EGYPT'S MYSTERY LABELS

Status of Interpostals still Undetermined

Verdict: "Some Postal Purpose at present Not Fully Known"

By ALBERT H. HARRIS.

Route: CAIRO—ASSIOUT

When the small body of collectors who formed themselves into the "Egypt Study Circle" first met on March 23rd, 1935, one of the items on the agenda was: "Should the existence of Egyptian Interpostal labels from a particular town be regarded as evidence that an Egyptian post office existed at that town?"

It being a fair assumption that one of the main objects of a study circle is to solve problems and to publish the results for the public good, those of us who were mystified by the Egyptian postal labels which had come to be known as Interpostals had been hoping that the Egypt Study Circle (hereinafter called the Circle) would give a lead.

After waiting eight years, during which I continued to collect Interpostals, and the sum total of enquiries among my friends (including members of the Circle) being contained in the phrase: "Nobody seems to know anything about them," I (a non-member) did not consider it presumptious to gather the evidence, so far as I could, with a view to ascertaining their uncertain status, and this was published in *The Philatelic Magazine* of July 6, 1943.* That I provided the incentive, hitherto lacking, is shown by the attention the Egypt Study Circle has since given the matter, and my paper has, to that extent, achieved its object.

The Circle took up the challenge: "Let those who deny the full postal status of these stamps now produce their evidence to the contrary, or for ever hold their peace." After preliminary discussions they honoured my paper by calling a special meeting to discuss it. At that meeting my deductions were analysed, dissected, and in some cases disputed. Better still, some new evidence was produced; and although it had to be admitted that the problem could not yet be entirely solved, all who, like myself, have no other object in research than to ascertain the truth, will be grateful to Dr. W. Byam and his colleagues for the paper he read before them, and for their amendments which he embodied after discussion.

That paper Dr. Byam has been good enough to send me. It is not suitable for publication *in extenso*, and its facts will be better appreciated if condensed to their essentials.

Let me give way at once on two small points which most people will have realised were slips of the pen. In the early part of my article when I wrote "found *only* on Egyptian official letters," and "appear on the backs of *all* official letters," I should have omitted the two words now italicised. Obviously no-one can assert that a label, whose precise purpose still remains unknown, must have been used at all times for a single purpose. Were that so, the problem under discussion would not exist. So let us waste no time on academic points of debate, but bear in mind that we do not know what Interpostals were intended for, and we are trying to find out.

Covers Bearing Interpostals

The Circle have inspected four covers bearing Interpostal seals. On none was any seal obliterated by a postmark. (1) An official cover, postmarked 1867, with five Benha seals on the back. (2) Cover addressed to an official, postmarked 1882, found open in the mails, and closed by an Interpostal folded over the top margin. Place of origin not known, as top left corner torn off. (3) A postal stationery envelope of 1 piastre, plus a 5 milliemes adhesive. Postmarked Tanta 1890. Envelope slit open, and re-sealed with a Tanta Interpostal. (4) A cover salvaged from the wreck of S.S. "Cairo," addressed from Scotland to Assuan, delivered with a red official headquarters seal on centre of reverse. The first three are in the Danson collection, and the fourth in the Mackenzie-Low collection. (5) There is a fifth cover, which the Circle did not examine, and did not ask to see. That is the one in my collection, sold me as genuine by one of their own members. It is an official envelope postmarked 1892, bearing the 1885 Interpostal of Birket el Sab (office of dispatch), and the 1872 Interpostal of Alexandria (office of receipt). The Circle consider the seal of Birket el Sab may have been officially applied, but question whether the Alexandria one was "put on at a later date by someone who had insufficient knowledge to realise that he was applying the wrong label." That may be so, but is inconclusive. As one Interpostal was on already, it might equally be

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said that anyone lacking knowledge would be the last to put on a second of the receiving town. But I quite realised its inconclusive nature when I bought the cover, and have no grouse against the Circle member who sold it to me. However, the important point brought out here is that they were sometimes used as "Officially Sealed" labels.

Covers Without Interpostals

The Circle have also put forward two official covers, one registered from Wadi Halfa in 1885 (Danson Collection), the other unregistered from Zagazig in 1888 (Byam Collection). There is no Interpostal on any part of either envelope. This is interesting; but there must have been many thousands of official envelopes, and the evidence of two alone can hardly be taken to prove custom. All that is proved is that, of four official covers here recorded, two bear Interpostals and two do not.

Coincidence of Introduction

I pointed out that the introduction of Interpostal labels in 1864 followed closely upon cancellation of various conventions in 1862, and the substitution of a new contract under which the Posta Europea undertook to carry official correspondence free of charge. As the Posta Europea derived its revenue from that portion of the mail that was not carried free, I made the not unreasonable suggestion that, therefore, "distinction between official and unofficial mail was a paramount necessity."

Dr. Byam apparently seeks to upset this argument by pointing out that regulations for official correspondence provided for "a detailed list in duplicate. After verification the Postal Clerk will impress the date stamp on both lists and return one to the sender." But I do not think that necessarily upsets the almost certain desire of the management to keep the official and unofficial mail separate. Therefore, pending discovery of what Interpostals really are, I do not see why the suggestion that they may have been related to the new postal contract, introduced less than two years earlier, should be dismissed as unimportant. It certainly cannot be irrelevant to a search for the facts, which Dr. Byam admits he does not know. Either Interpostals bore some relation to the way the mails were handled under the new contract, or their introduction at that time was mere coincidence.

The De La Rue Labels

As to whether the adhesive De La Rue labels superseded the Interpostals, Dr. Byam attempts another point which is surely purely academic. I did say they continued in use "until 1892, when they were superseded by the rectangular label by De La Rue." I took the date from Gibbons, but Dr. Byam points out that Gibbons is wrong, and the De La Rue label was not issued until Jan. 1st, 1893. He also says that his Circle have seen 29 Interpostals postmarked between 1894 and 1897. For that matter, I have a few, too, but they prove nothing unless it can be shown that the Post Office continued to print Interpostals after the De La Rue label was introduced, for it is common knowledge that most labels superseded remain in use for some time afterwards.

One of the material coincidences to be ascertained is why no Interpostals were issued—if that be so—after the De La Rue labels appeared; also whether, and what relationship, if any, they had. Or was the cessation of the one, followed by the introduction of the other, just as remarkable a coincidence as was the introduction of the first Interpostals in 1864, following a contract whereby official letters were to be carried free?

Conclusions

So we arrive at the conclusions which Dr. Byam puts forward on behalf of his Circle, that the Interpostal labels—

(*a*) Had no power to defray postage.
(*b*) were primarily intended to denote the office of dispatch of all mail transmitted in bulk between one post-office and another (as to which no supporting evidence is cited), but
(*c*) were also employed as seals, and put to other uses, some of which are not at present fully understood, and
(*d*) are eminently collectable and an interesting study.

Really, these conclusions do not advance the subject very far. As to (*a*) there was no statement in my article that Interpostals did pay postage. On the contrary, it was proved, by documentary evidence, that the 1862 contract with the Posta Europea *exempted* official correspondence from all postage, so the point does not arise. (*b*) associates them with mail transit in bulk between offices, and as (*c*) admits that some of the uses to which these labels were put are not yet fully understood, it seems idle for independent minds to deny the possibility that exemption from postage may have been one of them. (*d*) is hardly called for, but is presumably meant to accept Interpostals within the ambit of postal study inasmuch as the labels under notice were produced and used by the postal authorities for purposes, none of which, so far as known, was unconnected with mail matter. In fact, there is no use to which they are known to have been put to which one kind of postal label, or another, has not been put in other countries.

All of which leaves us so very much where we started that it reminds us of old Omar :

Myself when young did eagerly frequent
Doctor and Saint, and heard great argument.
Yet evermore came out from that same door
Wherein I went !

Perforated Crown

Sir :—With regard to the query on perforated crown 1d. Lilac illustrated in your issue of May 5th, I feel that this may be an issue of H.M. Office of Works. This issue was prior to the surcharge of 1896. The perforation was effected upon the 1d. Lilac only and the crown should be over O.W. It is very possible that the initials escaped perforation on some stamps, especially in the illustration the crown seems rather low. A used copy of this was valued at 20/- many years ago.

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