

MEDICAL PRACTITIONERS IN 16TH CENTURY MALTA

This communication is meant to throw some new light on the office and duties of the Medical Practitioner/s employed by the City of Notabile, primarily, during the first half of the 16th century. It has also been possible to trace the centres of higher learning abroad where Maltese Doctors had graduated in Surgery or Medicine or both during the second half of the same century. These are the earliest and only Maltese Doctors that could be traced in the records of these Schools.

The beginning of the sixteenth century was quite a sad one for the practice of medicine in Malta. Till the last decade of the fifteenth century, members of the Jewish community residing in the Island provided the personnel who cared after the health of the population. But once the Jews were expelled from the Maltese shores, the dire need to remedy for the lack of suitable persons, duly trained in medicine, was immediately felt (1). This situation was still very acute during the first decades of the sixteenth century.

On the 23rd July 1516, the Town Council of Notabile, during one of its sessions, studied the possibility of assigning a suitable salary from its own entries to maintain Angelo de Anello as the town's and the island's physician (2). But their measures enacted on that occasion do not seem to have had any effect. On the 20th January of the following year, the same council lamented that the island was still in sore need of a medical physician, there was in Malta then, in fact, no one duly qualified for such an office. Hence the members of the council discussed how and from where they could obtain the services of a doctor of medicine and, quite logically, what was to be the salary to assign to him. The financial aspect of the problem was duly solved. It was proposed to give him an annual salary amounting to forty onze to be derived from the revenues of the Commune itself as well as from those of the hospital. Moreover, it was decreed to enlist contributions for the same salary from the well-to-do members of the community. In fact, various individuals, on that same occasion, promised the share they meant to subscribe for that purpose (3).

Although this aspect of the problem had thereby been duly solved, it

1. Paul Cassar, *Medical History of Malta*, London 1964, 14-16.
2. M[alta] L[ibrary], *Univ.* 12, 142v-143v.
3. *Ibid.*, 156v-158v.

was not quite easy to find a man to fill the office in question. It does not result, so far, whether any doctor of medicine was actually employed by the Università immediately after the above-mentioned provisions had been made. Some further years had to pass until a solution was finally reached. During a meeting of the Town Council, held on the 16th October 1521, the discussion centred on one focal point, namely, whether it was feasible to contract the services of Dr. Bernardo de Munda "medicinae fisticus", as well as to determine what salary to assign to him and for how many years he was to remain employed by the Università (4). It is quite probable that de Munda was employed by the Town Council on that occasion. It seems that he had already been rendering such a service at the civic hospital of Rabat some months before. On the 29th July 1521, the Cathedral paid him the sum of one onza and twenty tari being one third of his annual salary defrayed by the Chapter (5). In 1528, his term of office was nearing its end, and on the 16th April of that year, a further extension of his previous contract was made to cover another six years. His salary, at this stage, was to amount to thirty two onze a year, five of which were to be defrayed by the hospital and the rest by the Town Council itself (6).

During his term of office, de Munda was successful to be officially recognised by the Town Council as the island's protomedicus, enjoyed thereby the same special prerogatives attached to this office in Sicily, as de Munda considered himself performing the same duties in Malta. This enactment was decreed by the Jurats in December 1528 at the request of de Munda who styled himself as "the substitute of Dr. Antonio Pyrri, the Protomedicus of the Sicilian Reign for the town and island of Malta". He was, thenceforth to control the sale of all poisonous medicines which were to be sold exclusively by the pharmacists of the town; to investigate all instances

4. *Idem.*

5. *Ibid.*, 459v-461v. In 1530, the Cathedral's share of this salary amounted to three onze, ten tari and three grana [A[rchives] of the C[athedral], M[alta], *Misc(ellanea)* 102, 17r] There was a special tax which included provisions for the maintenance of the town medical practitioner. This tax was renewed in virtue of Papal Briefs given on the 10th April 1582 and the 26th July 1597 [Archivum Secretum Vaticanum, *Segreteria dei Brevi*, Vol. 52, 240r-v; A[rchiepiscopal] A[rchives] M[alta], *Corrispondenza*, Vol. I, pp. 37-38; ACM, *Misc.* 3, 59r-61r; *Misc.* 7, pp. 27-31, 60-63; *Misc.* 21, 5r-v; *Misc.* 39, 44r; *Misc.* 41, 4r, 27r-v]. Confer also: Alfredo Mifsud, "La Santa Sede e Malta. Frammenti Storici." in *La Diocesi di Malta*, Anno I, No. 1 (June 1916), 15, and "L'Approvvigionamento e l'Università nelle passate dominazione" in *Archivum Melitense*, Vol. III, No. 5 (July 1918), 202.
6. Regarding Pharmacists in Malta confer P. Cassar, "Inventory of a Sixteenth Century Pharmacy in Malta" in *St. Luke's Hospital Gazette*, Vol. XI, No. 1 (June 1976), 27-33 and Jos. Borg, "First recorded Pharmacist in the Maltese Islands" in *Journal of the Malta Union of Pharmacists*, Vol. II, No. 1, 15-18.

where private individuals deemed themselves as having been excessively taxed by those exercising the professions of chirurgy and pharmaceutics and finally to prohibit the practice of medicine in the town and throughout the island by unqualified persons (7).

During the late thirties, de Munda seems to have been unable to cope alone for the needs of the community. His health began to deteriorate while he had various personal affairs to look after. Moreover, there was then at Notabile a fellow Maltese who was a duly qualified medical practitioner. This was Dr. Joseph Calli or Callus. Callus seems to be the first Maltese who had graduated Doctor of Medicine although it has been impossible to trace so far where he had received his training abroad. Whereupon the Jurats of Notabile petitioned the Grand Master and the Council of the Order to make provisions so that thenceforth the city could be provided with the services of two doctors instead of one, who would divide among themselves a sum total of forty annual onze, as they suggested that another eight onze were to be added to the normal salary given so far to de Munda, which was still thirty two onze. Their request was acceded to by the Head of the Order in a rescript dated 13th January 1537 (8). De Munda subscribed to these provisions as he began to receive a salary of twenty onze till his death which must have occurred sometime late in October or early November 1540 (9). After de Munda's demise, Dr Callus was the only Medical Officer employed by the Town Council and he received the same salary previously assigned to de Munda (10). He began these duties in September 1540 and retained this office till 1560 (11). During that year he was dismissed (12) and was succeeded by Dr. Ferrando Calamia, a Greek, in October 1561. The salary Calamia began receiving on his appointment, however, was somehow increased, he began receiving forty onze a year (13).

7. ML, *Univ.* 12, 494r-v.
8. ACM, *Misc.* 2, 153r-v.
9. His widow received her late husband's salary amounting to three onze and eleven tari covering the months of September and October 1540 (ML, *Univ.* 84, v).
10. Regarding Dr. Jos Callus confer the following articles written by Gius. Gatt and published during February 1945 in *Il-Berqa*, Nos. 3915, 3916, 3918, 3919, 3921, 3925, 3927, 3928 and 3929; Seraphim M. Zarb O.P. Editorial in *Scientia*, Vol. XI, No. 2 (April-June 1945), 49-62; Jos. Galea, "Matthew Callus" in *Ibid.*, 63-68; E.R. Leopardi, "A Maltese District Medical Officer of the XVI century" in *Melita Historica*, Vol. 3, No. 4 (1963), 42-43.
11. ML, *Univ.* 84, 8r and 322r. The last payment made to Callus covered till the end of April 1560.
12. Paul Cassar, *op. cit.*, 17-19.
13. ML, *Univ.* 84, 346v, 358r, 363v, 364r etc.

alem the study of medicine and its practice underwent various modifications and ameliorations. One important modification concerned the appointment of the Protomedicus. This right was, thenceforth, no longer a prerogative of the Town Council, but was transferred to the new head of state, the Grand Master (14). De Munda's instance quoted before, seems to be, so far, the only occasion when the Maltese Commune exercised its right in the appointment of this official.

Till the first six decades of the sixteenth century, no documentation, as yet, is available recording the training abroad of our earliest Maltese doctors of medicine and surgery. The first document in this regard is dated 18th September 1569. On that date a fellow Maltese from the old city of Notabile, Gregorio Mamo obtained his Doctorate in Surgery from the renowned College of Doctors and the School of Medicine of Salerno (15). Seven years afterwards, he presented himself once more in front of the same College to graduate, this time Doctor of Arts and Medicine (16). Incidentally, Mamo happens to be the first name of a Maltese met with in the research carried out in the archives of the college of Doctors of the School of Medicine and the only Maltese to graduate there throughout the sixteenth century. Apart from Salerno, however, the records of the Colleges of Doctors of Medicine at Rome and at Naples gave forth the names of another two Maltese who had graduated there. These are Dr. Francesco Garibo, who graduated Doctor in Medicine at Naples on the 1st May 1586 (17) and Dr. Domenico Falson who obtained the same degree from Rome on the 29th September 1593 (18).

Although, so far, there are only these sporadic data regarding studies in medicine pursued abroad by Maltese citizens during the sixteenth century, it is to be hoped that further research may, eventually, provide other interesting information in this regard.

I hope eventually to publish the results of extensive research I carried out in the records of the above-mentioned three institutions of higher learning. A considerable number of fellow Maltese who afterwards practiced Medicine and Surgery in Malta during the following three centuries, namely till the beginning of the 19th century, have received their preparation in these institutions.

14. Paul Cassar, *op. cit.*, 274.
15. Archivio di Stato, Salerno, *Collegio dei Dottori, Reg.* 1, 155r-156r.
16. Archivio di Stato, *Collegio dei Dottori, Reg.* 1571-1595, 181r.
17. Archivio di Stato, Napoli, *Collegio dei Dottori di Napoli, Vol.* 165, 11v.
18. Archivio di Stato, Roma, *Collegio dei Dottori, Università, No.* 49, 112r.