



An extraordinary testimonial of thermal rehabilitation: Giuseppe Garibaldi 2011: 150th Anniversary of the Italian Unification

G. CANNATA ¹, M. DE FABRITIIS ², D. CANNATA ³, G. GIGANTE ¹

On the occasion of the 150th Anniversary of the Italian Unification, the discovery of some letters by Giuseppe Garibaldi – referring to a period of thermal treatments at the Baths in Civitavecchia (Rome) – gave us the opportunity for writing a commentary about a not well known experience in the Two World Hero's life: the numerous treatments carried out at many Italian spa centres for treating a rheumatic pathology (probably a rheumatoid polyarthritis) and the outcomes of various war wounds, especially the famous gunshot-wound in his right ankle during the Battle of Aspromonte, in 1862.

KEY WORDS: Baths - History - Rheumatic diseases.

In 2011, the year of the 150th Anniversary of the Italian Unification, one of its main contributors has been repeatedly celebrated: Giuseppe Garibaldi, the Two Worlds Hero. This also gave us the opportunity for re-discovering some of his letters referring to a period he stayed for thermal treatments at the Ficoncella and Traiano Baths (near Civitavecchia, Rome). Those letters highlight a yet undisclosed aspect of the Hero's life: the numerous treatments he received at many Italian spa centres.

At the beginning of the 80s, a patient, now unfortunately dead, who had the originals, offered us

In memory of Prof. Dr. Dario Cannata (Messina, September 9, 1927 – Rome, June 13, 2011).

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Corresponding author: G. Cannata, Department of Physical and Rehabilitation Medicine, Tor Vergata University, Via Montpellier 1, 00133 Rome, Italy. E-mail: giu_cannata@teletu.it

¹Department of Physical and Rehabilitation Medicine
Tor Vergata University, Rome, Italy

²Department of Physical and Rehabilitation Medicine
A.O. Spedali Civili, Brescia, Italy

³Department of Clinica Medica, Tor Vergata University,
Rome, Italy

a reproduction of four letters Giuseppe Garibaldi wrote to Dr. Romolo Piattelli, his doctor at the Baths in Ficoncella, between 1875 and 1879 (Figure 1A-D). The 150th Anniversary of the Italian Unification has meant the opportunity to re-discover these documents after about 30 years. Dr. Romolo Piattelli was also the author of the publication "Sea-baths and a preliminary commentary on the thermo-mineral water in Ficoncella".¹ The copy of the front page was attached to the copy of the letters.

Clinical and historical framework

Giuseppe Garibaldi was affected by multiple musculoskeletal symptoms due to a not better defined "osteoarthritis" — possibly "rheumatoid arthritis" ² — and due to the consequences of gunshot-wounds as well. His "osteoarthritis" originated at the time he was exiled in South America, between 1836 and 1848, because of his revolutionary engagement. However, it never prevented an uninterrupted experience as cowboy, teacher, trader, soldier and even pirate. Upon his return in Italy, his rheumatic condition had worsened to the extent that, in February 1849, he was so severely impaired that he had to be

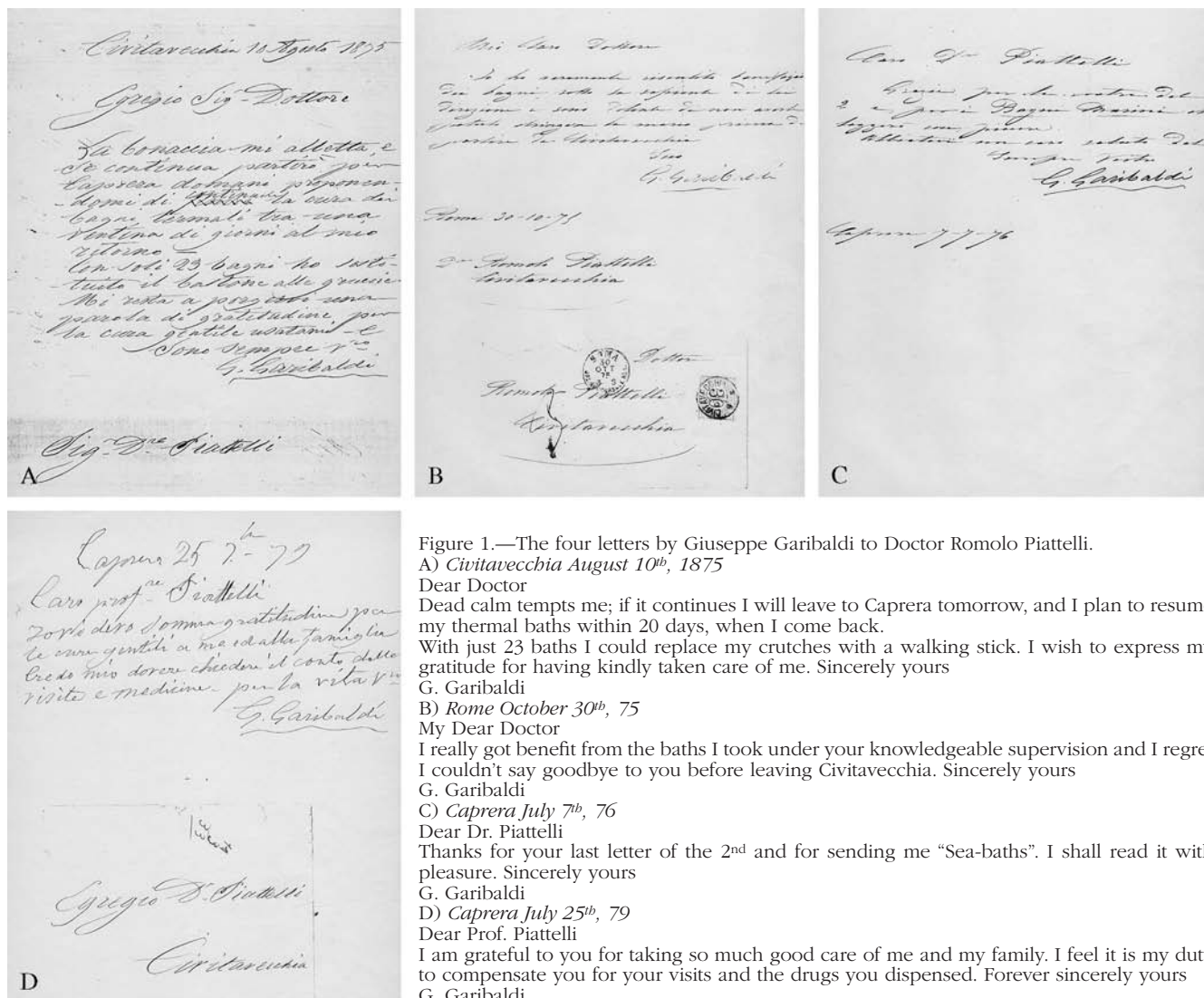


Figure 1.—The four letters by Giuseppe Garibaldi to Doctor Romolo Piattelli.

A) Civitavecchia August 10th, 1875

Dear Doctor

Dead calm tempts me; if it continues I will leave to Caprera tomorrow, and I plan to resume my thermal baths within 20 days, when I come back.

With just 23 baths I could replace my crutches with a walking stick. I wish to express my gratitude for having kindly taken care of me. Sincerely yours

G. Garibaldi

B) Rome October 30th, 75

My Dear Doctor

I really got benefit from the baths I took under your knowledgeable supervision and I regret I couldn't say goodbye to you before leaving Civitavecchia. Sincerely yours

G. Garibaldi

C) Caprera July 7th, 76

Dear Dr. Piattelli

Thanks for your last letter of the 2nd and for sending me "Sea-baths". I shall read it with pleasure. Sincerely yours

G. Garibaldi

D) Caprera July 25th, 79

Dear Prof. Piattelli

I am grateful to you for taking so much good care of me and my family. I feel it is my duty to compensate you for your visits and the drugs you dispensed. Forever sincerely yours

G. Garibaldi

literally carried to the Republican Assembly Chamber: nevertheless, in the following months he did not refrain from guiding his troops through hand-to-hand fights. He fled to New York City in July 1850; his inflammation was so active that he had to be dropped off the liner like a piece of luggage³ — the same would have happened 29 years later in Civitavecchia.⁴ During the guerrilla against the Austrian army, when in command of Cacciatori delle Alpi troops and also during the Sicily campaign, his disorders were exacerbated by months of exhausting

marching and fighting.² Moreover, during his long military career he sustained several war-wounds, which made his disability even more severe. His most famous wound occurred in his right ankle in 1862 during the Battle of Aspromonte; its clinical course was particularly troublesome and long. Later medical, surgical and thermal treatments would have healed this wound, but the underlying skeletal lesion caused him ankle joint ankylosis that forced General Garibaldi to walk with the help of two axillary crutches for a long time. At the end of thermal

treatments, he could eventually have “replaced his crutches with a walking stick”.

Based on our documents, supported by the available literature, we know that since 1875 Garibaldi was treated at the thermal Baths in Ficoncella by Dr. Romolo Piattelli, to whom Garibaldi often expressed his immense gratitude for the relief experienced through his medical care.

The four letters by Giuseppe Garibaldi to Dr. Romolo Piattelli

It is interesting to notice that the handwriting styles in these four letters seem to belong to at least 3 different people, while the signatures are comparable. The last letter from Caprera shows a shaky handwriting, possibly due to an arthritic hand, and it could be the only one written by Garibaldi in person (Figure 1 A-D).

It may be argued that Giovanni Basso, a former brother in arms similarly based in Caprera and Garibaldi's secretary for a long time, in charge of writing his correspondence, could imitate the General's handwriting so well that it is still difficult to decide if some letters are truly autographic.⁴ Therefore we may imagine that more than one letter to Dr. Piattelli may have been written by Basso. Unfortunately, it is only a hypothesis because the patient owning these documents died more than 20 years ago and after such a long time there is no evidence of any surviving relatives who could offer more information about the source and the fate of the originals.

In his letter of July 7th, 1876 Garibaldi cites the publication “Sea-baths” that its author, Dr. Piattelli, had sent him. “Sea-baths and a commentary on the thermo-mineral water in Ficoncella” is a short, 40-page monograph, that was published in Civitavecchia by A. Strambi in 1876 (the same year as the letter).¹ The short chapter “A commentary on the thermo-mineral water in Ficoncella” (pages 37-39) reports its “great efficacy on several diseases”, denying that this was due to the presence of arsenic.

The Civitavecchia Society of History, which published on its website information about Garibaldi's stay in Civitavecchia for thermal treatments,⁵ refers for more details to the only existing book on this topic: “Garibaldi in Civitavecchia on the centenary of the death of the Hero” by Carlo De Paolis, 1982.⁴ This book is a valuable information source. The de-

tailed description of Garibaldi's stay in Civitavecchia reveals the clinical course of the General's rheumatic disease and the remarkable benefits that the thermal treatments had on his musculoskeletal system. On page 38 there is even the transcript of the August 10th, 1875 letter to Dr. Piattelli, one of those letters Garibaldi wrote to people he felt particularly grateful to, as he left for Caprera at the end of his stay in Civitavecchia beginning in July 12th, 1875. The same doctor is mentioned in this book twice more, that is, as Garibaldi was invited by the Town Council of Civitavecchia to experience the benefits of thermal treatments and also in the description of their executional details: “It is certain that towards the end of Spring, in line with the general sentiment of the population, the Municipality officially expressed the desire to host him and to give him an opportunity to experience the benefits of “our hot baths”. (...) Doctor Piattelli, who had received the assignment to take care of him, probably made a decision to re-read the “essay” by Gaetano Torraca *About the ancient Taurine Baths in the area of Civitavecchia* and to revise text-books on “thermal therapy for arthritis” (page 20); “The morning was entirely devoted to thermal treatments, which he carried out under the supervision of Dr. Piattelli, in a tub in Villa Lucchesi, with water coming from the Traiano Baths” (page 25).

Thanks to these thermal treatments, Garibaldi's health “rapidly improved so that he could lead a more autonomous life: he could move his neck and his hand-fingers again and even climb stairs without help”.

Still nowadays in Civitavecchia, a plaque, on the façade of Villa Albani in Via Terme di Traiano (former Villa Lucchesi at the time of Garibaldi's stay), reports, although with inaccurate dates: “*In 1875 from July 31st through August 31st, this rural mansion had the privilege of hosting General GIUSEPPE GARIBALDI who was suffering from very painful arthritis, and here he recovered his health through the efficacy of the mineral waters of the ancient Traiano Baths*” (Figure 2).

Garibaldi returned to the continent in October, after the painful experience of the death of his 16 year-old daughter Anita, due to malaria. He arrived in Civitavecchia on the morning of the 23rd and the day after he reached Tarquinia, where he stayed until the 26th, before leaving to Rome. During those days he could also visit the thermal waters in Bagno-



Figure 2.—The plaque that commemorates Garibaldi's stay and thermal treatments on the façade of Villa Albani in Civitavecchia, former Villa Lucchesi, where Garibaldi stayed between July and August in 1875.

lo, between the Marta River and Poggio dell'Uovo.^{4,6}

He stayed in Civitavecchia for the last time in 1879. This is confirmed through memories from the last members of the Bruzzesi family, whose akins reported that the Hero used to have “sun-baths” during that period. Certainly his children Manlio and Clelia loved to take sea-baths and took swimming lessons at the Bruzzesi Beach. Unfortunately by the end of August the health of Garibaldi worsened, although in a “non-alarming way”; on September 1st, out of a bout of arthritis and nostalgia, he suddenly decided to return to Caprera, where he would die three years later.

Except for the information in the letters above, there is no direct evidence of his personal experience doing thermal treatments in Civitavecchia in the Hero's personal reports of his life: his official memories were published in 1872, and the short chapter dated “Civitavecchia July 15th, 1875”, that he



Figure 3.—The Traiano Thermal Establishment behind the Monument of Garibaldi on the seafront-promenade in Civitavecchia, on a post-card of 1906.

wrote in town during his first, compulsory days of inactivity “in trustful waiting for the beneficial effects of thermal treatments”,⁴ does not contain any useful highlight.⁷

The baths in Ficoncella

The Baths in Ficoncella are situated on a hill near Civitavecchia (Rome): they host a little spa centre, where still today sulphurous water flows. That made the site popular since the time of the ancient Etruscans and along with the Taurine or Traiano Baths, one of the favourite places for the ancient Roman society. The water sourcing from the Ficoncella spring is the same that flows into the Taurine Baths, now unfortunately dried out. A few kilometres from the Baths is the true archaeological site of the Taurine Baths. Water sources from the spring at a temperature between 53 °C and 60 °C (40 °C in bathing pools) and it belongs to the class of mildly alkaline, calcium-sulphate water: it can be used for both external and internal thermal treatments, through baths, showers, inhalations, drinks or douches to treat arthro-rheumatic and post-traumatic diseases, respiratory and otolaryngological disorders, skin diseases, ulcers, sores, suppurative wounds, phlegmons and other conditions (gastro-intestinal and gynaecological disorders). At this spa, as the above-mentioned documents evoke, Garibaldi carried out several, repeated sessions of thermal treatments (hot baths), to promote the healing of his indolent skin wound and to treat his rheumatic disease, also improving his walking ability.

Discussion

Publications on the History of Medicine are quite detailed about the numerous, sometimes even world-famous physicians who treated Giuseppe Garibaldi.⁸⁻¹⁵ None of these texts, however, mentions Dr. Romolo Piattelli, a thermal-treatment specialist, to whom Garibaldi wrote a letter from Civitavecchia on August 18th, 1875: “*Dead calm tempts me; if it continues I will leave for Caprera tomorrow, and I plan to resume my thermal baths within 20 days, when I come back. With just 23 baths I could replace my crutches with a walking stick*”. On other letters (on October 30th, 1875 and on July

25th, 1876) the Two World Hero confirms, more than once, the benefits obtained from his thermal treatments under the “knowledgeable supervision” of Dr. Piattelli. On any account, the detailed monograph “Garibaldi in Civitavecchia” mentions him three times, despite it omits his first name.⁴ Based on our historical-bibliographic research, over the years Giuseppe Garibaldi had been frequently staying at thermal Baths: from Monsummano to Chianciano, from Casamicciola in Ischia to Trescore Balneario and Rapolano — he also visited Castel San Pietro, Acqui and Acquasanta Terme, besides the above-mentioned Bagnolo in Tarquinia — and lastly the Baths in Ficoncella, consistently with our documentation.

The echo of Garibaldi’s stay was such that in 1876 the Municipality of Civitavecchia decided to build, at its own expenses, the grand Traiano Thermal Establishment, which was inaugurated in 1881:¹⁶ it remained very popular until the Second World War, despite changing managements. It was located on the seafront on Viale Garibaldi, behind the monument devoted to the Hero, that is still there today (Figure 3). The Establishment was supplied with thermal water from the hot spring of Ficoncella, through a piping-system that would not alter the original pressure at the source; therefore there were thermal baths near the sea for the “Rich people” while the Ficoncella Baths were still available uphill for common people. Bomb attacks during World War II entirely destroyed the Baths: only the site on the hill was spared and it is still functioning nowadays. The Traiano Thermal Establishment has been replaced by residential and commercial buildings.

Conclusions

The rediscovery of some letters by Giuseppe Garibaldi, which refer to a thermal treatment period in Ficoncella, near Civitavecchia (Rome), has motivated us to present this historical commentary that regards an important event in the History of the Italian Risorgimento, while it was also an opportunity to highlight the role of thermal treatments in the rehabilitation of the illustrious, wounded Hero.

In 2011, the year of the 150th Anniversary of the Italian Unification, the publication of these letters means to offer an original and significant testimony

on how the Two World Hero obtained benefits from a type of therapy which, in our opinion, is still relevant after centuries.

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