

# THE DIPLOMATIC COURIER OF THE ORDER OF ST. JOHN IN EIGHTEENTH CENTURY MALTA

By Paul Cassar, S.B.St.J., M.D., B.Sc., D.P.M., F.R.Hist.S.,

Hon. Fellow of the Royal University of Malta

The scope of placing the transmission of diplomatic correspondence on a privileged footing is to allow the government of a country to communicate with its official representative abroad privately and without its being subject to the scrutiny of foreign powers.

The diplomatic courier service of the Order of St. John during the eighteenth century operated in three ways: — (a) “in the ordinary way” (*per la via ordinaria*) i.e. through the established postal service (*secondo il corso della posta*); (b) entrusting despatches to members of the Order who happened to be coming to Malta from abroad; and (c) by means of an *ad hoc* boat to various ports in Sicily and Italy.

By 1761 direct sea connections had been established between Malta and the following places:— Syracuse, Augusta, Licata, Messina and Naples.

The type of boat employed was the *speronara* or the *felucca* which is referred to as the *speronara del dispaccio* (1729) except when sent with urgency when it was called *seria speronara* or *barca seria*.

From the above-named ports, the despatches were forwarded to their ultimate destination by the “land courier”. Naples was the main clearing centre. In fact from this city, correspondence was sent by courier to the ambassador at Rome who was sometimes asked to direct despatches from Malta to his counterpart in Paris; to the Order’s ambassadors at Paris and at Vienna; and to the Receiver in Turin. Despatches to the English monarch in London were routed through the Order’s ambassador at Rome or at Paris (1); those destined for Madrid and Portugal were sent through the Receiver at Genoa (2).

It is not known exactly how long the transit took as the data one has to go by are the date of the despatch sent from abroad and the date of the reply from Malta. It is very likely that the time taken in transit was less than this interval between the two dates, as the reply from Malta was not always sent immediately on the receipt of the despatch from overseas. In fact it is on record that despatches were not answered promptly if their contents were “of such great importance that they deserved to be pondered on before an adequate reply could be formulated” (3).

It appears that sometimes several despatches written on different dates were collected at some clearing place on the Italian mainland awaiting a courier or a boat to Malta. Thus, for instance, despatches written on the 13th, 20th and 27th September 1763 were received at Malta in one batch on the 20th October.

According to the "date "interval" alluded to above, the time taken in transit was 22 to 37 days from Rome; 23 to 27 days from Venice; 20 to 23 days from Naples and 5 days from Licata.

The transit of the diplomatic bag to its final destination was sometimes hampered by delays, mishaps and loss. In fact the Chancellery's concern as to the quick or safe arrival of despatches is implied by the use of such expressions as **essendo di nostra somma premura l'annesso piego per Parigi** or by the instructions to the Receiver at Naples to forward despatches to Rome **al suo arrivo subito e con staffetta seria**.

Occasionally the ambassador at Rome is told **tostochè lo riceverete avrete l'attenzione di farlo partire col primo corriere per Francia** or else that the despatch was being sent from Malta "with great haste" or to use "every diligence to ensure the arrival of the attached packet of letters with the utmost security" to Vienna. At times the haste with which the **speronara** was sent to Sicily did not give the Chancellery "enough time to place (in the packet) everything that was required" (1729) (4).

To ensure against loss, despatches were sent in duplicate or even triplicate (5) by different routes and at different intervals of time (6).

There were instances when the anxiety of the Chancellery reached such a pitch that the Receiver was enjoined to inform Malta of "his doings to put our mind at rest" or else to "send us immediate news of your actions which we await with impatience".

The disappointment of the Chancellery at the delay in the receipt is evoked by such complaints as "we are surprised that we have had no letters from you" or "we have been deprived of news from you to our great displeasure". These expressions were at times accompanied by warnings to the Receivers to send their despatches with greater regularity (7).

When the time factor was of extreme importance, the despatch was sent urgently by **una speronara apposta**. The Grand Master had resort to this means in September 1729 when he wanted to forestall a communication from the Inquisitor to the Secretary of State of H.H. the Pope during the controversy that had arisen between him and that prelate in connection with his jurisdictional powers.

In winter rough seas disrupted the regular conveyance of despatches. In January 1729 no less than sixteen despatches, brought by four different land couriers to Augusta from Rome for shipment to Malta, were held up in that port as it was not possible for the **speronara** to sail safely to Malta (8). In March of the same year nineteen despatches were delayed to Syracuse. It happened at times that in spite of the rough weather the **speronara** took the risk of crossing the channel for Malta but with the result that the packet of letters reached the Island "in a damaged condition due to its being washed over by the waves during the voyage" (March 1729). Indeed the papers were in such a bad state that they could not be read and duplicate ones were asked for (9).

Towards the end of November 1763, the *speronara* which had left Malta for Sicily had almost reached the coasts of that Island when it was prevented from entering the port of Syracuse by the bad weather and was forced to return to Malta with the undelivered despatches and wait in our harbour for calmer seas.

In January 1766 the correspondence from Palermo was delayed and reached Malta after a diversion to Catania as the Receiver of Palermo was compelled to move about "under the escort of soldiers on account of the bandits that infested the Kingdom of Sicily" (10).

The outbreak of infectious diseases abroad also caused disruption in the service as the packets had to be submitted for disinfection by the sanitary authorities to ensure that they carried no danger of passing the "contagion" from one place to another

I have come across no instances of misuse or abuse of the diplomatic bag, as happens in our time, for the smuggling of objects from one country to another or for the passage of espionage information; nor of any hints of attempts by anyone to gain access to its contents so much so that I have found no indication that any code was used.

The correspondence that passed between the Maltese Chancellery and its ambassadors and Receivers abroad dealt with the most varied subjects imaginable ranging from matters of finance, negotiations for the importation of wheat and meat or the acquisition of wood for the naval arsenal to the sending of news of the outbreak of "contagious" illnesses, the sending of Christmas greetings and congratulatory messages to members of the European nobility on the birth of an heir and letters of recommendation to highly placed personages "to assist and protect" young men going to Italy to pursue a course of academic studies. Strained relations between the Grand Master, the bishop and the Inquisitor; requests for preachers from Italy for the delivery of sermons at the Conventual Church of St. John during Advent and Lent; and pleas for aid from continental powers in the form of armaments and soldiers for the defence of the Island against Turkish attacks also figured among the items of correspondence.

It seems that the diplomatic bag could stretch in size from a packet of letters to several packing cases. In fact apart from despatches, the *speronara* and land courier carried other articles to and from Malta such as "small box" containing objects of porcelain to Florence (1729) (11), *lunari* and newspapers from Livorno (1761). In 1761 twenty-four *compagne di vetro* and, in 1763, a number of *salviette damascate* were received from Venice. In December 1764 six falcons were sent to the King of Naples (12); but the most frequent items that left Malta with the diplomatic bag were the cases of oranges offered as gifts to the Court of Naples, the Duchess of Savoy at Turin and other personages at Genova, Ancona, Parma and even Vienna between the months of March and July. The oranges for the Empress at Vienna arrived in a bad state in June 1764. This is not

surprising as before they reached their ultimate destination they were directed to the Order's Ambassador at Venice who in turn channelled them to Vienna through Trieste. Apart from the length of the journey, however, there must have been something amiss with the way they were packed for it was decided that in future the packing of the fruit would be carried out "in accordance with the instructions forwarded by the *confetturiere*" of the Empress (13).

The letters are written in Italian except those addressed to the English King, the King of Poland and the Empress at Vienna which are written in Latin (14).

In general the letters are concise, business-like and marked by a tone of compromise, tolerance and politeness. The greatest defence was used towards foreign potentates even when differences of views and conflicting issues were being dealt with. There figure only a few ecclesiastical personages with regard to whom the customary restraint in language gave place to uncomplimentary and indignant words. These targets were provided by the Inquisitor, the Bishop of Malta and the Capuchin Friars.

The Inquisitor was a thorn in the flesh of the Grand Master. The latter was exasperated by the prelate's **torbido ed irriquieto modo di operare** and by his having troubled the Order "in so many ways" in connection with his unceasing efforts to undermine the authority of the Grand Master (1729) (15).

Another festering sore was the Bishop who clashed with Grand Master Em. Pinto de Fonceca on the question of "clerics". Thus the despatch sent to the ambassador at Rome by the Grand Master on the 26th March 1765 dealt in very articulate terms with the "prostitution of the tonsure bestowed on whoever was presented to the Bishop" (16) and referred to "the imbecility of Mgr. Bishop which is becoming worse and which causes us new troubles". This friction had arisen from the "clandestine tonsures placed on the heads of persons of advancing age who have no vocation for the ecclesiastical state" and whose only aim in acquiring the tonsure was to evade the authority of the Grand Master (17) and thus gain exemption from the payment of certain taxes, from performing military services and from submission to trials in a secular court.

In 1766 the Capuchin friars also embittered the life of the Grand Master, so much so that in his letter to the ambassador at Rome of the 23rd June he referred to them as "**le cabale fratesche (che) non solo fanno dimenticare il proprio dovere ma di più procurano d'impedire il bene** and he asked to have the **Commissario di Terra Santa** appointed by a **breve apostolico** to render that official independent from the superiors of his community (18).

The overall impression that one gains from reading these diplomatic files is that the arrangements devised by the Order of St. John for the

transmission of despatches were quite efficient for their times; that great care was taken to record copies of outgoing letters in a chronological order and in a clear hand that is a pleasure to read; that the volumes containing this correspondence constitute unexplored sources of information about the foreign affairs of the Order, the relations of the Grand Master with the ecclesiastical authorities of the Island and the social conditions of Malta. They are especially valuable with regard to the perennial problems of ensuring adequate food supplies for an ever increasing population that has, throughout our history, always depended for its sustenance on foreign markets.

(This article first appeared in the quarterly Scientific Review "SCIENTIA", Vol. XXXVII, No. 3, 1974, July-September).

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| (1) Archives 1521, no pagination,<br>Royal Malta Library (RML) | (10) Archives 1522, n. n., RML. |
| (2) Archives 1490, n. p., RML.                                 | (11) Archives 1490, n. p., RML. |
| (3) Archives 1520, n. p., RML                                  | (12) Archives 1520, n. p., RML. |
| (4) Archives 1490, n. p., RML.                                 | (13) <b>Ibidem.</b>             |
| (5) Archives 1521, n. p., RML.                                 | (14) Archives 1521, n.p., RML.  |
| (6) Archives 1490, n. p., RML.                                 | (15) Archives 1490, n. p., RML. |
| (7) <b>Ibidem....</b>  | (16) Archives 1521, n. p., RML. |
| (8) <b>Ibidem.</b>   | (17) Archives 1520, n. p., RML. |
| (9) <b>Ibidem.</b>   | (18) Archives 1522, n. p., RML. |