XLIV
Sinai

Introduction

Although the Sinai Peninsula is an integral part of Egypt, it has special features that justify giving it individual attention. The boundaries are a line north from the tip of the Gulf of Suez (essentially the route of the Suez Canal) on the west and a line from the tip of the Gulf of Aqaba northwestwards to where the Mediterranean coast turns north. The latter line, with minor variations, was traditionally the boundary with Ottoman territory and later with Palestine, and is today the border with Israel. The northern Sinai is the historical invasion route, in either direction. Consequently, the Sinai is the part of Egypt that has most often suffered foreign occupation.

Qantara

The first post office in the Sinai, Qantara (Cantara, Kantara) only barely qualifies for inclusion, since the town is located on the banks of the Suez Canal. It came into existence during the construction of the Canal and its first post office was opened by the Suez Canal Company[1] (Chapter XXXV). When the Company's postal service was taken over by the Egyptian Postal Administration, Cantara was issued a circular date-stamp of Type II-2 (Fig. 1); it is known with dates from September 1868 to July 21st 1869. Interpostal seals in Types IV and IVA (Jan. 1868 issue) exist. The date-stamp was then revised to Type II-4 by removing the word REGIE; in the revised form it is known with dates from August 28th to November 28th 1869. It was replaced by Type III-2.5 which has been recorded with
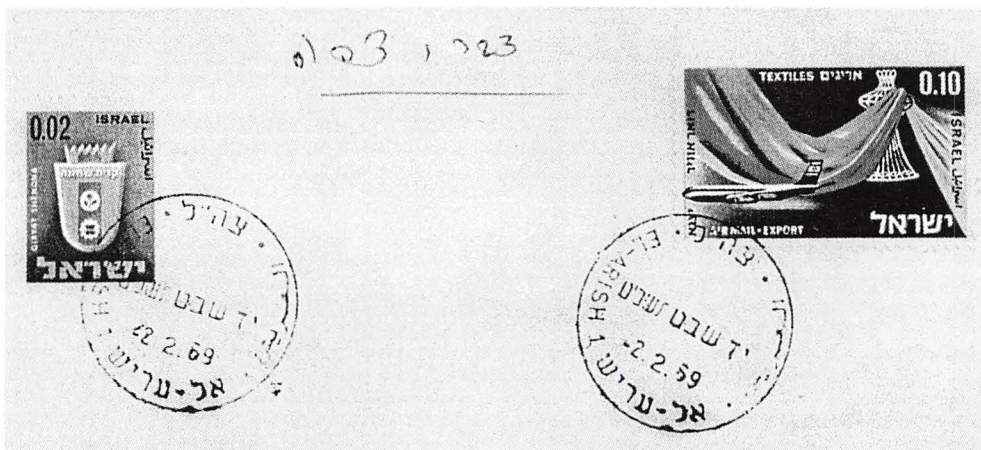

Fig. 1 Postmarks of Cantara in the classic period.

dates from December 9th 1869 to January 22nd 1871. These three date-stamps are rare and I know of none on cover. Thereafter the office must have been closed for a period, for no interpostal seal is known for it until Type VIIIA (1882 issue) and no example of its postmark has been recorded earlier than 1888, when a new type of date-stamp made its appearance. The spelling became KANTARA and seven vertical bars formed an arc above the date band. A date-stamp (Type X), also inscribed KANTARA, with five short vertical bars inside an arc above the date band followed (Fig. 2); it is known used from October 27th 1891 and lasted into the first years of the twentieth century. At a date no later than March 1905 the spelling was changed to Qantara, which is a more accurate transliteration of the Arabic spelling. Several date-stamps used this spelling. The office on the east bank of the Suez Canal had a date-stamp inscribed QANTARA SHARQ in the 1960s.

Fig. 2 Later postmarks (Kantara, Qantara).

As a consequence of the Six-Day War of June 1967 Israel captured all of the Sinai and eventually opened a civil post office in Qantara, using the standard trilingual Israeli type

El Arish

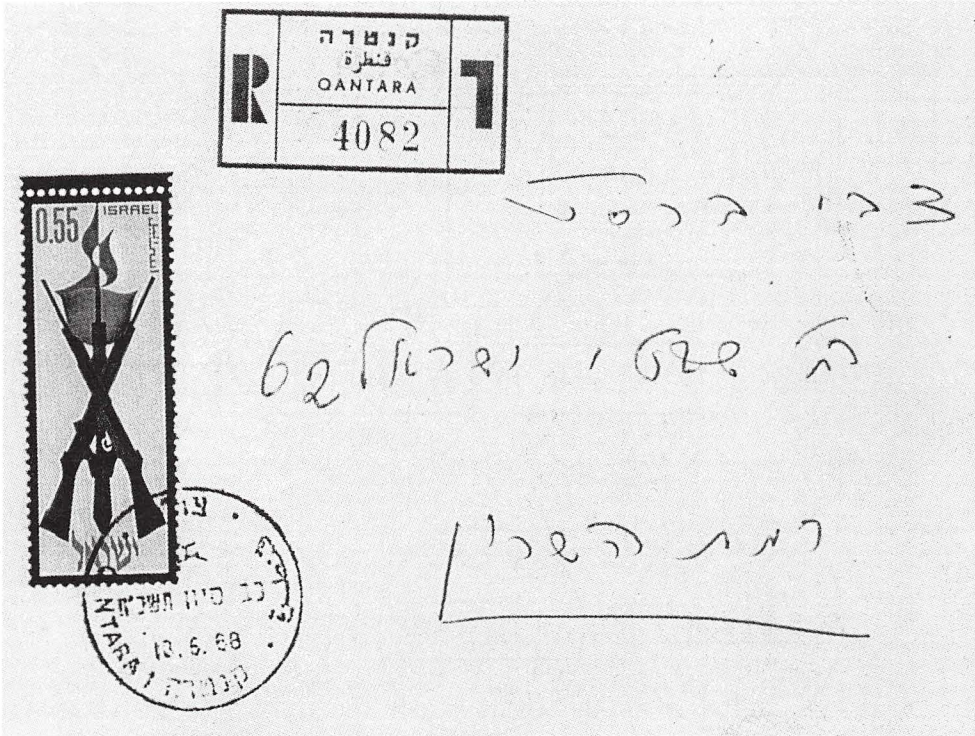Fig. 3 Israeli date-stamps for El Arish and Qantara.

Fig. 3 contd. – Qantara

of date-stamp (Fig. 3). The town remained under Israeli administration until Egypt stormed the Bar–Lev Line in 1973.

El-Arish[2]

A post office was opened at El-Arish[3], on the Mediterranean coast, at least as early as 1886 and probably in 1884. An interpostal seal in Type IX (issued 1884) exists for it. Its first date-stamp was in Type VIII, inscribed ARICHE (Fig. 5). About 1890 it was replaced by Type X with 7 bars within an arc above the date band (earliest date reported 15 X 92). The early twentieth century saw a change to English phonetics, ARISH. Date-stamps with this spelling have been seen in black in 1911 and in blue in 1913. Many years later the more accurate form EL ARISH was adopted and the Arabic version was placed at the top (several varieties known). An intaglio seal post-mark inscribed ARISH / al 'arish also exists.

In World War I Turkey invaded the Sinai and occupied El-Arish from November 1915 to November 1916. Turkish date-stamps[4] replaced the Egyptian ones and Turkish stamps were used (Fig. 4). Covers are known, but examples are rare.

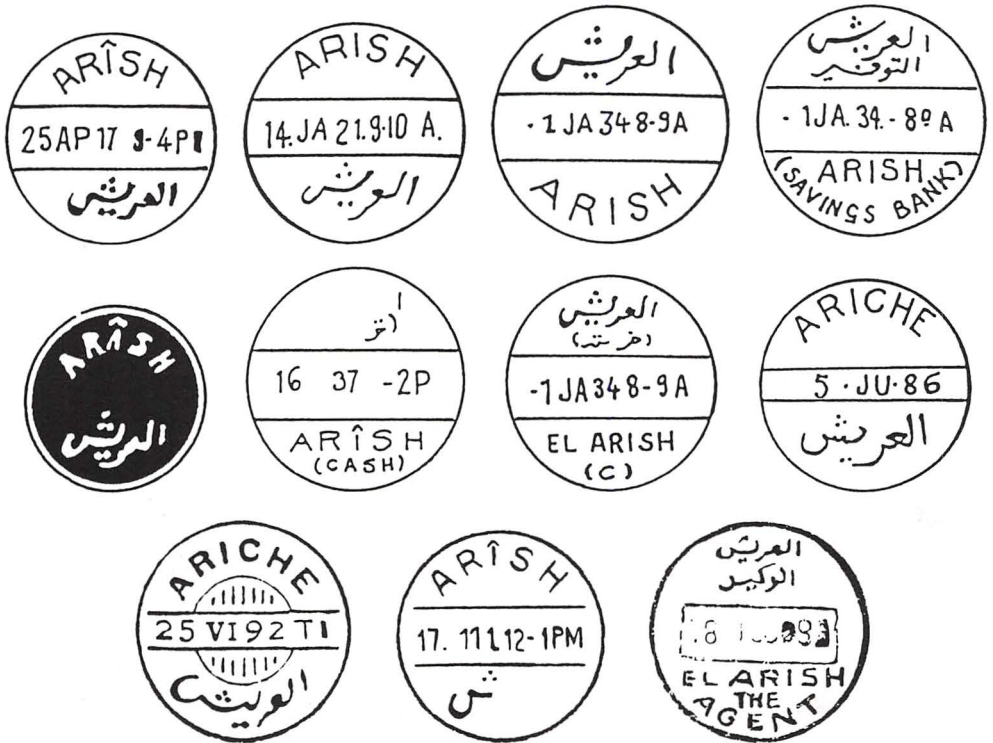**Fig. 4** Turkish stamps used in El-Arish.

Fig. 5 Postmarks of El-Arish.

For reasons unknown, the Turkish or German forces prepared a group of 20 date-stamps (inscribed in Arabic only) and corresponding intaglio seals for places in the Sinai where there was no permanent settlement and no apparent need for a post office[4]. The date-stamps are dated in Arabic "332" (AH1332, AD1913–14) and the intaglio seals have the fixed date "1334" (AD1915–16). These postmarks are mostly seen on cut-outs, but are known on stamps; the specimens are almost certainly bogus and did not fulfil a postal function. The Turkish military posts in Sinai in 1915–16 have been discussed in detail by Collins[5] and by Alexander[6].

El-Arish came under Israeli control in 1956 and was issued a circular date-stamp in the standard trilingual Israeli type for use until Egyptian control was restored in 1957. As with Qantara, the post office of El-Arish came once more under Israeli control after the Six-Day War and the standard trilingual Israeli date-stamp was assigned to it. El-Arish eventually came back to Egyptian control in 1979 as a result of the peace agreement following the storming of the Bar–Lev Line in 1973 and the subsequent phased withdrawal of Israeli occupation.

Tor

On the east coast of the Gulf of Suez, well south of the Suez Canal, a quarantine station was established to deal with disease-carrying pilgrims returning from the Hajj. It was named Tor and a post office was opened at least as early as 1893, but no interpostal seal

was ever prepared for it. It used a date-stamp of Type X, with seven bars within an arc above the date band (Fig. 6). A date-stamp in Type VII succeeded it (dates seen from 1900 to 1903). It had a narrow date band; a new date-stamp with a much wider date band followed it (dates seen 1909 to 1910). Confusion with the town of Tur, in the Beheira, and with Tud, the Arabic forms of which are very similar, became sufficiently acute that the name of Tor was amended to CAMPEMENT TOR; date-stamps with this name are recorded from 1905 to 1908. Another change converted it to GABAL EL TOR (Mount Tor) (seen from 1914 onwards). Eventually the format was revised so as to have the Arabic at the top. Later spellings recorded are GEREL EL TOR (an error) and GABAL EL TOR / CAMP. An intaglio seal postmark inscribed GEBEL EL TOR and Arabic also exists, as well as one inscribed GABAL EL TOR / (CAMP). Examples of any of these postmarks are scarce and covers are very scarce to rare[7].

Fig. 6 Postmarks of Tor.

Rafah

There was no post office at Rafah, the border crossing between Egypt and Palestine, until World War I when Turkey built a railway through there toward Qantara. After the Turkish forces were expelled in the Egyptian Expeditionary Force campaign under General Allenby, a new line in standard gauge was built roughly parallel to the Turkish one, which had been dismantled, and Rafah became a division point. It is generally considered to be in Palestine (or Israel), but the western part is Egyptian. Apart from the

traveling post office Kantara–Rafa (Chapter XXXVII) that used Palestinian stamps (and later, Egyptian ones), Egyptian stamps are known used with cancellations inscribed "Rafah El Balad", "Rafah T" (or P or C), and "Rafah Station" in the 1950s and 1960s (Fig. 7).
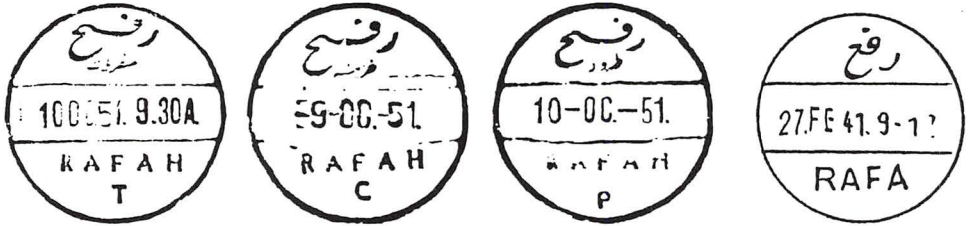

Fig. 7 Postmarks of Rafah.

St. Catherine Monastery

The monastery is an ancient and venerable establishment that attracts visitors not only in its own right, but also because of the adjacent mountain where Moses is said to have received the Ten Commandments. Nevertheless, it has never had an Egyptian post office. Mail from visitors, usually postcards, is taken to the most convenient regular post office, usually Suez but sometimes even Cairo, to be put into the mail stream[8]. Such mail can only be identified if the message or return address specifies origin from the monastery, unless a cachet of the monastery is applied (Fig. 8). It has been stated that such cachets
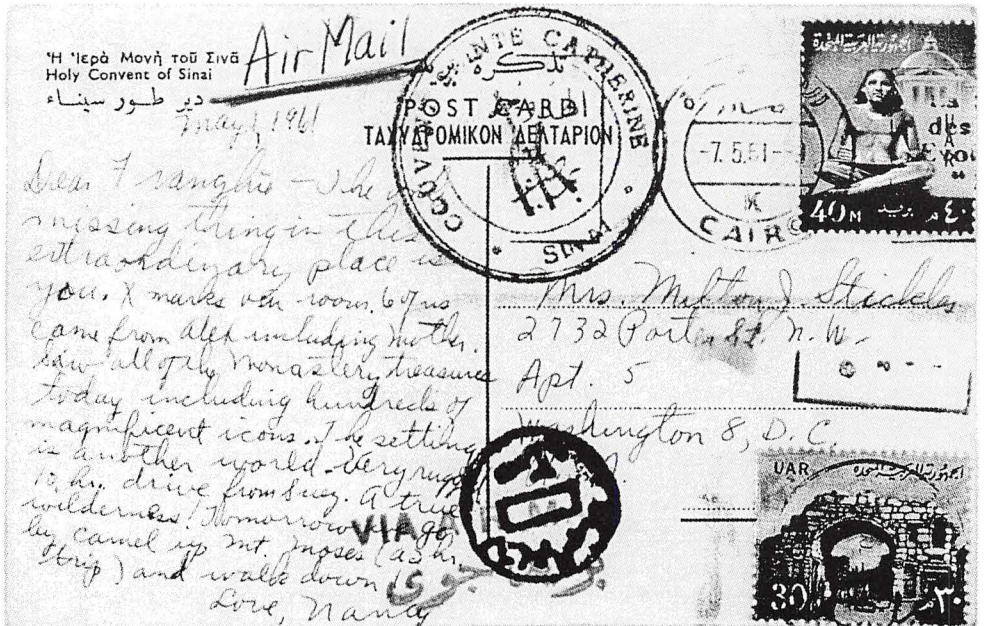

Fig. 8 A postcard from St. Catherine Monastery, cancelled at Cairo and bearing the monastery cachet.

were sometimes used to cancel Egyptian stamps (or Israeli stamps during the Israeli occupation), but I have not seen an example of such use. A large circular date-stamp inscribed ST. KATHARINA / SINAI and the equivalent in Arabic and Hebrew exists with dates during the Israeli occupation.

Other Offices

A post office at Abu Zanima (also Abu Zaneima, Abo Zenema)[9] on the east coast of the Gulf of Suez was opened at least as early as 1932 and probably continues in operation. A date-stamp for Om Bogma is known; it is inscribed UM BOGMA (Fig. 9). The 1932 Egyptian Postal Guide lists several offices of the lowest categories (class 7 and 8), described as "railway stations served by traveling post office Qantara–Rafa", admitted only to ordinary correspondence (class 8) or ordinary and registered correspondence plus arriving parcels (class 7): Abu el Tibul, Gabir Amer, Gilban, Maadan, Mazar, Mosseifiq. I have not seen a postmark of any of them and they may have had none. The 1968 UPU List of Post Offices of the World does not mention them (but the railway had been destroyed by that time). At a later date a post office was opened at the oil-field town of Abu Rudeis.
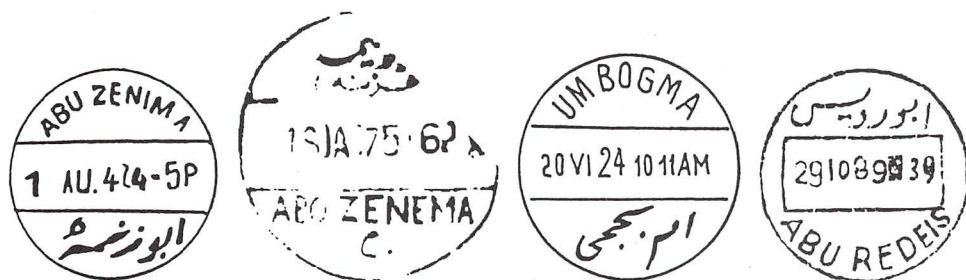

Fig. 9 Postmarks of Abu Zenima, Um Bogma, and Abu Rudeis.

Following the peace accord between Egypt and Israel, tourist resorts were established on the Sinai coast, notably at Dahab, Nuweiba, Ras Sudr, Sharm el Sheikh and Taba. There must be postal facilities at these places, but I have not seen a postmark from any. Following the Six-Day War a Jewish settlement was established west of Rafah, with the name Yarmit; it presumably had a post office. The settlement was demolished before the area was handed back to Egypt, possibly in 1979.

The military importance of the Sinai led to the opening of military camps having post offices, possibly open to civilians as well. Moascer el Arish is an example.

During World War I Turkey built a railway from near Beersheba into the Sinai, reaching Hafir (El-Auja) near the border, and Qusseima well into the Egyptian side[10]. Postmarks of the Turkish post office at Hafir are known (very rare) as well as Qusseima (Arabic only القصيمه; four covers reported).

The traveling post offices Haifa–Kantara and Kantara–Rafa is shown in Figure 10.

Fig. 10
Cancellations used by the
Palestinian and Egyptian TPOs
across northern Sinai.

References

Special Acknowledgement

I am indebted to Edmund Hall for most of the drawings of postmarks shown here.

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