

Cholera, Politics and the Mail Service to Rome in the 1860's

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This article will examine the combination of factors that influenced international mail routes to Rome in the mid 1860s. Specifically, we will examine the effect of the fourth cholera pandemic, and some of the political factors that influenced the French mail packet service to Rome.

Cholera

Cholera is one of the most rapidly fatal illnesses known. It is transmitted by the ingestion of food or water which has been contaminated with feces of an infected person. The bacterium *V. cholerae* that is now known to cause cholera was not identified until 1885 by Robert Koch and in the 1860s the method of transmission of the disease was just beginning to be understood. Notably, in 1854 Dr. John Snow discovered that water contaminated with sewage in London had been the source of epidemics in that country. However, ten years later Snow's theories had still not gained wide acceptance in the larger international community.

Cholera pandemics, that is cholera epidemics that spread over very large geographical areas, are now commonly identified by a chronological numbering system. The first cholera pandemic (1816-1823) originated in Bengal and spread to the Persian Gulf and Asia. The second pandemic (1840-1850) spread from Bengal along caravan routes into Afghanistan and eventually to Europe, Scandinavia, the Americas and Africa. The third pandemic (1852-1860) spread first to Europe and North America but eventually spread to Asia and South America as well. While these three pandemics originated on the peninsula of India, the fourth pandemic (1863-1874) entered France and Italy from trade routes to Arabia, Egypt and Turkey. Pilgrims returning to southern France and Italy in 1865 are believed to have brought cholera from Palestine and Syria.

Politics

Quarantine policies in Europe had developed over the previous centuries in response to largely local crises. As communication and trade increased in Europe it grew increasingly important that more uniform standards needed to be implemented to halt the spread of disease over large distances. To that end, in 1834 France proposed a meeting of representatives of various countries to discuss ways that the transmission of disease between countries could best be prevented. The first meeting of the International Sanitary Conference was eventually held in Paris in 1851. Twelve nations participated, each sending a politician and a physician in an attempt to establish guidelines for minimum maritime quarantine requirements. Although 137 regulatory articles were agreed upon at the convention, these did not commit their respective governments to ratify and only five of the powers signed the convention – France, Portugal, Sardinia, the Sublime Porte, and Tuscany. Only France and Sardinia eventually ratified the agreements 1852. Later Portugal adhered to the convention but both Sardinia and Portugal withdrew compliance in 1865.

Reaching a consensus of opinion regarding best policies to be followed was complicated by regional and national political interests. The quarantine system was viewed not just in

terms of stopping the spread of disease but as a way to control immigration, restrict the movement of people, regulate trade, restrict activity of a country's citizens, and even to define the sovereignty of a country.

In 1865, following the outbreak of cholera in both Italy and France, France had to consider the effect of possible quarantine restrictions from both a military and health perspective. Large garrisons of French troops were stationed in Civitavecchia and Rome which needed to be provisioned from France.

The disinfection of mail, still widely believed at this time to be of benefit in halting the spread of cholera, was certainly less onerous than the imposition of a long quarantine. As is now known, all measures to disinfect letters were completely ineffective in halting the spread of the disease.

Mail

In 1861, in the period before the fourth cholera pandemic, the primary mail route for international mail sent via France to Italy was by steamers of the French *Messageries Impariales* Italy Direct Line which operated weekly between Marseille and Naples with an intermediate stop at Civitavecchia. The letter cover shown in Figure 1 is an example of a letter carried on this route.



Figure 1. December 31, 1861 letter from Boston, via France, to Rome.

The letter originated in Boston, Massachusetts on December 31, 1861 correctly prepaid for carriage via London and France to Rome. It was carried on the French Italian Line steamer *Capitole* which departed Marseille on January 20, 1862 and arrived, after stops at Genova and Livorno, in Civitavecchia two days later where it received a transit backstamp and the arc "Civitavecchia Dalle Via Di Mare" handstamp. It was carried

onward to Rome by rail. Civitavecchia was the port of entry for all mail addressed to Rome that was carried by French steamers throughout this period.

From May 11, 1865 the French line service to Italy was modified slightly with an intermediate stop at Livorno added and the terminus extended from Naples to Messina (see Figure 2 map).



Figure 2. Map of French Packet Routes to Italy. Red line is the Italy Direct Line route as operating before May 1865. Black line, including the dashed portion, is the Italy Line as operating from May 1865. The dashed portion represents the portions affected by temporary discontinuance due to the cholera outbreak.

With the beginning of the cholera epidemic starting in mid 1865, quarantine measures and the disinfection of mail were introduced in many places in Italy. An early example of mail disinfected at Civitavecchia is shown in Figure 3. This July 25, 1865 cover from Newport, Rhode Island was prepaid for the 28 cent rate via Bremen but was actually sent as an overpaid 27 cent French mail rate to Rome.



Figure 3. July 25, 1865 cover from Newport, Rhode Island to Rome. Disinfected at Civitavecchia with slits and bearing "Netto fuori e dentro" handstamp.

Like the previous example, the cover was sent via London and Marseille. At Marseille it was postmarked August 12, 1865 and placed on the French Italy Line steamer *Pausilippe* departing for Livorno and Civitavecchia on August 17.

The cover was disinfected with slits at Civitavecchia and received the boxed “Netto fuori e dentro” (clean outside and inside) handstamp before carriage onward to Rome. It bears a “Via de Mare Roma August 19, 1865” backstamp. This practice must have been short-lived at this port as all handstamped examples known to the authors date between August and November 1865.

Shortly after the arrival of this cover, France was forced by health considerations to modify their *Messageries Imperiales* service to Italy. In July 1865 disturbances had broken out in Messina upon the arrival of the *Messageries Imperiales* steamer with the mails from Alexandria and a mob set fire to the offices of the Quarantine Department there. Following this, from September 18, 1865, the route was shortened and the terminus was changed from Messina to Naples.

On October 6, 1865 the French newspaper *Moniteur* reported that the French army was to be withdrawn from Rome and that the withdrawal was to commence that year. It was believed that the Pope would organize an army sufficient to preserve order and trusted himself to the safe-keeping of this army.

From October 19, 1865 the French Italian Line route was shortened again when Civitavecchia temporarily became the terminus replacing Naples. A newspaper report in the *New York Times* mentioned a telegram from Rome dated November 10 that reported:

“Cholera does not at present exist upon Pontifical territory. Very few cases have occurred at Corneto and Toscanella. Orders have been issued prohibiting the entry into Pontifical territory of travelers coming from Naples or adjacent places unless they can prove a stay of fifteen days in a district free from the epidemic.

It is stated that the evacuation of the provinces of Velletri and Frosimone by the French will commence on the 13th, and they will be replaced by Pontifical troops.”

Following the abatement of the cholera pandemic, the mail route changed again in January 1866 when full service to Messina was re-established. The effect of the fourth cholera pandemic on mail service is clearly demonstrated by this discussion. Although the actions of France in changing their postal routes to Italy were clearly influenced by political considerations, those considerations were tempered with the protection of the health of her citizens by the imposition of temporary changes.