

## THE HOLY INFIRMARY OF THE ORDER OF ST. JOHN

JOSEPH BORG

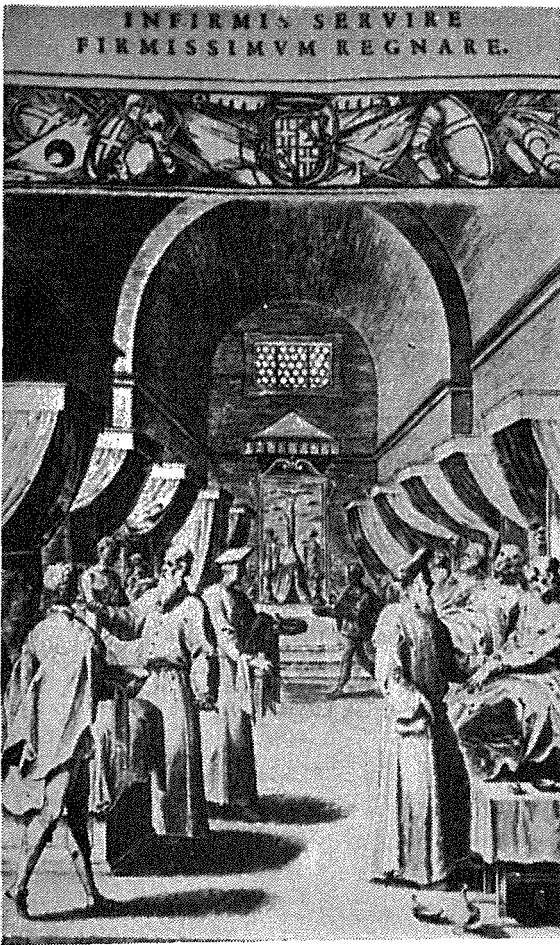
K.M., Ph.C., L.P., F.R.S.H., F.Inst. Pet.

*Senior Customs Analyst.*

The "Holy Infirmary" or hospital of the Order of St. John was the chief *raison d'être* of the Brotherhood. The very first concern of their founder and first rector, the Blessed Gerard Tom de Martigues from Provence, after Pope Paschal II had by his Bull "*Pie postulatio voluntatis*" issued at Benevento on the 15th. February 1113 confirmed

the establishment of the order and taken it under his protection, was the erection of a hospice and a hospital annex in Jerusalem for the benefit of the sick or weary pilgrims who had gone there to visit the places which had been sanctified by Our Lord's presence. The oldest document in the Royal Malta Library is one dated 1107 and relates to a donation by King Baldwin of Jerusalem to the Order of some property on Mount Tabor for the noble purpose of building a hospital thereon. By 1104 the hospitallers had already become armed monks. When Saladin drove the Christians from Jerusalem in 1187, the Knights retreated to Acre, which had been called Ptolemais under the Greeks, in the north of Palestine or present-day Israel, where they built a hospital for the benefit of the sick besides some fortifications for its proper protection, the place then being called St. John of Acre.

Incidentally, the skull of Blessed Gerard had been jealously kept by the Knights, first in the Holy Land and then at Rhodes. When this stronghold fell, the skull was taken in 1535 by Fra John de Boniface, Lieutenant-Grand Master and Bailiff of Manosque, to his Commandery of Manosque (in the Lower Alps at Provence in the South of France), the Order's chief property in the Priory of St. Gilles, and Blessed Gerard's presumed native place. In 1792 the French revolutionaries sacked the Order's church and the skull, deprived of its silver repousse, was somehow sent to the Order's seat at Malta, where it is still preserved with loving care at the Order's nunnery of St. Ursula, in St. Ursula Street, Valletta. These Ursuline nuns of Valletta, who had been under the Order's special protection, bearing the white eight-pointed Cross on their black habits and hence also called the Jerusalemite Sisters, had been brought to



The great ward of the "Holy Infirmary".

Malta from Aracoeli in Syracuse in 1583 by the French Grand Master Cardinal Fra Hugh de Loubenx Vardale (1582-1595). They had first settled at Vittoriosa but later moved to Valletta when their church and convent were built in 1595. The reliquary in the form of a head, commissioned in 1674 by Fra Francis Carbonel de Lussan, then Bailiff of Manosque, made of silver and measuring 33 by 26 cm., was saved, and is now to be found in the Hotel de Ville at Manosque.

At Rhodes and wherever the Knights had settled they made the tending of the sick their chief and immediate duty, and the Head of the Hospital or "Hospitaller" was the Bailiff of the Langue of France. In Rhodes the hospital had even been provided with the first Apothecary recorded since 16th August, 1473, working under the general direction of the "Commissarius Sanitatis", while the first clerk of the hospital "scriba Infirmariae" was employed on 3rd December, 1476: (cf. Arch. No. 75); and the first ever Maltese to work therein and, indeed, the first to join the Order, was Fra Gonsalvo Vella, who was enrolled in the



**Blessed Gerard's skull at Valletta**

Langue of Italy at Messina on 15th September, 1480 and later attained the high rank of Bailiff (cf. Arch. No. 76).

When the Knights came to Malta on the 26th October, 1530 and settled at Borgo, they erected there in 1531 a very large hospital with a small church adjoining dedicated to St. Anne. When they crossed over to the new City of Valletta in 1571 they also constructed between 1574 and 1575, during the rule of the French Grand Master Fra Jean Levesque de la Cassiere (1572-1581), a very fine hospital "The Holy Infirmary", which was enlarged and improved by the Spanish Grand Master Fra Raphael Cotoner (1660-1663). On completion the "Sacra Infermeria" was one of the earliest organized hospitals in the world. It had six large wards, each provided with an altar, the four larger ones called "Gran Sala", "Sala Nuova", "Sala Vecchia" and "Sala dei Feriti" respectively; the first, dedicated to the Most Holy Trinity, was 505 feet long, 34 feet 9 inches wide and 31 feet high, overlooking the Grand Harbour. It was one of the longest rooms, unsupported by pillars, in Europe and consequently lon-



**Grand Master Wignacourt's spherical pharmacy jar**

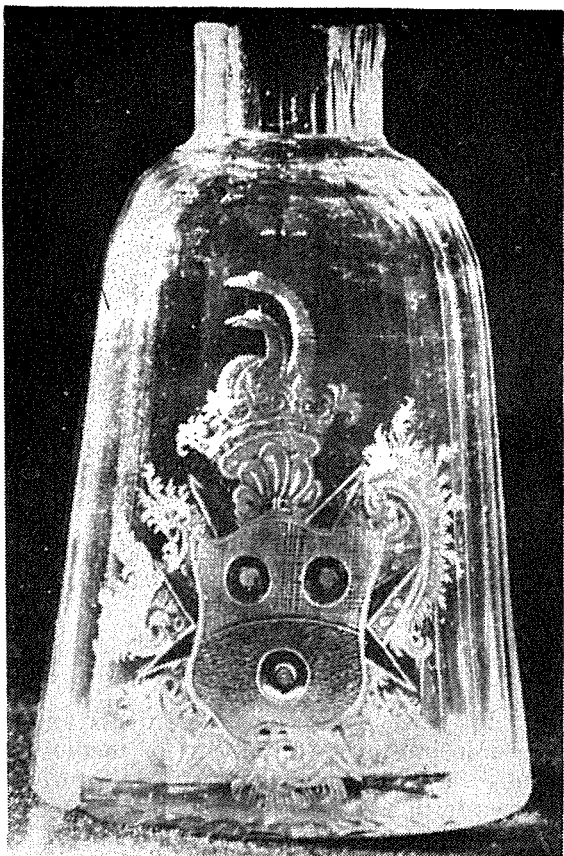
ger than the wards of any other hospital in the whole world; at one end of it was a valuable picture representing the Sultan of Turkey, Bayezid II giving the left arm of St. John the Baptist in 1484 to the French Grand Maser Fra Peter d'Aubusson (1476-1505) wearing Cardinal robes. Usually the hospital had 500 beds, at times even 745 and this number could be increased to 2,000 in case of need; its patients were most efficiently looked after, and it was considered one of the most advanced hospitals in Europe at the time. About 2,000 patients were admitted per year.

Patients took their meals from silver dishes, drank from silver bowls and ate with silver spoons, forks and knives, and it was the duty and honour of all the Knights as servants of the hospital to attend at meals to "their Masters the Sick". The food of all the patients was better and more carefully cooked than that of the Knights who served them; every Knight performed this service one day of each week. Grand Masters Alof de Wignacourt (1601-1622) and Anton Manoel de Vilhena (1722-1736) gave to the infirmary very fine sets of tin-glazed chinaware pharmacy jars, Wignacourt getting these from Urbino in Italy while Vilhena obtained them

from Caltagirone in Sicily and from Venice. It is recorded that 780 medical substances were available in them. Some of these pharmacy jars are now at the Valletta National Museum and some with representations of St. Anthony Abbot or St. Andrew or larger bluish ones at the Governor-General's Palace at Valletta. The Spanish Grand Master Fra Raymond Perellos y Roccaful (1697-1720) provided the hospital in 1710 with new sets of instruments and appliances necessary for the proper and smooth running of the pharmacy; while the German Bailiff Fra Francis Anton von Schonau von Schwrsstatt provided a complete set of polygonally-shaped, Bohemian fine glass drinking bottles for all the patients and staff. This Knight was Bailiff of Brandenburg and had served the Order as Captain of the galleys, Commander of the Maltese Militia and Head of the Common Treasury. He was greatly beloved by his nationals, his fellow-knights and the Maltese, and, when he died on the 11th January 1743, was buried at St. John's Conventual Church inside his Langue's chapel at the extreme right side near the altar. All the officers, with the exception of the medical ones, were Conventual Chaplains. The Knight of Provence took charge of the sick on Sundays and were



Grand Master Perellos y Roccaful's bronze mortar and pestle

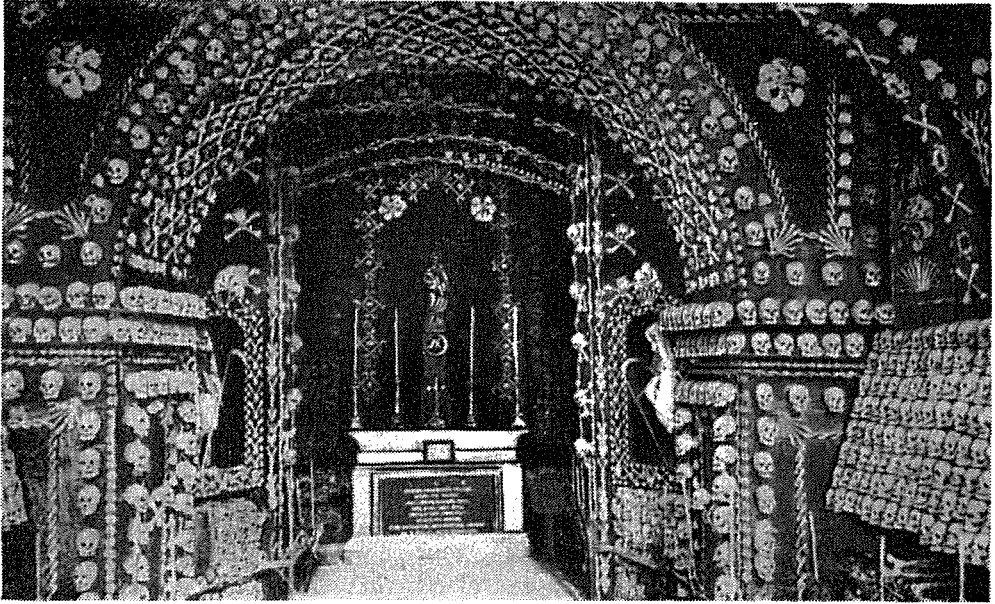


**Bailiff Fra Francis Anton von Schonrau von Schwstatt's drinking glass bottle.**

followed by the other Langues according to seniority, the Anglo-Bavarian and German serving together on the last day of the week. There was no discrimination in the nursing of the sick, except that if one happened to be a Knight he was entitled to have a brother-knight look after him, while if he were a slave he was accommodated in the ward underneath. The motto for this noble work was "*Infirmis servire firmissimum regnare*", as appears in Grand Master Cardinal Verdale's Statute of the Order issued in 1586, giving the duties of the Knights at this noble charitable Institution with this motto on page 30, over a drawing of the great ward. Mattia Preti's painting showing Saints Cosmas and Damian originally hung in the "Hall of the Wounded" of this hospital; it is now to be found in the main sacristy of St. John's Conventual Church.

In 1788 the annual cost for the running of the hospital was £7,947 or about one shilling per person per day. During the French occupation it was used as a military hospital and afterwards as a wine store. Under the British it was again used as a Military Hospital and lastly as Police Headquarters. During the Second World War it sustained great damage, but the "Gran Sala", which was not a total loss as the upper structures were, is now being restored by Mr. Michael Ellul a government Architect in charge of Antiquities. Just across its lower side street was a small cemetery with a chapel, dedicated to the "Holy Name of Mary" and built at the expense of the Italian Commendatore Fra Giorgio Nibbia in 1619 with a rather large room at its back where hundreds of skulls of Knights, Priests, Civilians and Slaves alike were arranged along all its walls to remind the onlookers of the inevitability of death, a point which had also been made in the epigram on the marble slab of Baron Bailiff Fra Wolfgang Philip von Guttenberg's tomb in St. John's "*Fumus, Humus Sumus; et Cinis est nostra ultima Finis*" — "we are like smoke and dust and we will end in ashes". This small church was appropriately called the "Chapel of Bones".

Not many years after the building of the "Sacra Infermeria" at Valletta, the French Grand Master Fra Jean Paul Lascaris Castellar (1636-1657) built the "Lazaretto" on the islet, in Marsamxett Harbour. This hospital was greatly improved during the plague which ravaged the Islands for nine months in 1675-1676 and carried off 11,300 of the population, "when the corpses were thrown out into the streets remaining unburied so that the sky was their only cover, while the houses were turned into sepulchres", by the then Spanish Grand Master Fra Nicholas Cotoner (1663-1680), who also on the 19th December, 1676 instituted the School of Medicine and Surgery including Practical Anatomy at the "Sacra Infermeria". It was again enlarged during the time of Grand Master De Vilhena, who added a chapel and naturally had it dedicated to St. Anthony, the saint after whom he had been called. He also constructed a fortress in 1726, on designs previously made in 1715 by the two famous



**The Chapel of Bones**

engineers of King Louis XIV of France  
Chevalier Gion de Mondion and Brigadier  
Chevalier Renè James de Tigné.

These notes serve to show how the  
Order of St. John, in its Maltese period,

lived up to its long cherished ideals and  
helped foster the development of medical  
practice. These objectives it still faithfully  
pursues to this day, in many countries and  
in various ways.