

Texts and Documents

AN EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY BILL OF HEALTH OF THE ORDER OF ST. JOHN FROM MALTA

by

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DURING ITS two hundred and sixty-eight years of domination over the Maltese Islands (1530–1798), the Order of St. John of Jerusalem waged an unceasing war against the Barbary and Turkish pirates in the Mediterranean. Those who escaped death were enslaved by the victor, irrespective of sex or age, or whether they were combatants or simply passengers and crews of unarmed vessels; so much so that slavery came to form a sort of institution regulated by definite rules concerning the selling, employment and ransoming of captives by either side.

A Maltese boy, Gio Maria Zammit, was captured by the Barbary corsairs in 1734 at the age of fifteen years and sold as a slave at Tripoli in North Africa. After twelve years in captivity he renounced the Catholic faith and turned Moslem, as he was constrained to do by his master. He subsequently married a Moslem girl by whom he had several children. He finally succeeded in escaping from Tripoli after forty-three years in captivity, and reached Rome with his fourteen-year-old son Joseph. Gio Maria Zammit, by this time sixty-five years old, abjured the Moslem religion, became reconciled with the Catholic faith and had his son baptised in Rome. He eventually came with his son to Malta but being unable to find work, he decided to return to Rome in search of employment.

In those days no one could leave Malta without the express permission of the Grand Court of the *Castellania*. Zammit therefore applied to the Grand Court and obtained the necessary “bill of departure” [*patente di partenza*] which entitled him to sail from Malta for Sicily, whence he planned to travel to Rome.

Meanwhile, however, he was having trouble with his son. Joseph was getting out of hand and even robbed his father of his little store of money. Out of revenge after parental punishment, Joseph denounced his father to the Tribunal of the Inquisition. He alleged that his father’s real intention in going to Sicily was to board a ship bound for Tripoli, there to rejoin his Moslem wife and children. As the Tribunal was informed of Gio Maria Zammit’s past apostacy, immediate steps were taken to prevent him from leaving the island. He was arrested by the Chief Executive Police Officer [*Gran Visconte*] and his bill of health was seized and exhibited in court. When brought before the Tribunal, Zammit denied his son’s accusation and succeeded in convincing the judges that it was a trumped-up charge, that he had no intention of returning to Tripoli, and that he genuinely meant to seek employment in Rome. The Tribunal released him, but the bill of health was not returned to him and to this

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day it has remained tucked away in the archives of the Tribunal of the Inquisition in Malta.¹

DESCRIPTION OF THE DOCUMENT

This bill of health (see Figure 1) is an attractive copper engraving of fine workmanship. It occupies a sheet measuring 43 cm by 59 cm and bears a watermark $\frac{GB}{I}$ in the right lower corner. The design consists of an architectonic head-piece topped by the crowned and winged coat-of-arms of Grand Master Emanuel de Rohan Polduc —i.e. nine golden lozenges on a red field quartered with the white cross of the Order of St. John on a crimson background.

The coat-of-arms is flanked on each side by banners and lances and by an allegorical reclining female figure symbolizing Justice and Prosperity. External to these figures, on a plinth, are the upright effigies of St. John the Baptist on the left and of St. Paul on the right. St. Paul had introduced Christianity to Malta in A.D. 60 and was invoked as protector of the Maltese Islands against all kinds of calamities; St. John was the patron saint of the Order of St. John of Jerusalem which settled in Malta in 1530.

Below the coat-of-arms, in the centre, there is a vignette with an outline map of the Grand Harbour and of the Port of Marsamxett with their fortifications. The Port of Marsamxett was the quarantine harbour for all shipping reaching the island from infected areas and had a Lazzaretto on Manoel Island, which is also shown in the map. Small black squares along the shores mark the presence of small towers where guards were stationed to watch over the coastal areas and prevent illicit entry of vessels and clandestine disembarkation of passengers and crews in the island's many inlets.

The rest of the decorative design is made up of a floral and leafy border entwined by a ribbon tied in a loose knot at the bottom. Below this knot is an embossed armorial paper seal affixed to the sheet with a red wax. It bears the coat-of-arms of the *castellano*, the Knight Antonio Barone de Neveu, who had issued the bill of health. It shows, in its upper third, the white cross of the Order of St. John over a red field and below it two crossed anchors upside down.

Within the border is a Latin text, clearly printed in neat lettering in italics. In a blank space in the print is inserted a handwritten script in Italian recording the names and other personal details of the passengers and their destination.

The designer of the bill was Francesco Manno and the engraver, Garofalo of Palermo.² Their names appear on the plinths beneath the effigies of St. John the Baptist and St. Paul respectively. On the verso of the sheet, handwritten in ink, are the words: "With shipmaster Marcello Grech" [*Con Pad. Marcello Grech*].

¹ Cathedral Archives, Mdina. AIM 133c, *Processo* 384, fol. 1174.

² Francesco Manno (1754–1831) was a Sicilian painter and architect and secretary of the Academy of St. Luke of Rome. He was the brother of Antonio and Vincenzo who, in 1794, painted in fresco the ceiling of the Cathedral of Mdina. C. Siracusano, 'Profilo di Francesco Manno', *Quaderni dell'Istituto di Storia dell'Arte Medievale e Moderna, Facolta di Lettere e Filosofia, Universita di Messina*, Rome, 1975, p. 45; E. Benezit, *Dictionnaire des peintres, sculpteurs, dessinateurs et graveurs*, Saints Ouen, 1961, vol. 5, p. 753.

Garofalo of Palermo was probably Giuseppe Garofalo who was active in Rome at the time. *Ibid.*, vol. 4, p. 164.

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The Latin text is as follows:

Nos Castellanus sive Praeses Magnae Curiae Castellaniae Melivetanae Universis et singulis praesentes nostras litteras visuris lecturis pariter, et audituris, Salutem Fidem facimus, et verbo veritatis attestamur hanc Inclytam Melitae Insulam, a qua, ejusque generali portu Gio Maria Zammit d'anni 65, Giuseppe Zammit d'anni 14 maltesi d'orda. sta. pelo capo e faccia bruna partono colla sp. ra di Pad. ne Marcello Grech maltese discedit, Divina favente Clementia, ituri alla Trizza e tutto il Regno di Sicilia nullo, Omnipotentis Dei, ac SS. Joannis Baptistae, et Pauli Protectorum gratia, Epidemicae, seu Pestis morbo laborare; nec in ea hujus morbi suspicionem aliquam adesse. In quorum fidem hasce manu propria firmatas, nostroque sigillo munitas, et manu Magnifici Notarii Magnae Curiae praedictae subscriptas fieri jussimus. Datum in aedibus dictae Magnae Curiae. Die vigesimo secundo Mensis Maii anno millesimo septingentesimo octuagesimo secundo sive 1782.

Il Cav.re Neveu Castellano

M. Not. Emmanuel Zarb MCC Mel.

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.

Gio Maria Zammit, 65 years, and Joseph Zammit, 14 years, both Maltese, of ordinary stature with dark hair, head and face are departing from the General Harbour with the favour of Divine Clemency on the *speronara* [small sailing boat] of Master Marcello Grech for Trizza and the whole of the Kingdom of Sicily.

In assurance of which we have commanded this document, signed by our own hand and furnished with our seal, to be subscribed by the Magnificus Notary of the aforesaid Grand Court. Given at the seat of the said Grand Court this 22nd day of the month of May 1782.

The Knight de Neveu Castellano.

Magnificus Notary

Emanuel Zarb, The Grand Court of the Castellania of Malta.

COMMENT

The main interest of this bill of health lies in its rarity, for though we meet with frequent references to the “bulletin of health” [*bollettino di salute*] in the records of the sanitary authorities of Malta during the time of the Order of St. John, this is the only one that has been encountered by the writer during twenty three years of research in Maltese medical history. Its conservation is due to a combination of circumstances—the state’s concern about the public health of Malta on which depended the uninterrupted maintenance of commercial relations with neighbouring Mediterranean ports; the church’s jurisdictional powers over the religious beliefs of the people of Malta exercised by the Tribunal of the Inquisition; and the care with which documentary evidence against the accused was collected and preserved in his file by this Tribunal.

It has been stated that the bill of health was introduced in Europe in 1600 when ships’ captains were required to produce these documents on entering their next ports of call.³ However “safe conduct certificates” [*salviconductus*] issued by the Grand Master of the Order of St. John show that the practice was in existence in Malta by 1576, if not earlier. Thus a manuscript copy of one of these certificates, dated 28 May 1576, informs the sanitary authorities of the next port of call that the bearer was entitled to full freedom of movement as “by the grace of God, here (in Malta) we enjoy good health without any suspicion of bad influence [*mala influenza*]”. Another certificate of 27 July 1576 adds “that there was no suspicion of plague”.⁴

³ *World Health*, January–February 1965, p. 31.

⁴ Malta Public Library, Valletta (MPL), Arch. 436, fols. 298–307 and 313t.

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This specific allusion to plague stems from the fact that this disease was endemic in the Mediterranean and at times assumed epidemic proportions. Indeed the Maltese code of laws of 1640 laid down detailed rules for the sanitary port authorities to prevent the introduction of “contagious diseases” especially by ships coming from the Levant and the coast of Barbary.⁵ Identical provisions were contained in the revised code promulgated in 1681.⁶ These precautions had been dictated by the bitter experience of two major epidemics of plague that visited the island in 1592 and 1675.⁷ Fears of another outbreak of pestilence were entertained in April 1743 when plague broke out in Messina, with which port Malta was in constant sea communication but the island escaped infection.⁸

Among the supposed causes of plague, the “wrath of God” was assigned an important role; hence the attribution, in the bill of health, to freedom from pestilence to “the grace of Almighty God and the Saints protectors John the Baptist and Paul”. This concept still prevailed many years after the Order of St. John had been driven away from Malta and the British Crown had taken over the island; so much so that the British Governor, Sir Thomas Maitland, ordered the dedication of a day of “prayer and thanksgiving to Almighty God” on the cessation of the plague epidemic of 1813–14.⁹

In the eighteenth century the Order of St. John in Malta issued three types of documents to persons departing from the island—a passport, a safe conduct certificate¹⁰ and the bill of health. The period of validity of the first two documents varied from one to three years but that of the bill of health was very short as it covered only the period from the day the passenger left Malta to the time of arrival at the destination specified in the bill. It was of no further use once it was inspected by the sanitary authorities of the receiving port and once the traveller was allowed unfettered movement on disembarkation.

The official authorized to issue the bill of health was the holder of the highest post in the legal hierarchy in Malta, viz., the *Castellano* or President of the Grand Court whose overall function was to ensure that “justice was rightly administered for everyone”. He was a knight of the Order of St. John and was appointed to, or confirmed in, office annually by the Grand Master. At the time this bill of health was drawn up—1782—the *Castellano* was Antonio Barone de Neveu of the Langue of Germany¹¹ whose armorial bearings can still be seen emblazoned in a frieze on one of the walls of the old building of the *Castellania* which is now the seat of the Ministry of Health in Valletta.

In the Maltese legal codes of 1640 and 1681, there is reference to the “bulletin of the Court of the Castellania” and to “the usual bulletin” but there is no indication as to its contents; but the code of laws of 1724, besides alluding to it as “the patent

⁵ MPL. Ms. 148, fol. 70t.

⁶ MPL. Ms. 150, fol. 153.

⁷ P. Cassar, *Medical history of Malta*, London, Wellcome Historical Medical Library, 1965, pp. 165 and 172.

⁸ P. Cassar, ‘Sanitary organization in Malta in 1743’, *St. Luke’s Hosp. Gaz.*, 1966, 1: 55–59.

⁹ Cassar, *op. cit.*, note 7 above, p. 423.

¹⁰ MPL. Arch. 586, fols. 238 and 243t.

¹¹ MPL. Arch. 587, fol. 281.

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or bulletin of departure”, specifies it also as “the bill of health”.¹² Incoming passengers and crews who failed to produce a bill of health from their port of provenance incurred the death penalty if they happened to arrive from ports infected with plague or suspected of harbouring this disease.

There were two kinds of bills—the ‘clean’ [*patente netta*] and the ‘foul’ one [*patente brutta*].¹³ The bill here illustrated is a “clean” one. It belongs to the last years of the domination of the Order of St. John in Malta since Grand Master Emanuel de Rohan Polduc was the penultimate Grand Master to rule over the island before the Knights of St. John were expelled by Napoleon in 1798. As the document bears the personal coat-of-arms of this Grand Master, it must have been in use for a period of not more than twenty-two years covering the period of his rule from 1775 to 1797.

SUMMARY

During the rule of the Order of St. John over the Maltese Islands (1530–1798) no-one could leave the country without first obtaining a bill of health from the President of the Maltese Grand Court for submission to the sanitary authorities of the next port of call in order to enable them to apply the necessary quarantine measures.

The bill here described and illustrated was issued in 1782 and consists in an artistic copper engraving with Latin and Italian wording to the effect that Malta was free from epidemic and pestilential diseases. It is decorated with the coat-of-arms of Grand Master Emanuel de Rohan Polduc, and with the effigies of the “saints protectors John the Baptist and Paul”.

The main interest of this bill lies in its rarity as it is the only one that has been encountered during many years of research in Maltese medical history. Although it belongs to the last years of the Order’s domination of Malta, there is documentary evidence that the practice of issuing certificates about the state of the public health of the island for the use of travellers goes back to at least 1576.

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¹² MPL., op. cit., note 5 above, fol. 72 and note 6 above fol. 144; *Leggi e costituzioni prammaticali*, Malta, 1724, pp. 1, 2, 33, 76 and 111.

¹³ *Del dritto municipale di Malta*, Malta, 1784, pp. 276–7, and 289.