

SMOM and Malta issues

by

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By a decree of May 20, 1966, the Grand Magistracy of SMOM revived its own postal service under the name of *Poste Magistrali del Sovrano Militare Ordine di Malta* with Comm. Remo Cappelli as its head. A central post office at Palazzo Malta in Rome was opened through the entrance in Via Bocca del Leone. Another post office was inaugurated at Villa Malta on the Aventine Hill. Both properties of the Order enjoy extraterritorial rights recognised by Italy.

For the inauguration of the *Poste Magistrale* a set of nine stamps, printed by the world-known security printers Thomas de la Rue of London and Carte Valori Staderini of Rome. To emphasise its independence of any other entity, SMOM expressed the value of each stamp in the old denomination of *scudo*, *tari* and *grano*. One *scudo* equals 12 *tari* or 24 *grani*, the currency used by the Order during its stay in Malta (1530-1798).

Postage stamps are still regarded as a symbol of independence and places a country at par with others.

SMOM showed its intention to issue stamps years before 1966. Sixteen years earlier, in 1950, the Order issued a set of nine letter seals (*chiudilettere*) designed by E. Pizzi and printed by the *Istituto Poligrafico e Zecca dello Stato* of Rome. They featured a cross-section of the Order its foundation and seats in Rhodes, Tripoli, Malta and Rome. They were made available at the minimal cost of one Italian lira.¹ These *chiudilettere* were so identical to “stamps” that in 1975 the remaining stock of 75,000 were overprinted “*SEGNATASSE*” and used as postage due labels (stamps).

First day of issue

The first set of nine stamps was issued on November 15, 1966. They were printed by De La Rue and Carte Valori Staderini. These stamps featured a view of St. Peter's Basilica as seen through the keyhole of the main gate of the Order's Villa Malta on the Aventine Hill, Rome (2 *grani*); the old seal of the Order (4 *grani*); a symbolic design of two hands signifying the friendship between SMOM and Malta (6 *grani*); the old icon of Our Lady of Philermos (10 *grani*); map of Valletta and a medal of Grand Master La Valette; St. John presenting the Order's banner to the Grand Master (20 *grani*); St John the Baptist, patron of the Order (40 *grani*); the coat-of-arms of the then Grand Master De Mojana (1962-88) (3 *tari*) and a crowned eight-pointed cross within a rosary (*half-scudo*).

Philatelists literally stormed both SMOM post offices on the first day of sale of these stamps. The complete stock, nearly 200,000 sets, was sold in a short time.

A heated controversy arose in the philatelic world and much space was taken up in philatelic publications. Many saw the mushrooming of new “states” issuing stamps for the sole reason of exploiting philatelists. The small states of San Marino, Liechtenstein and the Vatican were already very popular with philatelists. So the addition of SMOM was hardly welcomed enthusiastically in international stamp business circles.

As expected, there was some speculation on the first issue. Within six days the highest value of the series (half-*scudo*) was sold out and complete sets were only available from stamp dealers. Soon the mass media raised the question whether SMOM was right, or at least premature, in issuing these stamps.

The Order argued that as a sovereign state, recognised by more than 40 states, including Italy and the Vatican, according to international law, it had every right to issue stamps. However, some accused the Grand Magistracy of SMOM of being impatient and said it should have waited until Italy sanctioned certain agreements with SMOM on the matter. Another argument was that until SMOM’s application for the membership of the Universal Postal Union was accepted, these stamps were to be treated as *local*. Despite the debate, philatelists continued to show great interest in stamps of the Order and new sets were issued.

Agreements

Notes Verbale were exchanged between Italy and SMOM on January 11, 1960 in which it was agreed that SMOM mail would be linked to the national and international postal network. Following the recommendations of a Standing Committee of the Italian Chamber of Deputies on relations between Italy and SMOM, the 1960 agreement was ratified on March 13, 1979. This agreement was to come into effect on April 1, 1979 and renewed after 10 years. It was approved by the Italian Cabinet and signed by President Sandro Pertini on December 3, 1979. However, because of the long and complex procedures required, this agreement has not yet been published in the official gazette, and thus, according to Italian law, is not yet in effect.

This agreement is similar to the one between Italy and the Vatican and SMOM mail would have taken the same course as Vatican mail.

It was also pointed out that the United Nations Postal Authority issues stamps which are universally accepted as valid for postage. The UN has no territory except its headquarters in New York with seats in Geneva and Vienna. The three UN offices issue stamps in different currencies which are accepted everywhere, although these are not sovereign states.

The Order found itself in a very unpleasant situation and something had to be done to bypass this difficulty. Bilateral agreements with different countries were the only solution.

SMOM-Malta agreement

The first of these bilateral agreements was signed by Malta and SMOM on March 4, 1975. Diplomatic relations between the two states had been established at ambassadorial level on June 27, 1966.

According to the agreement, the Malta Postal Authority undertakes to carry to destinations in Malta correspondence originating from SMOM and franked with stamps of the Order. The *Poste Magistrali* reciprocated by delivering all correspondence originating from Malta franked with Maltese stamps. Both postal authorities under-took to abide by Universal Postal Union regulations. Any correspondence to Malta franked with SMOM stamps would be backstamped in Malta and forwarded to addressee. *Figure 1, 2.*

Two subsidiary arrangements, describing the whole procedure in carrying out this agreement, were annexed to the main document. The Order agreed to place in a special bank account the sum of Lm70,000 or 25% of the value of SMOM stamps sold during the previous year, whichever was the higher. The sum deposited was to be at the disposal of the Malta Government and was to be used for the restoration of historic buildings and monuments erected during the period of the Knights in Malta. SMOM also bound itself to send to the Malta Post Office specimens of all stamps issued by the Order.

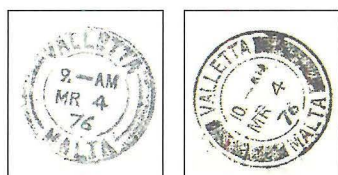
To avoid any confusion with local stamps and postmarks, SMOM could not use the word "Malta" but its full title of "*Sovrano Militare Ordine di Malta*". It was also agreed that future issues of SMOM stamps were to be printed in Malta as long as the standard of stamp production was as high as the previous issues produced by Thomas de la Rue (London) and Carte Valori Staderini (Rome).



Figure 1



Figure 3 - 1975



Back Stamp



Back Stamp



Figure 4 - 1976



Figure 5 - 1977

Back Stamp

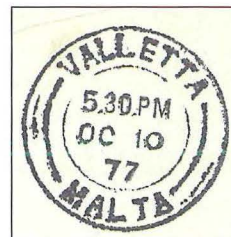


Figure 1, the first SMOM stamps following this agreement were issued on June 9, 1975, to commemorate the foundation of the Malta Blood Bank, and Figure 2 delivery date stamp in Malta.

The stamps were printed by Printex Ltd. Qormi which have been printing Malta stamps since 1973.

A second subsidiary arrangement laid down in detail the steps to be taken in processing incoming mail from SMOM. Every posted item or letter had to be inserted by SMOM in a red-coloured envelope addressed to the Postmaster General, General Post Office, Valletta, Malta. Such envelope was to be sealed and regularly franked with Italian stamps. On the top left corner the envelope was to indicate clearly "*Sovrano Militare Ordine di Malta*". The Postmaster General in Malta would make arrangements for the opening of such envelopes on arrival, back-stamp the enclosed item and deliver it to the individual addressee in Malta, *Figure 3, 4, 5*. This arrangement lasted up to 1977.

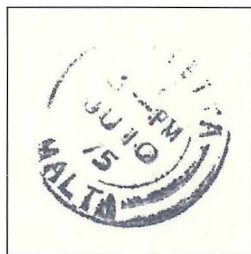


Figure 2 - 1978

In Parliament

This agreement was announced in Parliament on March 4, 1975 by the Minister of Posts and Electricity, Dr Daniel Piscopo. A debate followed the announcement and the Opposition regretted it had not been given a chance to see the text and study it. Dr Vincent Tabone asked for more details on the whole procedure in treating SMOM mail reaching Malta. Dr Alfred Bonnici, *Present Editor*, an expert philatelist in his own right, asked whether this was a recognition of SMOM stamps.

The Prime Minister, Mr Mintoff, explained the agreement and promised to lay a copy on the Table at the next sitting. He emphasised the benefits Malta stood to gain from this agreement with SMOM.

The Opposition expressed great concern over the opening of mail at the GPO, but the Prime Minister made it clear that only the outer cover was to be opened².

Inauguration

The postal service between Malta and SMOM, according to this agreement, was officially inaugurated on April 1, 1975. A few trial despatches to test the new arrangements were forwarded from Rome to Malta between March 23 and 31.

On inauguration day, a considerable number of envelopes, printed for the occasion, were posted from the SMOM post office in Rome to Malta. Maltese members of SMOM received a complimentary cover marking the occasion.

On this inauguration day, the *Poste Magistrali* launched its express delivery service and released a special stamp to pay for the service and at the same time distinguish such postal item. All SMOM mail as soon as it arrived at the Central

Mail Room in Valletta, was backstamped to indicate the date and time of arrival. Letters to addressees living in other postal zones received a second backstamping at the branch post office making the delivery. This is the normal course foreign mail takes from arrival in Malta to actual delivery, and SMOM mail was treated accordingly.

The office of the *Poste Magistrali* offers all postal services, including the sale of stamps, postal stationery, postal cards and aerogrammes. It also affords registration of letters which are given individual attention at all stages until it is delivered to addressee. Such letters are given a number in a red cachet with a large R on the right. This is what the UPU regulations demand for registered items.

Postmarks

Poste Magistrali used different postmarks all inscribed “*Sovrano Militare Ordine di Malta*” both for cancelling stamps as well as for backstamping. After



Figure 6 - 1978



Back Stamp

the 1975 Malta-SMOM agreement these handstamps were restricted to untravelled envelopes to Malta. For all other covers travelling to foreign destinations, the Order introduced a new handstamp inscribed *Poste Magistrali* only. This was important to avoid any ambiguity and confusion with Malta Post Office, as stipulated by the Malta agreement.

On travelled First Day Covers an additional postmark, *Primo Giorno d'Emissione*, with the Order's coat-of-arms in the centre, was also applied. In 1983 a new bilingual

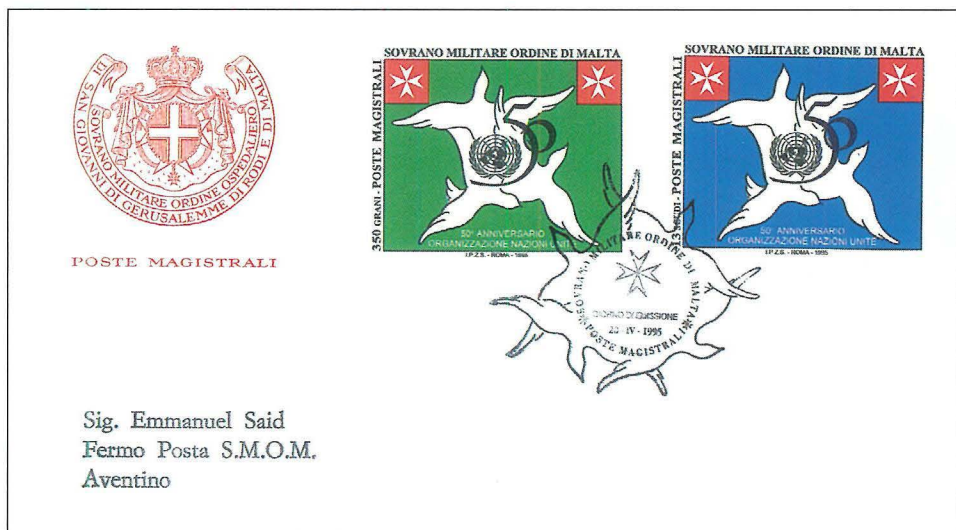


Figure 7 - 1995



Back Stamp

handstamp *Primo Giorno d'Emissione* – First Day of Issue was introduced.

The Malta-SMOM agreement lapsed on February 28, 1978, but was never renewed. During its three years of smooth running, this agreement served as a prototype for other similar treaties with other countries. The first one was signed with Nicaragua on June 27, 1977. Several others followed on the same pattern and today SMOM has similar postal agreements with 45 countries. Through such agreements SMOM makes considerable grants and contributions towards hospitals, medical services and other humanitarian activities.

From 1978 onwards personalised addressed envelopes were directed to:

Fermo Posta SMOM / Aventino. Figure 6, 7.

SMOM stamps have a special attraction to us Maltese as they feature many aspects of our social, cultural and artistic heritage so closely connected with the Knights.

History is the dominant feature covering the annals of the Order from its foundation to its present-day activities throughout the world. Various sets portray the complete series of Grand Masters, their coats-of-arms and the different uniforms of ranks within the Order. Naval battles and victories, maritime, vividly depicted on various sets, and famous artists like Mattia Preti and Caravaggio are strongly represented.

From 1996 envelopes were no longer personally addressed but directed:
Alla Direzione della Zecca / Palazzo Magistrale. Figure 8.



Figure 8 - 1995



Back Stamp

These art masterpieces are so vividly reproduced that SMOM stamps are artistic miniatures in themselves. They create interest even in those who are not philatelists. This is perhaps why so many philatelists around the world are collecting SMOM stamps.

In Germany, USA, Canada, France and Italy, interest in them is so great that there are special societies and circles specialising in SMOM stamps, while there is a good demand for special albums and catalogues for SMOM stamps.

Local dealers Emanuel Said's *SMOM Stamp and Coin Catalogue* not only lists the stamps but also gives full details on the subject. It describes each stamp, provenance, location and other details which render the collection and the catalogue a source of general information.

In this way the SMOM collection which has grown into 475 ordinary postage stamps, 56 airmail, five express and 48 miniature sheets, has become meaningful, cultural and interesting – three aspects which keep philatelists collecting these stamps issued by the *Poste Magistrali* which is celebrating 30 years of service this month.

References

¹ *Rivista Illustrata SMOM, Aprile-Giugno, 1950, p. 21.*

² Malta Parliamentary Debates, Sitting 384, March 4, 1975, pp. 329-342; Sitting 385, March 5, 1975, p. 449.