

## TWO MORE DOCUMENTS OF 1813 WRITTEN ON WOOD DURING THE PLAGUE OF MALTA \*

**Paul Cassar and Albert Ganado**

The plague of 1813 is the most publicised among the epidemics that have visited the Maltese Islands though far more severe pestilences occurred in 1592-3 and 1675-6. (1)

In the early nineteenth century the belief still held ground that plague was a "contagious" disease in the sense that it was thought to be conveyed from a sick person to a healthy one by touching the patient's body or his belongings or by the handling of "susceptible" materials.

The preventive measures adopted by the sanitary authorities of Malta to stem the spread of the plague in 1813 were based on these assumptions. They included, among others, the immersion of articles of food in water and the passage of coins through vinegar before being touched by the recipient; the removal of threads and wool filaments by means of pincers so that these materials would not come into contact with one's skin. (2)

Similar steps had been taken elsewhere in Europe even hundreds of years before. Thus, in England, money was passed through water during the plague of 1603 and letters were "smoked" upon being received during the pestilence of 1625 and again during the plague of London of 1665. (3)

The disinfection of letters arriving from abroad had become regular practice in Malta by 1678, two years after the worst visitation of plague in our history (1675-6). By the mid-eighteenth century, correspondence was disinfected by splitting the papers by means of a chisel to ensure that the "perfume", by which the letters were fumigated, penetrated thoroughly inside

\* We would like to thank the Very Reverend Fr. Prior Victor Schembri of the Carmelite Priory of Valletta for biographical data about Fr. Prior Lorenzo Elia Ferroni.

1. P. Cassar, *The Medical History of Malta* (London, 1965), pp.164-91.
2. P. Cassar, 'The Use of Wood as a Writing Medium during the Plague of 1813', *Medical History*, 10 (1966), 275; *Ordini per le guardie urbane*, 28 agosto 1813.
3. C.F. Mullett, *The Bubonic Plague and England* (Lexington, 1956), pp.120, 158 and 222.

them. (4) What, however, seems to have been a distinctive feature of preventive medicine, as then understood, during the plague of 1813 was the substitution of pieces of wood for paper as writing material in the belief that wood, in contradistinction to paper, was not "susceptible" to contamination by plague and, therefore, was safe to use both by the writer and by the recipient of letters and documents.

The first official warning against the supposed dangers of contact with paper appeared in an "Advertisement" (*Avviso*) dated 12th May 1813. It was issued by the Board of Health and contained the following provision: "Papers to be Smoked, the necessary Composition for this Purpose will be Sold at Cost Price, at No. 47, Strada Giovanni" (St. John Street, Valletta).

A notice, issued by the Magistrate of Police on the 26th July 1813 on the order of H.E. the King's Civil Commissioner, again drew attention to the hazards from susceptible articles, including paper. Paragraph 2 of his notice stated: "That persons shall not throw into the streets feathers, rags, paper, cordage, wool, cotton and other articles susceptible of contagion but cause these to be burned within their respective houses". (5)

A further "Order" of the 28th August 1813 by the Inspector General of the Urban Volunteer Guard enjoined the people to search for bits of paper among coffee beans and other food items and to burn them after picking them up with pincers from these foodstuffs. (6)

The Urban Volunteer Guard had been formed by the Inspector General, F. Rivarola, for "the maintenance of good order, cleanliness and the strict observance of quarantine" by the inhabitants. Among the suggestions contained in the proposal for the formation of this Guard, dated the 4 August 1813, was the proviso that the names of the inhabitants joining this corps were to be inserted, with the numbers of their houses, on a "tablet" (*tabella*) which was to be suspended "in a fit place" (7). It is very likely that this "tablet", in order to avoid using paper for the writing of the same lists, was made of wood.

One of the present writers (P.C.) has already drawn attention to the existence of nine documents written on wood which he has described and illustrated elsewhere. They include a power of attorney, a testament, three

4. P. Cassar, 'Splitting of Letters for Disinfection in the Eighteenth Century in Malta', *British Medical Journal*, 1 (1967), 105-6.
5. *Notificazione*, 26 luglio 1813.
6. *Giornale di Malta*, 8 settembre 1813, p.352; *Ordini per le guardie urbane*, 20 agosto 1813.
7. *Proposals for the formation of an Urban Volunteer Guard*, 4 August 1813.

with which he rendered spiritual assistance to the plague-stricken. A portrait in oils hangs in the convent at Valletta. (13)

The *scudi* and *tari* were denominations of the coinage of the Order of St. John which remained current after the Order left Malta in 1798. In the early days of British rule, the exchange rate was fixed at one shilling and eight pence to the *scudo*. Twelve *tari* made one *scudo*.

#### Discussion

The eleven tablets that have so far come to light were all made in 1813 and they bear the following dates:

1. 15 August — Receipt (Rev. Salvatore Dimech)
2. 21 August — Receipt (Fr. Lorenzo Elia Ferroni) Valletta
3. 21 August — Letter (Marchesa Vincenza Testaferrata) Zurrieq
4. 9 September — Testament (Rev. Filippo Calleja) Zebbug
5. 19 September — Power of attorney (Rosa and Francesco de Albanese) Cospicua
6. 23 September — Receipt (Rev. Saverio Vassallo)
7. 5 October — Letter (Rev. Francesco Borg) Zejtun
8. 5 October — Letter (Maria Damico Inguanez Bonici) Notabile
9. 29 October — Bill (Luigi Mifsud)
10. 10 November — Receipt (Fr. Lorenzo Elia Ferroni?)
11. 2 December — Receipt (Maria Damico Inguanez) Notabile

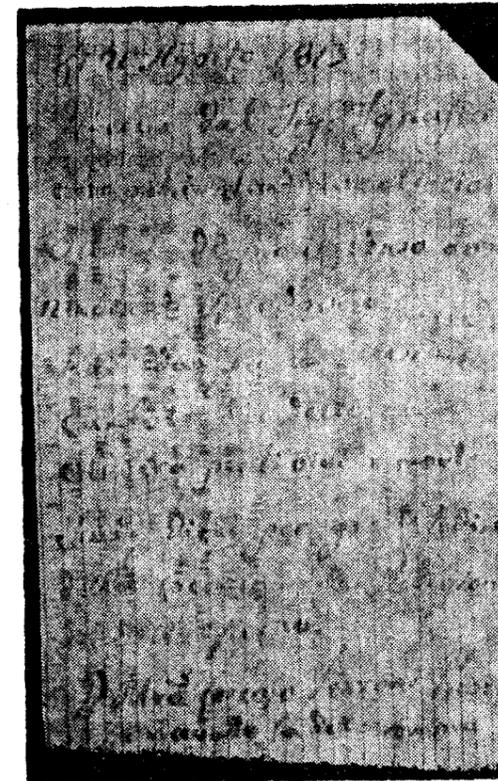
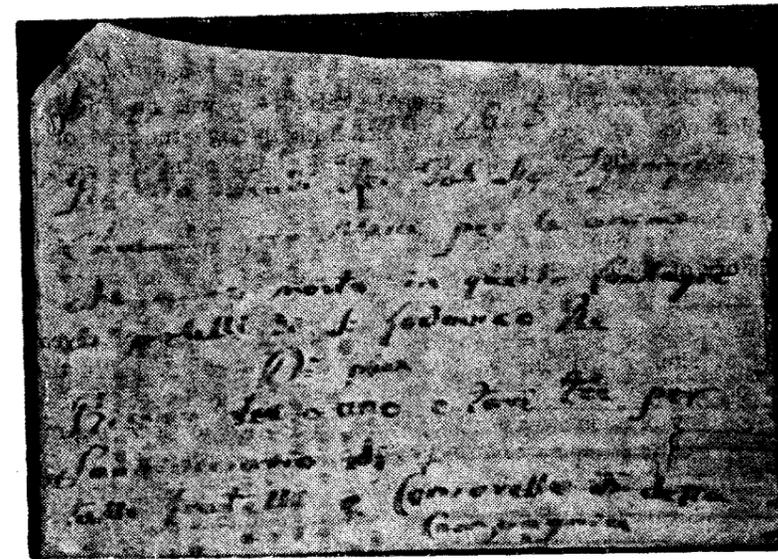
The period covered by these tablets (August—December 1813) corresponded to the decline of the epidemic; in fact, the decrease in the incidence of cases began towards the end of August and continued in the following months, so that by the beginning of January 1814 pratique was granted to the inhabitants of Valletta and the three cities. (14) It is likely, therefore, that, if more of these documents on wood have survived, they would fall within this period.

Although by today's scientific standards the substitution of wood for paper as writing material in 1813 was a useless prophylactic measure against the dissemination of plague, it fitted in with the pattern of the medical thinking of those days and of many years thereafter; so much so that the disinfection of letters from overseas by the Maltese Health Authorities came to an end only towards the 1880s, although it was resorted to again, as an exceptional measure, in 1929 when plague broke out in Tunis. (15)

13. L. Sammut, *op.cit.*, p.94.

14. P. Cassar, *Medical History of Malta* (London, 1965), p.185.

15. P. Cassar, 'The Early Days of the Postal Services in Malta', *Union Postale*, No. 9 (September 1964), p.138a.



The idea that plague was a contagious disease began to be discarded only after 1894 when it was discovered that plague was an infection by a germ which was conveyed to man by sick rats through the bite of infected fleas. The role of the flea in the transmission of the germ was first mooted in 1897.

These wooden documents are only marginal *tesserae* in the wide mosaic of the history of medicine but they deserve recording for the following reasons: (a) they are unique to Malta: indeed, an extensive survey of the literature on the history of plague epidemics in other countries has not revealed the existence of similar writings on wood; (b) they afford an instructive commentary on how medical doctrine influences, and is reflected in, social behaviour; (c) they provide evidence that there was no loss or lowering of morale on the part of the people under the stress of the everpresent expectation of death and that they remained conscious of their social obligations towards one another and took the necessary steps not only to discharge these obligations but also to record their fulfilment *ad futuram rei memoriam*; (d) they testify to the resilience and resourcefulness of man who, when faced with the disruptive forces of disease, continues to strive for survival and endeavours to devise means to counteract the ensuing social disorganisation and to carry on, undeterred, with his day-to-day routine of life.

The emergence, in a time of crisis, of this healthy psychological reaction on the part of our ancestors is, in our view, the most significant feature revealed by a study of these wooden tablets.

## TARXIEN IN THE XVIII CENTURY: A STATISTICAL PORTRAIT

**Karm Sant and Mario Vassallo**

Despite its relevance for a thorough understanding of the socio-cultural processes that eventually led to the creation of the Maltese nation-state, the gradual development of the various settlements on the island is still unmapped. The first 'national' census of the population was taken in 1842, and as such, comparative social and demographic statistics are still unavailable for Malta. (1) A wealth of primary sources is however dispersed in numerous ecclesiastical and civil archives, ready for analysis. This paper is an attempt to start the construction of the mosaic that will eventually emerge, and limits itself to Tarxien, for the period 1699—1769.

Tarxien today has a total population of 6,776 (3,360 males and 3,416 females) and geographically is often confused as an extension of Paola, which now has a population of nearly twelve thousand. During the period under consideration the situation was the exact opposite. Tarxien had been founded as a parish on 29 May 1592, when it was separated from *Bir Miftuh*, whilst Paola, popularly known from its very foundation as *Rahal il-Gdid* or *Casal Nuovo*, was founded by Grand Master Antoine De Paul in 1662 and was erected a parish on 26 October 1909. Tarxien was then already an established community, and the development of Paola, because of the unhygienic swamps and marshes at the Marsa, was bound to be sluggish. The Paola community in fact began to grow substantially only after the draining of these marshes and the construction of the New Port, *Porto Nuovo*, around the middle of the 19th century. *Table 1* shows that the population of Tarxien and Paola, taken together or independently was by and large a relatively stable one. As evident from *Table 2*

*Table 2: % Rate of increase in Maltese Population*

1842	—	1911	14.52
1851	7.86	1921	0.33
1861	8.55	1931	13.83
1871	5.76	1948	26.64
1881	5.65	1957	4.26
1891	10.18	1967	-1.19
1901	11.94		

the mean % increase of the Maltese population since censuses were taken (1842) substantially supersede those registered a century or so earlier for Tarxien and Paola as given in *Table 1*.