

# THE DISINFECTION OF LETTERS IN MALTA

by *MARINO CARNEVALE-MAUZAN*

(Translated by MRS. I. TAUSSIG)

When publishing this chapter in a study which is exclusively devoted to French sanitary measures we by no means intend to annex the Island of Malta despite its long association with an Order in which recruitment from Provence has always been important and which was politically united with France during the vicissitudes of the disastrous expedition to Egypt.

If we describe the quarantine port below the bastions of Valletta on this occasion it is because we consider it as a kind of outpost of Marseilles despite the distance of 276 marine miles which separates both ports. This aspect is suggested by the position of the island which actually forms a link between the Turkish Empire and the Barbary Coast on the one hand and the western basin of the Mediterranean on the other hand.

Situated in the middle of a relatively narrow channel which separated the southern point of Sicily from the Libyan coast, Malta has always been a very busy port of call; particularly vessels en route to Marseilles from the Near East always went via Malta.

Throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries right up to the middle of the nineteenth century Malta was traditionally considered to be the boundary with regard to sanitation; beyond this point everything was doubtful. It is known that any vessels arriving from ports beyond Malta with clean bills of health were put in quarantine.

But this procedure was wrought with difficulties because vessels from Malta were sporadically subjected to endless quarantine inspections. Also it is evident from the important correspondence exchanged between the officials of the Health Office in Malta and the Superintendents in Marseilles that the former frequently tried to reintroduce the practices previously adopted with regard to the Phoenician city by calling attention to the fact that sanitary conditions had improved on the island.

We do not know of any factual documents from which one can deduce the nature of mail disinfection methods adopted in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

But let us just remember that at the end of the seventeenth century the flame of a cannon's powder discharge was popular on the north of France and that this method was probably used to disinfect letters sent via Malta. At least we definitely know that this was the customary precaution taken in 1678.

In a letter dated the 30th April of this year addressed to the Super-

intendents of Health in Marseilles Commissioners of Health De Janon and Don Agustin Delallosa stated:

"We are sending you a packet of letters from the Near East addressed to Marseilles for which a clean bill of health has not been obtained because of the plague prevailing in Smyrna and its surroundings. They have been "perfumed" by us and you, gentlemen, can take the normal precautions before receiving them . . . "

At the same time we learnt that subsequently Marseilles disinfected letters from Malta, a fact which was known to the local Health Authorities.

Usually the Knights of the Order had no other means of corresponding with their superiors and members outside the island than by forwarding their letters on vessels calling at Malta which were often not in possession of a clean bill of health. Therefore these letters were treated in Marseilles as though they had come from the Near East. This explains the recrimination hinted at by the Commissioner of the Public Health Department of the island, who writes on the 24th November, 1749:

"Gentlemen as we are occasionally obliged to send our letters by vessels which are in quarantine, most of the persons to whom they are addressed complain that the "perfume" which they exude when they get to Marseilles is so strong that it nauseates them and that they are so desiccated that they frequently cannot read them.

"His Eminence the Grand Master, well aware of the ticklish problem of sanitary measures, has bestowed the honour upon me to write to you. While he does not wish to ask you to do anything which is contrary to your regulations, he would nevertheless appreciate it if you could arrange for the letters reaching Marseilles to be less perfumed in future".

"In future we shall therefore place our letters in a container for which both the General Agent of our Order in Marseilles and the Secretary of the Grand Master in Malta have a key. This container will be locked and tied with a cord bearing the coat of arms of the Malta Secretariat. When you see the container you will thus know that the letters have not been touched; therefore your perfumes can be diluted and will be less obnoxious".

The Grand Master's secretary must have foreseen the fact that about a hundred years later soldered iron boxes from India would make light perfuming superfluous.

When Marseilles took draconian measures with regard to merchandise from North Africa between 1784 and 1787 the Sanitary Department in Malta could not fail to be impressed by the virulence of the plague.

On the 27th of August 1786 the Knights of Malta asked the Superintendents in Marseilles for advice. Their letter only arrived on the 8th of October. We neither know the date of their reply nor when it was received

in Malta. A later letter dated 15th May, 1787 acknowledged receipt of their advice which was translated into Italian so that it could be added to the documents of the Sanitary Department. This clearly demonstrates the esteem in which Marseilles officials were held in the Mediterranean area.

It appears that during this period the same method of disinfecting letters was used as in France. They were dipped in vinegar, and this method does not appear to have been changed while the British occupied the island during the Aboukir campaign.

Prior to the introduction of sanitary cachets it was unfortunately very difficult to rely on the prophylactic treatment carried out at the Malta hospital; as a matter of fact, a letter disinfected in Malta had to be treated again in Livorno, Genoa or Marseilles and it did not often happen that letters from infected countries were addressed to Malta.

While awaiting more concrete results of our investigations on this matter we would like to mention a letter which we have seen recently. This is a letter written in Syracuse in 1809 addressed to someone in Great Britain. It was sent via Malta, where it was slit twice and later despatched, i.e. it was returned to the post office which affixed the typical cachet in the form of an arch bearing the word MALTA.

To implement an excellent article, Doctor Donald S. Patton also produced a letter that was sent from Gibraltar to Malta which had the same slits and inevitable traces of vinegar (1824).

This is definite proof that the Marseilles method was used in Malta.

Nevertheless another method was simultaneously developed at the hospital, probably under the influence of continental hospitals such as the one at Livorno.

As a matter of fact a certain number of letters were opened and fumigated at least from 1816 onwards (the exact mixture being unknown) and closed again by an official wax seal.

But let us listen to what our Consul in Malta said who after giving a flattering description of the hospital wrote to a friend giving him the following details of the system which is of particular interest to us:

" . . . In this hospital another method is also used to disinfect letters which also supersedes that employed during the times of the Order when different authorities in continental ports struck letters from the Near East and the Barbary Coast with two blows from a chisel, soaked them in vinegar for a moment and then left the inner sheets dry and untouched; in this hospital, on the other hand, where the employees are only changed every four months they have to open these letters and give them a double dose of perfume. A very precise method ensures that the pages in the envelopes are not mixed up after they have been perfumed, when they are closed again and sealed with the stamp of the Health Authorities".

Joseph BORQ"

Without any noticeable changes we reach a very important date in maritime relations.

We are now at the beginning of 1837. Marseilles is getting ready to salute the maiden voyage of a mail-carrying vessel departing for Constantinople on the 1st of May.

Unfortunately cholera has broken out in various parts of Provence and the western part of the Mediterranean.

Marseilles, Naples, Malta and many other ports reciprocally impose quarantine regulations on incoming vessels.

Malta was to raise the alarm. Our consul in Malta got worried and made a special request that the island be allowed to revert to previous practices "in order to ensure the successful operation of our mail-carrying vessels plying between Marseilles and the Near East".

On the 25th February the troops occupying Fort Manoel at the eastern end of the sanitary island were obliged to retire and to place the building at the disposal of the health authorities.

On the 13th of June cholera broke out in Valletta at the very moment when the first French mail boat called at Malta on its return trip from Constantinople where it should have been put into quarantine! The following morning the "EUROTAS" this was the name of the vessel — left for Marseilles, where after arrival on the 18th it delivered its mail to the hospital.

Malta could not produce clean bills of health until the 15th October 1837. But the sanitary authorities in Marseilles who were extremely anxious and prudent did not permit the letters that had been treated in Malta to be disinfected a second time until the 16th of December 1837.

It so happens that we possess a letter from Smyrna dated 1st December 1837 which undoubtedly arrived in Malta on the "LEONIDAS" on the 6th of this month, where the ship remained for four days. This letter was disinfected there as proved by the wax seal affixed to it.

On the 15th the "LEONIDAS" arrived at Marseilles, where our letter was treated a second time. This proved that at this time Marseilles probably used the fumigation method based on chloride. As a matter of fact three quarters of the Maltese wax seal had disappeared by the time the last sanitary inspection took place.

After the instauration of regular mail boats in the Mediterranean, the close links already established between Marseilles and Malta became even closer. Moreover an agent of the French mail boats now resided permanently at the hospital in Malta and assisted in disinfecting the letters carried by our ships numbering 160, the first of which were: "EUROTAS", "LEONIDAS", "TANCREDE", "DANTE", "MINOS", "LYCURGUE", "MENTOR", "RHAMSES", "SCAMANDRE" and "SESOSTRIS".

From this time onwards the French influence in Malta was so strong that a second oval cachet — this time in ink — which was applied on non-fermented bread dough, was introduced to seal letters on which the words "disinfected in Malta" appeared.

The influence of Phoenician methods became more and more evident and by June 1838 chloride fumigation was used to disinfect letters which had previously been perforated.

Here are the details of these revolutionary measures which we have been able to obtain from the archives of Bouches-du-Rhône.

On the 14th April 1838 our Consul Frederic Gautier sent the following letter to the Health Department in Marseilles:

"His Excellency Sir Henry Bauverie, the Governor of Malta, wishing to simplify the method of disinfecting letters brought to the hospital on this island from the Near East by French or British mail boats considers it appropriate to adopt the methods used in Marseilles.

"In view of his H.E. has requested Mr. Emmanuel Bonavia, the Superintendent of Health and of the Marine Police in Malta to go to Marseilles to study the method of disinfection used by you . . .

. . . It is the aim of his mission to take measures to avoid the harmful confusion which may result from the opening of all letters."

. . . . "and if possible to create greater harmony between the health services in Malta and Marseilles.

GAUTIER".

The new methods were certainly to be in force before the 7th of June, the date on which the "MENTOR" which stopped in Malta for over a month en route from Constantinople would return to Marseilles. We have been notified that a letter carried by this mail boat bore the distinctive, marks described above.

Later in another letter delivered to the "EUROTAS" ten days later, our Consul after thanking the Marseilles Health Authorities for their kind reception of Bonavia on behalf of the Governor of Malta, makes the following observations:

"The Sanitary Authorities in Malta have adopted the method of disinfected letters and correspondence used in Marseilles and I express the hope that this procedure will be speeded up in future and that when closing envelopes care will be taken not to get the papers mixed up, a practice which occasioned complaints in the past."

Livorno did not see eye to eye on this and continued to remonstrate with the hospital in Malta. The most virulent attack was contained in a letter addressed to the Sanitary Authorities in Marseilles on the 1st of October 1839, reading as follows:

"Common interests urge me to bring the following facts to your notice: Ever since your Government inaugurated mail boats to bring correspondence from the Near East and all letters and despatches have been disinfected at the hospital in Malta, our sanitary administration has on innumerable occasions noticed that this disinfection has not been carried out as faithfully as it should have been in view of the importance of such sanitary measures.

"As a matter of fact our administration has noticed on several occasions that apart from the envelopes addressed to the offices being inadequately disinfected, the contents had occasionally not been treated at all. It has even come to the notice of the authorities that several local traders received samples of susceptible material in letters addressed to them.

"It is the opinion of our Sanitary Council that these lapses which have occurred in Malta are due to the fact that the procedure adopted with regard to ordinary letters is that they are only perforated. In view of the large quantities of envelopes which have to be disinfected after the arrival of each vessel from the Near East this system can never be satisfactory. It can never match our method which calls for the opening of all ordinary and oversized letters to ensure that they do not contain samples made of susceptible material.

"Finally, regardless of the causes of this inconvenience, the Magistrate has on several occasions and even recently found it necessary to lodge a strong protest with the Malta Sanitary Committee and he likes to believe that the latter will adopt the appropriate measures to prevent the recurrence of the previously mentioned infringement which may one day have fatal consequences with regard to public health which we are supposed to safeguard."

Marseilles immediately passed on this information to our new Consul, Fabriguette, who replied as follows:

. . . "You mention the complaints lodged by the Commissariat of Livorno with regard to the inadequate measures taken to disinfect letters here . . .

"I have been able to convince myself that the employees have exercised the utmost care when carrying out their allotted task . . .

"These gentlemen who have stated that the health authorities in Livorno did not confine themselves to criticising the methods adopted to perfume correspondence, but even the manner in which it was carried out, nevertheless the method which you have adopted in Marseilles, have made an exception in the case of Livorno, where every letter, even ordinary ones, will now be opened.

A "nota bene" states:

"N.B. — The complaints of the health authorities in Livorno are mainly based on a memorandum submitted to them by Dr. Grassi, the director of the hospital in Alexandria, who maintains that the efficacy of the chloride method has never been proved."

Therefore the two methods of disinfection existed at least up to 1844.

Letters that were opened, disinfected and closed again continue to appear up to this date even addressed to Marseilles.

As in the above-mentioned city, slits used in one method disappeared around 1848 and cachets by around 1853. After these dates no external marks appear to prove that letters had been treated despite the fact that they should have been. Nevertheless a cachet bearing a French text was brought to light in 1865 and 1878.

When the 19th century merged into the 20th, a practice which was considered obsolete was revived and a new cachet was produced. this time in English.

In the article already referred to, Dr. Donald S. Patten informs us that letters from Tunisia, where the plague had broken out in 1929, were still disinfected in Malta. The corners of the envelopes were cut and formalin vapour was passed through the orifices.