

Disinfection

Part 9

by Dr. A. Bonnici

Letters and other Documents written on Wood during the Plague Epidemic of Malta in 1813.

The plague bacillus "Bacillus Pestis" was discovered independently by Kitasto and Yersin during the epidemic at Hong Kong in 1894 (1) and the Advisory Committee appointed by the Secretary of State for India in 1905 established that infection was by means of the bites of fleas transmitting the bacilli from infected rodents. eg. rats. (2).

Up till 1905 it was believed that plague was a "Contagious" disease, conveyed from a sick person to another by touching the patients body, or his belongings or by the handling of infected material.

Government Notice of the 12th May 1813 (fig. 1) is a typical example of the precautions and necessary measures which the Government advised should be adopted. Among the precautions we find that "Papers to be Smoked, the necessary Composition for this purpose will be Sold at a fixed price, at No 47. Strada San Giovanni". In past issues it was pointed out how correspondence was disinfected by immersion in vinegar etc. (P.S.M. vol 12 no 3 pg 7) b) slitting P.S.M. vol 13 no 2 pg 3c), and by exposing the letters held by tongs to a flame of charcoal. (fig. 2)

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 (3).

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 PAPERS, among coffee beans and other items of food and to burn them after picking them up with pincers from these foodstuffs. (4).

From the above orders and precautions it can be seen that great importance was given to paper as a means of passing on infection, and so a Unique System of writing letters and other documents on wood was developed in Malta in 1813 during the Great Plague epidemic.

This method as far as I know has not been used in Malta prior to 1813 and never used in any other part of the world.

Fig 3 is the first part of a business letter written to Sig. Abriamo Attard on Board in Marsamxett in 1813 confirming this practice.

"We have received to day your 'Tavoletta' table in the form of a letter from which we note your arrival here etc" (5).

Dr. Victor Captur, M.D. FACC. has shown me a tablet in the form of a receipt (fig. 4)

Dated August 15, 1813, given out by the Rev. Salvator Dimech. This tablet is 10 by 9 cm in size and 2.5 mm thick. It is of a deep - brown colour and is broken in two parts by a vertical fracture that runs at about its middle. The fragments are held together by a piece of paper pasted on the back of the tablet and bearing a short manuscript note in Italian which states "Specimen of a receipt made out in Malta at the time of the Plague of 1813. (6).

The Rev. Filippo Calleja of Zebbug wrote his last will and testament before



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MANY of the Inhabitants who may be desirous of taking every precaution against the scourge of Plague, are unacquainted with the necessary measures which should be adopted.

To such, the following essential ones are pointed out:

To remain shut up in their Houses, or, being obliged to go out, to avoid touching any Person, or thing that can convey Infection.

To employ a Person who is not admitted into the House, to purchase the necessaries of Life.

To have a Tub of Water at the door into which Meat and Vegetables are to be thrown and well immersed, previously to being touched by the Family.

Money to be passed through strong Vinegar, Bread if received hot, to remain untouched till it is cold.

Papers to be Smoked; the necessary Composition for this purpose will be Sold at Fix'd Price, at No. 47, Strada S. Giovanni.

Linen to be washed in the House, and such as may already have been given out, to be received in Water, and remain therein at least 12 hours before it is touched.

Particular regard should be paid to cleanness, both in Persons, and Houses.

A plain, wholesome Diet is recommended, Pork, and Salt Food, should be avoided.

The Chief of every Family who wishes to adopt these Precautions must announce his intention to his Dependants, who not consenting to conform thereto, under the apprehension of the rigorous punishments prescribed for the violation of the Quarantine Laws, shall be allowed to quit the House.

Board of Health, 12th MAY, 1813.

J. CAST-MILLER, Secretary.

J. THOMAS, President.

AVVISO.

SICCOME diversi degli Abitanti che possono essere desiderosi di usare ogni possibile precauzione per evitare il progresso del Contagio della Peste, ignorino le proprie misure da usarsi; vengono a questi indicate le seguenti, che sono molto essenziali.

Di rimanere chiusi nelle loro Case, oppure essendo obbligati di uscire, di non toccare alcuna persona, od altre cose che potessero comunicare l'infezione.

D'impiegare una persona, che non si ammette nella Casa, per comprare le cose necessarie pel vitto.

Di tenere nella Porta un recipiente con acqua in cui la carne e li vegetabili debbano gettarsi e ben immergersi, prima di esser toccati dalla famiglia.

Il Danaro debba passarsi da Vinegar forte.

Il Pane ricevendosi caldo non debbasi toccare prima di raffreddarsi.

Le carte devonsi profumare, per cui, la necessaria composizione si vende a prezzo fisso in Strada S. Giovanni No. 47.

La Biancheria devesi lavare nella Casa, e quella tale che sarà di già data fuori, da ricevervi nell'acqua, e da lasciarsi colà almeno per dodici ore prima di toccarsi.

Debba ogni Individuo avere una cura particolare di tener la massima pulizia tanto nella propria persona, quanto nella rispettiva casa.

Un alimento sano si raccomanda, e debbasi evitare il mangiare carne di Porco, e roba salata.

Ogni Capo di famiglia che vorrà usare queste precauzioni dovrà annunziare la propria intenzione a' suoi dipendenti, i quali non volendo conformarvisi, e temendo le rigorose pene prescritte per li violatori delle leggi della Quarantena potranno lasciare il servizio.

Comitato di Salute 12 Maggio 1813.

J. THOMAS Presidente.

J. CAST-MILLER Segretario.

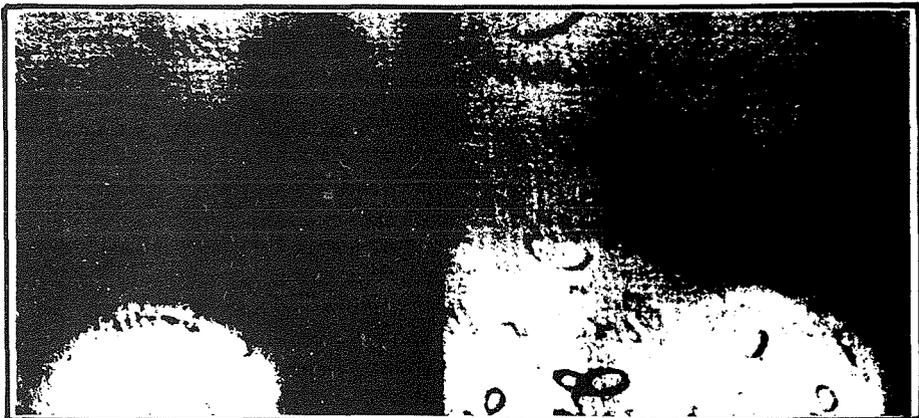


Fig 2,

Marsamusetta Sig.^o Abramo Alkadi
 Malta li 7. Luglio 1813

e Abramo ricevuto quest'oggi le vostre tavolette in forma di
 lettera dalla quale osserviamo il oro arrivò qui, in quanto alla
 soddisfazione che ci domandate a dirvi il suo parere Sen-
 ti 25 giorni consumate nel porto s.^o Paolo dovranuo essere
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Fig 3.

Il 25 Agosto 1813.
 La Sig.^o Anna Menicello, pagò
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Fig 4.

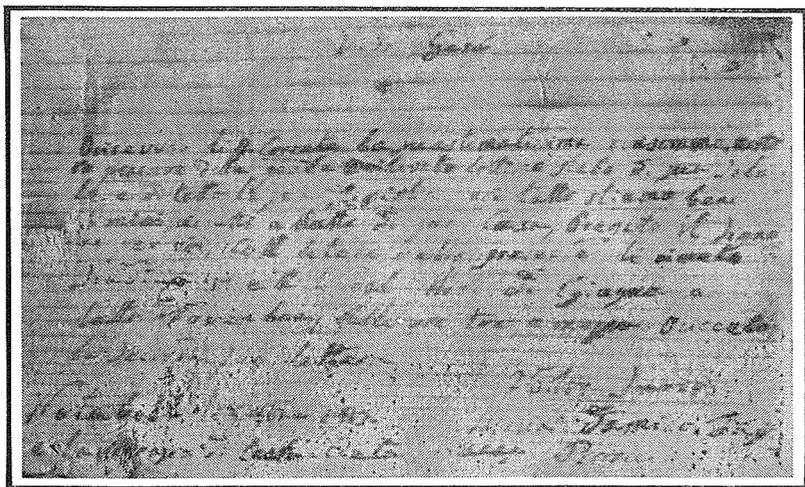


Fig 5.

he died on September 9th 1813 on a wooden board.

“The tablet measures about 26.5 by 19.5 cm and is 1.3 cm thick. It has a smooth surface and rounded edges. The writing is on both sides but no longer cypherable. Fortunately six months after the testator’s death a transcript on paper was made.”

The original tablet together with the transcript are to-day preserved at the Government National Archives in Valletta. There are no other documents written on wood at the Government National Archives but on the back of the envelope containing the board of the testament of the Rev. Calleja there is a manuscript note to the effect that “The Baron possesses several receipts and bills written on wood during the plague of Malta 1813 – 14 (7). Dr. Paul Cassar (BMA 5th August 61.) states that only one of these has been traced. It measures about 17.5 × 10.5 cm and is 1.3 cm thick. The author was a Baroness married into the Inguanez family. It was written in Italian. (fig 5).

“Jesus for ever.

On the 2nd Instant I received with the greatest of pleasure, your most esteemed letter, from which I learn the very good health enjoyed by yourself and by all your family. We are all well. Give my regards to every one at home. Pray God for us. With the bearer of this letter I am sending you 31 Scudi and 6 tari for the months of June to the end of November. At 5.30pm I received your second letter. I thank you for so much kindness.

Notabile 5th Oct 1813.

Your servant.

Maria Damico Inguanez Bonnici. (8).

Dr. Cassar also states that “The name of the same Baroness appears on another tablet a receipt for 100 scudi” dated 2nd Dec 1813 in the possession of the descendant of the Inguanez family of Mdina” (9).

At the National Museum Valletta there is another small tablet. It is of a dark colour and measures 17 × 12.5 cm and 6 cm thick. Dr. Paul Cassar described this tablet stating “Both surfaces are written on, but the script on the

back is not discernable as the words have become indistinct owing to the Spreading and fading of the ink The obverse is dated September 19th 1813 and the wording authorizes a certain Mrs Lorenza Xiberras to christen the baby daughter of Mrs Rosa and Francesco de Albanese (11).

Dr. Albert Ganado and Dr Paul Cassar described two other known tablets which are dated 21st August 1813 and 10 Nov 1813 respectively. They are of an irregular oblong shape and written in Italian. "The first one measures 135 – 140 mm in height and 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 dark hue. It has been identified as being white soft wood. (12).

"Received of Mr. Ignatis 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 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 second letter states.

"Received of Mr. Ignatius Cauchi twenty scudi that is eight scudi for the souls of the brethern of the confraternity of St. Ludvicus "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." 13.

Eleven tablets have so far been documented (14). and they are:

- 1) 15 August – receipt (Rev Salvator Dimech) fig 4.
- 2) 21 August Receipt (Fr. Lorenzo Elia Ferroni) Valletta.
- 3) 21 August – Letter (Marchese Vincenzo 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 Saverino Vassallo.)
- 7) 5 Oct letter (Rec Francesco Borg) Zejtun.
- 8) 5 Oct Letter (Maria Damico Inguanez Bonici) Notabile.
- 9) 29 Oct Bill (Luigi Mifsud).
- 10) 10 Nov Receipt (Fr Lorenzo Elia Ferroni.)
- 11) 2 Dec Receipt (Maria Damico Inguanez Bonici) Notabile.

I believe that this Unique system of writing on wood was only used in Malta. Any further information on this subject from our overseas Members interested in Disinfection would be appreciated.

References

1. & 2. C.H. Browning and T.J. Machio. Text-book Of bacteriology. Pg. 364.
3. Notificazione 26 th July 1813.
4. Giornale di Malta. 8 Sep 1813. Pg 352.
Ordine per la Guardie Urbane 20 Aug 1813.
Paul Cassar and Albert Ganado. Melita Historica. Vol VII No 4 Pg 357.
5. Published by kind permission of Dr. Giovanni Bonello LLD.
6. Published by kind permission of Dr. Victor Captur M.D. FACC.
- 7/8/9/10/11. Published also by Dr. Paul Cassar BMA 5th Aug 61 Pg 378.
- 12/13/14. Melita Historica Vol VII No 4 Pg 358. Dr. Paul Cassar and Dr. Albert Ganado.