

# Maltese medical Pauline traditions

Charles Savona-Ventura

## Abstract

The advent of the apostle Paul and evangelist Luke to the Maltese Islands in 60 AD led to the development of a number of pseudo-historic and medical beliefs that apparently saw their rise around the 12<sup>th</sup> century and reached a climax during the 17-18<sup>th</sup> centuries when an indigenous *materia medica* known as *terra sigillata melitensis* was being prepared and exported overseas. This eventually fell into disrepute by the latter half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

## Introduction

In the sixth year of the reign of Roman Emperor Nero Claudius Caesar Augustus Germanicus, a doctor from Antioch named Lucas [anglicised to Luke] was shipwrecked on Maltese shores. He is referred to by Paul of Tarsus in his letter dated 61-63 AD to the Colossae Christian community as “my dear friend Lucas, the physician....” (4:14). He is further mentioned by Paul in his letter to Philemon (*verse 24*) and in the second letter to Timothy (4:11). These letters, all written during Paul’s sojourn in Rome, confirm the physician Lucas was a constant companion to Paul. Lucas’ earlier joint experiences with Paul are traced in the Acts of the Apostles attributed to the pen of Lucas himself.

## Keywords

Medical history, *materia medica*, Malta

**Charles Savona-Ventura** DScMed, FRCOG  
University of Malta Medical School,  
Mater Dei University Hospital, Malta  
Email: charles.savona-ventura@um.edu.mt

The Acts of the Apostles can be considered as Part II of the work that can be called “a history of the rise of Christianity”, the first part being the third gospel attributed also to Lucas. This composite work reflects the writer’s particular interest in medical matters since only three of the miracles attributed to Jesus described in the work are not of a medical nature. He also positively states that Jesus “called the twelve together and gave them power and authority over all devils, and to cure disease” (Luke 9:1). He further is the only evangelist to record the parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:29-37) which circumscribes the whole of the physician’s duties. Lucas apparently joined Paul of Tarsus probably around 57 AD during the latter’s visit at Alexandria Troas, an ancient city on Turkey’s western coast (Acts iv: 9 *et seq*). From there Lucas continues as Paul’s companion, with only a brief interlude of separation, until the latter’s transfer to Rome.<sup>1</sup> According to 2<sup>nd</sup> century tradition, Lucas died in the year ~84 AD near Boeotia in Greece.

## Classical medicine

Hailing originally from Antioch, he may have studied medicine at Tarsus in south-central Turkey. The renowned school of Tarsus rivalled those of Alexandria and Athens, and there Lucas would have been taught the contemporary knowledge of Hellenistic medicine. The theory and practice of Greek medicine had become highly sophisticated during the 4<sup>th</sup> – 5<sup>th</sup> centuries BC based on the Ionian philosophers, Hippocratic medicine and Alexandrian anatomy and physiology. Besides rational concepts, Hellenistic medicine also incorporated religious and magical components in its practice. This rationalisation of medicine saw the emergence of the professional-trained physician well versed in pharmaceuticals and surgery, but still resorting to temple medicine in sites dedicated to Aesculapius. The intellectual traditions in the eastern Mediterranean continued on different tracts of medico-philosophical thoughts or schools of medicine. By the end of the 1<sup>st</sup> century BC the “Dogmatist” school had come to the fore. The Dogmatist physicians emphasized the need for anatomical study; in contrast to the “Empiricist” school whose adherents placed full reliance upon philosophical argument. The third school was the “Methodist” school that concentrated on the individual patient and rejected all general knowledge. A branch of the Dogmatic school of thought gave rise to the “Pneumatist” school that revived the Hippocratic concept of the four humours which were imbalanced in the presence of disease. The Roman population’s attitudes towards medicine during the 1<sup>st</sup> century

AD remained oriented towards a series of recipes that could be dispensed by the *pater familias* to his household. Writing in 77 AD, Gaius Plinius Secundus in his *Historia Naturalis* records the habit of placing the Maltese dog over the epigastrium to relieve stomach pains. He also comments on the absence of poisonous scorpions on Gozo. The four schools were eventually to merge into an unconscious fusion in the 2<sup>nd</sup> century and the resulting Greco-Roman medicine was to be dogmatized by Galen of Pergamum in the 3<sup>rd</sup> century AD.<sup>2</sup>

In spite of the various advances that had been made over the centuries with the introduction of a more rational outlook towards disease and its management, the armamentarium available to the physician remained limited especially in the field of internal disorders. This limitation allowed for the continued use and reliance on magico-religious practices in such conditions. Shrines dedicated to Aesculapius throughout the Mediterranean world continued to be venerated well into the 4<sup>th</sup> century AD. A physician like Lucas, trained in the realm of the confusion and limitations of rational medical practice current during the 1<sup>st</sup> century AD, would easily have been attracted to descriptions of miraculous healing particularly if he subscribed to a Methodist school of thought. In his gospel, the evangelist Lucas describes several episodes of medical import emphasising repeatedly Jesus' power over disease. In the Acts of the Apostles, Lucas emphasises that the power over disease and its cure held by Jesus had been transferred to the apostles. Much of the healing experiences described by Lucas were apparently second-hand experiences. He however was witness to the resurrection of Eutychus of Troas by the apostle Paul after the accidental death caused by falling from a height (Acts 20:7-12). He was also witness to the healing from fever and dysentery (Acts 28:7-10). The latter miraculous healing from dysentery was carried out in Malta by the apostle Paul soon after the apostle and Lucas were shipwrecked on the Island. Lucas writes that "In that neighbourhood there were estates belonging to the chief man of the island, whose name was Publius. He received us and entertained us hospitably for three days. It happened that Publius' father was in bed, suffering from fever and dysentery. Paul went in to see him, and after a prayer he laid his hands on the man and healed him. When this happened, the other sick people on the island also came and were cured....."<sup>1</sup> Maltese tradition places this miracle at San Pawl Milqi at Burmarrad (derivative "fields of disease" – the area was originally a marshland).

### Endogenous materia medica

This important event in Maltese medical history was however to leave little import in eventual local folklore. Greater import was eventually made with the other perceived miracle described by the evangelist Lucas. After their shipwreck, the inhabitants lighted a huge fire to help the survivors get warm. "Paul had collected a bundle of sticks and was putting them on the fire when a viper brought out of the heat attached itself to his

hand. When the inhabitants saw the creature hanging from his hand they said to one another, 'That man must be a murderer; he may have escaped the sea, but divine justice would not let him live.' However, he shook the creature off into the fire and came to no harm, although they were expecting him at any moment to swell up or drop dead on the spot. After they had waited a long time without seeing anything out of the ordinary happen to him, they changed their mind and began to say he was a god" (Acts 28:3-6).<sup>1</sup>

The first actual official association between the island of Melite mentioned in the Acts of the Apostles with the island of Malta is the poem *De Actibus Apostolorum* composed by Pope Vigilius in 536 AD; though an earlier post-4<sup>th</sup> century association was current in the New Testament apocrypha entitled *Acts of Peter and Paul*. However there is nothing to suggest that a Pauline tradition became established in Malta with his arrival and the archaeological evidence suggests that the earliest Christian presence on the island occurred at a post-Constantian date. The first evidence of a Maltese Pauline tradition may be a 12<sup>th</sup> century account by Konrad of Quernfurth who refers to the *Uomini di San Paolo* who were claiming to have received a special gift from the descendants of the Maltese, whereby they could administer cures for venom and snakebites. These Maltese descendants had the power of killing venomous animals by spitting on them. Their deceit was eventually exposed in 1485. The belief that Malta rock sanctified by the apostle Paul, when pounded into dust and diluted in wine, was a potent antidote against venomous substances was mentioned by the German cleric Ludolph of Suchen in the mid-14<sup>th</sup> century. The rock was by 1536 more directly related to the rock from the cave near the Roman walls of the city of Melite where the apostle is thought to have resided during his stay on the island. A church had been built above the cave by 1366 suggesting an even earlier association. Jean Quintinus d'Autun in 1536 wrote that "From this cave, which I have just mentioned, pieces of stones are daily cut off by visitors who confirm openly throughout Africa, Italy and Rome that they are healed from the bites of serpents and scorpions through these stones. The people consider this a favour from St Paul."<sup>3,4</sup> The Swiss-German physician-surgeon Paracelsus [b.1493; d.1541] mentioned the *terra sigillata, id est terrae Sancti Pauli* from Malta in his work *Bucher und Schriften* [ed. Johannea Huser; C. Waldkirch: Basle, 1589-99, vol.6:p.471,566].<sup>5</sup>

By the 14<sup>th</sup> century, the viper story described in the Acts of the Apostle had been expanded to include a number of pseudo-historic and medical beliefs.<sup>6</sup> The current absence of snakes sufficiently poisonous to harm humans on the Maltese Islands has been explained by the belief that the apostle banished all poisonous animals from the Islands and the poison ceased to exist in the mouth of Maltese snakes.<sup>7</sup> Others have suggested that the poisonous species has now become extinct, or was an accidental imported specimen, or simply that it was a case of mistaken identification – the species being the harmless

Leopard snake which has superficial similarities with the viper that the evangelist Lucas would have been familiar with.<sup>8</sup> Even more important was the perpetuation and augmentation of the 12<sup>th</sup> century myth started by the *Uomini di San Paolo*. Ground or chipping of rock from St. Paul's Grotto at Rabat, known as *terra sigillata melitensis*, became an important part of *material medica* in the treatment of venomous snakebites and poisons. The earth from the grotto was available in two forms: (1) *terra cruda* in its crude form and (2) *terra preparata* powdered and worked into a hard paste and made into balls and medals often stamped with special seals of authenticity and exported to Europe. The rock was also worked into statuettes, vases, and cups (*controveleno cups*). The rock chippings were finely powdered in a mortar and subsequently placed in a marble or earthenware receptacle and soaked in water. The suspension after stirring was decanted and filtered through greased paper. The bolus thus formed was used as required. The earth was taken either mixed with wine, water or spirits, or else by drinking water or wine poured into *controveleno* jugs made from the stone.<sup>9</sup> Besides being efficacious for venomous bites, it was allegedly also of use in smallpox and fevers.<sup>7</sup> Similar properties were attributed to fossil shark teeth which were considered to be imprints of the tongue of St. Paul. These were mounted and worn as amulets, suspended on devices to be used as poison detector by royalty, or powdered and used as a medicine (known as *linguae* or *lapid. divi Pauli*).<sup>6</sup> By the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the efficacy of *Terra sigillata melitensis* was being queried. Comte de Borch in 1782 recommended its restricted use but cautioned against using it in cases of fever. He considered that excessive use of the powder was harmful since it could leave calcareous deposits in the milk-ducts and the bladder.<sup>10</sup> These items of *materia medica* were regularly exported to the European continent. In spite of the easy availability of *Terra sigillata* from local sources, the *Sacra Infermeria* during the period 1770-1798 regularly imported from Marseille *Terra Lemnia sigillata* that originated from the island of Lemnos.<sup>11</sup> Dr. Hennen in 1821-24 reported that this "absorbent earth found in some caves is used in all cases attended with acrimonious humours, and as a specific in fevers."<sup>14</sup> An authentication testimonial was issued as late as 1844.<sup>12</sup> The therapeutic reputation of *terra melitensis*

apparently waned after the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century. Writing in 1870, Dr. A.L. Adams quoting previous authors reported in an apparent historical context that "St. Paul's earth was supposed to be an antidote for snakebites, and the *terra sigillata Melituae* was considered cordial and sudorific."<sup>13</sup>

The latter part of the 19<sup>th</sup> century saw major advances being made in physiology and chemistry, furnishing not only a greater understanding of disease processes but also serving as an impetus to the development of effective targeted pharmaceuticals. These advance led to the abandonment of naturally-derived substances with increasing preference towards synthetic-derived medicines, thus gradually pushing the former into the realm of medical history and folklore.

## References

1. The New Jerusalem Bible. London: Darton, Longman & Todd; 1985.
2. Scarborough J. Roman Medicine. London: Thames & Hudson; 1969.
3. Buhagiar M. St. Paul's shipwreck and early Christianity in Malta. *Cath Hist Review* 2007;93(1):1-16.
4. Quintin d'Autun J. *Insulae Melitae* description. Lyons; 1536
5. Dannenfeldt KH. The Introduction of a new sixteenth-century drug Terra Silesiaca. *Med Hist* 1984;28:174-88.
6. Savona-Ventura C. Maltese Medical Folklore – Man and the Herpetofauna in Malta. A Review. *Maltese Med J* 1990;2(1):41-3.
7. Brydone P. A Tour through Sicily and Malta in a series of letters to William Beckford, Esq of Somerly in Suffolk. 3rd ed. Vol 1. Dublin: J. Potts; 1775. p.231-2.
8. Lanfranco G. The snake that bit St Paul. *Sunday Times of Malta*. 1960 April 17;5.
9. Zammit Maempel G. Rock from St Paul's Grotto (Malta). In: Azzopardi J, editor. *Medicine and Folklore. St. Paul's Grotto, Church and Museum at Rabat, Malta*. Malta: Progress Press; 1990. p.169-216.
10. de Borch. *Lettre sur la Sicile et sur l'isle de Malthe, pour servir de supplement au voyage en Sicile et Malthe de M. Brydone ecrites en 1777*. Turin; 1782. p.203-4.
11. Cassar P. Importation of the drugs and equipment for the Pharmacy of the Holy Infirmary of Valletta in the Eighteenth century. *J Malta Union Pharmacists* 1967;1(1):p.19-27.
12. Hennen J. *Sketches of the Medical Topography of the Mediterranean*. London: Thomas & George Underwood; 1830. p.539-40.
13. Adams AL. *Notes of a Naturalist in the Nile Valley and Malta*. Edinburgh: Edmonstone & Douglas; 1870. p.81 fn.
14. Hennen: *Sketches of the Medical Topography of the Mediterranean*. London, 1830, p.539-540.