

Bottle Post

Edmund Hall (ESC 238)

In the live auction of February 2014 there was an interesting and unusual cover with a cachet Posted by Bottle / In Straits of Messina / SS El Malek Fouad./ Khedivial Mail Line S.A.E (Fig. 1). Now I knew of these “posted by bottle” covers: the late Dennis Clarke had a couple, which I assume were sold in the auction of his material.



Fig.1

At the September 2010 meeting a member raised the issue, having seen such a cover on an internet auction site with the description "never seen before, never to be seen again...". As our meeting report goes on to say, "Needless to say, it did not sell at a starting price of \$350". The report does however add a picture of a second bottle post cover, supplied by our member Cyril Defriez (ESC 172) with a different marking of the SS El Malek Fuad, together with an SS Nefertiti handstamp.

Also on our website, under Queries, Q18 of June 19, 2006 (from a non-member), is a cover with a cachet "Straits of Messina Bottle Post SS El Malek Fuad" dated 1951. The cachet is similar to the one on Cyril's example. The non-member asked for any information about his cover, saying he had found nothing in British or US philatelic journals, including the *Seaposter* (magazine of the TPO & Seapost Society) and the Italy and Colonies Study Circle. He hoped an ESC member may be able to help: it seems he has had no reply.



Fig.2

Fig.3.

I can find little in my library of philatelic cuttings garnered over the last 35 years, or on the internet, for which the main references are our own website!

From my clippings I have one article, from the *Philatelic Magazine* of October 1955, by Tom Morgan in a potpourri of philatelic tidbits in which he gives a few paragraphs about the bottle post. In full it reads:

I've had a letter by bottle post; by the "El Malek Fouad" Bottle Post, to be exact. Never heard of it? Neither had I until this unusual item came along the other day from Mr Basil Benwell Rees (Alexandria).

Mr. Rees was on his way out to Egypt on the *s.s. El Malek Fouad* and took part in an interesting mail posting ceremony.

When the ship was sighted approaching the Straits of Messina several small boats put off from the mainland. Meanwhile, on board the ship, letters were written and placed in a bottle along with some cigarettes and a few lira.

The ship slowed down and the bottles thrown overboard, whereupon they were picked up by the small boats which took the letters ashore and posted them while the boatmen presumably took themselves off to the nearest café to smoke the cigarettes and spend the cash.

The postmark on the envelope is Catona in Italy and the cachet was apparently applied on board the ship. Outer inscription on the cachet is: *s.s. El Malek Fouad, Khedive Mail S.A.E. Line*, and the inner words around the outline of the bottle are: *Posted in Bottle in Straits of Messina*.

Now the cover in our auction is addressed to Mr Rees, so is the cover in the auction the cover from the article, received by Mr Rees and passed on to Tom Morgan? Or did Mr Rees send another as well?

The illustration from the article (*Fig. 4*) has a small blob near the bottom left corner not seen on the auction cover. However this may merely have been added during the printing of the article.



Fig. 4. Postcard of the SS El Malek Fouad circa 1950.



A blog on the internet tells of how the writer and his wife sailed through the Straits of Messina by freighter and quotes their daily journal for April 30, 2001:

Curt & Margie [I assume travelling companions] told us of a longstanding tradition with the fishermen of the Straits of Messina, that any bottle message recovered in their nets would be returned to the sender, if the bottle contained a few cigarettes and Lira to cover the cost of postage for the message to be returned.

Curt with 6 others had done this previously (25 years previously), and 6 out of 7 messages had been returned. Curt & Margie were the unlucky ones, and were determined to try again on this voyage. Curt, Bridget & ourselves, prepared our bottles. We passed through the Straits of Messina at around midnight on the 30th. April 2001 and Curt & I launched the bottles from Deck 11 of the *Grande Europa*.

On our return to England, our message, bearing a 5th. May 2004 Messina postmark, was waiting for us! Bridget got hers back too! At the time of writing, Curt & Margie are still waiting.

An interesting website is devoted to *A place for "out of ordinary" stamps and covers!!*. It has a cover, clearly philatelic in nature with Danish stamps, but poorly illustrated so not used here, of "Bottle Mail at Strait of Messina": the bottle with this cover was dropped from by the *MS Christian Maersk*, of the Danish Maersk Line and dated 1967.



The website also shows two more bottle mail covers, one from the Hapag Lloyd line dropped off the Azores, Portugal, in 1976 and another a "postbuoy" cover with a cachet and postmark of a postbuoy that was placed in the Kiel Bight in June 1984 on the occasion of the 19th World Postal Congress in Hamburg.

Query 118 from John Davis (ESC 213) - CAIRE / T. IMPRIMES / (2)

While mounting two REFUSÉ covers from mid-1958 I noticed that on the reverse of one cover the 20 millièmes postage due stamp issued that year was cancelled with a date-stamp I have not come across before. The top of the circle is in Arabic - presumably it reads much the same as the French in the bottom sector, that is, CAIRE / T. IMPRIMES / (2).

The back of the cover includes in blue a Cairo roller cancel advertising a fair in Damascus reading "Visit Damascus International Fair 1-30 September 1958". My thanks to Ted Fraser-Smith (ESC 238) for the translation. A blurred boxed REFUSED - ARABIC - REFUSE completes the markings.

I have attempted to draw the date-stamp and have one or two questions:

1. Has anyone seen this before?
2. Is there a number (1)?
3. What does it actually mean?
4. Does the T. refer to tax, as in postage due?



As to the meaning, I have referred to my French dictionary for "Imprimés", where it suggests "Book post" when in the plural. As a singular, as often seen written on postcards, it seems to refer to printed paper for which a special rate was available in the early part of the twentieth century.

Editor's reply:

I was under the impression that this is a "fairly common" date stamp. However, as I collect anything to do with the Egyptian military, I have noticed that it is often found on the back of mail sent by military personnel endorsed *barid el harby* (military post). The sender seems to have hoped that this endorsement would grant free postage to family or friends; for this concession, however, *barid el harby* mail had to be posted in a military mailbox rather than a civilian one. The 10 millièmes postage due, double the normal letter rate for the time, is always stuck to the reverse. As far as I know, only numbers (1) (*see my illustration*) and (2) have been recorded.



The Arabic reads *safra el qahira* (traffic post of Cairo); then *matbu aat* مطبوعات (printed matter). The T stands for traffic rather than tax and a part strike of this date stamp is recorded in the Blomfield sheets under the heading Traffic. These are therefore transit date stamps. My suspicion is that they record the point where the civilian post took over from the military post.

Now what is really intriguing is the use of the word "imprimés" which also means printed matter and is often found on Egyptian mail either hand endorsed or by a hand stamp. To my knowledge this is the only date stamp specifically designated for this purpose.