THE VALLETTA SACRA INFERMERIA IN TRAVELOGUES AND ART

CHARLES SAVONA-VENTURA traces the history of the Sacra Infermeria and its reputation abroad.

The Order of St. John originated in Jerusalem with the raison d'être being to provide hospitality to the sick pilgrims visiting the Holy City. The first hospice of the Order of St. John in Jerusalem was set up around 1050. Hospitality remained a central theme of the Order’s role, even after their expulsion from the Holy Land, being looked upon as “one of the most eminent acts of piety and humanity: all Christian people agree in this opinion, because it comprehends all other acts. It ought to be exercised and esteemed by all good men, much more by such as are for distinguishing themselves by the name of the knight hospitallers. And for this reason, we ought not to apply ourselves more particularly to any other function, than to that from which our order receives its denomination”.

In line with a hospitaller role, the Order undertook steps to set up hospitals in all the countries they settled in. After the Maltese Islands were ceded to the Order, the knights immediately undertook steps to set up their first Sacra Infermeria at the maritime town of Birgu, this being completed in 1533.

Following the Knights victory over the Turkish armada in 1565, the Order augmented the fortifications in the Grand Harbour by building the fortified city of Valletta. This necessitated the building of a new Sacra Infermeria in the southeastern side of the new city, an area that was reserved as a centre for the medical and social services provided by the Order. The building works commenced in 1574 and were completed four years later under the Grand Mastership of La Cassiere. It subsequently was augmented in three phases: (a) 1583 under Grand Master Hughes de Loubenx Verdalle who built a new block including a separate ward for incurable diseases; (b) 1662 under Grand Masters Rafael and Nicholas Cottoner who commissioned the extension of the main ward; and (c) 1712 under Grand Master Ramon Perellos y Roccaful who commissioned the last major extension.

The Valletta Sacra Infermeria was to enjoy a prominent reputation throughout the subsequent centuries with several visitors commenting favorably on the care and hospitality given to its inmates irrespective of creed and social status. While still in its earlier phases of development, 16th century visitors to the hospital including the Italian Giovanni Battista Leoni (1582) and the German Samuel Kiechel (1586) were favourably impressed with the establishment, the for-
mer describing the institution as a “macchina meraviliosa”. The German Hieronymus Megiser (1588) refers to the hospital and its links to the origins of the Order. “Among other things to see in the city of Valletta there is...... the Infermeria or the hospital of the knights which, as will be reported later on, the Order took its origins; it is also for this reason that the knights are called hospitallers”.4

Seventeenth century visitors were more effusive in their praises. The American visitor George Sandys (1610) wrote “Saint John’s Hospital doth merit regard, not only for the building, but for the entertainment there given, for all that fall sick are admitted thereto. The Knights themselves there lodge when hurt or diseased, where they have physic for the body and soul also, such as they give; the attendants many, the beds overspread with fine canopies, every fortnight having a change of linen; served they are by the junior Knights in silver, and every Friday by the Great Master himself, accompanied with the Great Crosses; a service obliged unto from the first institution, and therefore called Knights Hospitallers”5.

The German Count George Albert of Erbach (1617) wrote that “The hospital called the “Infermeria”, was situated in a large new building and presided over by the Regent of the French Knights, the Great Hospitaller, who had under him five doctors graduated in medicine in the medical school and three apothecaries. The tending of the sick was carried out by Knights and servants from time to time deputed for this service.... Every bed had its special covering on which was worked the cross of the Order, and at the head was a board, on which the doctor’s directions for the patient’s food were inscribed. At the end of the long apartment stood a small altar, at which Mass was daily said..... It was the business of two Knights Hospitallers told off for this duty for a year, to see that the Director of the Hospital or his deputy thoroughly carried out the duties of their office. They had also to see that all the provisions were in a perfect state for any negligence in this respect was strictly guarded against. Any slovenliness met with severe punishment. The Grand Master received daily reports concerning the hospital, visited it in person three times a week and on such occasions waited upon the sick persons, and spoke words of consolation and encouragement to them”6.

Other positively impressed visitors included the Frenchman Coppin (1639) and the Englishmen John Ray and Sir Philip Skippon (1664). Monsieur de Thevenot (1665), stated that he found the hospital “fort bien basti, la salle pour les Chevaliers malades est tapissee de haute lisse ... Tous les malades sont receus a cet Hospital & fort bein traitez ...”7. The Englishman Rev. Henry Teonge (1675) wrote that “The hospital is a vast structure, wherein their sick and wounded lie. ‘Tis so broad that twelve men may with ease walk abreast up the midst of it; and the beds are on each side, standing on four iron pillars, with white cur-

A 1780 plan of the hospital (reproduced from A. Mifsud: ‘Knights Hospitallers of the Ven. Tongue of England in Malta’.
Malta 1914)
tains and valance and covering extremely neat, and kept clean and sweet: the sick served all in silver-plate; and it contains above two hundred beds below, besides many spacious rooms in other quadrangles within, for the chief cavaliers and knights, with pleasant walks and gardens: and a stately house for the chief doctor and other his attendants".

Teonge’s compatriot Edward Brown (1676) also left glowing accounts of the hospital writing “The Infirmary stands on a Island, and the great Hospital is a noble building; to speak the Truth the very Glory of Malta. Here the sick are provided for much better than they could be in their own Houses; There are but two in a Room, which is large and commodious, every Patient having two Beds for change, and a Closet with a Lock and Key to himself. The sick are served by the knights in Person, their Diet is prescribed by the Physicians, and brought up in Silver Dishes; such exact Order being observed, and every Thing being performed with such Magnificence, as surprizes Strangers, and gives them a high Idea of the Charity of this illustrious Order”.

G. Wood (1687) was shown round the Infermeria by a priest from Valletta. He was captivated by the building and left a detailed flattering description of the hospital wards. A few years later Sieur du Mont described the infirmary (1690) as being a magnificent hospital where the sick are “serv’d by the Knights when they Eat or Drink .... The Vessels are generally of Silver; the Beds are good and the Linen is Chang’d pretty often. And besides, the disease’d are so plentifully furnished with all things that are proper for their Entertainment and Cure that the Knights themselves scruple not to lodge here when they are sick”.

The renown and standards were maintained throughout the eighteenth century. The Englishman Sir Richard Colt Hoare (1790) was favorably impressed by the hospital. “The public Hospital is a handsome edifice, and the institution itself is noble and charitable. Two extensive galleries besides smaller apartments are destined for the reception of the sick, who are treated with the utmost attention. A few devout, and perhaps penitent, Knights still observe the
ancient custom of attending the sick in person which was one of the duties incumbent on the Order while it preserved its original spirit and character”\textsuperscript{12}.

The French visitor Comte de St. Priest (1791) was similarly struck by the spacious halls and the lavish hospitality given to the sick of all nations and creeds. “L’hopital contient plusieurs grandes salles bien aérées et de vastes magazins dans lesquels on peut a l’aise quadrupler les rangs de lits; dans cet asile ouvert aux malheureux de tous pays, de toutes les religions, de tous les cults on prodigue aux malades les soins les remèdes les consolations des chevaliers, y surveillent non seulement les diverses parties d’administration, don’t la première place est une de grandes dignités
de l'Ordre, mais tout y vont eux memes servir les malades. La vaisselle qu' on employe est presque toute en argent la simplicite de son travail announce que cette magnificence est moins un objet de luxe qu' on moyen de propreté”.

However the late 18th century Sacra Infermeria failed to impress medically-oriented visitors. John Howard (1786) left a detailed criticism of the hospital as he viewed it. Together with his overall description of the building and services, he remarks that “...The ceiling is lofty; but, being wood now turned black; the windows being small and the walls hung round with dusty pictures this noble hall makes but a gloomy appearance. ... They were all so dirty and offensive as to create the necessity of perfuming them; and yet I observed that the physician in going his rounds was obliged to keep his handkerchief to his face. The use of perfume I always reckon a proof of inattention to cleanliness and airiness; and this inattention struck me here forcibly on opening some of the private closets with which this hall is very properly furnished...... The great hall already mentioned is on the ground floor; and under it is another hall or rather a large ward which is nothing but a dark and damp arched cellar.......

The last eighteenth century medical visitor was the French doctor in charge of the troops who described the Sacra Infermeria and made structural changes to it to better serve its purpose. He commented that “De toutes les salles il n’y a que la grande et celle des blesses qui soient salubres; les autres ne sont pas propres a’ recevoir des malades......Les malades qui etoient traitees dans cet hopital prenoient un caracter different selon les differentes salles ou’ etoient les malades. Dans celles que j’ai cy-dessus condamnees les fievres d’acces degeneroient promptement en continues; les continues en putrides, et les rechutes etoient frequentes. J’ai eprouve les memes effets dans l’extremite de la grande salle tenant a’ la Phalanga, tandis que dans l’autre extremite elles ne prenoient point ce caracter: cela est d’autant plus vrai que des que j’eus fait faire les reparation don’t j’ai parle je n’ai plus observe ces funestes accidents. Ainsi, si l’hoptial de Malte etoit si vante du temps de l’ordre, ces louanges ne peuvent tomer que sur la maniere avec laquelle il eut administrer. En effect les malades y etoient on ne peut mieux soignes et servis; il y regnoit le plus grand ordre et la plus grande propreté; tout la vaisselle etoit en argent. Les malheureux de tous les pays y etoient recus et des medecins habiles leur donnnoient des soins les plus assidus; tous les services s’y faisoient avec un zele et une assiduite exemplaires”.

Further information about the Sacra Infermeria, albeit an often graphic imaginative one, can be obtained from medically-related scenes drawn by various artists. Because the hospitaller role was central to the Order of St. John and was closely tied to the Order’s founder Blessed Gerald and the Order’s institutions, a common scene is that of The Blessed
Gerald caring for the sick. Two unsigned early 17th century copies of an identical scene depicting Blessed Gerald administering to a sick person assisted by two knights of the Order are to be found in the Museum of St. Paul’s Church [Wignacourt College] at Rabat and in the former Sacra Infermeria [now the Mediterranean Conference Centre] in Valletta. The latter has been attributed to the school of the Italian artist Mattia Preti [b.1613; d.1699]. The ward as depicted shows five patient beds surrounded by tent-like dark green curtains which served to afford privacy to the sick who lay in a well-furnished bed complete with pillow and coverlets. The room’s architecture apparently contrasts with that of the existing Sacra Infermeria in that the roof appears arched rather than rectangular.

Another painting depicting The Blessed Gerard receiving Godfrey of Boullion by the French artist Antoine de Favray [b.1706; d.1798] is held at the National Museum of Fine Arts at Valletta [Inv. 327]. This, in contrast, depicts the Sacra Infermeria with a flat roof but supported with arched columns. The background shows a number of four-poster type beds surrounded with heavy curtains, while patients are shown bandaged and with crutches.

Another sick-bed scene showing the Grandmaster ministering to the sick in the Sacra Infermeria is the 18th century painting attributed to the Neapolitan School held also at the National Museum of Fine Arts [Inv. 1607]. The scene depicts the Grandmaster, assisted by four other members of the Order, administering to a sick person lying in bed complete with sheets and blankets. Adjoining the bed is a chest that served also as a table. The background detail shows a naval battle scene.

A similar styed painting by Favray, that serves as an allegory to the Order’s hospitaller role, is held at the Cathedral Museum at Mdina. This depicts several male and female historical dignitaries of the Order administering to a bandaged sick individual lying on a mattress and covered with a sheet and blanket. Like the previous painting that depicts a naval battle scene, this painting appears to be set out in a open field, possibly a battlefield. Another sick-bed scene is the oval depicting St Igratius wounded at the siege of Pampiona painted by Favray and held at the Archbishop’s Curia at Floriana. Further sick-bed scenes have been depicted in ex-voti art, which art sometimes illustrates specific conditions such as haematemesis, hand injury, foot conditions, hysteria, plague, and pregnancy.

Artistic licence with the depiction of the Sacra Infermeria architecture is common in all the paintings, including the engraving depicting the Sacra Infermeria wards attributed to Filippus Thommasinus (1588). The latter depicts several physicians and attendants ministering to the sick in beds in the Grand Ward of the Sacra Infermeria. The beds in the engraving are depicted as four-poster surrounded with curtains. An altar stands at the far end of the ward. The roof architecture is arched in contrast to the true architectural pattern.

The Grand Ward of the Sacra Infermeria consisted of a very long hall measuring 153 metres by 10.6 metres and 9.45 metres. The hall was covered by trussed roofs, the wooden ceiling rafters being supported by wooden brackets projecting from the walls. The rafters were built up by placing one shallow beam on top of another. In contrast to the actual architecture, many of the paintings depict the roof either as arched or alternatively supported by columns. A ribbed Gothic cross-vaulted arched roof is a feature of the lower ward underlying the Great Ward. This arched roof is depicted in a 17th century plan of the Sacra Infermeria. The closest architectural depiction to the Great Ward is the engraving by Christian von Osterhausen (1650) that shows the funeral scene of a knight in the ward. The hall is further depicted with an altar at the far end. The beds are furnished with tent-like curtains while four-poster beds apparently alternate.

The period documentation in art and literature serves to emphasise the regard with which locals and foreign visitors viewed the Valletta Sacra Infermeria. The building and its heritage must be regarded as a social and historical treasure in Malta’s patrimony. The present exhibit about The Knights Hospitallers sited in the basement of the building helps to revive the chivalrous world of the Hospitaller Knights of St. John. This exhibition should be augmented to better illustrate Malta’s role as a centre of medical excellence in Europe during the 16-18th centuries.

(See Notes on page 101)