

‘Nizza’: A Method Used for Sealing Letters

Chev. Dr. Alfred Bonnici

Pietro Fanfani – Dizionario della Lingua Italiana (Firenze, 1881) defines NIZZA; “Quella linguetta con la quale si sigillavano le lettere in antico come si dichiara nell’ esempio: Sansovin, Segret. 23 [i.e. the erudite Francesco Tatti known as Sansovino (1521-1586) in his work “Del Segretario, libri VII, Venezia, 1568]. “La corte usa comunemente di chiuder le lettere dall’un de’ capi e Tagliando il garolo o nizza dal pie della carta, si fora quasi nel mezzo la lettera che e piegata, e vi si caccia dentro il girolo ec”

P. Petrocchi – Novo Dizionario Universale della Lingua Italiana (Milano, 1908) “Linguetta delle lettere antiche per sigillarle (Sansovin); Sopracarta (Cesare Coporali, perugino, Sec. XVI; Giovanni Gherardini, milanese 1778-1861)”

Salvatore Battaglia – Grande Dizionario della Lingua Italiana (Torino, 1981) “Linguetta di carta che un tempo era adoperata per chiudere le lettere: veniva introdotta con un apposito attrezzo attraverso il foglio piegato e fissata a questa con la ceralacca del sigillo”.

Nicola Zingarelli – Vocabolario della Lingua Italiana (Milano, 1930 e 1953), simply states “Linguetta di carta, Girolo” but he is the only one who indicates the possible etymology of NIZZA as being the Latin word “META”, and none of the above gave any indication why it was used.

One of the deadliest diseases that afflicted humanity was the **Black Death---Plague**. It was first reported in Europe in the middle ages and whenever there was an outbreak, it caused death to thousands of people, and disrupted economies of nations. Strict quarantine was imposed, and so no food could be imported or exported. The first plague epidemic that visited Malta according to A. Ferres, occurred in 1270. (2) In order that it did not spread to other countries, severe sanitary and quarantine precautions had to be imposed, by European States, and quarantine stations called Lazarettos were built, in all major European ports. (3).

John Howard in 1778 published a paper “An Account of the Principal Lazarettos in Europe” in which he describes the Lazarettos of Marseille, Genoa, La Spezia, Leghorn, Venice, Trieste, Naples, Messina, Venice, Trieste, Zanta, Corfu, and Malta. (4)

On the 20th March 1348 the first sanitary council was set up in Venice, which authorised the isolation of infected ships, etc (5)

In 1374, quarantine laws were first passed in Reggio Calabria by Count Bernardo, and in 1403 the Venetians, followed by Genoa in 1467, and by Marseilles in 1526. (6)

Quarantine measures were enforced in Malta during the Middle Ages, (7), but were more strictly enforced by the Order in Malta, on its arrival here, adopting the procedures which they had evolved during their stay in Rhodes. (8).

The first explicit claim to observation of a living micro-organism in causing plague was made in 1658 by the Jesuit Priest Athanasius Kircher (9), but the real cause and method of transmission of Plague remained unknown, - various causes being attributed to its cause, e.g. *bad air, and paper*, until 1894.

To day we know that the main transmission is: *Bacillus pestis in Rat - Flea - Man* (10).

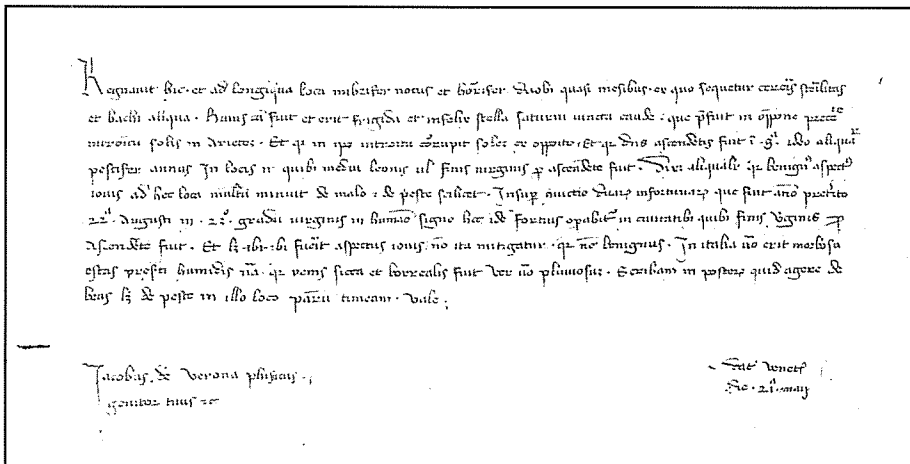
It was during an epidemic in Hong Kong (11) in 1894, that the causal organism was discovered by Yersin, and Kitasato independently (12), in infected rats *Rattus rattus* and *Rattus norvegicus* (13), the Bacillus being named *Bacillus Pestis*. (*Pasturella Pestis*. (14).

The method of transmission was by means of a flea *Xenopsylla cheopis*, and *Ceratophyllus fasciatus*, (15), which sucked the infected rat's blood, going on to a human or another rat, and by biting them infect them. So the transmission is Rat - Flea - Man.



Engraving by Geupy: 'A view of the city of Malta on the side of 'he Lazzaretto or Pest House, where ships perform quarantine.'

In Europe paper was always considered as being one of the methods of transmission of plague, so during the whole reign of the Order in Malta (1530-1798) letters, were strictly disinfected. This has been corroborated by various postal history authors among which we find;



Letter undated, (14th century), written in Latin, sent from Venice by Dr Jacobus de Verona to his son in Bologna, telling him that Plague was expected to break out, due to the bad humid weather.

G F Ingrassia p 171, stating; “Perche la carta e fatta di pezze di legno”, and “Le lettere pigliano infezione. benché meno per esser lisce” because it was considered as being susceptible for transmission, any substance, that was “peloso”, where the “miasma” disease, could hide (16).

C. FEDELE – M. GALLENGA, (1667), in Quaderni di Storia Postale - X, Prato (1988)- Strade, corrieri e poste dei Papi dal Medioevo al 1870, says “della qualita di carta da evitare in tempo di epidemia preferendo quella di qualita superiore, secca. (17), and L.A.MURATORI. Modena. (1722)., stating ; “Da altri si crede che la carta, e per conseguenza le lettere, non contagano l’infezione per cagione della loro superficie consistente e liscia. Trattandosi nondimeno di risparmiare I pericoli, s’ha da ritenere la saggia cautela di profumare.” (18)

There were various methods of cleansing or purification of letters. The most common 15th century method was the sprinkling of vinegar, or actually immersing it in a bucket of water or vinegar, which was frequently followed by smoking / fumigation /slitting (19)

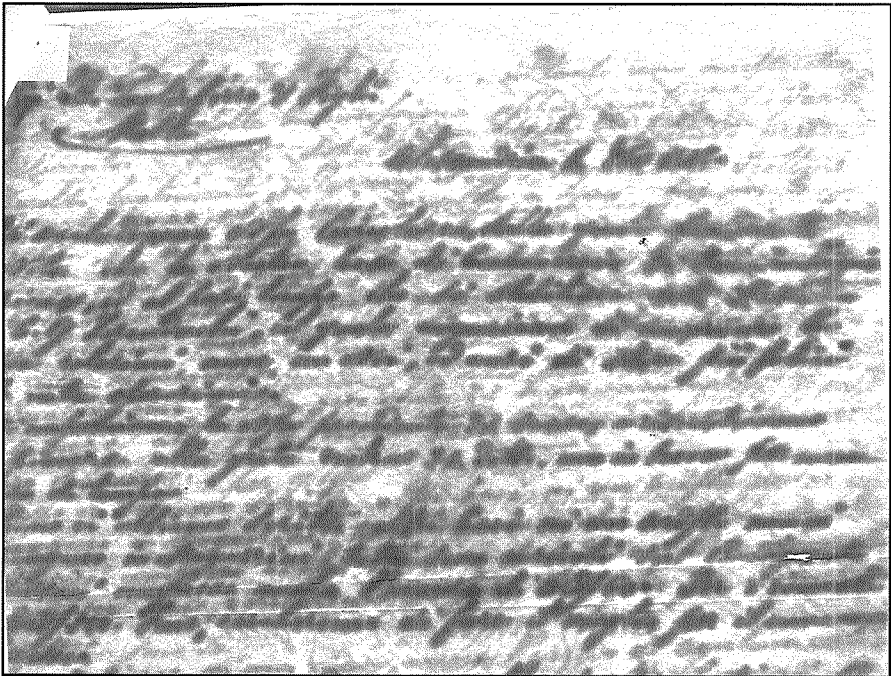
Teall 1947 says,. “The smoke from straw, burning tobacco, or sulphur, steam from charcoal fires, the evaporation of camphorated vinegar and smoke from pitch or gun powder all seem to have been used at one time and another”, and Ancona in 1951 stated “In Malta, in addition to dipping in vinegar letters from the orient were laid in a case on a wire grate under which straw and perfumes were burnt” (20)

These methods often made the contents of the letters undecipherable.

During early British rule the same sanitary and quarantine precautions continued to be observed, and Proclamations were issued from time to time, first by Captain Alexander J Ball, R.N. (1799-1801; 1802-09) (21), and later by his successors.

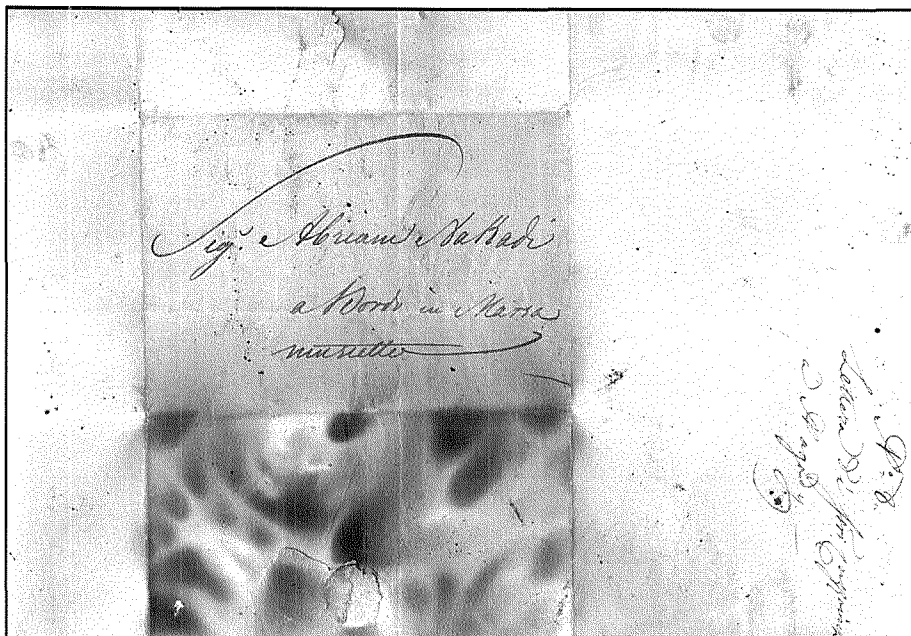
On the 7 November 1804, Sir Alexander John Ball appointed a “Comitato di Salute Publica” Per Le Isole di Malta, e Gozo, composed of; Head of Comitato di Salute Publica, Dr Luigi Caruana; Baron Gauci and Dr Vincenzo Azzopardi as Commissari di Sanita., Membri; Il Marchese Mario Testaferrata; Dr Franklin; Gregorio Mattei; Edmund Noble; Dr Fisico Giuseppe Cia;a; Il Cav. Paolo Sciberras Bologna; (22). Other *comitati di salute* followed from time to time.

An *Advertisement - Avviso* issued on the 12 May 1813 by J.Thomas, Presidente di Comitato di Salute, and J. Cast Miller Secretary, stipulated among other instructions that, “*papers (letters) had to be smoked*”.(23)



Lieutenant General Sir Hildebrand Oakes, G.C.B. (1810-13), Civil Commissioner issued the first Regulations for the Performance of Quarantine at Malta - Article XLI. (24)

“*All Communication by Letter with Persons in Quarantine in the Lazzaret, and on Board Ship is prohibited excepting through the medium of the Health Officers. All Letters must be received by the Health Officers and forwarded to the Post Office, the precaution of dipping such Letters in Vinegar and fumigating them being*



Smoked Letter

always observed, care also being taken when several Letters or papers are enclosed together that the Cover be slit open, and when parcels of Letters are very Bulky, or when they are suspected to contain Patterns of Cloth, they must be opened for the purpose of being fumigated, and sealed again with the Health Office Seal.”

This fumigation process necessitated that the letters when opened could be read, with the consequence that confidentiality was breached. In fact during British rule, when considerable intrigue, was going on about the future of Malta, prior to the treaty of Paris, it gave the government an excellent opportunity to scrutinise the contents of all incoming correspondence (25).

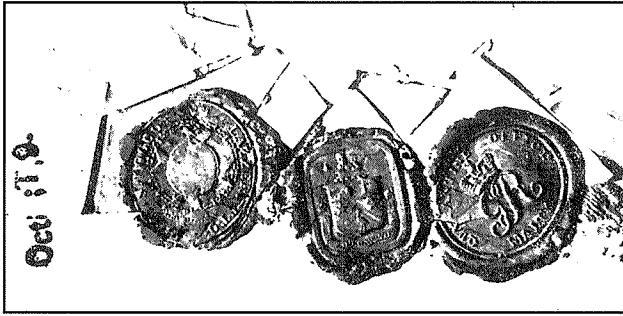
In order to preserve confidentiality, and at the same time fumigate letters, **“ONLY” Popes, Kings, Dukes, Grand Masters, Ambassadors, and the Courts in Italy** could make use of a specially designed wrapper called **NIZZA** to seal their letters, in such a manner, that two sides of the letter remained unsealed, and so fumigation could take place without the letter being opened, and therefore confidentiality respected.

Method of closing a letter by means of a nizza

There were two methods of closing letters by means of a *nizza*.

The first method, is normally found, when only one sheet of paper, was used:

1. A piece of right angled triangular paper (called *nizza*), was cut from the left



*Letter
opened
and sealed
during
British
rule.*

hand side of the letter, measuring about 1 to 2cm at the base, with a right angle side on its left, the right side tapering to a point, extending to three fourth's of the letter.

2. The letter was then folded in half, and
3. again in half horizontally, when
4. finally it was folded in half vertically.
5. A small slit was done vertically going through all the folds.
6. The tip of the tapering piece of paper was inserted through the slit and folded, the free end of its base was folded round the letter, the wide part passing on top of this pointed end, both ends being held together on top of each other by means of a special black adhesive, which was then,
7. subjected to a special hand press bearing the coat of arms of the sender, which become embossed on the *nizza*.

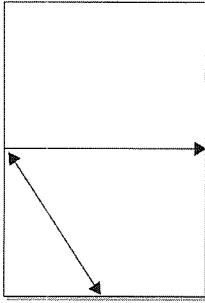
The second method, normally found when the letter consists of more than one sheet:

The same procedure as in the one sheet letter described is followed, with the difference that this time the *nizza*, is obtained from a different piece of paper, leaving the letter intact.

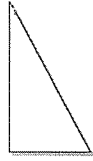
The incision going through all the folds of the letter is done this time horizontally, and the tip of the *nizza* is folded in the following manner.

1. the tip of the *nizza* is folded at its base, which is referred to as the base axis,
2. the middle of this base axis forms 90 degrees with the tip, which is then pleated forty five degrees on either side,
3. the tip is inserted through the horizontal slit, folding neatly at its insertion,
4. the wider part of the *nizza* is now folded neatly round the letter to go over the tip, holding it in place by means of an adhesive.
5. Finally the *nizza* is subjected to the pressure of a hand press and the coat of arms of the individual embossed on it.

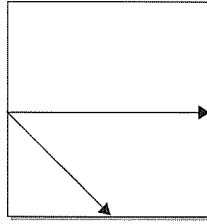
The first method



1. One sheet letter, showing from where the nizza is cut.



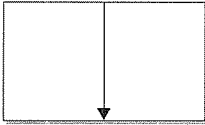
Right angled triangular piece is cut from right side of letter. This is called nizza.



2. The letter is folded horizontally in half.



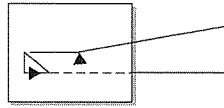
3. It is folded horizontally again in half.



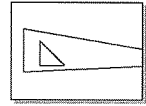
4. It is now folded vertically in half.



5. A vertical slit through all folds is made.



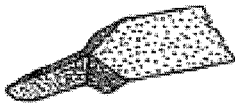
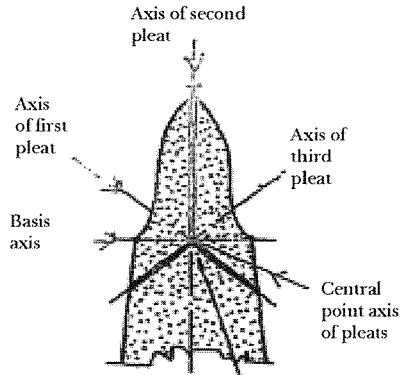
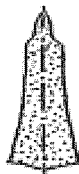
6. The tip of the nizza is inserted through the slit, and folded to the right



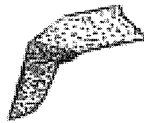
7. The wide base of the nizza is folded over the right side of the letter, so that this wide part will by means of an adhesive at the tip of the nizza. This wide part will be finally subjected to a hand - press showing the coat-of-arms of the individual.

The second method

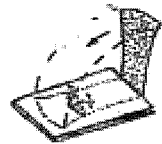
Diagram of nizza taken from another sheet.



How the pleats will appear



Final pleats of nizza





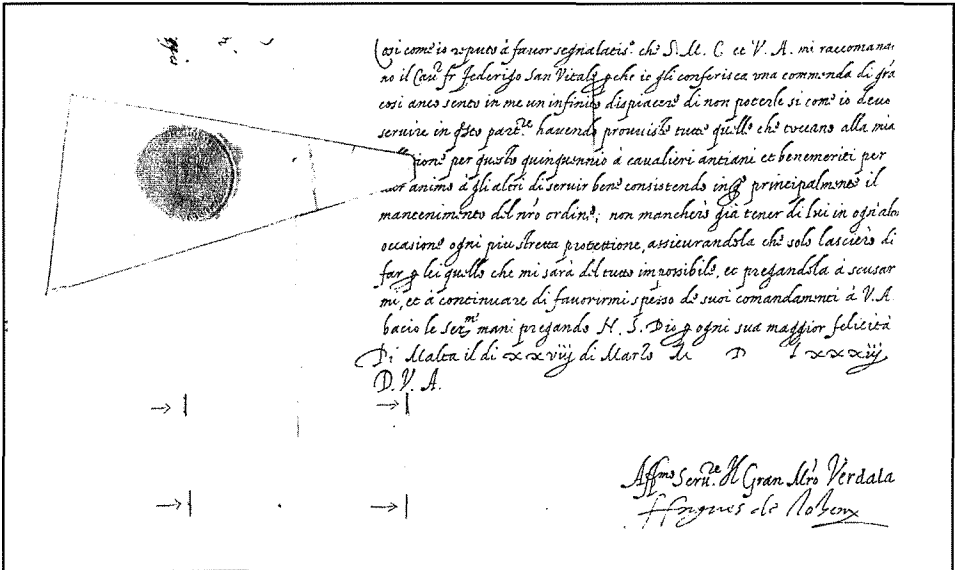
Letter by Grand Master Jean L'Aveque de la Cassiere showing Nizza with wafer seal of the Grand Master, addressed to Cardinal Farnese in Rome.(1)

Final appearance of the letter, bearing the **Address** on the front, and the **Paper Seal** on the back.

Both types of *nizza* have the advantage of sealing the letter, but at the same time the side of the letter over which the *nizza* passed remained open to the air, and could be fumigated without opening the letter, and hence confidentiality respected (26)

However, not all Kings in Europe made use of this method.

In the National Archives of Malta, there are letters dating to 1528, from Emperor Charles V, King of Spain, Head of the Holy Roman Empire, to G.M Philippe Villiers de L'Isle - Adam, (1530-34), when still in Italy, which are totally sealed. (27).



G.M. Verdalle 28.3 83, to Serenissima Madama Margerita d'Austria. closed by *nizza*.(28) showing insertion cuts.

Non fa altro scriveri a V. M. che di se in Terra di Sicilia. Sappo l'arcano
 pendente qui ede in l'altro per servizio di lei. Essendo in questo
 ogni mia avaricia per commodarla con le parti, ma vedendo
 Napoli binanzi al Nunzio d'ordine di S. S. dove il Re
 di quelle parti per quanto mi vien offerto seguir pagheranno.
 questa causa, io non posso a tanto alcuno committarmi come sarebbe
 il debito e desiderio mio di fare in tutto la parte che desidero da
 V. M. la quale degnarsi d'incaricarmi in questa parte per isussu,
 e come per ogni maniera sara assistita dal Re. La lettera, a chi
 mi rimetto e servirsi di me in ogni altro parte, dove si compiacera
 comandarmi, come ne fare ad ogni cosa gentile e onorabile. Et a
 V. M. sarai le mani. Di Malta li 4. di Giugno 1596

G. M. Martin Garzes
 Malta a S. Giorgio
 M. Garzes

Di V. M.
 Ferr.
 Agn. m. affrey

(Vertical text on the left side of the page, partially obscured and difficult to read, likely a library or archival stamp.)

Letter written by G.M. Martin Garzes (1595-1601) dated 4th, June 1596, to The Duke of Parma Ranuccio Farnese, (1569-1622), closed by means of a nizza (29).

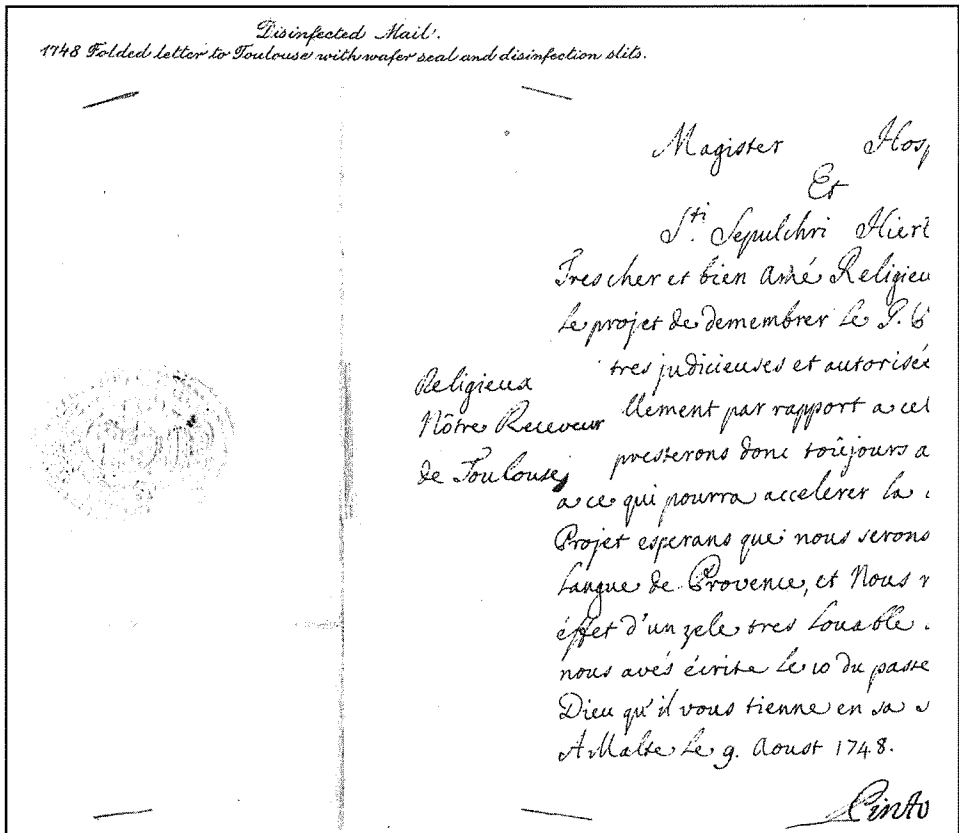
Another method used for fumigating letters, including MALTA, was by means of slitting them by various means, eg a chisel (30), (31)

From 1836 onwards, these chisel slits were accompanied by various hand stamps.

Letters sealed by means of a nizza, when opened up, will show the slit in every quadrant, through which the nizza went through, consequently Mr Godwin Said together with Messrs Christies Robson Lowe, and Messrs Harmers (33), have wrongly described these slits, as being the *Official Chisel Disinfection Slits* described by Meyer.(32)

In 1734 Messina in Sicily was invaded by plague, and Dr P.Pollacco a plague expert from Venice was called to Messina to conduct a general depurgation of the stricken city. After carrying out the depurgation 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 a set of manuscripts in the

Disinfected Mail.
 1748 Folded letter to Toulouse with wafer seal and disinfection slits.



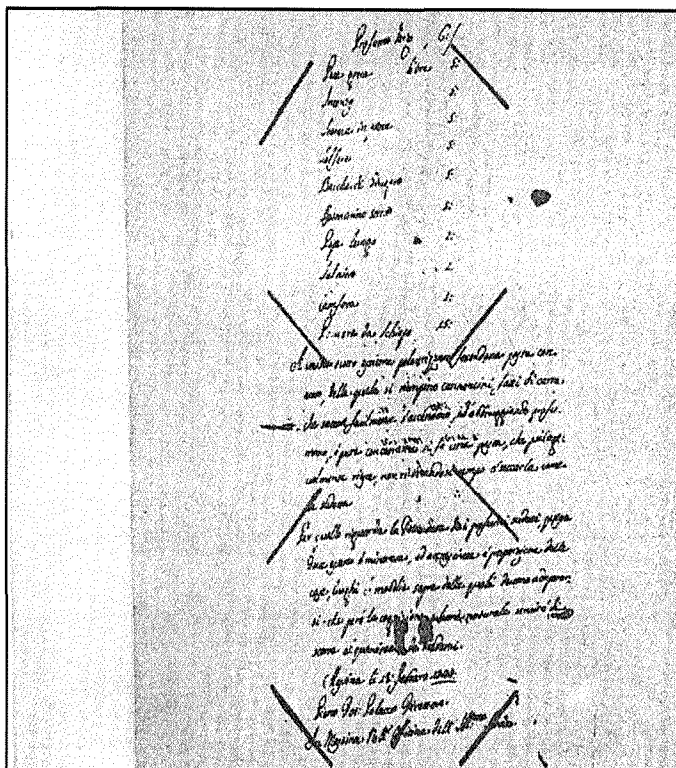
Magister Aloy
 Et
 St. Sepulchri Hier
 Tres cher et bien aimé Religieu
 Le projet de demembrer Le S. G.
 Religieuse tres judicieuses et autorisées
 Nôtre Receveur llement par rapport a cel
 de Toulouse presterons donc toujours a
 a ce qui pourra acceleser la
 Projet esperans que nous serons
 langue de Provence, et Nous r
 effet d'un zele tres louable.
 nous avés écrit le 10 du passé
 Dieu qu'il vous tienne en sa
 A Malte le 9. Aoust 1748.

Pinto

Grand Master Pinto's 1748 letter to Toulouse, wrongly described by Mr Godwin Said and others, as having disinfection slits. The slits shown, are the slits of the tip of the Nizza, which went through the letter.

<p>1822 </p>	<p>1823 </p>	<p>1824 </p>	<p>1825 </p>
<p>1828 </p> <p>LEFT HAND SIDE OF COVER CUT ALL THE WAY</p>	<p>1829 </p>	<p>1830 </p>	<p>1831 </p>
<p>1839 </p>	<p>1840 </p>	<p>1841 </p>	<p>1842 </p>
<p>1843 </p>	<p>1844 </p>	<p>1845 </p>	<p>1846 </p>
<p>1847 </p>	<p>1848 </p>	<p>1849 </p>	<p>1850 </p>

Some chisel slits used from 1832 onwards in Malta, as described by Meyer.



Dr P. Polacco's report dated 18 February 1744, black lines showing the oblique slitting, (a piece of dark paper had been introduced in the cuts). (35)

Malta Public Library. It consists of ten handwritten sheets. Each sheet is incised by eight slits, four on each side, each slit about 3.5cm in length. This date is the earliest recorded use of slits for disinfection.(34)

Earliest recorded dates in Malta (as of to day), of letters by means of a *nizza* in;

1. Private Collections.
 - 27 March 1575.from G.M. Jean L'Aveque de la Cassiere, French (1572-1581).
To Cardinal Alessandro Farnese (1520-1589), nephew of Pope Paul 111 (1534)
Alessandro Farnese (1468-1549) (36).
2. Malta National Archives.
 - King Henry VIII letter dated 1522, to G.M. Philippe Villiers de L'Isle-Adam (1530-1534), when still in Italy.(37)
 - French King ? letter to G.M. Philippe Villiers de L'Isle Adam., when still in Italy, dated 9 March 1528 (38)

G.M.Jean de la Valette (1557-1568), letter sent to the Università at Mdina, *exhorting them to take care of art objects in the Cathedral., dated 27 May 1561* (39).

Museum and Library of the Order of St John, St John's Gate - Clerkenwell. U.K.

The earliest recorded letter in the archive sealed by means of a *nizza* is dated 14 June 1532. Written in French, by G.M. Philippe Villiers de L'Isle Adam, to the *Ambassadour pour il Roy*, concerning galleys of the Order that were sent against the Ottoman Empire.(40)

3. Mdina Museum

In spite of extensive research, helped by prominent Postal History colleagues both in Malta and Overseas, I have not yet found a satisfactory explanation why this piece of paper sealing these letters is called a “NIZZA”

References

- ¹ Author's collection.
- ² Ferrer, A (1866), *Descrizione storica delle chiese di Malta e Gozo*
- Ferris, F, “The Church of Malta”, *Daily Malta Chronicle*, Special Eucharistic Congress Number, April 1913, p 24.
- Patton. (1951).
- ³ John Howard (1789) *An account of the Principle Lazarettos in Europe.*
- ⁴ John Howard, *ibid op cit.*
- ⁵ K.F.Meyer.M.D., Disinfected Mail – (1962). *Lazarettos, Quarantine, Contumaz and Disinfections Stations* p. 20.
- ⁶ *ibid., Quarantinable Diseases.* p.13.
- ⁷ Dr Paul Cassar (1965) *Medical History of Malta.* *Quarantine* chapter 31, p. 285.
- ⁸ *ibid., op. cit.* p. 286.
- ⁹ Meyer *op. cit., Quarantinable diseases*, p. 13.
- ¹⁰ C.H.Browning, & T.J. Mackie – (1949) *Textbook of bacteriology*, p.369/400.
- ¹¹ *ibid., op. cit.,* p. 364.
- ¹² *ibid., op. cit.,* p. 134.
- ¹³ *ibid., op. cit.,* p. 371.
- ¹⁴ *ibid., op. cit.,* p. 365.
- ¹⁵ *ibid., op. cit.,* p. 370.
- ¹⁶ G.F.Ingrassia. p. 171.
- ¹⁷ C.Fedele – M.Gallenga (1667) *Quadrini di Storia Postale* Prato (1988).
- ¹⁸ L.A.Muratori. – (1722), Modena.
- ¹⁹ John Howard., *op. cit* p.9
- ²⁰ J.Teall (1947)
- ²¹ 12 September 1806,- *Instructions for Commanders of Vessels under Quarantine, signed by Francis Laing, acting Public Secretary, by order of His Majesty's Civil Commissioner* (Sir Alexander John Ball).
- ²² 7 Nov 1804 – Proclamation – *Composition of Comitato di Salute.*
- ²³ 12 May 1813 – Advertisement-Avviso, signed by J Thomas, President, and J Cast, Secretary, on

- behalf of the Board of Health, *instructing the population what measures were to be taken against the scourge of plague.*
- ²⁴ 1813 - Very detailed *Regulations for the Performance of Quarantine at Malta*, consisting of 19 paragraphs together with: “*Instructions given to Commanders of Vessels including a tariff of fees, to be charged for every service given, issued by Lieutenant General Sir Hildebrand Oakes*”.
- ²⁵ W. Hardman. (1909) *A History of Malta during the period of the French and British occupation (1798-1815)*, P495.
- ²⁶ AOM. No 59/1.
- ²⁷ Luciano De Zanche (Padova 1997) – *Storia della disinfezione postale in Europa.* p. 22/23.
- ²⁸ Author’s collection.
- ²⁹ *ibid.*
- ³⁰ Elvezio (Venezia 1718). *Trattato de’ Rimedj contro la peste.* This book is in the National Library of Malta.
- ³¹ C.L.Dessoulavy, *Visitors to Malta, from the 15th to the 18th century*, The Sundial 1940. iii. 105 - P.Cassar. *op. cit.* p 289.
- ³² F.K.Meyer. *op. cit.* p.147.
- ³³ Messrs Christie’s Robson Lowe. 18/19 September 1991, Sale. Lot No. 2102.
“1859(Apr). E.L., **with disinfections slits**, written on behalf of Hugues de Verdalle and showing good arms wafer seals”.
- Messrs Christie’s Robson Lowe 9 June 1999, Sale, Lot No.1425.
“1583 (18 Sept.) E.L., **with disinfections slits**, from Hugues de Verdalle to Principe de Parma, signed Hugues de Lobenx” Lot No 1427. “1597 (8 May) E.L., **with disinfections slits** written by Martin Garzes to the Duke of Parma.”
- ³⁴ Dr. P.Polacco’s report dated 18 February 1744, in National Library.
- ³⁵ This report is in the National Library of Malta, and was reviewed by Dr P Cassar, in January 1967.
- ³⁶ Author’s collection.
- ³⁷ AOM. Vo I 57.
- ³⁸ AOM. Vo I 58.
- ³⁹ Univ. 5, f. 4r
- ⁴⁰ Museum of the Order of St John, St Johns Gate, Clerkenwell. U.K.
Grand Masters of Malta Letters; Old reference No. K 2/15 (M), new reference No.14/5. f. 1532.

F.I.P. Exhibitions

Praga 2008 – 12-14/09/2008

WIPA2008 – 18-21/09/2008

Full information may be obtained from our F.I.P. Commissioner,
Mr. John Cardona,
56, Triq Santa Marija, Tarxien - Malta - Europe
Tel: 2189 2141
johncardona@gmail.com