



The State Courier Post of Mohammed Ali

When the Napoleonic occupation of Egypt was ended, the political vacuum was soon filled by Mohammed Ali (who eventually became known as 'The Great'). He was appointed Governor of Egypt by the Ottoman Sultan in 1805 and was subsequently responsible for many beneficial innovations, such as the cotton industry and the Medical School, along with ruthless acts of violence against his enemies. He established a messenger service between Cairo and the principal towns, exclusively for government communications. Much of our knowledge of its nature is due to the book, *Les Postes en Egypte*¹, published on the occasion of the UPU Congress held in Cairo in 1934.

The State Post of Mohammed Ali functioned by means of runners in relays, who made daily trips²; 24 hours were required for travel between Cairo and Alexandria. For Middle Egypt (roughly Cairo to Asyut), the service was only weekly, and for Upper Egypt it was monthly. After Mohammed Ali achieved the conquest of the Sudan in 1821, the courier service was extended to Khartoum; a letter from Cairo to Khartoum is said to have required 50 days.

Although the service was closed to the public, private individuals could apply to the Director to arrange the hire of a messenger. Details are lacking and there have been suggestions that there were alternative means by which merchants could send their letters, perhaps even by some sort of organized post preceding the *Posta Europea*. However, there eventually evolved an established arrangement for including private messages in the pouches of the official couriers, on payment of a fee according to weight and distance. The unit of weight was the dirhem (equal to 3.12 grams). For Middle Egypt, the charge varied between 10 and 30 paras; for Upper Egypt, the charge per dirhem ranged from 3pi.25pa. to 6pi.5pa. These were very large sums for those times.

When the *Posta Europea* (Chapter IV) began operating about 1832 the courier service became redundant and was eventually withdrawn in the Delta in favor of the *Posta Europea*. Withdrawal continued later as the Viceroyal Post, established in 1865, spread its services from the Delta to Middle and Upper Egypt, eventually in a grand expansion reaching Khartoum and beyond. At that point, 1874, the courier service ended.

Philatelic evidence of the operation of the courier service is scanty. Nothing from the early period is known, although letters carried by it may be lying somewhere unrecognized. Handstamped markings would not have been used or needed, and a knowledge of old handwritten Arabic would be essential for identifying such letters, for only a small minority would have been addressed in European handwriting. The only letters known to the philatelic world date from the 1850s when handstamps in the form of small intaglio seals began to be used³. Three such covers were in the sale of the Byam collection (1961) and four were in the Häffle collection; together they may constitute nearly half of the recognized examples.

The intaglio seals are small, about the same size as the personal seals in common use throughout Egypt. They are only distinguishable from them by the inclusion of the word *bosta* and the name of the town: Asyut, Aswan, Esna, Girga, or Qena (Fig. 1). The year of manufacture was engraved on each seal, using the last two digits of the Muslim calendar. The earliest is Qena, dated “71” (AH1271 or AD1855). For Asyut there may have been two seals, for a very blurred but recognizable strike of one somewhat smaller than the one shown in Fig. 1 has been reported to me. A seal possibly of Khartoum has also been reported. The seals continued in use for years after manufacture, however, and the date of a letter bearing one of them can only be determined by other markings, if any, or from the manuscript inside.



Fig. 1 Intaglio seals.

Dates seen are summarized in the following table:

Name	Year	Earliest	Latest
Aswan	87 (1870)		27 AP 72
Asyut	79 (1862)	– – 62	1 MR 72
Esna	?	– – 60	
Girga	67 (1856)	– – 56	10 AP 73
Qena	71 (1854)	– FE 58	3 AP 73

The seals are generally stamped in black, except for Asyut, which used blue. They were struck on either the front or the back of letters and apparently served as franking marks. They are always accompanied by a handwritten notation of the weight and the fee paid (Fig. 2). So few examples are known that the basis for the charges cannot reliably be deduced, but it is clear that both weight and distance were involved. The charges were expressed in paras (*fadda*) or piasters, but the notations are mostly scrawled and difficult to read. It is also possible that the charges changed over the years. One letter from Girga to Cairo is inscribed “1 dirhem / 1 piaster”, but another that traveled the same route is inscribed “30 *fadda*”. Whatever the basis for the charges, they were obviously prepaid, for there are no postage-due indications on any known example.

Most of the surviving letters are addressed to Cairo or beyond and have the appropriate handstamps of the postal service that carried them onwards, even, in some cases, to Europe. Presumably the onward postage was collected from the addressee when the letter went abroad, but the original fee appears to have included handling by the Viceroyal Post where necessary.

Some letters are headed inside “Luxor” or “Sohag”, yet they bear the franking seal of a different town. This suggests, but does not prove, that there were no offices in those two towns, at least at the date on which the letters were written; perhaps examples will yet be found.

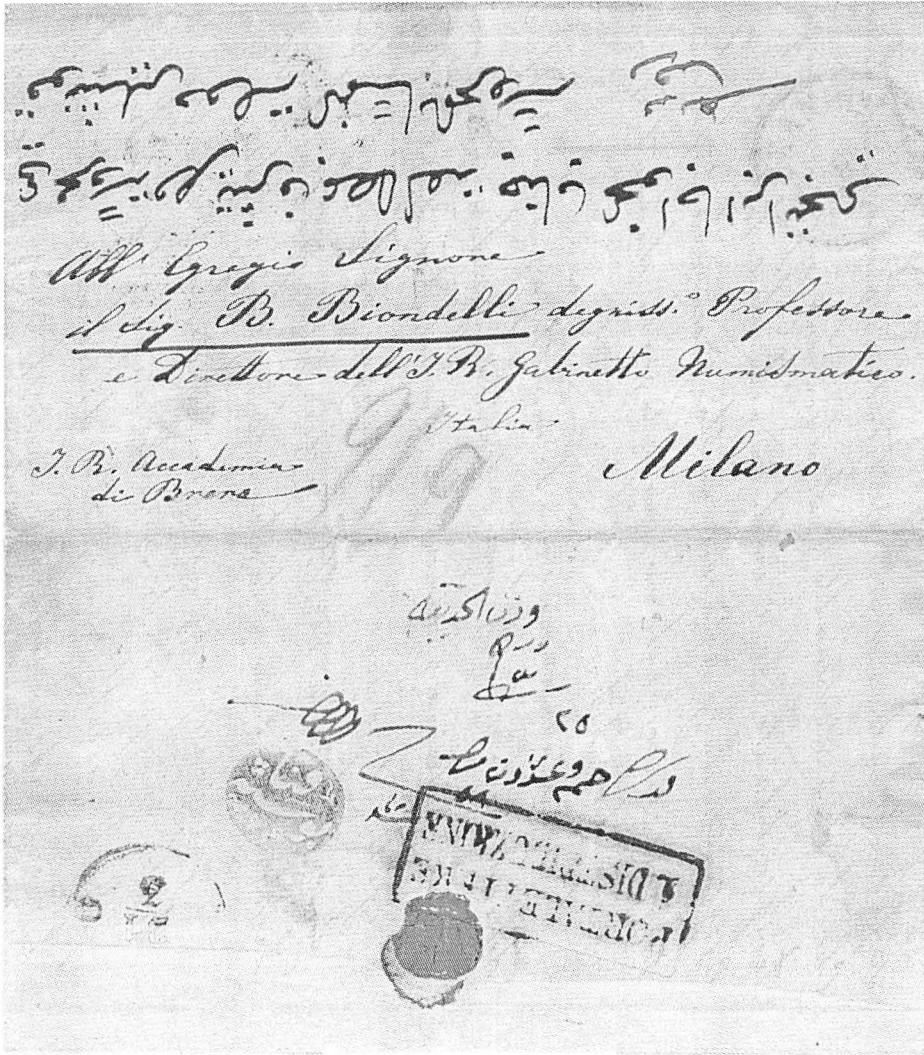


Fig. 2 A typical cover.

No letter originating in Lower Egypt before the issue of stamps has been reported, but at least two examples are known of letters franked with stamps of the First Issue and addressed to locations in Middle Egypt, beyond the reach of the Viceroyal Post. One of them is a small, flimsy envelope franked with only a single copy of the 20pa., which is cancelled normally at Cairo. (Fig. 3). There are no backstamps and no seal, but it is addressed to Asyut. The sum of 20pa. does not correspond to any rate of the Viceroyal Post, so one must conclude that the letter was handed over directly to the courier post and that the 20pa. paid the charge for its service (the letter must have weighed less than 1 dirhem). The Häffele collection contained another cover addressed to Asyut but franked with a 10pa. and 20pa. stamp of the First Issue, cancelled at Cairo 13 MAG 66; the letter

is dated inside "30 *zul bigga* 1282". The routes of the two covers are the same, but the weights may have been different.

There exists a document dated January 1867 that states rates for letters to Upper Egypt⁴. For Asyut, the rate is given as 30pa. per dirhem, in addition to any postage required to carry the letter to Cairo, the point of departure of the couriers for points south. For Minya, the rate quoted is 20pa., for Girga, 1pi., for Qena, 1pi.10pa. It also states that newspaper, samples, registered letters, and printed matter were not accepted. The rates for letters may have changed as the railway extended southwards (it reached Minya before August 1867 for example).

Although seals for them have not been discovered, the foregoing document gives rates to a number of towns for which examples may exist: Beni Suef, Fayum, Fashn, Korosko, Wadi Halfa, Berber, Dongola, Khartoum, Sennar, Corfofan, Fazoglu, and "El Take".

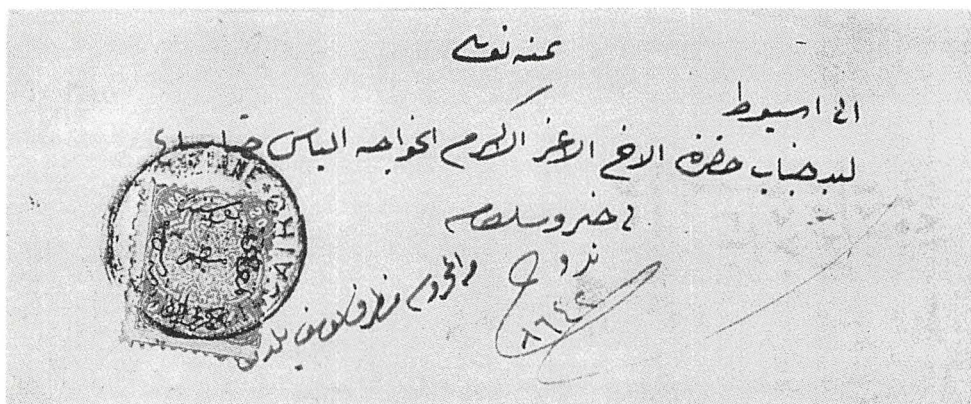


Fig. 3 A cover from Cairo to Asyut, presumably carried by the State Courier Post.

References

1. Egyptian Postal Administration, *Les Postes en Egypte*, Cairo, 1934.
2. J. Tagher, *L'OP* No. 75, 162-70 (July 1951), reprinted from *Cahiers d'Histoire Egyptiennes* (Mar. 1951).
3. P.A.S. Smith, *QC X* (1), 20-6 (whole no. 105, Mar. 1978).
4. J. Boulad d'Humières, *L'OP* No. 53, 439 (Jan. 1946).