

FURTHER BILLS OF HEALTH FROM MALTA 1576 - 1805

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INTRODUCTION

The Bill of Health was a certificate drawn up by the sanitary authorities or by highly-placed state officials at seaports and delivered to a ship master at the time of his sailing from a harbour. This certificate declared either the existence of communicable disease, usually plague, at the port of departure (known as a Foul Bill of Health) or else it testified to the absence of such a disease (such a certificate being qualified as a Clean Bill of Health).

A Clean Bill of Health ensured that the crew and passengers were not debarred from disembarking on reaching their place of destination. A ship with a Foul Bill of Health, on the contrary, was either refused entry into a port or else was directed to a Quarantine Harbour while the passengers and crew were isolated for a period of detention in a Lazzaretto.

It has been stated that the Bill of Health came into use in Europe in 1600 when ship masters were required to present such a document on reaching their port of call (1).

It is on record, however, that in Malta written declarations testifying to the presence of good public health and to the absence of communicable diseases were issued by 1576. They were handed to travellers departing from the island to ensure that these persons would be allowed freedom of movement on disembarking at their destination abroad.

BILL OF HEALTH OF 28TH MAY 1576

A copy of one of these early certificates issued by the Order of St. John during its rule over the Maltese Islands is registered in its archives in Malta. It is reproduced hereunder in a free translation from its original Italian. It was given out in the name of the Head of State, Grand Master Jean Levesque de la Cassiere (1572-81):-

"To the Princes, Dukes, Royal Officials and Titled Per-

sonages, etc. and to the Deputies responsible for the superintendence of cases suspected of plague, especially those of the provinces of Calabria, and to all those to whom these letters patent are directed, we wish everlasting good health.

We hereby notify and truthfully declare that the frigate of our Order (of St. John), under the shipmaster Bernardino Orioroles, is sailing from our Grand Port of Malta to Naples to convey the Knight Fra Jacobo de Dyo, Commander of Charrieres and St. Anne in the Priory of Auvergne, and his servants.

We therefore request the above named officials to grant him an unfettered welcome and free pratique because, thanks to God, here (in Malta) reigns good public health without any suspicion of bad influence. We have, further, instructed the said Commander Dyo and the master of the frigate not to touch any other place suspected of harbouring plague; on the contrary, they are to adhere to the plan of their itinerary to Naples.

Given to Malta on 28th May 1576 and affixed with the seal of the Grand Master in black wax" (2).

BILL OF HEALTH OF 28TH AUGUST 1576

There is another record of a copy of a certificate issued in the name of the same Grand Master to the Knight Fra D. Gaspar de Camano who was proceeding to Rome on official business. It is dated 28th August 1576 (Fig. I). It carried the seal in black wax of the Grand Master as a guarantee of the authenticity of the document. After the usual preamble of greetings to all the officials abroad to whom the certificate was addressed, the Italian text continues as follows (freely translated):-

"To all and everyone we pray that a warm welcome and free pratique be accorded (to Fra Gaspar de Camano), as by the grace of God, Malta enjoys good public health without the least suspicion of any bad influence" (3).

RA TER Joannes Levesque obi' custos A tutti e' singoli Illi ce specie: -
 Nat: Principi Duchi Marchesi et alibi baroni titolati et not' titolati et c.
 Sopramendanti et deputati sopra il iamio della suspitione della peste com-
 munitari governatori et assistenti puenciali capitani Assessori Syndici colitti
 vnicersita et homini et alibi qualivuoq' officiali Regij principalmente delle
 France d' Italia et ali quale la pace pervenire sperare et ara quomodoli-
 bet salute salute nel 1778 p' p'etua et prosperita et felicitia come desiderava
 sapendo come malvagio il religio mio fra di Gaspar de Camano (Anaglieri
 de i nri puencati d' Italia et hora in Roma et Napoli p' trattare negotia
 alcuni negoti spiciali a noi et a nra Religione co la Santita di Dio
 sig' et con la Cco' del S. Vicere di Napoli come p'ona pratica et ch
 non ben instruita sopra detti negoti Pertanto a tutti et ciaschedi de noi
 suddetti affectionatissimi amiche preghiamo vogliate dar liberamente ogni ben-
 vicetto et pratica p'che gratia di Dio qua Regra bona sancta senza
 p'liere alcuna mala influenza, questo facendo si obligarano ad sim-
 lia et multa mania in cui rei et. Sulla nra regalia in certa mign' et
 Data Melita obi' Die xviii mens Augusti M. D. CCLXXVI

FIG. I. Copy of a Bill of Health issued on 28 August 1576 to the Knight Fra D. Gaspar de Camano who was proceeding to Rome.

BILL OF HEALTH OF 18TH OCTOBER 1576

A further copy of a certificate issued about two months later is registered in these words (free translation) (Fig II):-

"We, Grand Master Joannes Levesque (de la Cassiere) hereby declare that two armed galleys of our Order of St. John are departing from Malta for Spain and France. They are the San Jacobo, Captain Fra Thomas Coronel and the Santa Maria della Vittoria, Captain Fra Marcello Mastrillo. They are accompanied by a frigate under Master Bernardino Rasolo. These ships are carrying the crew, officers and soldiers to man and convey to Malta the galley San Paolo which is being launched at Barcellona.

We therefore, pray that a good reception and free pratique be extended to them as, by the grace of God, we enjoy

RA TER Joannes Levesque obi' custos vnicersita et fidem fuimus col
 ff si parteno ff. parti di Spagna et Italia de qua parte qual porto di Malta
 due galere Armate de qua nra sacra Religione h'risobritana a la fregata
 nostra l'una chiamata S. Jacobo Capitana del Religio monacharimo fra
 thomas Coronel com' de albayro et l'altra de la nra Capitana e l'una
 justa et l'altra navata S. Maria de la nra capitana del religio
 so col fra Marcello Mastrillo com' de Melita del priorato de barletta et la nra
 fregata p'armata de bernardino rasolo le quali partono sopra esse tutto
 l'armamento ch'una homini d' capo Soldati et un'altra galera nominata San
 Paolo, la quale hano de fare varrer in Barcellona de nra l'una deo con
 omne come esse. Preghiamo donq' affectionatissimi amiche vogliate darli libe-
 ramente ogni ben vicetto et pratica p'che gratia di Dio regna bona sancta
 senza suspitione d' alcuna mala influenza, e questo facendo si obligarano
 ad similia et multa mania in cui rei et. Sulla nra regalia in certa mign' et
 Data Melita obi' Die xviii mens octobris M. D. CCLXXVI

FIG. II. Copy of a Bill of Health issued on 18 October 1576 to the Captains of the galleys San Jacobo and Santa Maria della Vittoria.

good public health in Malta without any suspicion of any bad influence.

In testimony whereof we have affixed our Magistral Seal in black wax. Given at Malta on 18th October 1576" (4).

BILL OF HEALTH OF 3RD DECEMBER 1576

Yet another copy of the same period runs as follows after the formal opening addressed to the Deputies of Health at Rome (free translation):-

"We truthfully declare that our dear Brother in Christ, Fra Alfonso Domenichi, Head of the Commenda of St. George, is leaving this Grand Port of Malta with the frigates of our Order. The ship master has been instructed not to touch at Sicily or any other place suspected of harbouring plague but must sail direct to Naples to deliver our despatches and to ascertain if there are any (despatches) for us. Fra Alfonso Domenichi is proceeding to Rome to discuss the affairs of the Commenda of St. George. He is accompanied by his servant Horation Fiorillo, who is between 19 and 20 years old and of a short stature.

We therefore entreat every official, entrusted with the safe-guarding of the public health against any suspicion of plague, to grant him a cordial welcome and free pratique as, by the grace of God, here in Malta we enjoy good public health without the least suspicion of any bad influence".

The Bill dated 3rd December 1576 bore the seal of the Grand Master in black wax (5).

BILL OF HEALTH OF 10TH JANUARY 1784

As the originals of Bills of Health were consigned to the Sanitary Authorities at the port of arrival abroad, one does not expect to come across the original Maltese Bills of Health in our archives; however, due to very exceptional circumstances, a few original Maltese Bills of Health have remained in our island. So far, the earliest of them traced belongs to 1713 (6,7). During subsequent searches on the subject, two other unpublished original specimens have been encountered. They belong to 1784 and to 1796 and are here described.

The 1784 Bill of Health is printed on a sheet of paper measuring 40cm by 50cm. Its left upper corner is torn and

missing (Fig. III). At its lower end the sheet has a watermark which cannot be made out completely as it is very faint. It consists of an open crown topping an oval frame below which is a scroll with a few capital letters of which only the initial AD can be distinguished.



FIG. III Original Bill of Health issued from the Castellania on 10 January 1784. (Courtesy Librarian of National Malta Library)

The text is surrounded by a decorative frame made up of a floral and leafy border entwined by a ribbon which is tied at the bottom in a loose knot. The frame is surmounted with the armorial bearings of Grand Master Emanuel De Rohan flanked on each side with a reclining female figure symbolising Justice and Abundance respectively. External to these figures are the upright effigies of St. John the Baptist on the left and that of St. Paul on the right. St. John was the patron saint of the Order named after him and St. Paul was venerated as the Protector of the Maltese Islands against all sorts of disasters. On the plinths below the effigies of these two saints appear the names of the designer, Francesco Manno and of the engraver, (Giuseppe) Garofalo (8).

Below De Rohan's escutcheon is an oval vignette showing the Grand Harbour and the Port of Marsamxett with Manoel Island on which stood the Lazzaretto. A number of dark dots along the coast line mark the sites of small towers where guards were posted to prevent the unauthorised approach of ships towards the shore and thus forestall the clandestine landing of passengers and crew.

At the lower end of the sheet, below the ribbon knot, is affixed a white paper seal embossed with with the coat-of-arms of the Castellano (the President of the Law Courts) the Knight Antonio Barone de Neveu consisting of a white Latin cross on a red field in its upper third and of two crossed anchors upside down in its lower two-thirds (9).

The text is partly printed in Latin and partly handwritten in Italian. Liberally translated it reads as follows:-

"We, Castellano, President of the Grand Court of the Castellania of Malta, wish good health to one and all who see, read or listen to these our present letters. We bear witness and truthfully declare that the renowned Island of Malta is not subject to any epidemic and pestilential diseases or to any suspicion thereof, thanks to the grace of Almighty God and of our saints protectors John the Baptist and Paul.

The Donat Ignazio Vergnasco, from Naples, aged 21 years; and Gaetano Marino, from Rome, aged 30 years, of ordinary stature and with dark hair and complexion are departing, with the favour of Divine Clemency, with the speronara of shipmaster Benedetto Gabrieli, Maltese, for Naples and other ports of passage. In assurance whereof we have commanded that this document, signed by our own hand and furnished with our seal, be subscribed by the Magnificus Notary of the said Grand Court. Given on the 10th day of the month of January of the year 1784.

The Knight (Antonio Barone) de Neveu, Castellano. Paulus Camilleri J.U.D. Notary of the Grand Court of the Castellania of Malta" (10).

The verso of this certificate presents two separate groups of writings. The upper two-thirds, dated 24th January 1776, is taken up by arithmetical calculations working out the amount of interest at 6% accruing on a capital of scudi 270 over a period of twelve years from 24th January 1776.

The lower third bears a note in Latin concerning a cedula addressed by D.D. Vespasiano and Maria Righetini to Josephine, widow of Notary Paul Victor Giammalva requesting the fulfilment of her obligation (11).

This Bill raises a few questions which, however, cannot be answered on account of the absence of relevant documentation. Why has this Bill remained in Malta when it was meant to be delivered by the shipmaster Benedetto Gabrieli to the Sanitary Authorities at Naples? Could it be that some unexpected circumstance cropped up at the last minute which prevented Gabrieli and his two passengers from leaving the island with the result that no use was made of the Bill? If so, what could have happened? And lastly, what is the connection of the Bill with the cedula, the calculations and the names of persons registered on the verso?

BILL OF HEALTH OF 9TH AUGUST 1796

The sheet of this Bill measures 39 cm by 55 cm (12). It has a watermark of verghette. The design, with its armorial bearings and ornamental framework, is the same as that of 1784 but the printing is coarse and of poor quality due perhaps to the wear and tear of the copper plate from its frequent use. The Latin text, too, is identical. In fact this retained a standard form of wording since at least 1713.

The description of the physical features of the ship master and crew; the name of the ship and the course of its itinerary are handwritten in ink in Italian (Fig. IV).



FIG. IV Original Bill of Health issued on the 9 August 1796. (Courtesy Librarian of National Library).

The Bill specifies that the sambuco named The Holy Family was sailing under the ship master Liborio Panzavecchia, a Maltese national, aged 52 years. His crew was made up of eleven seamen, himself included. Their names are listed on the verso of the sheet. The ship carried a load of empty barrels and was bound for Scoglitti and the whole of the Kingdom of Sicily.

The Bill is signed by the Vice Castellano, Commendatore (Carlo Giuseppe) de Gondrecourt (13) and by the Court Notary Emmanuele Zarb (14). It is dated the 9th day of the month of August 1796. At the bottom of the sheet is affixed a white paper seal embossed with the coat-of-arms of Gondrecourt in the shape of a white Latin cross on a red field in its upper third and of six heraldic fleurs-de-lis in two horizontal rows in the lower two-thirds.

On the verso of the sheet are three hand-written entries:-

(a) A list of the names of the seamen, i.e.

- Lazzaro Lichermo, 60 years old
- Francesco Papalardo, 30 years old
- Giovanni Ragusa, 40 years old
- Salvatore Panzavecchia, 24 years old
- Giovanni Balzan, 29 years old
- Paolo Balzan, 74 (?) years old
- Francesco Arditto, 42 (?) years old
- Felice Darmanin, 28 (?) years old
- Felice Grueli, 29 years old
- Carmeno (sic) Rizzo, 11 years old

All are stated to have been of "ordinary stature, apart from Rizzo, who was of medium height, and all with dark hair and complexion".

(b) The Holy Family eventually reached Scoglitti on the south-west of Sicily, and by the 27th August was preparing to leave this port and return to Malta. On that date the Health Deputy, D. Giovanni Grastella, declared in writing as follows (freely translated from Italian):-

"After the usual interrogation (of the ship master), as required by the rules of the General Superintendence of Health, I took cognisance of the present (Bill of Health from Malta) certifying free and secure pratique. It is hereby notified that the ship master has loaded the entire cargo of wine for Malta and is sailing with the same crew of eleven seamen. It is to be noted that I am writing this declaration on the (same Maltese) Bill of Health because no (Sicilian forms) of Bills of Health are available (at Scoglitti)."

(c) The ship left Scoglitti two days later with one seaman less. The Pro Deputy of Health of that port added this note on the 29th August (freely translated):-

"Let it be known that the seaman Felice Grueli, 29 years, whose name is marked (on the list) with a cross has been left behind so that the crew complement consists of ten men including the master". Signed. "I Francesco Benfissuto, Pro Deputy."

MALTESE BILLS OF HEALTH IN ARCHIVES ABROAD

Three original Maltese Bills of Health from the years 1784, 1798 and 1805 are known to be preserved in Sicily (15).

(a) One dated 26th March 1784. The format and design is different from that of the 10th January 1784 already described. The printed text is wholly in Italian and the framework enclosing it is simpler in its pattern. On top it bears the armorial bearings of Grand Master De Rohan and the caption in capital letters NOI COMMISSARI DELLA SANITA' DEPUTATI DALL'EMINEN. SIGNOR GRAN MAESTRO E SUO SAGRO CONSIGLIO (We Commissioners of Health and Deputies of His Eminence the Grand Master and His Sacred Council).

A liberal translation of the wording reads as follows:-

"In the exercise of our duty to watch over the public health of the Island of Malta and its Dependencies we declare in all truth to whom it may concern to read this Bill that by the grace of God this island enjoys excellent public health without the least suspicion of a contagious illness. Giuseppe Turregrossa is leaving this General Port for Girgenti on the ship named the Madonna of Morgana under the master Basilio d'Amevna (?). He

carries a cargo of ten barrels of white honey and ninety-six pieces of Levantine hides that have been purified (disinfected) at the Lazzaretto. He may be granted free and secure pratique in any city or place. Given at Malta on the 26th March 1784. (Signed) Le Chev. D'Ausel (?) and Giuseppe Reynaud, Deputy Actuary of Health."

It is to be noted that by 1796 there had been a return to the format, design and text of the Bill of Health of the 10th January 1784 as shown by the Bill of the 9th August 1796 already described.

(b) The Bill of the 6th July 1798 was issued during the French occupation of Malta. The letter head bears a female effigy, symbolising the French Republic, in an oval frame at the top of the document. This emblem is flanked by the words in capital letters LIBERTA' on the left, and EGUALTA' (sic) on the right. The text is in Italian but the wording has been modified from that of the Order's time. It was issued by the Commission of Health to the ship master Benigno de Cesare and his crew of eight seamen, with Italian surnames, who manned his fishing boat on its trip to Girgenti. It has two signatures, one of which is that of Giuseppe Reynaud, Cancelliere della Sanita'. The other name cannot be deciphered.

(c) The third certificate dated 11th February 1805 was issued by the President of the Grand Court of the Castellania of Valletta to the Sicilian ship master Biagio Spalma whose speronara was sailing to Girgenti with seven crew (including himself) and passengers whose names are given in two separate lists. There was a reversion to the text of the Bills in use at the time of the Order of St. John with the difference that the wording was all in Italian. The design, too, was different, the text being surrounded by a double frame containing a series of bandeaux representing vignettes with a landscape, a vase with flowers, etc. At the summit of the frame is the British Royal coat-of-arms and at the bottom centre is a seal.

The certificate is signed by the Court President Barone Franciscus Gauci and by the Registrar Joseph Natale Monreal (16).

THE LAST PERSONAL BILLS OF HEALTH FROM MALTA

Personal Bills of Health continued to be issued from Malta until the 1st November 1837 when a Government Notice of this date stated that persons leaving the island were no longer "required in future to take any such bill." Ship masters, however, still needed to be provided with a Ship's Bill of Health from the Superintendent of Quarantine and Marine Police indicating the names of the ship, crew and passengers. Clearance of the ship was to be granted only after the crew and passengers had been duly mustered by an Officer of Quarantine and Marine Police (17).

FOREIGN BILLS OF HEALTH BROUGHT TO MALTA, 24TH JULY 1756

Foreign Bills of Health brought to Malta by ship masters from various ports of the Mediterranean were preserved in the archives of the Maltese Port Sanitary Authorities; but these archives, if they are still existant, have not yet been traced. However, a copy of one such foreign Bill of Health has been found in a collection of documents of the eighteenth century concerning the Neutrality of the Port of Malta (18).

This Bill hails from Candia. It was issued on the 24th July 1756 by the British Consul of that place to an English captain, William Hodgson, who entered the Port of Malta on his way to Livorno. In Malta he found himself at variance with the Port Authorities because of conflicting statements in his ship papers. The quaint Italian wording of the Bill is to the effect that

"by the Grace of God, Candia enjoys perfect public health without any suspicion of contagious disease. (The said Captain) may, therefore, be allowed a secure pratique wherever he goes. In witness of the truth thereof, this present Bill has been signed by our own hand and marked with the seal of our chancellery. (Signed) Giovanni Sammo, British Vice Consul."

This Bill was received and registered in Malta by the Actuary of the Deputation of Health, Gaspar Carcin, and signed by Bali Francisucus Guedes, Vice Chancellor.

SUMMARY

As a result of the author's continued quest, since 1977, for further specimens of Bills of Health issued in the past from Malta, two such unpublished documents, dated 10th January 1784 and 9th August 1796 have recently been discovered among the holdings of the National Library of Malta. Attention is being drawn to three others known to be preserved in the State Archives of Agrigento in Sicily.

A total of ten original Bills of Health issued from Malta between 1713 and 1805 have now been traced and studied:-

1. 16th September 1713 (19)
2. 28th February 1766 (20)
3. 27th October 1766 (21)
4. 22nd May 1782 (22)
5. 10th January 1784 (23)
6. 26th March 1784 (24)
7. 7th November 1794 (25)
8. 9th August 1796 (26)
9. 6th July 1798 (27)
10. 11th February 1805 (28)

Four copies of Bills of Health dated 28th May, 28th August, 18th October and 3rd December 1576 have been recorded.

These Maltese Bills of Health furnish evidence of how Malta played a key role in the prevention and control of sea-bourne epidemic disease, especially plague, thanks to its collaboration with other Mediterranean regions since at least the sixteenth century.

Apart from the public health aspect, these Bills of Health have an intrinsic interest on account of their distinctive designs and art work.

The 'Archivio della Deputazione di Sanita' (Archive of the Maltese Sanitary Authority) referred to as existing in 1756 has not yet come to light.

It is likely that further original Bills of Health issued from Malta in the past are preserved in archives of Sicilian and other Mediterranean ports (France and Spain) and are still awaiting discovery.

References

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 2. Arch. 436, fol. 298, National Malta Library (NML)
 3. Arch. 436, fol.313, NML
 4. Arch. 436, fol.307v, NML
 5. Arch. 436, fol.308v, NML
 6. Cassar, P. Medical History, 1977, 21, 182-6
 7. Cassar, P. J. Hyg. Camb., 1979, 82, 419
 8. Francesco Manno (1754-1831) was a Sicilian painter and architect. He was the brother of Antonio and Vincenzo who, in 1794, painted in fresco the ceiling of the Cathedral of Mdina. C. Siracusano, "Profilo di Francesco Manno", Quaderni dell'Istituto di Storia dell'Arte Medievale Moderna, Universita' di Messina, Rome, 1975, p.45; E. Benezit, Dictionnaire des peintres, sculpteurs, dessinateurs et graveurs, Saints Ouen, 1961, Vol. 5, p.753. Garofalo of Palermo was probably Giuseppe Garofalo who was active in Rome at the time E. Benezit, op., cit., Vol. 4, p.164
 9. Rietstap, J.B., Planches de l'Armorial General, Paris, 1912, Vol. 4, Planche 283
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 24. Gibilaro, G., op. cit. p.47
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 27. Gibilaro, G. op., cit., p.48
 28. Ibid. p.46
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