge and experience.¹⁴ Dr. Gravagna was not the only medical man to die of the disease. It has been estimated that over one hundred physicians and surgeons were engaged in treating plague patients and that thirteen of them lost their lives through this disease.¹⁵

GRAIN

One of the gravest problems that Malta has had to face during its long history has been the provision of an adequate supply of food for its inhabitants. Bread has always been the staple article of diet of the Maltese but the quantity of wheat grown in an island of just over ninety-one square miles has never been sufficient to meet the needs of its population. As a way out, a municipal board was set up in medieval times to import and lay in a supply of corn equal to the wants of the inhabitants. Since the mid-sixteenth century the imported wheat was stored in underground pits or granaries excavated in the rock. Here the wheat was preserved for years without deteriorating. The granaries, which are still in use at the present day, contained not only the supply normally needed by the islanders but also reserve stocks that might have been required in the event of a siege. To prevent these stocks from falling into the hands of an invading enemy, the granaries were almost exclusively dug within the fortifications of Valletta and Floriana. During the 1813 epidemic all communication between Valletta and Floriana with the countryside was cut off to prevent the spread of the disease to the rural areas. This measure, however, hindered the transport of wheat from the granaries of Valletta and Floriana to the various villages where the reserves of wheat were limited. The depletion of these reserves became a source of concern to the countryside; hence the reference to the acquisition of wheat in the letter of Rev. F. Borg. The difficulty of supplying the villages was overcome by the erection, on the fortifications of Floriana, of a machine which delivered grain into the carts from the countryside without their entering Valletta and Floriana, thus preventing contact between the two towns and the countryside.¹⁶

OFFERINGS TO THE HOLY VIRGIN AT ZABBAR

Since very early times man has believed that illness is sent upon humankind as a punishment for transgressing the divine laws. This concept underlies the causation of disease as described in the Old Testament¹⁷ and has also influenced later Christian thought. Sir Thomas Maitland, who was appointed Governor and Commander-in-Chief of the Maltese Islands during the plague epidemic, wrote to Lord Bathurst that he regarded plague as being 'a direct scourge of God'.¹⁸ Another Englishman, J. D. Tully, Surgeon to the Forces, refers to Providence as having 'inflicted this calamity' on the Maltese Islands.¹⁹ The notion that disease is a divine punishment for sins committed is still one of the folk beliefs of the Maltese Islands; hence the old custom of offering gifts to the deity in order to obtain mercy and ensure recovery from illness. In many churches of Malta and Gozo one can still see numerous 'ex-votos' in the form of paintings or of small anatomical parts of the human body in silver foil hung up on the walls in thanksgiving for deliverance from serious accidents or grave maladies. The sanctuary of Zabbar, dedicated to Our Lady of Graces and mentioned in the wooden letter, is renowned for the variety of such votive objects it contains.²⁰

Rev. Borg's anxiety about the state of health of Zabbar was quite justified as this village was then only about one-and-a-half miles from Zeitun. As things turned out, however, Zeitun was lightly hit by the plague and escaped with only eleven deaths while the number of fatal cases at Zabbar was limited to forty-four out of a total

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mortality of 4,668 persons in a population of over 100,000 for the Islands of Malta and Gozo.²¹

EXPULSION FROM THE CHURCH AT ZEITUN

One of the measures taken to prevent contact among the inhabitants was the closure of schools, the theatre and the law courts. The Bishop co-operated with the civil and sanitary authorities by exhorting the people to obey the quarantine regulations devised for their own safety and by warning them that by disregarding these regulations they were not only failing in the exercise of Christian Charity towards their neighbours but also incurring eternal damnation. On 24 May 1813 he issued a pastoral letter in which, after stating that plague was disseminated by 'contact and by crowds', he declared that in order to diminish intercourse among the inhabitants he had found himself faced with the 'hard necessity of closing the churches to the people'. However, he enjoined the faithful to assist in spirit, from the privacy of their homes, at the Sacrifice of the Mass which was celebrated at stated times in the parish churches.²² These circumstances explain why the Parish Priest of Zeitun would not allow anyone in his church. He was the Very Rev. Bartolomeo Sant who escaped the plague but fell a victim to cholera when this disease struck the island in epidemic proportions in 1837.²³ The churches were opened to the public towards the end of January 1814 when Sir Thomas Maitland directed that the 29 January 'be set apart as a day of solemn prayer and thanksgiving to Almighty God' in acknowledgement of 'the gracious interposition of Divine Providence in relieving these Islands from the dreadful calamity' of plague. The Bishop, too, ordered the celebration of a solemn *Te Deum* in the churches within his episcopal jurisdiction²⁴.

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