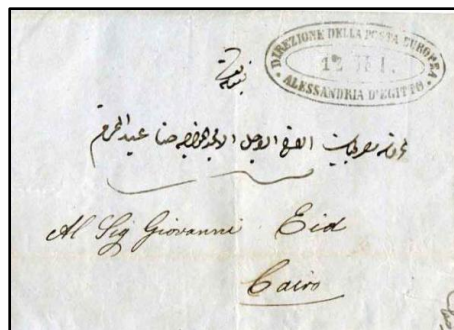




The Eye of Horus - Beginners' Corner 5 - with David Ogden. Our column giving newcomers to Egypt collecting a glimpse of its philatelic history looks at the dawn of the postal service, when an Italian businessman used trains to expand his forwarding service for merchants and diplomats



Posta Europea covers with their distinctive handstamps: Mansura to Alexandria, and Alexandria to Cairo



Posta Europea: Egypt's gateway to modern postal services in the 19th century

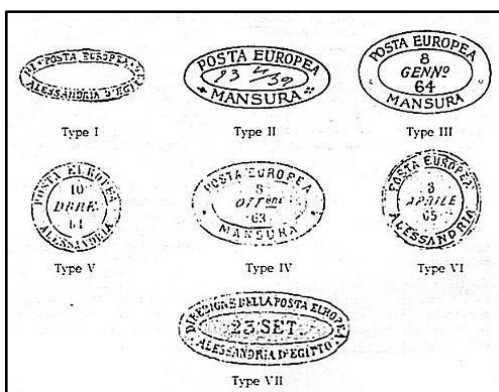
You may have wondered why early Egyptian stamps and cancellations feature Italian words? Let's go back to the early 19th century, when the country was undergoing a rapid transformation under the rule of Muhammad Ali Pasha (1769-1849, *right*), who modernised its infrastructure and administration. Among his many reforms was development of a postal system that would evolve into the Posta Europea, a landmark institution in Egypt's communication history.



Roots of the Posta Europea trace back to 1821, when Carlo Meratti, an Italian entrepreneur, established a rudimentary mail forwarding service in Alexandria. Initially serving European merchants and diplomats, his operation developed in scope and efficiency throughout the Nile Delta and eventually outside Egypt's borders.

By 1842 the service was formally named Posta Europea, reflecting its role in bridging Egypt with Europe. When Meratti died the following year his nephew, Tito Chini, took over running the service. Chini was joined by fellow Italians Giacomo Muzzi in 1848 and Vittorio Chioffi in 1862. The business was so successful that it gradually connected to all the major towns of Lower (northern) Egypt.

Competition with the government post was so successful that Posta Europea was granted a ten-year postal monopoly from 1862, and, in the period before stamps, began issuing its own distinctive oval and circular handstamps.



Handstamps are recorded from 1844

Most Posta Europea letters were written and addressed in Arabic. To assist the mainly Italian clerical staff, a part-transliteration of the name of the receiving office was often written in crayon on the front; for Alessandria, it might be "Alessa" or even simply "A".

Shortly after Chini's death in 1864, Muzzi and Chioffi proposed a uniform postage rate for any destination in Egypt, intended to be pre-paid by the issuing of postage stamps. The Viceroy, Ismail Pasha, was so taken by the idea that he bought back the postal monopoly, and ownership passed to the State Administration on

2 January 1865. Posta Europea ceased to exist and Muzzi was appointed the first postmaster general of the Viceroyal Post (Poste Vice-reali Egiziane).

Collectors today regard covers with the distinctive Posta Europea town handstamps as valuable items. They reflect a unique period when Egypt was navigating modernisation, and foreign expertise played a pivotal role in shaping its institutions.