

Unit 7.5 – **The Plague of 1813-1814** – *prepared by Ray Spiteri M.A.*

The Plague enters Malta

In the early 19th century the belief still held ground that plague was a contagious disease conveyed from a sick to a healthy person by touching the patient's body, belongings or clothes. Preventive measures adopted by the sanitary authorities to stem the spread of the **pestilence** were based on this assumption. Food was thus immersed in water. Coins were immersed in vinegar before being exchanged. Similar steps had been taken before in the Great Plague of London in 1665, and Malta in 1675-76 when nearly 9,000 had died. Little improvement seems to have been made in the fight against this dreadful disease.

The plague entered Malta by an English merchant vessel, the *St Nicholas*, which came from Alexandria in Egypt on 28 March 1813. The first case occurred in Valletta on 14 April, the victim was the daughter of a smuggler who may have come into contact with the crew. On 16 April another case of plague occurred at a shoemaker's shop in West Street. The authorities refused to declare the disease as plague, probably afraid of causing panic among the population. It was only on 5 May that the disease was declared as plague by the **Board of Health**. By that time it was too late to contain the epidemic. On 12 May the Board of Health issued a series of regulations to try to contain the disease from spreading:

1. Public gatherings are prohibited.
2. People are to stay at home.
3. Shops are to remain closed, except those with a special license.
4. The Bishop has suspended obligatory attendance to Mass on Sundays and feast days.
5. All houses are subject to inspection by the health officials.
6. Sanitary notices are placed in public areas to advise the people how to avoid being infected.
7. Valletta has been divided into eight districts guarded by civic guards.
8. The Government will be distributing bread, soup, wine and money for the poorest families.
9. Fort Manoel has been turned into an emergency plague hospital together with the *Lazzaretto*.
10. Persons feeling symptoms of the disease are to report to Fort Manoel for diagnosis.
11. Prisoners and convicts carrying the sick and dead will be pardoned after the plague.
12. Carts loaded with food provisions will be touring Valletta and the Harbour cities twice daily, selling at low prices fixed by the Government.
13. Army doctors and nurses will be serving at the plague hospital.
14. Dead corpses were buried amidst lime to accelerate their decaying process.

The spread of the pestilence

One easy way how the plague spread from one house to another was by clothes hung on roofs. Unable to speak in streets and shops, neighbours, unable to resist isolation for long, ignored the regulations and exchanged chats on the roofs, spreading further the plague germ in the process. There were some who spread the plague out of spite or envy to healthy persons not yet hit by the disease. The way the pestilence reached Zurrieq shows how some people were careless of regulations. This same pattern could have been similar to the other villages in Malta.

A family of five children took refuge at the plague hospital where the mother gave birth to a baby. Both mother and baby died of plague some days later. A priest from Zurrieq, who had assisted the mother on her death, became infected. Unaware of the symptoms, he returned to his village where he died of plague on 28th June. A few days before he went to a barber who also died of plague a few days after the priest. Thence hundreds more at Zurrieq fell victims of the plague.

Many expected the disease would slow down in the summer months because the heat would kill the germ. By the contrary occurred. June, July and August were the months with the highest number of deaths. Hildebrand Oakes replaced the Board of Health with Englishmen and enforced strict quarantine between the Harbour towns and the villages. People began to realize that strict isolation was the only way to stem the plague from spreading. Some of those infected showed no symptoms and thus they continued with their daily routine until only a few hours before death. On some rare occasions some even fell and died instantly without any previous symptoms of illness or pain. Those few who were immune to the disease acted, without knowing, as carriers of the germ. It was these three groups who were the most likely to spread the plague.

As months passed and people got used to the horrors of the plague, they also became careless for their health, often ignoring or breaking quarantine regulations deliberately. In August the authorities had to give a severe warning to the people when a man who broke the curfew was stopped by the guards, tied to the door and shot on the spot. People behaviour and moral values tended to change as the plague progressed. In its early stages people were more afraid of infection and death. Sensing death as very close and inevitable, some became deeply pious and religious others resorted to an immoral life by practicing various vices. Some people risked being contaminated for altruistic or egoistic purposes. Below are a few examples of different behaviour:

- Convicts stole clothes and valuables from the sick and the dead.
- A foreigner attempted to rape a woman at the plague hospital.
- A young woman from Valletta took care of two infected orphans until all three died of plague.
- A man, who was living with a woman, married her when she was already infected and both died of plague a few days later.

The arrival of Sir Thomas Maitland as Governor



When the new Governor Sir Thomas Maitland arrived on 13th October 1813, the plague germ had already started to lose its initial strength. More cases of infected persons surviving the plague became more common from the month of October onwards. Maitland immediately enforced stricter isolation regulations. The last cases of plague were reported at Qormi and Xaghra Gozo. Maitland ordered walls to be built manned with guards at the roads leading to that village. In January 1814 the plague

entered Gozo, killing some 200 people there. Qormi was free from plague by April 1814. In February churches and shops opened again for the public. People started to move freely from different parts of the island after quarantine restrictions had been removed. In September 1814 Maitland declared that Malta had been free from plague for six months and asked foreign countries to open their harbours to Maltese ships.



Consequences of the Plague

The epidemic left 4,486 dead from a population of nearly 116,000, that is about 4% of the population perished. The risk of another outbreak of plague remained for years. In fact, between 1819 and 1841, 12 ships entered harbour with the infection on board. Several deaths among the crew occurred at the *Lazzaretto*, the normal quarantine hospital. Often, some of the hospital staff fell victim of plague too, but in all occasions, the plague was prevented to spread outside the *Lazzaretto*.



Year	Victims of Plague
1819	2
1821	12
1835	6
1837	4
1841	2
1841	25

The plague resulted into a sharp drop in commerce and agricultural produce. Malta lost foreign markets and agencies. Most villages set up their own cemeteries, chapels and statues dedicated to St Roque, patron saint against the plague. The plague destroyed the boom of the previous years. Sicily opened its harbours to Maltese ships in 1815. The end of the plague brought two incidents between Church-State relations: one over precedence between the Governor and the Bishop and the other regarding the ownership of St John's Church in Valletta.