

SANITARY ORGANIZATION IN MALTA IN 1743

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A paper read to the British Medical Association (Malta Branch) on the 10th March, 1966)

Down the centuries until recent times, the most dreaded medical disaster that could befall a community was an invasion by pestilence. Together with the rest of Europe, Malta has had its share of these visitations and the Order of St. John of Jerusalem had to face the challenge of two major plague epidemics during its stay of two hundred and sixty-eight years in these Islands, i.e. in 1592-93 and in 1675-76.

Through the eighteenth century many places in Europe saw the outbreak of epidemics of bubonic plague — Prussia in

1709, Vienna in 1713, Marseilles in 1721, Ukraine in 1737, Messina in 1743 and Moscow from 1789 to 1811 (1). Of these foci of infection, the nearest to Malta, and hence the most dangerous to it, was that of Messina with which Malta had close commercial relations. It is understandable, therefore, that the events at Messina should have aroused acute concern in Malta and alerted the Grand Master and Council to take steps to counteract the menace of plague infiltration.

The Messina epidemic began towards the end of March, 1743, on board a Neapolitan ship arriving from Missolonghi (Greece). It reached its peak on the 6th

June. The town was so badly hit and disorganised that the Senate of Messina sought to enlist the help of other towns in Sicily and also of the Order of St. John in Malta.

On the 17th June the Senate wrote to the Grand Master entreating him to send them a number of slaves or at least two doctors who were experienced in the treatment of plague to succour the city "which was perishing". To understand the demand for slaves the following facts must be borne in mind: (a) The Moslem and the Christian powers of the Mediterranean were, in those days, engaged in relentless warfare on religious grounds and the vanquished were taken slaves by the victors; (b) most of the slaves in the hands of Christians were men from the Barbary coast, from Turkey and from other places in the Levant; (c) plague was then endemic in these areas especially in Turkey; (d) it was believed that the surviving inhabitants of these areas of pestilence became resistant to the disease and that one attack of the malady conferred immunity for life. These facts explain why slaves from Turkey and the Barbary coast were sought after for nursing and treating plague patients. It has been recorded, for instance, that the King of Naples had sent to Messina four Barbary slaves who had, in the past, suffered from plague in the Levant and had recovered from it. During the Messina epidemic these captives were employed in such dangerous tasks as the disposal of infected clothing and the removal of corpses and yet none of them was attacked by the disease (2).

The Order of St. John sent neither slaves nor physicians to Messina. Indeed the Senate of the stricken city did not even receive a reply. It has been suggested by the Secretary of the Senate that the letter perhaps never reached Malta. This is quite possible as the postal services of Messina had broken down. An eyewitness has, in fact, stated that "those who were entrusted with the delivery of letters were everywhere, both by land and by sea, driven away by force" while those letters that reached their destination were so heavily depurated by their recipients that

they were illegible on account of the burning and other treatment to which they had been subjected to remove all traces of "contagion" from them (3)2.

The precautions adopted in the eighteenth century by the more advanced maritime powers of the Mediterranean against the introduction of plague and other "contagious" illnesses were based on the idea that these diseases were propagated by personal contact or by contaminated cargoes. The routine Port Sanitary measures applied by these countries, such as by France at Marseilles and by Italy at Leghorn, were:

(A) Control over shipping by means of Bills of Health. In Turkey these documents were issued by the Consuls of the various nationalities; in Christian countries they were drawn up by the local government. These Bills testified to the state of the public health in the country and its neighbourhood and stated the number and names of the passengers and crew. They were of three kinds:

(a) Clean Bill of Health attesting the absence of pestilential illnesses at the port of departure. Such a bill ensured the disembarkation of passengers and cargo at the port of arrival without any hindrance or formality (*free pratique*).

(b) Suspected Bill of Health declaring the existence of a malady suspected of being of a pestilential nature or else that the port of departure was in free communication with a country suspected of being infected or that was actually so. A ship with such a bill was relegated in quarantine in a special area of the port.

(c) Foul Bill of Health certifying that the port of departure was infected. The ship with its passengers, crew and cargo was confined in strict quarantine in an area of the port reserved for the purpose and cut off from communication with the shore and other vessels.

(B) Quarantine for persons and goods. This was a period of isolation in special establishments, known as *Lazzarettos*. Here the passengers and goods were submitted to certain operations intended to destroy the "contagious" agents attached to persons and merchandise. The

period of quarantine varied from a few days to forty or even eighty days.

(C) Purification or disinfection of letters by fumigation, immersion in vinegar and other means.

These measures were all scrupulously observed in Malta as the Order of St. John had brought the sanitary system of the Island as close as possible to European standards. However quarantine restrictions had been enforced in Malta since at least 1458 — and probably earlier — that is, a good seventy years before the coming of the Order of St. John to Malta in 1530. From this year onwards the Knights implemented the quarantine laws which they had developed during their stay in Rhodes. These laws were modified and amplified during the succeeding centuries and by 1743 had become incorporated in the Island's legal codes of Grand Master A. Manoel de Vilhena and Grand Master Em. de Rohan (4). In brief they were:

(a) No ship could disembark passengers or crew before its bill of health had been examined by the port sanitary authority. Following the plague of 1655 ships were no longer allowed to berth in Kalkara Creek as it had been found that the infection of that year had been introduced by a farmer who had dealings with the crew of a ship moored in that creek. Vessels that entered the Grand Harbour only to replenish their food supplies were made to anchor beneath the Lower Barracca or Post of Castille. Such ships were kept under the constant watch of two boats from the Sanitary Office. In the event of a "gregale" springing up, these ships were allowed to move behind Senglea for the duration of bad weather.

Ships that had to undergo quarantine were diverted to Marsamxett Harbour which was then known as the Quarantine Harbour. Boats were prohibited from entering this harbour except when seeking shelter from a storm. In such a case they were to berth behind Dragut Point, after the Master had called out his name and surname to the guard stationed on Fort St. Elmo.

(b) All merchandise likely to convey "contagion" was landed at the Lazzaretto

for depuration by airing or "smoking".

(c) Passengers and crews were detained at the Lazzaretto for variable periods of time and there depurated, together with their personal belongings, by fumigation. Passengers underwent two "smokings" — on admission to quarantine and two days prior to the expiry of quarantine before being granted free pratique.

(d) Incoming letters were disinfected at the Lazzaretto by slitting or chiselling them and then "smoking" them in apposite cupboards over the fumes of burnt straw and perfumes. Sometimes they were also immersed in vinegar (5).

(e) Contraventions were punished by sentencing the malefactor to be a rower on board a galley for life, or even to death.

When the risk of importing "contagion" into the Island was greater than usual, special additional and stricter precautions were taken. Hence the stringent sanitary instructions that were issued and carried into effect on the occasion of the plague of Messina of 1743.

Rumours about the occurrence of suspicious cases of contagious illness at Messina were current in Malta by the end of April; so much so that on the 1st of May His Serene Highness Grand Master Fra Manoel Pinto de Fonçeca felt the need of issuing a *bando* or proclamation to forestall in time "any disorder or inconvenience" likely to disturb the public health "especially in these times" of suspicious illness at Messina. This *bando* prohibited boats that entered the Grand Harbour from approaching other craft before they were visited and examined by the Commissioners of Health. Fishing boats were not allowed to go beyond a twenty mile limit from the shores of Malta and Gozo. All ships were to give truthful information about their port of departure, the places they had touched on the way and the ships with which they had communicated during their voyage. The captain was obliged to tender a "specific and distinct" account of the whole voyage and to state whether there had been any cases of illness on board, the number of passengers and the place of their embarkation. Disregard or

contravention of these injunctions was punished by death (6).

Official confirmation of the existence of "contagious disease" at Messina reached the Grand Master and Council of State on the 29th May, 1743. It came in the form of a letter from the Order's Agent in that city and from the Health Board of Reggio Calabria. The Grand Master and Council set up a special Commission of Knights to invigilate, with the Ordinary High Commissioner, on the public health and "to proceed with the necessary precautions in conformity with the decrees and good practice of the Religion" (7).

The Commission was composed of: The Venerable Grand Commander Fra Ottavio de Gallean, President of the Treasury; the Venerable Admiral Fra Pietro Rovero di Guarena; the Venerable Grand Chancellor Fra D. Giuseppe Pixiotto and the Venerable Prior of Germany Fra Filippo Guglielmo Count of Nesselroad. The high rank and status of these officials testifies to the earnestness and determination with which the Order tackled the duty of safeguarding the health of the Island.

The Commission's first act was to recall to port the galley squadron that had left Malta the previous day bound for Augusta and Civitavecchia in order to avoid any contact with the Italian mainland.

On the same day the Commissioners framed a series of "Regulations for this General Port and for that of Marsamxett concerning ships coming from Sicily". In compliance with these regulations ships from Sicily were to discharge their cargo at the place and manner decided upon by one of the Ordinary Health Commissioners who was to be present during the operation. The ship with its crew was then directed to a section of the port assigned to it by the same Commissioner. Vessels carrying livestock were to proceed to Marsamxett Harbour where the animals were landed and provided with the necessary fodder and water.

On the same day the Commissioners issued orders for the watching of the shores of Malta and Comino. Every shallow bay and inlet was to be guarded by

a number of men under the command of a knight while the *Turcopoli* or cavalry were to inspect all inlets and notify the nearest coastal tower of the presence of any ships therein (a).

Two knights were sent to Gozo to supervise, under the command of the Governor and his Lieutenant, the guards of its various towers. The Knights were also to ensure that the night patrols posted along the littoral were awake at night to foil attempts at clandestine landings from ships coming from ports other than those of Malta.

These arrangements do not seem to have been found stringent enough for, two days later, on the 31st May, the Commissioners tightened their control over the coasts of Malta and Gozo by other means. They disposed four boats known as "*speronare*", each under the command of a knight, as follows: One was detailed to patrol the channel between Malta and Gozo called the *fliegi* or *freghi*. The second and third boats guarded the entrance of the General Port by day. At night one of them proceeded westwards to check on the vigilance of the guards in the coastal towers and make contact with the boat patrolling the channel; the other port boat went eastwards as far as Marsaxlokk and then kept plying between these two points along the coast. The night identification signal of the patrol boats consisted of a cloud of smoke to which the other boat responded by showing two lanterns at the prow placed one above the other at such a distance from each other that they could be distinctly made out. The fourth *speronara* patrolled the shores of Gozo where landings were most likely to be effected. Some days later a galley was also sent to this area to exercise a stricter surveillance over the coasts of Gozo and Comino (8).

From the 3rd June onwards, the Commissioners turned their attention to the

(a) Until 1867, £1200 were being voted in the Annual Estimates for the maintenance of the Maltese Regiment to furnish coast guards to prevent breaches in the Revenue and Quarantine Laws. See *The Malta Times* of 5th December, 1867, p. 1.

control of shipping inside the harbour. A *barque de garde*, under the command of a knight, was stationed at the mouth of the harbour near Fort Ricasoli to check ships and other craft plying in and out of the port. Fishermen who left harbour were provided with a permit issued by the *Gran Visconte* or Chief of Police to be shown to the *Barque de garde* for the *laissez passer*. On re-entering port at night, the fishermen presented their permit for checking by the night patrol boat and then handed it to the *barque de garde* (9)

(To be concluded in our next issue)

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