

IV

The Posta Europea and the Pre-stamp Government Post

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Introduction

The Posta Europea, a privately owned service providing internal mail service, deserves a chapter to itself because it served all the major towns (*villaggi*) of Lower Egypt and was the true foundation of the Viceroyal Postal Service. Its history has been thoroughly described by J. Boulad^{1a} and by Biolato^{1b}, augmented by the personal recollections of the origin of the Egyptian postal service by Valle², an early Postmaster of Cairo (a brief account of the Posta Europea has also been given by Hurt³). A thoroughly researched book on the subject was recently published in Italy^{1b}.

The history of the Posta Europea may be said to begin with the arrival in Egypt about 1820 of Pietro Santo Michele Meratti (contemporarily known as Michele, but in previous literature commonly and erroneously referred to as Carlo), a printer from Italy, born in Livorno in 1796. He initially acted as a forwarding agent in Alexandria, serving the merchants by collecting their mail and consigning it to the most suitable ship. Later he perceived that the merchant community had a need for a reliable and efficient carriage of letters between Alexandria and Cairo, which was not adequately met by the existing courier post of the Government (i.e., the State Courier Post of Mohammed Ali, Chapter III). He undertook the task of providing what was needed, perhaps about 1828–30, and developed the service into a regular operation with its head office in Alexandria (this was the beginning of the name ‘La Posta Europea’). The earliest letter identifiable with the service is one dated July 31st 1831 from Cairo to Alexandria, endorsed CON CORRIERE EUROPEO. Two other covers (1831 and 1837) bear different intaglio handstamps. Other folded letters of the period 1830–43 are known without markings; they may only be presumed to have been carried by Meratti.

The beginning of the oval Posta Europea handstamps seems to have followed upon Meratti’s death in 1843 and the inheritance of it by Tito Chini (previously identified as his nephew, but actually a cousin). The name, ‘European Post’, reflects the intention to emulate the type of postal service to which the principals were accustomed in Italy, but it also implies the important feature of providing connection with European mail boats at Alexandria. (It should be noted that ‘Europea’ has four syllables and should not be written or pronounced ‘Europa’.) Chini was joined by Giacomo Muzzi in 1848. Biographical details of these men and their associates have been published by Colucci⁴.

The first known handstamps date from 1844.

Although the *Posta Europea* had to compete with the Government courier service, Muzzi's enterprise soon put the latter into a lesser status. When the Egyptian State Railways began building from Alexandria to Cairo in 1854, Muzzi quickly took advantage of it and opened new offices (Damanhour and Kafr Zajaf in 1855, Tanta, Benha, and Birket el Sab in 1856) as the railway reached them. He also opened offices in Atfe and Rosetta which were not on the railway, but were reachable by water. In 1857, when the railway expanded into the eastern part of the Delta, offices were opened in Damiatra, Mansura, Mehalla, Samanoud, Zagasik, and Zifta. The railway from Cairo to Suez was completed in 1858 and presumably it was in that year that the office in Suez was opened.

An agreement with the Government in 1856 fixed the payment for the use of the railways by the *Posta Europea* and gave it a *de facto* monopoly for five years. The monopoly was renewed for ten years in 1862 with the obligation for the *Posta Europea* to carry the Government mails without cost in lieu of the former payment for use of the trains. At the same time, the Government conceded the superiority of the *Posta Europea* and closed down its courier post in Lower Egypt.

The steady increase in the business of the *Posta Europea* overtaxed the administrative staff and Vittorio Chioffi, of Milan, was brought in. When Tito Chini died in 1864, Muzzi and Chioffi were in sole charge. They proposed establishing a uniform postage instead of a charge by distance, and collecting it by means of stamps. Permission to issue stamps was requested of the Viceroy, Ismail Pasha. The Viceroy was so impressed with the importance of the proposal that he promptly negotiated to buy out the *Posta Europea*. The deed of sale was signed on October 29th 1864, with transfer of ownership effective on January 2nd 1865. Muzzi was appointed as the first Postmaster General of Egypt. Some of the documents relating to these matters are reproduced in *Les Postes en Egypte*⁵ from the originals in the Cairo Postal Museum.

The *Posta Europea* continued much as before during the First Transition Period, January 2nd to April 15th 1865, and there were no immediate philatelic consequences. In the Second Transition Period, a major consequence was the replacement of the various handstamps inscribed *POSTA EUROPEA* by circular date-stamps inscribed *POSTE VICE-REALI EGIZIANE*. During this period preparations were completed for issuing adhesive stamps and simplifying the postage rates to a uniform charge of 1 piaster. The transition period ended when stamps were issued on January 1st 1866 (Chapter XII).

Handstamps: *Posta Europea*



Fig. 1 The Type I handstamps.

The first handstamps (Type I) were provided only to Alexandria and Cairo (Fig. 1). They were small double ellipses without date-slugs; dates were usually, but not always, entered in the center by hand. (In the absence of an inscribed date, it is necessary to examine the enclosed letter to establish the date of use; the dates were usually expressed in Arabic in the Muslim lunar calendar⁶.) Curiously, the inscriptions of the two handstamps differed, that for Cairo having *AGENZIA DELLA POSTA EUROPEA IN CAIRO*, whereas that for Alexandria had *POSTA EUROPEA IN ALESSANDRIA D'EGITTO*. This may

be a reflection of the fact that Alexandria was the headquarters. The inclusion of D'EGITTO was of particular concern to Italians in order to avoid confusion with the city of the same name that lies between Genoa and Turin.

The Type II handstamps were introduced in 1850, perhaps on January 1st. They were larger and included a changeable date (day and month only). The difference in inscription for the two cities was even more explicit: DIREZIONE vs. AGENZIA (Fig. 2).

With the expansion of the service, 14 new offices were issued handstamps in a new style, Type III. Like Type I, they were intended to have the date entered in manuscript, but the intent was not always followed. The earliest report of a Type III is January 1st 1857 (Tanta), but earlier ones very probably exist. The Galiub handstamp was inexplicably made much smaller than the others (Fig. 3). Type III for Tanta exists in two forms, perhaps because the first one was damaged or lost. The majority are 43mm wide and the lettering is regular. The second variety, seen dated 27 Ott. 62, is only 41.5mm wide; the A of POSTA is below the level of the other letters, and the bar of the second T of TANTA is slightly deformed.



Fig. 2 The Type II handstamps.



Fig. 3 Type III handstamps (the ornaments differ somewhat among the offices).



Fig. 4 Type IV

Type IV, of circular format, was provided in January 1861 (probably Jan. 1st) to Cairo and Alexandria only. The simple inscriptions no longer made a distinction between the two offices and the date slugs were increased to include the last two ciphers of the year (Fig. 4).

In mid-1863 (probably July 1st) both Type IV and Type III were replaced, the former by similar circular date-stamps having a double outer ring (Type VI), and the latter by elliptical devices (Type V) otherwise having the same features as Type VI. Once



Fig. 4 Type V



Fig. 4 Type VI

again, that for Galiub was made smaller than the rest. These remained in use until mid-April 1865. Beginning July 1st 1865 letters were backstamped on arrival with Types V or VI.

Tracings of the handstamps of each office in each Type can be found in the cited publications by Boulad.

Registration of letters appears to have been available as early as 1858. Such letters were at first indicated only by a manuscript notation and number, but straight-line handstamps reading PER CONSEGNA were introduced about 1859 or 1860. Alexandria and Cairo were later (1863?) given elliptical ones with numbers as part of the handstamp (Fig. 5). Assignments of the Types to particular offices and the reported dates of use, are given in Boulad's articles. All registered letters are rare.

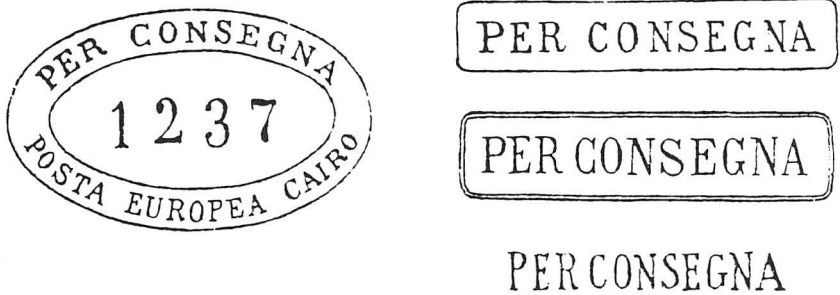


Fig. 5 Handstamps for registered letters.

Several handstamps denoting prepayment or exemption from payment are known (Fig. 6). Boulad states that these were used on the letters of large users who were allowed to open current accounts for the charges, to be settled in lump sums periodically. However, all of these marks are very scarce to rare, an aspect that does not seem to be consistent with the large scale of use implied. No example has been seen on a cover that can be dated with certainty prior to 1860.

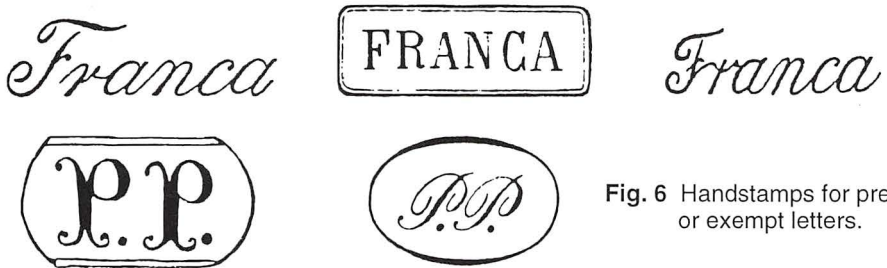


Fig. 6 Handstamps for prepaid or exempt letters.

The color in which the various postal markings were struck can be black, green, or blue. There does not seem to be any significance to the color and some handstamps, such as Cairo in Type I, can be found in either color, depending on the date. The distinction between green and blue is in many cases difficult to make because the commonly used letter paper was itself blue. There is also the probability that there can be a gradation in shade as the ink pads were successively re-inked.

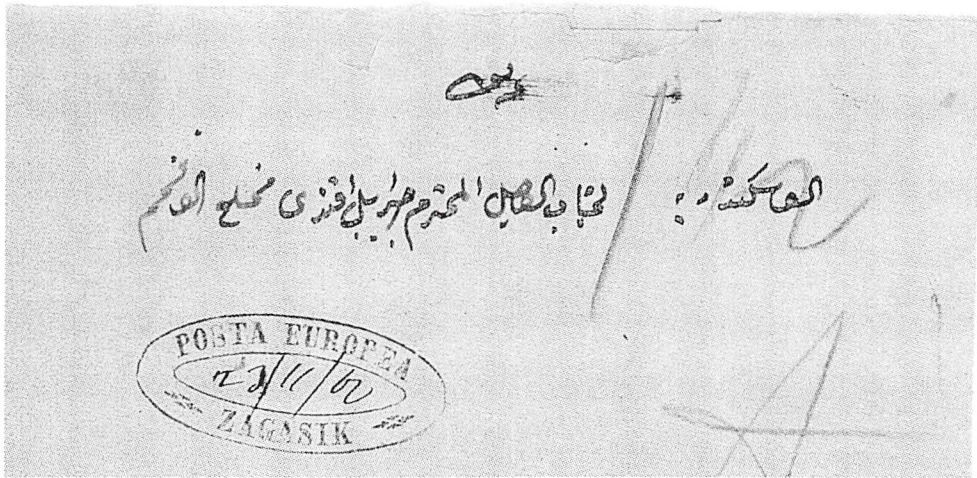


Fig. 7 An 1860 folded letter to Alexandria, with rate “1½” and “A” in blue crayon.

Most Posta Europea letters were written and addressed in Arabic. To assist the mostly Italian clerical staff, a partial transliteration of the office of address was often written in crayon on the front; for Alessandria, it might be “Alessa” or even simply “A”. In some instances, a handstamp, ALESSA^A, was used for this purpose (Fig. 7).

TABLE 1 — POSTA EUROPEA OFFICES						
	Earliest seen	Latest seen	R	Earliest seen	Latest seen	R
	Type I			Type II		
Alessandria	4 AP 44	21 JN 48	20	7 JA 51	5 DE 60	6
Cairo	25 FE 44	— — 49	9	8 JA 50	29 SE 60	4
	Type IV			Type VI		
Alessandria	6 JA 61	5 JN 63	5	28 JN 63	14 AP 65	4
Cairo	13 JA 61	8 JN 63	5	4 JY 63	18 AP 65	4
	Type III			Type V		
Atfe	—	16 AU 64	25	—	—	—
Benha	28 MY 59	26 SE 59	25	11 OC 63	15 MR 65	24
Berket el Sab	13 JA 57	25 MY 62	24	19 NO 64 (Birket-)		25
Damanhour	18 JA 59	—	25	17 DE 63	29 MR 65	24
Damiata	3 MY 58	25 MR 63	6	24 JY 63	21 FE 65	6
Galiub	?	?	(25)	—	21 FE 65	25
Kafr Zajat	4 JA 58	30 JN 63	3	4 JY 63 (Zayat)	14 AP 65	3
Mansura	29 NO 56	1 MY 64	1	1 JY 63	14 AP 65	2
Mehalla	15 AP 58	23 JN 63	5	13 JY 63 (Michalla)	15 AP 65	3

Table 1 — Posta Europea Offices contd.

	Earliest seen	Latest seen	R	Earliest seen	Latest seen	R
	Type III			Type V		
Samanud	17 AU 57	29 JN 63	1	4 JY 63	29 MR 65	2
Suez	5 MR 60	17 FE 63	24	18 AU 63	14 AP 65	24
Tanta	1 JA 57	22 MY 63	1	7 JY 63	28 MR 65	2
Zagasik	17 JN 58	18 JN 63	3	1 JY63	15 MR 65	3
Zifta	24 MY 59	24 AP 63	5	22 JY 63	20 MR 65	3

R = ratings. These estimate relative value, based on scarcity, and are necessarily somewhat subjective.

Strikes of Alexandria and Cairo in Types IV and VI are commonly poor; complete, firm strikes are worth a premium.

Handstamps: Viceroyal Post

On April 15th 1865 the handstamps for all offices were replaced: the office-name date-stamps were supplanted by circular date-stamps in three types (Fig. 8) which were later used to cancel stamps (Chapter XXVII). For registered letters, the "per consegne" handstamps were supplanted by ones reading "raccomandate". The circular date-stamps that have been recorded are listed in Table II; they consist of ten offices formerly of the Posta Europea, plus two newly opened ones, Costantinopoli and Smirne. An office at Gedda (Jiddah) was also opened in the same period, but no example of its use has been recorded before the issue of stamps. Several of the Posta Europea offices are not represented in Table II, but there is little doubt that they, too, were issued circular date-stamps in 1865 which remain to be discovered (all of these missing date-stamps are known cancelling stamps of the First Issue, however). Furthermore, the officially published book *Les Postes en Egypte* states that additional domestic offices were opened in 1865 to make a total of 28. In one case, there was a change of name; the Zifta office became "Zifta & Mitg." (Mit Gamr), a joint post office for the adjacent towns separated only by a branch of the Nile.

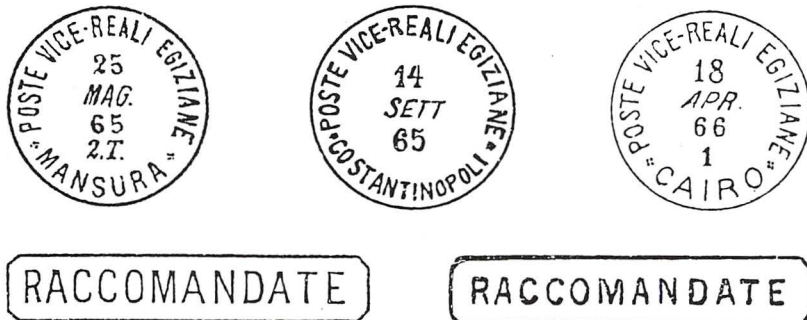


Fig. 8 Date-stamp types and registered handstamps of the Viceroyal Post.

TABLE 2 — DATE-STAMPS OF THE VICEROYAL POST
(earliest dates seen)

	Type I-2.5	Type I-1	Type I-2.1
Alessandria	18 AP 65		
Cairo	19 AP 65	8 OC 65	31 DE 65
Benha	26 AP 65		
Damiata	3 DE 65		
Mansura	22 AP 65	22 AP 65	
Michalla	6 NO 65		
Suez	19 AP 65		
Tanta	8 JN 65		
Zagasik	18 AP 65		
Zifta & Mitg.	31 JY 65		
Costantinopoli		17 AU 65	
Smirne		2 DE 65	

The date-stamps of the Viceroyal Post are approximately four or five times as scarce as the Posta Europea Type V handstamps of the corresponding offices. They were used as backstamps of arrival as well as handstamps of origin.

Postal Rates

The postal rates are not as clear as one would like. Most of our knowledge of them is derived from a printed notice dated 1860 that implies that the rates were the same in 1856, except for heavy letters, the charge for which was reduced. The rates are given for 'simple' and 'double' letters, which probably meant 1 dirhem (3.12 grams) and 2 dirahem (6.24 grams), since the charges for letters above 'double' are expressed in dirahem (a single sheet of the thin, blue paper generally used for folded letters weighed less than 1 dirhem, even with a wax sealing wafer). The charges varied according to distance; they are shown in the accompanying chart. There is a curious feature in the notice: for all destinations from Suez (and vice versa) and letters between Cairo and Alexandria, the charges are expressed as 'on posting only', whereas for all other routes, the expression is 'on posting and receiving'. The choice of wording appears to be quite deliberate and not random. The careful use of 'and' rather than 'or' implies that for most routes, half the total postage was to be collected in advance, and half on delivery. This interpretation is supported by the fact that the listed charges for letters to and from Suez are much higher than for the other routes.

The charges were customarily written (or rather, scrawled) in blue or red crayon. There is no evidence that there was any significance to the choice of color.

According to the notice, registration cost 2pi. above the normal postage. Newspapers were charged 5pa. when addressed to Cairo, otherwise 10pa. However, if a paper was not wrapped in a band it was to be treated as a letter and charged accordingly. 'Samples' (small articles of merchandise) could be sent for 5pi. and bulky parcels not containing any correspondence were given a discount of 20%.

A uniform rate of 1pi. per 7.5 grams was introduced at an uncertain date in 1865, according to *Les Postes en Egypte* (the weight unit became 10g when stamps were issued in 1866).

TARIFFS — 1 January, 1860

	Alexandria	Benha	Berket el Sab	Cairo	Damanhour	Damiata	Kafr Zajat	Mansura	Mehalla	Samanud	Suez	Tanta	Zagasik	Zifta
Alexandria	—	1	1	1*	1	2	1	2	1,20	1,20	3*	1	1,20	1,20
Benha	1	—	0,20	1	1	2	1	2	1,20	1,20	2*	1	1,20	1,20
Berket el Sab	1	0,20	—	1	0,20	2	0,20	2	1,20	1,20	3*	0,20	1,20	1,20
Cairo	1*	1	1	—	1	2	1	2	1,20	1,20	2*	1	1,20	1,20
Damanhour	1	0,20	0,20	1	—	1,20	0,20	1,20	1	1	3*	0,20	1,20	1
Damiata	2	2	2	2	1,20	—	1,20	1	1	1	4*	1,20	2	1,20
Kafr Zajat	1	0,20	0,20	1	0,20	1,20	—	1,20	1	1	3*	0,20	1,20	1
Mansura	2	2	2	2	1,20	1	1,20	—	1	0,30	4*	1,20	1,20	1,20
Mehalla	1,20	1,20	1,20	1,20	1	1	1	1	—	0,20	4*	1	1,20	1
Samanud	1,20	1,20	1,20	1,20	1	1	1	0,30	0,20	—	4*	1	1,20	1
Suez	3*	3*	3*	2*	3*	4*	3*	4*	4*	4*	—	3*	4*	4*
Tanta	1	0,20	0,20	1	0,20	1,20	0,20	1,20	1	1	3*	—	1,20	1
Zagasik	1,20	0,30	1,20	1,20	1,20	2	1,20	1,20	1,20	1,20	4*	1,20	—	1,20
Zifta	1,20	1,20	1,20	1,20	1	1,20	1	1,20	1	1	4*	1	1,20	—

* "On posting only"; amounts without asterisk are "on posting and receiving" (for Mehalla–Zagasik, neither phrase is present, presumably by oversight).

Single letters	Double letters	Excess/ dirhem	Single letters	Double letters	Excess/ dirhem
0,20	0,30	0,10	2,0	3,0	0,30
0,30	0,50	0,10	3,0	4,20	1,05
1,0	1,20	0,15	4,0	7,0	1,20
1,20	2,20	0,25			

The charges are expressed in 'piasters, paras' (40 paras = 1 piaster).

Essays and Interpostal Seals

Preparatory to the proposal to simplify accounting and serving the public by issuing postage stamps, an essay in four denominations was produced, apparently in 1864: 10pa. *brown*, 20pa. *grey*, 30pa. *blue*, and 1pi. *pale rose* (in each case lithographed in black, imperforate). It is curious that they included the name of an office, Mansura (Fig. 9). Two sets are known (one was in the Palace Collections, the other in the Byam collection). Boulad has stated that a block of 20 of the 30pa. exists; if so, the project must have advanced to the plate-proof stage.

Interpostal seals (general-purpose closure seals, Chapter XXXIV) are known for 14 offices. Each is inscribed AMMINISTRAZIONE DELLA POSTA EUROPEA IN EGITTO inside a double circle containing the central inscription "UFFIZZIO / di / (office name)" (Fig. 7). ("UFFIZZIO" is incorrect Italian.) Each is lithographed in black, on paper different in color for each office, and die-cut into a disk. They are very scarce as a class, but certain of them are rare. Poor condition is usual. None is known postmarked, but one example has



Fig. 9 Essays for adhesive stamps.

been reported⁷ bearing a handstamped “Franca”. No example has been reported on cover or document, and it seems doubtful that they were put in use. However, by their nature they would not have required postmarking, and the absence of postmarked copies is not of itself evidence against their use.

Alessandria, *buff*
 Benha, *dark green*
 Birket-el-Sab, *bright rose*
 Cairo, *brown*
 Damiata, *rose*

Galiut [*sic*], *carmine*
 Kafer-Zajat, *dark brown*
 Mansura, *green*
 Michalla, *deep yellow*
 Samanud, *green*

Suez, *pale blue*
 Tauta [*sic*], *yellow*
 Zagazik, *orange-yellow*
 Zifta, *light blue*

(Atfe and Damanhour have also been reported to exist, but the colors are not known.)

Mixed Frankings

Cooperation of the Posta Europea with the several foreign post offices led to the use of its franking handstamps on letters originating in or destined for interior Egypt (Fig. 10). The rates charged by the Posta Europea were not marked on any such letters that I have seen, and it is not clear how they were paid. I have seen letters carried by the British, French, Greek, Austrian, and Italian postal services; Boulad has reported the existence of mixed franking through the Russian post office. All are rare, the French being the least so. Mixed franking extended into the Second Transition period when the date-stamps of the Government Post were in use; examples are markedly rarer than those having Posta Europea franks. Cooperative handling occurred even before stamps were supplied to the foreign offices and I have seen stampless letters involving the Posta Europea and the French or British offices. Although these are rare, they do not seem to be as popular as those bearing stamps.

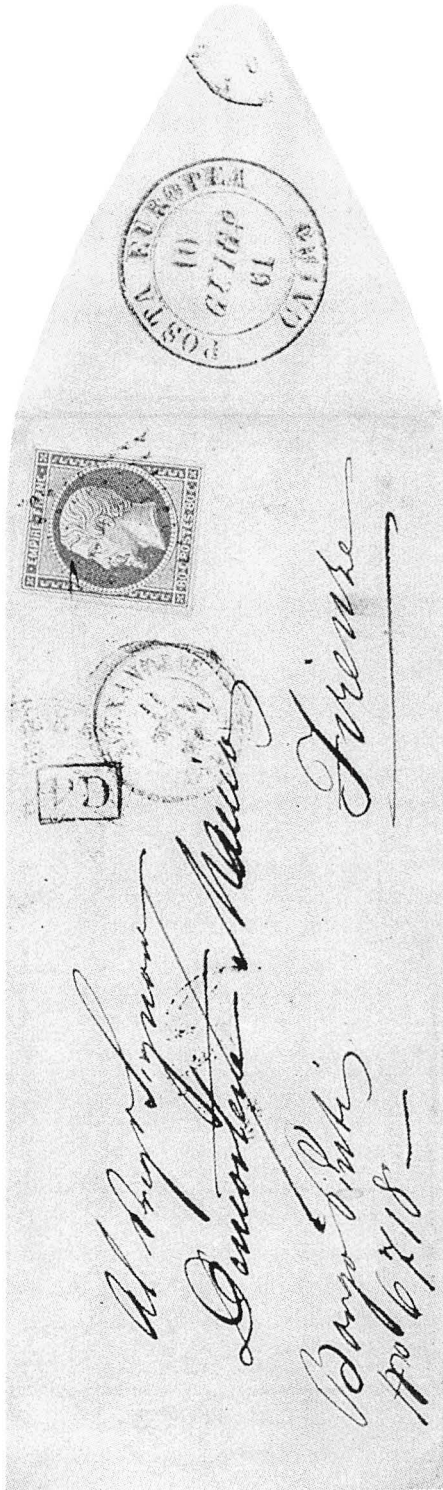


Fig. 10 An example of mixed franking of the Posta Europea with France.

Forgeries

The only known forgeries came on the market as a bulk lot, about 1990. All are of Type I for Cairo, and addressed to Sonnino, Alexandria. The covers and letters appear to be quite genuine, contemporary letters, presumably carried by private messenger, but the Type I strikes are from a badly damaged (corroded?) device, which appears to be the original one that has undergone severe deterioration from age (Fig. 11). The lettering is incomplete, and the ovals, especially the part above (DEL)LLA POS(TA), show breaks or crude attempts at repair. The forgeries are struck in dark blue, even when the letters are dated when black was normally used. (Covers addressed to Sonnino, a known firm of that time, should not be considered forgeries automatically; there exists much legitimate correspondence to that firm, including genuine use of the Posta Europea.)



Fig. 11 A forged Type I Cairo handstamp, and a good strike of the genuine for comparison.

References

Special Acknowledgment

Mr L.D. Biolato most kindly provided advance information from his recent book, and thereby made it possible for this chapter to be written more accurately than would otherwise have been possible.

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- b. L.D. Biolato, *La "Posta Europea" nel Contesto della Storia Postale dell'Egitto nel Sec. XIX (1820–1865)*, Libreria Giovanni Carnevali, Foligno, 1996.
2. G. Valle, *L'OP* No. 113, 295–316 (Apr./July 1964).
3. E.F. Hurt, *AP* 70 (5), 339–40 (Feb. 1957).
4. G. Colucci, *L'OP* No. 62, 345–9 (Apr. 1948).
5. Ministry of Communications of Egypt, *Les Postes en Egypte*, Cairo, 1934; published for the delegates to the Xth Congress of the Universal Postal Union.
6. Muslim dates are fairly easily converted to Christian dates by means of conversion tables, of which a considerable variety is available. Especially recommended is A. Birken, *Handbook of Turkish Philately: The Calendar*, produced for the Arbeitsgemeinschaft Osmanisches Reich / Türkei by James Bendon Ltd., 1995.
7. E.A. Kehr and P. Cockrill, *Egypt. The Posta Europea and 1984 Kehr Catalogue of Interpostals*, Philip Cockrill, Newbury, Berks., 1984.