



## The Plague of 1813 and the Blessed Virgin of Mellieħa

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By the beginning of 1813, at the height of the Continental Blockade imposed on Europe by Napoleon with the aim of leading Britain to bankruptcy, the Maltese Islands enjoyed an economic boom which made them a great centre of commerce, contraband and communication in the Mediterranean. However, the increase in ships entering Maltese harbours also meant a higher risk of an epidemic disease reaching the islands and wrecking havoc in the islands' economy and social life. This is exactly what happened on 16 April 1813, when the first victim of the plague succumbed to the disease in Valletta.

It appears that the plague epidemic of 1813 was brought over to Malta from Egypt on the Brigantine *San Nicola*. Although the crew was taken into quarantine, the vessel was left for some time docked in Marsamxett Harbour, with the result that some cloth was stolen from aboard the ship and sold to a shoemaker from Valletta who was unaware of the origins of the sheets he had bought at a reduced price. The shoemaker's daughter was the first victim, soon to be followed by her mother and father.

At the time many people believed that the plague spread as a result of a bad wind, while others were of the opinion that it was contracted through touch. Nobody knew that the plague originated from a microbe that attacked rats and then passed on to people who were bitten by lice infesting those same rats. Not even the Health Authorities were aware of this and many precautionary measures were taken in vain. All Maltese ports were closed to commerce and no ship was allowed to enter or leave harbour, while Courts, churches, theatres and other public places were kept closed.

The contagion spread like wildfire and those contracted were taken to the Lazzaretto on Manoel Island. Additional hospitals were opened at Bighi and in Saint Dominic's Convent in Rabat, while wooden huts

or *barracche* were constructed in the ditch at Floriana and also outside Valletta. In a short time the British Authorities ran short of grave diggers and so they made use of prison inmates to feed the plague-stricken and to carry and bury the dead. Many of these prison inmates, who were constantly guarded by soldiers, suffered the same fate and the same happened to other similar prisoners brought over from Sicily.

The plague continued to spread and Qormi, Żebbuġ and Birkirkara were severely hit. These cities were surrounded by soldiers and a wall was built to keep the inhabitants inside. This was Martial Law and non-conformists were shot on the spot.

The British Governor, Thomas Maitland, took very strict measures and ordered the police and soldiers to keep those infected in restricted areas. He also convinced the Maltese Bishop Ferdinando Mattei to issue a Pastoral Letter saying that those who disobeyed the restrictions about the plague would be guilty of mortal sin and invoked the clergy to explain clearly to the people regarding the urgency and gravity of the situation.

In September 1813 there were signs of an abatement in the plague but it was only on 29 January 1814 that the people of Valletta and other cities and villages were allowed to move freely. Only Qormi remained under quarantine until March of the same year. In February 1814 the plague hit Gozo, at Xaghra, and the people were immediately transferred and isolated into tents up to 13 June of the same year. The Maltese Islands were declared completely free of the plague on the 8 September 1814, the feast of the Nativity of Our Lady. The plague had claimed the lives of nearly 4500 people out of a population of 116000.

### The Blessed Virgin of Mellieħa

The Maltese people have always been able to adapt themselves to any crisis that came their way and have

grown used to put their faith in Divine mercy, entrusting their whole lives in the hands of God and Our Lady. The triumphal Arch leading to the Mellieħa Sanctuary courtyard bears the inscription "In Thee did Our Fathers trust, They trusted and thou didst deliver them" taken from the Book of Psalms, and the hundreds of ExVoto paintings and gifts bear witness to this. These gifts were given as a sign of thanksgiving to Our Lady of Mellieħa by people who had put their faith in Her.

These gifts, which vary from paintings to iron chains, crutches, war mementos and sundry other objects, remind us of the sufferings and turmoils of our forefathers in their everyday lives and are a living reminder of their great faith.

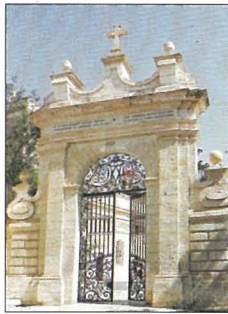
Amongst the many paintings in the Sanctuary sacristy, one finds an oil on canvas showing a hospital ward in the Sacra Infermeria of Valletta, with beds on either side all occupied by patients who had contracted the plague of 1813. The legend under the painting says that a certain Anna Lungaro had contracted the plague with two wounds in her left thigh. With the divine intercession of the Blessed Virgin of Mellieħa, herself and two other patients were saved out of a total of 160 hospital inmates. This occurred on 17 August 1813. This vow was made by Anna Lungaro and her relative Giovanni (Portelli).

A second ExVoto, also in the Sanctuary, presents us with a particular family hit by the plague and shows us how the widow Liberata Calleja of Floriana, together with her daughter Maria, contracted the disease and both were taken to the purposely built wooden huts in Floriana's ditches. Liberata had about thirty wounds all over her body and after she was cured by a Sicilian doctor, and with the intercession of the Blessed Virgin of Mellieħa, together with her daughter she recovered on the 2 January 1814.

Another interesting ExVoto painting of the plague of 1813 gives us a vivid description of the precarious situation existing in the ditches exactly outside Valletta's bastions. A certain Nicola Bartolo, a carter employed to carry water to those infected with the plague and who were under quarantine in the first ditch of Porta Reale of the city of Valletta, was terrified that he would contract the disease himself. So, from May till December, he prayed the Most Blessed Mother of God of Mellieħa and Saint Barbara and he was delivered from all harm.



This last ExVoto incorporates many details and clearly depicts the wooden huts built outside Valletta's bastions, the infected persons coming out to have their share of water from Nicòla's barrel, others are seen carrying a cartload of dead bodies to be buried, a priest is seen comforting one of the stricken persons, relatives of the infected persons are seen looking into the compound from behind the quarantine wall and armed guards are seen surveilling the whole scene. We also have a view of the main entrance into Valletta with Saint John and Saint James counterguards on either side.



Apart from other ExVoto paintings, which over the years have gone missing from the Mellieħa Sanctuary, there are many other references to monetary gifts, candles, oil and other donations which were donated to Our Lady of Mellieħa during and after the plague of 1813.

Another connection with the Sanctuary of Our Lady of Mellieħa was Count Francis Rivarola who, in 1813, was appointed Inspector General of Police by Maitland himself, with the express order to contain and arrest the spread of the plague, a task which he meticulously carried out, using dictatorial measures. Count Rivarola occupied one of the Pilgrims' rooms near the Sanctuary for his personal use. Also stationed there were guards for signalling, equipped with horses and a carriage. In fact he ordered all the

Sanctuary pilgrims' rooms to be cleaned, restored and whitewashed, at a cost of 46 Scudi 9 Tari' and 10 Grani. The same Count, who was a frequent visitor to the Sanctuary, on one occasion made a donation of several gold coins of Sicily to help out in the expenses involved in the feast of the Nativity of Our Lady of Mellieħa of 1814, which coins procured a substantial sum of over 181 Scudi.

In the years to follow 1813 several thanksgiving pilgrimages were made from different villages and towns in Malta and Gozo to this holy shrine of Mellieħa and some have kept their appointment up to the present day, 200 years later.

Surely this holy miraculous Icon venerated in the Mellieħa Sanctuary had been a great source of comfort and strength to those affected by that terrible epidemic.

Without any known cure, the only source of hope and faith of those miserable plague victims was in the Blessed Virgin who had always been such a great source of solace for their forefathers in all that they beseeched Her.

First and fourth photos courtesy of Mr Michael Cauchi and Mr Emanuel Cini.

