DISINFECTED MAIL OF THE SPANISH PHILIPPINES

by Don Peterson

Mail contaminated by anthrax spores! Million dollar decontamination machines at post offices! How our modern world has changed. Although not a topic of discussion by generations of Americans until after September 11, the spread of infectious diseases by mail and the decontamination of mail by various means was a major concern to mail handlers in the 18th and 19th century. In fact, from the 15th until the end of the 19th century, mail was regularly decontaminated at one location or another in the world to prevent the spread of infectious diseases.

Bevoise (1995) provides a detailed discussion of epidemic disease and crises mortality in the colonial Philippines, which first occurred soon after the Spaniards arrived in the 16th century. In the colonial Philippines, crises mortality episodes primarily occurred as a result of the spread of small pox and cholera. Other "epidemic-like" diseases also occurred, but were the result of environmental conditions, rather than being spread by the contact of humans. These other diseases included beri-beri (lack of vitamin B in diet of highly-milled rice) and malaria (spread by certain mosquitoes), etc.

Records of crises mortality episodes in the colonial Philippines are fairly well known. From the 16th century, provincial physicians (*medicos titulares*) were required to prepare annual reports (*Memorias medicas*) of prevailing diseases and causes of death. As a result of these reports, Bevoise (1995) documented crises mortality episodes from small pox and cholera that caused the loss of thousands of lives in the Philippines. With a substantial increase in shipping beginning in the 1840s, cargo and sailors infected with small pox, cholera, and other diseases became a serious problem in the Philippines and elsewhere.

In late 1820, cholera struck Manila for the first time (Bevoise, 1995). Based on studies by Bevoise (1995), Smith (1978), and Worcester (1909), cholera epidemics occurred in the Philippines (colony-wide) in 1821-1823, 1830, 1842, 1854, 1863-1865, 1882-1883, 1888-1889, and later. Bevoise (1995) reports that in 1863, imported cholera struck Manila, where it was transported by steamship to Zamboanga and other islands. McCoy et al. (1982) stated that "cartfuls" of Filipinos were dumped into common graves as a result of a severe cholera epidemic in 1882. World-wide cholera epidemics occurred throughout this period. For example, cholera epidemics occurred in Madras, Bombay, and Arabia in 1846; and in Spain in 1848. Genetic and acquired resistance were the only defenses against cholera in the Philippines in the 19th century.

Small pox epidemics occurred sporadically in the Philippines prior to 1870, but almost annually after 1871. In many instances, the records reveal the loss of thousands of native Filipinos shortly after the arrival of a ship from a foreign destination. For example, the (*Memorias medicas*) reports that small pox epidemics in 1872, 1880, and 1891 killed 45,000 people in Iloilo Province (Bevoise, 1995). McCoy et al. (1982) stated that "thousands died of small pox) in 1894." Also, serious small pox epidemics resulted in the death of thousands of Filipinos following the arrival of American troops in 1898 and 1899. This pattern repeated itself over and over again in various provinces in the Philippines. Vaccine for small pox first appeared in the Islands in 1805. However, it was always scarce and generally unavailable to large portions of the population in the 19th century.

Meyer's (1962) classic study of disinfected mail makes no mention of the Philippines, but goes into great detail about the disinfection process, disinfection stations for ship mail, and mail markings that occurred primarily in Europe and the Americas in the 19th century. In spite of the fact that the Philippines were frequently infected with small pox and cholera from arriving ships, I am not aware of any disinfection stations established in the Philippines for incoming ships to treat cargo, passengers, or mail.

Many businessmen in the Philippines were opposed to establishing disinfection stations because they believed that quarantining ships would impede business. However, the Spanish authorities were not lax in taking steps to control local outbreaks. For example, Bevoise (1995) reports that in July 1873, the Spanish consul in Singapore notified Manila that all ships arriving from Bangkok had been put under strict quarantine because of a cholera outbreak in Bangkok. The Spanish Philippine Board of Health (*Junta Superior de Sanidad*) in Manila immediately imposed a 15-day quarantine on all ships from Thailand and reserved the power to decide on what further measures should be taken to protect the health of Manila's citizens. In some cases, temporary disinfection stations may have been established in the Philippines. For example, in the 1870s, the military governor of Zamboanga described plans to dock any ship from an infected area at Santa Cruz island, within sight but an hour's distance from the port, where the vessel and the crew were to be quarantined until health officials determined that no danger existed. However, I know of no markings on any incoming mail indicating that it passed through a temporary quarantine station anywhere in the Islands.

This was not true in Europe, the Americas, and other parts of the world where disinfection stations were formally established to disinfect ship cargo, passengers, and mail, particularly during periods of known disease episodes. Disinfection stations for incoming mail were located in Italy, France, Germany, Great Britain, Greece, Austria, Russia, Japan, the Americas, and other countries. Disinfected mail from these stations often showed the results of disinfection, in the form of slits on the front or back of the letter to allow fumigants (e.g., sulphuric acid, herbs, camphor, etc.) to enter the letter, vinegar stains on the letters, and handstamps or wax seals certifying that the letter was "clean" or had been disinfected at a particular disinfection station.

FIGURE 1 is an 1848 Manila to Cadiz, Spain, letter, via Gibraltar, that shows a disinfection handstamp (**FIGURE 2**) from the Malta disinfection station. This cover (dated-lined May 24,

1848), from the businessman Juan Marcaida in Manila, was hand-carried to a British ship in the harbor, bypassing the Manila Post Office. Based on Kirk (1982), the cover connected with the British P&O steamer PEKIN in Singapore, was transferred to the P&O BENTINCK at Suez, went overland to Alexandria where it was placed on the P&O RIPON enroute to Malta (arrived July 18). It arrived at Gibraltar on July 24 and at Cadiz (destination) probably a day later. Since the letter spent little or no time at Malta, I suspect the ship was certified as "clean" (no disinfection was required), the handstamp was applied to the letter, and the ship quickly departed enroute to Gibraltar.

The black Malta handstamp in **FIGURE 2** contains the words PURIFIE AU LAZARET in the circle and MALTA in the center. This handstamp was in use at the Malta Lazaret from 1838 through 1879 (Meyer, 1962). A brief article of this cover was previously published by the author in IPPS News (Peterson, 1983).

I am aware of only four Spanish Philippine covers with the Malta disinfection station handstamp. Another interesting disinfected cover is an 1883 Manila to Rome, Italy, cover from the Italian Consulate in Manila, with two slits on the front indicating fumigation (Philstamps Auction, February 16, 1991).

The recent loss of Americans as a result of intentional anthrax contamination of mail has raised the anxiety level of a threat not experienced in the United States for many decades. However, generations ago, thousands of people died annually in the colonial Philippines due to epidemics, such as cholera and small pox. It is interesting, then and now, that mail was and still remains a connecting link between people and some infectious diseases.

If anyone has any additional information on Spanish Philippine disinfected mail, contact IPPS or Don Peterson at 7408 Alaska Ave., NW, Washington, DC 20012.

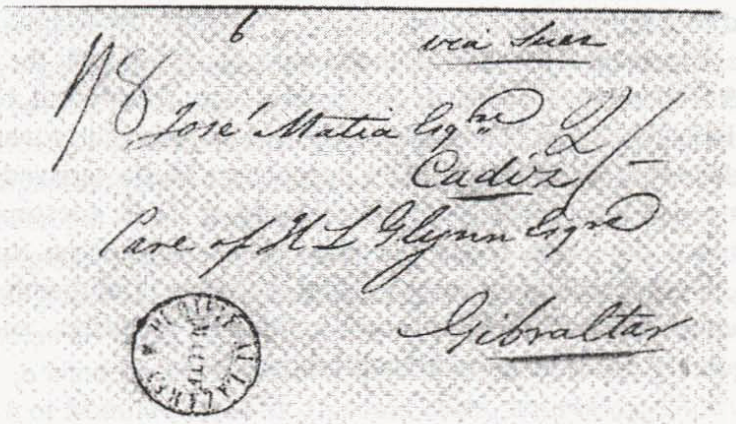

FIGURE 1. 1848 Manila to Cadiz, Spain, via Gibraltar, With a black Malta disinfection station handstamp, PURIFIE AU LAZARET MALTA (Don Peterson Collection).

FIGURE 2. Malta disinfection station handstamp, PURIFIE AU LAZARET MALTA, used from 1838 through 1879 (Meyer,1962).

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