

Stamped covers to Malta from pre-unification Italian states

by

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The united Italy we know today was, in the first half of the 19th century, little more than the wishful thinking of a patriotic elite. What is now known as Italy was a fragmented conglomeration of separate states, some under foreign domination, others more or less autonomous, some on friendly relations with their geographical neighbours, other on the most hostile terms. Some were kingdoms, some were former republics, all were disjointed. Italy was a political assemblage separated by a common language.

It was only through the visionary action of the patriots and political thinkers that a united, free and democratic Italy took shape over the 19th century in the long, painful and gory process known as the Risorgimento. The foreign dominations were defeated, the local petty monarchies and dukedoms overthrown, and a united Italy coalesced more or less adequately under the Savoia dynasty. The moral courage and leadership of Giuseppe Mazzini, the diplomatic genius of Camillo Benso, Count of Cavour and the heroic military interventions of Giuseppe Garibaldi eventually saw a political impossibility turn into a historical reality: the unification of Italy, complete with the wrenching of the Papal States from the control of Pope Pius IX, the *Papa-Re*, in 1870.

Every state in-pre-unified Italy, large or small, had its own postal administration which circulated its own distinctive postage stamps. I have counted nine stamp-emitting states in all. The Austria-controlled Lombardy-Venice first issued postage stamps in 1857, the Duchy of Modena in 1852, the Kingdom of Naples in 1858, the Duchy of Parma in 1852, the Romagna in 1859, Sicily in the same year, the Kingdom of Sardinia in 1851, the Papal States in 1852, and the grand duchy of Tuscany also in 1852.

Covers to Malta from these pre-unification states prove to be rather rare. There is a bewildering abundance of correspondence from the UK to Malta, and quite a noticeable amount from France, but stamped envelopes and entires from the Italian peninsula to the Maltese islands are hardly as common as the geographical vicinity of the Italian mainland to Malta would suggest. Why this should be so goes beyond the remit of this study.

I will illustrate and describe five pre-unification covers addressed to Malta from as many different Italian states, ranging from 1857 to 1870, to give readers a tentative and very superficial flavour of this fascinating area in the vast range of philatelic studies.



Kingdom of Sardinia

Letter from Genova to Malta, dated 24 July 1857, Malta postmark on back dated 29 July 1857. Addressed to “Sig.e G.B. e Flllo (fratello?) Bondin” and sent ‘*Col vap(ore) postale*’. It is franked with four non-perforated vermilion stamps of 40 cents each, in conjoined sets of two, having the embossed profile of King Vittorio Emanuele II in a white oval. These stamps were first issued in 1855.

Kingdom of Sicily

Letter from Messina to Malta, dated 25 October 1859 with Malta postmark on the back dated 26 October 1859. Addressed to the Maltese merchants and auctioneers Messrs Dalzel & Gingell by H.J. Ross, ship broker in Messina, whose cachet it bears. It is franked symmetrically with a total of twenty Grana, made up of ten postage stamps of Sicily, all on Naples paper: two Half Grana, pale orange yellow; seven 2 Grana (three pairs and one single), and one 5 Grana, plate 1, carmine rose, all not perforated – Sicily never perforated its stamps. All have the effigy of King Ferdinand II, known to his enemies as *Re Bomba*, in copper engraving. These beautiful stamps are popularly referred to as *testoni*. Some experts consider them to be the most handsome of all the classical issues.

Sicily adopted a peculiar cancellation, known as a deferential obliterator, rather horseshoe shaped and without date, to avoid disfiguring the face of the monarch.



Grand Duchy of Tuscany

Letter from Trieste to Malta, via Leghorn, dated 10 May 1859, with unclear Malta arrival postmark on the back. It is addressed to Sig.r Henry B. Bennet, signed by Fratelli Marinetti. The cover is franked with five postage stamps of Tuscany first



issued in 1851 totalling together 40 Crazie, made up as follows: two horizontal pairs of 9 Crazie, dull purple on grey, and 4 Crazie, green on white, all non-perforated. The letter was sent '*Col (vapore) postale*'.

The stamps show the symbol of Florence, the heraldic crowned lion holding the fleur-de-lys shield, known as Il Marzocco, a word of ancient usage but whose origin is unclear.

Austrian Lombardy-Venice

Letter from Trieste to Malta dated 4 August, 1862, written by Lorenzo Caruana whose cachet appears on the front, to Signor Enrico Polacho (Pollacco?). This letter was received in Malta on 14 August, 1862 as evidenced by the arrival postmark on



the back. It is franked by four perforated stamps totalling together 29 Soldi, made up of a pair of yellow 2 Soldi, one brownish red 10 Soldi and one blue 15 Soldi, all bearing the embossed profile of Emperor Franz Joseph of Austria, facing right. The letter travelled '*Via Italia*'. This Italian state, under the control of Austria-Hungary, started perforating its stamps in November 1858.



Papal States

Letter from Rome to Malta, dated 30 April 1870, addressed to Don Salvatore Canonico Cumbo, *segretario di Monsignor Vescovo di Malta*. It is under-franked by one perforated 20 Centesimi violet stamp. This cover received the handstamp *Francobollo Insufficiente* and was taxed in Malta with the rare 1s./4p. large circular postage due handstamp on arrival. No stamp issued by the Papal States bore the effigy of the reigning pope. They all showed the symbolic crossed keys of the See of Peter in different shapes and frames. The first perforated stamps of the Papal States were issued in March 1868.

Rome was captured by the Risorgimento forces just a few months after this letter, on the 20 September 1870, and this brought to an end the long process, military and political, for the liberation and unification of Italy.

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G. Bonello served as Judge of the European Court of Human Rights during the years 1998-2010. Among other awards he was awarded: 2003: Gold Medal of the Malta Society of Arts, Manufacture and Commerce. - Companion of the National Order of Merit - Cavaliere of the Italian Republic - Knight of the Sovereign Military Order of Malta - Insignia of Merit by the Russian Federation for outstanding achievement - Extraordinary gold medal by the Judiciary of the Republic of Moldova.