

# Disinfection

## Part 6

By Dr. A. Bonnici

Achille Ferris, a noted Maltese Ecclesiastical Historian, in 1881 published his 'Memorie Dell'Inclito Ordine Gerosolimitano Esistenti nelle Isole Di Malta' and in his short description about the Lazzaretto he says that:-

*'In the office of this institute there exists the registers of the Order containing a list of all the ships and persons that had undergone quarantine. The oldest register goes back to 1654.'*<sup>1</sup>

Another interesting fact which Ferris also describes in the same book is how 'Le Corse di Quadrupedi' had its origin as a result of the plague epidemic of 1592.<sup>2</sup>

Ferris describes how in 1592 during the reign of Grandmaster Verdala, four Tuscan galleys coming from the Levant, had captured two enemy ships loaded with merchandise. These ships had several sick crew members, who were transported to the Infirmary in Valletta. The Doctors did not diagnose their illness as being plague, and so they were allowed to contact others. However, one doctor whom Dr. Paul Cassar mentions by name – Dr. Raimondo Calamia<sup>3</sup> insisted that their illness was plague. Eventually when the epidemic was rampant the authorities had to admit that this was plague, which had started in the beginning of June, 1592, and ended around September, 1593, after having caused the death of 3,000 persons including forty knights.

So when this catastrophe was over the Council of the Knights organised various thanks givings, and among the social events, in order to provide the population with honest recreation the 'Corse di Quadrupedi at Pietà' was set up.

Ferris says:-

*'Fatti solenni ringraziamenti per la cessazione della peste, furono stabilite le dette corse di quadrupedi. È sciocchezza però il dire, che queste corse si fanno in adempimento di un voto. Il Consiglio dell'Ordine, come voto a Dio, sotto l'invocazione del Santo, aveva stabilito altre opere di varia natura: le Corse le aveva stabilite e fondate come divertimento e onesta ricreazione del popolo, che tanto aveva sofferto, quando infieriva il terribile flagello. Questa corsa diede origine ad altre che si fanno nelle due isole anche in circostanze straordinarie, etc.'*<sup>4</sup>

An eye witness during this plague epidemic was Dr. Pietro Parisi of Trapani who was the first doctor to describe such an epidemic.<sup>5</sup> An extensive description of this plague (1592 – 93) is given by Dr. Paul Cassar in his Medical History of Malta, as well as other plague epidemics. Going through this chapter, one notes that plague visited the Island in the following years:-

1270, 1348, 1427 – 28, 1453, 1501, 1519, 1523, 1575, 1592 – 93, 1623, 1655, 1675 – 76, 1813 – 14, 1917, 1936 – 37.<sup>6</sup>

The Knights of Malta under Grandmaster Hompesh capitulated in June, 1798 and Napoleon landed in Malta.

The French capitulated on the 5th September, 1800 and we passed under British rule.

As Malta was ideally situated as a port of call for shipping going from the East to the West of the Mediterranean or vice-versa, the British Administrators made sure that the Island was exposed as little as can be to contagion. The first order was issued by Major General Pigot on the 9th May, 1801<sup>7</sup> whereby

captains and skippers of ships were instructed not to land passengers and discharge cargo except under the direction of the Port Authority.

That order was followed on the 5th August, 1801 by more specific instructions<sup>8</sup> which were published by Mr. William Eaton who, as Superintendent of the Lazzaretto, wielded absolute power in matters of quarantine. The new instructions referred to the hoisting of the yellow flag, the proper place for anchorage, identification of quarantine water, means of communication with shore establishments as well as with other vessels and the functions of the Officers of Health. Infringement of these regulations was punished by the penalty of death 'without the benefit of the clergy'.<sup>9</sup>

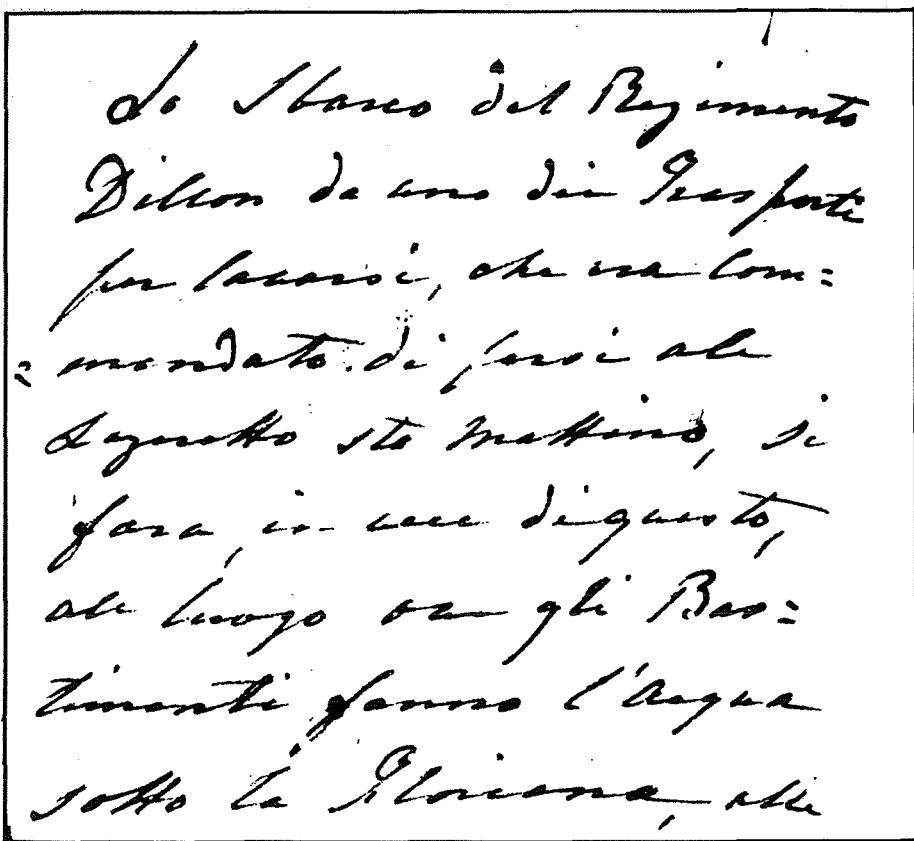
These strict orders were to be observed even by the British Military Authorities themselves as is shown by the following reproduced letter from General W. A. Villetes himself who was 2nd in command to Nelson to the Officer of Public Health at Marsamxetto.

*The landing of the Dillon Regiment from one of the transport vessels to Lascaris that started this morning at the Lazaretto, will instead occur at the place where the vessels take on water under Floriana at 9 in the morning. Therefore, the Commisioners of Health are requested to send one of their officers to be present for this operation.*

*The Palace, 1st April 1803.*

*Signed W. A. Villetes.*

*General Commanding.*<sup>10</sup>



*Lo Stesso del Regimento  
Dillon da uno dei Trasporti  
per Lascaris, che era com:  
mandato di farsi alle  
9 questo sta mattina, si  
fara, in case di questo,  
al luogo ou gli Regi:  
timenti fanno l'acqua  
sotto la Floriana, alle*

ore 9. Di mattina —  
di Commissionari  
dunque della Società  
sono esposti di  
mandare uno dei  
loro ufficiali per aper-  
presente a questa oper-  
azione. —

Palazzo W. A. Villotay  
1. Aprile - 1903  
Generale Comm. —

Per gli Signori  
ufficiali della Società  
Messa Marchetti.

W. A. Villotay

In spite of the above order, another notice was issued by Alessandro Macauley on the 23rd March, 1803, stating:-

## A V V I S O

**S**UA Eccellenza il Regio Commissionario vedendo li abusi che vanno introducendosi dai Padroni, e Capitani de' Bastimenti provenienti dalla Barberia, e Levante con trascurar di munirsi delle Fedi di Sanità, ed altri documenti necessarj, e consueti dal Console, o Vice-Console di quel luogo: Ordina

Che qualunque Bastimento di qualsisia specie proveniente dalla Barberia, e Levante il di cui Capitano, o Padrone non sarà munito dal Console, o Vice Console del luogo, delle Fedi di Sanità, e delli documenti consueti, sarà soggetto ad empire una doppia contumacia.

Dato in Palazzo li 23. Marzo 1803.

Per Ordine di S. Eccellenza il Commissionario Regio.

*Alessandro Macaulay Pub. Seg.<sup>o</sup> del Regio Commiss.<sup>o</sup>*

*His Excellency the Royal Commissioner, having seen the abuses that are being introduced by owners and captains of ships coming from Barbary and the East, by neglecting to provide themselves with Certificates of health and other necessary and usual documents from the Consul or vice-Consul of that country – Orders that any vessel of any kind coming from Barbary or from the East, whose captain or owner has not been furnished by the Consul or vice-Consul of that country with a certificate of health, and the usual documents, will be subject to undergo a double period of quarantine.*

*Given at the Palace, 23rd March, 1803*

*By order of His Excellency the Royal Commissioner.*

*Signed: Alexander Macaulay*

*Public Secretary of the Royal Commission<sup>11</sup>*

Professor Galea says that:-

*'It appears that maritime trade was flourishing and that many casualties or sick members of the crew required treatment in the hospitals of Malta. For this reason some directors of English trading firms together with certain captains of the Mercantile Marine, on the 5th June, 1804, submitted a petition to the British Commissioner of Malta, Sir Alexander Ball, proposing that sick and wounded seamen in the merchant service be admitted into Maltese hospitals on payment of a fee of 3 tari of Malta (7½ pence), a day for seamen of British vessels, and 6 tari for those serving on board of privateers.'<sup>12</sup>*

This state of affairs was the cause of several rumours, and as the authorities were afraid of panic, the following notice was issued on the 4th November, 1804 by Alessandro Macauley,<sup>13</sup> in order to show the population that the authorities were not ignoring the situation, but on the other hand were not prepared to accept anything which might cause unrest.

**S**UA ECCELLENZA IL SIG. COMMISSIONARIO REGIO è stato informato di romori sparsi a proposito della Sanità pubblica in esagerazione de' pericoli a cui può esser la madesima esposta in queste Isole, ed in queste circostanze. Conosce lo spirito che alimenta tai romori non poter essere quello di un vero zelo pel ben essere degli Abitanti; ma osserva che la stessa semplice sollecitudine tra un Popolo su un oggetto di tanta importanza, per malfondata che sia, e per vano, e triste che sia stato l'autore del romore, che l'abbia prodotta, dev' essere, sempre e con ogni diligenza evitata; Quindi non ignorando S. E. lo stato attuale di malsanità di più Contrade del Mediterraneo, e volendo toglier di mezzo ogni cagion di disturbo, e contribuire tutto perchè gli Abitanti di queste Isole gustino senza alcun mescolgio d'inquietudine l'abbondanza, e la tranquillità, che nelle presenti circostanze vanno felicemente godendo; ha determinato di creare una deputazione composta di quattro de' Principali, e de' più informati personaggi, e di due Medici acciocchè unitamente cogli attuali Commissarj e Ministro di Sanità formo un Comitato di Salute pubblica incaricato d'invigilare all'esatta osservanza d'ogni riguardo, e di appigliarsi ad ogni miglior espediente per conservare, ed assicurare la Sanità in queste Isole.

Nomina S. E. a tale effetto il Marchese D. Mario Testaferrata, il Bñe Paolo Sciberras Bologna, il Medico Inglese Dr. Franklin isettore generale degli Ospedali uno de' Medici Principali degli Ospedali Malesi secondo che si troverà nel tempo di vacanza dalla visita, ed i due tegozianti Gregorio Mattei, ed Edmondo Noble.

Il Comitato di Salute Pubblica si unirà a proporzione che lo siegerà per il bisogno, o che ne faranno istanza gli attuali Commissarj, e Maestro di Sanità.

Chiunque avrà la minima difficoltà a questo proposito o sentirà qualche notizia in qualunque maniera interessante la Sanità sarà obbligato di esporla il più tosto possibile al Comitato di Salute Pubblica, e non inquietare col suo spargimento la popolazione, se non vorrà incorrere l'indegnazione del Governo, e soggiacere alle pene dalle leggi destinate per gl'Impostori, e pertubatori della quietà Pubblica.

Segreteria del Governo li 4 Novembre 1804.



*Alessandro Macaulay Seg. Pub. del Com. Reg.*

G.N. Zammit Pro Seg. Pub.

*'His Excellency the Royal Commissioner has been informed about the rumours that are spreading regarding the exaggerated dangers to which public health can be subjected in these Islands.*

*Under these circumstances, he is aware that the spirit behind these rumours, cannot be a true zeal for the well being of the inhabitants, but observes that although there is great interest among the population on such a subject of great importance, no matter how ill-founded, and sinister, this anxiety might have been the cause of such rumours, which must always and with all diligence be avoided. On the other hand, H.E., not ignoring the actual state of bad health in various parts of the Mediterranean, and desiring to remove every reason for concern, and to show that every precaution is being taken, in order that the inhabitants of these Islands will continue to enjoy the present tranquility they are enjoying, without being subjected to anxieties, has decided to nominate a deputation composed of four prominent and best informed persons, and two medical doctors, in order that together with the present Commissioners and the Minister for Health, they will form a Public Health Committee which will be empowered to supervise the exact observance of every precaution and to make use of the best methods to preserve and ensure the Public Health in the Islands.*

*H.E. appoints for the purpose:-*

*Marquis D. Testaferrata; Baron Paolo Sciberras Bologna; Dr. Franklin, the English Physician, Hospital Inspector General; One of the Principal Physicians of the Maltese Hospitals; and the two merchants, Gregorio Mattei and Edmondo Nobile.*

*The Committee of Public Health will meet in accordance with the exigence of necessity or at the request of the Actual Commissioner and the Master of Public Health.*

*Whoever encounters the least difficulty in this regard, or hears any news which in any way concerns public health, is bound to make it known as early as possible to the Committee of Public Health, and not alarm the people by spreading it, unless he wants to incur the indignation of the Government and suffer the penalties of Law stipulated against impostors and those who cause unrest.*

*Office of the Secretary to Government  
4 November, 1804.*

*Alexander Macaulay*

#### REFERENCES:-

1. Achille Ferris – Memorie Dell' Inclito Ordine Gerosolimitano esistenti nelle Isole Di Malta. (Page 216, Chapter 25).
2. 4. Achille Ferris – (Page 257, Chapter 288).
3. 5. 6. Dr. Paul Cassar, 'Medical History of Malta' (Page 165 etc.)
7. 8. 9. 12. Prof. G. Galea, 'Lazzaretto' (Page 21). Dalla Segreteria di S. E. di 9 Maggio, 1801-Malta. Information to Commanders of vessels entering the port of Malta Health Office, Malta. 5 August, 1801.
- 10 11, 13. Published by kind permission of Dr. Giovanni Bonello.