

Guarding Against Contagion: Vigilance and the Role of Fortifications in Malta during the Outbreak of Plague in Messina in 1743

Stephen C. Spiteri - University of Malta

L'Anno del Nostro Signore mille sette cento quaranta tre was not a good year. The dreadful plague had broken out in the city of Messina, a short distance across the sea in nearby Sicily. It also happened to be one of the coldest winters on record to hit the Maltese islands in the course of the eighteenth century.¹

For the Hospitaller knights and their Maltese subjects this deadly combination of factors did not augur well for both the Island's commerce and for the safety of its inhabitants. The Hospitaller Order of St. John was never one to take the news of such deadly outbreaks lightly. Indeed, the Knights' sanitary departments had always prided themselves on the rigour of their well-proven quarantine laws which had served them well over the centuries and had preserved the Island, their Convent and their subject population from many such calamities.

Now, once again, the whole machinery was set in motion. But in this instance, given the close proximity of the source of the contagion and the many maritime, commercial, and social contacts which the Maltese had with the city of Messina, the risks were deemed even higher. The situation demanded even more careful vigilance not the least because of the ferocity of the outbreak. As a matter of fact, the outbreak of plague at Messina in 1743 would prove to be exceptionally

1 The following year, 1744, was also noted for its '*lunghe piogge dell'inverno*'.

devastating in its fatality. The prominent and flourishing Sicilian city, for its part, was taken unawares largely because it had been spared from pestilential outbreaks for more than a century. The last epidemic that had occurred there was in 1624 but on this occasion a vessel from Corfu had somehow managed to evade the sanitary barriers and by the time that the pestilence had run its course, it would destroy some 50,000 persons, nearly two-thirds of Messina's inhabitants.² According to the Order's own records, the plague was believed to have originated in Alexandria '*da dove l'ha imbarcato bastimento Inglese*' which then took it to Smirna and '*nell'Isole dell'Arcipelago*' (where it was reported that it was devastating the population at the rate of 150 people a day), and, from there, found its way to Sicily.³

The first rumours about the outbreak of a suspicious contagious illness at Messina began to reach Malta by the end of April, about a month after the first occurrences took place at the end of the previous month. The direct connection between Messina and Malta would have ensured that the Order would have been among the first locations outside Sicily to receive the grave news. By the first of May, the freshly elected Grand Master Manoel Pinto de Fonseca and his council felt the need to issue a decree to pre-empt any disorders.⁴ This *bando* prohibited foreign vessels entering the Grand Harbour from making contact with

2 *Popular Science Monthly*, volume 57.djvu/600https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/Page:Popular_Science_Monthly_Volume_57.djvu/600.

3 For an account of the outbreak of plague in Messina in 1743 see Orazio Turriano *Memoria istorica del contagio della città di Messina dell'anno 1743 ... con l'istruzione, che si osservò nello spurgo praticatosi nella medesima città, che servirà di continuazione al supplemento della storia di Sicilia aggiunta ai principj della storia del signor abate Langlet* (Naples. 1745), as well as shorter commentaries in Paolo Assalini, George Pinckard, *Observations on the Disease Called the Plague, on the Dysentery, the Ophthalmy of Egypt, and on the Means of Prevention: With Some Remarks on the Yellow Fever of Cadiz, and the Description and Plan of an Hospital for the Reception of Patients Affected with Epidemic and Contagious Diseases* (T. & F. Swords, printers to the Faculty of Physic of Columbia college, 1806) xxxiii-xlii; Samuel Latham Mitchell, Edward Miller, E. Bliss and E. White, *Medical Repository of Original Essays and Intelligence Relative to Physic, Surgery, Chemistry, and Natural History*, Volume 8 (1805), 225.

4 P. Cassar, 'Sanitary Organization in Malta in 1743', *The St. Luke Hospital Gazette* 192, (Malta, 1966), 57

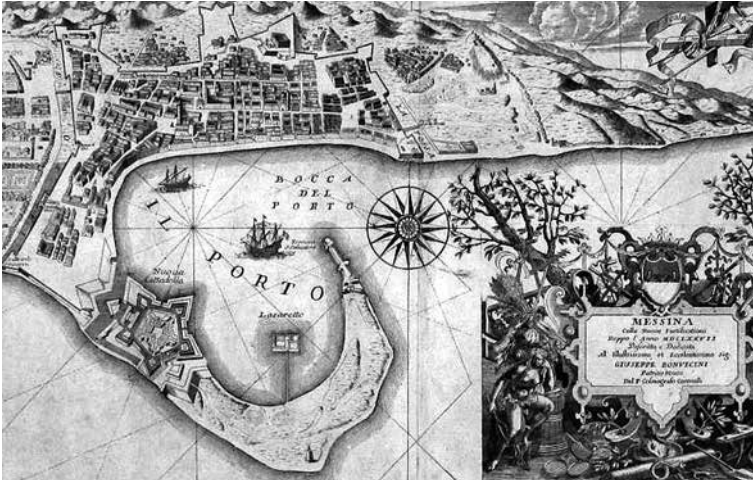


Figure 1. General schematic plan of the city of Messina, in Sicily, as it stood in 1677.

other craft before being examined by health inspectors and banned local fishing boats from venturing beyond a twenty-mile limit from the shores of Malta and Gozo. The Grand Master also appointed a special high-powered commission of Knights-grand crosses, endowed with all the necessary authority, to see that all necessary measures were pushed through. These four commissioners, Fra Ottavio de Gallean, president of the Order's treasury, Fra Pitero Rovero di Guarena, Admiral of the Navy, Fra D. Giuseppe Pixiotto, Chancellor and Fra Filippo Guglielmo Count of Nesselroad, Prior of Germany, lost no time in drawing up the necessary emergency measures and saw to their enforcement. Their first act was to recall back to Malta the galley squadron that had left Grand Harbour the previous day bound for Sicily and to order the vessels to avoiding any contact with the Italian mainland.⁵

The first of the Commission's *Istruzioni* (written instructions) were issued on the same day, 29 May, the very same day that the Order received official confirmation of the plague in Messina. Amongst these were instructions '*per l'Isola e Spiagge di Malta*' and for Gozo.

⁵ Ibid., 58.

Included in these provisions were orders to arm three naval vessels ('*speronare*') each under the command of a Knight, two of which were to be stationed in the Grand Harbour and the other '*nei Freghi*';

'... E giunta la note questo del porte vanno l'una verso ponente, e l'altra verso levante; talmente che incontrandosi quelli di ponente con quella stabilita nei freghi alla meta' dell'isola facendosi riconoscere l'una all'altra ritornino ogni una per suo camino in dietro, osservando se le torri rispondono al segnale, che avranno dato le speronare per darne avviso all'Emza. Sua in caso che non rispondono, e non stasero colla vigilanza dovuta.

Quella poi destinata per la Parte di Levante dovrà arrivare sin a Marsascirocco e puigliando le sue misure di consumare tutta la note tra l'andare e venire invigilando alla custodia di tutta quella spiaggia'.

Other directives, issued on 10 June, dealt with the organization of the *Corpi di Guardia* of the *Barriera del Gran Porto*,⁶ the Lazzaretto and Marsamxett, and Corradino, as well as the regulations for the *Felucca* detailed for guard duty at the mouth of the Grand Harbour. The *Commissari della Sanità* were furthermore issued with a '*Regolamento per questo nostro general Porto e per quello di Marsamuscetto per li Bastimenti provenienti dalla Sicilia*'. Ships laden with cargos of '*comestibili, o altre merci che non soffrono contumacia*' were to be allowed '*lo scarico nel modo e luogo*' assigned to them while those '*carichi di bestiami*' were to be taken to Marsamxett Harbour and to proceed according to instructions given to them. By June, however, only ships from Calabria and the *Regno di Napoli* were to be accorded '*l'ingresso e la pratica*' while those which had '*toccato in Sicilia*' or had departed '*da luoghi sospetti*' were to be boarded and inspected by

6 *Istruzioni Per il Corpo di Guardia destinato alla Barriera del Gran Porto* (10 June 1743) – this comprised '8 uomini compreso il Caporale', and a Knight, who took charge of the post '*doppo cena*' and retired '*alle ore sei della mattina circa*' when he was relieved by the '*Guardiano del Porto, o Scrivano della Sanità*.'

29. Mag^o
 1743.

Regolam^{to} per le marine, ^{dell'Isola} di Malta, e
 Gozo, al Comino rispetto ai bastim^{ti}
 che procedessero dalla Sicilia.

Che le Calanche principali, ^{dell'Isola di Malta} dove possono
 scaricare tali Bastimenti, siano custodite
 da un Cav^o per ciascheduna con quante
 Person^e di Marina l'Em^o Sua. E che i
 Turcopoli vadano ogni notte facendo diligent^e
 rondone per tutte le marine coll'obbligo
 di dare P^oviso al Cav^o più vicina —
 quantovolve si accorgessero di Bastimento
 che stasse per approdare in quelle: Ed
 in quanto alle diligence da usarsi dai
 Torrioni non si è parlato, avendo l'Em^o Sua
 gli opportuni provvedimenti.

In quanto al Comino milita la stessa ragione
 che per le altre Torri

che si
 troverà
 nella Torre

Figure 2. Minute in the Order's records outlining the regulations to be adopted in the surveillance of the coastal areas in relation to ships arriving from Sicily, dated 29 May 1743. Courtesy of the National Library of Malta.

an official who was then himself, together with the vessel, its crew and cargo, quarantined for 24 days. Ships arriving from Catania, Palermo, and Messina 'e suoi contorni', on the other hand, were to be denied entry and sent away 'senza nessun ricevere ne lasciar scaricare loro mercanzie d'alcune specie'.

Cordon Sanitaire

Ensuring that the pestilence did not set foot on the island of Malta called for other measures apart from the requisite quarantine provisions. Foremost amongst these, was the need to establish a *cordon sanitaire* – a defensive ring which allowed the Knights both to keep a strict and careful watch over every inch of shoreline bordering their little realm and also to intercept any attempts which sought to disregard the ‘safety’ barrier laid around its shores.

Inevitably, the system of coastal watch towers and militia guard posts which had been set up to guard against approaching enemy galleys and corsair vessels was immediately recruited as part of the line of coastal pickets. Yet, it was soon realized that these handful of towers and militia posts alone were not going to be enough to hermetically seal off all the vulnerable landing places. For although comprising a land mass of little more than 316 km (121 sq miles), in practice Malta’s long and easily accessible shore line spanned some 136 km in length, making the task of controlling every single bay, inlet, and hundreds of possible landings places a considerably more difficult task than it may have seemed *a prima vista*.

To begin with, the Knights had serious concerns about the efficacy of the coastal guards stationed in the towers. Such was their concern that the Order commissioned Notary Vittorio Gixti to inspect all the towers and report on their state of readiness and repair.

His account makes for very interesting reading and reveals the overall state of abjection in many of the old De Redin and Lascaris watch towers, some of which were already more than a century old. It also reveals the squalid living arrangements and conditions of the small detachments of coastal guards - the *capomastri* and bombardiers - who were permanently stationed in these distant outposts.

In one instance, for example, we learn that the men at Ghajn Hadid Tower were reduced to cooking their meals in the shaft of the tower’s spiral staircase;

‘... Si servono di cucina nella scala lumaca, quindi questa si vede imbrunita, siccome pure la camera per cagione di fumo, lo che pregiudica non poco alla Torre’.

Many other towers lacked windows and door furniture or leaked water from their vaulted ceilings in rainy weather. Practically all the towers were badly in need of maintenance, above all the quintessential *ribocatura*, the re-pointing of the intrices between the stone courses on the exterior walls of the structures, which ensured the water did not seep into the heart of the walls and cause all sorts of structural damage, not to mention the resulting dampness inside the already bleak living quarters within the towers.

More importantly, however, was the realization that the system of about thirty or so coastal towers, although well-placed to keep a 360-degree lookout against approaching enemy vessels, could not be used to enforce an island-wide picket line. True, the Knights also had scores of other coastal defences in the forms of batteries and redoubts placed closer down by the shore, many of which had only just been built a couple of decades earlier, and, indeed, these too were automatically recruited into the quarantine provisions.⁷ But even so, this still left many other significant areas of shoreline which could not be directly controlled to intercept any landings, especially under the cover of darkness. To begin with, the network of batteries and redoubts was largely confined to the areas within the bays and coves, leaving the headlands and other accessible places outside the confines of these anchorages unmonitored while the watch towers themselves, on the other hand, were, for their most part, placed on high ground and a considerable distance inland from the shoreline. In short, there remained many other places that simply had to be guarded if the Knights truly wanted to seal off the island:

‘ Che le Calanche principali di quest Isola di Malta dove possono sbarcare tali Bastimenti siano custodite con quante

7 For a comprehensive inventory of Hospitaller coastal batteries and redoubts see S.C.Spiteri, *Fortresses of the Cross*, 505-38 and 539.

persone stimerà l' Eminenza sua e che i Turcopoli vadano ogni notte facendo diligentemente la Ronda per tutte le marine coll' obbligo di dare l'avviso al Cav[aliere] più vicino quante volte si accorgeressero di Bastimento che sta per approdare in quelle'.

The Coastal Watch

As in the past, the problem of guarding such places was often solved by stationing small detachments of guards wherever these were needed. Ever since the middle ages, the Maltese had made use of a system of open-air posts placed strategically around the shores of the island. After the Order of St John took over Malta in 1530, the Knights continued to rely heavily for the defence of the island on this local militia set-up which they incorporated into their own defensive system. This set-up consisted of two main elements, the *Māhras*, a coastal watch, and the *Dejma*, a sort of standing militia army. The organization of the coastal guard dated back to at least the late fourteenth century, when the Royal Camerarius, Philippus de Marino, was entrusted by the king with the organization of a watch for the whole island in 1375, and as shown by the militia lists of 1419-20, this came to include all the men of Malta between the ages of sixteen and sixty-five (except for the clergy who were exempted), who were obliged to keep watch one night a week according to an established roster.

The men were deployed in three-men groups at strategic points around the coastline at night and, in a few sensitive places, even by day, the men being sent to the coastal posts nearest to their villages as was practicable. Thus the men in the district of Naxxar, for example, which had the largest area and stretch of coastline to patrol, were deployed in such a way that the inhabitants of Raħal Dragu, Raħal Presa, and Raħal Dimagħ were sent to Lippija, those of Raħal Calleja and Mosta to Ghajn Tuffieħa, those from the village of Naxxar, Raħal Ghargħur, to Ghajn Rasul, St. Paul's Bay, Burmarrad (Naxxar & Lija) and those of Raħal Sammut (together with some men from Ħal Pessa, Lija, Raħal Attard,

Raħal Balzan, and Birkirkara) at Bir il-Baħar (Għallis).

When Grand Masters Lascaris and Martin De Redin built their coastal towers in the middle of seventeenth century, the Knights still had a network of *'sessanta Guardie in circa più e in ciascheduna delle quali fanno la guardia quattro uomini, che ogni notte sono due cento quaranta; questi sono i più poveri e i più miserabili di detta Isola'*.⁸ A list and map of the location of these posts is given by Stanley Fiorini in his seminal paper on the *Maħras* and *Dejma* posts.

Not all these posts, it seems, were out in the open for some had small refuge places in the form of unfortified *capanne* (rural buildings) or other sentry rooms *'all'anticha'*, as Mederico Blondel calls them.⁹ A number of these sentry rooms were still in use during the eighteenth century and some of these even find their way into contemporary plans and documentation. A plan of the Marsaxlokk defences at Bengeħisa Point and Wied ix-Xoqqa, for instance, dated 23 February 1761, shows one such militia sentry room at *Posto Rasgilian*, a short distance away from Bengeħisa Battery and entrenchments but further out along the shore closer to the sea and a nearby fougasse. A *Pianta topografica del territorio di selmun appartenente al sacro Monte della redenzione degli schiavi fatta nell'anno 1789*, likewise, shows a *Camera di guardia* north of Mistra Battery. Other so-called 'Dejma posts' are often cited, such as the Ta' Tabibu farmhouse in St. Paul's Bay. Still, a number of militia posts seem to have lacked any shelter whatsoever.

Therefore, in a winter which was proving to be one of the coldest on record (*'L'eccessivo freddo che si fece sentire in quell'anno'*), stationing men out in the open was no solution. Something had to be done to protect the sentinels from the cold wind and rains. The answer, it appears, was to build a host of easily transportable sentry boxes (termed *guardiole* or *guerites*) and to deploy these wherever a permanent sentry was required to be stationed:

8 NLM, Arch. 110, f. 31.

9 NLM, Arch. 6551, f. 104, *'...non ritrovandosi in tutta quella Costa di Scirocco e mezzogiorno, altro che due piccole guardie all'anticha, senza corrispondenza nessuna e con pochissimo effetto'*.

‘... Sovra venendo l’inverno si penso di dare i mezzi accioche li guardiani delle antiche piccolo Torri dell’Università della Notabile e Valletta potessero attendere al loro dovere malgrado l’accessivo freddo.’

Francesco Marandon, the Order’s resident military engineer, tells us that these ‘*guardiole, in Francese Guerites, per mettere a coperto le sentinelle*’ were constructed of ‘*tela incerata coll’ossatura di legno*’. He then goes on to give a detailed description;

‘Queste guardiole avevano per base due legni grossi tre oncie e lunghi dodici palmi, nel mezzo de sud.^o legni era fatta l’ossatura quadra di tre palmi in quadro la quale sosteneva il tetto inclinato da inanti a dietro, sicche essendo attorniata e coperta di tela o lana incerata metterà la sentinella a ridosso della pioggia, del freddo e del vento; Per impedire ch’ il vento non roversciasse si poneva una grossa pietra dietro ed inanti sulle sud.ⁱⁱ legni o stanghe ed allorche il vento veniva imboccare la portella la sentinella agevolmente girava la guardiola abbracciando li due capi delle due stanghe’.

In short, each sentry box was constructed from a wooden framework of three-inch thick strips of wood, had a sloping roof, and was covered in oiled canvas or woollen cloth, and was built to rest on two long sleeper poles in the manner shown in the diagram below. The whole contraption was light enough to be manhandled by the sentry on duty so that it could be easily turned against the direction of the prevailing wind. But because of this very lightness, each sentry box needed to be weighted down with stone boulders so as to prevent it from being toppled over or blown away by strong gusts of wind. Such *guardiole portabili* were sent to *Punta Lembi*, *Punta Dragut*, *Madliena Redoubt* (Baħar ic-Cagħaq), and *St. Thomas Tower* amongst others.

In actual fact, the use of wooden *guerites* in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Malta was then already a very common practice that

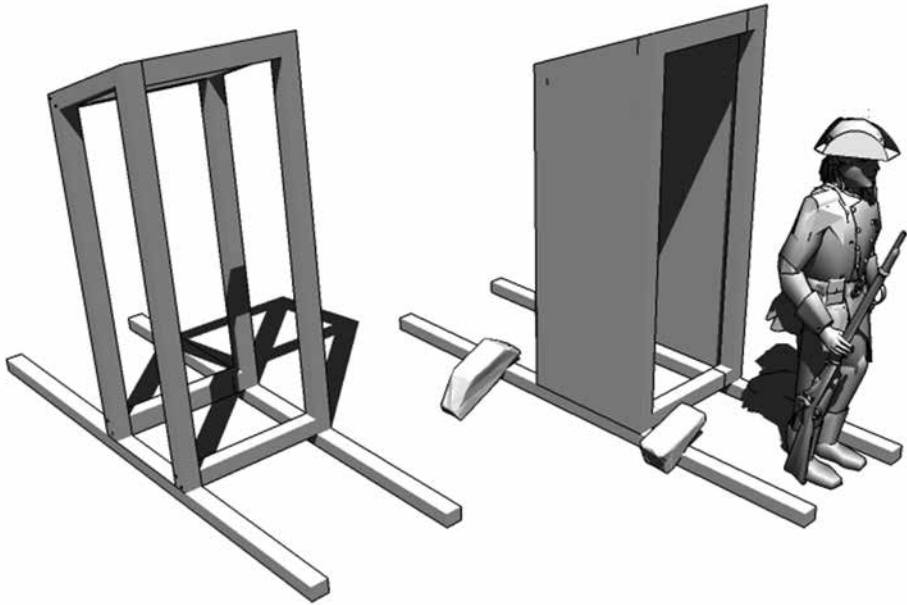


Figure 3. Author’s graphic simulation of the mobile canvas-covered wooden *guardiole* manufactured purposely for the emergency of 1743, based on Francesco Marandon’s description (see text).

has largely gone unnoticed. Although we are nowadays more familiar with the domed stone-built *echaugettes*, some of these had actually begun their life as ephemeral wooden boxes before they were eventually replaced and rebuilt in stone. One well documented example is Fort Manoel, which has been shown by the present author to have lacked stone *echaugettes* when it was first built and completed in the years 1723-1736. The Manoel Foundation documents record the use of a number of wooden *guerites* throughout the first decades of the fort’s life, and one of its wooden sentry boxes was also sent to equip the Qala Lembi battery built as an outpost of Fort Manoel on the seaward side of the Sliema headland, across the harbour.¹⁰

The problem of protecting the sentinels on lookout duty, however, was not confined solely to the open air stations. Even some

¹⁰ Stephen C. Spiteri, *Fort Manoel*, Arx Occasional Papers 4, 2015.

of the towers and batteries themselves, though not all, required such added protection. A number of the then-existing military structures, we are told, required some added provisions to ensure that their sentries did not freeze out in the cold whilst undertaking their lookout duties. As a result, a number of the existing defensive works were either supplied with temporary wooden *guerites* (as in the case of St. Thomas Tower) or else had new sentry boxes built permanently in stone. Wied iż-Żurrieq Tower still retains a sentry box built in stone but most have lost this feature. One can, nonetheless, get a glimpse of such elements in the plan of the Ramla Redoubt and a lithograph of Wignacout Tower at St. Paul's Bay (this appears to have already been fitted to the tower before 1743).

The Order of St John was also obliged to repair existing militia posts (built in stone) and build others in stone in new locations. These, too, seem to have been supplied with sentry boxes although it is not clear if the *guardiole* mentioned in this instance were of *tela incerata* or else built entirely in stone. Given that Mondion specifically mentions the latter only in particular instances, it may be assumed that the *guardioli* otherwise mentioned were constructed of stone.

In all, Marandon's list gives a total of 93 watch posts and coastal fortifications which had been established to form part of the coastal picket line in 1743, amongst which were,

- 20 newly established militia posts supplied with *guardiole* (fixed / portable); later in a 1745 letter, Marandon mentions only 19 posts;
- 15 repaired or rebuilt old militia posts (either in stone or supplied with sentry boxes);
- 17 towers of which 6 were given sentry boxes;
- 19 batteries of which 4 were given sentry boxes; and
- 16 redoubts of which 3 were given sentry boxes.

This list does not include the provisions, if any, which may have been undertaken for the protection of Gozo's coastline. Still this should not be taken to read that no provisions were implemented to protect the

sister island, given its similar predicament, although it is difficult to explain why Marandon would have chosen to omit to mention such efforts.

Apart from the creation of new militia posts and the erection of *guardiole*, the Knights implemented various other measures likewise intended to improve the existing defences. Amongst these was the building of various *ponti di pietra* in order to provide access into a number of redoubts and batteries which seem to have lacked adequate drawbridges or other means of spanning their ditches. A number of batteries, nevertheless, still lacked drawbridges as late as 1792 when a decree was issued for them to be supplied with planks of wood instead. Some batteries and redoubts were also fitted with banquettes.

Marandon's notes and list are also useful because they serve to reveal various interesting facts. The Mellicha Tower, for example, is shown to have been employed to house a contingent of Knights from the '*galliota*' which was deployed to guard the neighbouring waters. The passage leading down to the sea at Miġra l-Ferħa (*Passo Meira Ferħa*), on the other hand, was sealed off with a wall as was a similar path way leading down to Fomm ir-Rriħ, which had been built on the site of a collapsed Lascaris watch tower at *Della Capra* (Blat il-Moġħza). Other details shed light on the state of what are still rather obscure defences. The entry for Tombrell for example, shows that the battery had still not been built by 1743. The document also provides a *terminus post quem* for the present blockhouses and redan at Mistrà Battery which still lacked any form of roofed structures during the 1743 emergency, reaffirming the present author's earlier observation that this battery, begun in 1714, had been originally built simply as a prepared gun platform until it was fitted with landward defences during Grand Master Pinto's reign, possibly a couple of decades later during the mobilization efforts of 1761.

Francesco Marandon's full account of measures undertaken in 1743, reads as follows:

*'... Si fabricano il posto Napolon presso Ricasoli
Si aggiunse una guardiola all'antico posto Preina*

Si inalzo di alcune filate l'antico posto Zennae
Si fece una divisione con muro alla camera della Torre della
Grazia ò sià Scia ajra per separare il cavaliere dalla gente del
presidio
Si fabbrica più vicino al mare, l'antico posto Blatabaida
Guardiola alla Torre Migieles
Si fabbrica il nuovo posto Preposito con guardiola e il nuovo
posto Siege'
Guardiola alla Torre Zoncol
Si fece il ponte di pietra alla Ridotta Vuied el aajn (Wied il-
Għajn) e se li aggiunse la gardiola all'angolo saliente
Guardiola di tela incerata a San Tommaso
Si fece il ponte di pietra alla batteria Maxel a sinistra di Cala
S. Tommaso
Il medesimo alla Batteria Ricama a destra di Cala S. Tommaso
Si fece il nuovo posto Monsciar con guardiola
Guardiola a torre Sciop el again
Nuovo posto Cali e guardiola
Terrazzo e li banchi all'antico posto Tombrel
Nuovo posto Falsun e guardiola
Guardiola Torre limara (Delimara)
Ponte di pietra e guardiola alla Batteria Vilgia (Wilġa)
Niente alla Ridotta de Fango
Niente alla Ridotta Craite Vendome
Ponte di pietra alla Batteria Cajenza
Ponte di pietra Ridotta San Giorgio
Guardiola e li banchi batteria Ghzira
Ponte di pietra Ridotta a Birzebbuga
Niente alla batteria Elminiek
Niente alla ridotta Calafrana
Il ponte alla batteria Ben isa
Niente al posto Rasgilian (there already was a post here)
Si e messa ad uso di guardiola l'antica Santa' Barbara della
Torre Ben isa

Si e fatta una volta al posto ditto Vujed el mista
Si e fabricato il nuovo posto Uied Znuber con guardiola
Niente alla Torre Wardija
Nuovo posto Kabar el Gharib con guardiola
Niente al Torre Suto, questa si rinova nel 1761 capace di cannone
Si è fabbricato di nuovo e 15 canne piu verso levanter il posto
Rasbajadha e guardiola
Ras il hamrija (?)
Nuovo posto Ajn Manoel e guardiola qual posto cadde in
rovina per esser mancato di sotto la rocca
Nuovo posto Ghar Lapsi e guardiola a fine di trasferire ivi li
guardiani dell' antico posto Carrub che per essere troppo dentro
terra non serve nell'oscurita della note
Si rifabricano l' antico posto Pietra negra nel sito in cui era
Si murò solidamente il Passo Megira Ferha
Si fabrico il nuovo posto Blat el Melk
Il posto della Capra fu fabbricato a spese dell' Università
dell'Notabile
Niente alla Torre Lippia
Niente alla Tore Ajn Tuffieka
Nuovo posto Hamricia
Guardiola alla Salina depiro
Qualche piccola riprazzione alla Torre Rossa Sant Agata per
alloggiare i Cavalieri ufficiali della Galliota dopo essendo partite
galere che facevano la guardia nelli fregghi bisogno fare detta
guardia in terra
Si fece nuovo posto Cirkewwa
Niente Batteria Ujed muza (Wied Musa)
Niente alla Rid.^{ta} vicina del med. Nome
Niente alla Rid.^{ta} Grasp Bandeville
Niente alla Batteria Vandome nel mezzo de Fregghi
Niente alla Ridotta Crevelli
Niente alla Rid.^{ta} della Ramla Hosilien Spada
Niente alla Batt.^a Torre Harach

Si Taglio un passo che era nella rocca tra questa Torre e la figura (?)
Si fabbrica il nuovo posto Redum Hammar con guardiola
Si é demolita la camera destra della Batteria Fedeau de Vangien
la terrazzo della quale in occasione del terremoto cadde con
porione de muri
Niente al Ridotta Vandomo (Mellieħa)
Si fece ponte di pietra ed una guardiola alla batteria Westreme
Si fece nuovo posto Aain Zeituna e guardiola
Si aggiunse la guardiola alla torre Selmun
Si fabbrica il nuovo posto Selmunet in fronte al canale
Si fece un posto ò sià camera nell'antica batteria La Mistra e si
mando una guardiola portabile
Niente alla Batteria Arrias
Niente alla Batteria Vendome
Niente alla Torre San Paolo
Ponte e banchi alla Batteria Bugibba
(gia ditto) Qawra
Niente alla ridotta sinistra delle saline
Niente alla ridotta destra delle Saline
Una guardiola alla Torre Gallis
Nuovo posta Ghadira Gallis con guardiola
Niente alla batteria Gallis
Niente Ridotta Marco
Niente Torre Marco
Si fece un piccolo riparazione alli magazeni della Batteria
Marco
Si Mandò una guardiola portabile alla R.^{ta} della Madalena
Si fabbrica sulla punta Saliente il posto se Kedderine che era
nell'angolo rientrante e vi si aggiunse la guardiola
(oggi capace di cannone)
Si aggiunse una guardiola all Rid.^{ta} San Giorgio
Piccola riprazione alla Grotta sulla punta Ghemmuna per
mettere a coperto tre omini in tempo di bonaccia
Si fece il nuovo posto San Giuliano con guardiola

Guardiola alla Torre san Giuliano
Guardiola tal Genla
Nuovo posto Salvaloco e guardiola
Guardiola portabile all punta Lembi
Fece la guardiola della Madonna
Guardiola portabile alla Punta Dragut.'

Guarding the Harbours

The Order's great concern for the need to control the island's distant shores was equally matched by its concern for ensuring a tighter grip over all the quarantine areas established within the two main harbours themselves. Controlling the large volume of naval traffic reaching the harbour necessitated the enforcement of various measures aimed at ensuring both an adherence to standing regulations as well as the establishment of additional quarantine areas set aside for the berthing of foreign vessels.

The most sensitive quarantine area was Marsamxett Harbour which housed the Lazzaretto or quarantine hospital that had been established on the *Isolotto* way back in the mid-seventeenth century by Grand Master Lascaris and now also housed Grand Master Antonio Manoel de Vilhena's newly built fort. Such was the importance of this station that specific detailed instructions were issued to regulate the various maritime and quarantine activities around the shores of this harbour. These *Istruzioni per il Corpo di Guardia destinati per la Custodia del Lazzaretto*, issued on 10 June, reveal that this particular guard was to comprise a detachment of twenty soldiers, a sergeant and two corporals under the command of a Knight, '*divisi in due differenti corpi di guardia contigui al ditto Lazzaretto*', whose duty was to guard against any unauthorized activity on both land and sea. The first of these was established on the southern part of the *Isolotto*, facing Valletta, and was to comprise a knight, a sergeant, a corporal and twelve soldiers. This detachment was obliged to '*fornire una sentinella sul capo di*

rocca vicina al mare detta il cannone, another *‘alla sua dritta sulla punta del Sperone’* [the spur of the glacis] and a third *‘sul secondo sperone’*.

The second *corpo di guardia*, on the other hand, comprising a detachment of eight men was to take control of the area *‘all estremita del Lazzaretto presso la Capella’* as well as the area of the quarantine hospital *‘sul bordo di mare’*. The garrison of the nearby Fort Manoel was also expected to contribute to the quarantine provisions by providing two sentries to be likewise stationed *‘sopra li due speroni che sono tra le due corpi di guardia’*.¹¹

The regulations also stipulated that the Knight in charge of these two locations was to be allowed to retire to the city every day *‘per pranzo e cena’*. The commissioners of Health, for their part, were stationed just across the harbour opposite the *Isoletto*, *‘sotto la loggia’*, a building which stood on the quay just outside the Marsamxett Gateway leading into the city. This administrative station was also expected to *‘arborare un piccolo standardo’* for signalling purposes.

Corradino

Equally important was the *Corpo di Guardia* established for Corradino. This station was set up to control all the quarantined ships laying at anchor *‘nel Porto dietro l’Isola’* (now known as Dockyard Creek) which was set aside as an anchorage for foreign vessels. For this purpose a wooden barrier was erected in the middle of the creek and the area divided in such a way as to isolate the *‘Bastimenti d’Italia, Francia e Spagna con patente netta’* from those ships with a *‘patente sospetta’* and *‘patente brutta’* (see manuscript plan). This barrier was constructed from ships’ masts bound together with iron chains (*‘Antenne legate con forti catene di ferro’*), similar to the Venetian *porporella*, to which was attached a *‘pontone di guardia’* (floating guard post).

11 Fort Manoel has four *speroni*, or spurs of the glacis, two serving the re-entrant places-of-arms and the other two, the salient place-of-arms along the land front.

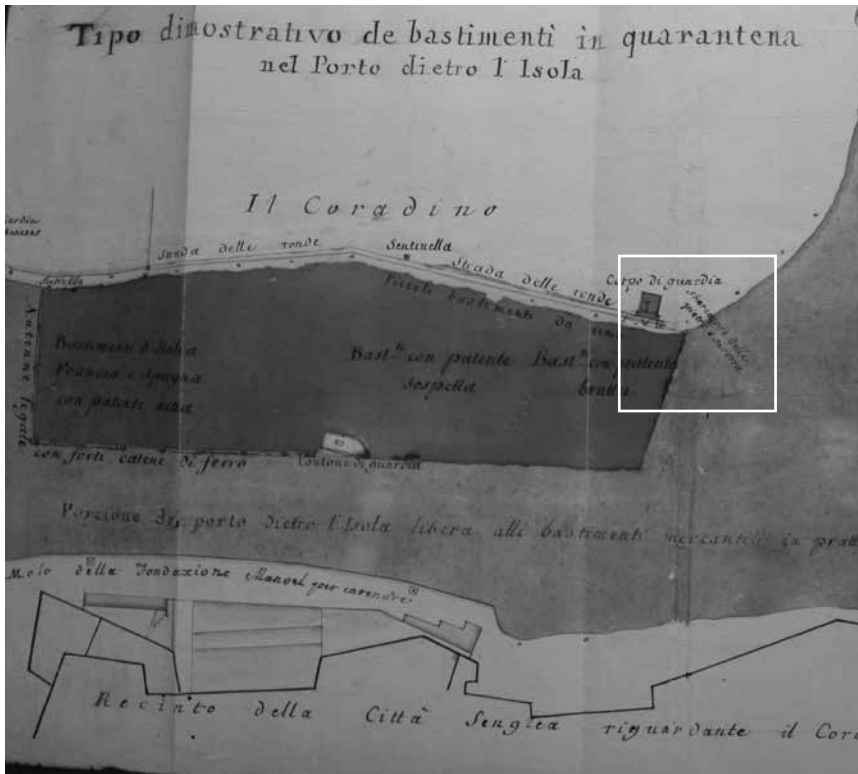
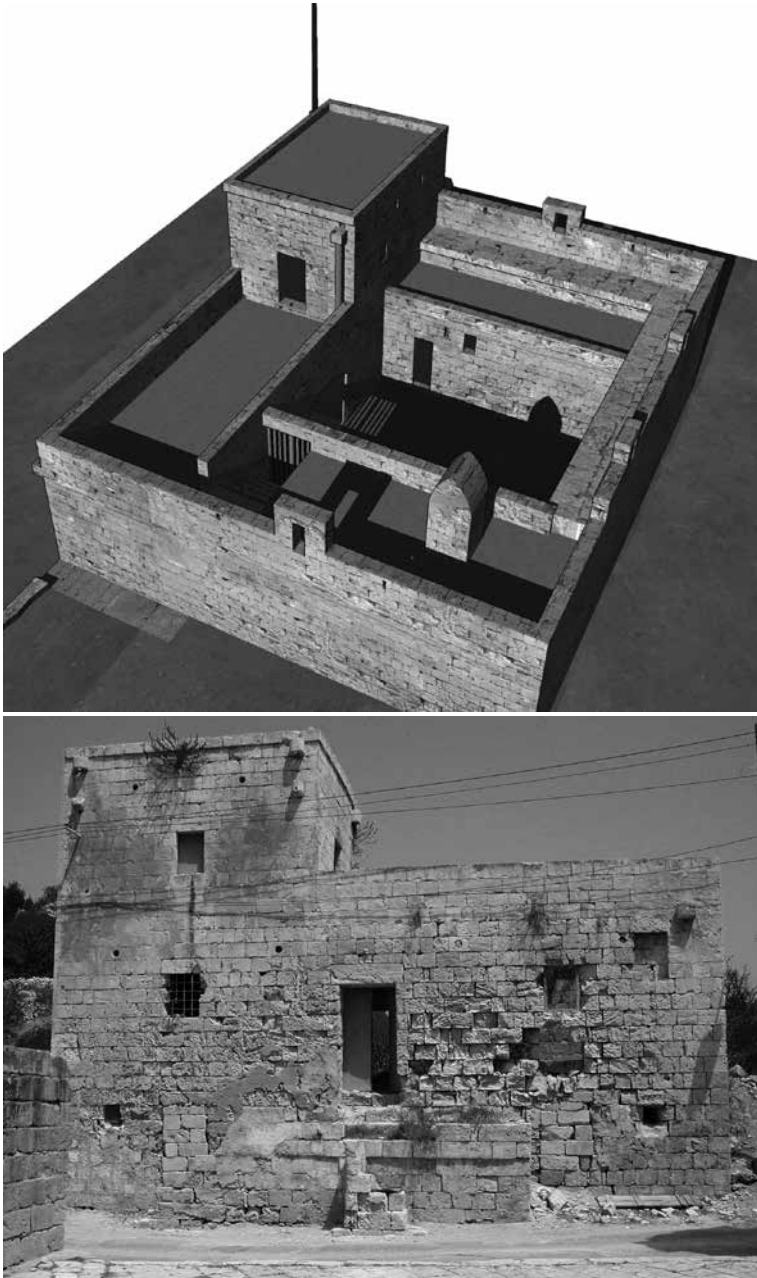


Figure 4. Manuscript plan attached with the folder containing the various 1743 *regolamenti*, showing the berthing arrangements in the Senglea creek set aside for the quarantine of foreign vessels arriving from suspected locations. The location of the Corradino ‘*Corpo di guardia*’ with its courtyard-type of enclosure is shown enclosed by the white box. Image courtesy of the National Library of Malta.

The troop assigned to this station consisted of a sergeant, two corporals and eighteen soldiers and these were stationed in a large building located at the mouth of the creek, below the Corradino heights and close to the location where ‘*pietre e savorra*’ (ship ballast) were ordinarily deposited. This building itself, or better still, the walled compound, is shown in a manuscript plan entitled ‘*Tipo dimostrativo de bastimenti in quarentena nel Porto dietro l’Isola*’. It is drawn as a rectangular enclosure with a singular room - a courtyard type of



Figures 5 and 6. The *Corpo di Guardia* building at Wied Qirda, limits of Żebbuġ, with Author's graphic reconstruction (top) showing the courtyard arrangement with its *chemin-de-ronde* and merlons.

guardhouse configuration which, as a matter of fact, is very similar to a still-existing building that was likewise used for guard duties in the eighteenth century as a form of *guardia casalis* on the outskirts of the village of Żebbuġ at Wied Qirda - this small compound is situated next to the small church (or chapel as it is often called) dedicated to The Visitation Of Our Lady To St. Elizabeth.¹² This church was itself grafted onto an older and obscure watch tower equipped with box machilocation (hence its name as *Torri tal-Miṣḥun*) which seems to date from the sixteenth century. This militia *corpo di guardia* is enclosed by a high wall fitted with a narrow sentry walk or walkway (*chemin-de-ronde*), musketry loopholes, and merlons, while its main entrance, and façade front the country lane leading out of the village. Another interesting feature, undeniably linked its role as a sentry post, is the pair of stone flag-pole holders crowning the highest room of the building. These would have been used for signalling purposes.

The Corradino *corpo di guardia*, judging by the plan, was not located at sea level because the drawing shows the building fronted by a double flight of steps rising from the '*strada delle ronde*' that ran all along the foot of the Corradino heights. This detachment was obliged to

'fornire, giorno e note tre Sentinelle; l'una su le armi alla Porta del Corpo di Guardia; la 2.^{da} Alla punta del molo vicino al Giardino del V.do Bali Don Francesco [Giardino Menezes]; e la 3.^a tra quella, ed il Corpo di Guardia. Alle quale sentinelle sarà consegnato l'ordine di non lasciar entrare, ne uscire dal recinto della quarantena Barca veruna grande, ò piccola, Scialupa, ò Caicco, si di giornio, che di note; e di non lasciarle ne pure avvicinarsi à Bastimenti infetti sotto qualunque motivo, ò pretesto, che fosse'.

12 This church attracted considerable veneration. The Conventual Chaplain and Vice Chancellor of the Order Fra Gian Frangisco Abela is said to have had a particular devotion towards this church which he used to visit frequently and also provided for its maintenance. The present Baroque-style edifice, however, was re-erected in 1675 by Cleric Bartilmew Magro and was consecrated in 1678. Magro, who was later murdered in the course of a robbery, was buried inside it.

Defensive Isolation

A closer examination of the Order's special quarantine measures adopted in 1743 shows that the system of defensive quarantine adopted on this occasion was very much in line with the preventive system of *cordon sanitaire* - or defensive isolation – then practiced by the leading maritime states of Venice, Genoa and Naples, as well as by the Papal states.¹³ These precautions comprised a multi-layered defensive ring which was designed to guard, intercept and report upon any suspicious activity.

Basically, this consisted of an outer defensive line of armed sailing boats (listed as '*speronare*' in the Maltese context), a second line of coastal forts, towers and observation posts (including coastal batteries and redoubts) within visual distance of one another, an inner ring of foot and cavalry patrols (mounted 'Turcoples' in Malta and Gozo), and an inner ring of quarantine (isolation) stations and controlled entry points inside the harbours.

This tiered hierarchical structure was designed to warn of incoming vessels, intercept them at sea with force if necessary and prevent any landed elements from proceeding inland. Each layer was obliged to remain in a state of vigilance and report on those elements that came in contact with it – the captains of the *speronare*, for instance, were expected to check and report on the tower's sentinels and the Turcoples were used to report on the alertness of the various guard posts. We know, thanks to Marandon's notes, of at least one grave attempt, during this emergency, which was fortunately intercepted and this involved a contaminated Brigantine which sought to make a landing along the coastline somewhere in the vicinity of Żabbar. This episode, actually, was the cause for the erection of an number of inland guard posts, such as those at Corradino and perhaps that at Wied Qirda.

13 A detailed survey of the system of *cordon sanitaire* as adopted throughout these various states can be found in Andrew D. Cliff, Matthew R. Smallman-Raynor, Peta M. Stevens, 'Controlling the geographical Spread of Infectious Disease: Plague in Italy, 1347–1851' in *Acta med-hist Adriat* 7, no. 1 (2009), 197-236.

A large part of the system's success, nevertheless, was also tied to the lines of communication which existed between the Order and the various states and cities with which it had direct dealings. The Order's extensive network of ambassadors, *ricevitori*, and agents (and often spies) deployed throughout the main cities and ports of Europe were instrumental in maintaining a continuous stream of information flowing into the Island. Foreign governments, too, sought to apprise the Order directly through their representatives and were in turn briefed by the Grand Master. While, as shown by Paul Cassar, direct communications with the Senate of Messina itself seem to have been interrupted by June, with letters from the city council seeking assistance apparently failing to reach the island, the Order and its officials were relatively well informed of the latest developments, even though, as remarked by Bali de Froullay (the Order's representative at the court of Versailles) to Grand Master Pinto in August that '*les quarantaines sont causes que les lettres de Rome retardens*'.¹⁴

Indeed, the official correspondence between Pinto and the French court continue to reveal the scars of having been imposed to quarantine sanctions and purification until well into the months November and December.

Certainly, the stringent measures did not come without their own brand of negative side effects. The heavy commercial activity with Sicily, for one thing, came to an abrupt halt. This immediately affected the importation of food supplies such that within a few weeks of the implementation of the enforced isolation, the local provisions of food began to fall to dangerously low levels and Grand Master Pinto and his council were soon faced with the loathsome inevitability of having to purchase alternative supplies from their North African neighbours.¹⁵

The Island's predicament was brought to the attention of the French King who made it known to the Grand Master, via Bail de Froullay, that the French Court would not object to a truce between the

14 NLM, Arch. 1224, f.345v.

15 C. Testa, *The Life and Times of Grand Master Pinto, 1743-1773*, (Midsea Books, Malta. 1989), 97.

Order and its Barbary adversaries as long as the contagion in Sicily remained for '*Malte un malheur tres considerable*'.¹⁶

Epilogue

As things turned out, the threat from Sicily abated by the end of that summer and the Order was spared the awkward necessity of having to enter into a formal truce with the Barbary states, even though, as already stated by Carmelo Testa, some products were actually imported from North Africa through foreign intermediaries'.¹⁷

More importantly, however, was the fact that the Maltese population had emerged from the ordeal unscathed. The Maltese islands were spared the devastation that had visited nearby Sicily. Whether this was the direct result of the stringent quarantine provisions which had been implemented by the Order on this occasion, or simply because of good fortune, it is impossible to tell. The Maltese islands would continue to remain plague-free for the remainder of the eighteenth century under Hospitaller rule and it would be only in 1813 that the Maltese would succumb to one of the worst epidemics ever to hit their island throughout the course of its early modern history. That, however, is another story.¹⁸

16 Testa, *ibid.*, 97-98.

17 Testa, *ibid.*, 98.

18 An expanded and fully illustrated version of this paper, in book form, is under preparation for publication in the ARX series of Occasional Papers.