

The Gozo Committee of Health Minutes during the Cholera Epidemic of 1837

JOSEPH GALEA

Introduction

In the seventeenth century frequent pandemics of bubonic plague ravaged the populations of Europe, North Africa and Asia as far as China (Hays, 2005: 103; Brook, 1999: 163), while the nineteenth century world was tormented with wave after wave of cholera pandemics. The relative ease of population mobility across the vast empires in the dawn of the nineteenth century led to spread of diseases across continents and by 1817, cholera left the banks of the Ganges delta to reach Europe and the Americas. The first cholera pandemic started in Jessore, India in July 1817, appeared in Calcutta by September and reached Madras the following summer. After ten years of sowing death in Asia, cholera moved into Europe, affecting Russia in 1830, the United Kingdom in 1831, Marseille in 1835 and Naples and Sicily in the spring of 1837 (Figure 1). By the summer of the same year, it

had reached the Maltese shores, having already massacred 62 million people.

The Government in Malta was inexplicably under the delusion that as Malta was a small island fifty miles distant from the nearest mainland, this epidemic would be unable to cross the channel or would pass by without touching the Maltese shores' (Stilon, 1848: 7-8). Despite all this hope, the first cases of certified cholera broke out in the Ospizio in Floriana on 9th June 1837. The Ospizio was an asylum housing 'about seven hundred and fifty aged and impotent persons'. Cholera spread relentlessly among the inmates and by 19th June 1837, two hundred of them had died.

The then Governor of Malta Lieutenant General Henry Frederick Bouverie (1783-1852) and his advisors soon realised the gravity of the situation and on 13th June he ordered that the Ospizio inmates

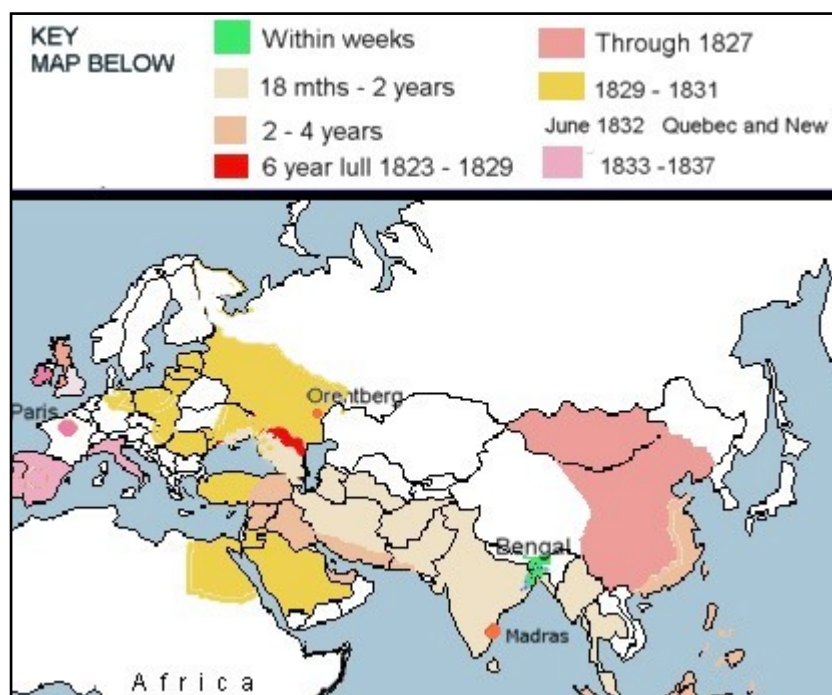


Figure 1. The spread of cholera from India to Europe.¹

¹ <http://freepages.history.rootsweb.ancestry.com/~mandx/page22cholera.htm> (accessed 27th September 2017).

² The committee was made up of Count Baldassare Sant (President); Baron Vincenzo Azopardi; Sig. Giuseppe Gauci Azopardi; Dr Clarke, Assistant Inspector of Hospitals; Dr Luigi Gravagna, Police Physician; Dr Liddell, Physician to the Naval Hospital; Nicholas Nugent, Esq. Treasurer to Government; Major Ward, Royal Engineers and George Ward, Secretary.

The Maltese Central Committee met on 22nd June (Government Gazette, 1837: 229) and proposed that:

- A well-arranged hospital should be provided for each of the country districts, situated in the highest and most airy part of the Casal.³ These should be ready to receive the sick, furnished with appropriate remedies and have any requisite comfort.
- Local committees should be formed in each Casal consisting of the:
 - i. Deputy Luogotenente
 - ii. Parish Priest
 - iii. Principal Medical Practitioner
 - iv. Other respectable local inhabitants

These local committees were to have the duty to:

- i. remove filth from streets, courts and cellars,
- ii. visit houses in narrow lanes, damp and low-lying places,
- iii. oversee proper cleanliness,
- iv. ensure proper ventilation in abodes,
- v. discover any disease concealment,
- vi. encourage head of families to apply for medical assistance quickly,
- vii. present the poor and destitute early assistance either by sending them to hospital if they so wish or supply them with medicine at home if they opt to remain there,
- viii. supply the Deputy Luogotenente with printed instruction for the treatment of the disease,
- ix. trust to ‘animate the zeal of medical men’ (Government Gazette, 1837: 229).

A *Comitato di Salute* for Gozo was formed on 21st June 1837 and the minutes from the committee meetings are found in a manuscript located at the Gozo Public Library in Victoria (Figure 2). The contents of this volume are the subject of this monograph.

The *Comitato* was formed following “*una deputazione degli abitanti del Rabbato di questa isola (Gozo)*” to the Lieutenant Governor “*per pregarlo di aver la bontà di prendere in*

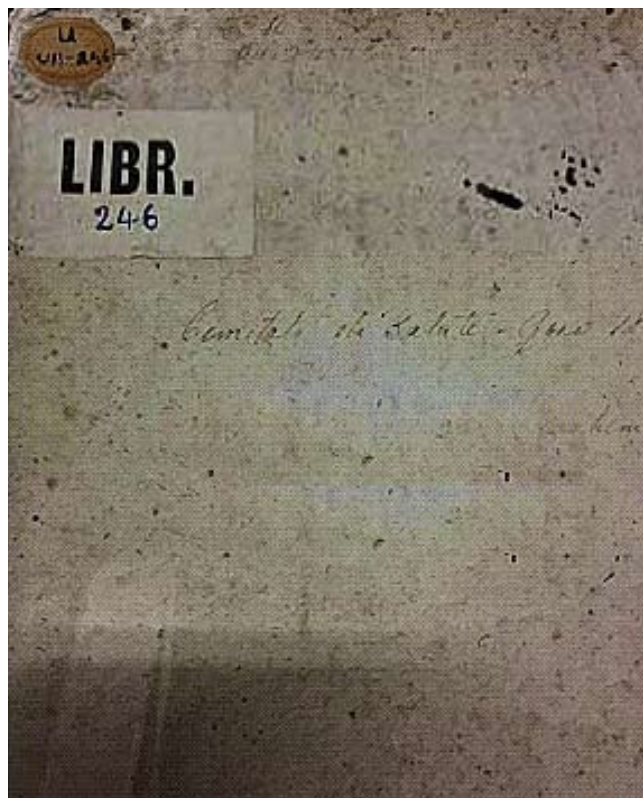


Figure 2. Manuscript Number 246 with minutes from the meeting of the *Comitato di Salute di Gozo*.

sua considerazione lo stato presente di salute nell'Isola di Malta, come venisse rappresentato nella Notificazione di Governo della 19 del corrente mese, onde compiacersi di adottare quelle tali misure che posso essere richieste dall'esigenza del caso...” to help manage cholera in Gozo.

The *Comitato* was made up of Magistrate Giovanni Battista Schembri (President), Mr James Somerville, Dr Eduardo Dingli, the Reverend Pro-Vicar, Canon Fr Publius Gauci, Father Guardian Pelagio, Dr Michel'Angelo Mizzi, Dr Eduardo Mallia, Dr Giuseppe Cutajar and Giovanni Montanaro. Dr Fortunato Mizzi was Committee Secretary and he kept the minutes of the meetings.⁴ It was decided that it should meet every day at the Lieutenant Governor's Office in Rabat and at any hour of the day if there was the necessity. It also had to report its activities to the Lieutenant Governor of Gozo Major C.A. Bayley C.M.G

The Gozo Comitato met on the same day (21st June) at 5.30pm and established rules on the same lines

³ Village.

⁴ The Comitato di Salute del Gozo (1837) Manuscript at the Gozo Library.

as those that had been published in Malta. The rules issued on the 21st June stated that:

1) From then on, the dead should be buried at the cemeteries and not in churches with the exception of those who had their private tomb and the burial had to be under *sette palmi di terra* plus the necessary quantity of *calcina*⁵ and always in the presence of a Police Sergeant who will make sure that all is done according to the rules. However, if someone wants to use their personal burial plot he must obtain permission from the *Comitato* – in the knowledge that this burial might be prohibited or controlled in case of cholera or suspected cholera, depending on what the committee decides in each particular circumstance.

2) The Lieutenant Police Officer of Rabat (Gozo) and the Deputy Lieutenants of the casals must inform the *Comitato* of all the suspected cases and deaths that occur in the districts they are responsible for and the parishes are prohibited to move or intern the cadavers without prior written permission from the Committee of Health.

3) Every morning the medical practitioners must report any cases in their care – which report should be given straight away in cases of death or suspected cholera.

4) All church burials must be well sealed.

5) Due to the current circumstances the *Magistrato del Mercato* is requested to pay special attention to the state and quality of fish, cured meat and other alimentary items that are being sold to the public and to perform frequently the obligatory inspection accompanied by one of the medics who will be appointed by the Committee for Health.⁶

The Gozo Health Committee reconvened the following day at 9.00 a.m. and released further notifications. These included a proposal to

designate well-ventilated buildings that are not far from the habitations in each of the localities to serve as hospitals in case cholera appears on the island and that these hospitals are adequately equipped where possible. At this sitting, they identified such buildings in each locality⁷ and suggested that each hospital should have a designated doctor, priest and nurses who should report in their locality in the event of a case of suspected cholera. If a case of cholera or possible cholera arises, the stricken should be taken to these local hospitals and if the person could not or would not be transferred, the doctors and nurses are to offer all the assistance the patient can have in his own house. However, if the house of the affected is small and crowded, it was advisable that the persons living under the same roof are evacuated. In the same sitting the committee recommended the division of Rabat and its districts and the villages into sectors and to designate a person for each sector to execute the instructions of the same committee in preparation for the possible spread of cholera to Gozo. The committee also suggested that the Police Lieutenant of Rabat and the District Deputy Lieutenants should keep records and thoroughly inspect all habitations, the location and types of any animals kept, and if any animal dung is stored indoors or outdoors. They should then report their findings to the committee mentioned.⁸

At 11.30 a.m. of 23rd June, after confirmation of the minutes of the previous meeting, the Lieutenant Governor appointed Captain Whyte of the 70th Regiment⁹ to the *Comitato*. A letter of invitation was sent to Captain Whyte at the Chambray Barracks (Figure 3). During the same meeting the Lieutenant Governor presented the committee members an extract from the 8th October 1834 issue of the Malta Government Gazette, for distribution across the island. The extract carried an address with instructions to the people of Gibraltar who were visited by cholera in 1834. This was sent to the Government of Malta in 1834 in preparation for the arrival of the deadly cholera.

⁵ Lime mortar

⁶ Dr Michel' Angelo Mizzi was appointed for a week at the same committee sitting.

⁷ These included the Conservatorio delle Zitelle in Rabat, Casa di Ghain Lukin in Casal Caccia (Xagħra), Casa di Don Alessio Cauchi in Xeuchia, Casa del Paris in Sannat, Casa di Don Fortunato at Nadur, Unnamed House vicina alla chiesa in Cala, Forte Garzes in Hain Sielem, Casa di Don Gio Maria Cini in Zebbug and Casa del Dr Cassar in Garbo.

⁸ Victoria, Gozo, Gozo Public Library, 'Manuscript with Notamenti of the Comitato della Salute', Gozo' (1837) fols. 3r-4r.

⁹ Also called the Surrey Foot Regiment and was deployed to Malta in July 1836 and left for the West Indies in January 1838.

On the following day the committee recommended that the slaughterhouse would be relocated from the centre of Rabat to a place distant from residential areas. The committee did not meet on Sunday 25th June 1837 but reconvened on Monday 27th at 5.30 p.m. and in the presence and approval of the Lieutenant Governor decided that:

1. Two committee members should carry out a thorough visit to the *Aromaterie* on the island to decide whether the drugs and medication were of good or bad quality and if they are of bad quality they should be thrown away. Also these members

were to check if these places are well stocked with cholera medications and then report their findings to the committee.

2. Since at that moment, the casals were not able to follow the first directive from the 21st June with regard to the burial of the dead outside the churches, it was recommended that they continue to be buried in churches with the proviso that the rules of the said directive are followed. This would not apply to Rabbato and its limits because they have a spacious and convenient cemetery.

3. The Committee members read the report by the central committee in Malta issued on 20th June and published on 22nd June in the Government Gazette and provided by the Lieutenant Governor and took the necessary measures to promulgate it immediately around the island.

The meeting of 27th June appointed two committee members, Dr Michel'Angelo Mizzi and Mr G. Montanaro, to visit the island's *Aromaterie* as was decided and discussed in the doctors' reports on the state of the health of the island.

The Gozo Health Committee had to prepare the buildings in Rabat and the casals to turn them into cholera hospitals, designate medical personnel to manage these hospitals and look after communities living in the casals and nominate various other persons as needed in preparation for the likely outbreak spread to Gozo. On the 28th June, the Gozo committee members asked the Central Health Committee in Malta for financial support for these reasons.

Giovanni Battista Schembri, president of the *Comitato* on the 29th June formally thanked Canon Don Giovanni Battista Ellul for his zeal both as an ecclesiastic and as a citizen in accepting the committee's decision to utilize the *Conservatorio delle Zitelle* as a cholera hospital in case '*si manifestasse in questa isola il morbo che affligge l'Isola di Malta*'.

On the 6th July the Committee met at 11.00 a.m. and decided that Maria Cassar¹⁰ who might have been infected with cholera, could not be buried in

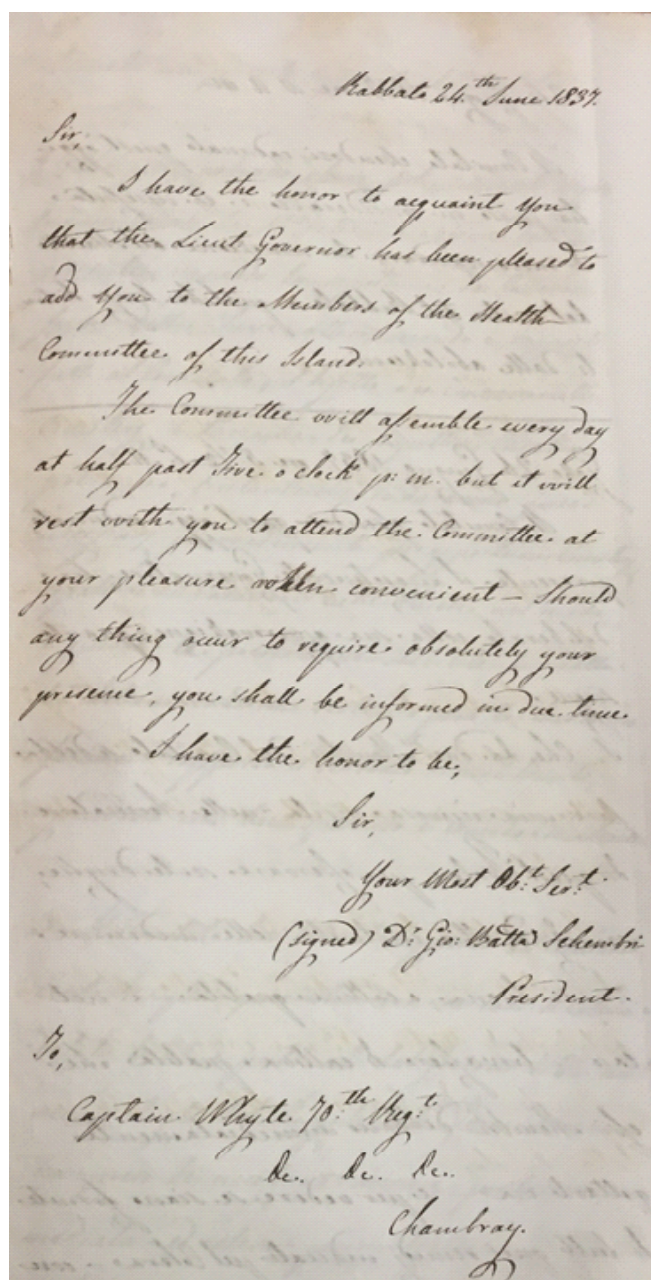


Figure 3. Invitation letter to Captain Whyte of the 70th Regiment to become a member of the *Comitato della Salute* of Gozo.

¹⁰ Maria Cassar was not included in the list of patients who died from cholera which appears at the end of this same report.

the Matrice in Rabat in burial number 45 allocated by Archpriest Cutajar to Eduardo Busuttill, the husband of the dead woman's sister.¹¹ In the same sitting the committee asked the Lieutenant Governor for 84 pounds sterling so that *Casa San Calcedonio* (Figure 4) in Rabat be refurbished to be able to receive the inmates of the *Conservatorio delle Zitelle* (Figure 5).¹² It was also on the same day that the first casualty to cholera in Gozo was

recorded. The committee duly informed Lieutenant Governor Bayley that Dr Cutajar reported the first case of cholera in person of Giuseppa Falzon '*una povera disgraziata e povera indigente*' and the committee agreed with the report's conclusion.

The committee's concerns, when it met on 8th July, were mainly to organise the medical doctors on the island so as to act promptly when cases of



Figure 4. Casa di San Calcedonio received the inmates from the conservatorio delle Zitelle.



Figure 5. Conservatorio delle Zitelle transformed into a cholera hospital.

¹¹ The decision was based on examining the contract between Busuttill and the archpriest which attested that the burial ground could be used by Eduardo Busuttill and his family. Maria Cassar, being the sister of his wife, was not consanguineous and was not from his family.

¹² Comitato di Salute, Gozo, 1837, fols 8v -9r.

cholera were noted. They assigned each of the seven doctors available different locations and assignments (Table 1).

In addition, Dr M. Angelo Mizzi, Dr Cutajar, Surgeon Montanaro and Dr Sammut were each assigned ‘*un uomo a loro servizio*’ who would be paid a shilling a day on the days he was employed. All designated doctors were to commence work the following day. The deputy lieutenants of the casali were each urged ‘*senza alcun ritardo*’ to choose locations for cemeteries in their own area of responsibility and report straight away to the Comitato.

There is no mention in the minutes as to how many, if any of the cholera hospitals in the casals were operational. Although many patients listed in the manuscript were treated ‘*in ospedale*’, there is no mention of which specific cholera hospital was active in contrast to the ones in Malta, which were very active (Government Gazette, 1837: 233).

The first report regarding cases of cholera was presented to the Gozo committee on 9th July and covered the cases from 6th July to 8.00 a.m. on the 9th July and from then on there was going to be a daily report up to 8.00 a.m. Copies of these reports were sent to the central committee in Malta. In the afternoon the committee decided with urgency to appoint four priests to provide immediate religious

assistance to the sick and dying from cholera. Two of these priests were named as Don Ludovico Formosa and Canon Deacon Giuseppe Cefai.

During the meeting of Tuesday 18th July, on the suggestion of Captain Whyte, the committee decided to appoint committees in the casals made up of the parish priest, the deputy lieutenant of the same locality and one or two prominent persons from the village. These local committees were to report to the *Comitato della Salute* about the cholera situation in their respective localities and receive instructions from the same committee. This proposition was communicated to the deputy lieutenants and they had to appear at the committee meeting in 48 hours with the names they had selected for the said local committees. On Thursday 20th July the deputy lieutenants named the persons they had selected to serve on these local committees (Table 2).

When the government through the *Comitato* during the 21st July sitting asked the doctors to negotiate their payment, all the doctors answered that they were happy to accept any offer the government was pleased to establish and they all signed this declaration (Figure 6).¹³ The committee was consistent in its ruling against home burials and on 30th July it denied the permit to bury Carmela Pace, who died from cholera, in her house.

Doctors	Assignments and Locations
Drs Mangion and Mallia and Surgeon LaSperanza	Civil and Cholera Hospitals; The district of Rabat, Gran Castello and their surrounding area.
Dr Michel Angelo Mizzi	The districts of Garbo (Għarb) and Żebbuġ and their surrounding area.
Dr Cutajar	The district of Casal Caccia (Xagħra) and its surrounding area.
Surgeon Montanaro	The districts of Nadur, Qala and Għajnsielem and their surrounding area and Comino.
Dr Sammut	The districts of Xewkija and Sannat and their surrounding area.

Table 1. Assignment of doctors during the cholera epidemic in Gozo.

¹³ The Comitato di Salute del Gozo (1837) Manuscript at the Gozo Library fol. 12’ “*La risposta delli medici e’ stata la seguente- Del Dott M.A. Mizzi – Io sono contento di tutto cio che il Governo si e’ compiacuto di stabilire*” Dr G.S. Mangion, Dr E. Mallia, Sig Speranza, Dr G Cutajar and Dr Sammut followed suit and signed the declaration.

Locality	Committee Members
Nadur	Don Nicola Spiteri (parish priest) Pietro Paulo Tabone Giuseppe Cassar
Xewkija	Don Nicola Vella (parish priest) Don Paolo Grech Michele Cauchi Pasquale Cachia
Sannat	Don Alessandro Cauchi (parish priest) Giuseppe Muscat Paolo Muscat
Żebbuġ	Don Michele Grima (parish priest) Don Salvatore Galea Don Luigi Hasciach Gio Maria Cini Francesco Vella
Garbo (Għarb)	Don Publio Refalo (Archpriest) Can. Michel Angelo Micallef Don Giuseppe Agius Nicoló Apap Giuseppe Debrincat
Casal Caccia (Xagħra)	Not given

Table 2. The local committees in the Casals.

On 3rd August, at a sitting of the *Comitato*, Captain Whyte suggested that if there was no possible harm to public health, the family of the afflicted could bury him/her in their house provided the grave is nine palmi (2.38m) deep and the body is covered with a copious amount of lime mortar. There is no evidence that this procedure was ever followed in Gozo and when on the 17th August there was a petition to bury an afflicted member of a sacred congregation in the Congregation's grave, the committee decided that they were subject to all the regulations that had been established on 21st June.

On the 24th August, the committee ordered that all the dirty houses in Rabat and those in which there were cases of cholera are immediately

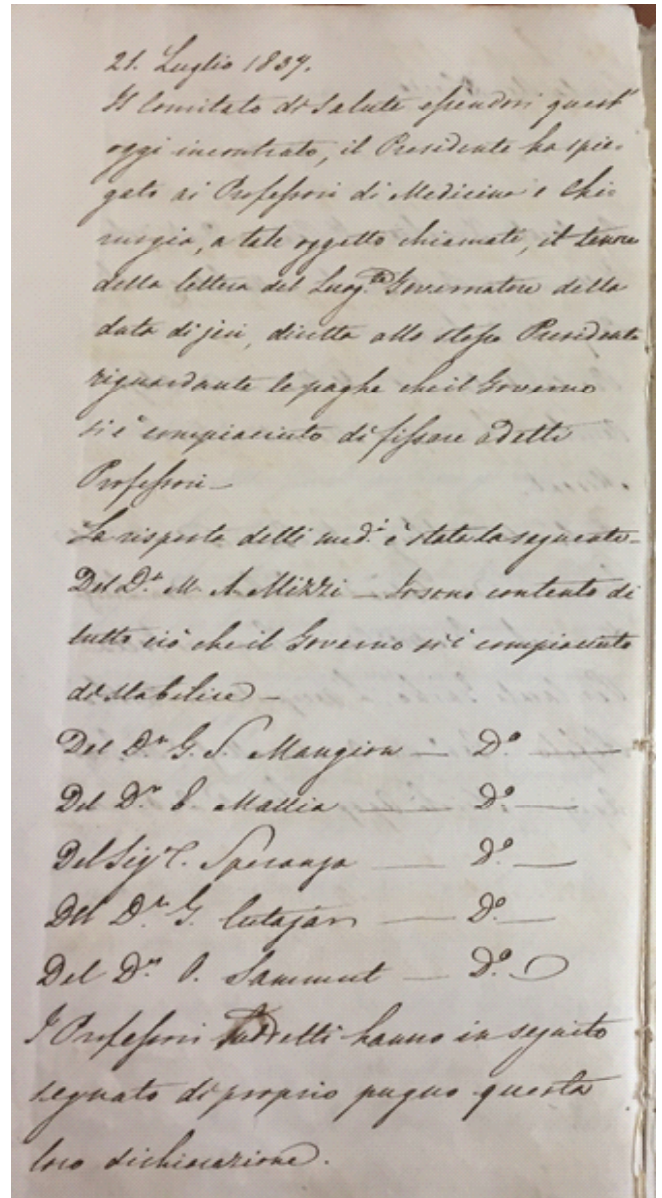


Figure 6. Declaration by doctors that they would accept any remuneration that the Government deemed fit.

whitewashed with lime. On the 31st of the same month it established that those persons who were cured from cholera and died from another disease immediately after they had had cholera were to be buried in the cholera cemetery and all church burials of persons who had been cured from cholera were to have an iron bar blocking the grave and it was not to be opened before the stipulated time.

The *Comitato della Salute* of Gozo met for the last time on 1st September. A letter of dissolution dated 30th August was sent by the Lieutenant Governor to the President of the Committee conveying his heartfelt thanks for “the advice and assistance which you have rendered me during this trying

and anxious occasion and I must beg you will be good enough also to convey to the Gentlemen of the Committee my thanks for their services and for the very ready and willing manner in which they came forward at a time of no ordinary moment.”

At the end of the document there is the list of 743 patients afflicted by cholera including the date of diagnosis, their place of abode, the date of their cure or their date of death and if they were managed at home or in hospital (Figure 7). The last page of the document honours 14 persons ‘who have offered their services to the Lieutenant Governor and the Committee of Health in Gozo’ during the cholera epidemic (Figure 8).

The cases of cholera peaked between the 20th and 27th July 1837 and were tailing off by the end of August (Figure 9). The recording stopped abruptly when the Committee was dissolved on 31st August.

The population of Gozo was 16,534 in the beginning of 1837¹⁴ and the rate of 743 afflictions

was therefore 4.5% of the Gozitan population up to end of August. If September is included from other sources one has to add a further 61 patients; 804 patients or 4.9% of population affected.

Up to 31st August the number of females afflicted was 392 (53%) and that of males was 351 (47%) (Figure 10). The female population of Gozo was 8,377 (affliction rate of 4.7%) and the male population was 8,157 (affliction rate 4.3%). The rate of female affliction was therefore higher than that of males.

345 patients succumbed to the disease but more than half (395) survived up to the end of August (Figure 11). The mortality rate from cholera in Gozo up to 31st August was 47% of those afflicted. Data from other sources shows that the mortality rate for the three summer months (July- September) was 359 of 804 patients (46%) (Chetcuti, 1837: 13). The mortality rate was therefore less than that of Malta, which was 3,893 of 7,981 or 51% (Chetcuti, 1837: 13). Possible contributions to a better outcome of

Date	Name	Place	Date
1 st July	Luigi G. Scurro	St. Peter's	12 th July
2 nd "	Maria Scurro	"	9 th July
3 rd "	Maria Vella	"	8 th "
4 th "	Antonio Scurro	"	8 th "
5 th "	Scurro Scurro	"	16 th "
6 th "	Emman. Vella	"	9 th "
7 th "	Maria Scurro	"	9 th "
8 th "	Maria Scurro	"	9 th "
9 th "	Antonio Scurro	"	18 th July
10 th "	Maria Scurro	"	16 th "
11 th "	Scurro Scurro	"	9 th July
12 th "	Scurro Scurro	"	17 th July
13 th "	Scurro Scurro	"	11 th July
14 th "	Scurro Scurro	"	18 th July
15 th "	Scurro Scurro	"	22 nd "

Figure 7. The first 15 consecutive patients on the list of patients afflicted by cholera.

Date	Name
26 th June	M. Scurro
"	M. Scurro
27 th "	M. Scurro
30 th "	M. Scurro
"	M. Scurro
"	M. Scurro
"	M. Scurro
1 st July	M. Scurro
2 nd "	M. Scurro
"	M. Scurro
3 rd "	M. Scurro
4 th "	M. Scurro
5 th "	M. Scurro

S. Scurro
President

Figure 8. The list of honour of volunteers who helped in the fight against cholera.

¹⁴ https://nso.gov.mt/en/nso/Historical_Statistics/Malta_Blue_Books/Documents/1836_chapter13.pdf (accessed 1 May 2019).

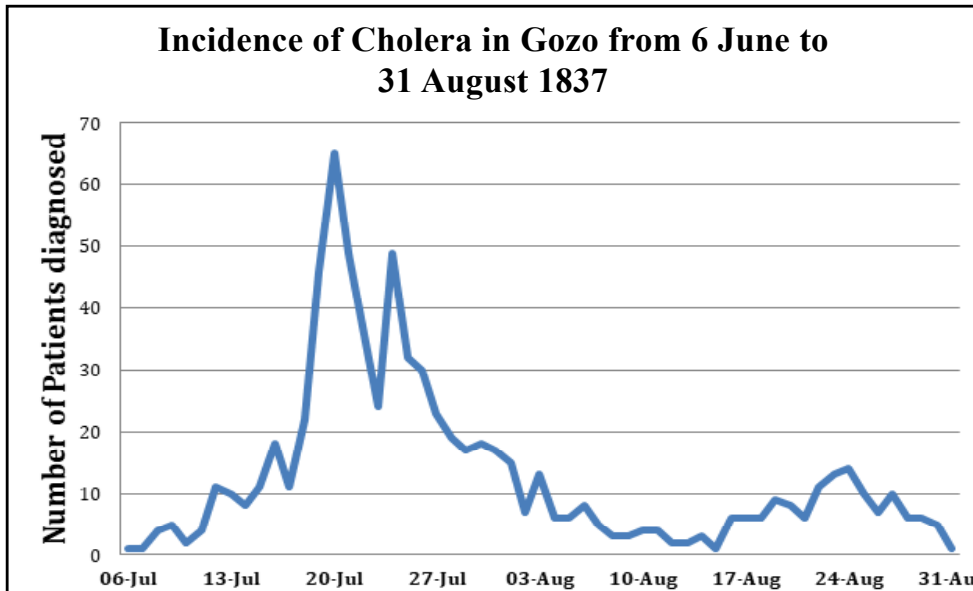


Figure 9. Cases of cholera diagnosed in July and August of 1837.

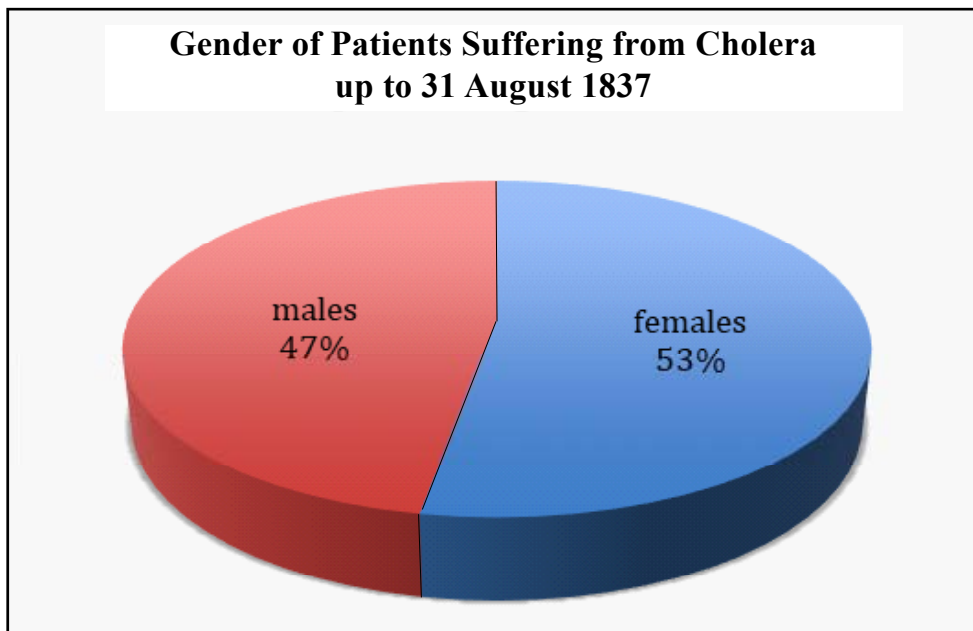


Figure 10. Gender of patients suffering from cholera in July and August 1837.

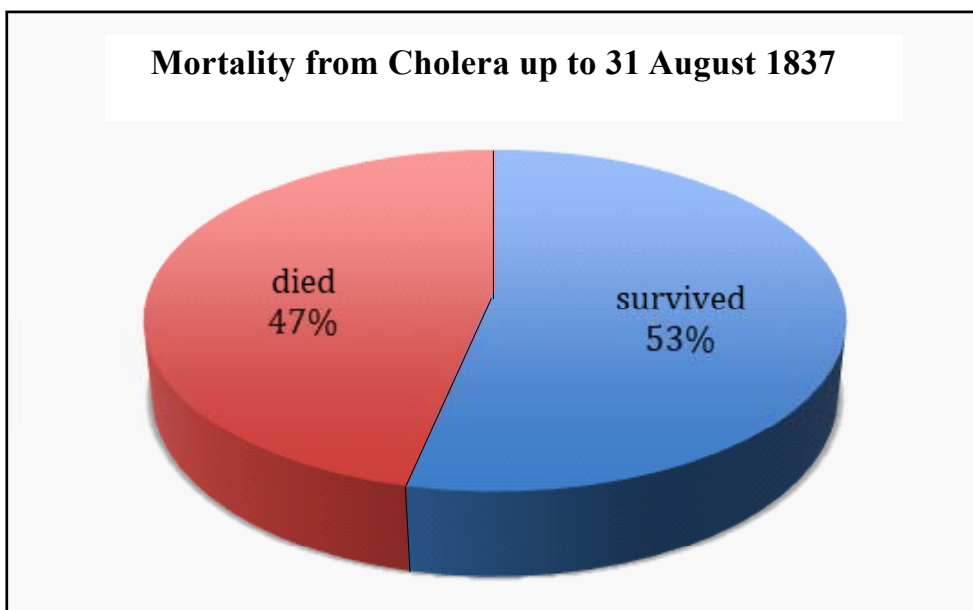


Figure 11. Mortality from cholera in Gozo occurring in July and August 1837.

Districts of Gozo	Cholera Cases	Population 1842 census (Bezzina, 1985: 342)
Rabat, Castello, Kerzem and area*	380	4904 (7.7)§
Xagħra	180	1720 (10.4)
Xewkija	77	1391 (5.5)
Sannat and Munxar	39	899 (4.3)
Żebbuġ and Għasri	9	720 (1.25)
Nadur, Qala, Għajnsielem	20	3295 (0.61)
Għarb	4	1413 (0.28)
Ospizio and Ospedali civili	15	-
Others	13	-

*Belliegha (17), Għajn Qatet (7), Hammimiet (1), Wied Sara (1), Wara s-Sur (1), Għammiesa (3), Għajn Tuta (2), Mandraġġ (1), Lunzjata (4), Hamrija (8) u Fontana (41).
§ These percentages are only indicative because the cholera epidemic occurred five years earlier.

Table 3. Location of habitation of cholera patients in Gozo for July and August 1837.

cholera patients in Gozo include the preparation by the Lieutenant Governor and the *Comitato di Salute* before the epidemic touched Gozo as well as the cleaner air in Gozo.

The distribution of cholera cases in Gozo shows the majority of patients to come from Rabat and its surrounding territories, Xagħra and Xewkija. The incidence of cholera in Għarb, Nadur, Qala and Għajnsielem was low. The closest census to 1837 is the first recorded census five years later in 1842. Although the population is different from 1837 the above will give solid evidence where people lived in those years. No huge changes in habitation sizes would have changed in five years in those days. The incidence per district cannot be worked accurately but an approximate indication is possible. So one can assume crudely that the highest incidence was in Xagħra followed by Rabat, Xewkija and Sannat. Għarb has the lowest incidence and Nadur, Qala Għajnsielem and Żebbuġ show a relatively low incidence (Table 3).

In conclusion, the Gozo Public Library manuscript sheds important light on the way the first cholera epidemic in Gozo was tackled, including measures taken and the cleaner environment prevailing in Gozo at the time.

References:

- Bezzina, J. (1985). *Religion and Politics in a Crown Colony – The Gozo Malta Story 1798-1864*. Valletta, Malta: Bugelli Publications.
- Brook, T. (1999). *The Confusions of Pleasure: Commerce and Culture in Ming China*. USA: University of California Press.
- Chetcuti, T. (1838). *Notizie Storiche e Patologico-cliniche sul cholera che Divampo In Malta e Gozo Nell’Estate del 1837*. Malta.
- Government Gazette of Malta*. 8 October 1837. Malta: DOI.
- Government Gazette of Malta*. 28 June 1837. Malta: DOI.
- Gozo Public Library. (1837). ‘*Manuscript with Notamenti of the Comitato della Salute*’, Gozo’. Victoria, Gozo: Library Number 246.
- Hays, J. N. (2005). *Epidemics and pandemics. Their impacts on human history*. Santa Barbara, California: ABC-CLIO.
- NSO. (1836). *Blue Book 1836*. Malta: National Statistics Office.
- Stilon, G. M. (1848). *The Cholera at Malta in 1837*, (translated by Seth B. Watson). London: Churchill.

Acknowledgement: I would like to thank Mr George Cassar head of the Gozo Public Library who made me aware of this manuscript and for letting me scrutinise it.

Joseph Galea graduated MD in Malta in 1985 and pursued training in Cardiothoracic Surgery in the UK. Elected FRCS from Edinburgh College of Surgeons in 1992 and Intercollegiate FRCS(CTh) in 2000. He was awarded a Doctorate in Medicine by research by Sheffield University in 2000. He was appointed Consultant Cardiothoracic Surgeon in 2001. In 2017 he was awarded MA by the University of Malta and in 2018 he was promoted as an Associate Professor by the University of Malta. He is currently the President of the Association of Surgeons of Malta.