

LICENCE TO SELL AROMATIC DRUGS GRANTED TO A SHOPKEEPER IN 1764

Paul Cassar

Summary

A document of 1764 held in a manuscript at the National Library of Malta shows the role of the *Collegio di Sanità* in issuing licences and setting down regulations regarding the sale of medicines when Malta was under the rule of the Order of St. John. This, and other documents carrying an earlier date prove the existence of regulatory bodies controlling the practice of pharmacy in Malta even as far back as the 17th Century.

Keywords

Order of St. John, *Protomedicus*, *Collegio dei Medici*, *Collegio di Sanità*, licence.

Introduction

During the rule of the Order of St. John in Malta (1530-1798), the regulation of the public health and of the medical and pharmaceutical professions were entrusted to the *Protomedicus* or Physician-in-chief corresponding to the Chief Government Medical Officer of today. This official was appointed by the Grand Master and was usually one of the senior physicians of the Holy Infirmary with a long medical experience.

The duties of the *Protomedicus* were laid down in some detail on the occasion of the appointment of Dr. Nicholas Cilia to the post of *Protomedicus* on the 2nd August 1624. They were repeated on the 10th June 1634¹. They ranged from the approval of physicians, surgeons and apothecaries regarding their competence to exercise their respective professions, to the examination of the medical preparations compounded in pharmacies and of the medicaments and 'drugs' offered for sale by licensed shopkeepers (*medicamenta et drogas vendere*)².

Following the death of the *Protomedicus* Pietro Paolo Azzopardi in the summer of 1764, his office was replaced by a Medical College (*Collegio dei Medici*) composed of three physicians and the senior

surgeon of the Holy Infirmary³. This college was established by Grand Master Emmanuel Pinto de Fonseca (1741-73) on the 3rd July 1764 with the aim of providing 'for the just and good government of the very important affairs of the (public) health' until a successor to the late Dr. P. P. Azzopardi was appointed as *Protomedicus*. The members of the college were Dr Giorgio Imbert, Dr. Domenico Biagio, Dr. Giuseppe Bigeni and the Master Surgeon Michel' Angelo Grima⁴. They were bound by the same obligations previously imposed on the *Protomedicus* among which was the checking of the qualities of the drugs kept in pharmacies and in other shops authorised to sell drugs and medicaments⁵.

A few weeks later, the college asked the Grand Master for permission to order, from the government printing press, a number of printed forms of the licences corresponding to each particular profession or to each 'type of shop' concerned. They also suggested the registration of these licenses at the Grand Court of the Castellania (the Grand Court of Law) to serve as evidence in any 'contraventions that might arise'. These requests were granted on the 1st August 1764⁶.

Licence Issued to Maria Pace

One of these licences had survived among a mass of unrelated papers in a manuscript volume held by the National Library of Malta. It measures 25 by 35cm and has a watermark VLS (?) in the upper right hand corner. At the top, in the center, it bears an oval stamp with the coat of arms of Grand Master Emmanuel Pinto whose name and title surround the edge of the oval.

The licence was issued to Maria Pace, wife of Arrigo, who runs a retail shop (*bottega di merciajo*) at Qormi (*Città Pinto*). It is dated 27th August 1764 over the signatures of the four members of the college who refer to themselves as the *Collegio di Sanità* on this occasion. This document, written in Italian, is here published for the first time and is shown in the accompanying illustration (Figure 1). Freely translated it runs as follows: "We, the undersigned, members of the *Collegio di Sanità* under the auspices of His Most Serene Highness Fra. D. Emmanuel Pinto, Grand Master of the Sacred Order of (St. John) of Jerusalem grant a licence to Maria Pace, wife of Arrigo, to sell from her retail shop every kind of aromatic substances in the natural or compounded state, solution of wine in water (*aqua vitae*), tobacco in powder or leaf, honey, hard and soft soap but excluding abortive and poisonous drugs such as mercury, sublimate and arsenic in all its forms, under the penalties laid down

in the proclamation registered at the Grand Court of the Castellania⁷. Given from our College on the 27th August 1764".

Regulations controlling the sale of medicaments and drugs by pharmacists and other shopkeepers had been enacted by the Order since at least the early 16th century. The original point of departure were the *Prammatiche* promulgated during the Grandmastership of Fra. Emeric D' Amboyse (1503-12) while the Order was still in Rhodes. These *Prammatiche* laid down the conditions under which traders (*Demercatoribus*), shopkeepers (*Bazarioti*), spice sellers (*De speciarjis*) and pharmacists (*De apotecarijia*) were given licences to carry out their business⁸.

On its coming to Malta, the Order enacted similar *ordinazzioni* in 1624 and 1634. They were confirmed on the 19th June 1662 when Dr. Blazio Cazzola was raised to the protomedical office as had been done when Dr. Giuseppe Ducosso was appointed to the same office on the 31st January 1650⁹. These *ordinazzioni* also form chapters in the legal codes of laws promulgated by Grand Master Manoel Antonio de Vilhena in 1724 and Grand Master Emmanuel de Rohan in 1784¹⁰. We will now consider the items referred to in the licence.

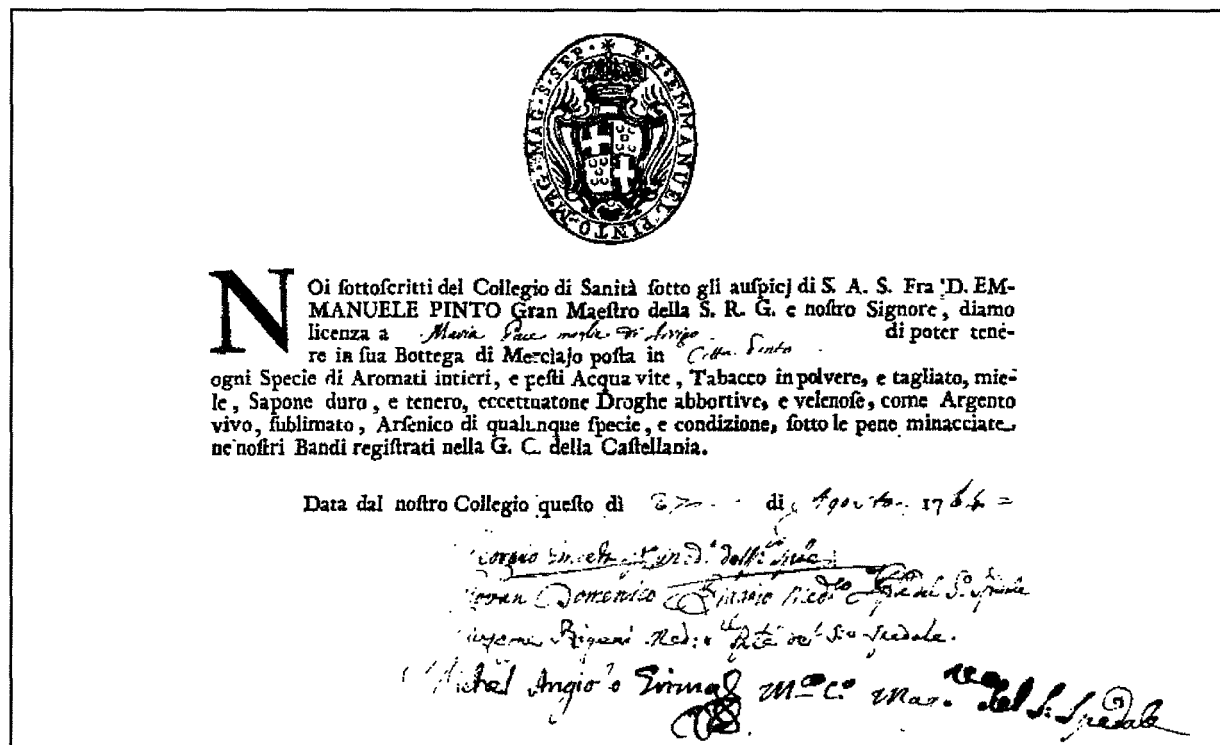


Figure 1: Licence granted by the *Collegio di Sanità* to Maria Pace of Qormi to sell aromatic substances in the natural or compounded state. Dated 27th August 1764. Courtesy National Library of Malta.

Droghe e Drogherie.

Until the late 18th century the word 'drug' (*droga*) had no specific pharmaceutical connotation nor as yet achieved the present day notoriety of any addictive properties; but was the general name applied to medicinal therapeutic agents (medicinal drugs); to substances with a pungent smell, used as food condiments such as spices, coffee and chocolate; to colouring oleo-resins (colouring drugs) employed in various trades and manufactures for dyeing of draperies and for mixing paints and varnishes; and to the so-called 'perfuming drugs' in vogue for the disinfection of ships and merchandise¹¹.

An earliest official reference in Malta to the word *drogherie* occurs in the *Prammatiche Magistrali* of the 31st January 1650¹². It recurs in the legal codes of 1724 and 1784 and lastly in the *Bando* (proclamation) of the 18th July 1797¹³.

Pace's licence refers to two distinct classes of preparations i.e. abortive drugs (*droghe abortive*) and poisonous drugs (*droghe velenose*). The abortive drugs are not specified as to what drugs the licence was meant to cover although their administration had already been prohibited by the *prammatiche* of the 31st January 1650 and repeated in all subsequent legal codes. On the other hand, the poisonous drugs are specified individually i.e. *argento vivo* (mercury), *sublimato* (bichloride of mercury) and *arsenico di qualunque specie e condizione* (arsenic in all its forms and conditions).

The prohibition of selling poisons mirrors the fears of the ordinary citizen, but especially of those in

authority, of the possibility that certain poisons under the cloak of medicines could be used with criminal intent. Infact this fear was such a continuous preoccupation that pharmacists were enjoined to keep such poisons under lock and key and not to sell them to 'slaves, whether Moslems or Christians, to servants, children and other suspected persons'¹⁴.

Aromati

The *aromati intieri e pesti* were vegetable products in their natural state or compounded with an oily base i.e. roots, leaves fruits mixed or pounded with such piquant ingredients as saffron, cinnamon and pepper, all of which were used in the flavouring of food¹⁵.

Shops Under Public Health Control

Certain shops selling organic medicinal and nutritive preparations, that were liable to decay by the passage of time, were subject to the annual inspection by the *Protomedicus* to ensure that they remained fit for human consumption. They were those of the *aromatari*, *droghieri* and *mercieri* sometimes referred to as *bottega di cose aromatiche* and *bottega di drogherie*. Holders of the last two kinds of shops were enjoined by law to register themselves at the Grand Court of the Castellania in Valletta with their names and surnames and address, these particulars being entered in a register kept for this purpose¹⁶.

Maria Pace, as a seller of 'all kinds of aromatic substances', had to abide by this condition; but there is no evidence that she did so as no registers of licensed retailers has yet been found.

Modern Parallels

With what category, if any, of present-day shops may Maria Pace's *bottega di merciaio* be compared or identified ?

The current Maltese term *Hanut tal-mercja*, corresponding to the English 'grocery shop or store' immediately comes to mind but there is no clear indication in her licence that would definitely place her shop in the grocery class in the modern sense. There appears to have been a hazy area in her time between the sellers of eatables and those of pharmaceutical preparations. Infact this area

comprised such preparations as sweetmeats, and preserved and candied confections made of a combination of fruits, almonds and liquorice with sugar or honey. These preparations were prescribed by physicians as medicines for the relief of constipation and stomach complaints but were also eaten by healthy persons for pleasure as foods.

Hence this crossing of the line, between the trade of the *merciaio* and that of the professional pharmacist, which appears to have lasted until the close of the 18th century (1797 at least).

Conclusion

The printed licence here illustrated is of particular interest to the historian of the economics of Maltese pharmacy because:

1. It throws light on the household items (soap, honey and aromatic ingredients) stocked by the village shopkeeper in the 18th century.
2. It refers indirectly to the importation of non-indigenous chemicals with poisonous properties and to the state control of their marketing on account of their misuse for criminal purposes;
3. It authorised a non-professional person to sell 'all sorts of aromatic substances' showing that there was some overlap between the trade of the *bottega di merciaio* and the *apoteca* of the professional pharmacist apparently without any rivalry;
4. It is the only document of its kind that has come to light so far.

References

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The Author

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1965 and the latest *The Holy Infirmary of the Knights of St. John "La Sacra Infermeria"*, Malta, 1994. On the 8th March 1995 Dr Cassar was conferred with the *Croce di Commendatore dell'Ordine al Merito Melitense* by the Sovereign Military and Hospitaller Order of St. John of Jerusalem, Rhodes and Malta, based in Rome for his contributions to the history of the medical services of the Order in Malta.

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