

SLITTING OF LETTERS FOR DISINFECTION IN THE EIGHTEENTH CENTURY IN MALTA

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The purpose of disinfecting correspondence was to prevent the importation of pestilence into the Maltese Islands, as in the past it was believed that the "contagion" of plague could attach itself to paper (Cassar, 1962, 1965).

Arrangements for carrying out the disinfection of letters were in existence in Malta by 1678 — that is, two years after the worst visitation of plague in the history of the Maltese Islands. It has been stated that the means employed for this purpose at that time are unknown, and that no precise documents have been found from which one can deduce the nature of the mail-disinfection methods of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries in Malta. It has been suggested that by 1787, over a century later, the process used in Malta was the same as that then prevailing at Marseilles — that is, incising the letter (*entailles*) and soaking it in vinegar. The earliest instance, however, which has been quoted of the incising of correspondence for purification in Malta belongs to 1809. The evidence consists in a letter that passed through the Island in that year on its way to Great Britain from Smyrna (Carnevale-Mauzan, 1960a).

I have recently come across a set of manuscripts which, though not dealing directly with the subject, contain references to the mail-disinfection procedures in use in Malta in the eighteenth century. So far as I am aware these manuscripts have never been published. It has therefore been thought worth while to place on record those parts of the documents that concern the purification of letters (Archives 6464, Royal Malta Library, Valletta).

The earliest allusion is to the year 1720. On 12 September of that year a series of regulations were issued by the Deputation of Health of the Order of St. John relating to the quarantining of vessels, the control of ship-to-shore communication, and the unloading of merchandise. They also deal with the reception and handling of correspondence. The following is a free translation from Italian of the relevant excerpt: "Dispatches brought in by ships are not to be received unless they are first perfumed. The packets and

letters are to be unpacked, disinfected by a double perfume, and left exposed to the action of the latter for twenty-four hours. It is only after undergoing this process that letters are to be delivered." The nature of the "double perfume" is not disclosed, and no reference is made to "slitting".

In 1743 we find a letter that bears unmistakable proof that it was disinfected by slitting and perfuming. The city of Messina, in near-by Sicily, was invaded by pestilence in that year. A plague "expert" from Venice, a Dr. Pietro Polacco, was called to Messina to conduct a general depuration of the stricken city. After carrying out the depuration he wrote a detailed report on the various steps he had taken to stamp out the plague. A copy of this report, dated 18 February 1744, was sent to Malta, and is included in the set of manuscripts already mentioned. It consists of ten handwritten sheets and two blank ones at the end. Each sheet (30 by 20 cm.) is incised by eight slits, four on each side, each slit being oblique in direction and about 4.5 cm. in length. The back of the last sheet has a brownish discoloration, most marked along its lines of folding.

The report bears no wording or mark indicating its place of disinfection, because seals and cachets attesting the place of purification appear much later in postal history — that is, in 1813 in France and in 1816 in Malta (Carnevale-Mauzan, 1960b). We know, however, that there was a direct sea route between Messina and Malta. It is therefore reasonable to suppose that this letter was disinfected at Malta, which was the receiving — and vulnerable — end. A printed booklet of 60 pages (15 by 6.2 cm.), forming part of the same collection of documents, was also disinfected, and has two horizontal slits that traverse its whole thickness from front to back. The title of the booklet is "Trattato de rimedi contro la peste" (Treatise on Remedies against the Plague). It was written by a Signor Elvezio, physician to His Royal Highness the Duke of Orleans, and published in Venice in 1743.

To dispel all doubts about the existence of the practice of slitting letters for disinfection we have a document of 1749 which provides definite proof of the prevalence of this procedure in Malta at that time. Among other provisions relating to quarantine matters there is the following ruling: "Letters brought by ships with a clean bill of health but hailing from suspected places are to be incised by a scalpel to ascertain that they contain no susceptible goods such as objects of wool, silk, and thread and to ensure that the perfume penetrates inside them. The letters are then to be placed in the perfuming stove." Incising was therefore used for letters coming on ships from suspected places. Correspondence conveyed on ships with a foul bill of health, besides being incised, was also immersed in vinegar.

Confirmatory evidence of slitting comes from the French traveller J.

Houel (1787), who saw it applied at the Quarantine Station at the *Barriera* on the wharf of Valletta. The letters were seized with a pair of pincers and struck with two blows from a chisel so that they were cut in two places from one side to another. They were then placed over a grille inside a stove and fumigated for half an hour over burning straw and aromatic herbs.

The documents quoted above demonstrate that the slitting of letters for disinfection purposes was certainly being carried out in Malta before 1809. In fact it was current as far back as 1749 (and very likely 1744 — that is, at least 60 (and very probably 65) years earlier that has been recorded so far. Slitting became infrequent after 1845 but was still in use by 1866 (Meyer, 1962).

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