

# Disinfection

Middle Ages to 1789

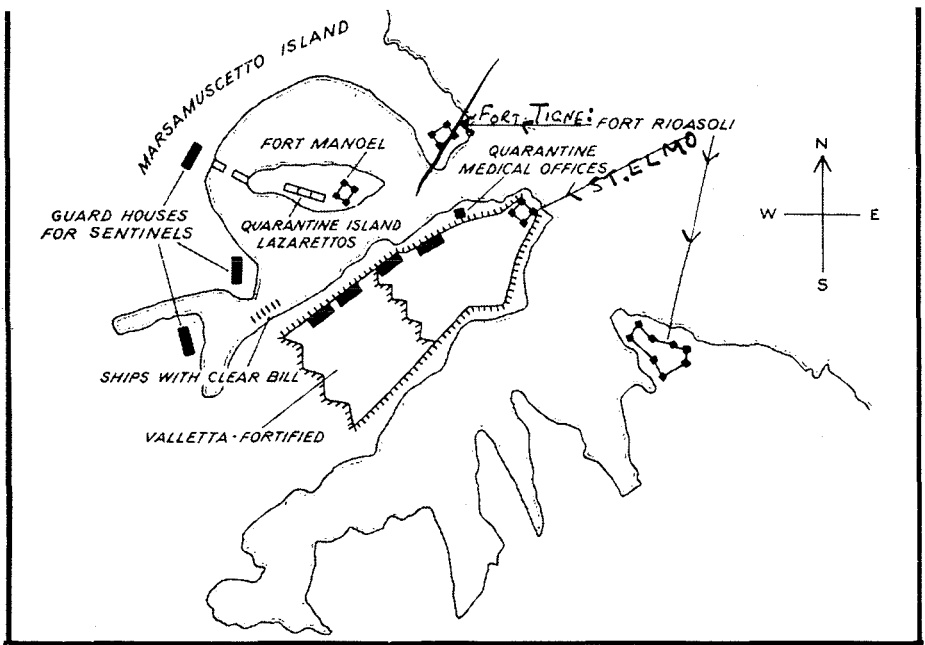
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## Part 2

The Council of the Order issued quarantine regulations which were comprehensive and strict, enforced by an Authority called the Commissioners of Health. In Vilhena's Code of Laws we find:-

“Every ship not found with a clean bill of health entering port for shelter or for supplies, was obliged to anchor below Castile Bastion near the Baviera. Two quarantine boats had to remain on water around the ship day and night. If the master of such a ship wished to discharge cargo or to acquire a clean bill of health, he was directed by the Captain of the port to proceed to the Lazzaretto in Marsamxett Harbour (Quarantine Harbour) where he landed his merchandise and afterwards remained anchored for the requisite period of quarantine. Likewise ships returning from a privateering cruise were directed to the Lazzaretto anchorage where they discharged cargo or slaves and remained for a period of observation; meanwhile all passengers and crew on board such ships were requested to send to the quarantine station their personal effects for disinfection and fumigation (including papers and letters). Whilst a ship was undergoing quarantine restrictions, no one without a permit from the Commissioners of Health was allowed to approach it or buy or receive any object from it. Cargo and merchandise were discharged into warehouses allotted by the Guardian of the Lazzaretto and were to remain there until he gave his permission for release. All passengers kept in quarantine had to undergo disinfection twice as well as all cargo in storage, the first time on admission, disinfection was carried out under the supervision of the Guardian, and the second time, two days before release, under the supervision of the Officer in Charge of disinfection, who was known as (Purificatore).” (1)

The Commissioners of Health had ample means to enforce their authority. Prof Galea tells us “They had under their command patrol boats carrying gun crews, and fully armed soldiers to police the harbour. One of the boats was always moored by the Barriera Wharf to watch for ships entering the Grand Harbour and every craft sailing in or going out of the harbour was bound to report to the Master of the patrol boat. Strict discipline was maintained on the boat, shore leave was only granted to two members of the crew at a time and they had to return on board in the evening because during the night, the full complement of men had to be available. Every week each patrol boat was inspected by one of the Commissioners”. The staff under the Commissioners consisted of Guardians of Health, some of whom did duty afloat, some guard duty on top of Guardamangia Hill (Guardia Maggiore hence the corrupted name Guardamangia); on top of the Hill at Ta' Xbiex point, and on top of the Hill behind the Forestals showroom on the Strand; (as shown in the illustration); others were employed at the Lazzaretto. Originally there were twelve of them, but later their number was increased to eighteen; they were selected for their honesty and integrity and were prohibited to engage in any other trade or



### Quarantine Installations

occupation. Before their appointment those Guardians of Health promised under oath to be diligent and honest in the performance of their duties.

Prof Galea tells us that supervision of ships was so strict that two watch boats were detailed for duty with each ship, so that if one of the boats had to carry some message from the ship to shore, or was engaged on some other errand, there was always the other boat to keep watch. The Master paid a tariff of nine "tari" (6.25c) for the service of each boat, which later was reduced to four "tari". These fees were passed on to the boatmen as part of their salary.

The watch boats had the duty of preventing any communication with ships undergoing quarantine. No other vessel was allowed to approach a ship held in quarantine or to drop anchor near it. On no account were foodstuffs or other articles to be collected from other ships or dropped into the sea. Provisions were delivered on board only with the permission of the Guardian of Health.

The principal Officer of the Lazzaretto the "Purificatore", was appointed by the Grand Master on the recommendation of the Commissioners of Health, and had overall control. He was responsible for the smooth running of the establishment, the strict isolation and proper disinfection of letters of persons and their belongings. He was a very important man and later during the early British occupation, was allowed almost absolute power.

The disinfection of mail brought by ships from infected ports was an integral part of the quarantine imposed in Malta.

In a letter dated April 30, 1678 addressed by the Commissioners of Public Health, de Janon and Don Augustin Delallosa to the Superintendent of Public Health at Marseille, we find the following. (2)

Specimen of script not clear due to immersion for fumigation.

“We are sending you a package of letters coming from the Levant, addressed to Marseilles, with a “dirty” certificate because of disease in Smyrna and surrounding country. We had them perfumed. You can first before accepting them submit them to your ordinary precautions.....”. Carnevale is of the opinion that the “flame of cannon powder” was used to fumigate the letters and that many letters purified at Malta were disinfected again at Marseille. This double disinfection led to complaints. The following letter published by Carnevale in 1958 is dated 24th November 1749 from the Superintendent General of the Quarantine Service of the Island to the Public Health authority at Marseille is historically important and interesting: (3)

“As we are obliged at times, Sirs, to place the bundle of our letters on some ships which are in quarantine - the majority of the people to whom these letters are addressed complain that the strength of the perfumes used at Marseille spoils them to such a manner that often they cannot be read. His High Eminence the Grand Master gave me the honour of writing to you that, knowing how delicate the matters of public health are, His Eminence does not want to beg your indulgence in something which might be against your rules - that, by lessening the precautions which you will be taking from now on, the perfumes used on these letters in Marseille should be less strong. We shall place our letters in a case. Simon the General Agent of our Order, will have a key to the case in Marseille, and the Secretary to the Grand Master will have a similar one here. This case will be backed with a key and tied with a string which will be sealed with the Arms of the Secretary of Malta. Therefore when you see the package untouched, you will rightly think that “the letters have not been touched, and therefore, your perfumations can be lighter, and the lighter perfumes will not spoil the correspondence. Cecil G. Teal says “This recommendation to shipmail in iron boxes anticipated by a century, a similar procedure adopted for mail coming from India”.

(to be continued)

1. Leggi e Costituzioni Prammaticali, Malta 1724.
2. Cecil G. Teall - Malta - The Quarantine Officer (1962),
3. Marino Carnevale - Marzan (1958).