

Malta maritime mail

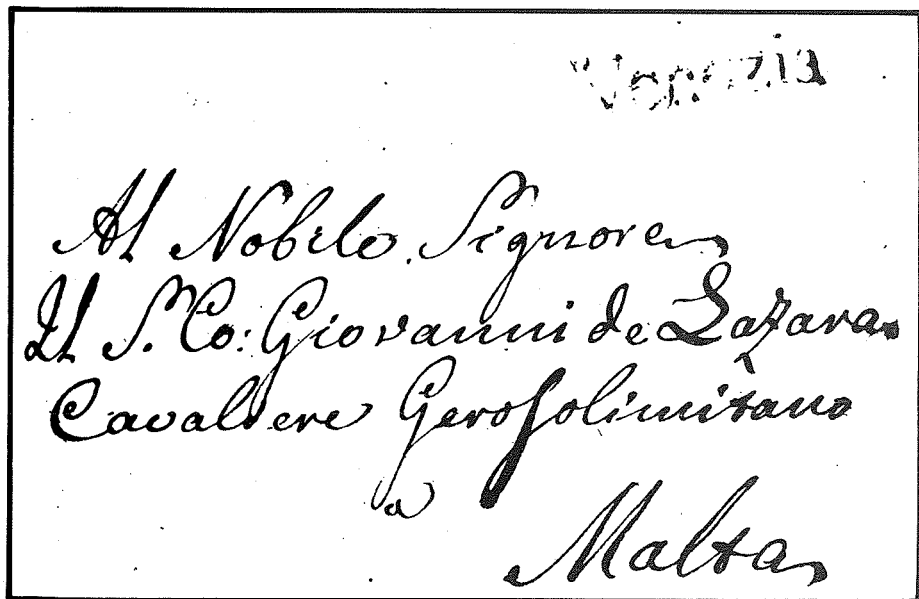
By Mr. C. Diamantino

(A glance at some of the markings and methods used for the carriage of mail by sea up to 1860 – taken from a talk given to the Philatelic Society (Malta) by Cecil Diamantino)

The earliest recorded maritime markings appear during the last decade of the Knights' rule. Prior to that, some letters showed picturesque manuscripts inscriptions such as "Che Dio Aiuti", "Che Dio Guardi", "Iddio accompagni a Salvamento", all wishing "God Speed" and a safe passage for the vessel. Of course none of these old letters bear any postmark and they were probably entrusted directly to the captains of the merchantships who delivered them more often than not to each addressee personally.

The VOYE DE MER/APR MARSEILLE (1757) is the earliest of the known handstruck marks, that is, marks which were used specifically to indicate despatch, arrival or transit by sea. Correspondence with Italy followed some years later after the establishment of direct sea connections with that country and Sicily. Letters from Malta to Venice (1787–88) received the oval fringed cachet LETTERE DA MARE/VENEZIA, and there are straight-line markings on incoming letters showing GENOVA (1771) and VENEZIA (1790) which appear to correspond with other maritime markings of that country. (Fig 1, 1a)

On 18 June, 1798, very soon after the French occupied the island, they decreed that a Post Office would be set up in the City of Valletta. Although one of its purposes was to organise the receipt and despatch of mail by sea, the service only lasted a few weeks and the only marking known during its short period of service was a strike on the 24 June, 1798 with the name MALTE in a frame of curved lines split at both ends, known as the "loaf of bread".



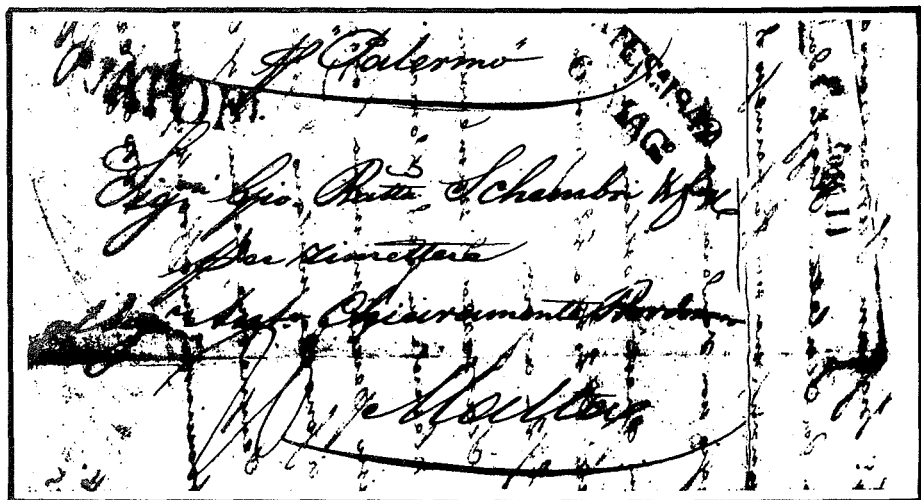


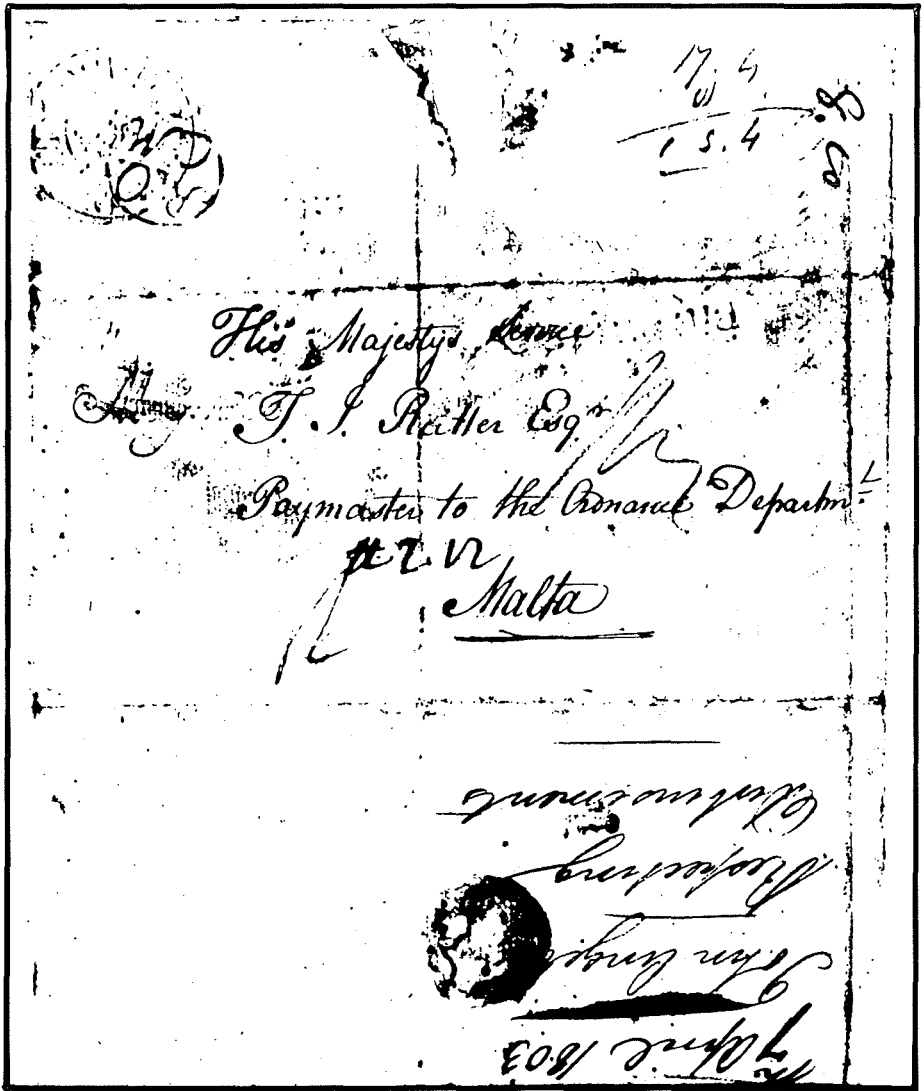
Fig 1a

Some maritime marks appear on mail during the early English period (1800–1806). One is an 1802 letter to Scotland which bears the PORTSMOUTH ship letter entry mark and was carried either by private ship or naval vessel. Another is an incoming letter (1803) sent on “His Majesty’s Service” addressed to the Paymaster to the Ordinance Department, Malta. The letter travelled via Naples and was struck there with the red circular maritime handstamp, inscribed R.O.C.M. (Regi Offici Corrieri Marittimi). Fig 2,3

Following the establishment of a packet agency in 1806 letters carried by Post Office packets from Malta to Falmouth were sometimes struck on arrival and while the earliest “packet letter” mark with an office-name is connected with Falmouth in 1806, the earliest so far recorded for Malta is five years later (1811). Outgoing packet mail was stamped with the name MALTA in cursive letters in a curved frame. Later, in 1826, the Hunter and Ross company attempted to set-up a first packet-boat service between Malta and Genoa, but the service was abandoned because, it would seem, it did not prove viable.

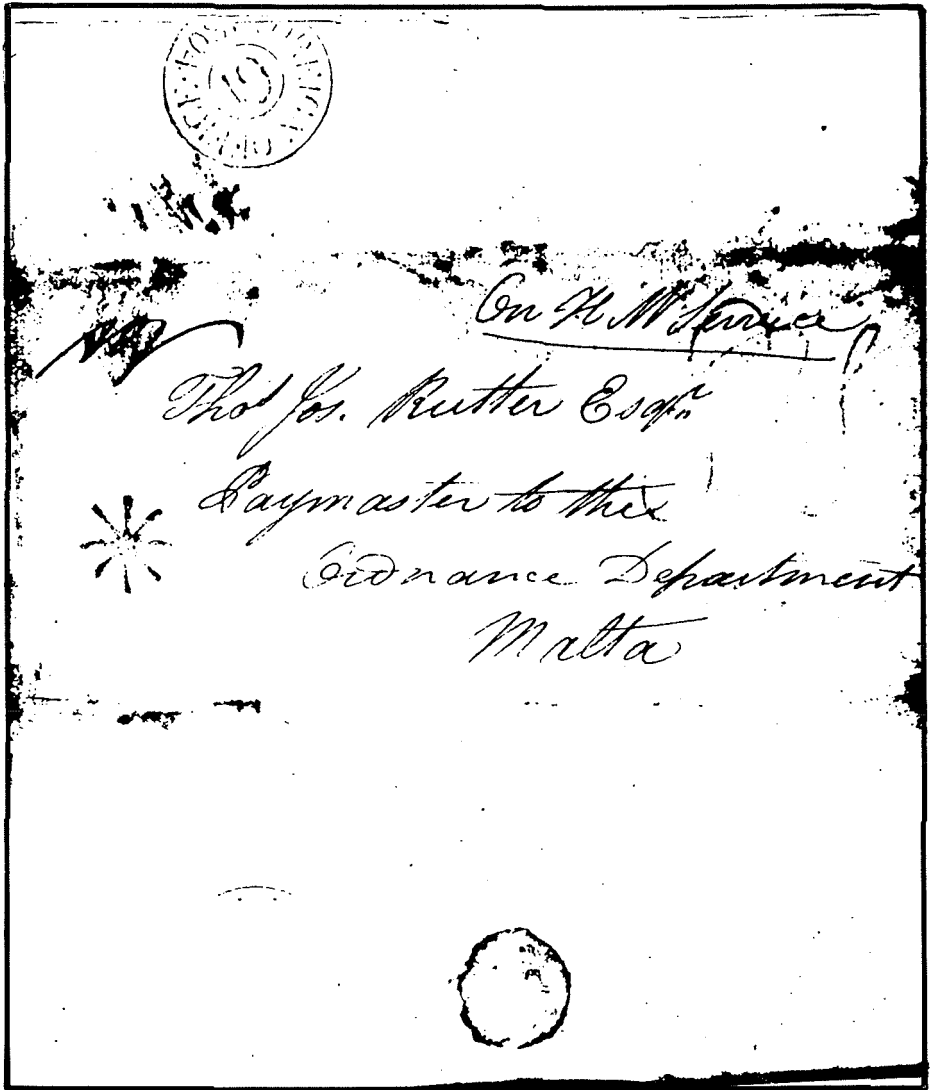
Between 1837 and the early 1840’s a series of packet boats came into service in the Mediterranean linking Malta with several ports and providing frequent services, thus putting an end to the problem of communications with Europe, Egypt and the Orient. The introduction in 1837 of French postal packet-boats in the Mediterranean linked Malta, three times monthly, with Marseilles, the Italian ports, Syria, Smyrne, Dardanelles and Constantinople as well as Alexandria via Syria. The P&O followed in 1840 linking Malta once a month directly with Southampton, Gibraltar and Alexandria on the Mediterranean sector of the Bombay & Australia Line. In the 1840’s the Neapolitan Line provided a service between Naples and Malta three times monthly. These provided packet-boats however did not have a monopoly over the carriage of mail which, as before, could be transported by commercial vessels. Although this was a slower route, it was less expensive. Fig 4

There is, undoubtedly, an important distinction to be made between a packet letter and a private letter. A packet letter is of course a letter carried by



Letter from the Office of Ordinance London (7 Apr 1803) to T.J. Rutter Esq. Paymaster to the Ordnance Department, Malta showing on reverse R.O.C.M. in circle (Regi Offici Corrieri Marittimi) struck in red at Naples. The letter is marked His Majesty's Service and shows circular handstamp FOREIGN OFFICE, various m/s rates including Tari 2 Grani 12.

(fig. 2)



On His Majesty's Service letter (27 Sep 1803) showing circular FOREIGN OFFICE/1804 handstamp, m/s rate 8/8 and a star with eight radiating lines struck in red.

(fig. 3)



(fig. 4)

“packet boat” (corresponding to the French “paquebot” and Italian “pacchetti a vapore”). Such boats were under Post Office control and although they were often privately owned they *had a contract* for the regular conveyance of mail. Letters carried by vessels which had *no agreement* for the regular conveyance of mails are termed “ship letters”. The Postal Office was not restricted to using just packet boats. It could, in much the same way as the ordinary individual, also use commercial boats with which it had no contract. Ship letters can be further distinguished between –

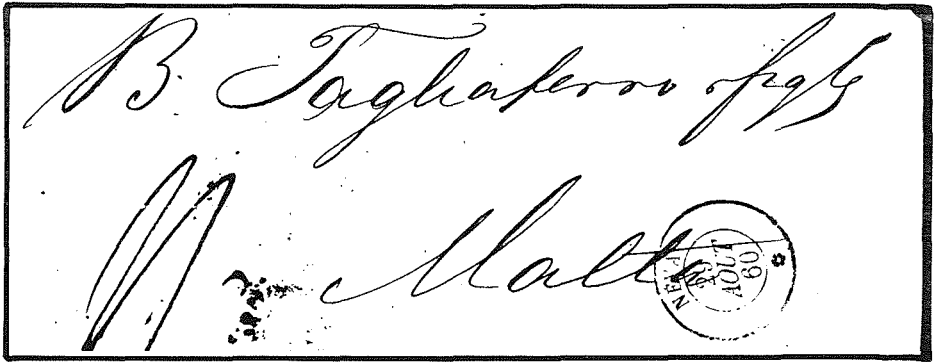
1. those letters entrusted to a vessel by the postal office at the port of departure or transit, and
2. letters entrusted to a vessel directly by an individual.

The first type includes those letters posted at the office of the port of departure (or brought to that office from other inland offices). Such letters, which usually showed the marking of the office at the port of departure, often had a manuscript request written by the sender, either general e.g. per via di mare, or specific, indicating the name (and often the nationality) of the selected ship, the departure date of which as well as the destination were known to the sender.

The second type relates to those letters which were posted on board. These are possibly the more interesting of the maritime items. Such letters, consigned directly by a private individual to a ship (quite frequently there was a post box on board) do not show the cancellation of the postal office of departure. If the particular shipping line had a postal official on board, the letter and any relevant stamps were cancelled by such official; if it did not have such an official but formed part of a shipping line which regularly carried mail, the letter and stamps were marked or cancelled at the next office where the letters were delivered or temporarily taken off board.

One other way, which is a kind of in-between method of despatch, occurred when a person presented a letter at the postal office, paid the rate for private ship letters, and subsequently personally delivered the letter to the ship. In this case the office of departure would mark the item with the particular strike intended for this purpose, while the letter would be cancelled at the office of arrival or port of call.

The Anglo-French Postal Convention of 1843 had made provision for the collection of mail which was posted on board ship either prior to departure or



(fig. 5)

during the voyage "... a letter box shall be placed against the mainmast of each packet, or in the most conspicuous place, to receive such letters as the public may wish to deposit in it between the closing of the mails and the departure of the vessel, entrusted with their conveyance. The moveable box shall be immediately carried to the postmaster who shall open it and take out the letters and directly return it to the agent who brought it." Prior to 1856 however there was no distinctive mark to identify mail that landed at Malta from the moveable boxes. Subsequently a mark was applied to denote the origin of these letters.

Intense development of the French and English packets in the Mediterranean took place in the middle decades of the 19th Century. The years between 1851 and 1866 are probably best known for the flourish of date stamps carrying the names of different French paquebot vessels. This period of 15 years started with the introduction of the Mediterranean Lines by the future Compagnie des Messageries Imperiales. The British Peninsular and Orient packets did not, regrettably, use the same picturesque datestamps. Fig 5

It often happened that the sender only paid for part of the letter's journey and would leave the balance of the rate to be paid for by the receiver. Various postal arrangements between countries and the system of paying only part of the rate, quite often creates an abundance of rates on an item which makes it very difficult to distinguish between the rates of one country and another. Normally the sender would pay only those rates applicable to the country of despatch and transport by sea leaving to the receiver the rates applicable to the country of arrival.

One of the most fascinating aspects of maritime mail is tracing the progress of a cover from its origin to its destination. One needs to look at its characteristics, that is to look at any cancellations or markings other than just the specific maritime markings. A mute cover, or one in which it is not possible to read or deduce these factors and the dates associated with them, is often less interesting and is a major reason why a cover is usually more collectible than a maritime strike on stamp or on piece. On a cover, it is possible that the combination of markings, read together, may indicate the route taken by the boat, where it originated, places of transit, which shipping line has carried it. A maritime marking or cancellation gathers much of its meaning when it is combined with offices of despatch, transit, rates, arrival date marks which, in combination alone, tell the history of the postal system that moved it across its journey.