
THE CORRESPONDENCE OF A SENGLIA MERCHANT DURING THE PLAGUE OF 1813

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The publications that are available about the plague of 1813 contain very little material on the impact which that catastrophe had on particular individuals very likely because there are no private archival sources that can be exploited on this aspect. The accidental discovery of a Letter Book containing copies of many business letters sent from Senglea during the plague is, therefore, a fortunate occurrence. These letters were written by an import-export merchant by the name of M.A. Cumbo in the pursuit of his business activities. The correspondence is in Italian except for a very few letters that are in Spanish.

The Letter Book or register measures 33.5 cm by 24.5 cm. Its cardboard cover bears the label 'Copia Lettere, B.Dal 1 Gennaro 1812 sino li 28 Dicembre 1813'. During this span of time Cumbo registered two hundred and twenty-two letters, one hundred of which were written during the plague period 5th March to 28th December 1813. The letter "B" suggests that this register was the second one in a series of letter books, the fate of which is unknown. It is provided with an index (Repertorio) containing the names to whom the letters were sent and the folio number where the copies are registered.

The original cover is torn in places. The upper edges of the folios are frayed and discoloured, the spine is missing and the top areas of the folios are dampstained and browned with fading of the ink so that the script is no longer readable in places. This damage was caused by the dampness of the rubbish heap where this register had been dumped and partially buried until it was rescued from further destruction, together with a few other unrelated manuscripts, by the present writer.

In Cumbo's entries the general subject of shipping receives frequent attention. This was inevitable as sea-communications were a matter with which trade and the conveyance of letters were very closely linked. In the first decade of the 19th century Malta was a busy centre through which much of the sea-trade of the Mediterranean was forced to pass especially during the war between Britain and France. Hence, apart from accounts of his trade operations, Cumbo sets down in his Letter Book the names and types of ships that carried his cargoes abroad or brought his merchandise from overseas and the ports which they visited. These ships varied in de-

sign and tonnage and included the bombards, polacres, xebecs, brigantines and schooners. He was the sole proprietor of the 'San Francesco' and the joint owner of a polacre which was armed with 6 to 8 pieces of cannon. As this vessel was "a fast ship" it was employed on the route to Constantinople.

The other ships plied with his merchandise to and from Mahone, Gibraltar, Cadiz, Messina, Palermo, Cagliari and the Adriatic. Others called at Prevesa, Samos, Scutari and Alexandria. In one of his letters Cumbo lays down the itinerary followed by one of these crafts that carried both letters and cargo. It first sailed to Albania, then to Lissa, Fiume and Trieste and back. This ship was manned by a crew of seven men besides the master. The expenses involved in running it included, apart from the wages of the sailors and master, the cost of the food for the crew, the maritime insurance premium and the port and quarantine dues.

These ships carried the most varied assortment of foodstuffs — grain, oil, wines from Samos, beans, peas, sugar, coffee and cocoa; apart from these items Cumbo dealt also in soap, tobacco, candles, cotton, hides, timber, lead and writing pens.

The masters mentioned in his letters bear surnames that were still familiar to Cottonera residents of fifty years ago — such as Arcangelo and Benedetto Gaffiero or Caffiero; Matteo Cassar; Vincenzo Grima; Salvatore and Giuseppe Camilleri; Biagio Drago, Emmanuele Grech and Salvatore Chetcuti.

Cumbo's entries describe not only routine business operations but also record his anxieties due to losses incurred during the voyage through some untoward event. The risks which he had to face were capture of vessels and cargo by Barbary pirates, seizure by the French during the war between England and France and losses from storms when merchandise had to be cast overboard or, worse still, when the ship itself foundered. Although merchants appreciated the protection afforded them by the presence of His Britannic Majesty's warships that kept sea-rover at bay, it was inevitable that occasionally merchandise and ships were lost to the enemy or to pirates. One such occurrence is mentioned in a letter of March 1813 when a Captain Marques, who was carrying Cumbo's cargo, was seized and taken prisoner by the French. When news of this incident reached Cumbo he wrote to the captain's wife in Cagliari informing her of the fate and place of imprisonment of her husband and assuring her that he was doing his utmost to have her husband exchanged with another captain in British custody.

There were compensations for these misadventures; in fact we read in another letter of the capture, by Cumbo's ships, of two prizes loaded with oil and grain in the Adriatic Gulf.

The subjects of maritime insurance, costs of freight, changes in exchange rates and the forcing down of prices by competition loom up very large in his correspondence. It appears from these references that he had

financial interests in a maritime assurance firm known as the *Compagnia Senglea*.

Conveyance of letters

Letters were sent to the addressee by various means and carriers depending upon their place of destination. Thus letters to Gibraltar and London were sent by the "packet" sometimes after pre-payment of postage; to Mahone and Sicily with sea-captains or friends who happened to be sailing to those islands; at other times letters were dispatched with the "royal transport" or else with merchant vessels escorted in convoy to dodge enemy warships. Sometimes letters took a very round about way to reach their destination. Thus in July 1812 Cumbo's letters to Majorca were, in the first instance, sent to his business partner at Mahone who in turn forwarded them to Majorca. On one occasion a letter to Mahone was sent by a British warship that happened to be sailing to that port (1813).

To ensure extra security during the sea voyage, correspondence was dispatched with "an armed boat" (July 1812). When the addressee did not have a fixed abode but was travelling on business from place to place, letters to him were sent to the care of the British Consul of one of the ports known to be on the route of the travelling recipient who called at the Consular Office for any mail awaiting his arrival.

As the departures of ships were far from being regular or according to a fixed schedule and as the progression of letters was slow, Cumbo sometimes wrote his correspondence in haste to catch a vessel that happened to be leaving the island at the moment. As, besides being erratic, the transmission of letters could not be relied on to reach the addressee with certainty copies of the same letter were sent by different routes and persons to ensure that at least one of the copies would arrive at its destination. Sometimes, however, in spite of this precaution both originals and copies failed to reach Cumbo's customers.

Following the outbreak of plague in April 1813, Cumbo's correspondence was mainly held with people residing in Malta because of the decline in overseas trade on account of the quarantine measures imposed by government and because the only communication that was possible among persons in Malta itself was very often by letter writing as there were times when people were barred from meeting one another. In fact very strict restrictions were enforced on the movement of the population between the four cities and the countryside and also between each of the four cities themselves. The aim was to avoid unnecessary contacts and thus diminish the chances of transmitting the "contagion" — as then understood by the medical world.

During the plague Cumbo wrote to his agents and partners in Valletta, Zejtun, Bormla and Birgu. The distribution of the post between the countryside and Valletta continued to function during the whole period of the

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plague though not without the occasional loss of documents during transit. Cumbo, however, did not suffer such losses in his inland correspondence. In fact, apart from delays of some three days in the receipt of local mail, the flow in the conveyance of letters to him was never interrupted. Thus writing to his partner Mr. M. Camilleri, in Birgu on 12 December 1813, Cumbo advises him thus:— "If you do not find ready means by which to send me your letters take them to the *Barriera* (at Valletta) by means of the boat of the Superintendent of the Port, Mr. Trevisan. The boat (from Valletta) calls at Senglea twice a day so that your letters should reach me quite soon". This method seems to have worked well for the following day Cumbo received two letters from Camilleri, the correspondence being delivered to Cumbo by the Health Guardian or *profumatore* who was in charge of the "smoking" of letters to disinfect them.

Plague letters

When plague broke out it darkened Cumbo's life, hampered commercial activities and intruded into his correspondence. The first hints of impending calamity occur in two letters of 5 and 12 March 1813 addressed respectively to officials of the Health Office by which Cumbo undertakes to assume responsibility for the expenses entailed by the stay in quarantine at the Lazaretto of the crew of the polacre *Madonna della Pietà*. The sanitary authorities of Malta had actually been alerted to the presence of plague in Alexandria as early as January 1813 but infected ships from that port began to arrive in Malta on 28 March when the sick were landed and confined at the Lazaretto².

From a letter of 2 April we learn that a consignment of tobacco for Cumbo had to be unloaded at the Lazaretto where no one was allowed to go "as ships coming from suspected places were berthed there. It was feared that they may harbour the fomites of disease but the sanitary authorities are doing their utmost to protect the public health". However, in spite of these sanitary measures, the first case of plague among the inhabitants of Malta came under medical observation on 19 April at Valletta³. By the beginning of May commercial transactions were restricted, ships in our harbours were placed in quarantine and the sale of "susceptible" articles prohibited⁴.

In a letter of 7 June, Cumbo informs his correspondent in Lisbon that "the situation of the country was critical" while on the 16 he openly writes that "the island is infected with the infamous disease of plague which thanks to the precautions taken by the government has not made alarming inroads

1. *Malta Government Gazette*, 12 January 1814, p.46.

2. Depiro, G.M. *Ragguaglio storico della pestilenza che afflisse le isole di Malta e Gozo negli anni 1813 e 1814*, Livorno, 1833, p.3.

3. Cassar, P. *Medical History of Malta*, London, 1965, p.176.

4. Depiro, G.M., *op.cit.*, pp. 17-18, 30-35.

though it has not ceased to infiltrate fresh places". The sanitary safeguards alluded to by Cumbo included the avoidance of personal contacts, the evacuation of healthy persons from infected household, the prohibition to enter Birgu, Bormla and Senglea and to communicate with ships. Government also announced the infliction of the death penalty for transgressors of the quarantine laws ⁵.

On 17 June Cumbo expressed the hope to his agent in Mahone that "thanks to Divine Providence and the stepping up of the sanitary campaign the disease would not continue to spread; meanwhile", he continued, "all business transactions are suspended but we are all in good health." In another letter of the same date addressed to a firm in Gibraltar he regretted that owing to the pestilence he was unable to avail himself of the favourable prices prevailing at Gibraltar and nearby markets. "I trust in the Almighty", he states, "that within a short time we will again enjoy the previous joy of living in this island... Captain Grima has arrived here but is detained in quarantine."

On 18 June he told his agent in Palermo that "the sinister circumstances caused by the contagious malady that afflicts this island prevents us from carrying out any commercial transactions". In fact two ships from Samos laden with wine had reached Malta but Cumbo was unable to dispose of the cargo because "we are isolated in strict quarantine as the illness has been advancing almost everywhere. The mortality, however, is not great in proportion to the population; in fact it has not surpassed the fifty to fifty-five cases daily between dead and attacked in the whole island of Malta. We hope that God in his mercy will calm his wrath and that through the precautions being taken the disease will not make further progress." His hopes proved to be unfounded for in his letter of 15 July addressed to his Maltese agent in Majorca, he states:— "I believe that you are aware of the unfortunate fate with which Our Lord has justly deigned to punish us. We are being afflicted with the scourge of plague without there being any sign of abatement. Only Divine Omnipotence can save us. All commercial affairs are suspended and it is only with great exertion that we can conclude the transactions that we were already engaged upon. All our friends are confined (to their homes) and we cannot communicate with one another. This is the reason why I am unable to answer your letters as I am myself in strict quarantine as also are my papers as a precautionary measure. I ask you to pray God for the safety of this disconsolate island." By 20 July he had begun to ask his customers to honour their bills of exchange and to effect payments due to him and settle their debts "since the present critical circumstances so require." And quite right he was for July proved to be the worst month with regard to the extent of mortality when by the end of the month 1602 persons had perished ⁶. His

5. Burrell, W. H., *Appendice V al secondo rapporto sulla quarantena, Londra, 1855*; p. 81.

6. Burrell, W. H., *op.cit.*, p. 26.

anxiety was intensified a few days later when communication with Valletta became extremely difficult. This, however, proved to be only a temporary setback for by the 2nd August he managed to send letters to Valletta and receive replies to them though with a delay of three days.

By the beginning of August some of Cumbo's foreign partners left the island with total disregard for their business affairs because of the fear of catching the disease. Others did so because they dreaded the possibility of being confined in quarantine, a fear that was quite for on 14 August Cumbo wrote that no one was allowed to embark on ships before performing a double quarantine. There was some relaxation in this prohibition about a week later when shipowners from Senglea were allowed to board their vessels on the production of a medical certificate and a permit from the *luogotenente* (deputy). Cumbo grasped this chance to slip to Gozo and there sell his tobacco and wine.

A very frequent recipient of Cumbo's letters was Giuseppe Pulis who during the plague was living at Zejtun and who carried out many trade operations on Cumbo's behalf. On 26 August Cumbo wrote to him to arrange a *rendezvous* at the *barriera* at the Marsa but we do not know whether they actually met.

A ray of hope illumines Cumbo's letter to Mahone on the 27 August:—"The terrible scourge seems to show signs of abating since a few days, thanks to the many (sanitary) measures taken by government so that the mortality in the whole island has now gone down to thirty a day... In Senglea, thanks to Divine assistance, we enjoy perfect health... With regard to prices, soap is fetching high prices but olive oil tends to go down." During the first week of September he was trying to obtain a cargo of vegetables from Gozo in exchange for a consignment of *vermicelli* and *macheroni*: and one hopes that he managed to do so because on 14 September he was complaining that there were no vegetables and no fruits to be had in Senglea owing to the lack of communication with the countryside. Because he was so cut off, he wrote to Pulis at Zejtun telling him that he was unable to meet him at the Marsa, as he had envisaged to do, but hoped that he would be able to do so on 16 "very early in the morning." The venue this time was to be the "slaughter house or near San Francesco alias tal Balliu" at Kordin. It appears from subsequent correspondence that they did succeed in effecting their *rendezvous* this time. In fact another meeting was fixed at the same place for 21 September but Pulis sent a letter saying that he was unable to keep the appointment. Cumbo also endeavoured to meet one of his partners at Valletta to whom he wrote on 19 September suggesting as venue the *barriera* at Valletta. Cumbo required the signature of his partner to a contract of marine insurance but he leaves us in the dark as to whether the encounter took place.

He sounds quite buoyant on 27 October when he wrote to Spain that restrictions in communications were being relaxed allowing for the resump-

tion of commercial operations "with due precautions". Indeed he knew on'y of three to four cases a day occurring in the whole island. Actually the incidence was more than the figures given by Cumbo but he was quite correct in saying that the epidemic was on the wane so much so that the mortality had declined to 196 during the whole month of October 7.

On 13 November he informed his correspondent in Mahone that since twenty days no new cases had appeared in the four cities and that it was only in the villages that cases still occurred. He was very hopeful that within a short time all the island would be completely free from such a "horrible scourge". The epidemic was by now showing signs of declining so that writing to Mahone on 6 December, Cumbo stated that government ordered a general depuration of Valletta and Floriana though cases still occurred in two casals that had been cordoned off by troops from the rest of the island. These were the villages of Zebbug and Qormi to which Birkirkara was later added⁸. Communication he added, was still restricted but he had been able to go to the *barriera* at the Marsa. The fresh appearance of a case at Naxxar induced the sanitary authorities to again tighten up controls and restrict communication within the towns so that Cumbo again found himself "locked" in Senglea though by 15 December he was trusting that within ten days permits would again be issued for those who needed to go to the *barriera* of the four cities and the wharf of Valletta. In the meantime he availed himself of this new period of quarantine to bring up his accounts up to date.

The last letter recorded by Cumbo is dated 28 December 1813 and is addressed to Giuseppe Pulis at Zejtun:—"I see your brother everyday. He is in good health... The polacre *Giovanna*, which is now in quarantine with sealed hatches in Marsamxett Harbour, departs with the first convoy which is expected to leave on 10 January. I enclose the booklet of signals, which you wish to copy, together with a small brush. I wish you and your family a prosperous and happy new year. I send my greetings and kiss your hand". Signed M.A. Cumbo, Maresciallo. And with that letter — the only one that bears his signature — Cumbo takes his leave of us.

Comment

I think it worthwhile to return to some of Cumbo's entries referring to particular persons and topics to place them in proper perspective in the contemporary scene.

The *profumatore* alluded to in the same letter was an employee of the Mr. John Andrew Trevisan who thirteen years previously had taken part in the military operations against the French during their occupation of Malta in 1798-1800. He then joined a Maltese regiment until on 13 May 1813 he was appointed Captain of the Port of Valletta and Commissioner of

7. Burrell, W.H., *op.cit.*, p. 26.

8. Burrell, W.H., *op.cit.*, p. 33 .

Health — a post which he filled, until 7 February 1815, with “activity, zeal and fidelity”⁹.

The *profumatore* alluded to in the same letter was an employee of the Health Department who was in charge of the disinfection of mail at the Lazaretto by means of the so called *profumo*, i.e. slitting the letters and then soaking them in vinegar or else exposing them to the fumes of a mixture of aromatic herbs, sulphur, camphor and other substances burnt in a special cupboard¹⁰. Cumbo's letters must have been disinfected in this manner at least for a short spell, for even a despatch and another official document sent to Maita by the Secretary of State on 5 and 6 August 1813 were subjected to slitting and fumigation¹¹.

It is likely that Mr Giuseppe Pulis, so often written to by Cumbo, was the American Consul in Malta to which office he was appointed in 1801. His activities as consul were suspended in 1812 when relations between Great Britain and the USA became strained during the Napoleonic Wars owing to British interference with American shipping and trade in the Mediterranean until Congress declared war on Britain on January 1812¹². Pulis resumed his role as consul on 26 April 1815 and it is likely that he engaged in trade in the interval in partnership with Cumbo.

In a letter to Majorca dated 15 July 1813, Cumbo states: “I am in strict quarantine as also are my papers as a precautionary measure”. The reason why his papers were “in quarantine” arises from the fact that paper was believed to be a carrier of the “contagion” of plague so much so that the health authorities discouraged the use of paper and drew attention to the health hazards from handling this material. The registers of the *Monte di Pietà*, for instance, were all unbound, deputed and rebound in January 1814, to ensure that they carried no “contagion”. The concept of “contagion” from paper dominated official medical thought for many years afterwards so much so that during the cholera epidemic of Gibraltar of August 1834, letters reaching Malta from the Rock were “steeped in vinegar” before they were delivered to their recipients in Malta¹³.

Apart from these measures some people during the plague of 1813 avoided all contact with paper and resorted to writing on small wooden tablets

9. Sammut, E. “A Military Career... and its Aftermath, Giovanni Andrea Trevisan 1781-1838,” *The Malta Land Force Journal*, 1972, No. 11, p.75 et seq.
10. Cassar, P. “Slitting of Letters for Disinfection in the Eighteenth Century in Malta,” *British Medical Journal*, 1967, *1*, 105.
11. The Palace Archives, Valletta, Despatches from Secretary of State, No. 5, July 1813 to December 1814, fols., 153 & 161-5.
12. Cassar, P. “Joseph Pulis, American Consul in Malta (1801-28)”, *Heritage*, 1978, *1*, 327;
Cassar, P. *Early Relations between Malta and the USA*, Malta, 1976, pp. 25-29.
13. *Malta Government Gazette*, 6 August 1834, p.256.

as it was believed that the disease did not attach itself to wood and therefore could not be carried from one person to another by the handling of wood¹⁴. Cumbo says nothing on this point and we are left guessing as to whether he ever wrote any letters on wooden tablets.

The *barriere*, referred to in various letters from Cumbo's pen, were set up on 19 June in order to ensure the provisioning of Valletta and the four cities with foodstuffs from the countryside. These exchanges took place under the supervision of sanitary guards. The *barriere* consisted in a number of railings so arranged as to allow people to approach within talking distance of one another but with an intervening gap between them wide enough to prevent them from touching one another. Besides the *barriere* mentioned by Cumbo, there were others located at Portes des Bombes for Valletta; and at Polverista Gate in the outer defences of the Cottonera lines, facing Zejtun, for the Cottonera area; and at Bormla Gate just outside Senglea which gave access to the wharf in French Creek¹⁵.

Cumbo's belief that the plague was a form of divine punishment was not a mere personal idea but was in accord with the collective credo of his contemporaries with its roots running as far back as biblical days. His reliance for deliverance on the "hope that God in His Mercy will calm his wrath" is, therefore, understandable especially when one remembers that in his time nobody knew about the microbial origin of bubonic plague and about the part played by infected rats and their fleas in its transmission to man. Lest one should think that this emphasis on faith in God was the peculiar preoccupation of Maltese Catholicism, it is instructive to point out that such religious ideas were shared by Protestants elsewhere in connection with the onslaught of epidemic diseases of which the cause was unknown. Thus as late as August 1834, on the occasion of the cholera epidemic that struck Gibraltar in that year, the Lieutenant Governor of that fortress ordered the holding of thanksgiving services "to Almighty God, in all churches, for this manifestation of his mercy"¹⁶.

Cumbo's personality

Far from providing us with clues as to his identity Cumbo poses us several questions and we can only speculate as to their answers. Whence the *Maresciallo* for instance? Is it a second surname or a nickname or a rank of some kind? Did he survive the plague? We are on sure ground with regard to this last question for we can say with certainty that he outlived

14. Cassar, P. "A Further Document on Wood Relating to the Plague of 1813-14," *Scientia*, 1961, 27, 165

Cassar, P & Ganado, A. "Two More Documents Written on Wood During the Plague of Malta of 1813," *Melita Historica*, Vol. 7, 1979.

15. Depiro, G.M., *op.cit.*, pp. 36 & 46.

16. *Malta Government Gazette*, 20 August 1834, p.273.

the plague because we know from the official lists of mortality that the only person from Senglea that succumbed to plague was a Maria Cassar who died at the Lazaretto on 14 June 1813¹⁷. We can, therefore, be sure that he was not among the 4572 victims mowed down by the epidemic in Malta¹⁸. Did he resume his former trading operations after the declaration of free pratique for Malta on 29 January 1814? The absence of further letters from him leaves us in the dark on this score but there is no doubt that sales of food stuffs were being effected in March and in May of that year from the warehouse "del Maresciallo" at Kalkara¹⁹. By mid-November commercial activities had revived to a great extent, the arrivals of ships becoming increasingly frequent as the days passed by and the amounts of exported goods increasing "considerably"²⁰ so that Cumbo should not have encountered any great difficulties in resuming his trading operations.

If we are unable to piece together a biographical sketch of Cumbo because of the lack of data, we can at least draw a profile of his personality from the perusal of his extant correspondence. In fact the contents of his letters reveal him not only as a type — the merchant intent on the day-to-day routine of his business affairs — but also as an individual with his peculiar traits of character. He appears to have been a wealthy man with a long experience of commercial affairs and a person of great initiative who, though warning his agents to conduct his affairs with prudence and caution, was not averse to take calculated risks in his business dealings and to embark on substantial commercial ventures. He kept an eye on the fluctuations in the exchange rates and in prices in various markets while seeking new opportunities for trade.

He was a hard-working man who endeavoured to get the best service out of his agents whom he spurred to study the state of demand and supply and to ensure the good quality of the items to be purchased and whom he instructed how to pay for these goods and how to collect the profits. The regularity with which he kept up his correspondence, the way he wrote it in a neat and clearly legible script, and its indexing show him to have been a meticulous man who did not do things in a hurry. In fact he recorded his trade operations in great detail taking care to note with whom he sent his letters, by what means, whether by convoy or by packet or whether through a consul "for greater security".

He took his losses with equanimity trusting in Divine Providence whenever he was faced with circumstances beyond his control. He expressed himself in becoming terms and in gracious greetings to his correspondents

17. Burrell, W.H., *op.cit.*, p. 43.

18. Cassar, P. *Medical History of Malta*, p.186.

19. *Malta Government Gazette*, 2 March 1814, p.77.

Malta Government Gazette, 4 May 1814, p.114.

20. *Malta Government Gazette*, 16 November 1814, p.222.

with some of whom he was bound by ties of friendship as well as business so that in his letters to them commercial topics are mingled with warm expressions of his pleasant anticipations of meeting them personally, with felicitations at the news of their safe arrival abroad and with congratulations on the birth of a baby!

He confessed that English was not one of the languages that he knew; but then, in those early years of British rule, very few Maltese were familiar with the English language. In fact Lord Bathurst, the Secretary of State, remarked in 1813 that the "upper classes" in Malta still spoke Italian²¹ as Cumbo did. Hence the reason why his letters are written in this language except for every few of them that are in Spanish. He obtained newspapers from Messina and in 1812 acquired a book entitled *Io per tutti ossia calendario o notizie per l'anno bisestile 1812*. In the following year he acquired from abroad *L'Officio della Beata Vergine* and *L'Officio del Santissimo Natale* which reveal him as a religious man devoted to the Blessed Virgin Mary — to whom the Parish Church of Senglea was dedicated — and intent on seeking solace in perusing the Office of the Birth of Christ during the Christmas season.

Epilogue

Cumbo's name has no place in the written records of our national history like that of the great mass of his undistinguished and unsung contemporaries who, never the less, through their humble activities provide the raw material on which the edifice of history is built.

I am not aware of the existence of any other correspondence by persons who lived through the harrowing experience of the plague of 1813 except for the small number of letters and other scanty documents written on wood already mentioned. In this respect, therefore, the *Copia lettere* under study is a unique manuscript especially in the absence of any diaries dealing with that period. Though the letters contain nothing spectacular or dramatic, they impart atmosphere to the bare official bulletins and literature concerning that calamity. In fact one feels that they provide us with a personal encounter with Cumbo himself and give us a deeper understanding of the overall picture of the repercussions of epidemic disease on the daily working life of an individual who struggled to carry on with "business as usual" when his own death by devastating disease was a constant threat. Apart from these considerations 1813 is a year that makes a great stir in Maltese history and any material that throws it into a sharper focus is worthy of committing to memory and recording in print.

21. Palace Archives, Valletta, Despatches from Secretary of States, No. 5, July 1813 to December 1814, fol., 136.