

Residential Areas of Medical and Paramedical Personnel in Valletta in the Late Eighteenth Century

Paul Cassar

This study attempts to trace and record the names and the whereabouts of the residences of medical and paramedical personnel living in Valletta in 1766 and their social environment. The source on which it is based is a roll or survey drawn up in that year and listing the male population of Valletta and Floriana liable to be called for military service¹.

The population of Valletta was then estimated to have been 18,880². Of this number there were 3348 men capable of bearing arms. The roll gives their names, paternity, ages, areas of residence and occupations. There are artisans, traders, shopkeepers, servants, students, lawyers, medical and paramedical personnel. The last two categories amounted to 93 representing 2.89% of the males listed in the roll and about 0.5% of the total population of the city.

Valletta was planned and built on a grid-iron pattern with its main street extending down the middle of the peninsula from the Gate of St. George to Fort St. Elmo in a west-east direction. A number of streets run parallel on each side of this main thoroughfare while other streets cut across it at right angles from the Grand Harbour side to Marsamxett Harbour.

The roll does not identify the residences by street names but by reference to 'quarters' in which the men lived. These 'quarters' were rectangular blocks of buildings bounded by streets on their four sides. They are indicated in the document by the name of some distinguished person who owned, or lived in, one of the houses of the block; or by the name of some prominent edifice, such as a church, or some other landmark within the 'quarter' or very close to it.

The task of identifying all the 'quarters' has been rendered difficult on account of the ravages wrought by time and by man-made alterations in domestic architecture during the past two hundred and twenty-five years. The fact that some of the property changed hands through inheritance or purchase also brought about the elimination of the names of the 18th century owners, and therefore, of the names of some of the 'quarters'. Other factors have been the disappearance of

some of the landmarks through destruction during the Second World War. These changes caused the old designations of the 'quarters' to sink into oblivion. Only approximate locations, therefore, have been possible in some cases while a few 'quarters' have not been identified with certainty. It may be noted that the fading of topographical

PROFESSIONAL CATEGORIES

The ninety-three men fall into the professional categories shown in Table I, i.e. 15 medical, 41 surgical, 10 pharmaceutical, 23 nursing and 4 miscellaneous.

TABLE I

Category	Where engaged	Number	Total
Medical Physicians (<i>medici</i>)	Infirmary	10	15
	District Medical Officer	1	
	Private practice	1	
	Unknown	3	
Surgical Surgeons (<i>chirurgi. sic</i>)	Infirmary	5	14
	Navy	3	
	Private practice	6	
Junior or Assistant Surgeons (<i>prattici</i>)	Navy	2	2
	Barber-surgeons (<i>barberotti</i>)	Infirmary	10
	Navy	4	
	Private practice	4	
Phlebotomists (<i>insagnatori</i>)	Infirmary	2	7
	Private practice	5	
Pharmaceutical Pharmacists or Apothecaries (<i>aromatari</i>)	Private practice	2	4
	Unknown	4	
Assistant Apothecaries (<i>spezialotti</i>)	Infirmary	3	10
Apprentice (<i>allieve speziaria. sic</i>)	Infirmary	1	
Nursing Hospital Attendants (<i>guardiano; serve all'ospedale</i>)	Infirmary	23	23
	Miscellaneous Master of the steam-baths (<i>maestro di stufia</i>) Spectacles maker (<i>fa occhiali</i>) Surgical students (<i>studenti di chirurgia</i>)	Infirmary	1
Private practice		1	
Infirmary		2	
Total		93	93

names from social memory was not unique to Valletta but has occurred in other towns such as Senglea and Bormla and also in some villages³.

Paul Cassar
B.Sc., M.D., D.P.M.(Lond.)
F.R.Hist.S.(Lond.),
D.Litt.(Hon.Causa)

AGE STRUCTURE

A breakdown of the ages of the various categories of practitioners gave the following results:-

Category	Youngest	Oldest	Average
Physicians	25	57	40
Surgeons	28	60	41
Assistant Surgeons	25	32	28
Barber-surgeons	16	45	24
Phlebotomists	22	44	34
Pharmacists	26	60	42
Assistant Apothecaries	22	30	26
Apprentice (pharmacy)	17	—	—
Hospital Attendants	18	75	41
Master of the steam-baths	18	—	—
Spectacles maker	31	—	—
Surgical students	20	22	21

This analysis shows that physicians, surgeons and apothecaries were, on an average, in their early forties; the assistant surgeons, barber-surgeons and assistant apothecaries were, on an average, in their mid-twenties as one would expect in the case of junior members of the staff who were still in the process of consolidating their knowledge of the particular branch of the profession in which they were engaged. The phlebotomists, in their mid-thirties, were old enough to have acquired the necessary skill in their limited area of practice. The young ages of the Master of the steam baths, the spectacles maker and the surgical students are within an acceptable range of years.

With regard to the highest echelons of the profession - the physicians, the surgeons and the apothecaries - one notes that due to their having reached middle-age, they would by then have attained considerable intellectual maturity and accumulated an adequate fund of clinical acumen as to provide their patients with the best type of treatment then available. The nursing staff, too, because of their length of service must have acquired a sufficiently wide practical knowledge in the management of the sick as to compensate for their lack of formal nursing teaching and training.

THE PHYSICIANS

Of the fifteen physicians in the roll, one is registered by his first name only (Fantino...) and two others are designated as being Sicilians (Francesco Merchiere and Ignazio Bojarello). They have not been traced in contemporary records. The other physicians are:-

Gaetano Azzopardi
Domenico Biagio
Giuseppe Bigeni
Salvatore Camilleri
Antonio Creni
Giuseppe Demarco
Giorgio Imbert
Giorgio Lucano (Locano)

Carolo Perdon
Andrea Seichel (*sic*)
Lorenzo Thei
Basilio Zammit.

All these physicians, with the exception of Dr. G. Demarco, were in the employment of the government. Gaetano Azzopardi and Domenico Biagio were Senior Physicians at the Infirmary⁴. Giuseppe Bigeni, after serving at Floriana for seven years, joined the navy for twelve years (1743) and later was appointed Assistant Physician (1754) at the Infirmary and finally Senior Physician⁵. Salvatore Camilleri served on many occasions as Assistant Physician at the Infirmary until he asked to be transferred to the hospital at Gozo⁶. Antonio Creni (or Cren) was initially at Floriana and later on in the Order's navy (1765)⁷. Giorgio Imbert rose to the highest post in the hierarchy of the profession as Physician-in-Chief (*Proto-medico*)⁸. Giorgio Lucano was physician in the navy (1754) and later, Senior Physician at the Infirmary (1782) and Professor of Medicine at our University⁹. Carolo Perdon was, at first, Physician for the Poor (*Medico dei Poveri*) at Floriana and subsequently physician in the navy and finally at the Infirmary (1754)¹⁰.

Gaetano Azzopardi, Domenico Biagio, Giorgio Imbert and Giorgio Lucano were appointed, together with surgeon Michel'Angelo Grima, to form the Medical College which was at the head of the Faculty of Medicine at our University when that institution was founded in 1771. This College had the task of examining medical students and of nominating candidates for professorships¹¹.

Andrea Seichel started his career as physician in the navy, then as Assistant Physician at the Infirmary, Physician to the Women's Hospital and Grand Prison; and finally Principal Physician at the Infirmary¹². Lorenzo Thei was Principal Physician at the Infirmary and subse-

quently Physician-in-Chief, the equivalent of to-day's Chief Government Medical Officer¹³. Basilio Zammit was, for a time, Physician for the Poor at Bormla (1754)¹⁴. Giuseppe Demarco studied in Malta and at Montpellier. On returning to the island he settled as a general practitioner initially at Senglea and later at Valletta. He kept notes on the illnesses observed by him. These manuscripts form the earliest records on communicable diseases in Malta¹⁵.

Several of these physicians have carved a niche in our medical history through their publications¹⁶.

THE SURGEONS

The fourteen surgeons were:-

Felice Camilleri
Gio Batta Castiglione
Antonio Farrugia
Giuseppe Farrugia
M.A. Farrugia
Stefano Gatt
Francesco Grech
Andrea Gusin (Cousin?)
Lorenzo La Speranza
Giacomo Lofreda
M.A. Magri
Nunzio Pugliese
Antonio Vella
Gabriele Zammit

Of these surgeons, six (one of whom a Sicilian, Nunzio Pugliese) appear to have been in private practice. The remaining eight were in government employment either in the navy or on the staff of the Infirmary or of the Women's Hospital (*Casetta*).

The range of operations that the 18th century surgeon was called to perform was limited and consisted mainly in the amputation of limbs, removal of tumours from breasts, opening of abscesses, reduction of fractures, cutting for bladder stone, extraction of musket balls from wounds and the occasional trepanation of the skull in cases of depressed fractures of the cranium pressing on the brain.

Three of the above named surgeons have left their mark in the written records of their time. Felice Camilleri, during over thirty five years in the government service, rose from the grade of junior barber-surgeon (*sotto barberotto*) at the Infirmary to the high post of Master Surgeon which he occupied until his death in 1767¹⁷.

Giuseppe Farrugia spent fifteen years as barber-surgeon at the Infirmary before proceeding to study surgery at Montpellier and at Paris for an aggregate period of six years returning to Malta in 1759. He was appointed surgeon in 1763 and Master Surgeon in 1767. He earned a reputation for his proficiency in performing trepanation of the skull for the removal of collections of blood or pus pressing on the brain following head injuries¹⁸.

Lorenzo La Speranza was also very adept in carrying out the operation of trephining of the skull. Besides being on the staff of the Infirmary he saw service in the Order's navy¹⁹.

ASSISTANT SURGEONS

The two Assistant or Junior Surgeons were: Giuseppe Falzon who was employed in the Order's navy. He had a brother - Francesco - who worked as Assistant Apothecary at the Infirmary²⁰; and Giuseppe Micallef (son of Gaetano) who was a surgeon to the *Reggimento di Malta* and also served in the navy which he left after fourteen years to be appointed Senior Surgeon at the Infirmary following the death of surgeon Giuseppe Farrugia mentioned above. A brother - Saverio - was a barber-surgeon in the navy in 1766²¹.

BARBER SURGEONS

They were:-
 Pietro Brancati
 Giuseppe Calleja
 Pietro P. Damato
 Pietro Antonio Galea
 Emanuel Gonsi (Gonzi)
 Francesco Grech
 Gabriele Grech
 Lorenzo Grimau
 Giuseppe Marini
 Giuseppe Micallef
 Saverio Micallef
 Antonio Santre'
 Giuseppe Tabone
 Bastiano Zahra (*Q. sotto l'Osp. le*)
 Sebastiano Zahra (*Q. dietro l'anime*)
 Fedele Zammit
 Stanislao Zammit
 Michel'Angelo... *Greco*

The barber-surgeon started his career in surgery at a young age. The 'surgery' that he would, eventually, be expected to carry out consisted mainly in the cleaning and dressing of wounds and the application of ointments to ulcers and abscesses. After a long period in this grade he had the opportunity of promotion to Assistant Surgeon²² and, following a formal course of studies abroad, to that of Surgeon²³. However he might not have advanced further than Assistant Surgeon and he might even remain a barber-surgeon for his whole career²⁴.

THE PHLEBOTOMISTS

They were:-
 Giacomo Alancin
 Vincenzo Daniele
 Francesco Mamo
 Francesco Mifsud
 Domenico Pace
 Giacomo Pace
 Giorgio Tonna.

The phlebotomist (literally vein-cutter) or

bleeder was an important member of both the medical and surgical teams. His services were much sought after for the relief of pain, for lowering the temperature in feverish illnesses, for promoting sleep and for preventing unduly marked inflammation of wounds²⁵. Blood was usually drained from the vein at the elbow but sometimes also from the jugular vein²⁶. Bloodletting was still very much in vogue in the early decades of the nineteenth century both on the continent and in Malta²⁷. The instruments of the phlebotomist were the lancet, the bleeding bowl for collecting blood, leeches, blistering plasters of cantharides and cupping glasses²⁸. The phlebotomist disappeared from the list of licensed medical practitioners in Malta only in 1921²⁹.

THE PHARMACISTS AND APOTHECARIES

They were:-
 Michel'Angelo Agius
 Saverio Busuttill
 Gioacchino Delicata
 Giacomo Gatt
 Andrea Farrugia
 Michel'Angelo Re.

The roll does not indicate the location of their pharmacies. From another manuscript of a later date³⁰ we learn that in 1782 there were in Valletta 'six fixed pharmacies destined by His Serene Highness (the Grand Master) for the service of the public'. It is of interest to note that this number of pharmacies corresponds to the number of pharmacists appearing in the roll of 1766.

Thanks to this same document of 1782 we have been able to trace the whereabouts of the pharmacy of Michel'Angelo Agius who was still running it twenty-one years after the roll was drawn up. It was sited in the *strada della fama*³¹ very likely near the corner formed by Republic Street and Archbishop Street where Aquilina's bookshop now is. In fact a pharmacy on this site was still known as *de la Fama* as late as 1854³².

Giacomo Gatt appears in an official record of 1756³³. In August of that year he addressed a petition to the Order's Treasury asking to be paid for services rendered to the late Bali Jacques Francois de Chambray. These services consisted in the supply of medicaments, attendance at the Bali's residence and the provision of a secret remedy (*occulto rimedio*).

ASSISTANT APOTHECARIES

These were:-
 Vincenzo Camilleri
 Francesco Falzon
 Emanuele Gumbau.

All of them were employed at the Holy

Infirmary. Their duties included (a) accompanying the physician during his daily ward visits and writing the medicaments prescribed by him in the *Libro maestro della fisica* (Master Book of Physic or Prescriptions); (b) administering the medicines to the sick at the hour of the *Paternoster* (in the early morning) and again in the evening; (c) compounding with 'the due precision' all the medicaments for distribution to the monasteries, the Slave Prison and the sick poor living at home in accordance with the prescriptions of the Physician for the Poor (*Medico dei poveri*)³⁴.

PHARMACY APPRENTICE

There was only one apprentice or student - Gaetano Grech, 17 years of age.

HOSPITAL ATTENDANTS

These were:-
 Lazzaro Attard
 Gaetano Bonnici
 Giacomo Bugeja
 Battista Camilleri
 Simeone Cassar
 Michel'Angelo Falzon
 Gaetano Fenech
 Battista Galea
 Gaetano Galea
 Paolo Galea
 Alberto Marmorar
 Andrea Micallef
 Raffaele Pace
 Gregorio Spiteri
 Ignazio Vella
 Salvatore Vella
 Sebastiano Vella
 Francesco Xiberras
 Alessandro Xiqluna

These men have left no records about their qualifications, if any, or their working conditions or personal data. In two instances not even their names are registered in the roll; they are simply referred to as *guardiano all'ospedali*; in the case of two other only the names are given, i.e. Gio... and Lorenzo...

MISCELLANEOUS

The same dearth of information, as in the case of Hospital Attendants, applies to the following four men:-

Ignazio Pullicino, 18 years of age, Master of the Steam Baths. These baths (*stufia* or *falanga*) were used for the treatment of patients suffering from syphilis. The *stufia* adjoined the rear wall of the Great Ward or Fever Ward of the Infirmary. It consisted of a ground-floor room where a log fire was lit (*forno*) to heat an overlying room where the patients were 'steamed' i.e. exposed to the hot air and made to sweat; and two halls (*sale*) for the reception of the patients after

undergoing the steam baths. A large magazine was annexed for the storage of firewood³⁵.

Gio Batta Casaramona, 31 years of age, was a spectacle-maker who was also a sergeant with the *Falconiere*.

Salvatore Cirincione and Policarpio Leone, 22 and 20 years old respectively, were surgical students at the Infirmary. Judging from their surnames, they appear to have been foreigners who might have come to Malta to study surgery.

SOCIAL STATUS

Among the medical practitioners in 18th century Malta, only the physicians enjoyed a status of social respectability thanks to their university education. With the lawyers, notaries and priests they formed the cultural elite of contemporary society.

The social position of the apothecary, on the other hand, was not so high as that of the physician in spite of his educational attainments. He was regarded more as a retailer of medicinal preparations than as a professional man. However, like physicians and lawyers, he enjoyed the privilege of being exempted from the obligation of carrying a sword as was prescribed for other citizens by various *bandi* (decrees) issued between 1737 and 1744³⁶.

Most surgeons had no academic background and were considered more as craftsmen or manual workers than learned men. Though they were grounded in a knowledge of anatomy and were reputed for their operative skill, they were socially quite a cut below the physicians.

The barber-surgeons stood at an even lower rung than the surgeons in the social framework of the time.

The phlebotomists and the hospital attendants and the other health workers never attained any social distinction and they are met with in the written records as mere names while in the case of four hospital attendants not even their name and surname are recorded.

RESIDENTIAL STANDARDS OF MEDICAL & PARAMEDICAL PERSONNEL

In a general way, the 'quarters' in which those with a medical and paramedical calling lived fell into two distinct regions of the city: (a) a minority resided in houses scattered over the 'upper parts' of Valletta extending from South Street to Archbishop Street; (b) the majority lived in the 'lower part' of the city, so referred to because of the

declivity of the terrain extending from Archbishop Street to Fort St. Elmo.

The medical focus of Malta in the 18th century was the Holy Infirmary sited at the lower end of Merchant Street very near to Fort St. Elmo and, therefore, quite within the 'lower part' of the city. It is understandable why those with a medical calling tended to reside in that part of Valletta nearest to the Holy Infirmary if we keep in mind that in those days walking was the commonest means of getting about. Hence the reason why most of the staff engaged at the Holy Infirmary sought to live within easy reach of, and a short walking distance from, the hospital.

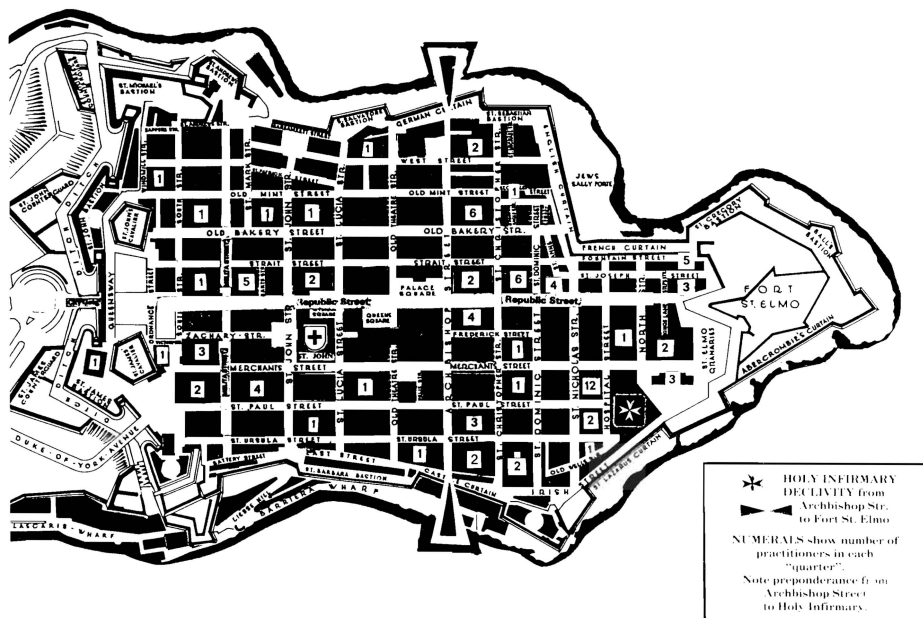
I am not aware of any survey of the housing conditions obtaining in the residential areas of Valletta in the 18th century. The nearest descriptions in point of time to 1766, that I know of, belong to 1813 i.e. fifty years later. In 1813 Valletta was described in an official sanitary report as being a 'mixture of palaces and hovels'. The latter dwellings were often one-roomed tenements on the ground floor of three-storey houses. They lacked ventilation, were dark, humid and smelly. These were the homes of the 'low classes'.

The intermediate landings, called *mezzanini*, were inhabited by a 'better class' but they too were badly lighted and inadequately ventilated and with a low ceiling. The 'high society classes', usually the owners of the edifice, lived in the uppermost floor or *piano nobile* which was well provided with

windows and, therefore, well lighted, aired and dry; but the whole building, especially the ground floor, was permeated with the smell of untrapped house drains and the odour of the dung of horses kept in the stables attached to the edifice.

Apart from the Mandragg, the worst areas were in the 'lower parts' of Valletta³⁷. Things had not changed by 1865 when housing conditions were found to be just as bad during the cholera epidemic of that year especially in the habitations of the 'lower part' of Valletta³⁸.

It is within these sectors of Valletta - that were condemned for their insanitary conditions in 1813 and in 1865 - that the residences of the majority of the 18th century medical practitioners and hospital attendants were located. It is remarkable that even to-day, after the lapse of well over a century, it has been recently officially stated that 'large parts (of Valletta) qualify as slums' - the site of these 'slums' corresponding to the 'lower part' of the city. Housing conditions in this area, therefore, seem to have changed very little so that it is not unreasonable to assume that the same bad housing environment - if not worse - prevailed also in 1766 and that the majority of medical professional people and their ancillary personnel lived in the humbler areas of Valletta characterised by sub-standard habitations and by such an insanitary environment that would to-day qualify as slums³⁹ and, therefore, far from being considered as 'respectable' residential areas by present standards.



Plan of Valletta with the present street ▲ names. The numeral in each black block show the number of practitioners living in each 'quarter' of the city. Three residences have not been located because the 'quarters' containing them could not be identified. The manuscript makes no references to street names.

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