

TWO MORE DOCUMENTS OF 1813 WRITTEN ON WOOD DURING THE PLAGUE OF MALTA *

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The plague of 1813 is the most publicised among the epidemics that have visited the Maltese Islands though far more severe pestilences occurred in 1592-3 and 1675-6. (1)

In the early nineteenth century the belief still held ground that plague was a "contagious" disease in the sense that it was thought to be conveyed from a sick person to a healthy one by touching the patient's body or his belongings or by the handling of "susceptible" materials.

The preventive measures adopted by the sanitary authorities of Malta to stem the spread of the plague in 1813 were based on these assumptions. They included, among others, the immersion of articles of food in water and the passage of coins through vinegar before being touched by the recipient; the removal of threads and wool filaments by means of pincers so that these materials would not come into contact with one's skin. (2)

Similar steps had been taken elsewhere in Europe even hundreds of years before. Thus, in England, money was passed through water during the plague of 1603 and letters were "smoked" upon being received during the pestilence of 1625 and again during the plague of London of 1665. (3)

The disinfection of letters arriving from abroad had become regular practice in Malta by 1678, two years after the worst visitation of plague in our history (1675-6). By the mid-eighteenth century, correspondence was disinfected by splitting the papers by means of a chisel to ensure that the "perfume", by which the letters were fumigated, penetrated thoroughly inside

* We would like to thank the Very Reverend Fr. Prior Victor Schembri of the Carmelite Priory of Valletta for biographical data about Fr. Prior Lorenzo Elia Ferroni.

1. P. Cassar, *The Medical History of Malta* (London, 1965), pp.164-91.
2. P. Cassar, 'The Use of Wood as a Writing Medium during the Plague of 1813', *Medical History*, 10 (1966), 275; *Ordini per le guardie urbane*, 28 agosto 1813.
3. C.F. Mullett, *The Bubonic Plague and England* (Lexington, 1956), pp.120, 158 and 222.

them. (4) What, however, seems to have been a distinctive feature of preventive medicine, as then understood, during the plague of 1813 was the substitution of pieces of wood for paper as writing material in the belief that wood, in contradistinction to paper, was not "susceptible" to contamination by plague and, therefore, was safe to use both by the writer and by the recipient of letters and documents.

The first official warning against the supposed dangers of contact with paper appeared in an "Advertisement" (Avviso) dated 12th May 1813. It was issued by the Board of Health and contained the following provision: "Papers to be Smoked, the necessary Composition for this Purpose will be Sold at Cost Price, at No. 47, Strada Giovanni" (St. John Street, Valletta).

A notice, issued by the Magistrate of Police on the 26th July 1813 on the order of H.E. the King's Civil Commissioner, again drew attention to the hazards from susceptible articles, including paper. Paragraph 2 of his notice stated: "That persons shall not throw into the streets feathers, rags, paper, cordage, wool, cotton and other articles susceptible of contagion but cause these to be burned within their respective houses". (5)

A further "Order" of the 28th August 1813 by the Inspector General of the Urban Volunteer Guard enjoined the people to search for bits of paper among coffee beans and other food items and to burn them after picking them up with pincers from these foodstuffs. (6)

The Urban Volunteer Guard had been formed by the Inspector General, F. Rivarola, for "the maintenance of good order, cleanliness and the strict observance of quarantine" by the inhabitants. Among the suggestions contained in the proposal for the formation of this Guard, dated the 4 August 1813, was the proviso that the names of the inhabitants joining this corps were to be inserted, with the numbers of their houses, on a "tablet" (*tabella*) which was to be suspended "in a fit place" (7). It is very likely that this "tablet", in order to avoid using paper for the writing of the same lists, was made of wood.

One of the present writers (P.C.) has already drawn attention to the existence of nine documents written on wood which he has described and illustrated elsewhere. They include a power of attorney, a testament, three

4. P. Cassar, 'Splitting of Letters for Disinfection in the Eighteenth Century in Malta', *British Medical Journal*, 1 (1967), 105-6.
5. *Notificazione*, 26 luglio 1813.
6. *Giornale di Malta*, 8 settembre 1813, p.352; *Ordini per le guardie urbane*, 20 agosto 1813.
7. *Proposals for the formation of an Urban Volunteer Guard*, 4 August 1813.

letters, three receipts and one bill. (8) The present paper deals with two more receipts written on wood that came to light recently and that are held in a private collection.

Description

The tablets are dated 21st August 1813 and 10th November 1813 respectively. They are of an irregular oblong shape. The first one measures 135—140 mm. in height, 85—88 mm. in width and 3 mm. in thickness; the second one is 71—80 mm., 110—114 mm. and 3 mm. The wood is of a light brown colour and shows well marked graining of a darker hue. It has been identified as being white soft wood. (9)

The text is in Italian. That of the first tablet runs as follows:-

“Li 21 Agosto 1813.

Ricevo dal Sig. Ignazio / Chauchi (sic) Scudi venti, cioe' / Otto Scudi per il Censo an / nuale di S. Ludovico. / Scudi due per la Messa / Cantata del detto Santo e libera per li vivi e morti, / Scudi dieci per gratitudine / della Creazione de (sic) Religiosi / del detto giorno. / P. Mro. Lorenzo Ferroni Priore / ha ricevuto la detta somma”.

Free translation: — Received of Mr. Ignatius Cauchi twenty *scudi* that is eight *scudi* for the annual *censo* of St. Ludovicus (St. Louis); two *scudi* for the High Mass in honour of the said saint and *libera* for the dead and the living; ten *scudi* as a token of gratitude for the refreshment (?) of the religious on the said day. *Padre Maestro* Lorenzo Ferroni, Prior, has received the said sum.

The text of the second tablet states:-

“Li 10 Novemb. (sic) 1813

Ricevo Scudi Sei dal Sig. Ignazio / Chauchi (sic) per messe per le anime / che sono morte in questo Contagio / de (sic) fratelli di S. Lodovico Re. Di più / Ricevo Scudo uno e tari tre per / l'anniversario di/tutti fratelli e Consorelle di detta / Compagnia”.

There is no signature but the writing appears to be by the same hand as the first one.

8. P. Cassar, 'Documents written on Wood during the Plague of 1813 in Malta', *British Medical Journal*, 2 (1961), 377; *idem*, 'A Further Document of Wood relating to the Plague of 1813-14', *Scientia* (Malta), 27 (1961), 165; *idem*, 'The Use of Wood as a Writing Medium during the Plague of Malta of 1813', *Medical History*, 10 (1966), 275.
9. Personal communication by Mr. Carmelo Camilleri of Sliema.

Free translation: — Received of Mr. Ignatius Cauchi six *scudi* for Masses for the repose of the souls of the brethren of the confraternity of St. Ludovicus, King (of France), who died during this epidemic.

I have also received one *scudo* and three *tari* for the anniversary of all the male and female brethren of the said confraternity.

Social and religious background

According to one writer, the plague of 1813-14 carried off 4668 persons out of a population of over 100,000 (10) although different estimates are given in other sources. It is, therefore, not surprising that some of the members of the Confraternity of St. Ludovicus were among the victims of the pestilence which affected all strata of the population.

The confraternities were religious associations of laymen, usually belonging to the same trade or craft as in the case of the guilds. Their aim was to promote the religious zeal of their members by holding church services, organising meetings for collective prayers and providing burials and offering Masses for the repose of the souls of deceased members. They were based at particular churches in which they had very often their own altar or chapel dedicated to the patron saint of their craft or confraternity. (11)

The Confraternity of St. Ludovicus, King of France, was the association of barbers. It was set up on the 16th November 1804 at the Church of Our Lady of Mount Carmel of Valletta during the time of the Prior Lorenzo Elia Ferroni. The confraternity had its own altar in this church dedicated to its patron saint who was portrayed in the altar-piece with the Holy Virgin and St. Theresa. After flourishing for a number of years, membership of the confraternity dwindled considerably towards the mid-century, so much so that it was dissolved on the 29th January 1851. (12)

The identity of Mr. Ignatius Cauchi has not yet been established but very probably he was an official of the confraternity possibly its Treasurer.

Prior Lorenzo Elia Ferroni (1770—1845) was Doctor and Master of Theology and formed part of the community of the Carmelite Convent in Valletta. For many years he occupied various important administrative posts in the hierarchy of the Order. He gained renown during the epidemic of 1813 for the zeal

10. G.M. Depiro, *Ragguaglio storico della pestilenza in Malta e Gozo negli anni 1813-14* (Livorno) 1833), p.82.
11. A. Mifsud, 'I nostri consoli e le arti ed i mestieri', *Archivum Melitense*, 3 (1917), 41.
12. L. Sammut, *Is-Santwarju tal-Karmnu* (Malta, 1952), p.176. In this work Ferroni is referred to as Ferrone.

with which he rendered spiritual assistance to the plague-stricken. A portrait in oils hangs in the convent at Valletta. (13)

The *scudi* and *tari* were denominations of the coinage of the Order of St. John which remained current after the Order left Malta in 1798. In the early days of British rule, the exchange rate was fixed at one shilling and eight pence to the *scudo*. Twelve *tari* made one *scudo*.

Discussion

The eleven tablets that have so far come to light were all made in 1813 and they bear the following dates:

1. 15 August — Receipt (Rev. Salvatore Dimech)
2. 21 August — Receipt (Fr. Lorenzo Elia Ferroni) Valletta
3. 21 August — Letter (Marchesa Vincenza Testaferrata) Zurrieq
4. 9 September — Testament (Rev. Filippo Calleja) Zebbug
5. 19 September — Power of attorney (Rosa and Francesco de Albanese) Cospicua
6. 23 September — Receipt (Rev. Saverio Vassallo)
7. 5 October — Letter (Rev. Francesco Borg) Zejtun
8. 5 October — Letter (Maria Damico Inguanez Bonici) Notabile
9. 29 October — Bill (Luigi Mifsud)
10. 10 November — Receipt (Fr. Lorenzo Elia Ferroni?)
11. 2 December — Receipt (Maria Damico Inguanez) Notabile

The period covered by these tablets (August—December 1813) corresponded to the decline of the epidemic; in fact, the decrease in the incidence of cases began towards the end of August and continued in the following months, so that by the beginning of January 1814 pratique was granted to the inhabitants of Valletta and the three cities. (14) It is likely, therefore, that, if more of these documents on wood have survived, they would fall within this period.

Although by today's scientific standards the substitution of wood for paper as writing material in 1813 was a useless prophylactic measure against the dissemination of plague, it fitted in with the pattern of the medical thinking of those days and of many years thereafter; so much so that the disinfection of letters from overseas by the Maltese Health Authorities came to an end only towards the 1880s, although it was resorted to again, as an exceptional measure, in 1929 when plague broke out in Tunis. (15)

13. L. Sammut, *op.cit.*, p.94.

14. P. Cassar, *Medical History of Malta* (London, 1965), p.185.

15. P. Cassar, 'The Early Days of the Postal Services in Malta', *Union Postale*, No. 9 (September 1964), p.138a.

The idea that plague was a contagious disease began to be discarded only after 1894 when it was discovered that plague was an infection by a germ which was conveyed to man by sick rats through the bite of infected fleas. The role of the flea in the transmission of the germ was first mooted in 1897.

These wooden documents are only marginal *tesserae* in the wide mosaic of the history of medicine but they deserve recording for the following reasons:- (a) they are unique to Malta: indeed, an extensive survey of the literature on the history of plague epidemics in other countries has not revealed the existence of similar writings on wood; (b) they afford an instructive commentary on how medical doctrine influences, and is reflected in, social behaviour; (c) they provide evidence that there was no loss or lowering of morale on the part of the people under the stress of the everpresent expectation of death and that they remained conscious of their social obligations towards one another and took the necessary steps not only to discharge these obligations but also to record their fulfilment *ad futuram rei memoriam*; (d) they testify to the resilience and resourcefulness of man who, when faced with the disruptive forces of disease, continues to strive for survival and endeavours to devise means to counteract the ensuing social disorganisation and to carry on, undeterred, with his day-to-day routine of life.

The emergence, in a time of crisis, of this healthy psychological reaction on the part of our ancestors is, in our view, the most significant feature revealed by a study of these wooden tablets.