

Disinfection

Middle Ages to 1789

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Part 1.

Malta being in the centre of the Mediterranean sea has from prehistoric days been a staging post, for mariners coming from the East and North Africa to Europe, or vice versa. Its excellent harbours afforded shelter and safe anchorage from the raging seas, and the tired crews relaxed among the hospitable people, who victualled their ships, and attended to the sick.

We do not know anything about any arrangements, if they existed at all for the reception of infections in our Island, in those distant times, when epidemiology had not yet developed as a special Medical science. Of course Plague, Cholera, Leprosy and Smallpox, forced the Authorities to take special measures, but even here the cause was still unknown.

At the end of the Middle Ages some sort of administrative machinery was established in the Island. The "Universita of Notabile", the local Government of the period took drastic measures against the spread of the disease. However the jurisdiction over the Island was, in those days shared with the "Castellano" who had his seat in Fort Saint Angelo in the Grand Harbour, who sometimes through an abuse of Authority gave pratique to vessels detained under quarantine or else impeded others from leaving port.

The Municipality protested with King Alfonso of Spain against these encroachments on its rights and the King by a diploma of the 22nd Feb. 1458 limited the jurisdiction of the "Castellano" to the precincts of the Fort and Confirmed the Municipality in its role of Sole Guardian of the public health. (1)

Ships suspected of harbouring infections were directed to Marsamxett Harbour which became known as the Quarantine Harbour. (2) During the period of purification the ships had to remain isolated and no one was supposed to approach them or go abroad, however it was known that in spite of these rules, many traders found ways and means of communicating with the ships, and traded cargoes and slaves, that were even landed stealthily and scattered over the Island thus risking the spread of infections.

So, in 1524 the Universita (Municipality) issued the 1st Sanitary regulation in Malta "Bando" or official enactment for the protection of the health of these Islands. (3) It contained the following:-

"Any person who boarded a ship undergoing purification at Marsamxett Harbour, or bought anything, or landed any cargo from such ship, was guilty of an offence punishable by a fine of fifty 'Ounces', also by the seizure of the merchandise acquired by him, and by the burning of his residence. It was also ordered that all ships arriving from suspected ports were to undergo purification, and those ships actually carrying infectious diseases were to be considered as infected and refused pratique". This enactment may be considered as the 1st Health Law in Malta. Thus Health guards were posted on three main positions, from where they could supervise the Marsamxetto (Quarantine) Harbour. One guard post was on the Hill of Guardamangia, which was the Major Guard (Guarda Maggiore), the other on the Hill at Ta' Xbiex point, which is still in existence, and the other one on top of the hill behind the Forestals show room in the strand at Gzira, which over looks Sliema Creek.

An infected ship in 1523 gave rise to an outburst of plague at Vittoriosa - Birgu, which was encircled by a quarantine barrier, and the ship itself and all the cargo was burned and destroyed. (4) These regulations remained in operation and for some time after the arrival of the Knights in 1530.

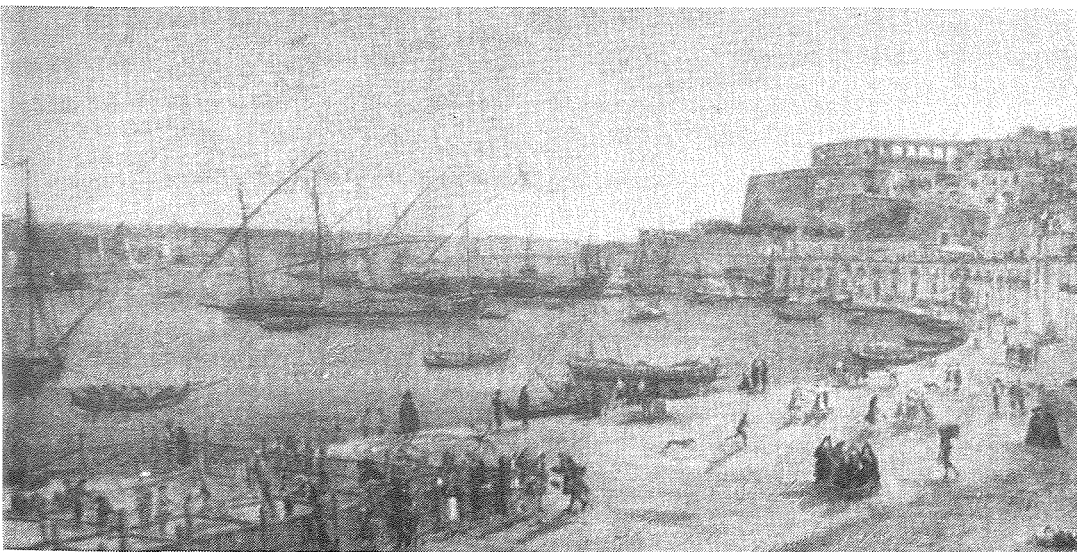
The next positive measure against the introduction of contagious disease was taken on the 10th Oct. 1534, when a Commission was set up consisting of two professed Knights and three Maltese Gentlemen who had the duty and the authority to regulate and control the practice of foreign ships. (5)

They made severe regulations, even inflicting the death penalty for those who disobeyed the health regulations. (6)

Fishermen were not allowed to enter Quarantine waters (7) while women who tried to get in touch with men on ships undergoing quarantine were banished from the cities of Valletta, Birgu, and Senglea for a period of five years; if the women were prostitutes they were exiled from the Island. (8)

Infected ships and ships coming from infected ports were fumigated and disinfected at Marsamxetto Harbour (Quarantine Harbour). The patients landed on Bishop's Island, later named Manoel Island, lodging in huts which were exposed to the bad weather. (9)

During epidemic outbreaks infectious patients were also admitted into the wards of the hospital at Birgu. During the plague epidemic of 1592 - 93, a temporary Lazaretto was set up on Bishop's Island by the Grand Master de Verdala, but a petition was submitted to the Commissioners of Health requesting the transfer of plague patients from Bishop's Islet of Marsamxetto Harbour to some other place, because of bad conditions. To relieve the patients the Commissioners thought fit to have them transferred into the old infirmary at Birgu. As they did not want to contaminate the new hospital in the city of Valletta, Dr. Parisi Pietro, who was sent personally by the Vice-Roy of Sicily pointed that the Birgu infirmary was a better place, because it was separated from habitation, as it was built on a bastion and had a tunnel opening into a gate by the seashore through which plague patients could be carried into the hospital wards. (11)



Barriera Wharf (Museum of Fine Arts)

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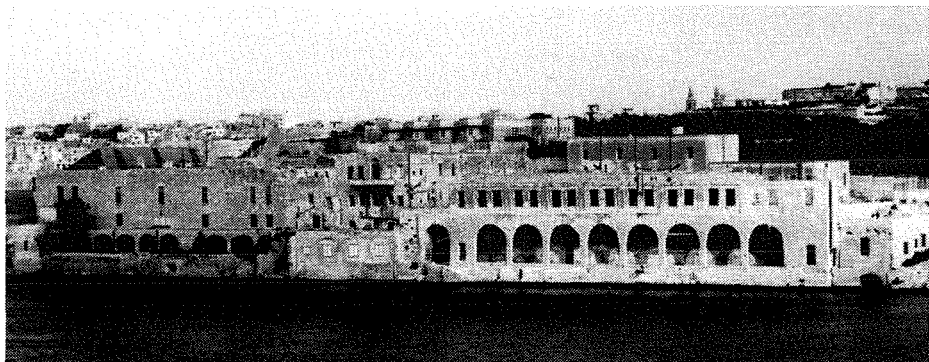
The first Lazareth in Malta was erected at Rinella in the Grand Harbour. (12) It was subsequently transferred to the foreshore beneath the Kordin heights in the Valletta Harbour, and afterwards during the time of Grand Master Ramon Perellos (1697 - 1720) to a large hall on that part of the Valletta wharf known as il-barriera. (13) This place was very convenient, as there was a row of stores and warehouses above which residential accommodation was erected for the passengers and crew kept under observation. A special loggia was also built for the benefit of distinguished passengers. Over the portal of the hall there is an inscription "Haec fecit populorum amor". A few yards away from the isolation quarters the wharf was bounded by a row of bollards forming a barrier to keep away unauthorised persons from entering the quarantine area. That barrier gave rise to the name by which the wharf is now known i.e. "Il-Barriera". (14)

This Barriera Station was not meant for passengers and crews actually suffering from infection, such patients were referred to the Lazzaretto or to the hospital at Birgu. The Barriera station was only used in emergency. The Lazzaretto in Marsamxett Harbour was primitive, but full use of it was made on various occasions when plague afflicted Malta in the first half of the 17th Century. In 1643 Grand Master Jean Paul Lascaris built a permanent Lazzaretto. (15) Persons of high rank were, however lodged while undergoing quarantine elsewhere. When his Britannic Majesty's Ambassador to Turkey came to Malta in April 1669, he was lodged in the Villa of Sarria at Floriana. (16) In 1686, another British Ambassador to Constantinople was also kept in the same residence where he died during his first few days of quarantine. (17)

However the Lazzaretto at Valletta was kept in use for quite a long time after the erection of the new building on Manoel Island. As late as 1779 - 88, allusion is made in the Treasury accounts of the Government to "The expense of the considerable repairs made at the quarantine at the Grand Port. (18)

The little island in the Middle of the harbour, known as Bishop's Island - Tal-Isqof, as it belonged to the Medina Cathedral, was ideal for the segregation of contaminated cargo, passengers and crew, which was developed subsequently by the Knights of St. John, as a Lazzaretto and Quarantine Station. The indiscriminate admission of plague patients into different isolations continued up to the middle of the 17th Century when Grand Master Lascaris took definite steps to develop the little island in the middle of Marsamxett Harbour, Quarantine Harbour, as a regular quarantine station. Grand Master De Paule had tried without success to secure the Bishop's Island "Tal-Isqof" in Marsamxett Harbour for that purpose, but it was left to Lascaris to negotiate an agreement with the Church Authorities, as the islet was the property of the Cathedral of Mdina.

Hence the name "Tal-Isqof", meaning belonging to the Bishop. By a deed entered into the acts of Notary Lawrence Grima, on the 18th July 1643, and with the approval of Pope Urbanus VII, on the 2nd Nov. of the same year, the Order acquired possession of the Islet in exchange for lands at Fiddien, a fertile valley west of Mdina, owned by the Order. (19) Following the great plague epidemic of 1675 - 76, the Marsamxetto Lazzaretto was improved by Grand Master Cottoner. (20) and afterwards in 1688, by Grand Master Gregorio Carafa and in 1728, Grand Master Antonio Manoel de Vilhena. Warehouses were built for the storage of merchandise, subject to the quarantine laws of the period. (21) Manoel de Vilhena also built a Fort on the eastern end of the Lazzaretto island, which was named Fort Manoel, and thereafter the whole was called Manoel Island.



The Lazzaretto.

The new Lazzaretto on Manoel Island was in accordance with the best concepts of Quarantine measures prevailing at the time. It occupied the block of buildings now called the "Old Palace" and provided accommodation.

The Grand Master, in order that the inmates could somehow participate in Religious functions, built a chapel on the opposite side of the harbour on the bastions dedicated to St. Roque, the protector against plague; Its front was wide so that the inmates of the Lazzaretto across the harbour, could follow Divine Service. (22) Unfortunately this chapel was bombed during the last war and not rebuilt. The swimming baths under the bastion, "Il-Banjijiet ta' Sant-Irrokku", derive their name from the name of this chapel which was on top of the bastion. Howard, in his account of the Principal Lazzarettos In Europe in 1785, states that the Lazzaretto consisted of sixteen rooms on two floors, the eight apartments on the first floor opening on to a balcony. There were also three courts, two for passengers and merchandise, and another one for the cattle imported from the Barbary coast, a burial ground and a place for the burning of Bodies of patients dying of the Plague.

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