

# O.H.M.S. CORRESPONDENCE IN THE XIX<sup>th</sup> CENTURY

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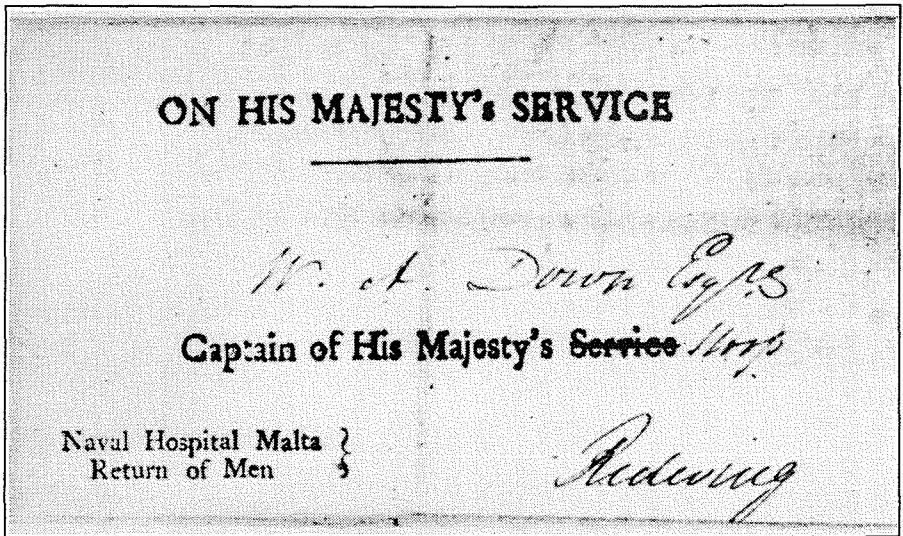


Fig.1 A letter from the Naval Hospital in Malta, dated 30 November, 1810, to W.A. Down, Captain of H.M.'s Sloop Redwing. On His Majesty's Service pre-printed. H.M., in this case, was George III.

Those of us who lived before Independence and the proclamation of the Republic in 1974, will remember that a substantial part of our daily mail was O.H.M.S. — On His (or Her) Majesty's Service. Correspondence originating from a public authority was distinctively marked as such.

In pre-Republican times, the public services existed, at least in political theory, for the Sovereign's use; they were seen as a function exercised by the citizenry for their ruler. Mail thus travelled On His Majesty's Service. The concept that the service of Government existed for the utility of the people, was still in evolution.

In fact, most postal services originated for the benefit, and exclusive use of the central power. It was only gradually that the general public was allowed to place its letters alongside with the official correspondence, to be forwarded by the postal organisation of the state. O.H.M.S. correspondence is the mailing system in its original, pristine function.

Servizio di Sua Maestà

All'Ufficio della Polizia Esecutiva

Dal Carmi 1816 *[Signature]* La Notabile

Fig. 2 Letter from Qormi, 4 June 1816, addressed to the Office of the Executive Police in Notabile (Mdina). Giovanni Casha, Deputy Lieutenant of Qormi states that on a report that wheat had been stolen, he had apprehended Alessandro Attard, pecoraro Gozitano, and found some wheat hidden in his possession. As Attard's explanation proved to be false, Casha put him in ceppi – the origin of the Maltese word cipp for the detention-room at the police station. Letter marked Servizio di Sua Maestà in manuscript.

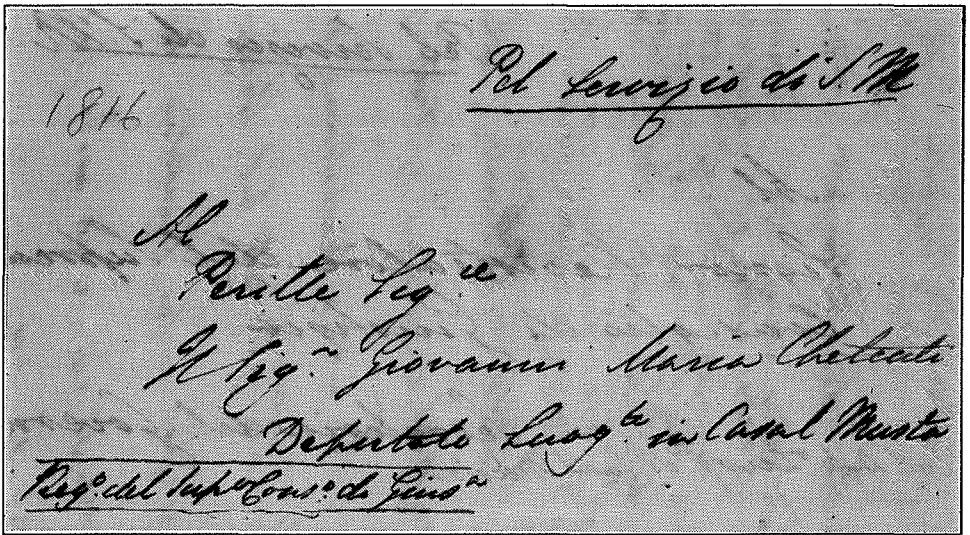


Fig.3 Letter dated 27 August 1816 from Giovanni Maria Chetcuti, Deputy Lieutenant of Mosta village, from the Registry of the Supreme Council of Justice. Carried Pel Servizio di S.M.

This short feature will focus on the nineteenth century in Malta, the first hundred years of the British colonial connection.

It seems that at the outset of the new colonial rule, there came into existence two parallel systems of official mail. The exclusively inward and local mail, on the one hand, and the official rulers' mail on the other. The one exchanged internally, originating from an official Maltese source but addressed to fellow natives was in Italian, and had external Italian markings to indicate that it was on H.M.'s service.

And what a variety of Italian translations! It seems that no agreement could be reached on what the proper rendering for "on" was to be in Italian. Some letter writers avoided the difficulty by merely stating *Servizio di Sua Maestà*. Others ranged through all the prepositions, from *Pel Servizio...*, *Nel Servizio...*, *In Servizio...*, *Col Servizio...*, and even with a charming Maltesism: *Sul Servizio*.

The rest of the official mail, i.e. outward bound, or originating from, or addressed to, British authorities, either had On His (Her) Majesty's Service printed on the outer wrapper or envelope, or had the handsome Royal Arms on a red background, or occasionally both (Fig.8 and 10).

Pel Servizio di Sua Maestá.

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All' Ill<sup>mo</sup> Sig<sup>ro</sup>.

Il Sig<sup>ro</sup>

*Lord Luogotenente  
Marchese G. Testaferrata Viani*

§c. §c. §c.

UFFICIO DELL' ISPETTORE GENERALE,  
DI PULIZIA.

VALLETTA.

*Circular*

On His Majesty's Service.

To

*1819*

*The Marchese Giuseppe Testaferrata Viani*

TO

On His Majesty's Service

*Marchese Giuseppe Testaferrata Viani  
Lord Lieutenant of the District of Courmayeur*  
§c. §c. §c.

*1824*

On His Majesty's Service.

To

*The Lord Lieutenant and  
the Magistrates composing  
the Court of Sessions of the 5<sup>th</sup> District*

Fig. 4 Four O.H.M.S. wrappers containing official correspondence and despatches from the Government to the Lieutenant Marchese Giuseppe Testaferrata Viani. The First, dated September 1819 has the imprint in Italian; the others, ranging between 1823 and 1833, are imprinted in English even though the contents are occasionally in Italian. The first three are signed by Richard Palskett, Chief Secretary to the Government.

1836

On His Majesty's Service.

To

M<sup>r</sup> Vincenzo Segond

&c.

&c.

&c.

Fred. Hankey,

Palletta

Fig. 5 Envelope to Vincenzo Segond, from Frederick Hankey (c.1830). Sir Frederick Hankey was Chief Secretary to the Governor (1824-1837) and the de facto ruler to whom Governor Sir Frederick Cavendish Ponsonby delegated most of his functions. His Majesty, in this instance, is George IV.

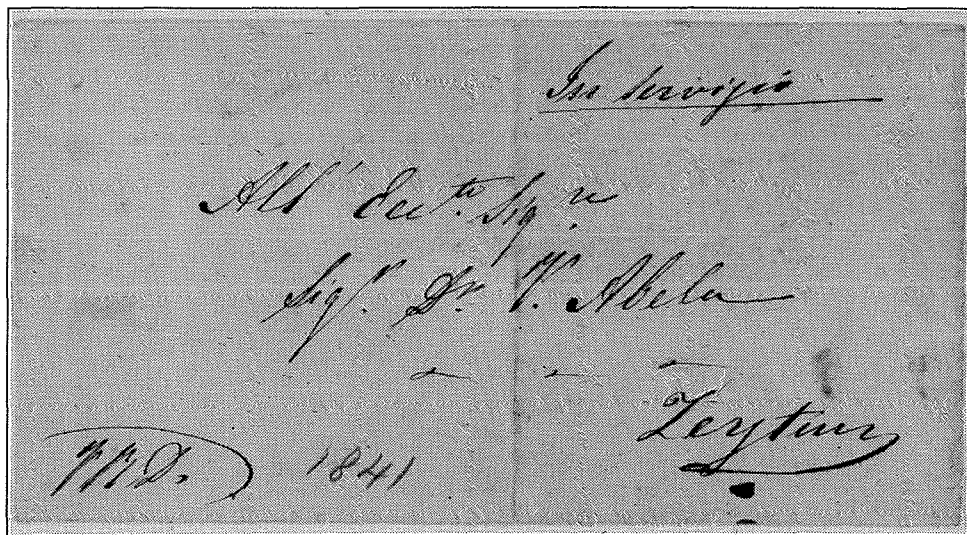


Fig.6 Letter dated 21 January 1840 to Dr Vincenzo Abela, a Doctor and Surgeon from Zejtun. He had asked the Medical Committee to tax his fees for professional treatment in favour of the late Caterina Magro between 1837 and 1840. Dr Abela detailed the various services he had rendered. Dr Gravagna, on behalf of the Medical Committee, readdressed his letter back to him, with the annotation: Fees due to him are dieci lire, otto scellini e quattro pence, and marked it In Servizio.

We seem to take it for granted that official mail is, with specific exceptions, not stamped. Normal mail originating from a government department only bears an adhesive stamp if it is registered, or addressed overseas, to cover the additional charge. This was not always so. In the Victorian (and Edwardian) era after the half-penny charge was introduced for internal mail in 1860, also local ordinary O.H.M.S. mail started to be duly stamped, though I was unable to find a Tariff regulating this. G.B. stamps have occasionally been seen on O.H.M.S. letters addressed abroad.

Stamping O.H.M.S. correspondence with adhesives was probably resorted to, to prevent abuse of the postal service by unauthorised persons who would have forwarded private correspondence for free through O.H.M.S. covers. (Fig. 8 and 9).

*On Her Majesty's Service.*

**To**

**The Deputy Commissary General,**

*Tender for  
Forage.*

**MALTA.**

Fig.7 An early Victorian O.H.M.S. A tender for the supply of cereals and straw for the bedding in the barracks hospitals. The tender, by Gio. Maria Micallef, dated 28 December 1848, is printed in English on the address panel, and has the offer and conditions printed in Italian on the inside.



Fig.8 Official envelope with Royal Seal embossed white on red, addressed to Mrs Elizabeth Spiteri, a teacher at the Floriana Government School. Although the letter is endorsed *In Servizio di S.M.* in manuscript, it is stamped with a halfpenny yellow, tied by an A 25 duplex dated 11 March 1868.

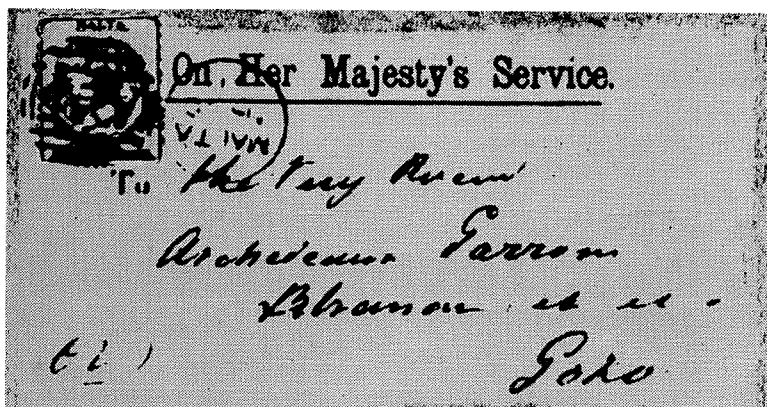


Fig.9 Official stationery envelope, dated 1871, addressed to Archdeacon Garroni in Gozo, stamped with a dull orange halfpenny, CC, perforation 14.



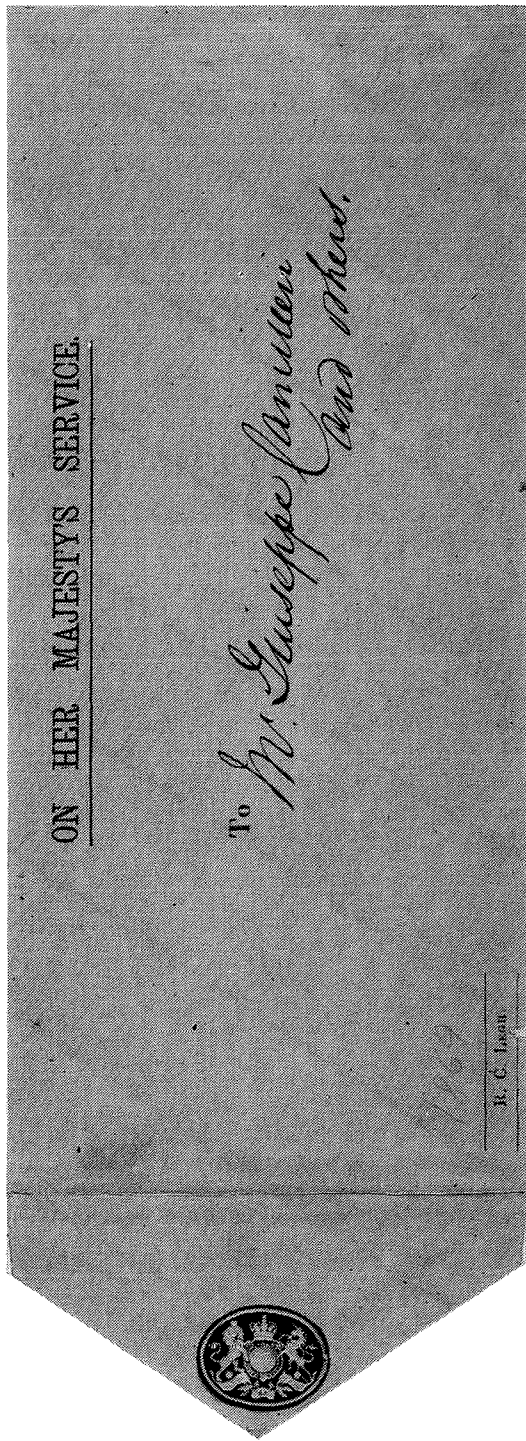


Fig. 10 An official envelope, in stiff sky-blue paper c. 1869, showing both the O.H.M.S. inscription and the Royal seal embossed on a red ground.