

Historical Perspective

Hospitaller activities in medieval Malta

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Introduction

The Medieval Period in the Mediterranean World is generally considered to cover a period of about a thousand years, and is considered to initiate with the end of the Roman era heralded by the division of the Roman Empire into two parts between the sons of Theodosius in AD 395. It ended with the advent of the Renaissance movement of the fifteenth century. This period in Malta was to see the Islands come under the influence of the Byzantine Empire encompassing the period prior to the ninth century; the Arab dominance starting in AD 870 and lasting until their formal expulsion in the mid-13th century; and the Latin phase of the late 13th century to the early 16th century when the islands were ceded to the Order of St. John of Jerusalem. The documentary sources dated to before the 14th century are rather scanty and often limited to ecclesiastical and political matters. A number of extant documents relate to medical matters, particularly with the setting up and management of hospital services and with matters relating to the affairs of hospitaller orders having links to the Maltese Islands.

These documents attest to the presence of hospital services in the Maltese Islands from at least the 14th century onwards. Chronic illness and ill-health required the setting aside of provisions to care for the sick and infirm through the establishment of hospitals or hospices. Christianity perceived sick-nursing as a duty and the setting-up of medical establishments was considered a philanthropic activity encouraging rulers and well-to-do individuals to make provisions for the management of these institutions. A number of establishments serving different functions were set up throughout the Christian world. The *Xenodochium* referred to a refuge for travellers and poor people; the *Nosokomeion* referred to a hospice which cared for sick people; while the *Hospitium* referred to a dwelling reserved for the chronic care of poor and infirm individuals. A dwelling dedicated to the chronic care of lepers was referred to as the *Leprosarium*.¹ A number of such establishment augmented the range of services with the passage of time. For example, the original brief *Pie postulation voluntatis* dated 1113 setting up the Order of St. John in Jerusalem makes specific reference to a *xenodochium*. Specific mention of the care of the sick in this establishment was only made around 1136.² The Medieval Period also saw the establishment of monastic orders dedicated to the care of the ill and infirm. Some of these monastic orders may have had financial interests in the Maltese Islands.

hospitalis Sanctj Franciscj

The earliest established hospital in Malta was *hospitalis Sanctj Franciscj*, situated outside the Medieval walls of Mdina. A collation document from King Frederick IV referring to the administration of the hospital dated 4th December 1372 confirms that the hospital had already been “*ad presens vacat*.” The administration in 1372 was delegated to *fratem Nicolaum Papalla ordinis minorum confessorem*.³ A summation document of the *Regia Cancellaria* post-1347 register kept in the Secret Vatican Archives suggests that St. Francis Hospital was functioning during the second half of the 14th century during the reign of King Frederick IV [1355-1377] under the direction of *Fрати Paulo Papalla*.^{4,5} The relevance of this document has been disputed;⁶ but an earlier existence of the hospital, even as early as 1299, has been proposed on the basis of the land holdings linking the hospital to the Cathedral.⁷ The establishment of this hospital may have been in response to the authorization to grant up to a hundred days of indulgence to the faithful who assist in the building of churches and the running of hospitals given to

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Cardinal Bishop Gerardus of Sacina, appointed by Pope Boniface VIII in July 1299 as Apostolic Legate to the Kingdom of Sicily and the neighbouring islands including Malta.⁸

It has been suggested by “*Il dott. Gerlach, ...che l’Ospedale Santo Spirito, uno del piu` antiche di Europa, sia stato istituto pei lebbrosi*”, thus explaining its extra-mural situation.⁹ There is no contemporary documentary proof to this effect, though the welfare of those afflicted with leprosy was a particular concern of the Franciscan Order during the Medieval period where every novice was obliged to serve some period of his novitiate in a leprosarium.¹⁰ There is to date no evidence for the presence of leprosy, leprosaria or the leper-dedicated Order of St. Lazarus in Medieval Malta. The first recorded case of leprosy in Malta involved a Gozitan woman named Garita Xejbais who in 1492 bequeathed land to the Church.¹¹ Furthermore, there was in 1575 no apparent prevalent veneration to St Lazarus considered the patron saint of lepers¹² and the name *Lazaro* appears for the first time in relation to a land area at Ghasri, Gozo willed as a chantry benefice to the local Church in October 1592.¹³

By 1403 it appears that St. Francis Hospital was being badly administered and that the revenues of the hospitals in Malta were not being applied to the institutions’ real needs. In February 1403, King Martin, having received complaints that the revenues of the hospital were being diverted to other purposes, instructed the jurats and judges of the Maltese *Universita`* to inquire into and redress the situation.¹⁴ The situation did not apparently improve and in 1433, King Alfonsus again wrote to the jurats of the Maltese *Universita`* ordering them to appoint two “*probi viri*” as procurators accountable to the *Universita`* to run the hospital and to repair and maintain the building. The sovereign jurisdiction of the Bishop over the institution was recognised. The hospital cared not only for the sick but also for resident paupers.¹⁵

After the 1433 transfer of management, the affairs of the hospital became a regular feature in the town council agenda. The minutes of the Mdina town council and the hospital accounts bear witness to the fact that the *Universita`*, the Church and the hospital were all active constituents elements in one organic closely-linked establishment. On the 6th May 1467 a move was made by the Maltese *Universita`* to affiliate *hospitalis Sanctj Franciscj* with the *hospitali di Santu Spiritu* in Rome, possibly against the payment of two ducats. This latter establishment was erected by order of Innocent III (1198-1261) and many institutions eventually became affiliated to this. A *memoriale* was drawn up and subsequently presented to His Holiness the Pope for the granting of various indulgences to the hospital. By 1474, the *hospitalis Sanctj Franciscj* was being referred to as *hospitalis Sancti Spiritus Rabbati*.¹⁶ This latter name was retained in the subsequent centuries. The required repairs identified in 1433 were finally initiated on the 30th July 1494. These works, involving major constructional changes and the re-building of the hospital, were finally completed in mid-May 1496.¹⁷ It is possible that in the early-sixteenth century the corsair raids on Malta partly destroyed the edifice, and in May 1544 the adjoining chapel began to be used as a dormitory, a situation

that apparently persisted up to Duzina’s visit in 1575.

From the middle of the fifteenth century onwards the hospital functioned normally caring for a number of persons, mainly too old or too poor or otherwise incapable of caring for themselves, foundlings who were eventually adopted by local families, and patients. The 1494-1548 hospital accounts suggest that recurrent expenditure “*per il poveri habitanti dilo hospitali*” covered board, lodging, caring in case of illness and burial after death. After 1550, the hospital apparently changed its policy and while paupers continued to be supported, they were not allowed to reside in the premises. The medical patients included local residents who came or were brought to the hospital for treatment. In addition foreigners and captives taken ill while in Malta were also accommodated.⁷ The earliest mention of foundlings in the hospital and the employment of two wet nurses employed by the hospital for their care dates to 1518. The infant mortality of these children was very high approximating 25%. At the age of five years, these foundlings were integrated into society through fostering or adoption.⁷ The care of infants had always been close to the interests of the Church authorities. As early as AD 603, Pope Gregory the Great exhorted the Sicilian and Maltese Bishops to resume the practice of caring for sick children.¹⁸

In 1575 the Apostolic Delegate and Visitor-General to Malta Mgr. Pietro Duzina visited *hospitalis Sancti Spiritus Rabbati* and left a detailed and informative picture of its state of affairs during the mid-sixteenth century. The patients were received in the small Church of *Santo Spirito* that contained only four beds, each accommodating two patients. The bedding consisted of a mattress filled with flax and covered with a woolen coverlet. A surgeon was attached to the hospital, while the Mdina apothecary served the hospital needs. Duzina’s description suggests that the hospital management was not very satisfactory, and a set of rules for its management were put forward. Duzina suggested that a dormitory containing eight beds should be set up, each bed having a palisade, mattress, four bed-sheets and two blankets in winter. He also laid down detailed rules regarding the reception and care given to the poor febrile patients to whom was to be given all the necessary care prescribed by the physician. He further detailed the care that was to be given to foundlings, and required the hospital administrators to submit an annual report to the bishop.¹² The hospital continued to give a hospitaller contribution throughout the subsequent centuries until its closure in 1967.¹⁹

hospitalis Sancti Petrij

The 1433 *Regia* document does not specifically refer to the *hospitalis Sanctj Franciscj* but makes a general reference to hospitals in the city of Malta. A second Medieval hospital - *hospitale Sancti Petri intus civitatem* - situated within the walls of Mdina was functioning in 1418. It had been set up as a bequest left by Margaret of Aragon who was the daughter of William, the natural son of King Frederick III of Sicily and wife of the Governor of Malta.²⁰ The management of the *hospitale Sancti Petri* was conceded in perpetuity by the *Universita`* and

the Cathedral to the Augustinian Friars of Rabat in 1434.²¹ This hospital was suppressed in 1455 by brief of Pope Calixtus III after a petition was made by the *Universita`* and the Cathedral to replace this with a monastery for Benedictine nuns. Financial support for this nunnery was to come from the past revenues of the suppressed *hospitale Sancti Petri* supplemented by the revenues of the *hospitalis Sancti Franciscj*.²² Other temporary hospitals were established in times of need. Mgr. Pietro Duzina in 1575 reports that the Church of St. Sebastian at Rabat, Malta served to house the victims during pestilent epidemics.¹²

hospitale Sancti Juliani

The Medieval hospital in Rabat, Gozo was established by a bequest of Francesco Bonnici dated 22nd February 1454 *pro receptione et hospitalitate pauperum pellegrinorum*.²³ The establishment was situated in the locality of the storage room under the sacristy of the Collegiate Church. The hospice originally housed two beds but the institution was further expanded after the hospice was enriched by further donations. This hospital was by 1569 known as *hospitalis Sancti Spiritus*, and eventually by 1575 as *hospitale Sancti Juliani*.^{12,24} It appears that this hospital was initially founded to provide hospitality and shelter for pilgrim travellers, but subsequently became an institution catering for the sick, poor and infirm. The hospital was described in 1575 as consisting of a few dwellings near the gates of the city. At that time, it was being used to house prisoners, and no patients were being admitted because there was insufficient room for them, and because of the absence of blankets and beds. The income adjuring from the benefices were being distributed as alms to the sick poor in their homes. Mgr. Duzina gave specific instructions so that the building reverts to its original purpose as a hospice.¹² This establishment continued to function until it was replaced by a new hospital built in 1783 at Rabat, Gozo.

Ordinis hospitalis

Sanctj Jacobj de Alto Pascu

On the 18th November 1373, King Frederick IV instructed all officials in Sicily, Malta and Gozo to offer all the possible assistance to the three friars members of the Order of the Hospital of St. James of Altopascio. The three friars - Fra Bartholomeus de Gruptis, Fra Nicolaus de Penna and Fra Franciscus de Portu – claimed that they had been appointed to act as visitators by the late master of the Order Robertus de Bonismontibus of Piscia acting on the instructions of the Order's Chapter of the 3rd October. Their brief was to look into all matters pertaining to the Order in the provinces.²⁵ The Order of St. James of Altopascio was set up around the mid-10th century by some Augustinian monks with the intention of giving assistance to pilgrims making their way by this route to Rome or Santiago de Compostella.

The Order eventually assumed an added military role providing armed escorts for the passage of pilgrims. It expanded its activities to other European countries including France and England. Its fortunes declined after the 13th century with the decline in religious fervor and pilgrimages.

Domibus Sanctj Antonij

Another monastic order who had similar interests in the Maltese Islands was the hospitaller Order of St. Anthony the Hermit. A document in the Cancelleria Regia of the State archives of Palermo refers to a petition by Fra Johannes Venancij Cole de Busano, representing the *dominus Sanctij Antonij*, to enable him to exercise his rights as procurator over property in the realm of Sicily and the Maltese Islands. King Frederick IV on the 29th December 1373 instructed all officials to offer all possible assistance.²⁶ Further evidence of a continuing devotion to St. Anthony the Hermit in Malta is attested by the presence of a 15th century Greek-style fresco of the saint depicted in St. Agatha's Crypt at Rabat, Malta. This fresco depicts the saint holding a shaft and wearing a deep blue monk's robe and a brown hood covering the head and shoulders.²⁷ The Order of St. Anthony the Hermit was originally founded by Gaston of Dauphine and his son in about 1095 in thanksgiving for a miraculous relief from "St. Anthony's Fire", a disease then epidemic caused by a fungal infestation of rye giving rise to ergotism. Because victims of ergotism were viewed with suspicion and marginalized as a result of their symptomatology, their care came to be the work of the brothers of the Order of St. Anthony. The members of the order wore a black habit with the Greek letter Tau in blue. The congregation established sheletes or *domus elemosynaria* throughout Europe. It was canonically united with the Order of St. John of Malta in 1777.

Ordinis hospitalis

Sanctj Iohannis Hierosolymitani

The Order of St. John of Jerusalem established a definite link to the Maltese Islands after they were ceded the Islands by Charles V in 1530. This link was to last until they were ousted from the Islands by Napoleon Bonaparte in 1798. The Order had been formally established in Jerusalem in 1113. Initially a "hotellier" monastic order, they soon assumed a hospitaller [by 1136] and military role [by 1130]. They were expelled from the Holy Land in 1291 by Sultan Khalid, proceeded to Cyprus and eventually in 1306 settled in Rhodes until their expulsion by Sultan Solyman in 1523. Before their arrival, there are very few instances where this esteemed hospitaller order is mentioned in Maltese medieval documents. None of these references relate to their hospitaller role but rather to a political and military context. In July 1299, Pope Boniface VIII sent Cardinal Bishop Gerarduc as Apostolic Legate to the Kingdom of Sicily and the neighbouring islands including Malta. Among the powers granted to the legate was an authorization to exact contributions or request provision for his officials from any prelate, dignitary

or religious including members of the Order of St John and the Templars overriding previously granted decree of the Council of Lyons held by Pope Gregory X in 1274.²⁸ In 1272, a document in the Archivio Comunale at Viterbo describes the conflict that arose with the double appointment of two bishops to the See of Malta. The two appointed bishops included the Franciscan Jacobus de Malta and a hospitaller knight. The appointment of the former prevailed.²⁹ In 1445, Pope Eugenius IV wrote to the Franciscan friars in Sicily authorizing them to collect funds from Sicily, Malta and Lipari to be used in the Order's struggle from Rhodes against the Turks.³⁰

The arrival of the Order of Saint John to Malta in 1530 set the scene for the reorganisation of all hospitaller services in the Islands. They continued to maintain and support the *hospitalis Sancti Spiritus Rabbati* in Malta and the *hospitale Sancti Juliani* in Gozo. In addition by 1533, they established a *Sacra Infermeria* at the maritime town of Birgu where the Order established itself. The building was a four-sided structure covering an area of about two-thirds of an acre. This establishment catered for members of the Order, male civilians, orphans and foundlings. Further augmentation to the hospital structure were carried out in subsequent years. In addition, the Italian Knights maintained another small hospital at Birgu. Occupying a large hall of the Auberge d'Italie, the establishment was opened around 1554. These edifices were abandoned after the knights moved their residence to the newly built city of Valletta across the harbour in the aftermath of the Great Siege of 1565. Their arrival to the Islands could be heralded as the Renaissance of medical practice in the Maltese Islands.³¹

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