

POSTAL MARKINGS ON AGIUS DE SOLDANIS'S CORRESPONDENCE

By Giovanni Bonello LL.D., K.M.

The National Library of Malta houses a sizeable accumulation of letters written by or to Canon Gio Pietro Francesco Agius de Soldanis (1712-1770). A full assessment of their historical and social value has not yet been undertaken. This, I believe, would yield handsome returns. The story of eighteenth century Malta needs greater depth and tone.

I am reproducing a summarized biography of Agius de Soldanis from Joseph Cassar Pullicino's excellent lecture. The booklet, published by the Malta Historical Society in 1996, give the most up to date information about this valuable scholar.

"Born at Rabat, in Gozo, on October 31, 1712, he studied Latin and other languages in Malta, and was appointed Canon of the Collegiate of Gozo at the early age of seventeen when he was not yet ordained priest. He studied Philosophy and Theology at the Jesuits' College in Valletta. Agius also studied Law, graduating from the University of Padua, in Italy.

"His publications include a grammar of the Maltese language, which he considered as a direct survivor of the original Punic language. As a member of at least four Italian academies, he kept up a steady correspondence with some of their prominent members. In 1763 he was appointed first Librarian of what is now known as the National Library. He died on January 30, 1770".

I have only examined the National Library collection in terms of postal history, looking out for those specimens which could throw light on the poorly known postal arrangements prevailing during the last century of the Knights' rule in Malta. Here are some preliminary observations.

The collection can conveniently be divided into two: letters sent by De Soldanis to his correspondents, and those received by him. Those originating in Malta and forwarded abroad would obviously have had the greatest postal history relevance. Unfortunately, on file are only copies of the letters which De Soldanis had kept; these have no mail markings and no postal history significance.

We will thus have to make do with the second category: letters which Agius De Soldanis received from abroad. These are obviously originals that travelled privately or through an organised postal system.

By far the greatest bulk of letters received by De Soldanis has no postal markings at all. This seems to suggest that those letters were carried privately, or through the Order's receivers in Rome and elsewhere, together with the officially authorised mail, possibly clandestinely. It had to be so, as the private use or the meagre postal resources of the Knights of Malta was frowned upon and never fully acknowledged.

But exceptions do occasionally occur in the accumulation, and some of the more salient ones I have selected for illustration. The time span ranges from 1736 to 1759.

One feature that strikes instantly is the duration of the postal journey, which results from the careful annotations the Canon made on some of the letters themselves. Choosing at random from the Paris correspondence:

- A letter left Paris on October 3, 1736, and reached Malta on November 10 (fig.1)
- Another letter left Paris on January 26, 1744, and was received on March 12 (fig.2)
- A third Paris letter took from November 26, 1752 to December 5 - a record, or a blatant error (fig.6).

Letters from Paris and Grenoble (Switzerland) did not travel directly to Malta. They were addressed to Marseilles (fig.1, 4, 5, 6) where they were taken over by the Order's official forwarding agent. One has a clear instruction on its front panel: *Recommandé a Mr Simon, Agent General de l'Ordre de Malte a Marseille* (fig.1). He collected all the Order's mail in Marseille and was responsible to arrange for its delivery in Malta. An unknown use of the function of a forwarding agent, which precedes anything studied and published to date in the fascinating area of postal forwarding agents.

Another letter to De Soldanis from Syracuse witnesses a most devious route. This time round the Order's forwarding agent was the one in Venice. So the letter went first to Messina, where the rare (?) transit hand-stamp 'Messina' was applied, and thence north to Venice *Raccomandata all'Ill.mo Sig. Ricevitore della S(acra) R(eligione) Gerosolimitana* (fig.9).

Most interesting are the letters which show obvious signs of disinfection. We almost instinctively associate the fear of contagion with mail originating in North Africa and the Near East, endemic hearths of the plague.

But two letters from Paris, one dated 1744 (fig.2) and the other 1752 (fig.6) are really worth examining.

The first has very obvious scorch marks on the back folds, which prove that the letter had been placed on a hot plate for purposes of disinfection. The letter looks, for all intents and purposes, identical to those which survived the great plague in Malta. But it is almost 70 years earlier.

Even more intriguing is the second one, which shows both substantial scorch marks, and disinfection slits right through. I believe it is the only one in the De Soldanis hoard, and it must be among the very earliest with both scorch marks and slits in Maltese postal history.

In default of precise indications in the letters themselves, or of documentary evidence, it is impossible to establish with any degree of certainty whether the disinfection was carried out in Paris, Marseilles or Malta. Logically the preference points to the last port of delivery. Postal authorities slit letters to "let out the pestilential air" trapped inside them. It would have made little sense to perform that operation weeks before the actual delivery of the letter. I suggest that the disinfection routine - scorching and slitting - must have been carried out in Malta.

The overseas handstamped postal cachets found on the De Soldanis letters require examination by foreign experts more qualified than myself. Most were applied at the place of origin; Paris (fig.1, 3, 4, 11), Grenoble (fig.5), Rome (fig.7, 8, 12) and Palermo (fig.10). Another, Messina, I believe to be a transit handstamp.

Other postal markings which require study are the charges in manuscript. From Paris to Marseilles, for onward transmission to Malta; "7" (fig.1, 4, 6, 11); similarly from Grenoble (fig.5); from Syracuse to Venice: "8" (fig.9); from Palermo to Rome: "4"; from Rome to Malta: "7" (fig.12) and from Paris to Rome: "21" (fig.3).

The De Soldanis correspondence is contained in four bound volumes: Lib Ms. 146/1/2/3 and Lib. Ms. 155. Photocopies by courtesy of the National Library.

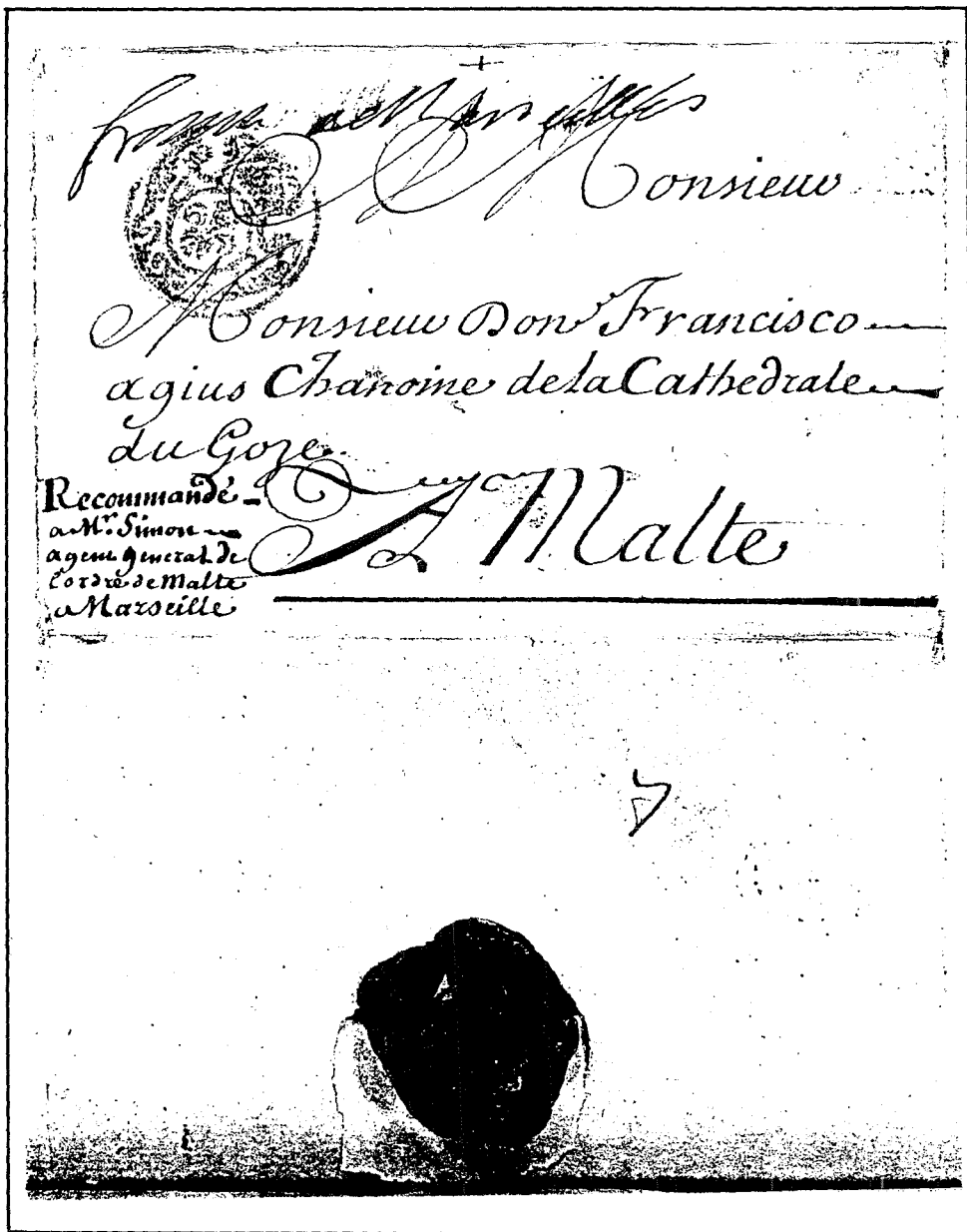


Fig. 1 Letter from Bailli Dericard to De Soldanis, sent from Paris on October 3, 1736 and which reached Malta on November 10. Note the handsome royal Fleur-de-Lys hand-stamp in black and the instructions to M. Simon, who acted as the Order's Forwarding Agent in Marseilles, from where the letter was carried by the Order's courier. (Lib. Ms. 146/3, f.71v)

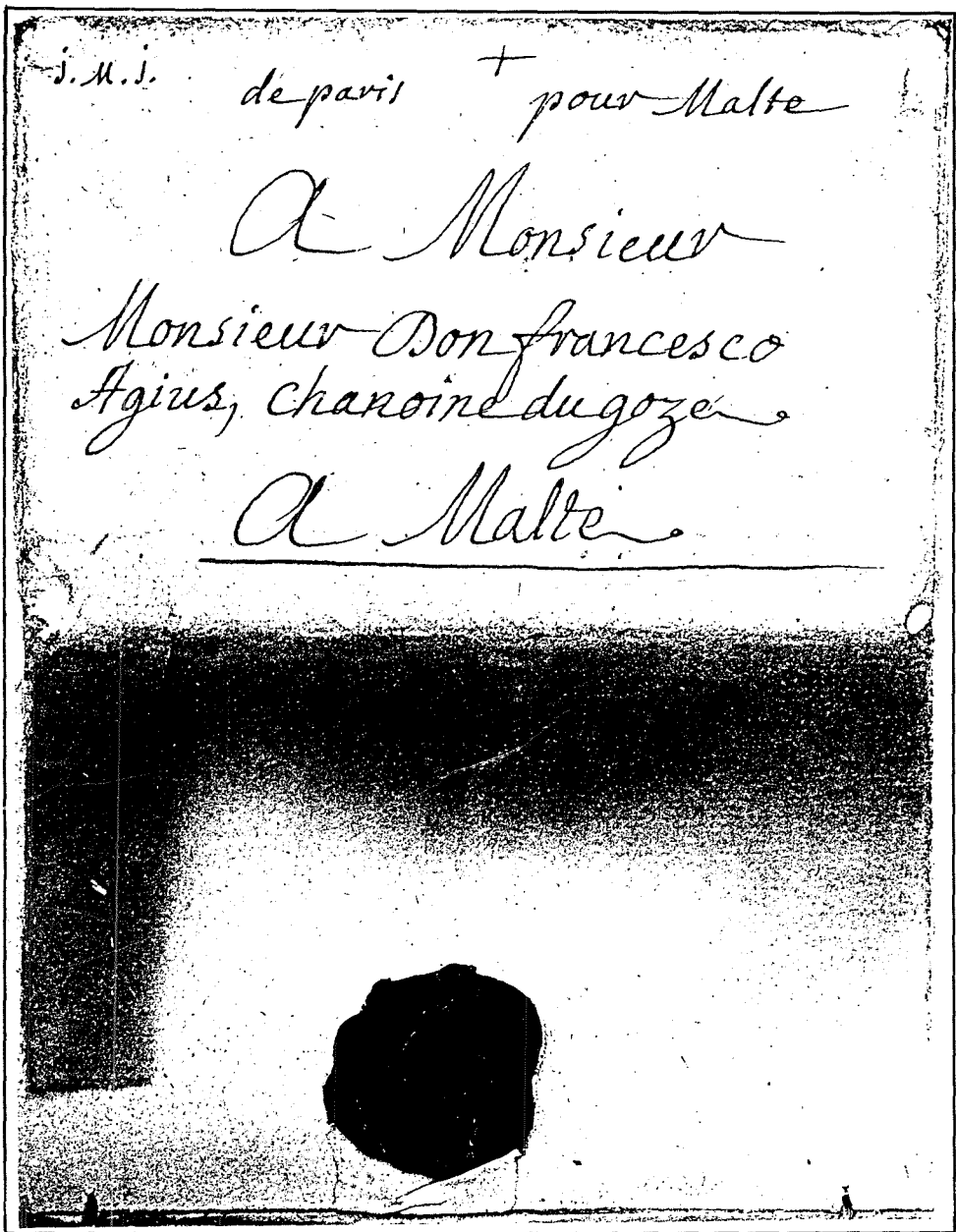
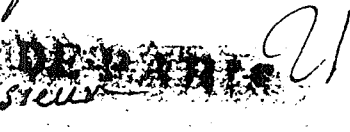


Fig.2 Letter from Bailli Dericard to De Soldanis, sent from Paris directly to Malta on January 26, 1744 and received by the addressee on March 12. Note the obvious scorch marks left by the disinfection process on the under-folds. No forwarding agent at Marseilles seems to have been involved, and it is thus safe to assume that the letter was disinfected on arrival in Malta (Lib. Ms. 146/3, f.192v)

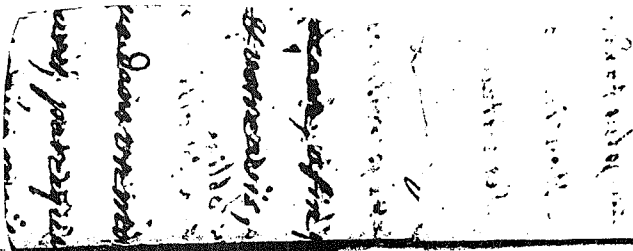
J.M.J.

de paris. ⁺ pour Rome

DE PARIS
A Monsieur 

Monsieur l'abbé Dom francisco Agius
Chanoine du goze.
avanti la chiesa de quaranta Martiri
di transtevere

A Rome



Handwritten text at the bottom of the page, possibly bleed-through or a list of names. The text is very faint and difficult to read, but appears to include several lines of cursive script.

Fig. 3 Letter from Bailli Dericard to De Soldanis in Rome, sent from Paris on April 3. It carries the "DE PARIS" handstamp in black and is rated "21" (Lib. Ms. 146/3, f.139)

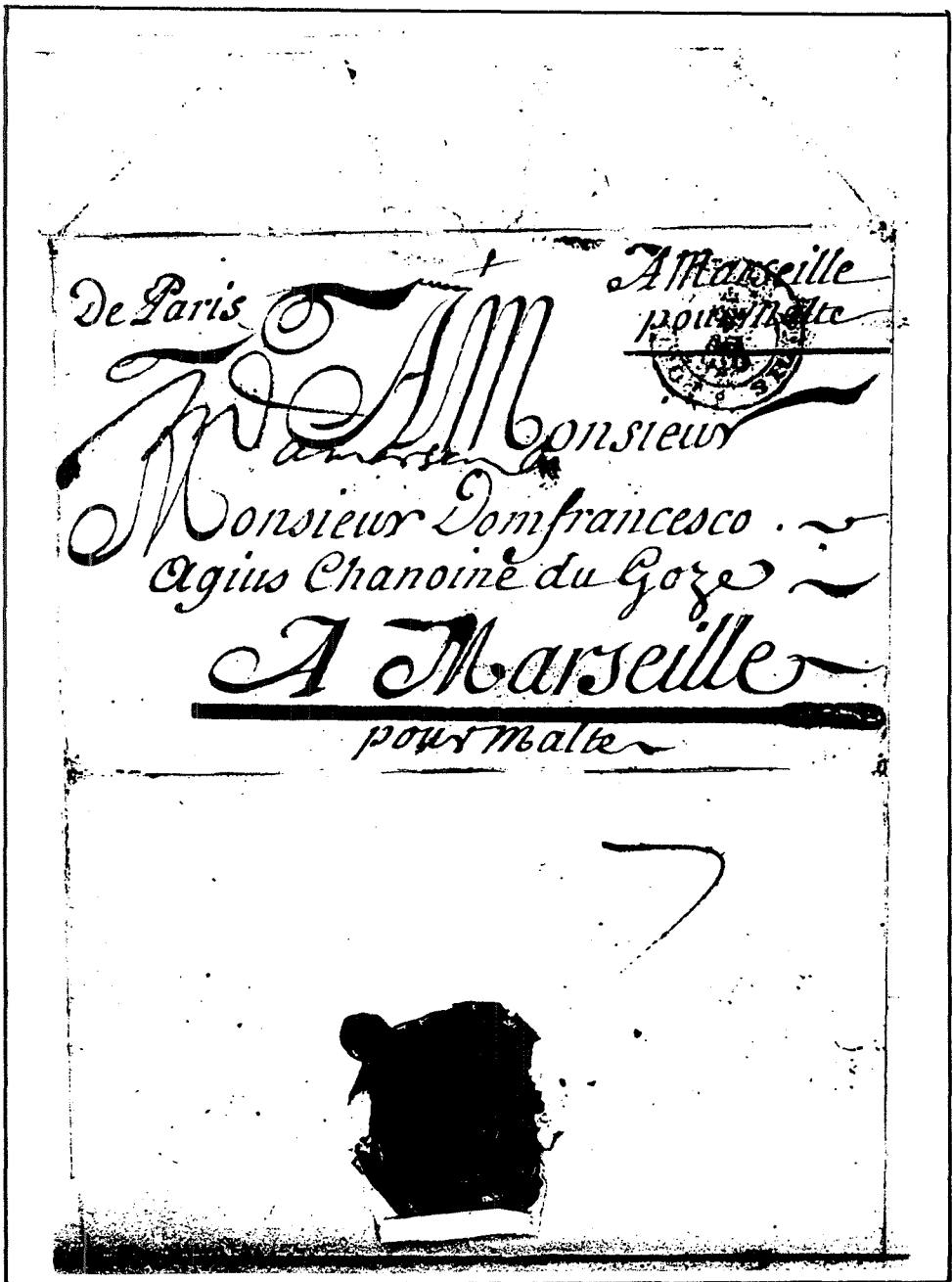
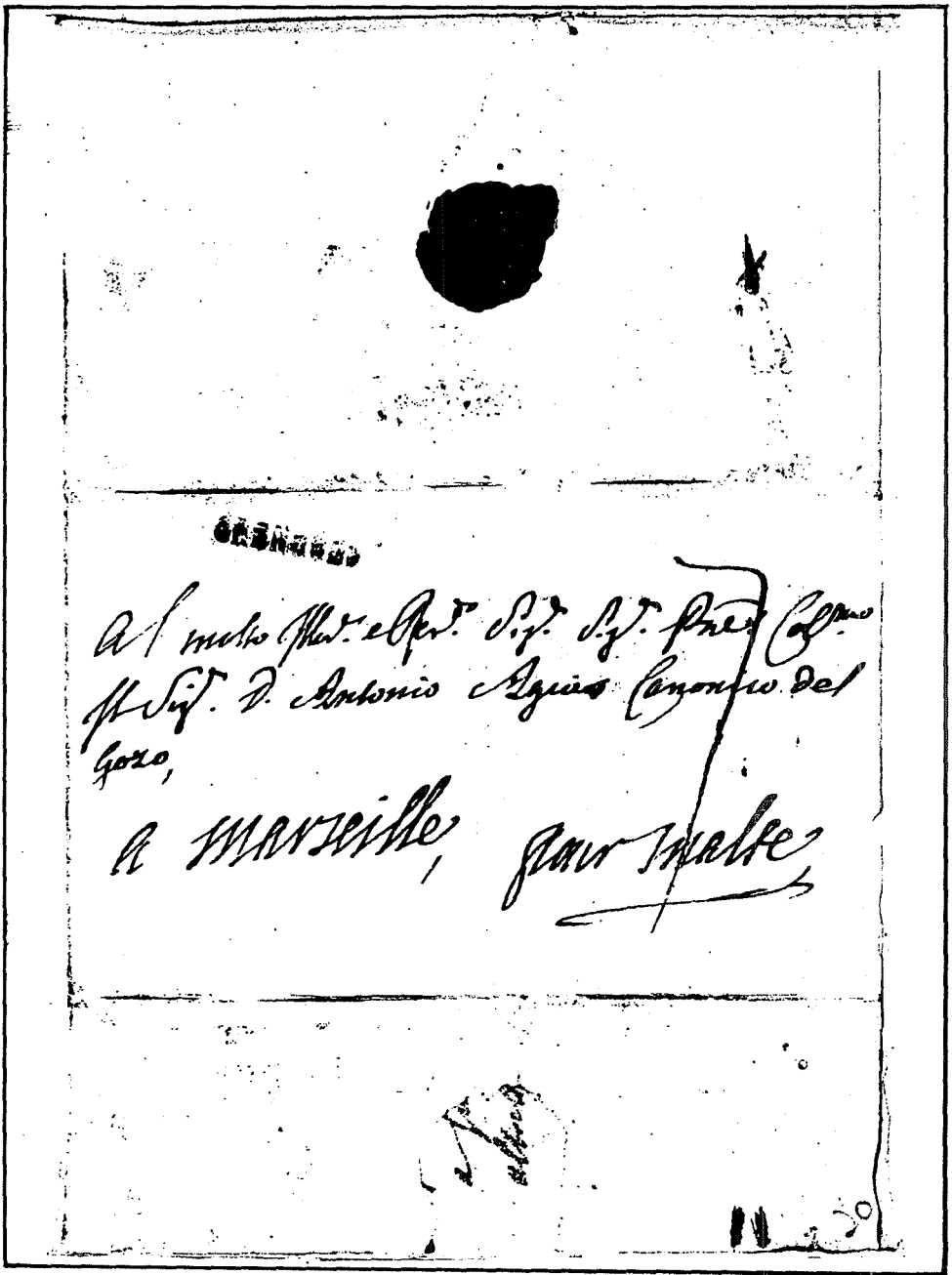


Fig. 4 Letter from Paris by Bailli Dericard sent on February 1, 1751 to Marseilles for onward transmission to Malta to De Soldanis. It is handstamped with the round Paris postal cachet in black and rated "7" (Lib. Ms. 146/3, f.124r)



GRENABLE

A Monsieur M^r. de Belmont. S^r. S^r. S^r. S^r. S^r. S^r. S^r. S^r. S^r. S^r.
M^r. S^r. D. Antonio Agius Canonico del
Gozo,

a Marseille, par Malte

attesté

11 30

Fig. 5 Letter from M. de Belmont in Grenoble, sent on February 25, 1751 to De Soldanis in Malta, through the receiver in Marseilles. It is handstamped "GRENABLE" (Lib. Ms. 146/2, f.111v)



Fig. 6 Letter from Paris by Bailli Dericard to De Soldanis dated November 20, 1752. Notice the scorch marks on the back panels and the slits right through the letter (Lib. Ms. 146/3, f.126v)

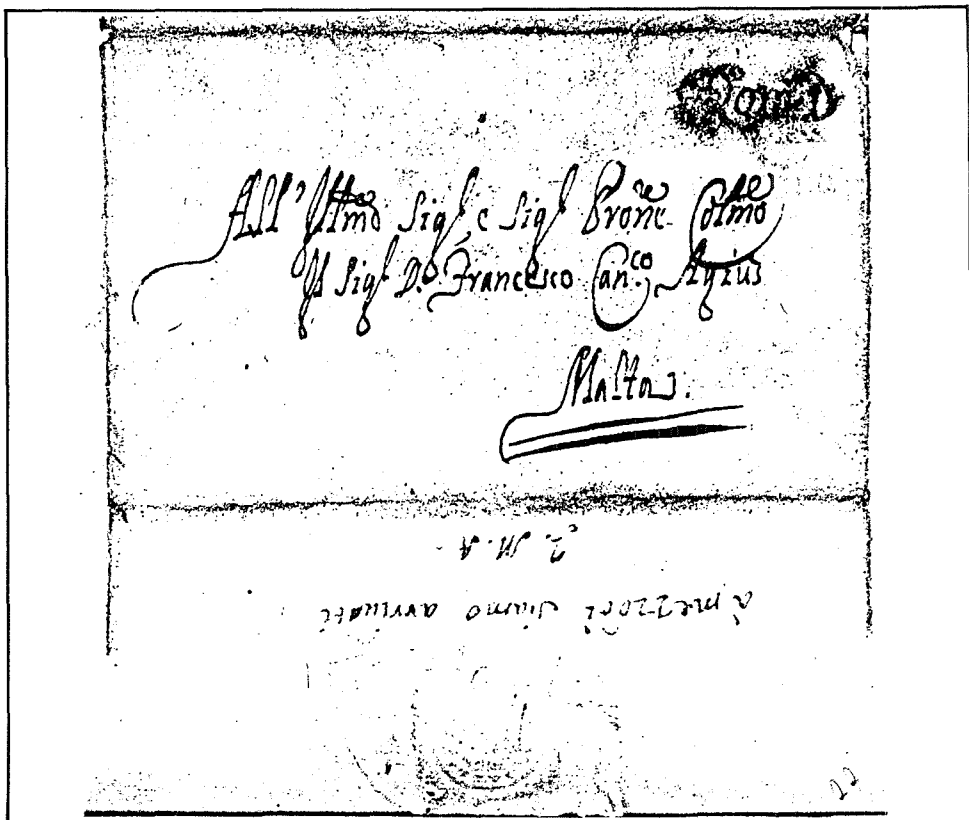


Fig. 7 Letter from Rome By Giovanni Trieste to De Soldanis dated July 25, 1755, received on August 18. "Roma" handstamp in black script (Lib. Ms. 155, f.91v)

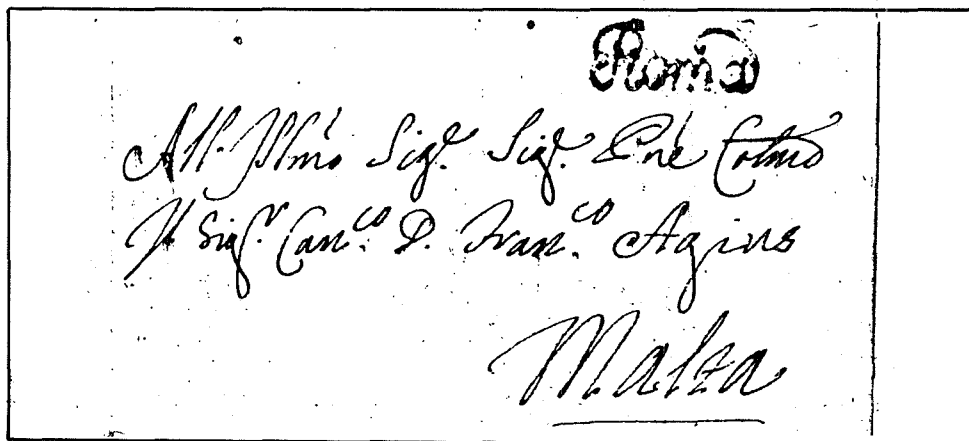


Fig. 8 Lettr from Rome By Francesco Saverio Scerri to De Soldanis, dated April 20, 1756. Carries the cursive black handstamp "Roma" (Lib. Ms. 146/1, f.36v)

All' Illmo e Rev. ^{mo} Sig. S. Paolo
 Il Sig. Canonico D. Francesco Agius
 raccomandata
 all' Ill. Sig. ^{mo} Giovanni D. R. Feropolimitano
 in Venezia

Fig. 9 Letter from Conte Cesare Gaetani, from Syracuse, to De Soldanis. It has the "Messina" transit (?) handstamp and is directed to the Order's forwarding agent in Venice (Lib. Ms. 146/2, f.13v)

All' Illmo Sig. e Sig. ^{mo} Paolo
 Il Sig. Can. D. Franco Agius,
 Roma

Fig.10 Letter from Giovanni Trieste e Bovio to De Soldanis in Rome. Handstamped "Palermo" in red. (Lib. Ms. 155, f.53v)

A Monsieur
Monsieur Azis de Soldanis
du Gore, au Gore, près Malte.

A Malte

7

Fig. 11 Letter from L.N. Mandoux to De Soldanis sent from Paris directly to Malta on July 31, 1758. It is handstamped with the round Paris cachet in red (Lib. Ms. 146/2, f.30v)

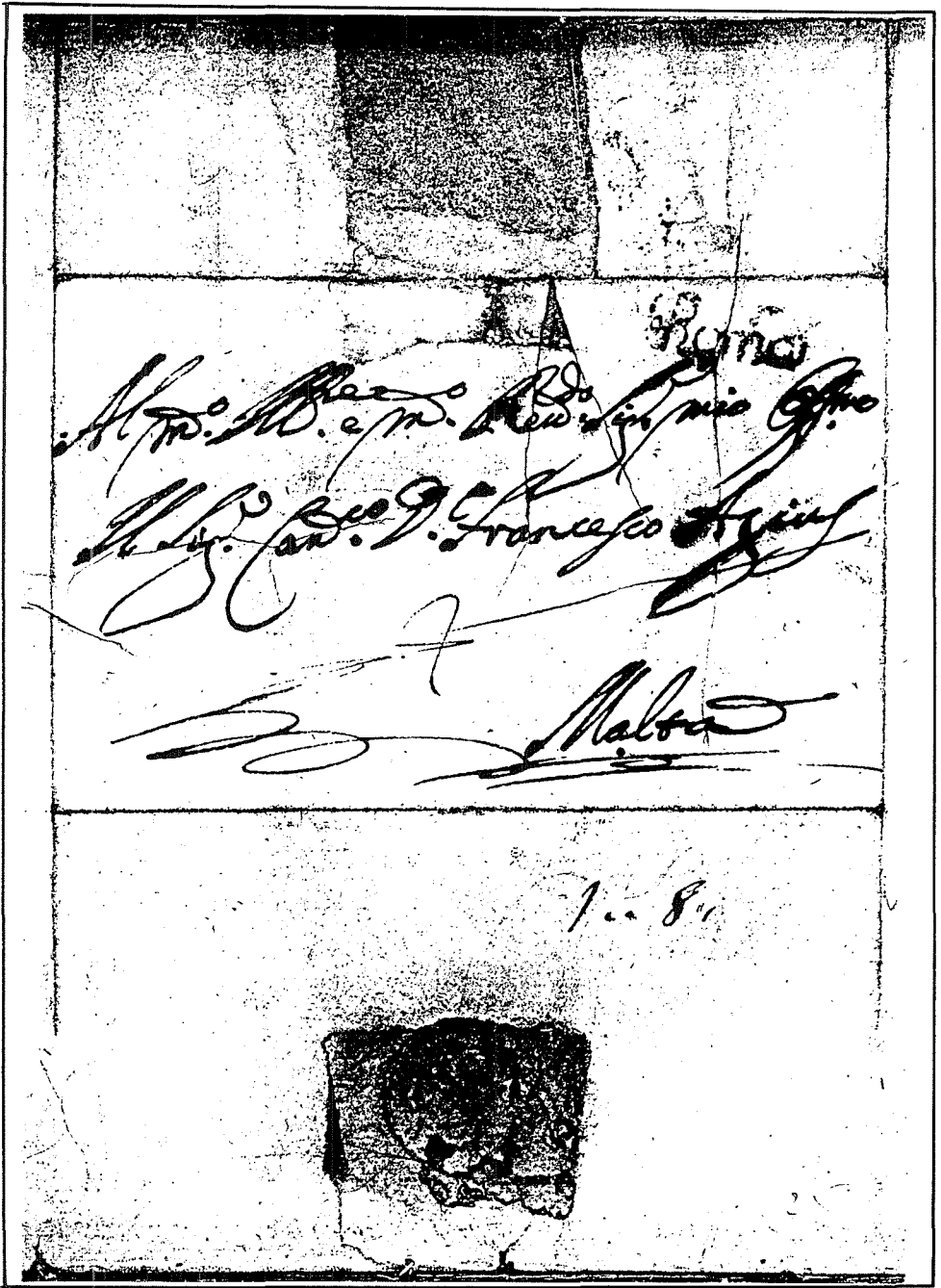


Fig.12 Letter from Francesco Vettori in Rome to De Soldani in Malta, sent on March 13, 1759. Handstamped with cursive "Roma" in red (Lib. Ms. 146/2, f.260v)