

SACRA INFERMERIA

Notwithstanding its progressive metamorphosis into a military power, the Order of St John never lost sight of its hospitaller vocation. Soon after reaching Malta in 1530, they built a spacious hospital in Birgu, whereas the plan of the new city of Valletta comprised a state of the art sanatorium. Likewise, the Grand Masters and the resident Knights regularly visited the sick, whilst novices assisted in the distribution of food at least once a week.



FACILITIES

The present compound is the result of multiple extensions. A section of the renowned 155 metres long ward started to be built in 1574 and was inaugurated the following year by Grand Master Jean de la Cassiere (1572-1581). By 1583, it was already considered too small and a new block was added. A cemetery for the internment of poor people who died while receiving treatment at the hospital was also created on the opposite side of the fronting street. This was adorned with a beautiful chapel which Fra Giorgio Nibbia built out of his pocket in 1612. Eventually, Grand Master Rafael Cotoner (1660-1663) approved the extension of the original ward which spanned the entire breath of St Lazarus Curtain Wall. Further additions were made during the early 18th century, while a new cemetery for the burial of deceased patients was created at Floriana during the late 1770s. Significantly wounded and sick seafarers could be admitted to the Sacra Infermeria via an underground tunnel reaching down to the foreshore.

CAPACITY AND SERVICE

The Sacra Infermeria accommodated 551 beds. These could be increased to 912 during emergencies. All patients, including Knights, were to be accommodated in the the large wards. Single rooms or small wards were reserved for the treatment of contagious or venereal diseases and for lunatics. Generally speaking, patients were served good quality food, including chicken broth and vegetable soup with vermicelli or rice. Knights were entitled to double portions and superior bread, but all patients were served in silver tableware.



Emblem of the Langue of France

MANAGEMENT

Day to day running was assigned to the Grand Hospitaller, a high ranking officer elected from among the members of the Langue of France. He was assisted by two comptrollers who oversaw the quality of the foodstuffs being acquired, the maintenance of the hospital equipment, the keeping of inventories, and the execution of the wills of the patients who died in hospital.

Hand-painted pharmacy maiolica jar

POST 1798

Following the ousting of the Order in 1798, the Sacra Infermeria was turned into a military hospital. It ceased functioning as a hospital with the end of the Great War in 1918. During World War II, it received multiple direct hits. In 1979, it was eventually transformed into an event facility.

