

Map Stamps of the Sovereign Military Order of Malta

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When Mark Honig recently made me aware of the map stamps issued by the Sovereign Military Order of Malta, I thought it might be useful to examine how these stamps relate to the Order.

The Sovereign Military Hospitaller Order of St. John of Jerusalem, of Rhodes and of Malta is a religious and lay order of the Catholic Church, which can trace its roots to men who founded a hospital in Jerusalem about 1048 to care for pilgrims to the Holy Land. It evolved over the centuries to include armed ground and naval forces charged with protecting Christians and Christian properties in the Holy Land and Mediterranean area.

There are two questions to be addressed prior to looking at the stamps issued by the Sovereign Military Order of Malta (henceforth abbreviated SMOM, or the Order). First, is SMOM a country? Some may recall this issue was mentioned in my article on Vatican map stamps (*The New CartoPhilatelist*, Whole Number 15, October 2006).

SMOM has some characteristics of a country: It has territory, albeit small, in their two offices in Rome that have extraterritoriality, that is they are sovereign territory within the boundaries of Italy. This is similar to the status of Vatican City, or a country's diplomatic missions in a host country. SMOM issues stamps (more below), has a currency that is of little use, has diplomatic relations with some 99 countries, and has observer status, but not full membership, in many international organizations such as the United Nations, World Health Organization, UN's Food and Agricultural Organization, and the European Commission and others. It also issues passports and I suppose the members who reside in Rome can be considered citizens.¹

However, as one on-line source says:

“While the Knights of Malta (another synonym for SMOM) was once an independent country, today it is no more an independent country than any other organization such as the International Federation of the Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies. The Knights of Malta are a religious organization that provides humanitarian and medical assistance worldwide ... and issues “passports” to its diplomats for diplomatic business but it does not meet the criteria for being an

independent country. It lacks territory, a permanent population, police power, and has no economy.”²

It seems to me that SMOM is not a country, but neither are the United Nations or the Vatican.

The second question has to do with the validity of the postage stamps issued. SMOM started issuing stamps in 1966.³ It now has agreements with 52 countries to deliver mail that is posted at the Magistral Post Office in Rome.⁴ But it is not part of the UPU, which does not recognize the validity of SMOM stamps. Recently, the Italian Post reached an agreement with SMOM to deliver most classes of mail internationally except for Registered, Insured and Express Mail.⁵

This presents a bit of a dilemma. Since the stamps are valid for postage to at least the 52 countries with which the SMOM has signed agreements, and perhaps other countries via Italy, it seems they are really postage stamps and not cinderellas or poster stamps. Yet the UPU does not recognize the validity of these stamps.

Stamps issued by SMOM are not listed in the Scott, Michel, Stanley Gibbons or Yvert & Tellier catalogues. They are listed in the Italian catalogues *Unificato* and *Sassone*, and in two dealer catalogues published in Malta. Numbering schemes in these catalogues are all slightly different. In this article, *Unificato* numbers are used, signified by the notation *U*.

SMOM has issued stamps with the Coat of Arms of each country with which it has a postal agreement. Two of these have small maps. Figure 1 (From *UBF25*) is part of a minisheet of 9 with the Coats of Arms for countries signing agreements between 1986 and 1988. The stamp illustrated is the Coat of Arms of Cameroun featuring a small outline map in the center. The stamp issued when the agreement with Madagascar was signed is shown in Figure 2 (*UA49*). It too has a small map of that country.



Fig. 1 - *UBF25*

As mentioned, the SMOM was founded in Jerusalem about 1048.⁶ Originally, the Order established a hospital to treat pilgrims to the Holy Land.

Then around 1100 when the Crusades began, they also began to treat Crusaders who arrived in large numbers. After the Crusaders claimed the Holy Land for Christians, the Order built other hospitals in the area. However, this was not a peaceful time and soon the Order became armed to help defend its properties, Jerusalem and pilgrims. Eventually, in 1187, Muslims under Saladin retook Jerusalem.

Figure 3 (*U23*) shows the eastern Mediterranean Sea and surrounding areas. Jerusalem, with the Order’s flag planted



Fig. 2 - *UA49*

there. The date of 1099 is noted, which is recognized as the official date of the Order's founding. Figure 4 (U575) is a 1733 map of the same area by Sebastiano Paoli. While more detailed than the map in Figure 3, it does not specifically note the Order's locations or dates.

After the Muslims regained Jerusalem, the Order moved north into Syria, establishing strongholds at Margat and Acre. They stayed there, again with much warfare with the Muslims, until 1291 when the Muslims laid siege to the fortress St. John d'Acre. Figure 5 (U BF31) has nice layout plan of the fortress at Acre.

Figure 6 (U BF29), while not really a map, shows the fortress at Margat.



Fig. 5 - BF31



Fig. 6 - UBF29

Figure 3 also shows these locations with the year the settlements were established, 1186 for Margat, and 1282 for Acre.

Figure 4 also shows this area.

Finally, unable to continue the battle, the remaining Knights of the Order left by sea and finally settled in Cyprus. They remained there



Fig. 3 - U23



Fig. 4 - U575

for only a few years. Figure 3 shows Cyprus with the Order's flag planted and the year of their arrival, 1291. Cyprus is also shown on the stamp in Figure 4. This stay was short and apparently not considered important by the Order as the name Cyprus does not appear in the Order's official name.

In 1305, they moved their base of operations to Rhodes but it was not until 1310 that they completed the takeover. From this island they were able to use their navy to fight and disrupt the sea trade of Muslims.

While the Order conducted raids on shipping by eastern countries, the Turks attacked Rhodes on numerous occasions. The Order held off all of the attacks until a 6-month siege in 1522, led by Sultan Suleiman II, finally forced the Order to abandon Rhodes in early 1523.

Several stamps feature maps of Rhodes. Figure 7 (U24). Figure 8 (U576) shows the fortifications at Rhodes.

Figure 9 (U184) is more of a view than a map but it does show the Siege of Rhodes. Similarly, Figure 10 (U BF41) shows the fortress at Rhodes.

For the next seven years the knights of the Order were left without a homeland. Finally in 1530 the Holy Roman Emperor Charles V gave Malta to the Order to be their home. Over the years, fortifications were constructed because there was concern that Suleiman would take Malta and use it as a stepping-stone to conquer Italy.

This concern became reality in 1565 when the Turks began a siege of Malta that would last from May until September. In the end, however, the larger Turkish



Fig. 7 - U24



Fig. 8 - U576

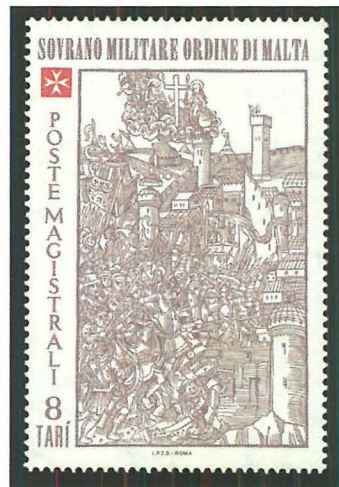


Fig. 9 - U184



Fig. 10 - UBF41

force had to retreat without taking Malta. In 1571, a combined navy from various Christian countries, including three ships from SMOM, defeated the Turkish navy in the Battle of Lepanto.

Figure 11 (U494-97) A nice map stamp was issued commemorating the history of the SMOM Navy of 1731. This map shows the islands of Malta, Sardinia, Corsica, Sicily, part of Italy and Africa, and other Mediterranean islands.

Over the years, while some fighting continued, the Order turned more and more toward its role of administrating to the sick and those in need.

On Malta, a large hospital was built, followed by a medical school. The Order continued to have Malta as its home until Napoleon, concerned about a treaty the Order signed with Russia, occupied the island in 1798. Thus ended the SMOM's possession of a true homeland.

SMOM has issued several stamps featuring maps of Malta. Figure 12 (U25), continuing the first set of stamps showing the Order's movements, has maps of Malta and Gozo, along with the year of occupation, 1530.

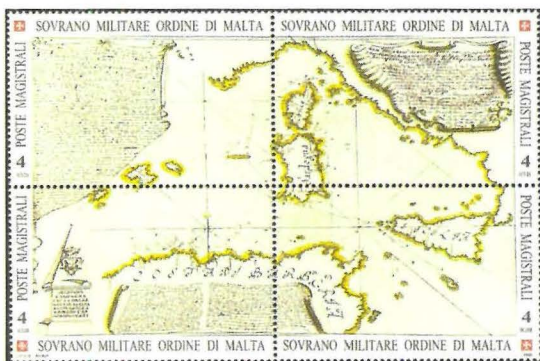


Fig. 11 - U494-97

Figure 13 (U577) is again a more detailed 1718 map of the islands by Michelot and Bremond and is interesting in that it is oriented with south at the top. The inset has a detailed map of Valletta, the capital of Malta.

SMOM issued two additional historic maps of Malta. Figure 14 (696-99) is a

detailed 1723 map of Valletta and the adjoining bays, including “new fortifications.” Figure 15 (U742-45) is a map from 1696. It has the islands of Malta, Gozo, Comino and Cominotto, the later two being small islands between Malta and Gozo. This map also has an inset map of the Valletta area.

A final map of Malta from SMOM is shown in Figure 16 (U314). This stamp was issued to commemorate the first meeting of the Order on Malta, in 1989, since leaving in 1798.



Fig. 12 - U25



Fig. 13 - U577

After being forced out of Malta, the Order established three locations in Italy: Messina, Ferrara, and Cantania. Figure 17 (U26) shows these locations as well as others in Italy and Sicily. Figures 18 (U731), 19 (U 732) and 20 (U 733) are plan views of three other locations in Italy, Fassano, Putignano, and Monopoli.

The Order’s website indicates that these are from 1712 so they probably do not reflect when they were trying to find a new permanent headquarters. Finally, in 1834, the Order established the headquarters in Rome, where it remains today. This is noted on the map in Figure 17.

The SMOM now has about 12,500 members worldwide. There are three classes of members: First Class, religious who take vows of obedience, poverty



Fig. 14 - U696-699