EGYPTIAN INTERPOSTAL SEALS

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THE cotton reel or target stamps of Egypt are known by sight to most collectors, though few people seem to know the purpose of these stamps which are usually referred to as interpostals. Probably because they bear no value, they have never been recorded in the "standard" catalogues, yet if you look at the first catalogued Egyptian Official stamp of 1892, it will be apparent that the Egyptians did not consider it necessary to put any face value on their Official stamps. Apparently the mere affixing of an Official adhesive covered the carriage of Official mail regardless of size or weight, or whether it was a single letter or the largest permissable parcel. The circular interpostals are merely Official stamps of an earlier era in the Egyptian posts, used for franking official mail between one post office and another. The fact that they usually bear an office name suggests that cataloguers possibly also regarded them as of local usage and therefore chose to ignore them.

For stamps which are not catalogued, they are extremely popular and sought after, commanding an average price of £1 each, while those from extra-territorial offices may fetch four to five times that amount. Used copies in good condition are generally worth twice as much as mint. It is significant in establishing their status that used copies are cancelled by the normal post office datestamp. Copies are sometimes found on piece, and these indicate that the seals were stuck on the back of the envelope, for they usually bear the flap and doubled paper from the central intersection at the back of the envelope. Collectors of Eastern countries will know that it is the usual practice to use stamps in this way on the back of the cover.

Only one example seems to have been recorded of the survival of an interpostal on an entire cover. This was used on the back of an envelope posted from France to Cairo on 24th February, 1902. A handstamp on the front of the cover reads:

SAUVE DU NAUFRAGE DU "CAIRO"
SAVED FROM THE WRECK OF
S.S. "CAIRO"

The adhesive was, no doubt, applied to indicate the "official" forwarding of the cover after it had been recovered from the wreck. It makes this unique cover a splendid rarity whether viewed from the back or the front.

Above: 1. 1864 Posta Europea seal; 2. Poste Vice Reali Egiziane Constantinople Office; 3. Poste Vice Reali Egiziane lined background Lagos; 4. Poste Khedevie office in Somaliland; 5. Postes Egyptiennes type 1; 6. Postes Egyptiennes type 2.

Historic Background of the Seals

It is not surprising that the Italians were great innovators of postal organisations. Situated in the middle of the civilised world, with the convenience all around of transportation by sea, they were ideally at the hub of the medieval area of commerce. In the Middle Ages, the Venetians had a well developed system of mail carrying and distribution, and in the middle of the nineteenth century, an Italian named Carlo Meratti ran, throughout the eastern Mediterranean, a well-organised mail service known as Posta Europea. Upon Meratti's death, his nephew, Tito Chini, with a partner, Giacomo Muzzi, took over and gradually extended the service.

In 1857, the Egyptian government authorised the company to open agencies at Alexandria, Afte Benha, Birket-el-Sab, Cairo, Damanhour, Damiata, Gatiub, Kefr-Zayat, Mansura, Samanud, Suez, Tanta, Zagazig and Zefta. This was gradually done over a period, and the service was so successful that, in 1862, the Viceroy of Egypt conferred a monopoly for the posts on the Posta Europea for the period of ten years. Various handstamps including the words POSTA EUROPEA were used by Chini and Muzzi's service and, for their "Official" mail they used a circular seal.

At some later date, after the postal monopoly had been conferred on the Posta Europea, it was not surprising that a similar style of circular seal was produced. These seals were printed by lithography, a basic stone being used for all types, and the office name being added subsequently. Ernest Kehr of the U.S.A., who collected and studied these stamps for many years, stated that there were six sub-types, indicating that a litho stone of six subjects was laid down for the printing. After printing the seals were die cut out to shape.

The printing is in various colours of ink or paper and, if any student has discovered the reason for these differences, it does not seem to have been recorded. There are several possibilities. The different colours may indicate different usage (e.g. on a small letter or large packet) or a different period of use, possibly even usage or whether it contained a routine return or was for special or urgent handling, by a different official within the office, or for a different destination, i.e. to indicate at a glance whether a package was destined for another office on the line, or for Head Office or an overseas office. As already indicated, the Posta Europea had offices throughout the Levant, Syria, the Aegean and North Africa, and seals for "non-Egyptian" offices were produced.

In 1864, Muzzi became the sole owner of the postal concession and, in 1865, the Egyptian Government purchased the postal monopoly from Muzzi, appointing him the first Director General of the Egyptian postal administration. In view of the Italian management, it is understandable that the inscription on the early interpostals was in Italian. In 1871, the title of the post, as shown on the seals, was changed from Postale Vice Reali Egiziane to Poste Khedevie Egiziane. Elaborately designed and exotically

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PAPUA NEW GUINEA 10/- STAMP OF 1963

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with petrol tanks full, and with their cars faced ready for another emergency exit!

Philatelically interesting were some flight covers associated with the emergency. Aircraft had been chartered by the Sydney *Daily Telegraph* and the Brisbane *Telegraph* respectively to convey their correspondents to the stricken area. VH-UYE, a twin-engined Gannet flown by Captain C. Gatenby and S. Marshall left Sydney 1st June to arrive at Rabaul via Brisbane, Townsville and Port Moresby some forty-eight hours later after a hazardous and gruelling journey. The return flight began very early on 5th June with the first mail from Rabaul since the emergency. Pilot Tommy McDonald in a single-engined Puss Moth VH-UQL left Brisbane the day before the Sydney *Telegraph's* reporters set out, but the lightweight aircraft had perforce to follow the coastline around via Thursday Island and Daru, thence via Lae to Rabaul. A few letters were brought back and both aeroplanes arrived safely home on 7th June.

The amount of mail carried was small — a couple of hundred covers or so — and most of these travelled in the Gannet. Such covers have a distinctly non-philatelic flavour being rather of the impromptu variety with many unstamped. These are marked "Franked" and are signed by the postmaster. The postmark in each case is of course Kokopo. A brief survey of these flights may be found in *The Airmails of New Guinea 1922-42* by Dan Hare (Hawthorn Press 1978), but very few collectors know of their existence and the writer is fortunate even to have seen a couple of examples.

The events of May 1937 had given the Administration a nasty jolt and doubts were expressed concerning the advisability of maintaining the Territory's capital in such a perilous locality. A second considerably less severe eruption immediately before the commencement of World war II provided the necessary stimulus for the transfer of the administration from Rabaul to Lae on the mainland, and hardly had this been effected than the Japanese landed at Rabaul on 23rd January 1942. Defences were inadequate and, with the women and children having been evacuated during the previous year, the town surrendered. Those who escaped continued to harass the enemy from the surrounding bush, while those less fortunate found themselves forced into digging a network of tunnels through the lava walls of the encircling volcanoes to provide shelter against the Allied bombing raids which must surely follow.

Three years later the Japanese were gone; so was the town! The ever-present threat of volcanic activity made it seem very unlikely that serious consideration would be given to rebuilding . Not until 1952 was official permission granted, a fact which now seems strange in the light of Rabaul's current status as the principal port of the combined Territory of Papua and New Guinea, second in importance not even to Port Moresby itself.

For the postal historian Rabaul offers a fine selection of post-war cancellations, and agencies have been opened at Toboi, the Airport, and at Matupit, although only the former has remained — an extension of the sea-front Westward, Toboi is a sufficiently important part of the harbour system to merit its own independent postmark. Matupit, now without its postal agency, is a densely populated suburb and the centre of the Chinese community, discernable on our stamp as a cluster of lights amid the evening shadows gathering at the base of Mount Rabalanakaia, and despite its name is in fact some distance from that temperamental volcano.

Deep in the heart of Mount Kombiu, the Mother, seismic apparatus keeps a constant vigil, monitoring every hint of volcanic activity within the whole caldera, and if any further eruption should occur there will be no emergency for the inhabitants will have received ample warning. Should the visitor find his appetite whetted by the sight and smell of the sulphur streams which still run near the golf course and the airport, he can take a trip to the very foot of Matupit itself and even climb to the summit of the sleeping volcano and peer down into that very crater which once upon a time so nearly obliterated Rabaul from the map.

Those less fortunate should remember the message proclaimed from every one of the Territory's presentation packs — "Every one can't visit Papua New Guinea, however you can get to know our country through our postage stamps", and if the reader has come thus far it may be doubted whether in future he will ever regard the 10/- stamp of 1963 in quite the same way again.

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coloured, seals were used by the Director General's office in Alexandria. With the adoption of French as the official international language of Egypt, the inscription appeared on the seals in French and Arabic. In the final types, no town name was printed, and the post office datestamp served to indicate the office of use.

Seals for some thirty offices were produced, many in several types, while some are not known to exist in some types. In 1892, the interpostals were succeeded by the first catalogued Official stamp of Egypt which, like these fore-runners, was simply inscribed in French and Arabic without showing any value.

Much study and research remains to challenge the collector of these fascinating stamps. Mr Kehr's catalogue and notes on these issues is published in Billig's Philatelic Handbook Vol. 21. A small section of these is being sold in Robson Lowe's Bournemouth Stamp Auction on 4th February, 1982. The Billig handbooks are also available from Harris Publications Ltd., 42 Maiden Lane, London WC2E 7LW.

Below: 7. Postes Egyptiennes type 3; 8. Postes Egyptiennes type 4; 9.-12. Different types of seals used by the Director General's office.

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