

Four bills of health issued from Malta by the Order of St John

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(Received 3 July 1978)

SUMMARY

The specimens here described enlarge our knowledge of the bills of health of the Order of St John issued from Malta, an aspect of public health that had hitherto remained unexplored. These lone survivors from a vanished by-way of Maltese medical history formed, in their age, an integral part of the daily social, commercial and sanitary pattern of life in Malta. The earliest met so far, and described in the present series, dates from 1713; two belong to 1766 and another dates from 1794. A further bill, issued in 1782, has been published elsewhere. The chance preservation of these documents in unlikely places, as here indicated, makes it probable that additional ones may eventually come to light.

INTRODUCTION

When in January 1977 I published an article on an eighteenth-century bill of health of the Order of St John issued from Malta in 1782 (Cassar, 1977), I stated that it was the only one that I had encountered during 23 years of research in Maltese medical history. That statement is no longer valid for I have recently uncovered four other such bills issued by the Knights of the Order of St John from Malta before and after 1782. It is to place my previous report in its proper perspective that the present study has been undertaken.

The earliest of these four bills belongs to September 1713 at the time of the grandmastership of Fra Ramon Perellos y Roccaful; the second and third were issued in February and in October 1766 respectively during the rule of Grand Master Emanuel Pinto de Fonseca; and the fourth one dates from 1794 at the time of Grand Master Emanuel de Rohan Polduc.

THE BILLS OF HEALTH

Bill of 16 September 1713

The document, with ragged margins and markings of square folding, measures 29.5 cm by 43 cm (Plate 1). The printed Latin text is enclosed within an oblong framed panel. On top of this panel, in the centre, is the escutcheon of Grand Master Ramon Perellos y Roccaful (1697–1720), displaying three (golden) pears on a black background quartered with the white cross on a red field, the emblem of the Order of St John of Jerusalem and Malta. This coat-of-arms is surmounted

by an open crown and is flanked by the symbolic female figures of Justice, with scales in her right hand and a sword in her left, and of Fame blowing a trumpet held in her left hand. This ensemble is surmounted by military trophies consisting of banners, lances, drums, etc.

At the left extremity of the top of the frame is the erect figure of St John the Baptist and, at the other end, a representation of St Paul in the act of shaking the viper into the fire. On each side of the panel hangs a vertical festoon of leaves.

In the centre of the bottom part of the panel is affixed, with red wax, a white paper seal embossed with the coat-of-arms of the *Castellano* (President of the Grand Court) Fra. T. Ermanno Baron de Schaden. On each side of the seal is a branch of laurel and a palm frond.

The text is printed in Latin but the description of the identity of the individual to whom the bill of health was issued is handwritten in ink in Italian. It states (translated): 'Gio Francesco Arbolense... (cannot be deciphered) from Valletta, 36 years of age, ordinary height, bald but wearing a wig, is travelling to Agosta and other parts of the Kingdom of Sicily' It is dated 16 September 1713 and signed by *Commendatore* E. de Schaden, *Castellano*, and Bartholomew Paschali, Master Notary of the Grand Court.

Bill of 28 February 1766

The sheet of this certificate measures 43.5 cm in height and 60 cm in length. The text is enclosed within an architectural format with baroque trimmings and is embellished with the eight pointed cross of the Order of St John. The headpiece carries the coat-of-arms of Grand Master Manoel Pinto de Fonceca (1741–73). These amorial bearings, consisting of five (silver) crescents on a red field and quartered with the white cross of the Order, are surmounted by a closed crown topped by the eight-pointed Maltese cross. It is surrounded by trophies and is flanked by the allegorical figures of Justice and Prosperity seated on a band of clouds. The upright figures of St John the Baptist and St Paul appear near the edge of a projecting bracket at each end of the headpiece. Set for emphasis in the centre, beneath the escutcheon of the Grand Master, is a vignette showing shipping in the Grand Harbour of Valletta. A semi-nude male human figure is seated on the ground against a background of banners and armour in each bottom corner of the print. The central part of the base of the framework is hidden from view by a white paper seal, affixed with red wax, bearing the faintly embossed coat-of-arms of the *Castellano Commendatore* Fra Giuseppe Provana de Colegno, the President of the court (Plate 2).

The handwritten description of the personal characteristics of the departing master of the vessel reads (translated): 'The Maltese vessel named St John the Evangelist and Souls of Purgatory, of the skipper Thomas Giordano, aged 35 years, of ordinary stature, with chestnut coloured hair and dark complexion (is sailing) with eleven members of crew whose names appear overleaf. The ship is bound for Mascali in Sicily'. It is dated 28 February 1766 and has the signature of the *Castellano* mentioned above and of the Notary of the Court Peter Paul Gontii (Gonzi).

Bill of 27 October 1766

Another bill of Pinto's time and of the same pattern has been found among the records of the Tribunal of the Inquisition of Malta. It is dated 27 October 1766 and is of the same size as that of the 28 February (AIM 128, fol. 301, Cathedral Archives, Mdina).

It was issued to 'Lorenzo Grech, Maltese, 24 years of age, of ordinary height, with chestnut coloured hair and dark complexion who is leaving with the ship of Captain Giuseppe Vidall for Genova and other ports of transit'. It is signed by the *Castellano Commendatore* Fr. Dn. Carlos Capons and the Court Notary Peter Paul Gontii. The seal of the *Castellano*, embossed on white paper, is affixed with red wax to the centre of the border at the base of the certificate.

This bill was never handed to the applicant as he never called for it at the *Castellania* nor was he present on the ship when the *Gran Visconte* (Chief Executive Police Officer) went on board for the routine muster of the passengers and their identification before the ship's departure. The bill eventually figured as an exhibit in the criminal Court at the trial for murder of a certain Giuseppe Buttigieg who was suspected of having attempted to escape from the island under the feigned name of Lorenzo Grech.

Bill of the 7 November 1794

The fourth bill, dated 7 November 1794, is identical in design and size to that of 1782 already published (Cassar 1977). It is in the name of Captain Martino Hernandez, a Spaniard, master of the vessel *Anime del Purgatoria* (Souls of Purgatory), bound for Barcellona. It bears the signatures of the *Castellano Commendatore* Fra Giacomo Compredon and of the Court Notary Emanuel Zarb. The paper seal is missing. On the back of the certificate are written in ink the names of the passengers and crew. There is also the signature of the Captain of the Port of Barcellona to whom it was consigned on arrival there.

PROCEDURE OF ISSUING BILLS OF HEALTH

Every person departing from the island had to obtain a bill of health from the Grand Court at the Palace of the *Castellania* before he was allowed to leave. When applying for the issue of the bill, the intending passenger presented himself to the clerk who was charged with the task of noting and recording the passenger's physical characteristics, age and intended ports of call and arrival. The bill was then signed by the President of the Court or *Castellano* and the Court Notary. When, however, 'contagious diseases' appeared in nearby countries, the bill of health was also signed by the four Sanitary Deputies as an added assurance that the island was free of communicable diseases as was the case in August 1652 (Arch. 259, fols. 46 and 50t, National Library of Malta.).

From the Grand Court the bill was sent with one of the court officials to the *Gran Visconte* or Chief Executive Police Officer who proceeded on board the ship to check the list of passengers and identify them individually. Having done so he

handed the bills of the health to the captain of the vessel who in turn delivered them to each passenger (AIM, 128, fol. 301, Cathedral Archives, Mdina).

The text and decorative features

The Latin text had a standard form of wording for at least 81 years, i.e. the period covered by the bills so far discovered ranging from 1713 to 1794. Latin was still internationally understood by the intelligentsia in the eighteenth century while Italian was then the administrative language of the Maltese government. A liberal translation of the wording runs as follows: 'We, *Castellano* and President of the Grand Court of the Castellania of Malta, to one and all who see, read or listen to these our present letters wish good health. We bear witness and truthfully declare that the renowned island of Malta is free from epidemic and pestilential diseases and of any suspicion thereof through the grace of Almighty God and of the saints protectors John the Baptist and Paul.' It is of interest to compare the Latin text of a bill of health issued by the sanitary authorities of Rome in 1758. It reproduces almost exactly that part of the text of the certificates of the Order of St John where reference is made to freedom from disease or any suspicion thereof thanks to divine grace (MS. 303, fols. 39/38, National Library of Malta). This seems to indicate that this part of the text had become the established form in the Mediterranean.

While the text underwent no change with each successive Grand Master, the decorative part of the certificate shows modifications not only with regard to the coat-of-arms of each new ruler, but also regarding its ornamental features. In fact all the bills of health examined so far present different designs and patterns with each successive Grand Master.

Artistic qualities

In all these four bills neither the name of the designer nor that of the engraver appears in the certificate. The design of the Perellos bill is in line engraving with some strokes of shading. The whole is coarsely printed with smudging in places.

The Pinto certificates of 1766 are far more elaborate than that of Perellos' time, their baroque ornamentation here reaching a very high pitch. The composition too, is more involved, the designer having given plenty of rope to his imagination which let itself go with great abandon. However, in spite of their overloaded decoration the Pinto certificates are not without charm and, in contrast to the Perellos' bill, are of better craftsmanship and of a higher standard of printing. The lettering of the text overlaps the ornamental border in some places which indicates that the printing of the text was carried out at a later stage than the printing of the decorative features from the copper plate.

Although the bill of 1794 is identical in design with the bill of 1782 already alluded to, its printing is of a very poor quality.

In judging the artistic merits of these certificates, and especially their imperfections of printing, we have to bear in mind that they were not meant to be ornamental pieces but were intended to fulfil a utilitarian function for a very



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short time, their sole purpose being to certify that the island was free from disease and to identify the bearer.

The Palace of the Castellania in Valletta now houses the Ministry of Health and Environment. The escutcheons of the *Castellani* Fra. E. de Schaden, Fra G. Provana de Colegno, Fra Dn. Carlos Capons and Fra Giacomo Compridon are still emblazoned in a colourful frieze that runs along the walls of the Great Hall of the edifice. (Nos. 60, 86, 87 and 103).

Medical significance of these bills

Their medical significance lies in the fact that: (a) the Perellos' bill, the earliest discovered so far, pushes the chronology of these certificates to a more distant point in time (i.e. to 1713) than the De Rohan one of 1782 already published elsewhere; (b) they provide evidence of the existence during the eighteenth century of a continuous flow of information on the state of the public health of the island to various places in the Mediterranean littoral with which Malta was in constant sea communication; (c) they afford proof of how Mediterranean countries were collaborating in checking the spread of epidemic diseases many years before notification of communicable illnesses was centralized through formally constituted international bodies such as the World Health Organization; (d) by their reference to the 'grace of Omnipotent God and the protection of St John the Baptist and of St Paul', the health authorities of Malta showed that they were fully aware of the impotence of the medical science and art of their time in preventing the appearance of epidemic disease. The concept of infection by bacteria and their transmission by animal vectors to human beings, as in the case of plague, had not yet been evolved in the eighteenth century. It is, therefore, scarcely to be wondered at if they relied upon the omnipotence and the mercy of God in a situation where no human aid was of any avail.

I am indebted to the following gentlemen for allowing me to study and publish the certificates in their care: Mr F. S. Mallia, Director of Museums, and Fr. Marius Zerafa, Curator of the Museum of Fine Arts, Valletta, for the Perellos and Pinto certificates (Feb. 1766); the Cathedral Museum Committee and the Rev. John Azzopardi, Curator of the Cathedral Archives, Mdina, for the Pinto certificate of October 1766; and the Rev. G. Briffa Brincati for the de Rohan bill of health.

REFERENCE

- CASSAR, P. (1977). An eighteenth-century bill of health of the Order of St John from Malta. *Medical History* **21**, 182–6.

EXPLANATION OF PLATES

PLATE 1

Bill of health dated 16 September 1713 issued by the Order of St John from Malta showing the coat-of-arms of Grand Master Fra Ramon Perellos y Roccaful and declaring that Malta was free of epidemic diseases. (*Courtesy of Fine Arts Museum, Valletta*).

PLATE 2

This bill of health, dated 28 February 1766, displays the escutcheon of Grand Master Emanuel Pinto de Fonceca and a vignette of the Grand Harbour of Malta (*Courtesy of Fine Arts Museum, Valletta*).