

Egypt: Sphinx and Pyramids Issues, 1879-1906

By **W. Byam** and **J.R. Danson**

The perfection of De La Rue's work is probably responsible for the little interest hitherto taken by philatelists in these stamps; a closer study however will be well rewarded. The design was obviously evolved by stages from the essays prepared by Penasson for the stamps of the Second Issue (1867), modified by Skipper and East and used by the Government Printing Works at Boulac when stamp printing was attempted there for the Third Issue (1872-1874/75) (Fig. 1). It continued in use by De La Rue, substantially unchanged, for thirty-five years, at the end of which time it was replaced by the pictorial designs of 1914. To show how it was modified during its long life is the purpose of this paper. We also explain the use of the vignette dies prepared by De La Rue.

Of the original artists' sketches five are known to us—those for the 20 paras and 2 piastres (Martin A. C. Smith collection), both dated 7 AUG 78, are obviously designs which were rejected (Figs. 1(a) and 1(b), Plate II); those for the 1 piastre (Danson collection), 2 piastres (Byam collection) and 5 piastres (Royal collection at Abdin Palace, Cairo). All are drawn to the exact size of the proposed stamps, the last three in colours approaching those used by the printers for the finished product (Figs. 2 and 3). The sketch for the 5 PT., dated 7 AUG 78, is pictured on page 36 of The Illustrated Philatelic Record; No. 3, for July 1939; by E. F. Hurt.

Instructions to engraver on the back of the 1 PT. (dated 7 AUG. 78) read—

“copy the large diagrams for the Arabic inscriptions and the Arabic numbers, as the inscriptions on this design are not correctly drawn. The bottom tablet is to contain the words ‘Postes Egyptiennes’ in Arabic; the right hand tablet the value in Arabic. 19 SEP. 78.”

On reverse of the 2 PT. (dated 17 SEP. 78)—

“copy the large diagrams for the Arabic inscriptions and the Arabic numbers, as the inscriptions on this design are not correctly drawn. The bottom tablet is to contain the words ‘Postes Egyptiennes’ in Arabic; the right hand tablet the value in Arabic. 19 SEP 78.”

On the back of the 5 PT. (dated 7 AUG 78) is written—

“copy the large diagrams for the Arabic inscriptions and the Arabic numbers, as the inscriptions on this design are not correctly drawn. The bottom label is to contain the words ‘Postes Egyptiennes’ in Arabic; the right hand tablet the value in Arabic. Take care to make it clear that the Arabic ‘5’ is a circle and not a dot. 19 SEP 78.”

The earliest engraved die proof of a vignette (Fig. 4) is dated 13 AUG 78 (Danson collection). It appears to have been rejected, which is not surprising as in it the Sphinx bears a striking resemblance to a Cairo dragoman.

The second engraved die proof for the vignette (Fig. 5) is dated 1 OCT 78 (Danson collection) and is of special interest because it differs in many particulars from all the completed die proofs and from the issued stamps. The most noticeable characteristic is the right shoulder of the Sphinx, on which the lines of shading are curved and run downwards—whereas on all the finished die proofs and on all the stamps the lines of shading are horizontal. The details of the desert foreground are distinctive and are not seen repeated elsewhere, on die proofs or stamps, except on the vignette proof of a daughter die, dated 17 OCT 81 (Danson collection) (Fig. 6). The details of the design in 1881 are identical with those of 1878 and these vignette dies were therefore obviously being used for some purpose, yet they were not used to strike the dies for the stamps themselves. For what then were they used and why is no vignette die proof found which corresponds in detail with the completed die proofs and the issued stamps?

In an attempt to answer these questions we made a critical survey of the completed die proofs we possessed: 60 copies in the Danson collection; 15 in the Byam collection. These, with one exception, are printed in

black on glazed cards and mostly bear the dates when the impression was struck, with, in addition the legend either "Before Hardening," "After Hardening," "Before Striking" or "After Striking"-the exception is the 4 millimetres die proof of the issued stamp, in colour, dated in MS. 18 SEP 06 (Byam collection).

The designs for the 1, 2 and 5 PT. had the longest life and remained unchanged, retaining the inscription in French at the top of the stamp.

2 PT. (Fig. 7). There are no essential differences between the die proofs of 19 NOV 78 and 24 MAY 01: both have a white flaw in the N.W. corner from the top of the Arabic numeral. Both proofs have the eyes of the Sphinx drawn in the manner of the vignette proofs, with the eyeball mainly solid colour and similar to the eyes for all three of the PARA values. Also a considerable portion of the right shoulder of the Sphinx is portrayed within the oval. The line of the sky-shading above the pyramid is clear of the apex.

5 PT. (Fig. 8). There are no essential differences between the die proofs dated 19 NOV 78 and 18 AUG 04, though the lines of the sky are deeper and more uniform in 1904. The design differs from the 2 PT. in that the forehead band is denoted by a pronounced line, whereas this line on the 2 PT. is quite slight and suggests it is merely the uppermost line of shading on the forehead. The drawing of the desert foreground is entirely different on the two values and neither is like the foreground on the vignette die. The line of sky above the pyramid is continuous with the apex.

1 PT. (Fig. 9). The main difference between this and all the other duties is that the lettering is in colour, instead of in white. Die proofs of 27 NOV 78 and 19 SEP 05 show no essential differences, though there is a coloured flaw in the N.E. numeral 1 in the proof of 1878 which is absent in September 1888 and also in September 1905. The line defining the forehead band is intermediate in density between the pronounced line of the 5 PT. and the very light one of the 2 PT. The desert foreground is again drawn differently. The line of sky above the pyramid is continuous with the apex, as on the 5 PT. die.

It is certain that the three values so far discussed were not prepared by stamping a die from a common original vignette die and none shows the distinguishing features of the vignette dies known to us. For all three values new daughter dies appear to have been made from time to time, but all from the same original die specifically prepared for each stamp.

The three PARA values (5, 10 and 20 paras) share certain characteristics with the PIASTRE stamps: (a) the shading of the right cheek of the Sphinx is continued on the lobe of the ear; (b) a considerable amount of the right shoulder is seen within the vignette; and (c) the eyes are treated in the same manner on all six stamps. The desert foreground is different for each value.

On each of the PARA values the line of the sky is continuous with the apex of the pyramid, as on the 1 and 5 PT.

Of the PARA values the 5 paras has the most pronounced forehead band. The 20 paras has ten lines of sky above the pyramid: and 5 and 10 paras have nine lines only; the 1 and 5 PT. nine lines; the 2 PT. has ten.

From the nature of the work, it would seem one engraver produced the vignette dies for all six values up to 1888, when the currency was changed from paras to millimetres; but each die was a separate and distinct entity. The first values to be produced were, apparently, the 10 paras and 5 piastres, the earliest completed proofs for which were both dated 6 NOV 78. The last of this series is the 1 PT.-27 NOV 78-hence, possibly, the attempt with altered lettering in colour, necessitating a different technique in the production of the die.

July 22, 1887 (2 and 5 millimetres) (Fig. 10) is the earliest date on the die proofs of the millimetres series, which stamps began to appear on January 1, 1888. The three new millimetre values and the 10 PT. (Fig. 11), then introduced for the first time in this design, show in common:-

- (a) wide open eyes, the pupils represented by hook-like lines;
- (b) upward curving lines on the left cheek, giving the face a more chubby appearance;
- (c) no lines of shading prolonged from the cheek on to the right ear;
- (d) less of the shoulder of the Sphinx than seen on the previous series.

The desert foreground is different on all four values-1, 2 and 5 millimetres and the 10 piastres. On none is the forehead band sharply defined. The lines of shading on the margin of the head dress slope upwards sharply

compared with the original design. Lines of sky above the pyramid are nine on the millieme values and eight on the 10 PT. The die proofs of this series suggest the dies were separately engraved, but by one engraver and not the engraver who produced the first series in 1878.

No essential differences can be detected on the die proofs of various dates for any one value, ranging in the case of the 5 milliemes from July 22, 1887 to July 9, 1908, represented in our collections by nine impressions on different dates during that period of time. The desert outline on the 5 milliemes suggests a heaping up of sand against the pyramid not seen on the other values of this series.

On January 1, 1892, the local rate for a single letter (15 grammes) was reduced from 5 milliemes to 3 milliemes and a new stamp of this denomination was issued on that day. The die proof (Fig. 12), shows a combination of the characteristics of both the previous series.

- (d) the eyes of the Sphinx are drawn as for the stamps of the first series;
- (b) the lines on the left cheek are much like those of the first series;
- (c) the lines of shading on the right cheek stop short of the ear, as on the second series;
- (d) the amount of shoulder included in the vignette conforms to the second series;
- (e) the lines on the margin of the head dress are less sloping than on the other millieme values.

There can be no doubt the die for the vignette of the 3 milliemes was not stamped from the die of any previous denomination.

The 4 milliemes, as conceived in 1899 (die proof 18 APR 99-Fig. 13), was much like the 3 milliemes stamp. The die, however, was not produced directly from that of the latter, as can be seen at once by comparing the desert foreground on the die proofs of the two values. Considerably more white of the eyes is shown on the 4 milliemes. On September 18, 1906, appeared the first die proof we know in colour (Byam collection),* with the sky lines above the head of the Sphinx cut away (Fig. 14). The remaining lines above the pyramid, with the exception of the two topmost, were interrupted by a series of vertical cuts. Those to the right of the pyramid were separated from it throughout the length of that side. The outline of the headdress of the Sphinx was accentuated and coarsened. No essential difference can be detected between the 4 milliemes die proofs of 20th Sept 06, 26th March 08 and 9th June 09.

In the Byam collection are two composite artists' drawings which appear to provide the answers to the questions we have posed. That for the 10 FT. (Fig. 15) dated 27th July 88, consists of a vignette printed in dark violet, which is exactly similar to the vignette die proof of 1st Oct 78 (Fig. 5), with sloping lines on the shoulder of the Sphinx. The other for the 3 milliemes (Fig. 16) has the vignette printed from the die for the 5 milliemes and shows the characteristic heaping of the sand against the base of the pyramid and the desert foreground drawn in the same way. Each of these composite sketches consists of a vignette printed in the proposed colour of the stamp-to-be, surrounded by a water-colour artist's drawing of the frame design, including an indication of the perforated margin as it was expected to appear on the finished stamps.

From the above observations we are convinced that separate original or mother dies were cut for the entire design of each individual denomination and that no second original die was engraved for any value, though many different daughter dies were produced. It would also seem that the vignette dies, of which proofs are known, were never used to strike dies for individual stamps, but were employed to print the centre portion of the designs prepared for the guidance of the engravers, thus reducing the labour of the artist. In each instance the engraver employed his own conventions and did not slavishly copy the artist's composite sketch. Hence we can classify these De La Rue stamps into:-

- (a) First series; consisting of all the stamps issued before 1888, and the 1, 2 and 5 piastre values till their replacement in 1914, which show the darkened eyes and flat left cheek;
- (b) Second series; consisting of the 1, 2 and 3 milliemes together with the 10 PT., which show the wide open eyes and chubby cheeks;
- (c) 3 milliemes; combining the characteristics of (a) and (b);
- (d) 4 milliemes; akin to (c) but modified by entirely new treatment of the sky

The procedure described in this paper was nearly certainly employed by de la Rue when preparing stamps, at this period, for other countries. One of us (W.B.) suggested this to Mr. R. H. Sennett after viewing his magnificent display of Great Britain Essays and Proofs at the R.P.S.L. on May 19, 1949, when vignette dies

differing from the completed dies were shown. It would seem therefore that the study of these Egypt die proofs has thrown fresh light on the De La Rue technique.



FIG.1 Evolution of the design

- (a) Engraved essay by Penasson for the Second Issue (1867);
- (b) Lithographed essay by Penasson for the Second Issue
- (c) Engraved essay by Pensasson for the Second Issue
- (d) Lithographed essay by Penasson for the third Issue (1872), with inscription in the top label appropriate to the Second Issue.
- (e) Lithographed stamp issued in 1872
- (f) Electrotyped stamp by de la Rue issued in 1879



FIG.1 (a) Artist's sketch dated 7 AUG 78 (Martin Smith collection)
 FIG.1. (b) Artist's sketch in water colour dated 7 AUG 78 (Martin Smith collection)



FIG.2. Artist's sketch in water colour for 1 PT. dated 7 AUG 78. Instructions to engraver, on reverse, dated 19 SEP 78. (Danson collection.)

FIG 3. Artist's sketch in water colour for 2 PT. dated 17 SEP 78. Instructions to engraver, on reverse, dated 19 SEP 78. (Byam collection.)



FIG.4. Die proof of vignette from a rejected design, dated 13 AUG 78. (Danson collection)

FIG.5. Die proof of vignette dated 1 OCT 78. Note the direction of the lines on the shoulder. (Danson collection.)

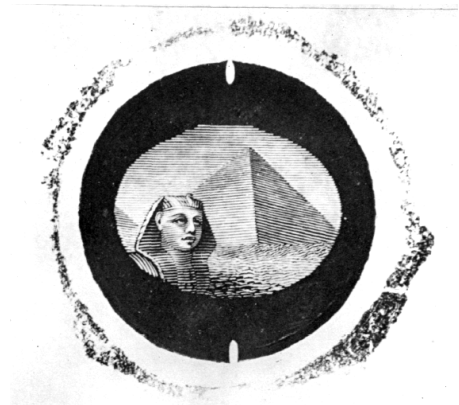


FIG.6. Die proof of vignette dated 17 OCT 78. The same in detail as the proof dated 1 OCT 78. (Fig.5). (Danson collection.)



FIG.7. Die proof for 2 PT. dated 19 NOV 78. No definite forehead band. (Danson collection.)



FIG.8. Die proof for 5 PT. dated 19 NOV 78. Pronounced forehead band. Compare with Fig.7 for drawing of desert foreground. (Danson collection.)



FIG.9. Die proof for 1 PT. dated 1 SEP 88, with lettering in colour-Vignette typical of Series I designs with dark eyes and considerable portion of shoulder included in the vignette.



FIG. 10. Die proof for 5 milliemmes, dated 22 JULY 87-Before Hardening. Vignette typical of Series II designs, with staring eyes, curved lines on left cheek and little of the shoulder showing.



Fig.11. Die proof for 10 PT. dated 23 OCT 88. Typical vignette of Series II. Note the even surface of the sand against the pyramid compared with the heaped up sand on the 5 milliemmes



FIG. 12. Die proof for 3 milliemes, dated 11 MAY 91. The treatment of the eyes resembles Series I designs but otherwise the vignette belongs to Series II.



FIG. 13. Die proof for 4 milliemes, dated 18 APR 99. vignette that of the 3 milliemes, but differing in detail. The original design prepared more than seven years before the stamp was issued.

FIG.14. Die proof for 4 milliemes, dated SEP 06. The modified design, with sky cleared around the pyramid



FIG.15. Composite Artist's Drawing for the 10 PT. The centre is printed in colour from the vignette die of 1978 and the surrounding framework is sketched in water colour. This design was not copied exactly by the engraver (compare with FIG.11). (Byam- collection.)



FIG.16 Composite Artist's Drawing for the 3 milliemes. The centre is printed in colour from the die used for the 5 milliemes and the surrounding framework has been completed in water colour by hand. This design was not followed slavishly by the engraver (compare with FIG.10 and 12). (Byam collection.)

