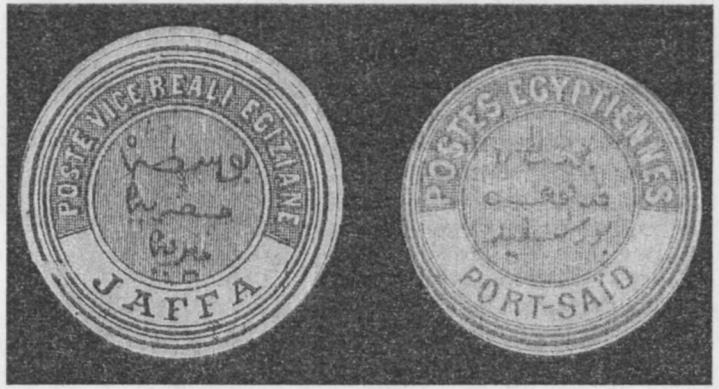
Egyptian interpostals purpose unclear

▼ BONNIE & ROGER RIGA

Many of us are familiar with the round seals known as Egyptian interpostals, even if we are not really sure what their purpose was. Unfortunately, it isn't likely that we'll ever be completely certain of their precise function in the 19th century Egyptian mail system. The consensus seems to be that they were a form of Official mail stamp to be used by government officials to direct mail to the various cities in the Egyptian sphere of influence.

The Italian company holding a 10-year contract with the Egyptian government for a postal monopoly introduced the labels in 1864. The company, Posta Europea, began in the early 1800s as a courier service to handle letters to and from Europe. This proved to be a very efficient service, so much so that the Egyptian government soon depended on it as well. The monopoly terms guaranteed government officials the same preferential treatment they had enjoyed from the original state-run messenger service. The label's round shape ensured that even the most illiterate on the company staff would recognize the mail and pass it through the system expeditiously and for free.

Virtually no covers have been found showing the prescribed usage that would prove these suppositions. Covers have been found with the labels sealing the flap on the back, but these are usually from the post-1880 time period. By that time the original use of these labels as Official free-franks was no longer valid, and it appears that they were used as Official seals.



On the left is a rare early seal for Jaffa (Palestine) with Italian inscription. At right is the more frequently seen seal with French inscription for Port Saïd.

The usual interpostal is red on white, with the name of a destination city printed in the lower part of the rings around the center. Colored-paper and various colored-ink interpostals are known, but they are scarcer. Labels for destinations outside of Egypt, such as Jaffa, are highly sought after and pricey. The two examples shown here are blue-on-white for Jaffa, and red-on-white for Port Saïd. A good collection would be a definite challenge to assemble, but philatelists enjoy that sort of a hunt.

Ernest A. Kehr and Philip Cockrill produced an invaluable booklet, *Egypt, The Posta Europea and 1984 Kehr Catalogue of Interpostals*, which relates the history and controversy surrounding these fascinating philatelic issues. This is another cinderella group that probably belongs in the standard catalogs, but until that day comes — if ever — the debate about the function of these labels in the postal world will continue. SSM