

The Old Hospitals

The Order Of St. John

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BETWEEN 1048 and 1070 in Jerusalem, the Order of St. John was founded for the direct purpose of helping pilgrims who had become lost, weary, or beset by other difficulties while en route to the Holy Land. They opened both hostels and hospitals for this purpose, though hospitals formed the main outlet of their activities; in fact, their organization was, and still is, referred to as "hospitalier." In 1113 they received a charter as one of the Orders of Knighthood by Pope Paschal II. Within a few years these Knights undertook the active responsibility for protecting those travelling to the Holy Land, which gave the Order a military character also.

The individual Knights, volunteers from many different European countries, were organized within the Order according to their origins into groups known as "languages": 1. Provence, 2. Auvergne, 3. France, 4. Italy, 5. Aragon, Catalonia, Navarre, 6. England, 7. Germany, and 8. Castille, Leon, Portugal.

A Bull issued by Pope Paschal II on the 15th of February, 1113, refers to the first hospital of the Order in Jerusalem. During the Latin Kingdom of Jerusalem this hospital was reputed to be able to accommodate 2,000 patients.

Patients were always admitted to the Order's hospitals without discrimination on the basis of their origin, color or creed, and there were no fees for the services rendered.

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After the decline and fall of the Latin Kingdom the Knights repaired to Syria to establish themselves first at Tyre and afterwards at the Castle of Margat, the "Krak des Chevaliers." Later they moved to Acre in modern Israel where they remained until the continuing enemy pressure drove them completely away from the mainland.

Their next home was the Island of Rhodes which they had conquered in 1310 and where they remained for over 200 years. Their hospital there, best known as "The Infirmary," earned fame throughout Europe for its methods of treatment as well as for the care and attention bestowed on patients. In 1523, after Suleiman the Magnificent drove them from this Island stronghold, they wandered about Europe for some years in search of a new home, until Emperor Charles V granted to the Order the Islands of Malta and the Fortress of Tripoli, as a noble fief free and unencumbered.

On October 26, 1530, Philip Villiers de l'Isle Adam, the Grand Master who had pleaded the cause of the Order at the various Courts of Europe, arrived in Malta to establish himself as Sovereign Ruler of the Maltese Islands and Head of the Order of St. John.

Though the resources of the Order were practically exhausted when the Knights first came to Malta, one of their first acts was to erect a hospital in Birgu, the little seaboard town on the south of the Grand Harbour. The spacious building, started in November 1532 and completed in six years, soon became overcrowded and more extensions had to be

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made. Thronging here came patients of every nationality, class and status.

This hospital was divided into two main divisions, medical and surgical. Each division had different wards for clinical grouping of cases—for example, there were fever wards separated into high and low fevers, a dysentery ward, a renal disease ward, a ward for syphilitic affections. There was a section for psychiatry and one for orthopedics. A tunnel led from the harbor shore directly into the basement of the hospital.

During this time the Order had been acquiring extensive properties called "Commanderies," scattered all over Europe. The revenues from these "Commanderies" were considerable. Moreover the Treasury of the Order received rents, taxes and other emoluments and dues from the administration of Malta and Gozo.

In 1566 the city of Valletta was founded by Grand Master Jean de la Vallette. The Knights then transferred their Headquarters to the new capital of the Island, giving up the old Infirmary at Birgu.

The new hospital or Sacred Infirmary was built on the southeastern part of Valletta promontory facing the Grand Harbour. The main feature of the original structure, commenced in 1574 and taking four years to build, were two large wards, one superimposed on the other.

In 1660, the Knights began to enlarge the hospital. This task was started under Grand Master Raphael Cottoner and completed under his brother and successor Nicholas, who in 1674 founded a School of Anatomy and Surgery attached to the Infirmary. The newly built section called the Great Ward, and the old section called the Old ward, were joined together into a single unit measuring 563 feet in length and 34 feet 10 inches in width, forming one of the largest interiors in the world. At one end of this large ward was an open window with a revolving cradle, called "ruota," where unwanted babies could be deposited to be taken care of by the institution.

In 1679 an isolation ward was built, apart from the rest of the hospital although integrated with it, and in 1687, a library was added.

Citizens, travellers and freemen in general were accommodated in the Great Ward. Slaves and criminals were taken care of in the big ward underneath the Great one. A separate ward served for pilgrims and Members of Religious Orders. Each Knight and Member of the Order had a separate room.

Within the hospital there was an attempt at clinical classification, a procedure in advance of what was happening in other hospitals of Europe. Fevers and other ailments of a medical nature were grouped in the large ward; serious cases and patients in a mori-



The Great Ward of the Sacred Infirmary as it appeared in the 17th century.

bund state were placed in a special unit; dysentery cases and other enteric affections were also kept separately; two rooms were reserved for patients undergoing lithotomy. The surgical division comprised the casualty, the operations and the bleeding sections. There was a separate ward for the insane, separate rooms for those undergoing mercurial inunctions, and other rooms for those requiring hot baths. Curiously, in 1758 a ward was opened which was reserved for British sailors. There was also an isolation ward for reception of suspected cases of smallpox and other infections pending their removal to the Lazzaretto or isolation hospital on Manoel Island.

At the peak of its activity this hospital of the Knights was the best known institution of its kind in the world. The methods of treatment were of the highest type. The operative procedures were far in advance of the times, including premedications and collaborative teamwork by the surgeon and his assistants. Both chest and abdominal surgery were carried out.

Patients and military casualties came to Malta from all parts of Europe. The operation of enterorrhaphy was first performed here with success by the Maltese surgeon Grima. Lithotomies, amputations and disarticulations were frequent. Head injuries were common and trephining was highly developed. Liga-

“At one end of this large ward was an open window with a revolving cradle, called ‘ruota,’ where unwanted babies could be deposited to be taken care of by the institution.”

tures, medicaments, application of ball stoppers, and packing were all used in the management of hemorrhages.

Their pharmacy was well stocked with surgical appliances including crutches and arm hooks. Contemporary descriptions speak of rows of shelves lined with splendid Majolica jars filled with medicaments, drugs and herbs of many kinds. Two powders popular at that time were St. Paul’s Powder and the Maltese Fungus Powder; the former was obtained by crushing stone dug from St. Paul’s Grotto in Rabat and was reputed to possess astringent, sudorific and antifebrile properties, whilst the latter was held to be effective against dysentery and other enteric affections.

Ointments, lubricants and poultices were much in use. A supply of leeches was always available. The pharmacy staff included female attendants who distributed supplies to outpatients and also paid domiciliary visits to the sick, a primitive form of district nursing.

Every patient had a bed for himself, a commodity which was nonexistent in other hospitals of Europe (at that time in the Hotel Dieu, the famous hospital of Paris, patients were being placed in twos in each bed, and in time of emergency, were even laid on frames placed on top of fourposter beds). Mosquito nets were provided for each bed.



Tablets made from stone dragged from St. Paul’s Grotto in Rabat.

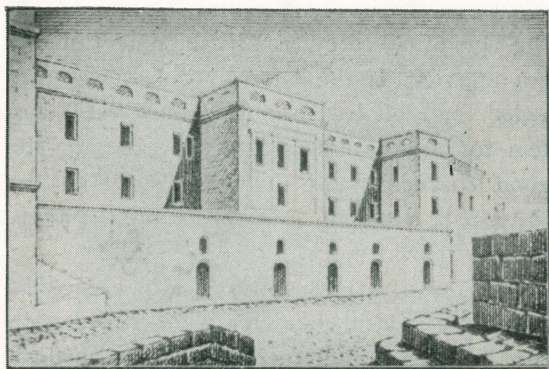
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The administration of the hospital was regulated by statute. The Supreme Head was the Grand Master himself, one of whose titles was that of Servant of the Sick. Another high dignitary was the Grand Hospitaller, who was the senior amongst the French Knights and exercised over-all control in hospital matters. His authority was unlimited. Not even the Inquisitor or the Grand Marshall who was in command of the forces could be admitted to the Infirmary without the consent of the Grand Hospitaller, though this was usually granted on condition that they should deposit their insignia of office at the hall.

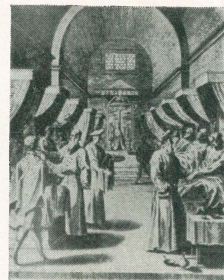
The day to day services were under the supervision of the Infirmary, usually a senior Knight. He resided in a separate apartment, and every morning would go around the wards to ensure that all hospital staff were fulfilling their duties and that all patients were receiving proper attention.

The medical staff of the hospital consisted of three senior physicians and two other physicians. There were three resident surgeons assisted by two other surgeons. There were also six junior surgeons, called "Barberotti," who resided in the hospital and were on call in rotation; these were allowed to perform minor surgery. A barber surgeon or "phlebotomist" was in charge of the leeches, cataplasms and vesicants which he applied in accordance with the physicians' and surgeons' orders. A chief dispenser was in charge of the pharmacy.

To ensure a continuing qualified professional staff, arrangements were made at the Valletta hospital for medical apprentices to



The Knights first Infirmary in Malta.

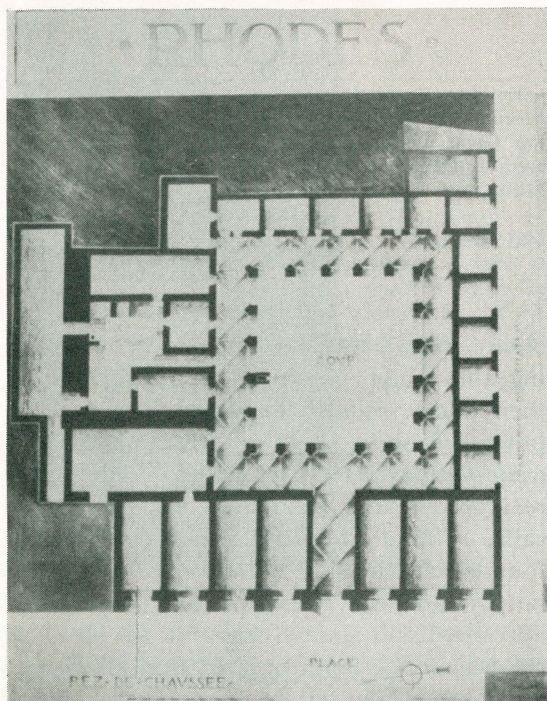


Knights Hospitallers ministering to the patients in the Great Ward of the Sacred Infirmary at Valletta, Malta.

obtain knowledge and experience by following the senior physicians and surgeons on their ward rounds. These were allowed to practice dissection and to attend postmortem examinations. In 1674, medical studies were reorganized and formulated more systematically. Grand Master Nicholas Cottoner founded a School of Anatomy which taught botany, anatomy, medicine and surgery and appointed Dr. Joseph Zammit as Head of the School. Cottoner ordered that all doctors employed in the service of the Order receive their training at this School, and that they should attend lectures on each Thursday throughout the year. The School of Anatomy developed into a proper School of Medicine, from which is derived the present Faculty of Medicine of the Royal University of Malta. The teachers of the old School of Anatomy usually belonged to the consultant staff of the infirmary; most of them had taken post-graduate studies at Pisa, Florence, or Montpellier.

Many of the doctors of the Valletta Infirmary became well known throughout Europe. Grima was acknowledged as one of the leading surgeons of his time. Barth, a pupil of Grima, went on to occupy the first chair of Ophthalmology at Vienna and to establish the first University Eye Clinic, where pupils from all over Europe were trained to lay the foundations of similar eye clinics in their own countries.

The Infirmary for a long time was a male institution; female patients were not admitted. This deplorable state of affairs was remedied by the generosity of a noble lady, Catherine Scappi, who some time previous to the year 1625 had donated a house in Valletta for the reception of sick and destitute women. When this became too small a larger house close to



Grand Floor Plan of the Hospital of the Knights of Saint John at Rhodes.

the Infirmary was acquired, to be known as the "Ospedaletto," the little hospital.

The Order soon realized that a hospital for women was an essential service, with the result that the Scappi hospital was developed as a department of the Infirmary. A medical staff consisting of two physicians and two surgeons were entrusted with the care and treatment of the female patients. When fully completed this hospital housed a surgical ward, a venereal disease clinic, a maternity ward and a general medical ward. Its activities were under the direct supervision of a lady called the Governess. The sick were attended by female employees. There were maid servants for general duties as well as the usual ancillary staff consisting of dispensers, laundry women and cooks. Female slaves were utilized for menial work.

Spittoons were provided for the tuberculous patients, a precautionary measure which hardly existed in other hospitals at that time. The treatment of mental patients followed the same pattern as in other hospitals, with excited and restless patients being chained to the wall.

The mechanism for admission of unwanted infants into the Infirmary has been alluded to. Each when received was registered in a special book and a metal tag hung around his neck. Infants were kept in special rooms under the care of two matrons who resided there, and other employed women as needed. The infants were nourished by breast milk from wet nurses; when the number of foster mothers was inadequate the sick babies were fed goat's milk.

Well babies left at the Infirmary would be given out to approved foster mothers for care, and be visited once every two months by one of the Comptrollers of the Infirmary. Each year on St. Martin's eve, the Patron Saint of the poor and destitute, two Comptrollers would visit the children to determine their progress and to give them presents.

Any child who became ill would be transferred for treatment to the hospital for women, where he would be given a separate cot and a special diet.

These orphan children remained under the care of the Infirmary until maturity. When eight years of age, the boys would be apprenticed in some trade or craft to which they had shown some inclination. Some of them joined the navy or the army of the Knights as boy sailors or soldiers. The boy apprentices were under the supervision of a priest who looked after their welfare; they were allowed only pocket money until they reached the age of 18 years when they were deemed capable of looking after themselves.

The girls on reaching eight years were admitted into a special institution called "Conservatoria," and trained to be maid servants or attendants in the hospital for women. At the age of 20, they usually became nuns or got married. If the latter, a dowry was provided for each by a pious foundation. A system for adoption was also in existence; the good character and financial means of the foster-parents was ascertained before the adoption was permitted.

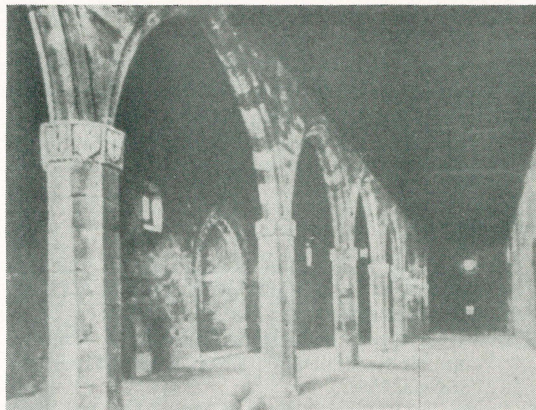
Other institutions or services of a medical or public health character were linked with the Infirmary, such as the district medical service, the care for the aged and infirm,

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the Lazzaretto, and the quarantine service, though supplemental to the scope and work of the Infirmary. These activities earned the international fame for the Infirmary of the Knights.

During the second half of the 18th century, the threat of Turkish domination of the Mediterranean passed, and the reason for the existence of the Order declined. Then came the French Revolution and the Napoleonic Wars which shocked old regimes and undermined the power and very existence of ancient institutions based on privilege and prerogative. The Knights of Malta lost their power and influence in France, their property was confiscated and their priories were suppressed. In other countries the income of the Knights was severely taxed. But the most serious difficulty was that the loyalty of many of the Knights towards their Order was shaken by the social and religious ideas spreading through Europe.

The Order of Malta was essentially a hospitaller Order; and it never deviated from that primary purpose. Indeed the Grand Chapter of the Order, held in 1588 in the



The Great Hall of the Infirmeria of the Hospitallers at Rhodes.

new city of Valletta, confirmed the early Statute and made hospitality mandatory to all Knights. As stated in Title IV of the Statute:

“Hospitality is one of the most eminent acts of piety and humanity; all Christian people agree in this opinion, because it comprehends all other acts. It ought to be exercised and esteemed by all good men, much more by such as are for distinguishing themselves by the name of knights hospitallers.”

Philatelic Note

In March 1966 a set of stamps was issued in Malta to commemorate the Fourth Centenary of the Foundation of Valletta by the Knights.

The *two-penny stamp* shows Grand Master Jean Parisot de la Valette who had proposed the building of a fortified city on the promontory of Mount Sciberras years before the Turkish invasion and the Great Siege of 1565.

Pope Pius V, depicted on the *three-penny stamp* with his coat-of-arms, helped to finance the project and sent his architect, Francesco Laparelli, to

plan the city and supervise the initial stages. Laparelli (*one shilling stamp*) had been Michelangelo's assistant in the building of St. Peter's dome in Rome and prepared the plans for Valetta in three days.

The *six-penny stamp* reproduces the plan of Valletta. When Laparelli left the Island in 1569, his Maltese assistant, Girolamo Cassar, was entrusted with its completion.

The *two shillings and sixpence stamp* shows Cassar, with two assistants, examining plans for the



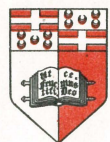
FENECH AND GALEA

exterior of the Conventual Church of St. John, shown in the background.

Sketch depicting the Mediterranean and showing how the Knights were forced by the Turks farther westwards from Jerusalem to Acre, Cyprus, Rhodes and Malta is taken from the book "Knights of St. John," by Gerhart Ellert.

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