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**The Development of Malta's Medical Services
During the Time of the Order**

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The year 1530 marks the beginning of the Order of St John's presence in Malta. I shall attempt to delineate a backdrop to the momentous events of 1530 so that you will be in a better position to appreciate what happened to these islands during the time that they were being administered by the Order. Before the arrival of the Knights the population of the Maltese islands stood at around ten thousand and Malta was predominantly a rural state. By 1798, when the Order left these shores, Malta had undergone a radical change. There was a demographic explosion in population, which stood at around one hundred thousand. But besides that, urbanisation had set in, Malta was no longer a rural state. Prior to 1530, the medical needs of the island were catered for by only one small hospital, that of Santo Spirito at Rabat. It had been in use at least since the late Fourteenth Century. Santo Spirito then had no more than half a dozen beds. It looked after the needs of the inhabitants of Mdina, Rabat and the outlying villages, mainly Zebbug, Siggiewi, Qormi and Naxxar.

At the other end of the island, at the place where we are all in at the moment, there was a small Castello a Mare and around it a small hamlet, called Borgo. The hamlet was made up of about five hundred dwellings. The Castellan was Alvaro de Nava. He owned a number of sailing ships that plied the shores of the Mediterranean. These were not only involved in commerce but also took part in corsairing. The people living at the Borgo and the nearby villages, mainly Zejtun, availed themselves of the services of 'surgeons' who used to form part of the crews of Alvaro de Nava's ships especially those participating in corsairing raids. Most of these ships carried as part of the crew a surgeon ready to treat any wounds suffered during skirmishes.

The inhabitants of Gozo had access to a very small hospital that was not founded by the Università (the local government), but by a public spirited gentleman called Francesco Bonnici in 1452. Initially this was also known as Santo Spirito but later become known as the Ospedale di San Giuliano. This too was a very small unit comprising less than ten beds. Thus, before the coming of the Order the medical needs of the Maltese islands were catered for by only two small hospitals that between them may have had, at most, twenty beds.

In the Fifteenth Century Jewish physicians, such as Abraham Safaradi, Abias Sibuha, Shema Djerbi and Simone Maltese played a prominent but not exclusive role in looking after the medical needs of these islands. A small number of foreign Christian doctors were also employed by the Mdina Università or the Hospital of Santo Spirito. They were mainly Sicilian, and included Giovanni Beniveni, Bartolomeo De Ansaldo and Bernardo De Munda. Others were Spanish, like Angelo Añello, the Catalan, Michele Ferriol and Francisco Iniquez, who was nicknamed "El Navarro" because he came from Navarre. Some, like Michele Ferriol, intermarried with the Maltese and settled in Malta. In the archives one can trace at least four generations of the Ferriol family who became physicians or surgeons and who spent their working life in Malta. Angelo Añello was a Jew who, in 1492, when the Jews were being expelled from the Spanish possessions, became a converso in order not to be exiled from Malta.

Many of these foreign doctors were only here for a brief period of time, sometimes as brief as six months, because the Università and the Hospital found it extremely difficult to raise the money with which to pay their salaries. The town doctor was usually poorly paid from revenue accruing from the wine tax of a florin on each barrel of wine. During this time, the archives record the names of the first Maltese medical personnel. The surgeon Salvo Schembri and the physicians Rainiero Bonello and Giuseppe Callus are the most prominent. Giuseppe Callus met a tragic fate because Grand Master de la Valette had him executed at Rabat. Callus had written to the King of Spain protesting against de la Valette's high-handed manner in ignoring the promises which his predecessor l'Isle-Adam had made to the Maltese. Unfortunately his letter was intercepted and he paid for his protest with his life. Callus is probably Malta's first political hero to be recorded in Maltese history.

Before coming to Malta, the Order entrusted a special commission with the task to draw up a report on the state of these islands. Among other things the state of health of the inhabitants of these islands was described as good.

The report stated that the inhabitants were said to be "ordinariamente di lunga vita, vedendovi quivi una grande moltitudine di vecchioni che passano gli ottanta e anche i novant'anni, rubicondi, rigorosi e robusti"¹; It was further said in this report that there were two factors that militated in favour of the Maltese inhabitants, one was la bontà dell'aria² (there was no pollution then!) and the second was presumed to be their frugal eating habits. They ate very little meat then, and their diet consisted mostly of bread, oil, pasta, tomatoes, vegetables and fish. It was basically a healthy Mediterranean diet.

On 1 January 1523 the Order had been finally evicted from Rhodes by the forces of Suleiman the Magnificent. Just over three months later, on April 10, Grand Master Philippe Villiers de l'Isle-Adam wrote to the Emperor Charles V and asked to be given as a future seat for his Order either the port of Brindisi or the island of Malta.

On 23 March 1530, following seven years of protracted negotiations, Charles V signed the deeds ceding Malta at Castelfranco near Bologna. To Malta, Charles V added the town of Tripoli. The Emperor was doing the Order no favour for he was getting rid of a serious responsibility. By giving Malta and Tripoli to the Order he passed on to the Knights the responsibility for their defence. Malta and the town of Tripoli stood at the line demarcating the Christian from the Muslim world.

L'Isle Adam arrived in Malta on 26 October 1530, landing at the Borgo and, twenty days later, at Mdina, he swore on a cross brought over from Rhodes that the Order would respect the rights and privileges of the Maltese. At a stone's throw from where we are meeting is the site of the first hospital built by the Order in Malta. Its construction began in 1532. It is now a Benedictine convent. At the time the Hospitaller was a Frenchman, a knight named Fra Bertrand Le Grant. The building of the Infirmary at the Borgo has special significance because it is to be seen as the Order's final acceptance of Malta as its permanent home. For a long time the Order thought of Malta only as a temporary base from which to attempt to recapture Rhodes. When the hospital was built the break with Rhodes was final. It is obvious that the Order then renounced any lingering hope of re-conquering that island.

It is interesting that the First Chapter General, that was held here in this Fort, directed that doctors employed by the Order were to visit the sick in their homes without receiving any extra payment from them. Hence, it is clear that, even before the hospital was operational, the Order was already looking after the sick; one presumes, around this area: the Borgo, Zejtun and the outlying villages but certainly not Mdina, which was too far away. The penalty for those doctors who were caught asking for money from their patients was severe. They were made to pay four times the sum that had been collected from their patients.

Besides that, the Hospitaller was specifically directed to check the quality of the drugs that were being dispensed. Furthermore he had to ensure that the sick were properly looked after.

The Order paid particular attention to the drugs which it acquired and spared neither effort nor money to get the best available. It is recorded that in attempting to acquire drugs it even dispatched its pharmacists to places as far away as Soria (Central Spain), which then had the reputation of being a leading centre for the production of drugs. The standards that were maintained in the hospital were high and carefully monitored. This is seen from the minutes of the various Chapters General that were held throughout the centuries of the Order's rule. Emphasis was repeatedly laid on the quality of care, on the number of visits that doctors had to carry out on their patients, on the surprise visits that the Hospitaller was asked to carry out on the hospital pharmacy and on the quality food which the patients were given. The doctors had to visit the sick in hospital at least twice a day.

A very important directive was issued in 1548. Hospital doctors, were specifically directed to hold a weekly collegial clinical meeting during which they were to discuss the condition of the patients under their care. This was real progress in the standards of hospital medical care.

After the Great Siege of 1565 it was decided to build a new, more defensible city, Valletta. Naturally a new hospital had to be built there. In the Chapter General of 1574, held under Grand Master La Cassiere, it was decreed that "si edifichi la Sacra Infermeria nella città nuova di Valletta in luogo comodo"³. A new Sacra Infermeria was thus set up. For a long time this hospital was considered to be among the best hospitals in Europe. Unfortunately, in the Order's hospitals, only male patients were admitted. What happened to female patients?

In 1625 a Sienese lady, called Caterina Scappi, through a deed drawn up on 20 June 1643, set up the first women's hospital in Valletta. It was called La Casetta (the Small House) and referred to by the name of Santa Maria della Scala. The deed also specified that the Grand Master had to choose two Knights, hailing from Siena, to administer the funds left by her. Within a few years it was found that the funds were not sufficient and this hospital was later further endowed by bequests from a number of individuals and also by grants of money from the Order's Comun Tesoro. The Pittanziere, who were perhaps Malta's first social workers, used this hospital as a base from where initially they issued up to 160 loaves every day to destitute women living in Valletta. By 1771 no less than 880 loaves were being distributed daily to needy women. The Pittanziere, also provided house-bound women with medicines, items of bedding and some financial relief. Who was looking after our old people?

In 1729 a small house in Floriana was converted into an Ospizio for the care of the elderly, both men and women. Three years later the Portuguese Grand Master de Vilhena founded the Casa di Carità offering better facilities for the aged. Perhaps I should, at this point, be allowed to digress a little in order to record the Order's contribution to the establishment and development of tertiary education in Malta. In 1592, a college of tertiary education, the Collegium Melitense, was instituted by Grand Master Hugues Loubenx de Verdalle and run by the Jesuits; this was the starting point of our University. In 1676 a School of Surgery and Anatomy was established in Malta by Grand Master Nicolò Cotoner who formalised medical teaching at the Order's Hospital.

The year 1676 was a crucial one for these islands. The previous year Malta had been ravaged by perhaps the most serious epidemic plague ever; it killed over eleven thousand people. Three Maltese doctors, the Protomedico Gian Domenico Sciberras, Francesco Buonamico and Giuseppe Zammit had diagnosed its presence in Malta correctly, soon after the first case appeared on the island. Unfortunately, the government chose to ignore them and to listen to the advice of a foreign doctor, Giuseppe Del Costo who diagnosed the condition as "una febbre maligna e comunicabile ma non pestilenziale"⁴. The result was disastrous. It is to be kept in mind that at the time fever was not considered to be a sign of an underlying condition but was believed to be a disease in its own right. Fevers were thus classified and sub-classified as different pathological disorders. Cotoner later realised his error and in an attempt to put right what had happened before established a medical school with Fra Dottor Giuseppe Zammit as its head. Zammit was a priest physician who lived until the ripe old age of ninety. He was personal physician to five successive Grand Masters, and set up our first medical library as well as the first medical herb garden, the 'giardino dei semplici'. The medical school was to make invaluable contributions towards the provision of competent medical care for the inhabitants of these islands.

At the beginning of the Eighteenth Century, Hospitaller Malta had developed into a microcosm of civilised Europe and was in a position to make medical contributions to the European mainland. Several Maltese physicians took up important appointments overseas, as they have continued to do throughout the years up to the present day. Amongst them were Michelangelo Magri, who was first appointed as Pubblico Incisore at one of Europe's leading hospitals, that of Santa Maria Nuova in Firenze. Magri later took up a chair of anatomy and surgery at the Regio Ospedale di Messina. Similarly, Emanuele Grillet took up a chair of obstetrics and gynaecology in Palermo and Josef Barth held the first ever chair of ophthalmology in Europe at the University of Vienna. Josef's father, Niccolò Barth, was German; he married a Maltese girl, Maddalena Sciberras. They had one offspring, Josef.

Barth studied medicine here in Malta then proceeded to the Ospedale di Santo Spirito in Rome for further training. There he met a member of the Order, Fra Francesco Carlo Von Smitmer, who took him to Vienna. There he met Baron Van Swieten, from Leyden, who had been summoned by the Empress Maria Theresa to reform the medical school there. Van Swieten immediately realizing the intelligence and potential of Josef Barth employed him at the medical school. In Vienna Barth trained in ophthalmology with Wenzel. At the time the Empress' son, later to succeed her as Joseph II, suffered from an ocular ailment which the best doctors then available failed to cure. Josef Barth successfully treated his eye condition. The Empress, in gratitude, in 1773 set up a chair of ophthalmology at the University of Vienna for him. Josef Barth occupied it until he died. He was a great friend of the arts, and had a large art collection. Some of the pieces he owned are today to be found in a number of European museums including the Kunsthistorisches Museum in Vienna. Barth was about to return to Malta when his mother died. Soon after the Order was expelled and Napoleon had taken over the islands. Barth was no Bonapartist, he changed his mind and never came back to his island home.

Requests for medical help were received from various quarters by successive Grand Masters. I refer here to just a few examples. Thus, in 1723 the Principe Don Carlo Albani in Rome and, three years later, the Senate of Catania asked for a surgeon to be sent over from Malta and the Grand Master sent Giuseppe Grillet.

In 1746 the hospital at Messina made a similar request for help and this time it was Michele, Giuseppe's son who was dispatched.

In 1755 one of Malta's best surgeons ever, Michelangelo Grima, was sent over to treat the Duke of Florida.

In 1770 it was the turn of the Republic of Venice to ask for help and Antonio Grillet was sent. Even our Muslim neighbours, at times when relations with them were normal, sometimes asked for medical help. Capania was the physician sent in 1754 at the request of the Bey of Benghazi.

In 1788 the Pasha of Tripoli approached the Order with a request for medical aid and the physician Giuseppe De Marco was sent over. The reputation of the medical services and the teaching facilities available at the Order's hospitals had spread widely over the whole Mediterranean coast. I have found in our National Archives a Libretto degli Arrivi⁵ of passengers, merchandise, crew and ships, that unfortunately only spans the time between September 1744 and September 1746.

It is to be kept in mind that ships then sailed around the Mediterranean mainly between May and perhaps, at the very latest, the first week of December, because of prevailing weather conditions. During that brief period of time no less than sixty-five patients are recorded as having come over to Malta to seek medical help. Forty-three of these cases obviously came over seeking a diagnosis, because the archives simply record the note "...viene per curarsi"⁶. They came over in small boats, very often together with live animal cargo or other types of merchandise. Frequently they travelled by themselves, although the better off used to be accompanied by their own doctor.

Many patients came to Malta for ophthalmological care, often to have their cataracts removed. Battle wounds, urinary retention, "tagliarsi per la pietra"⁷, and orthopaedic conditions featured prominently among the recorded complaints suffered by patients who came here seeking relief. Perhaps not surprisingly, a number of patients came to have their venereal diseases treated in total anonymity. The hospital at Valletta had a special section called the Falanga where these diseases could be treated using the latest available methods, in complete secrecy and privacy.

During the same period, there is a record of six students who came to Malta "per studiare medicina e chirurgia" ⁸. In some cases it is emphasised that they came "per prendere pratica di chirurgia", that is, to improve their surgical skills. One in particular who stands out was Don Matteo Veneziano who, having studied surgery in Palermo, our larger neighbour's capital, came here to specialise further in our medical school. Free medical service was available not just for the local inhabitants but this was also extended to sailors and travellers who might have fallen ill whilst in Malta - there used to be a large number of these, and they were treated irrespective of race, colour or religion.

The medical facilities established by the Order - that is, the building of two hospitals, the setting up of a medical school, the employment and stipulation of working regulations of skilled medical personnel and the provision of sound pharmacy practice - were in fact the first social services to be established on the island.

Notes

1. (normally long-lived, as we saw here a large number of old people in their eighties and even nineties, red-faced, sturdy and strong)
2. (the quality of the air)
3. (the Holy Infirmary shall be built in a suitable location in the new town of Valletta)
4. (a fever malignant and infectious, but not pestilential)
5. (Log of Arrivals)
6. (They have come here to be treated)
7. (cutting for the stone)
8. (to get trained in medicine and surgery)