

THE ROYAL PROTOMEDICATO IN SICILY

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ABSTRACT

This article describes the relationship between legislation and the royal medical tribunal or “Protomedicato” Office in the history of Sicily. The idea for the office began during the reign of Frederick II, and was created to manage several functions related to public health. Specifically, it was intended to monitor the practices of medical doctors and others who were involved in medicine. The regulations established by the office reveal the development, coordination and functions of the office throughout its history.

Key words: Protomedicato office, medical tribunal, Sicily, History, Public Health

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Introduction

The acts of the royal Protomedicato office in Naples in the 15th century were described by David Gentilcore when the first such office was founded in the Spanish colony⁽¹⁾. In 1444 King Alfonso the Magnificent appointed the first Protomedico: Jaume Quintana, the sovereign's personal physician. The custom of conferring the title of Protomedico to the king's physician illustrates the prestige which the position entailed. However, in reality the long trajectory of the office across the centuries indicates only relative importance, since the primary function was fiscal control. The broader functions of supervision and censure were acquired later, when Carlo V sought to extend the privileges of the office of Protomedicato in Naples during his reign for Narciso Verdugno, who complained about the difficulty in performing his duties. The usual source of conflict was territorial. In Naples as in Milan or Sicily, the existence of a university or medical school as well as trade associations such as barbers or apothecaries competed against the limits imposed by the Protomedico who was accused of interfering with traditional powers in well-defined spheres. The medical field consisted of those who were licensed after passing an exam and deemed competent to practice a medical specialty⁽²⁾. The protomedicato office examined aspiring medical practitioners in several categories. The protomedicato issued the licenses *ad beneplacitum nostrum*, which had to be renewed any time the practitioner changed⁽³⁾. The turbulent events surrounding the practice followed the history of the office into modern times, until the reforms of the 18th century. The authorization had been valid for three years in the previous period, but returned to life-long as originally, and in 1760 a special court was created with other figures such as assistant, notary, and guard. Nonetheless, the protomedicato office was second to the last in prestige in the reign, superseding only the postal court. The utilization of the protomedicato as a source of tax income damaged its precarious position even further. There were protests against the abuses during the period of reforms. The subsequent French period of 10 years favored the protomedicato thanks to the abolition of the order of physicians. In 1810 the appointment of Domenico Cotugno as protomedicato of Naples demonstrated attempts to legitimize the social climbing established during the turbulent period. Soon after Frederick's return to the throne in the new entity called the Reign of the Two Sicilies, there was much concern about the

field of medicine. The Bourbon regulations of the Restoration period included several issues in public health: vaccine and cholera commissions, military hospitals, army and navy doctors and surgeons, which indicate how much value the legislator placed on monitoring medicine, hygiene and health care.

The Situation in Sicily

Considering Gentilcore's work, our interest here is the history of the protomedicato office in Sicily, which has never been studied in depth before. Reading the acts and regulations of an old royal institution enables us to understand the complex network of connections between the players inside and outside the field of medicine in the Reign of the Two Sicilies. There was a relationship of reciprocal interdependence that united the powerful in the center and the periphery⁽⁴⁾. The work attempting to centralize administration was strongly desired by the government in Naples but was never fully achieved, so the events related to coordinating the royal protomedicato seem very complicated and at times cumbersome, probably due to the ancient tradition of an institution deeply rooted in the territory and in a sense symbolic heritage of unforgotten conflicts. Although the idea for the royal protomedicato office in Sicily originated during the reign of Frederick II⁽⁵⁾, it became a material reality only during the reign of King Martino I in 1397⁽⁶⁾.

By the second century the sovereign already required that all medical graduates must have a royal placet issued by him or his delegate to practice medicine. The wish to establish the office on the island is revealed by a kind of deadline, which was finally achieved by Giovan Filippo Ingrassia in his *Constitutiones*⁽⁷⁾. The focus was primarily on how many individuals could practice the medical arts. Among the duties was the need to hold periodic refresher courses for professionals in the main cities on the island. The protomedicato also had the task of confirming that physicians were practicing Christians.

The Protomedicato office in Catania

On the Island of Sicily the protomedicato institution consisted of a central office in Palermo, and other local offices in the major cities. The first protomedicato in Catania was Blasco Scammacca, a "*master licensed in arts and medicine, appointed*

protomedicato for life with jurisdiction over doctors, surgeons, physicians, apothecaries, and authorized barbers, after passing the licensing exam"⁽⁸⁾. Soon the title was given to aristocrats as a reward for their services, and finally the title was added to the category of saleable professions by Phillip V⁽⁹⁾. Following the restoration, the protomedicato institution was the center of limited renewed legislative assets, and more than once it was the subject of criticism and debate, due specifically to the condescension of health inspectors toward more than one license holder. In November 1824, a drafted circular was published by the Duke of Serradifalco, who was then general director of the different branches⁽¹⁰⁾, which accused certain protomedicato offices in Sicily of ignoring so-called doctors who practiced medicine without the necessary title. The circular went on to list the several duties entrusted to health inspectors. It is clear that the protomedicato held some power. The fact that they were often accused of neglecting their duty of monitoring doctors and others in the field of health care demonstrates the existence of favouritism and revenge that existed in medicine. The discomfort of the legislator in reaction to the accusations of supposed abuses was not particularly severe, considering that a new law on the subject did not appear until ten years after the previous law.

In October 1834, a lively polemic arose between the protomedicato of Salemi and the authority of that city, drawing attention to the duties of the protomedicato. The lieutenant in Sicily reaffirmed his subjection to the intendant "*for the regulation of medical practice and the competent authority for the infliction of the mute.*" The aim was to limit frequent abuses by the protomedicato employees who often crossed the borders of their assigned functions⁽¹¹⁾.

Hence it is obvious how the protomedicato office progressed in the undisguised attempt to free itself from the censorship of the legislator in order to function without interference. The government's French-style strategy created by the Bourbons after the restoration to control illegality was to delegate part of the duty to the intendant, a powerful figure at the apex of the complex administrative machine. An indication of these attempts to control the functions of the protomedicato and its collaborators is that on March 18, 1834, a document distributed by the lieutenant in Sicily announced that both the members of the protomedicato "*court*" and those practicing any profession under the authority of the

protomedicato were required to swear-in before the mayor of their respective community⁽¹²⁾. That was another confirmation of the attempt to unite health care with urban power. In 1841, however, the Catania intendant, Giuseppe Parisi, reported the Palermo protomedicato protest over the neglect by municipal officials⁽¹³⁾. It was claimed that there was a conflict of interests between the protomedicato office and the local officials. But in 1844, a decree was announced to clarify the functions of the General Protomedicato⁽¹⁴⁾, which became representative of a commission consisting of a president, secretary, and five members, all appointed by the sovereign from professors of medicine, natural history and chemistry. Every year one of those members was replaced by a new member designated by the monarch. The decree was approved by the interior minister and the finance minister, and the commission was intended to meet twice a month, with the primary function being financial matters, and specifically the protomedicato fees. The General Protomedicato's annual payment of 600 ducats was now assigned for the token of the commission's presence.

The regulations

The office was subject to modifications of the financial system, through a royal emanation signed in Naples on June 25, 1844, and extended to Catania January 26th the following year⁽¹⁵⁾. The authority of the general director over the several protomedicato branches on the island was confirmed. The scientific part was separated from the financial part, and entrusted to a commission located in Palermo headed by the protomedicato and composed of three royally appointed members chosen from professors of medicine, natural history and chemistry. All the protomedicato offices on the island formerly answered to no other authority, but were now subject to the commission in Palermo. That commission was headed by the city praetor and met twice a month, and the members were paid three ducats for their attendance. The General Protomedicato in Sicily was under the finance minister in financial matters, and under the interior minister for scientific matters. The regulations concerning protomedicato financial administration continued under the new decree. Among the most significant aspects was the obligation of the court to visit doctors annually, as well as other times if necessary to discourage unlawful practices.

In October 1846, a new decree affected the General Protomedicato in Sicily⁽¹⁶⁾. It specified two separate branches: one for correspondence and the other for accounting, both under the authority of the general director. The correspondence branch consisted of a secretary (paid 180 ducats a year), a clerk (108 ducats/year), and two supernumerary (72 ducats/year). The accounting branch consisted of a head accountant (180 ducats/year), a supernumerary (72 ducats/year), and a barandiere (108 ducats/year). The decree also described the nominative list of the new appointees in detail. The attention to all of this in the sphere of health care, in terms of the control of power, returned to the legislature and focused on the interests of the Protomedicato as with the other entities in that branch. A kind of "admonition" was published on March 21, 1850, concerning the swearing-in required of the various members of the protomedicato courts⁽¹⁷⁾. In April of the same year a decree dissolved the current commission and appointed the successor. The decree was validated by the ministers of ecclesiastic affairs, public education, and finance. In 1851, a modification of the decree was published concerning the payment of fees by the city in the case of default medical practice⁽¹⁸⁾.

These acts must be understood in the larger context of a climate of strong repression following the revolutionary events in 1848-1850, which affected all the parts of the institutions in the reign - not merely health care. The elements of the new commission were the king's first doctor as president, who enjoyed "*the honors of a university professor without holding the official title,*" and two assessors nominated by the king and the minister of public education for three years. The duties of the Royal Protomedicato were officially carried out by a commission under the president of the university and the general council of public education. Among the commission's many duties was to investigate that all the health professionals practicing in the territory were behaving morally without question and that they had the necessary qualifications. After consulting the intendants and ordinary diocesans the commission had the power to appoint a well-known and respected physician in the district capital as vice-protomedicato, as well as an assistant and a pharmacist. These individuals had the task of visiting and inspecting the health care practitioners in every town in their district once a year, and ensure the practitioners' payment of the fees due the protomedicato.

Hence, the protomedicato office underwent expansion relative to its focus, to related institutions that regarded above all the management of the office itself. The presence of a delegate of the university had the goal of reaffirming a traditional relationship, while the participation of “ordinary” citizens responded to the need for inspections after 1848. This strategy along with the loyalty that moral and political conduct required, attempted to limit secret manoeuvres and more serious conspiracies. The regulation continued with a detailed list of duties entrusted to the local protomedicato commissions, each composed of a royal district judge (or substitutes in those towns without a royal judge), the mayor, and the parish priest. There were two physicians or surgeons proposed as inspectors only in the city of Naples, which had a particularly vast territory. The law described a long list of duties that physicians, surgeons, pharmacists, herbalists, brachiere, dentists and segretisti had to comply with⁽¹⁹⁾.

The strong and constant presence of administrative staff in the work of the protomedicato reveals an institutionalization of the office entrusted to doctors but assisted by many representatives of urban power. This perspective should influence our reading of the communication of the protomedico of Palermo to the intendant of Catania, Angelo Panebianco, along with the mayors and subintendants of the province, dated April 1852, which required that the mayor of each town should guide the periodic visits of the protomedicato courts⁽²⁰⁾. The last two laws concerning the protomedicato referred to the old problem of so-called medical charlatans⁽²¹⁾ and the management of the Naples office. On January 22, 1853, the general protomedicato wrote to the Intendant in Sicily to confront the increasing habit of some doctors to practice medicine and specifically homeopathy without the required education. In August 1853, a decree regarding the protomedicato stipulated that the district commission (for each quarter of Naples) had to include a physician-surgeon, a member of the college of pharmacy, the elected, the parish priest, and the royal judge of the quarter as president⁽²²⁾.

Conclusions

Our survey offers a glance at the legislative and organizational challenges that faced the protomedicato office in Sicily. We were not able to discuss in detail the individuals who worked in that

office, but we should note that in Catania it was traditional (since 1579) to entrust the job to the university professor of theoretical medicine⁽²³⁾, which reflects the relationship between the academic world and civil society⁽²⁴⁾. That complex relationship requires further investigation by historians. However, we may mention that between 1788 and 1819, Professor Francesco Maria Scuderi (practical medicine)⁽²⁵⁾, was protomedicato “*thanks to the sovereign*.” The position was an appointment by the king rather than a result of the competition in Naples in 1788. When Scuderi died in 1819, the job of protomedicato passed to Professor Antonino Di Giacomo (theoretical medicine), who held the position until his death in 1850. However, some documents in the archives show the presence of Carmelo Platania as royal protomedicato in 1832 and 1836⁽²⁶⁾. Upon Di Giacomo’s death the position went to his nephew and scientific heir, Domenico Orsini Di Giacomo, instructor of clinical medicine⁽²⁷⁾.

There is clear evidence of the family’s continuity in the field of health care. These and other names illustrate interesting aspects of the medical field at that time, considering the notable transformations in doctrine that medicine experienced between the second half of the 18th century and the first half of the 19th century. Although far from new clinical models in other central European universities, and even far from those in northern Italy and Naples, scientific innovations also found acceptance in Sicilian medicine. Our survey focused attention on the aspects of the Bourbon period legislation related to the ancient protomedicato office, which show a strong and constant relationship between politics and the medical field, represented by physicians organized in academia and other professional groups.

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