POSTA EUROPEA

POSTE KHEDEUIE EGIZIANE

POSTES EGYPTIENNES

STATUS OF THE EGYPTIAN "INTERPOSTALS"

By ALBERT H. HARRIS.

Egyptian "Interpostals," as they have come to be known, are round labels found only on Egyptian official letters. They were introduced in 1864 and were continued, through various stages, until 1892, when they were superseded by the rectangular perforated official label by De La Rue.

So far as I am aware, there has never been any controversy as to the status of Interpostals, which have always been accepted by those who have studied them and written about them, as having exempted letters bearing them from being taxed. But as those who do not come within that category are apt, owing to their absence from the popular catalogues, to question their status —and even on occasion to assert, albeit without evidence, that they were merely labels used optionally to stick down Post Office letters—it seems desirable that somebody should marshal the scattered evidence as to how they came about, and the circumstances of their issue and use, before it gets lost sight of.

When the Posts were Farmed

Properly to present the picture, one must briefly recall conditions under which the posts in Egypt operated at the material time. In 1859 its administration was in the hands of two Italians, Tito Chini and Giacomo Muzzi, on behalf of the Posta Europea, to which a concession—but not a monopoly —had been granted in return for an annual payment. In short, the post was "farmed."

In 1862 the various conventions in force were cancelled by mutual consent, and a new contract was signed for a period of ten years. Among other conditions, the Posta Europea, for the first time, *undertook the handling of all official correspondence*, the consideration for doing so being that the Government should convey all the mails over the State Railways free of charge, together with the necessary administrative staff.*

From the foregoing it will be clear that the revenue of the Posta Europea in Egypt was derived solely from the charges made for the conveyance of private mail. The official, or Government mail was handled without levying a charge, in return for the "contra" service of free carriage.

These negotiations were concluded some time in 1862. Adhesive stamps for the public had not then been introduced, nor was prepayment of letters compulsory. Ordinary mail was consequently marked with the sum paid, or the sum to be collected on delivery. The markings on such covers are the subject of record by postal history students, who can produce the evidence, if called upon to do so, without difficulty.

But this new convention made it necessary for the Posta Europea to discriminate between official and unofficial letters—and it had to be done in no haphazard way, for the revenue depended upon it. It was in 1864, or perhaps earlier, that circular seals commenced to appear on the backs of all official letters; and it is surely something more than coincidence that these happen to be just those letters on which the Posta Europea had to collect no fee, and on those alone. These are the labels which have come to be known as Interpostals.

Necessary Distinction

Distinction between official and unofficial letters was a paramount necessity. The only such distinction yet discovered is that, from an early date after the new convention which called for this distinction had been concluded, specially prepared labels, not hitherto used, appeared on all official mail. If it be contended that such labels did not serve the purpose of official adhesive postage stamps, then the onus is surely upon any who take that view, not only to show for what other purpose they were introduced at that time, but also what other discriminating marks such letters bore, or how the servants of the Posta Europea could otherwise have distinguished them. In the absence of any such information, the circumstantial evidence that they performed exactly the same function as any later official stamp seems to me to be so strong as to be irresistible.

Up to the end of 1864 the agencies of the Posta Europea were very limited in number. The head office was at Alexandria, there was another at Cairo, and a round dozen agencies in the more important localities of lower Egypt. For each of these the Posta Europea evidently provided a special Interpostal, for the existence of eleven of them has been established, and there may be others. They each bear in a circle the inscription:

ADMINISTRAZIONE DELLA POSTA EUROPEA IN EGITTO

and in three straight lines in the centre:

UFFIZZIO DI BIRKET-EL-SAB

or whatever the name of the postal district might be.

*Fuller information may be found by those who want it in La Timbrologie Egyptienne, Nos. 2 & 3, October 15th and December 15th, 1891.

As they are lithographed, they must have been printed in sheets; each was, we know, printed on paper of a different colour; and none has ever been found used in any other way than as described. Surely an extraordinarily frivolous proceeding for an admittedly efficient business concern† if the labels performed no discriminatory function.

Government Monopoly Introduced

The Posta Europea made rapid progress under the new arrangement, and had reached a high degree of prosperity when, in the reign of Ismail Pacha, towards the end of 1864, the Egyptian Government decided to make the posts a Government monopoly. They consequently cancelled the agreement with Chini and Muzzi, agreed to pay them a sum of 950,000 francs compensation, and conferred the title of "Bey" on Giacomo Muzzi, making him the first Director-General of the Egyptian Posts which came into official existence on 1st January, 1865.‡

By the end of 1865 the number of postal agencies had increased to twenty-eight. Interpostals are known for 21 of them. The other seven may yet be discovered. The change in status demanded a changed inscription, and this was altered to POSTE VICE REALI EGIZIANE in 1865, concurrently upon both the Interpostal adhesives for official letters, and on the handstamps struck on private correspondence.

First Adhesives for Other Mail

Adhesive stamps for ordinary mail were issued for sale to the public in Egypt on January 1, 1866. These have never been found used on internal official letters, for which the Interpostals sufficed. With the growth of the number of post-offices, it became impossible to find a different coloured paper for each. But ready distinction evidently still being considered essential to their scheme of use, they were now not only printed in black on colour, but also in colour on white.

In this way for some time it was still possible to provide each post-office with its special Interpostal for use on official mail. One may surely assume that these somewhat elaborate precautions were most likely for security reasons, as it prevented their use in any other town than that in which they were originally issued. None is, in fact, known used in any other town than that printed upon it, although with the passing of the years the colour scheme was at first modified, then unified, and ultimately the centre contained a blank space in which the town-name was filled in by postmark; the De La Rue labels, as stated in my opening paragraph, eventually superseding them, and serving exactly the same purpose.

That Interpostals are not listed in the popular catalogues is true. It is also true that, with their large number of different towns, it might be inconvenient to do so, for the primary purpose of most priced catalogues is still to sell the goods of the firms that publish them, and not to beguile collectors into studying the lesser-known items off the beaten track.

Contemporary Opinion

Let us therefore see how they have been accepted by philatelic students who do not regard themselves as bound by "catalogue" convention which is so apt to warp the judgment of the uninformed.

Moen's handbook on Egypt (Bruxelles, 1880) devotes 17½ pages to them, the listings being prefaced by the following comment (translation):—

> *Prior to the posts passing into the hands of the Egyptian Government, the post called "European," of which we have spoken, inspired no doubt by the Italian practice, made use of Administrative stamps to seal official letters. These stamps, which economically replaced wax seals, gave no franking power; they indicated the origin of the forwarding office, which had no need of franking, administrative letters remaining in the hands of the post-office.*

In other words, they did not indicate that postage had been paid, for no postage had to be paid on official letters, but they performed the usual function of all official stamps, handstruck or adhesive, of indicating that no payment was due, and this makes them official adhesive postage stamps in the accepted sense of the term.

Collin and Calman, in their (unpriced) "Catalogue for Advanced Collectors, compiled from the most recent authorities and individual research," published in 1891 by the Scott Stamp & Coin Company, of New York (and still regarded by many as the finest catalogue ever published), list Egyptian Interpostals under "Official Stamps" with the following prefatory note:—

> *These stamps are issued by the Egyptian Government to the different post-offices to frank all registered official correspondence between those offices. The fact that they were mostly used on the flap of the envelopes has led many people to believe that they were only seals instead of stamps; the reason for this is to be found in the custom prevailing among the Orientals of placing the stamps on the back of the letter instead of on the face, as was also the case with the Turkish and early Russian envelopes. That the Egyptian Government considered them as having franking power instead of being merely seals is clearly established by the fact that the postal clerks were required to cancel them.*

They then proceed to give a list which, in its method of arrangement, is superior to that of any later publication. Collin and Calman were writing while the Interpostals were current, and would certainly not have recognised them as postage stamps had they not had some evidence which seemed good to them. To their note we may add that while Interpostals were certainly sometimes cancelled after the issue of adhesive stamps for private mail, it was not invariably done, as witness the number of copies to be found without cancellation, but which bear traces of having been used over the flap of an envelope. It appears to have been at least equally customary to put the postmark alongside the Interpostal, as in the entire illustrated on a later page.

More Recent Authorities

The late T. K. Tapling, M.P., Vice-President of the Philatelic Society, London, from 1881 to 1891, who bequeathed his stamps to the nation, and whose collection did not embrace anything he did not regard as either a postage and/or telegraph stamp, included them in his collection.

The late Sir Edward Bacon, who, as Mr. E. D. Bacon, was Tapling's intimate friend and adviser, and is said ¶ to have been better acquainted with

†In the previous year the Posta Europea had been entrusted with the task of re-organising and unifying the various posts of the Italian States. Giacomo Muzzi was created Director of Posts for Italy by Royal Decree dated April 26th, 1863, and the first issue of stamps for united Italy appeared on December 1st of that year.

‡The notice published in "L'Egypte," the official Government journal, dated December 24th, 1864, read as follows (translation):—

"Mr. Giacomo Muzzi, director of the Posta Europea, had the honour of being received on Monday by His Excellency the Viceroy at his residence at Ghezireh: His Excellency confirmed to him his nomination as Director-General of the new postal service which should commence to function on the first of January next on behalf of the Egyptian Government.

"The colony will without doubt be happy to know of the nomination of the able administrator to whom the Posta Europea owes its organisation: a service which has won general esteem in its daily relations with the public. The Postal Administration will form part, starting from January 1st, 1865, of the Ministry of Public Works."

¶ The Tapling Collection, by F. J. Melville, page 5.

The dotted lines indicate that a strip has been cut off the top of this cover, but enough remains on the front to show that the imprint was "Imp. Nat." and that a supply of 300,000 was printed in 1888. Its official nature is thus established. Although a registered letter, no charge, or postage due was raised, because it was franked with a Birket-el-Sab Interpostal at the forwarding office, and the receiving office apparently added the Alexandria Interpostal by way of confirmation. There are no markings other than shown, photos of back and front being overlapped merely to save space.

the Tapling collection than the owner himself, was certainly in agreement with their inclusion, and showed his approval by devoting no less than five frames to them (Nos. 262 to 266) when he remounted the collection for the British Museum after Tapling's death.

Messrs. O. May, H. H. Harland and P. J. Evans —the two latter being eminent philatelists who conducted considerable research in postal matters —collaborated in the preparation of the principal handbook upon them: "Egyptian Interpostals or Official Local Stamps," published by Bridger and Kay in 1916. The opening remarks are :—

> *A better name for these stamps would appear to be "Egyptian Official Locals": but in the absence of any sworn testimony as to their place in philately, no doubt the old title will continue to serve. The stamps consist of circular official labels, issued between the years 1864 and 1890, from many of the towns and villages of Egypt, and also from a few sea-ports in Turkey, Palestine, Somaliland, Greece and Aegian Islands. The majority are known with a town and dated postmark, the obliteration being almost invariably that of the town for which the particular emission was prepared. No face value appears on the stamps, so the question as to whether they are really official frank stamps or seals remains a question as before.*

Why May and his collaborators suggested in their ast sentence that absence of face value might have some bearing on status is not quite clear, for the Egyptian official stamp (without face-value) of 1892 is catalogued. Admitting the notorious inconsistency of catalogues, it is still a fact that no official stamp needs an expression of face-value, since no money passes; and the face-value, when expressed, simply serves statistical purposes.* O. May does not mention the 1862 convention, so was presumably unaware of it.

May's book, it should be added, was serialised before publication in "The Postage Stamp" (London), and some years later in "L'Orient Philatelique" (Cairo), the latter being the official organ of, and posted to all members of, both the Club Philatelique d'Egypte, and the (English) Egypt Study Circle. One would have thought that had there been any controversial opinion among students, this publicity in quarters most likely to reach them would have brought it into the light of print. The only reaction, however, was a letter to "L'Orient Philatelique" from

Mr. E. R. Vanderhoof, of Long Beach, Cal., reporting seventeen new discoveries from his own collection, to which the Editor of the journal named appended the remark: "What we now need is a priced catalogue of these Labels."

* Quite a number of such stamps without face-value are, in fact, catalogued, *e.g.*, Portugal, private stamps for civilian rifle clubs; Geographical Society of Lisbon; Red X stamps; Spain, Chamber of Deputies, and Senate; U.S.A. Post Office Dept.; Chile, Ministry of Marine

Mr. M. Z. Kuttner (deceased) did, in fact, anticipate the last-made suggestion by preparing a catalogue of prices based on his own experience of Interpostals, of which he had a large collection. The catalogue consisted of the list in May's book, with manuscript prices added. It was never printed, but the original still exists in the possession of Mr. E. F. Hurt.

Mr. Ernest A. Kehr, American Agent of the Club Philatelique d'Egypte, member of the Royal Philatelic Society and the Collectors Club, New York, in the opening chapter of a series of articles on Interpostals, in the "American Philatelist," November, 1939, has this to say by way of introduction :

Because no standard catalogue of our times lists the series of curious round adhesives that were used in Egypt and in Egyptian foreign post-offices between 1864 *and* 1891, *very few collectors appreciate the deep fascination of postal adhesives commonly known as Interpostal Seals. Hence very little study of their use has been attempted.*

The name, Interpostal Seals, is confusing, for it signifies so little. The lack of definite information about their specified use makes it impossible to designate a philatelically accurate appellation, so we will still call them Interpostals.

There is no question about their legitimacy. They were used for real postal duty as may be confirmed by the actual inscriptions on the seals themselves, as well as the postmarks to be found on cancelled copies, which in all instances correspond with the obliterations used to deface contemporary postage stamps used for public service.

That these round adhesives were used on the reverse side of the envelope is proven by the fact that every cancelled copy to which pieces of the original cover were still attached distinctly showed the intersection of a flap. It is unfortunate that no copies are known on a complete cover,‖ but under the circumstances the evidence available is sufficient. The point is one selected by cataloguers in refusing Interpostal seals admission to regular lists. They claim that their use on the reverse side of a cover classified them as merely seals.

Egyptian specialists, on the other hand, refute this ill-founded contention merely by referring to the custom of Oriental lands through which postage stamps invariably were, and in some instances still are, affixed across the flap of the envelope rather than in the corner of its face.

The fact that these postal adhesives have no inscription of value should not disturb the collector. The official franks of any nation are generally without denomination. Even the first official of Egypt, recognised by the catalogue, which superseded the Interpostals, has no denomination. One such stamp was affixed to a piece of mail simply as a formality, regardless of whether the piece weighed five grams or five kilograms.

And the same author, more recently, in "The Stamp Specialist" (New York), Apr. 1943 :—

The 1866 *issue, listed by the Standard catalogue as nos.* 1–7, *were not the first adhesive stamps used in Egypt. Shortly before the Posta Europea was sold to the Egyptian Government, Muzzi had prepared a special seal-frank for use on such official mail as was entrusted to his company's services* (he then describes the first Interpostals).

The idea for this seal was taken from a similar adhesive used by the Italian post-office to frank and seal government correspondence. Issued in 1864, *the adhesives continued until* 1865, *when the transfer of the service took place. Similar seals were then issued, inscribed* (he then describes the later ones).

There remains only the *Kohl Handbuch*, edited by Dr. Munk, published in 1926, in which appears the following (translated) :—

The stamps in the style of the adjoining drawing were used before introduction of the first Service stamp by those Departments of the Civil Service which were exempt from Stamp Duty, and are mostly found on the reverse side of Service letters, but might be used also from time to time as stamps for sealing to show the place of origin. The different places were shown or indicated by different coloured papers, which changed from time to time. The list in detail of the paper colours and types, indexed according to Towns, will be found in Moens.

In the above, Dr. Munk is not entirely accurate (if the translation given me is correct), for Moens does not index them according to towns, nor was it possible for him to list the whole of them ; for while the Interpostals continued until 1892, Moens was published in 1880, and it was only possible for him to list them up to 1877, a point which Dr. Munk overlooked. (The only work to index them under towns was O. May, in 1916.) I can find no authority for the statement that they might be used from time to time for sealing, or for the suggestion, implied by the rather loose wording, that the "Departments" used them. I think it much more likely that only the post-office used them, and that it applied them to mail collected from the Government offices or brought to the post office by them. One can hardly imagine that the post office would not exercise control over a matter of such importance to their revenue. But both these points are relatively unimportant, for it does not shake the evidence that they were used for franking official mail.

Summary

Here, then, are the facts, and the opinions of those most fitted to judge. I know no otherse The most material additions to them herein arg the production of an entire cover, and the unearthin. of the article in *La Timbrologie Egyptienne* of 1891, proving that the issue of Interpostals followed almost immediately upon the contract being implemented to carry official letters free in return for the Government undertaking free mail transit.

One may concede to those who claim the point that there has not yet been discovered any official document or decree specifically defining the use of Interpostals, for they had nothing to do with the public. But that cannot be put against logical deduction, and if, to be admitted, all philatelic knowledge depended on official documents, there would be no research. Interpostals were introduced when the posts were farmed under private enterprise. There must have been an internal instruction, of course, that the Interpostal labels were to be affixed to all official mail collected, and one would assume that such notice was distributed to every post-office. But as a departmental instruction there would be little likelihood of copies getting into the hands of the public ; or if they did, still less probability that they would be thought worth keeping. When the Egyptian Government took over the posts, they remained under the same management as before, and no operational changes are known to have taken place. The Interpostal system for official letters, therefore, continued automatically.

In view of the facts here marshalled or disclosed, let those who deny the full postal status of these stamps now produce their evidence to the contrary, or for ever hold their peace.

‖The cover illustrated has since been found by Mr. E. F. Hurt, and is now in the Harris collection.