

An Outline History Of Pharmacy

PART III. THE STORY OF MALTESE PHARMACY*

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We do not know when the academic study of pharmacy had its beginnings in Malta but it is very probable that it began at the Holy Infirmary at Valletta in 1676 when the School for Anatomy and Surgery was founded in that hospital by Grand Master Nicola Cottoner. It is certain that the Director of the School — the priest and physician Fra Giuseppe Zammit — was also the teacher of botany and that, in order to further the practical study of this discipline, he founded a botanical garden, out of his own purse, in a ditch of Fort St. Elmo in 1690. In this garden he cultivated medicinal plants.

Fra Giuseppe Zammit also introduced the study of chemistry, as understood in his days,

and used to show his students how to prepare sodium sulphate; indeed this salt was still known in Malta as Zammit's Salt until 1886.

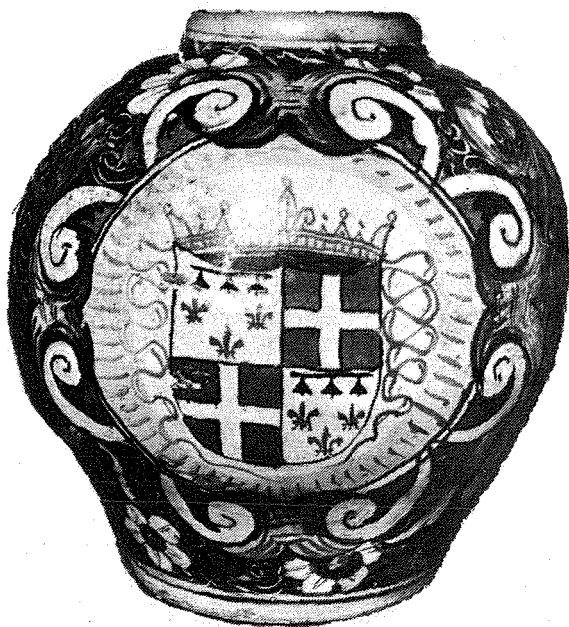
In 1729 we come across the first regulations for the running of the school of pharmacy. The students had to submit to an entrance examination conducted by the Chief Pharmacist of the Holy Infirmary to make sure that they knew how to read and write the Latin language, as in those days books on pharmacy and prescriptions were written mostly in Latin.

Apart from attending lectures, pharmacy students were required to work as apprentices at the pharmacy of the Infirmary. Those who failed to attend regularly and to carry out the work assigned to them were expelled from the course after being reported to the Grand Master.

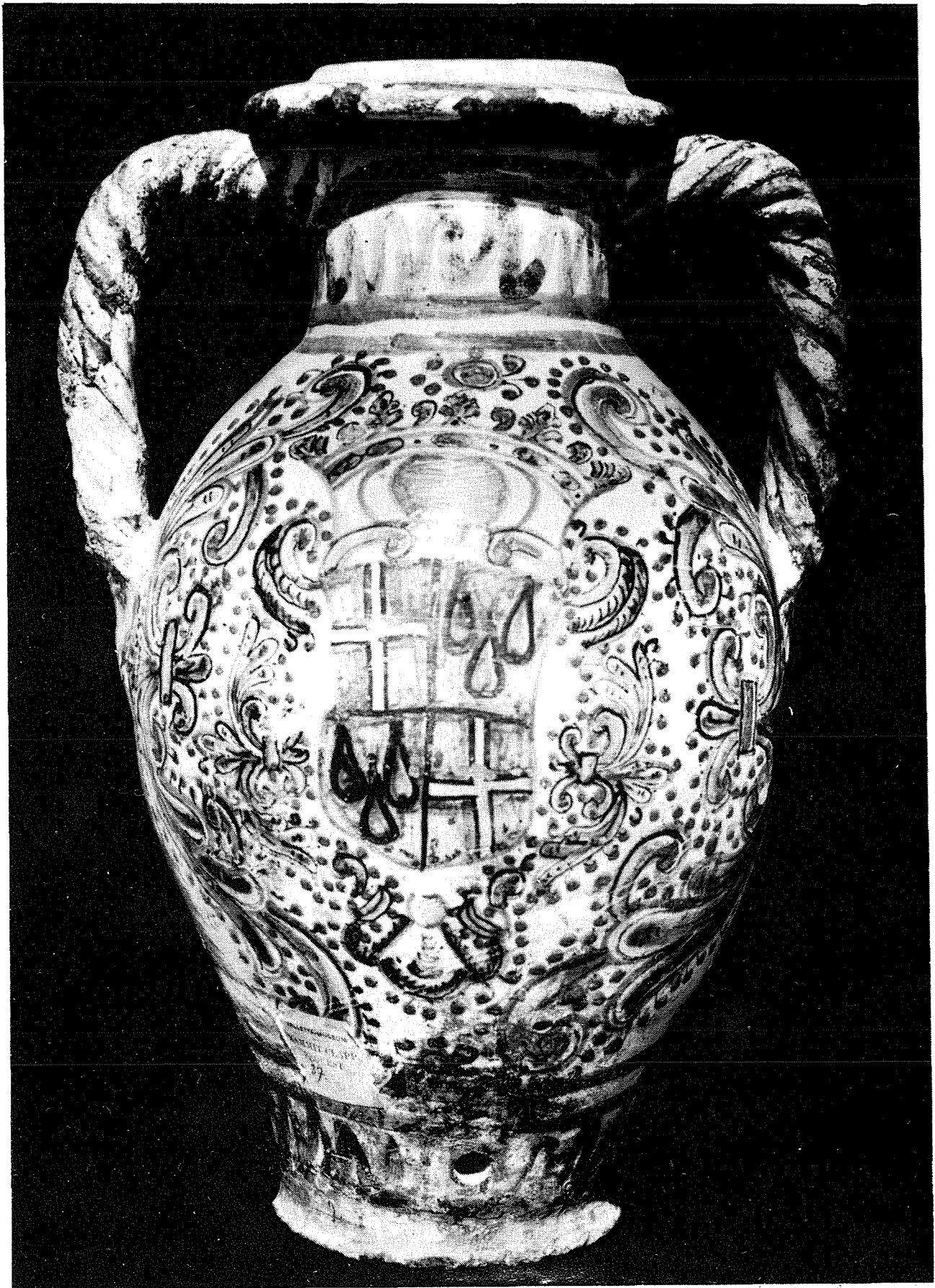
On finishing his studies and passing a qualifying examination, the student was granted a diploma and the licence to practice his profession.

During the 19th century — and precisely in 1838 — the University raised the standard of studies and extended the course to two years. During this period the students had to carry out practical work at the pharmacy of the Civil Hospital which had replaced the Holy Infirmary in 1798. In 1921 the course was extended to three years and in 1948 to four years. In the same year the diploma was replaced by the Baccalaureate in Pharmacy. These changes brought our course in pharmacy to academic levels obtaining abroad.⁽¹⁾

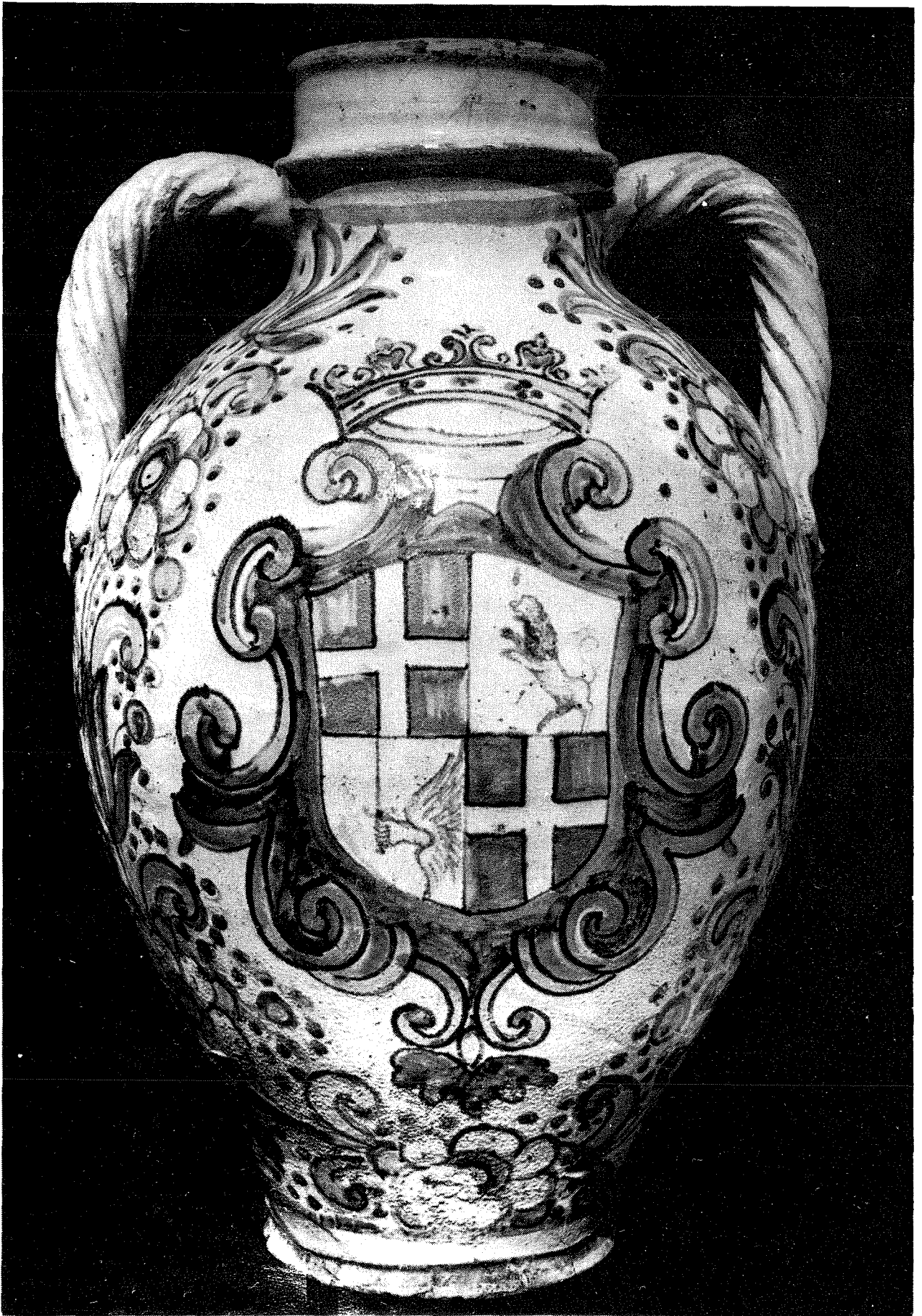
Up to the last decade of the last century, Maltese pharmacists followed various pharmacopoeias in their preparations of medicines. The Italian one by I. Brugnatelli, published in 1803, was available in Malta and was used by the pharmacist Ignatuis Custo' of Senglea. In 1864, however, when the British Pharmacopoeia was published, Maltese pharmacists were obliged to follow this pharmacopoeia in the preparation of their medicaments. To this day this publication remains the official authority by which we still abide.



1. Polychrome pharmacy jar decorated with the coats-of-arms of Grand Master Alofius de Wignacourt (1601-22). (Courtesy of National Museum, Valletta).



2. The "pitcher" jar. A very large container for "waters", bearing the coat-of-arms of Grand Master Ramon Perellos y Roccaful (1697-1720). Note the small round aperture at the base which may have been provided with some sort of tap or plug when in use. (Courtesy of National Museum, Valletta).



3. "Pitcher" emblazoned with the shield of Grand Master Antonio Manoel de Vilhena (1722-36). (Courtesy of National Museum, Valletta).

Regulations

The earliest regulations for the control of the exercise of the pharmaceutical profession go back to 1530 when the Maltese Islands passed under the rule of the Order of St. John of Jerusalem. According to these regulations, that were previously enforced in Rhodes, anyone wishing to open a pharmacy had to obtain the licence from the Grand Master. The same permit was needed if a pharmacist wanted to buy or sell a pharmacy or if he desired to transfer it from one locality to another. In order to ensure that the needs of the public were adequately met at all times, the pharmacist was exempted from military duties which were then compulsory for other citizens.

He was not allowed to sell medicines without a doctor's prescription and had to keep poisonous substances under lock and key. Opium preparations could only be sold with the written permission of the Chief Government Medical Officer while such poisons as arsenic, sublimate and mercury were to be kept locked so that they would not fall into the hands of young shop assistants. Stock mixtures were to be marked on the lid of their containers with the date on which they were compounded. The selling price of the various remedies was fixed by the Chief Government Medical Officer. Over-charging by apothecaries was made a punishable offence. Poisonous substances were not to be sold to servants, slaves, children and suspicious characters.⁽²⁾

Pharmacy Jars

The Maltese pharmacist of the past kept his herbs and medicinal preparations in drug jars or vases made of majolica. The first evidence of the existence of such jars goes back to 1592. An inventory of a pharmacy at Rabat in that year lists one hundred and eighty-one jars as part of the stock held by its apothecary but no description is given regarding their shapes and decoration.⁽³⁾ Their whereabouts to-day are not known; indeed the earliest pharmacy jars that have survived time and handling belong to the 17th and 18th centuries. These jars once formed part of the equipment of the pharmacies of Santo Spirito Hospital at Rabat, near Mdina, and of the Holy Infirmary at Valletta.

These jars are made of majolica and present a variety of shapes, sizes, colours and designs. They range from the small 13 cm high ointment pots to large pitchers for "waters" standing 60

cm in height. They comprise the following types:— (a) **albarello** — a tall cylindrical vase with a narrow waist; (b) the pitcher — a very large jar — for medicinal waters; (c) syrup pot with spout and handle; (d) spherical or ovoid vases for roots of plants; (e) flasks or bottles for aqueous solutions; (f) **pot-a-canon** — cylindrical jars with straight sides for balms and electuaries; and (g) owl-shaped jars, the head of the bird forming the lid.

Some of these jars bear the coat-of-arms of the Grand Master during whose rule they were acquired for the pharmacies of the two hospitals already mentioned. Some have the fleur-de-lys of Grand Master Alofius de Wignacourt (1601-22); others have the three golden pears on a black field of Grand Master Ramon Perellos y Roccaful (1697-1720); and others the winged right hand grasping a sword and the lion rampant of Grand Master Antonio Manoel de Vilhena (1722-36).⁽⁴⁾ (Figures 1, 2 and 3)

Many of these jars are now exhibited at the Museum of Fine Arts at Valletta. They were not manufactured in Malta but were probably produced in Italy and Sicily.

Importation and Inspection of Drugs

During the rule of the Order of St. John, imported ingredients for pharmaceutical use were examined on arrival in Malta by the Chief Government Medical Officer to ensure their freshness and good quality. One of the registers of two hundred years ago that contains the items bought from abroad for the pharmacy of the Holy Infirmary still exists in the Archives of the Order of St. John at our National Library. It records the names and quantities of the vegetable ingredients purchased from such places as Venice, Leghorn, Agosta (Sicily), Turin, Florence, Marseilles, Madrid and Lisbon. These last three places were well known as centres where one could find the drugs that reached Europe from the Americas and from the East. Out of one hundred and thirty-eight items imported from abroad during the last thirty years of the Order's domination over Malta, one hundred and five were from vegetable sources, fourteen of animal origin and nineteen were chemical substances such as mercury, arsenic, sulphuric acid, antimony, magnesium sulphate and ammonium carbonate. Other ingredients were of a very quaint nature and almost of repulsive character such as powder of dried serpents, fragments of skull of the whale and teeth of the wild boar.⁽⁵⁾

Once a year every pharmacy in the island was inspected by the Chief Government Medical Officer. Deteriorated drugs were destroyed and the apothecary was fined for having kept them for sale. At the Holy Infirmery the pharmacy was inspected every three months by the Grand Hospitalier, who was a high ranking knight and the supreme head responsible for the hospital administration, together with the physicians and the apothecary of the hospital. Worthless and spoilt ingredients were burned.

Legal Enactments

The legal codes of Grand Master Antonio Manoel de Vilhena of 1724, of Grand Master Emanuel de Rohan of 1784 and an edict of the 17th July 1797 incorporated all previous regulations and enactments. Subsequent advances in medical and pharmaceutical knowledge brought about modifications in these old legislative provisions; it is remarkable, however, that in spite of a distance of more than one hundred and eighty years, the laws regarding such administrative matters as the licensing of apothecaries, the sale of medicines, the safe keeping of poisonous substances and the periodical inspection of pharmacies have remained substantially unchanged and in 1900 formed the basis of Chapter IV of the Second Sanitary Ordinance regulating the practice of pharmacy in the Maltese Islands.

Apart from these legal enactments, Maltese pharmacists have felt the need to safeguard the prestige of their profession and to ensure the ethical behaviour of their colleagues by founding the Chamber of Pharmacists in 1900 which is still active to-day. The Pharmacy Board, set up by government in 1968 aims at promoting the same ideals and code of conduct.

Patent and Proprietary Medicines

The earliest advertisement of a proprietary medicine to be circulated in Malta, that I have come across, belongs to the year 1760. It is by an Italian, Pietro Siveri, who claimed that his **Tenaca** cured epilepsy, hydrophobia, apoplexy, melancholia and many other diseases. In 1765 another handbill advertised a tincture by the dentist Giovanni Ornieri for the treatment of toothache, deafness and defective eyesight.⁽⁶⁾

With the granting of the liberty of the press in Malta in 1839, the newspapers began carrying advertisements of various patent medicines for

"cleansing the blood", for the treatment of venereal diseases and of fevers. Some of these preparations were sold by booksellers and other traders.

It appears that the first pharmacist who began importing patent medicines directly from the United Kingdom was Louis Calleja, owner of the English Dispensary in Valletta, in 1843. In the following year Calleja started manufacturing patent medicines himself. In February 1844, for instance, he produced **Calleja's Life Pills** for liver diseases and constipation. Another pharmacist, W. Kingston, was selling an expectorant under the name of **Kingston's Compound Balm of Horehound** in 1858 from his pharmacy in Old Theatre Street, Valletta. Foreign patent medicines became a regular item in the stock of the Maltese pharmacy by the mid-19th century.

Epilogue

Up to fifty-five years ago some of the pharmacies of the Maltese Islands were not merely places of business but also the rendezvous of small circles of cultured and professional people who gathered there in the evening so that it was a common sight to see the apothecary, the doctor, the lawyer, the notary and the priest engaged in a dignified conversation or a discussion of the topics of the day.⁽⁷⁾ I can still recall from my adolescent days in Senglea such a distinguished group at the Victoria Dispensary run by the pharmacist Mr. Paolo Farrugia. Since then social, commercial and recreational developments have swept away these rendezvous and have destroyed the individuality of the old-time pharmacy establishment with its distinguished interior decoration and have reduced it to the state of a mere shop.

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