

Paul Cassar

A NOTE ON THREE LIBRI MORTUORUM OF THE HOLY INFIRMARY,
THE CIVIL HOSPITAL OF VALLETTA AND THE CENTRAL
CIVIL HOSPITAL OF FLORIANA (1677—1885) *

This paper deals with three *Libri mortuorum* that list the patients dying at the Holy Infirmary of Valletta, the Civil and the Central Hospitals from 1677 to 1855.

These very well preserved volumes are bound with hard boards covered with parchment. The front covers bear in black capital letters the inscription *Liber mortuorum* and the years during which the volumes were in use. These registers are held at the Medical Records Office at St. Luke's Hospital, Gwardamanga.

Apart from recording the names and surnames of the persons dying at the three hospitals, the first and second volumes also contain the names of men who were brought already dead to the Infirmary and of the infants of both sexes that were returned to the Infirmary for burial in the cemetery adjacent to this hospital.

The bulk of the patients were interred in the cemetery of the Infirmary, just alluded to, near Nibbia's Church on the site now occupied by the Evans Laboratories. Exceptionally, however, one comes across cases where the deceased was buried elsewhere as in the Church of St. Dominic in Valletta, of the *Anime Purganti* and of *Santa Maria del Gesu* and of St. John's Conventual Church in the same city; and even in parish churches such as those of Bormla and Senglea (1).

The first volume is titled *Liber mortuorum ab anno 1677 usque ad annum 1712*. It measures 39cm by 26cm. Its first folio opens with the note: *Libro dove si notano tutti quelli che morino nella Sacra Infermeria e quelli che si portano morti come anco li bambini per sepellirsi fatto nell'Ano. 1677 Gen. 1677*. The folios are not paginated.

On the second folio beneath the IHS symbol is written: *Nota delli morti*

* I am greatly indebted to Dr. Vincent Moran M.D. Minister of Health and Environment, for granting me permission to study the registers and to Mr. E. Causen, the Officer in charge of Medical Records at St. Luke's Hospital for his help.

1. Vol. I, 6 March 1682 & 25 April 1682; Vol. II, 4 November 1764.

della Sacra Infa, Cominciando dal pmo. Gennaro 1677 sin all'ulto. Giugo. 1677. In actual fact, however, the last entry bears the date 23rd April 1713. There are gaps in the chronology when no entries were made as for example from January to June 1677; July 1677 to September 1678 and May to December 1682 without any reason being given for these omissions.

The second volume is inscribed *Liber mortuorum ad anno 1713 usque ad annum 1755* but actually the entries go on till the 30th December 1782 (2). A note calling attention to this fact is written in French at the bottom of the title-folio in which is also laid down, in Latin, the manner in which the entries were to be made to conform with Roman usage (*juxta rituale romanum*) i.e. the names, followed by the surname, of the deceased with their place of origin, father's name, date of death and locality of burial. The hospital official responsible for keeping the register was the Hospital Prior.

This second volume, measuring 42cm by 28.5cm, was ordered and paid for in 1733 by the Knight Fra Luigi Desparron, *prudhomme* of the Infirmary.

Adults are registered by name and surname but infants are entered with the name only and the designation of *bambino* or *bambina* or *bastardo* or *bastarda* after the name such as *Antonio bambino* or *Anna bastarda* without any indication as to parenthood, age or place of origin.

Apart from date of death, the entries of adults record, though not invariably, paternity, age, village or town of residence; and nationality in the case of foreigners — French, Genoese Neapolitan, Greek, Venetian, Aragonese, etc.

The third volume bears the title *Liber mortuorum ab anno 1755 ad annum 1848*. Some of the entries, however, are as late as the 24th April 1855. A note in Italian on the title-folio states that the entries were to be recorded by the Prior of the Infirmary and that the register was paid for in 1756 by the Knights Fra Pietro Antonio Gaetani and Fra Sancio Basurto who were the *prudhommes* of the hospital at the time (1751 and 1753 respectively).

Another note, this time in French and in a different hand, states that up to the end of 1782 the deceased were recorded in "the alphabetical order of their baptismal names" but in 1783 it was deemed preferable to follow the "alphabetical sequence of their family names" or surnames. There is a further note to the effect that as from the 7th September 1798 patients dying at the

2. Vol. II, f. 483.

Infirmaries were buried in the cemetery of St. Publius at Floriana but quite a number of them continued to be interred in the churches of Valletta and other towns even as late as 1847.

This third register, measuring 44cm by 31cm, covers a period of one hundred years and contains not only the names of men dying at the Infirmary (up to 1798) but also of those dying at the Civil Hospital in Valletta (1799-1850) and at the Central Hospital at Floriana (from May 1850 up to at least 24th April 1855). These inclusions are accounted for by the successive taking over of the Maltese Islands, first by the French under Napoleon on the 12th June 1798 and then by the British monarchy in 1800. The French took over the Holy Infirmary for their own sick troops which necessitated the transfer of the civilian sick to the nearby monastery and Church of St. Magdalene which thenceforth became known as the Civil Hospital.

Among the names of men recorded in these registers one comes across a few entries of deceased women. A "baptised slave" is registered simply by the name of *Giovanna* without any more particulars (d. 20th January 1687). Another woman is specified as having been a *hospitalaria* (the female official immediately responsible for the administration of the Women's Hospital who died on the 5th May 1701). Anna Grilliet from Valletta died at thirty years of age on the 4th February 1703. She was the wife of the *pratico* (assistant surgeon) at the Holy Infirmary. Her infant son Aloisio followed her to the grave two days later. Was this an instance of abnormal childbirth with death of the mother and infant? A few other women are recorded as having died at the *Casetta* or Women's Hospital. A 25 year old married woman from Valletta — Maria Scotto — is entered as having been killed (murdered?) on the 24th October 1814 (3).

Social status

Social status and occupation are indicated only in a few instances. These are knights and novices, priests and friars, soldiers and sailors, beggars, "baptised slaves", *bonavoglia* and *forzati*. The names of the knights and of the Priests of Obedience of the Order of St. John are marked with the eight-pointed cross of the Order. Those of priests not belonging to the order are preceded by a small Latin cross.

Among the knights who died at the Holy Infirmary were some of its administrative officials. These include the *armoriere* (Armorer, who was in

3. Vol. II, 16 August 1725; 20 August 1725 & 23 April 1750; Vol. III fol. 567.

charge of the silver plate of the infirmary), Fra Guglielmo Berger (d. 7th June 1687) and the Infirmarians Fra Francesco de Hossay (d. 5th October 1710), Fra Ludovico Hurry du Meney (d. 10th July 1681) and Fra Hugo de Fleurigny du Vauvilliers (d. 29th January 1693); and the Vice Prior Fra Andrea Zammit (d. 13th June 1765) (4).

The swords of novices of the Order who died in the Holy Infirmary passed into the hands of the clerk of the Hospital in conformity with an "old established custom". This official also received the sword of "a noble captain of the langue of Provence" who died in the infirmary in 1700 (5).

On the 19th June 1707 is recorded the death of the *Chef des Chirurgiens (sic)* of the Infirmary at the age of 75 years. The hospital pharmacist Paolo Bezzina, aged 61 years, also died there (14th November 1731).

Among other men whose occupation is recorded were Anatolio Camenzuli, aged 84 years, the *Maestro di fisica* (Physic Master) who died on 21st March 1755; Domenico di Cosma, the *Raijes (sic)* of a *xebec* who died *ricongiunto* (28th May 1752) and was buried in the Lazzaretto cemetery; Francesco Brincat, 77 years, a "hermit of St. Venera" and Michel'Angelo "the dumb" from Valletta aged 60 years (6).

The employees of dignitaries of the Order were also accorded some importance. Among these instances of reflected glory after death was Antonio Fornez, aged 29 years, "baptised slave", coach-driver of Grand Master Nicholas Cotoner who died on the 15th April 1679; Giuseppe Flumen, 21 years of age, servant of Count de Ton, Prior of Bohemia, who died on 4th March 1702; Luca di Bono, coachman of the Grand Master Fra Ramon Perellos y Roccafull (d. 1st March 1704).

Religious aspects

Occasionally the deceased is described as *ricongiunto* i.e. reconciled to the Catholic Church as in the case of an Andrea d'Amsterdam who died on the 24th February 1703 and a Guglielmo di Londra, an Englishman, who died on the 8th May 1712.

A few men "died without (receiving the last) sacraments" (7). This desig-

4. Archives 6430, ff. 31,32 & 39, National Malta Library, Valletta.
5. Vol. I, 3 November 1696 & 30 September 1700.
6. Vol. II, ff. 376 & 446.
7. Vol. II, f. 394.

nation, however, does not seem to carry the implication that these men were estranged from the Catholic Church or that they were not practising Catholics. It seems to indicate that death was so sudden and unexpected that they had no time to receive the last sacraments. This is confirmed by the case of a priest — Fra Agostino Fiteni, Priest of Obedience — who is recorded as having died without sacraments and who was given a church burial. On the other hand an entry of the 2nd June 1799 refers to a man where it is explicitly stated that the deceased had not *adempito il precetto pascale* and was buried *fuori della chiesa* (d. 2nd June 1799). A similar case was that of a 66 year-old man from Valletta who, in 1826, was interred *fuori della chiesa per essere della setta dei metodisti* (8).

A foreigner — Luca Lucovich — who was a mental patient and who died on the 29th June 1812 was administered Extreme Unction only, probably because he was not considered *compos mentis* to confess and receive Holy Communion.

Causes of Death

It is a matter of regret that the natural cause of death is not registered. On the other hand a variety of violent deaths are recorded. A few are entered as having died from drowning (9). A German was murdered during the night in 1696 (10); a young man died at the Lazzaretto in July 1767 where he appears to have been undergoing quarantine (11); a young knight of the Langue of Provence was killed in a duel in 1779; a Frenchman — referred to simply as De Mon — aged 60 years *mori fucilato* on the 17th October 1798 (12); a man from Valletta died from the explosion of gunpowder in 1834; a boy of eight years fell from a bastion and was found to be dead on admission to hospital in June 1834 (13).

During the plague epidemic of 1813-14 a number of men who died at the Civil Hospital were buried *con l'infetti* at Pietà, presumably because they were suspected of having had the plague (14).

There are two outstanding entries in the third volume referring to the years 1799 and 1823 respectively. The first one refers — very laconically —

8. Vol. III, f. 570.
9. Vol. II, 17 May 1713, f. 395 & Vol. III, f. 201.
10. Vol. I, 30 October 1696.
11. Vol. II, 26 July 1767, f. 386.
12. Vol. III, 26 January 1779 & 17 October 1798.
13. Vol. III, ff. 395 & 480.
14. Vol. III, f. 567.

to the execution, by a firing squad, of five men involved in the abortive uprising against the French in Valletta in January 1799, i.e.

- 14 Gennaro — *Di Lorenzi Guglielmo di Corsica abit. nella Valla. d'an. 60 del fu ... (sic) mori fucilato.*
He was buried in the cemetery of St. Publius, Floriana.
- 17 Gennaro — *Xerri Sacerd. D. Michele di C. Rohan d'ann. 58 (or 55 ?) del fu Alberto Mori fucilato.*
- 18 Gennaro — *Xiberras Luigi della Valla d'ann. 30 di Alesandro. Mori fucilato.*
- 19 Gennaro — *Zarbr (sic) Sacerd.e D. Bartolomeo della C. Rohan d'ann. 50 mori fucilato (sic).*
- 31 Gennaro — *Matteo Pulis della Valla. d'ann. 30 del fu Antonio mori fucilato (15).*

No other names of men are recorded though it is known that a total of 43 faced a French firing squad (16). The place of burial is not recorded in these entries but a note on the title-leaf of this volume states:- *Li morti dalli 7 settembre 1798 sono sepolti nel cimitero di S. Publio.* (Those who died after the 7 September 1798 are buried in the cemetery of S. Publius). Presumably, therefore, the five men were interred in this cemetery at Floriana.

The second entry, under the date of the 11th February 1823, deals with the tragedy involving a large number of boys who lost their lives in the convent of the Friars Minor Observants at Valletta during the Carnival of that year. It runs as follows in translation:- "On the 11th February 1823, the last day of Carnival, 94 dead (children) between the ages of 15 and 16 years were brought to the men's hospital. They had died of suffocation in the corridor of the groundfloor of the convent of the Minor Observants of Valletta at 6.30 p.m. after the procession that is cutomarily held during the days of carnival. The next day they were conveyed to the cemetery" (17).

Comment

The reader of this note may think that these three registers have a certain remoteness and that they deal with matters that are only of marginal interest from the historical viewpoint. To the historian, however, with particular con-

15. Vol. III, 14 January, 17 January, 18 January, 19 January & 31 January 1799.
16. A. Vella, A. Azzopardi, E. Camilleri, *Grajjet Malta, It-tieni Ktieb*, Malta, 1980, p. 215.
17. Vol. III, f. 190.

cern for the medical history of our island, nothing is alien that touches the vicissitudes of the Holy Infirmary — not even what may be regarded as trivia such as the recording of the persons, who died within its walls, in special registers. I was led to delve into these registers because they had remained unnoticed for over a century until they were brought to my attention and I could not assess their historical value unless I went through them. Another reason which induced me to explore them was the fact that, as far as I am aware, no Libri mortuorum from the Holy Infirmary are to be found in the archives of the Order of St. John preserved at the National Library of Valletta. Other such *Libri* may be still awaiting discovery but in the meanwhile the three here described may claim to be the only ones that have escaped destruction by time and man. I thought it worthwhile, therefore, to publish the results of my examination of these registers for the benefit of those fellow labourers who are ever probing for additional information about the Holy Infirmary.

It is to be noted that these records were started soon after the end of the plague epidemic of 1675-76. Were they preceded by others that may still be unearthed? Or were they the first ever to be kept so that they constitute the earliest hospital mortality statistics to be compiled by the civil authorities in Malta?

One would have liked to study the mortality trends during the period of over 170 years covered by these registers but this was not found possible as there are months during which no entries were made. Besides, the ages of infants are not stated and the figures of deaths among women are extremely scanty. One can, therefore, only draw general impressions and say that in the period 1677 to 1712 the deaths of infants weigh heavily in the records and that a considerable number of men lived to a good old age some of whom reaching the 60 to 80 age group.

Of special interest are the years 1798 (20th September) — 1800 (4th September) which span the months of turmoil brought about by the uprising of the Maltese in the countryside against their new masters, the French occupying forces. One of the features of this crisis was the famine that struck both the French troops and Maltese civilians blockaded inside the towns round the Grand Harbour. One would have expected the effect of this malnutrition, shown in the spread of scurvy and phthisis, to be reflected in an increased number of deaths at the Civil Hospital. The relative register, however, records no such features, the mortality figures remaining as in previous years. This may be due to the fact that the French had reduced the population of the towns by discharging all convalescent patients from the Civil Hospital and sending

the beggars into the countryside. In fact by the beginning of October 1799 the urban population was reduced from 48,000 to 9,000. What may also account for the low mortality in the Civil Hospital is the possibility that those who died from starvation and disease did so in their own homes and would thus not be recorded in the hospital registers (18).

Another aspect of those months which merits special mention is the executions by the French of the five Maltese insurgents already alluded to. Their names and their fate receive no particular attention in the register. This is understandable as any allusion to their ideology or deeds might have been interpreted by the French as sedition on the part of the official making the entries. One is led to speculate why the names of these five men were registered at all in the *libri* mortuorum of the Holy Infirmary considering that they did not die in that hospital. Presumably their corpses were taken there as a routine measure as in the case of the cadavers of those who had died suddenly through natural causes or through a violent death. But this in turn raises the question — which remains unanswered — why the corpses of the insurgents who were executed in the same period, have not been taken to the Holy Infirmary. Or was this a special consideration accorded only to the leaders of the failed uprising?

Summary

The three registers record the names of patients dying at the Holy Infirmary and other hospitals from 1677 to 1848.

The records begin in the year following the plague epidemic of 1675-76. So far they constitute the earliest mortality figures from hospitals compiled by the civil authorities.

In the period 1677 to 1712 the deaths of infants weigh heavily in the records. A considerable number of men lived to a ripe old age.

The natural causes of death are not stated but a variety of types of violent deaths are registered.

The names of five of the Maltese insurgents who were executed by the French in January 1799 appear in the records.

The *liber* for 1755 — 1848 does not reflect the high mortality from starvation in the town during the French blockade of 1799-1800.