Petitions by medical practitioners 1632-1732

Giovanni Bonello

The very humble *suppliche* or petitions addressed by subjects to the Grand Masters constitute a major source of information about everyday life in Malta at the time of the knights. Seventeen large volumes of them have been preserved, ¹ ranging from the year 1603 to the end of the Order's rule. Rarely do they deal with matters of great historical import, but rather document private matters which have, at most, a social relevance.

Usually a *supplica* contains a brief statement of the facts and a specific request, accompanied by documents in support, as the case may be. The petitioner almost invariably used Italian, often quite Sicilianised or Maltesised in form; the Grand Master referred the request to the official competent in the matter at issue and to an *Uditore* – the advisers of the Grand Master with ministerial and judicial functions. They ended with a 'rescript' – the Grand Master's decree rejecting or granting the request, in whole or in part.

Though the *suppliche* cover many aspects of social and economic life, it is with the restricted area of doctors and medicine that I propose to deal. Medical appointments, practice, promotions, featured prominently, though I will not neglect more extraneous matters in which doctors figured to some extent. Quite importantly, they provide substantial lists of names of physicians practising in Malta during the *seicento* and *settecento*, not otherwise recorded.

I have to emphasise that the texts of the documents do not always make clear whether they are referring to medical or legal 'doctors'. In some cases the problem does not arise, e.g. when the petition refers expressly to *dottor fisico*. I have tried to establish from the context which '*dottore*' was a physician, and which a lawyer, but that not always proved possible, and thus I cannot exclude that a small fraction of the following material may refer to lawyers.

The first petition by a doctor I have come across dates to 1632, under Grand Master Antoine de Paul, but some of them recall far earlier events. Dr Consalvo Abel, for instance, in 1638 reminded Grand Master Lascaris of facts dating back to the Great Siege (1565). These antecedents he recalls in a rather garbled fashion. Dr Placido Abel (his grandfather?) had distinguished himself in Grand Master de Valette's times by having surveyed and inventoried the properties of those enslaved when the island was overrun by the Turkish armies. In gratitude, de Valette, moved by generosity, had offered him 20 *salme* of land which belonged to slaves who had died in captivity without heirs. Dr Placido had thanked the Grand Master profusely, but had declined that liberality.

Now, 72 years later, Dr Consalvo ventures to suggest that, in consideration of his ancestor's merits, the Grand Master should grant him a plot of public land several *tumoli* in extension, near the bastion of Senglea castle towards Kalkara, for his relaxation.²

Though most of the early *suppliche* refer to requests for grants of public lands, only a few filed by medical doctors aim in this direction. Besides Abel's already mentioned, I found a couple more, among which the very first petition by a physician. Giuseppe Muscat, surgeon of the galley *San Giovanni*, who requested to be granted a plot of public land in Valletta, lying between his house and the church of Nibbia – today in the grounds of the Evans laboratories, close to the *Infermeria* and the esplanade of Fort St Elmo.³

Giovanni Bonello LLD

European Court of Human Rights, Strasbourg, France

In 1690, the physician Arcangelo Grech owned, on the strength of his marriage a garden on the main road to Notabile, near Imriehel. This garden touched some marshlands which, according to Grech, damaged the adjacent properties and inconvenienced all those who made use of the road. He worms in a crafty suggestion: he offered to incorporate that 'offensive' marshland into his private garden. The newly elected Grand Master Adrien de Wignacourt rewarded that surge of concerned philanthropy with his princely go ahead.⁴

I would have expected more petitions by foreign doctors desiring to practice their profession in Malta, but only traced two, the first, in 1657, by Dr Baldassare Dani from Palermo. Now settled in Malta, he informed the Grand Master of his urge to serve the Order and its people. He claims he is *professore* of medicine, as results from the *privilegi* (warrants) of the universities of Palermo and Salerno, which he filed. The Grand Master allowed his request.⁵

Dr Abraham Monier, a Flemish medic, followed Dani in 1698, at the beginning of the reign of Grand Master Perellos. He claimed expertise in surgery, and a marked ability to distil and manufacture ointments and balms for wounds, ulcers and fractures. He had earned diplomas not only in Sicily, but wherever else he had practised. Dr Arcangelo Grech, the Grand Master's *Protomedico* (chief government medical officer)⁶, gave the prince favourable advice, but on the express condition that Monier would limit himself strictly to surgery and distillation.⁷

The petitions include the name of a little-known early *Protomedico*: Dr Nicolò Cilia, appointed in 1634.8 In 1641 his wife Lucretia requested to be reconfirmed tutor of their minor son Lazzarino as she required to appear in court on his behalf and the original decree could not be found in the Castellania.9 Three years later Dr Cilia and the Grand Master reach an out-of-court settlement in a dispute.¹⁰

Very sad is the story of Dr Antonio Torrensi, resident in Syracuse in Sicily. In 1643 he threw at Grand Master Lascaris a sorry tale. Now very old, he is living in abject misery and starving to death. He fears to return to Malta where he would face criminal charges and civil prosecution. Would the Grand Master grant him immunity from criminal and civil charges, so he could end his days living with his *nipoti* (nephews or grand children) and die in his birthplace? The compassionate Grand Master granted his request. I have not traced why Dr Torrensi had to escape from Malta and for what crimes the state wanted him prosecuted.¹¹

Equally seeped in pathos appears the story of Dr Flaminio Zammit. In 1675 he petitioned Grand Master Nicholas Cottoner to legitimize his three illegitimate children. He explained how he had had an affair with Menichella (Domenica) Torreu at a time when it could not be ascertained whether her husband Gio Battista Torreu was alive or dead (in captivity or in exile?). Three children were born to Dr Zammit and his mistress: Giovanna, Anna and Francesco. Eventually the couple broke up. Evidence

of Gio Battista's death finally reached Malta and Menichella then married - Filippo Habela, not Dr Zammit.

Dr Zammit now worried about the future of his three children – he wanted them to inherit his estate as if they were born in legitimate marriage. The sovereign enjoyed since ancient times the prerogative to conjure legitimacy out of bastardy. Cottoner, renowned in his earlier days for his consuming sympathy for frisky courtesans, acquiesced, after the children had formally agreed to their new status by means of a notarial deed. The Grand Master's detergent powers ensured the desired result "by removing every stain from their birth." ¹²

I had hoped the petitions would result more lavish with details about how and where the doctors had studied and trained, but from this point of view, with minor exceptions, they prove quite disappointing. Lorenzo Dalli, pharmacist, stated in 1709 – 1712 that he had trained and worked in Palermo for three years and a half with the renowned Domenico Alessandro. Dalli had married and settled in Gozo and had previously petitioned to be appointed chief pharmacist for the smaller island, but had been refused as it was not appropriate to have more than one. He mentions the 'old pharmacy' in the Citadel, run by Martino d'Assensi, now seriously indisposed and asks to take his place, opening a new pharmacy in Rabat.¹³

Another medic, Gaetano Azzopardi, in 1729 puts forward his claim to a job with the Order. He was aware, he said, that the *Protomedico* Massimiliano Petralito planned to employ as his assistant Dr Giuseppe Farrugia at 100 *scudi* a year. In Farrugia's job as doctor of the woman's hospital, would step the present doctor of the galleys Giorgio Imbert, presently physician of the ships of the line so the latter post would become vacant. "After having completed the course of medicine in this your domain" the applicant had gone to Montpellier where he studied for another four years and several months, applying himself both to theory and to practice. He reminded Grand Master Vilhena of the services rendered by his father, the *Protomedico* Giusto Azzopardi. He bound himself to pay 100 *scudi*, out of his salary of 150, to Dr Giuseppe Farrugia. 14

Medics did not seem to enjoy an automatic exemption from compulsory military obligations and services, though they obtained them quite easily if they so requested. In 1660 two Maltese medical doctors, Giorgio Zammit and Pietro Paolo Vassallo, lamented with the short-lived Grand Master Annette de Clermont Gessan that they had been ordered to ready a horse for war; how could they obey when no horses were available? Would the Grand Master extend the period for six months, during which they would do their best to comply? The Grand Master granted them a four months extension. ¹⁵

This, the applicants said, disrupted their work, with grave prejudice for their public duties. Would the Grand Master exempt them from parades duty, in order for them to better fulfil their professional obligations? In return they promised solemnly to keep their weapons at the ready at all times, compliant to every order. Cottoner decreed that doctors and surgeons in the

public service be left in peace.16

The same Lorenzo Dalli, pharmacist in Gozo, petitioned the Grand Master again in 1731 in connection with the current compulsory military service. He reminded Vilhena that as pharmacist he served the public in general and the hospital erected by the Grand Master's goodwill for the service of Gozo. Dalli had employed a man to gather medicinal herbs "which he has to do almost daily". It was in the interest of the general public, Dalli argued, that this person be exempted from military duties.¹⁷

The general impression one gets from perusing the petitions is one of poor conditions of employment, and of cut-throat competitiveness to get hold of a government post notwithstanding. This fits uncomfortably with the picture of a hospitaller Order boasting it provided the best medical services in Europe. Many physicians worked for years without any remuneration, simply in the expectation of a future vacancy.

Going through the records, in 1643 one comes across Luca Effner, *pratico* in the slaves' prison and previously *barberotto* in the *Sacra Infermeria* and on the galleys. After 25 years of working with all faithfulness and diligence, he laments his very hard work and very low pay. His large family just could not cope with the income he brought home, and he resorts to some unabashed lateral thinking. Instead of a rise in salary, could he be paid four *tari* extra for every freed slave who left Malta?¹⁸ Poor Effner, in 1651 was still struggling with his inadequate income. Bali Demandels (Demandolx?) had raised a company of musketeers for the countryside, and this had resulted in a further curtailment of his income by four *tari*. He pleaded to be exempted from this tax.¹⁹

Maruzzo Casha who acted as surgeon in Fort Ricasoli in 1705, only received a salary of four *scudi* per month, like the common soldiers he attended to. He served with "universal satisfaction", and not only in the art of surgery, but was out of pocket for giving medicines gratis to the majority of the soldiers who were most in need. The Grand Master had authorised him to charge for the medicines he handed out, but "considering the great misery of these soldiers" he went on distributing medicines for free all the same. Casha describes himself as the poorest of persons with wife and daughter. All he asks "for the love of God" is for the Grand Master to order that he be given daily four free loaves of bread.²⁰

The same disconsolate tone runs through the 1720 petition of Michele Fiteni, surgeon of Cospicua and Bormla. The late Giuseppe Fiteni had obtained from a previous Grand Master a decree of future succession in favour of Matteolo Fiteni, the petitioner's father to *far l'insegnante(?)* of the poor, with the usual salary and bread allowance. Now Michele Fiteni, married with six children, asks to succeed the late Gioseppe Fiteni *col fare l'instanie(?)* of the poor. ²¹ Another petition by Dr Michele Fiteni two years later gives an insight into the complex burocracy of the health services. He calls himself surgeon for Cospicua. His salary was paid as to one third by the surgeon of Vittoriosa and

Senglea, another third by the *Università* and the final fraction by the *Infermeria*. This last institution, however, required special instructions to release his salary, and he asks for this formality, pushing forward his destitute family as a compelling argument.²²

The Fiteni seem to have turned into a medical dynasty. In 1697 the surgical assistant Giuseppe Fiteni, a son of Matteolo, reminded the Grand Master that his father, who had served as *insegnante(?)* of the poor of Burmola, was now ill, and asked to take his place to support his nine brothers and sisters. The *Protomedico* certified that the *barberotto* Giuseppe Fiteni carried out his duties to perfaction.²³ And the surgeon Paolo Fiteni from Vittoriosa in 1717 petitions to fill the vacancy of surgeon for the poor of Vittoriosa and Burmola, vacated by the surgeon Gio Batta Zammit. A highly favourable report endorsed his application: over and above the considerable plus of being born in the profession, during the long incapacity of the previous incumbent, he had "treated the poor sick women with the precision, dedication and charity which were called for."²⁴

Dr Giuseppe Farrugia, in 1722, related to Grand Master Vilhena another tale of penny-pinching. The celebrated surgeon and lecturer Don Giuseppe Zammit, owing to his old age and recurrent illness, was about to give up his teaching post. Farrugia claims that for the past twenty years it was he, not Zammit, who had, *de facto*, borne the burden of this lectureship without ever receiving any emolument at all. He now asked to be confirmed permanently in Zammit's place.²⁵

Dr Francesco Scotto served five months as *prattico* in the *Infermeria*, but never got anywhere, although he had applied with others, and before others, for a post. He had therefore left to work in Casal Fornaro (Qormi) where he had been serving the poor as a volunteer "without payment, in fact, with great disadvantage, considering the noxious and bad air prevailing there." which, he says, on various occasions made him ill "and with danger of death, came close to end his life." In 1720 he pleaded with the Grand Master to comfort him "at least with the hope of some future succession" either on the ships of the Order or in Cospicua, so he could quit Qormi to escape the dangers of the air of the said village. Qormi then enjoyed a frightful reputation for *mal aria*. Laws enacted in 1648, and again in 1673, regulated the use of underground and stagnant waters in the area. ²⁷

Though most petitions made it point to be as economical with words as possible, a few exceptions provide considerable background details which make them far more relevant than others from a historical and sociological point of view. The medic Gio Dominico Xuereb in 1656 records how during the previous year's plague epidemic – the contagion of *Casal Pasqualino* (probably a corruption of Bisqallin, the lower village now part of Zejtun) he had volunteered to work in the *Lazzaretto* for the treatment of those infected, both as physician and as surgeon. He underlined the dangers to which he exposed himself and his personal hardships during those times of dread and panic.

In fact, one of the surgeons then working in the Lazzretto contracted the plague, but survived; several convicts sent to nurse the sick and bury the dead, succumbed to the *morbo*.²⁸ In view of his merits, Xuereb asked for a post in the *Infermeria* or elsewhere "with any reasonable salary with which he could honourably maintain his family."²⁹

Dr Giovanni Magi penned one of the most detailed petitions in support of his claims. He had served the Order for 55 years and was presently (1722) doctor of the poor in Valletta. On the occasion of the epidemic (1676?) he had worked in the prison of the slaves and the *Casetta* (the hospital for incurable women) and stood in for elder doctors during their incapacitation. In the time of the plague, his duties included that of accompanying the health commissioners in the infected houses and rooms for disinfection by fumigation, etc. A previous Grand Master, to reward his zeal, had appointed him *sotto-pratico* in the Infirmary, where he worked for four years.

Then the galleys of the Order returned from Negroponte and Scio in the Levant with a large number of stricken men on board, the majority of whom died in hospital, though many passed away in their own homes. The illness that came from Negroponte Xuereb describes as "malign and sticky", but, fortified by the sacraments of Holy Mother Church, he had carried out his duties with manifest danger of losing his life, like many guardians of the hospital had, and the *prattico* himself, whose place he took, all victims of the *morbo*. After seven years he had been promoted to doctor of the poor, which, up to his old age, he served for 40 years.

To add to his miseries, his son, a Fra Cappellano, had died, contracting a similar *influenza* at the return of the galleys in 1716. Now, in advanced age accompanied by many infirmities, he desired nothing so much as to retire. He wants to see his son, also a physician by profession, employed as doctor of the ships. He pleads for this job so as not to increase the poverty of his large family.³⁰

Gozo finds a little place in the records too. I have already referred to the pharmacist Lorenzo Dalli who opened a new pharmacy in Rabat. In 1669 the surgeon Gioseppe Casini, who claimed to be Gozitan, petitioned to obtain the post of surgeon in his island.³¹ And in 1707 Dr Gioseppe Gauci, ordinary physician in Gozo since 1684, asks for his son Dr Gio Nicolò, who had worked as a physician in Malta and Gozo, to be employed in his place "when the Creator will summon him to the next world."

Dr Gauci Sr described himself as one who "with all faithfulness, accuracy and sincerity had served everyone, rich and poor, without any exception, not sparing any fatigue, day and night and in all weather."

The *Protomedico* Dr Arcangelo Grech endorsed the request, praising both father and son: "I never received any complaint against this doctor" he wrote, adding quite wistfully "which is not unremarkable for one who is at the service of the public." As for Gauci's son "since he returned from his studies (abroad) with his degree and his doctorate ... he always frequented veteran

doctors for reasons of practice, and, in our usual academies he always proved his abilities."³² I do not believe the existence of these 'medical academies' in Malta had been recorded before.

I would include in this brief study some medical certificates and reports filed by non-medical petitioners to buttress their claims. They throw light on medical practices and social conditions then prevailing. Thus when, in 1686, Agostino Camilleri from Valletta received a summons for guard duties, he trudged to the *Protomedico* Dr Gio Domenico Sciberras. From early childhood, he disclosed, he had suffered from poor eyesight which, with age, deteriorated so badly that even during daylight he cannot, at short distance, distinguish a person from another, and by night, sees almost nothing at all.

Dr Sciberras certified the gravity of the complaint. The patient was affected by the dilatation of the pupils with the risk of a cataract forming. Camilleri, was badly *mancato* (*cfr* Maltese *immankat*) in his eyesight. Guard duties would only ensure he went completely blind. He obtained his exemption.³³

Similarly, in 1697, the young Bartolomeo Farrugia from Gudja asked for exemption from all military conscription on the strength of a certificate issued by the surgeon Salvatore Felici. Nine years earlier, the medic attested, Farrugia had fallen badly off a horse, and, notwithstanding treatment, had remained crippled in an arm. He was precluded, by the distortion in his arm, from mounting guard duties or from handling a musket.³⁴

Six years elapse before Lutio Vella received his summons for military service; *Protomedico* Dr Arcangelo Grech, however, let it be known that Vella already suffered blindness in one eye affected by cataract, and would be risking the other.³⁵

In 1718 Dr Giovanni Magi, as private doctor of the Baldacchino family, attested Nicola's various illnesses: a *fistula ossia apostema penetrante nei lombi* since 1698, and tuberculosis – he contracted an infirmity in his lungs and often suffered from the coughing of blood. This certificate enabled Nicola to avoid military service.³⁶

And a medical expertise about a kitchen garden belonging to Marc Antonio Caruana and situated under the bastion of Marsamuxxetto. Grand Master Zondadari had instructed a high powered commission, consisting of the two *Protomedici* Giusto Azzopardi and Don Giuseppe Zammit, two doctors of the Order, Francesco Agius and Giovanni Magi, Dr Giuseppe(?) Clinquant, doctor of the poor, and the master-mason Francesco Zerafa, to establish whether the garden constituted a health hazard.

An on-site visit determined that the garden was watered by foul liquids, and that therein collected dirty and malodorous waters – probably drainage from overlying Valletta. Caruana had been ordered to demolish the lot and had built an underground conduit to contain the fetid waters. This had been done in the presence of the Commissioners and under the direction of Zerafa, in that portion of land known popularly as *di Borgia* built (the garden?) about 65 years earlier.

Things now looked satisfactory. In winter, sea water

constantly flooded the conduit, and at other times it was cleansed by the overflows of clear water from the Palace kitchens and from the cistern of the biccerija, at the bottom of Christopher Street. ³⁷

What the petitions throw sufficient light on is the organization of government health services. Though the ultimate power of appointment of doctors in theory rested with the authorities, the system allowed plenty of leeway for horse trading, agreements on succession and deals in general. Another feature quite evident is that no retiring age at all seems to have been in place. It all depended on whether the guy who had turned gaga, actually noticed it.

In 1658 the surgeon Giorgio Cutajar who had worked in the *Infermeria* for 40 years recorded that his job had been 'subcontracted' to him by the *prattico* Gio Maria Zammit for an annual price of 50 scudi which he had obliged himself to pay Zammit during his lifetime. He started worrying about his future, should Zammit, whose job was *mutabile* (precarious? with a right to swap?) no longer occupy the post. He petitioned to request that whoever succeeded Zammit would assume the same responsibilities towards him. ³⁸

A surly Dr Zammit retorted in outrage: he had agreed to pay Cutajar 30 – not 50 – *scudi* as a consultant but for a period of three or four years only. Cutajar had never, not once, showed up at, or been seen anywhere near, the *Infermeria*. Zammit had to work himself to the bone "with evident danger to his life" when Cutajar stayed lazing out of sight. Come off it, Cutajar! And he now has the gall to simulate poverty, added the indignant Zammit, even though he could live comfortably off the income from his property.³⁹

The medic Giuseppe Calleja in 1667 came to know that the post of doctor of the poor for Birgu would soon fall vacant. Would the Grand Master keep in mind the services rendered for 50 years by his father as surgeon of the galleys and his own stepping in as locum in the absence of the doctor of the galleys, at the time of the *Principe Langravio* as *prattico* of the Infirmary and as commissioner for beggars?⁴⁰ The *Langravio* in question was the young Fredrick of Hesse, Cardinal and General of the Galleys present in Malta since the 1630s.

Dr Giusto(?) Azzopardi also petitioned the Grand Master. The *Protomedico* Arcangelo Grech, he said, for his many incumbencies, his advanced age (65) and his kidney maladies was carrying on his duties with notable damage to his health. The petitioner, to alleviate the hardships of the *Protomedico*, to serve the patients better in hospital and to earn himself the graces of the Grand Master, offered his services instead of Grech. As this swap was prohibited by the *ordinazioni*, Azzopardi asked to be authorised to take over all the functions of Grech, leaving to the old *Protomedico* his full salary – all this to be kept in mind by the Grand Master, please, when the next vacancy occurred.⁴¹

Dr Pietro Paolo Azzopardi, first physician of the galley squadron during the last campaign in the Levant – not a very distinguished one - when war flared up again between Venice and Turkey, put in his petition in 1717. Now that the doctor of the poor Errico Zerafa had died, he asked to be appointed in his stead.⁴² Similarly, shortly later, Dr Francesco Saverio Agius petitioned to replace Dr Giacomo Sagnani, now incapacitated from carrying out his duties in the infirmary.⁴³

Another petition by Dr Giusto Azzopardi shows the complex private deals that could be struck to promote a medical career. He had first worked on the galleys, then as *prattico* in the *Infermeria* for eleven years, later for 20 years as helper of the *Protomedico* Arcangelo Grech. In the job he only pocketed 100 *scudi* yearly of the 150 due to him, as he had to pass on 50 to his successor in the *pratticato*. Everyone knows, he adds, the multiple fatigues he suffered as helper. He now petitioned that the *Protomedico*, old and decrepit, be pensioned off and that the applicant should succeed him as ordinary physician, with the salary due to the *ordinari*. After all, was not that what had happened when Dr Biagio Cazzola succeeded Dr de Franchis in 1661-1662?⁴⁴ I have written about the misadventures of Dr Biagio Cazzola elsewhere.⁴⁵

Gio Gregorio Brancati, another *dottor fisico*, applied for a government job. He had just returned from the 1721 naval campaign with the Order's warships, serving to everyone's satisfaction, as could be seen from the certificates of the captains and commanders which he filed with his application. He pleaded for a government job, not, of course, forgetting to mention his father (Dr Giacomo Brancati) also a physician on the galleys who had died when still slogging as doctor of the poor.⁴⁶

72-year-old Dr Fisico Giuseppe Zammit, an icon of the medical profession in Malta, in 1722 wanted it known that he had served in the *Infermeria* for 52 years. Now, beset by various infirmities, he asked to be allowed to retire. He mentioned the professorship of surgery conferred on him by Grand Master (Nicholas) Cottoner and requests permission to pass it to his nephew Dr Giuseppe Farrugia who had taken over for the past 20 years. Then he adds, not quite clearly that, should there be a vacancy in the future (in the lectureship?) the post should be returned to the applicant as that post is so dear to him.⁴⁷

Concurrently with Zammit's request to be allowed to resign, came a spate of other petitions, including those of Dr Giuseppe Farrugia and Dr Giovanni Magi to which I have already referred. Typical of these petitions is the one by Dr Massimiliano Petralito. He had served on the ships for two years, and then for four years on the galleys. Now Dr Giovanni Magi, doctor of the poor in Valletta, after a long career wished to retire. They had come to an agreement whereby Magi passed over the job to Petralita, but kept the full salary. As Petralita had to live somehow, he had agreed with Dr Gregorio Brancati, doctor of the ships' squadron that, as soon as Brancati passed to the galleys and Magi to the ships, they would pay Petralito part of their salary: 15 scudi by Brancati and 50 scudi by Magi during the remainder of Magi's lifetime. No mention of who would pay the accountant.⁴⁸

Dr Brancati, in a separate petition confirmed the tripartite agreement reached between him, Petralito and Magi.⁴⁹ There are also two almost illegible petitions by Dr Leonardo Dalli, apparently asking to be appointed doctor in chief.

References

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