

## Looking Backwards

# THE MALTA PLAGUE EPIDEMIC OF 1675 — 1676

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The epidemic began on the 24th December, 1675 when one of the daughters of a certain merchant from Valletta named Matteo Bonnici, was afflicted by a strange disease the chief characteristics of which were its acuteness, red petechial haemorrhages and the enlarged lymph nodes in the right groin. The suspicions of the family doctor, Dr. Cassia, were quickly aroused and he immediately informed the protomedicus, Dr. Domenico Sciberras. The death of the young girl on the seventh day of her illness was followed by the illness of a brother and of a slave who developed a swelling in the groin. Up to then the disease was being considered as a simple acute febrile illness, until another sister fell ill being covered with petechial haemorrhages and showing enlarged lymph nodes in her armpits. The girl died after four days. Consequently under pressure from the general public the authorities closed the merchant's house together with that of a soldier relative of the family who had a daughter who had died with swollen lymph nodes.

Still, it seemed that the closure of the two houses was not enough, for cases began to appear everywhere whose main characteristics were enlarged lymph nodes, papules and petechial haemorrhages. At this stage the Protomedicus began to reconsider his position. Therefore on the 28th January, 1676, a meeting of the health authorities was held in secret, not to alarm the people, at which it was concluded that plague had probably appeared in the island. Therefore the protomedicus recommended the trans-

port to the isolation hospital of all affected persons and infected objects.

Another result of this meeting was the appointment of four Knights Grand Crosses to act as Plague Commissioners. To these officers was given absolute power to safeguard the public and "the Religion", as the order of St. John was customarily referred to. A tribunal met in the Chancellery twice daily — in the morning from 6 to 10 and in the afternoon from 3 to 5.

This tribunal was responsible for collecting news about the plague and for providing the needy with all requirements. To the four Knights Grand Crosses were added two Counts and the usual commissioners for public health. The counts and the Public Health officials were described as men of great skill. Their duties were to see that the orders given by the Knights Grand Crosses were obeyed and to distribute alms when necessary. Two other Commissioners were later added to supervise the transport of the diseased from their villages.

The virulence of the disease increased rapidly so that even men commissioned to combat the disease contracted the infection and died of it. All measures designed to limit the spread of the illness were proving ineffective and, as the disease progressed, more drastic measures began to be put into effect. The number of Public Health officers and isolation hospitals was doubled and all suspected and infected houses were closed. Doctors who willingly or through negligence failed to report cases were severely punished. A number of gallows were erected to deal

with people who disobeyed orders. To set an example three men were hanged.

The course of the disease appeared to be variable for after the phase of acute virulence a milder phase appeared and it seemed that the efforts of the Public Health authorities were bearing fruit. However, a new phase of acute virulence was heralded by the death of a child at Fort St. Angelo when the disease began to spread throughout the three cities, first in Vittoriosa and Cospicua then on to Senglea and to the country. The familiar features of the disease reappeared, namely the haemorrhages and the buboes so that the protomedicus was constrained to declare the island to be infected and accept international quarantine measures.

On the 26th February the special committee met again. In this meeting the Grand Master promised that everything necessary, both as regards medical and general help, would be provided to the island which was then in a state of chaos. Some people were thinking that the measures taken were sufficient while others were thinking that they were not severe enough. The opinion of the latter prevailed so that more vigorous measures were taken.

From the 24th March the movements of the people were very rigorously restrained while the diseased and the suspected were totally isolated from the community. The people of the Mandragg, the "Archipelago" and French Street — regions very severely affected — were told not to leave their houses. The Commissioners saw to it that butchers, cheesemongers, bakers, etc. were available to give proper service to these people shut in their homes. The order was repealed on the 16th June. Another order prohibited barbers from cutting the hair of the sick and of relatives of people who had died of the disease.

The plague was proving to be a very heavy burden on the community. Therefore it was not surprising that certain quarters began to question whether such vigorous measures were necessary. At this stage the Maltese School of Medicine was still not decided and while some

medical men were thinking in terms of plague others believed the island was being visited only by a high febrile illness. Therefore foreign opinion was asked for. Five physicians, from Marseilles, Rome, Florence, Valencia, Paris and Naples respectively were of the opinion that the island was affected with plague.

After the triumph of the first school of thought measures were made even more rigorous. Therefore the use of Holy Water was prohibited, and gatherings in churches, squares, hotels and streets were made illegal. The isolation hospitals were enlarged, barricades were constructed and finally the city was closed.

Three surgeons were called to Malta, one a Neapolitan and two French, the first on the 29th May, the second on the 9th June. All of them had had great experience of plague. The Italian was a volunteer who worked day and night with the sick. The other two came from Marseilles and were given travelling expenses, free board and lodging and 700 French pounds a month each. All agreed with the measures taken by the Public Health authorities in isolating the sick and those suspected of being so. In all 116 "barracks" were constructed on the shores of Marsamxett to house those suspected of being ill.

The galleys were provided for by depositing the food and other necessities in a special place known as the *Ristello della Marina* from where it was taken by the sailors. At night the ships had to anchor two to three miles out at sea until break of day, a guard being provided all the time on the prow and on the poop of the ship.

On the death of a diseased person the Public Health authorities had to be informed. These were responsible for giving the order for burial to the grave diggers and undertakers. The dead were buried in common graves which were situated in places recommended by the medical profession. The grave-diggers were responsible for beating the earth down very thoroughly. After the disappearance of the plague the graves were sprayed with

scent and their environments kept absolutely clean.

Meanwhile, Mdina and Gozo remained free from the disease. After the first invasion by families from Valletta, the *Capitano della Verga* closed the city, so that by the middle of April it was isolated from the whole island. The Captain provided a door and a guard of four men to guard it and used to supervise it himself. Food was deposited near the gate. Travel to Gozo was also discouraged. A commission was responsible for the storage of grain and of wheat and a small ship was used to carry supplies and to bring news.

The last phase of the illness was heralded by an extensive spread after a relatively quiet period. The island was now on the verge of despair. All that was humanly possible had been done and now panic began to appear. Some people went to live near the sea, nobody daring to approach the cities. There was a phase of religious revival. Everybody recited prayers and performed penance. The Blessed Sacrament and holy relics

**Table I. Number of deaths  
(Estimated population: 60,000)**

	<i>Men</i>	<i>Women</i>	<i>Total</i>
<b>Valletta</b>	<b>757</b>	<b>1300</b>	<b>2057</b>
<b>Vittoriosa</b>	<b>727</b>	<b>1063</b>	<b>1790</b>
<b>Senglea</b>	-	-	<b>1885</b>
<b>Cospicua</b>	<b>511</b>	<b>809</b>	<b>1320</b>
<b>Qormi</b>	<b>122</b>	<b>187</b>	<b>309</b>
<b>Zebbug</b>	<b>74</b>	<b>95</b>	<b>169</b>
<b>Zabbar</b>	<b>102</b>	<b>168</b>	<b>270</b>
<b>Other places</b>	-	-	<b>932</b>
<b>Total</b>	-	-	<b>8732</b>

**Table 2. Number of "Illustrious persons" who died of the plague**

	<b>Valletta</b>	<b>Senglea</b>	<b>Vittoriosa</b>	<b>Cospicua</b>	<b>Villages</b>
<b>Knights Grand Crosses</b>	<b>1</b>	-	-	-	-
<b>Knights</b>	<b>8</b>	-	-	-	-
<b>Parish Priests</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>1</b>	-	<b>1</b>
<b>Canons</b>	<b>1</b>	-	-	-	-
<b>Priests</b>	<b>23</b>	<b>18</b>	<b>37</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>10</b>
<b>Monks</b>	<b>21</b>	-	<b>8<sup>(1)</sup></b>	<b>4</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>Physicians</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	-	<b>3</b>
<b>Surgeons</b>	-	<b>1</b>	<b>6</b>	-	<b>4</b>
<b>(1) All Dominicans</b>					

were exposed for special veneration. The Grand Master seeing the plight of his people paid frequent visits to the affected areas both in the cities and in the country distributing alms and trying to help the needy.

The Commissioners' meeting on the 14th June came to the conclusion that there were enough medical supplies in the island. By the 27th August the disease seemed to be over at last. The happy people now began to clean up the island by getting rid of all rubble and waste material. All joined in thanksgiving to God.

On the 24th September, 1676 the final disappearance of the plague was publicly celebrated by the firing of guns and the ringing of bells. A *Te Deum* was sung and a most splendid procession was made. The isolation hospitals were closed, the barricades removed and the gentlemen of the Public Health were very generously rewarded and praised throughout the island.

(From manuscript 6402 of the Royal Malta Library)

#### **Burial grounds used during the epidemic:**

Valletta: Manoel Island  
 Vittoriosa: Il-Hisieli  
 Cospicua: Outside the fortifications  
 Senglea: Ditto  
 Birkirkara: Village cemetery  
 Gudja: Village cemetery  
 Qormi: Village cemetery. Later closed.  
 Zurrieq: Disused church of St. Thomas  
 Kirkop: Disused church of St. Giacione  
 Rabat: Disused church of St. Mark  
 Mosta: Don Martino Vella's Church  
 Bubaqra: Disused church of St. Nicholas  
 Attard: St. Michael's Church  
 St. Angelo: Ditch

#### **Isolation Hospitals used during the epidemic:**

Valletta: Manoel Island  
 Vittoriosa: Magazine near the "Manderaggio"  
 Senglea: Quarters of St. Philip.  
 Cospicua: Quarters of St. Paul.  
 Birkirkara: The Captain's Tower.  
 Attard: Giacomo Muscat's Palace.  
 Gudja: House.  
 Luqa: the house of Gio Domenico Sciriha and Vincenzo Abela.  
 Rabat: Hal Bajjad.  
 Kirkop: Ta' Galea's House.