

## What were the Interpostal Seals?

Omar Wassef (ESC 632)

Between 1864 and 1890, the philatelic community was hit with an influx of colourful circular adhesives produced by the Egyptian postal administration. With more than 800 printings, some on papers of various colors, the total exceeded one thousand and philatelists actively sought these circular wafers worldwide. The early stamp journals referred to them first as tickets, labels, or Egyptian Officials. But later, known to have been applied to mail sacks which are transferred between the various Egyptian post offices, philatelists called them 'Interpostal Seals', a name adopted by all philatelic circles until today, although the originator of the name is not known.

Interpostal Seals were created by the Posta Europea, the private Egyptian postal service founded in 1821 by the Italians Carlo Meratti and Tito Chini. The company held a monopoly on inland mail until its acquisition by the Egyptian Government in 1865. During the Posta Europea's short reign, 16 Interpostals are known to have been issued on different coloured papers, bearing the names of those post offices operating at the time. These are known as Type I, and none is recorded as having been used or postmarked by the Posta Europea offices. Later postal administrations continued printing more seals when new post offices were opened or when the language of the postal administration - initially Italian, then French and finally Arabic and English - changed. No official records exist of numbers printed or even why they were created in the first place.

Their postal use or function has been unclear ever since their inception and they represent one of the most controversial chapters in early Egyptian philately. Many collectors have seen them as official stamps but today there is widespread agreement that the circular seals were not used to defray postage but to seal packets of bulk mail, re-seal damaged, opened, undeliverable or censored letters and to attach official circulars to post-office bulletin boards. Some sources believe that the official records were lost in a fire in 1894.

Within the philatelic world a struggle over their intended function has long existed between those



*The first Interpostals were issued by Posta Europea in 1864*

who consider them genuine postal stamps with real franking powers and those who consider them simply letter-sealing labels.

- One group assures us that they were actual postal stamps in the real meaning of the word.
- The other sees Interpostal Seals as simple official labels used for sealing postal administration covers in a more convenient way than wax seals as well as showing the cover's origin.

The fact is that no official postal authority document defining the use of the Interpostal Seals has survived to clarify the situation. Perhaps none was ever published!

Ever since their introduction in 1864 by Posta Europea their postal status has been closely debated by the authors of books and articles published in stamp catalogues and philatelic magazines. Many authors have presented theories on their function and provided credible explanation for their opinions. Let us look at the two schools of thought, which have historically waged bitter warfare against each other.

### **First theory: Official stamps with an actual postal value**

Supporters of this idea appeared as soon as the circular wafers appeared on the philatelic scene. A short article in the March 1867 edition of *The Stamp Collector* illustrated the Alessandria Type III Interpostal Seal, which was issued that same year, and described it as:

*The large circular stamp is official, and franks the letters, whatever may be their weight, of the postal authorities of the different towns.*

This same theory was advanced by Ludwig Merlander in *Der Philatelist* of February 1890. A German collector living in Alexandria, Merlander published an eight-page review of the seals "[Die Administrationsmarken Aegyptens](#)" (*The Egyptian Officials*), in which he claimed that they were official stamps in the full sense of the word. The earliest recorded philatelic exhibition of Interpostal Seals appeared in Vienna in 1890 when Merlander's review was distributed by G. Koch, another German collector, alongside a collection of seals.

Early philatelic catalogues of the 19th century included full listings of the Interpostal Seals, describing them as "Official Stamps". The 1891 and 1901 issues of Henry Collin and Henry Calman's [A Catalogue for Advanced Collectors of Postage Stamps](#) featured a full listing. Their description, on page 187 of the 1901 edition, reads: *These stamps are issued by the Egyptian government to the different post offices to frank all registered official correspondence between those offices.*

Early philatelic catalogues of the 19th century included full listings of the Interpostal Seals, describing them as "Official Stamps". The 1891 and 1901 issues of Henry Collin and Henry Calman's [A Catalogue for Advanced Collectors of Postage Stamps](#) featured a full listing. Their description, on page 187 of the 1901 edition, reads: *These stamps are issued by the Egyptian government to the different post offices to frank all registered official correspondence between those offices.*

*The fact that they were mostly used on the flap of the envelopes has led many people to believe that they were only seals, instead of stamps; the reason for this is to be found in the custom prevailing among the Orientals of placing the stamps on the back of the letter instead of on the face, as was also the case with the Turkish and the early Russian envelopes. That the Egyptian Government considered them as having*



*franking power instead of being merely seals is clearly established by the fact that the postal clerks were required to cancel them."*

Colin and Calman's 1901 assertion that the seals were used to "frank all registered official correspondence" is astonishing given that no official documents on their use was published by the postal administration.



*Between 1864 and 1890 more than 28 types were printed*

The most outrageous defence of this theory appeared in a somewhat sarcastic announcement in the October 1880 issue of *The Philatelic World* of a collector of Interpostal Seals being awarded a prize for presenting an article concluding that the Birket-El-Sab seal "is intended to pay postage on letters between two places called respectively, Birket and Sab!"

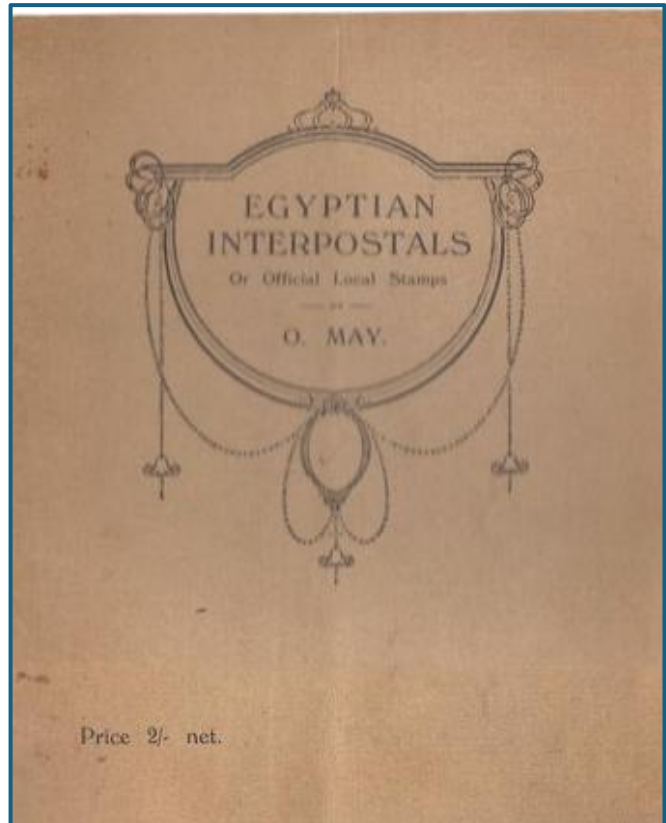
*The Philatelic Review* for August comes enlarged and printed in smaller type, thus giving much more matter. Several departments are opened on "Fiscals," "Post Cards," "Local Stamps," and "Envelopes and News Bands." The idea of keeping the stamps, envelopes and post cards separate is not bad, and is to "enable every reader to peruse the news relative the branch he reserves for his own study without finding sundry announcements entirely uninteresting to him intermixed." A prize is offered for the most complete list of Russian Locals, and Mr. Ash is awarded the prize for the best article on the "Egyptian Interpostal Stamps," he being the only competitor. A portion of his article is given, in which he comes to the remarkable conclusion that the stamp inscribed "Birket-el-Sab" is intended to pay postage on letters between two places called respectively, Birket and Sab!

In 1914 the first stand-alone catalogue of Interpostal Seals appeared on the philatelic stage, titled *Egyptian Interpostals, or Official Local Stamps*, written by O. May, who presented them as "Official Stamps" but hesitated to confirm their function. His introduction to the catalogue read:

*"A better name for these stamps would appear to be 'Egyptian Official Locals', but in the absence of any sworn testimony as to their place in philately, no doubt the old title will continue to serve. The stamps consist of circular official labels, issued between the years of 1864 and 1890, from many of the towns and villages of Egypt, and also from a few seaports in Turkey, Palestine, Somaliland, Greece and the Aegean Islands. The*

*majority are known with a town and dated postmark, the obliteration being almost invariably that of the town for which the particular emission was prepared. No face value appears on the stamps, so the question as to whether they are really official frank stamps or seals remains a question as before."*

We know little about O. May, except that he compiled his catalogue with assistance from other collectors and philatelists and that, according to Luca Biolato, author of the 1996 book on the Posta Europea, "O. May" may perhaps have been a pseudonym of the great philatelist Fred J. Melville. Credit must be given to him for being one of the earliest philatelists to sow doubt on the theory that Interpostal Seals were actual postal stamps which held sway among future philatelists until 1984, as we shall see later.



***O. May's catalogue of Interpostal Seals***

An ardent proponent of the theory of the seals being actual stamps was Ernst Kehr, an internationally renowned philatelist who was brought up and lived in Egypt and was one of the Circle's longest-standing and best respected members.

He devoted almost his whole career to this subject, published the *Kehr Catalog of Interpostal Seals* in the October 1939 *American Philatelist* and in a series of 1942 articles in the *Weekly Philatelic Gossip*, followed a year later by a 61-page booklet *The Interpostal Seals of Egypt 1864-1891*, republished in Volume 21 of *Billig's Philatelic Handbook* in 1954. Until his death in 1987, Kehr strongly believed that the seals were official stamps with franking power. He argued in his 1943 introduction that:

*"They were issued for real postal duty as may be confirmed by the actual inscriptions on the seals themselves (POSTE or POSTES), as well as the post-marks found on cancelled copies, which in all instances correspond with the obliterations used to deface contemporary postage stamps used for public service. That these round adhesives were used on the reverse side of the envelope is proven by the fact that distinctly showed the intersection of a flap."*

But Kehr had no data to substantiate this theory, so he added in the same paragraph:

*"It is unfortunate that no copies are known on complete cover, but under the circumstances the evidence available is sufficient. This point is one selected by cataloguers in refusing Interpostal seals admission to regular lists. They claim that their use on the REVERSE side of a cover classifies them as merely seals. Egyptian specialists, on the other hand, refute this ill-founded contention merely by referring to the custom of Oriental lands through which postage stamps invariably were, and in*

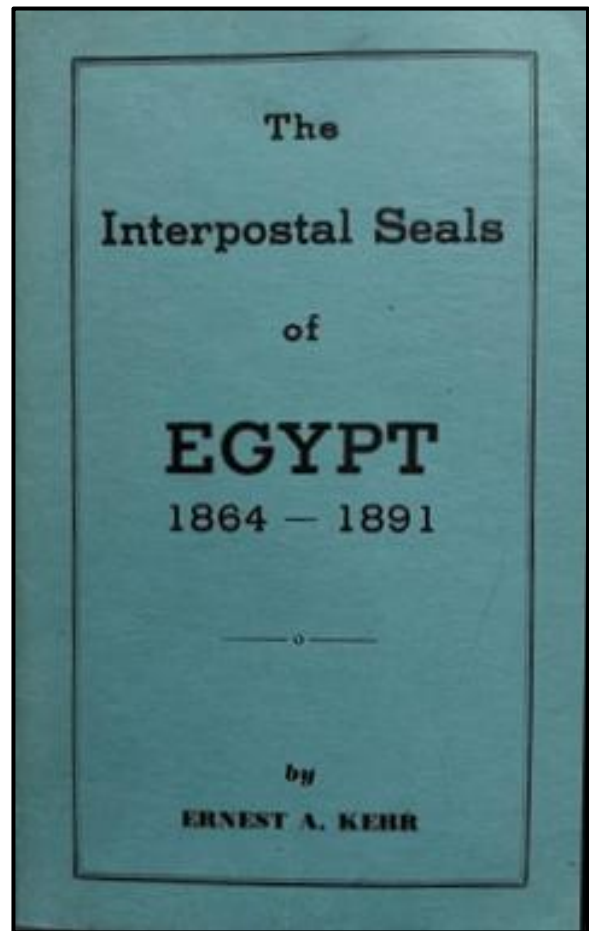
*some instances, across the flap of an envelope rather than in the corner of its face still are affixed."*

Kehr was aware that Egypt specialists such as those of the Egypt Study Circle and the Philatelic Society of Egypt disagreed with him so he provided some justification to support his theory:

*"The fact that these postal adhesives have no inscription of value should not disturb the collector. The official franks of many nations are generally without denomination indices. Even the first official of Egypt, recognized by the catalogs (The 'Meery stamp of 1892) which superseded the Interpostals, has no denomination. One such stamp was affixed to a piece of mail simply as a matter of formality, regardless of whether the piece weighed five grams or five kilograms."*

Kehr's publications on Interpostal Seals continued for 30 years, publishing the second edition of his catalogue in 1962 followed in 1984, in collaboration with Philip Cockrill, by a 59-page volume: *The Posta Europa and the 1984 Kehr Catalogue of Interpostals*, an expanded edition containing a section by Cockrill on re-plating the type II Alessandria seal. Through the wide dissemination of his published works, Kehr's cataloging and the numbering system he developed became the main reference for Interpostal Seal collectors and auction houses, to the present day.

Conflict between philatelists who see them as stamps and those who consider them labels raged even further after an article by Albert Harris, publisher of *Philatelic Magazine*, appeared in the issue of 16 July 1943 titled *The Status of The Egyptian Interpostals*. Harris described those who do not share his or Kehr's views as "absent from their popular catalogs!"

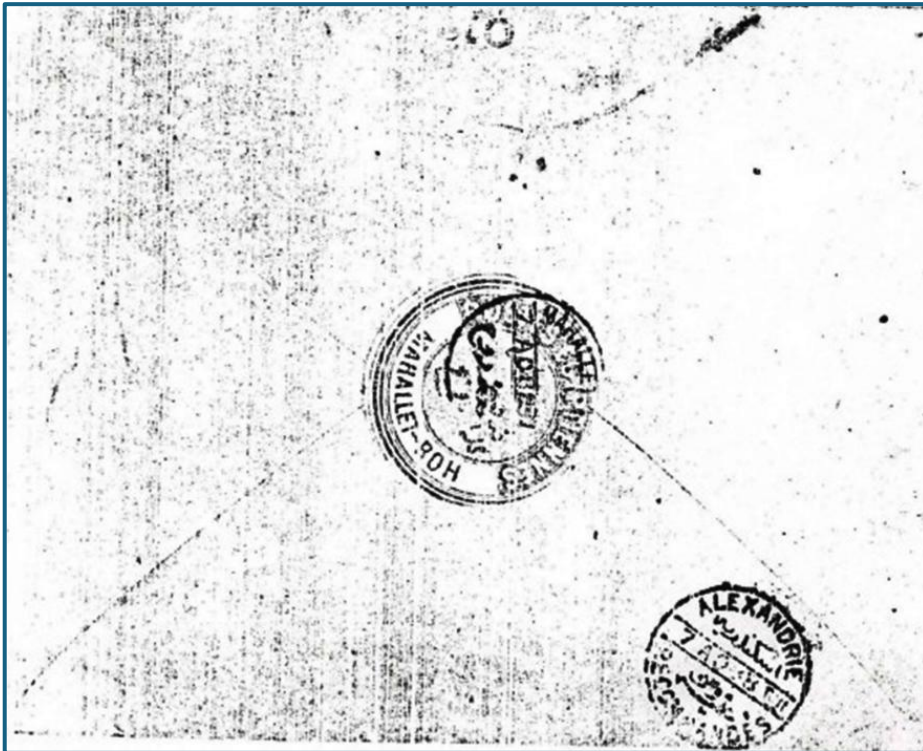


*"So far as I am aware, there has never been any controversy as to the status of Interpostals, which have always been accepted by those who have studied them and written about them, as having exempted letters bearing them from being taxed. But as those who do not come within that category are apt, owing to their absence from popular catalogues, to question their status — and even on occasion to assert, albeit without evidence, that they were merely labels used optionally to stick down Post Office letters - it seems desirable that somebody should marshal the scattered evidence as to how they came about, and the circumstances of their issue and use, before it gets lost sight of."*

In response to Harris's attack, the Egypt Study Circle published a letter of opinion sent to him in 1944 to ensure that his future philatelic publications described the seals accurately:

*“...the opinion of the 14 members of the Egypt Study Circle was that interpostal seals are not postage stamps and did not have the power to frank, they were intended to indicate the office of departure of mail sent from one office to another, and obliterated to specify the date of dispatch, that they were used to seal the mailings, to keep fixed the official communiqués posted in the offices or other customs not yet established, but that they were worth collecting by the specialists of Egypt.” (L’OP 92 p.205).*

But Harris, Cockrill and Kehr, the most influential philatelists of their time, continued publishing the same arguments. Formalities and decorum seemed to have taken a back seat when Peter Smith, president of the ESC president, criticised Kehr’s 1984 *Catalogue*:



***Cover bearing a postmarked Interpostal Seal. But the postmark does not indicate franking***

*“This edition appears to be an example of an enthusiast hastening to write about a subject he loves without doing his homework.” (QC 128, p.303).*

Within the Study Circle, the argument in favour of Interpostals having “franking powers” erupted again in 1985. A letter to the ESC was published (QC 131-132, p35) referring to photographs of two official government covers bearing Interpostal Seals duly tied by postmarks on registered mail between

post offices at Cherbin, Mahallat-El-Roh (*photo above*), and Alexandria. The owner argued:

*“...at least sometimes Interpostal Seals have been used as Free Franks.”*

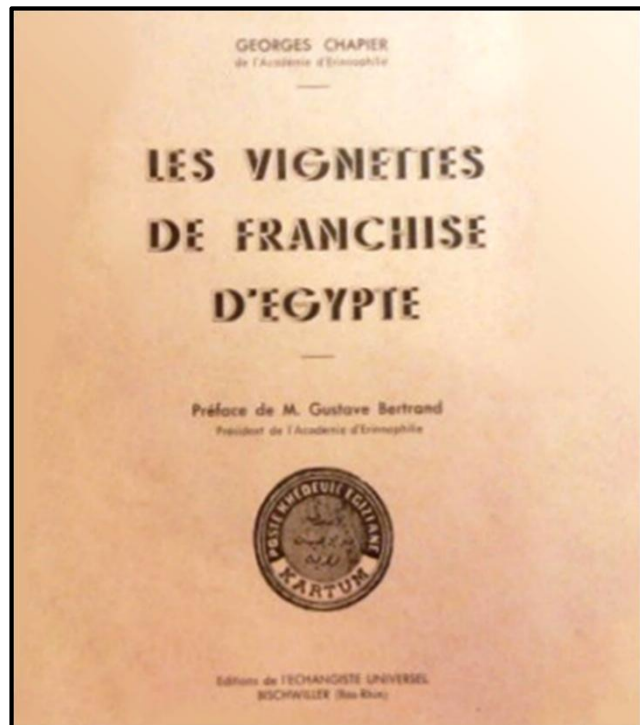
But by this time, as we shall see, this argument had been completely debunked and the reply, by Peter Smith, followed on the same page:

*“A central question to consider is what evidence is necessary to establish whether an adhesive label on a cover was the franking means. The position is not decisive, for such non-franking labels as air mail etiquettes are found on the face, as are registration labels. The presence or absence of a postmark on the label is also not decisive. I have several covers having air mail etiquette tied by a postmark, for example. More to the point, the “Found Open and Officially Sealed” labels are nearly always postmarked with the same datestamps as are used to cancel stamps; in fact, a specific space is designated on them to receive the postmark. The critical question is whether similar letters without the labels were treated as unfranked.”*

Smith presented examples of covers (from other countries) affixed with labels such as 'Found Open and Resealed' or 'Recommended Post' in which the stickers are postmarked by the post office, proving that postmarks on labels or stickers are not intended to indicate franking.

In France, another author who believed in seals' franking powers was Georges Chapier who was asked in 1948 by the French l'Académie d'Errinophilie (Academy for the Study of Cinderellas) to delve into the subject and find an answer to whether the Egyptian seals belong in Philately or *Errinophilie* (French for Cinderellas). In 1950 Chapier published a 23-page catalogue of Interpostal Seals: [Les Vignettes de Franchise d'Egypte](#) (*The Franking Stickers of Egypt*). His introduction emphasized his belief that they were real stamps, not Cinderellas. He wrote:

*"These stamps were in fact real official stamps, used not only throughout the territories subject to the authority of the Viceroy, but also in all the post offices that he maintained in various cities of the Ottoman Empire. Circular in shape, they have the appearance of a large stamp similar to those used in consulates and embassies."*



However, Gustave Bertrand, president of l'Académie d'Errinophilie who wrote the preface to Chapier's catalogue, was not so sure, describing the Interpostals as: "... *n'étant ni spécialement erinophiles ni spécialement philatéliques*", Translation: "...it is neither specially a Cinderella nor philatelic."

But French philatelists were not deterred by Bertrand's pronouncement. Pierre Nicolas authored a review titled [Les Interpostaux d'Egypte](#) in the September 2008 issue of *l'Echo de La Timbrologie*, in which he listed three uses of the Interpostals: "1 - As seals to repair damaged mail, 2 - as labels on mail sacks and, 3 - most importantly, as official stamps."

Another French philatelist who echoed the theory of Harris and Kehr is J. B. Parenti, who wrote two articles, both titled *Vignettes de franchise d'Egypte*, in December 1998 in *Le Monde des Philatelistes* and in 2008 in another French journal, [Documents Philatéliques](#), which he prefaced with the following:

*"Halfway between Cinderellas and philately, the status of round Egyptian stamps has long been the subject of heated debate. For many years, these stamps, devoid of any face value, most often appeared on the back of envelopes, leading many philatelists to believe that they were closing stamps. This idea was reinforced in the early 1920s, as the use of these stamps to seal letters and personalize mailings became fashionable. It was only after the Second World War that a few philatelists took their investigations a little further and allowed the status of these stamps to be reviewed. Albert Harris and, above all, Ernest Kehr were true pioneers in this field. Based on their work, they established that these stamps were issued by the Egyptian*

*government to all post offices, to serve as postage for all official correspondence between two offices or services. These labels therefore constituted genuine service stamps."*

His straightforward acceptance showered Harris and Kehr with praise for their mistaken belief in the franking powers of Interpostal Seals.

### **Second Theory: Used for sealing letters or official notices**

This is the thesis that has won the greatest following, prevailing and being accepted by modern philatelists. Many philatelists held this view right from their first appearance, regarding Interpostal Seals as stickers rather than as actual stamps.

The earliest comprehensive review appeared in 1868. *The Stamp Collector Magazine* devoted two pages of the issue of [August 1 1868 \(pp.118-120\)](#), to a listing and description of all types and colours printed by the Egyptian postal authority at that time. The editors believed they were seals, not "official stamps", concluding:

*"These stamps are termed official stamps and very probably if placed on official letters would be taken to indicate the nature of such letters and free them from charge. But we take it that they are also used as a species of seal and that it is indeed their principal employment to show simply whence comes the packet of letters to which they are affixed. The idea of these stamps was borrowed from the Italian post office in which similar labels are used to seal the bags of letters, and it will be in the remembrance of our readers that a large number of more or less ornamental designs were offered for these stamps when the emission of a new type was decided on. We believe that the Egyptian are put on all official letters emanating from the office whose name they bear and indeed it is only on the supposition that they are intended to indicate the place of origin of the letters to which they are affixed that the emission of stamps for each office can be explained."*

The 1875 *Illustrated Catalogue of Stamps* (p.259) also followed this theory, calling Interpostal Seals "office furniture":

*"These circular designs are given as specimens of the official seals, of which over a hundred varieties exist. They are not entitled to be considered as postage stamps, but simply forms of Office Furniture. Each chief office has its own seal."*

In 1880 J.B. Moens described the Interpostals as mere seals, intended only to replace sealing wax for sealing parcels, stating on page 88 of his French-language *Catalogue of Egypt and the Suez Canal Company*:

*"Before the post office passed into the hands of the Egyptian government, the so-called 'Posta Europea' office, undoubtedly inspired by the practice in Italy, used administrative stamps to seal official letters. These stamps, which are an economical substitute for sealing wax, do not grant any franking to the letters; they indicate the origin of the sending office, which has no need for a franking stamp, as administrative letters remain in the hands of the post office."*

A colourful defence of this theory appeared on page 31 of QC 39 (1952), in an article on the postal history of the Sudan. Lt Col J. R. Danson described how the seals were used by Sudanese post offices, several of which were opened before 1890, the time when the seals were being printed and used. See below some of the Sudan Interpostals:

*“In the absence of any official list of Post Offices, the best evidence that an office existed at any particular place is a postage stamp or cover bearing the postmark of the town but apart from Wadi Halfa, Massawa and Suakin, Egyptian stamps used in the Sudan are very rare indeed and I doubt whether examples exist from some of the smaller places. Other evidence must therefore be sought, and this is found in the existence of interpostal labels bearing the names of various places in the Sudan.*

*The use to which these labels was put is somewhat obscure but contrary to the note in Volume II of Robson Lowe's Encyclopedia they were not official franks and had no franking value. They were certainly used on occasions to seal up packages which had burst in the post and I show you an example of this usage at Alexandria; and they were probably, almost certainly, used for sealing packages of letters being sent in bulk from one post office to another in order to show at a glance the origin of the package. I am showing several pages of these labels with the names of various towns in the Sudan, also an official registered cover from Wadi Halfa, which has neither postage stamp nor interpostal label on it, but which was apparently delivered at destination without surcharge. This cover goes to show, I think, that the interpostal labels were not official franks.”*



***Interpostal Seals of the offices of the Sudan in 1890***

The ESC and the Philatelic Society of Egypt held the view that the seals were not actual stamps, but most philatelic publications continued to disregard or disagree with this view. The question seemed to have been put to rest in 1956 by Mehanny Eid, president of the Egyptian Philatelic Association. He wrote in the July *L'Orient Philatélique* an article titled *The question of Interpostals is now settled*, based on his research within old post office archives. He wrote:

*"Few months ago, and by a mere accident, I came across an official document, which I believe will clear up this question and put an end to the long discussions about these circular adhesives. This document is a register of a rather large size comprising 200 pages on which the high officials of the Postal Administration used to write their instructions in the form of circulars and circulate them among their subordinates in the same office, to note and sign.*

*When these instructions were intended to be sent also to the various post offices, they were then printed in letters. Some of these were found fastened to the pages of the register: but by what means? It was surely amazing to notice that the fastening was made by the Interpostals themselves. This proves one of the ways in which these Interpostals were employed. I was able to trace in the register few*

written and one printed circular relating to these Interpostals. The name given to them in the circulars is 'Ticket' in French and 'paper ticket' in the Arabic alphabet.

The text of a circular written in French and dated 15.11.1879 is given hereunder:

*'Les correspondances chargées d'Office, à l'adresse de la Direction Générale doivent porter le timbre « Recommandâtes » et les lettres, chargées ou non, « doivent être fermées avec un Ticket. La négligence à ces formalités, qui est cause d'un grand embarras à cette 2e. Division pour la distribution de la nombreuse correspondance qui arrive chaque jour, sera puni d'une amende qui varierait de 5 à 20 piastres.*

*Le Chef Comptable, G. B. Vascotto.'*

#### *Translation*

*'Correspondence which should be dispatched registered, to the address of the Director General, must be stamped « Raccommandate » and letters either registered or not must be closed with a Ticket. Any negligence in following these instructions, which causes a great trouble to this Second Division in distributing the enormous correspondence arriving every day, will be punished with a fine of 5 to 20 piastres.*

*Chief Accountant, G. B. Vascotto.'*

*This proved that the Interpostals were used as wafers to close letters addressed to the Director General of the Administration; but some years later, instructions were given to stop using this method for closing letters. A written circular dated 9.4.1885 was issued for this purpose, the text of which is as follows:*

*'Contrairement au règlement pour la confection de dépêches (Article 15), plusieurs bureaux continuent à fermer leur dépêche avec Ticket. Il est rappelé aux Agents que toutes les dépêches doivent être scellées à la cire,'*

#### *Translation*

*'Contrary to the regulations in force for handling correspondence (Article 15), it has been noticed that many offices continue to close their mail by Ticket. Agents are therefore reminded that all correspondence must be sealed with wax.'*

*What is more important is a typed circular letter in Arabic dated 24.9.1885, which was found fastened to the register by Interpostals. It is a long and detailed circular letter to the post offices instructing them how to fill in the different Postal forms for the registered and official letters and how to dispatch their mail in bulk with other regulations relating to the various activities of the post offices. In item 15 of the circular, instructions were given that the linen bag containing the mail should be tightly closed with a string and either the wax or the (Interpostals) should be fastened to the two ends of the string to receive the stamp of the office."*

Eid concluded his article by declaring that:

*"The Egypt Study Circle, London, has been of opinion that the circular adhesives known as Egyptian Interpostals.*

- (a) had no power to defray postal charges and are not postage stamps.
- (b) were primarily intended to denote the office of dispatch of all mail transmitted in bulk between one post office and another, being postmarked to record the date of departure.
- (c) were also employed as seals, wafers and in other ways, included among which are transit markings and to fasten postal documents to notice boards.
- (d) are eminently collectable and worthy of study.

*This opinion is now totally confirmed by official documents.*

*M. Eid, 1956."*

However, the opinions of the ESC and Eid were dismissed by Ernest Kehr, Albert Harris and Philip Cockrill, influential and prominent philatelists of their time, who continued to view seals as true official stamps as late as 1984 in the Cockrill Series booklet *The Posta Europea and the 1984 Kehr catalogue of Interpostal Seals* and other Harris publications.

The work most credited for cementing Eid's thesis, that the Interpostal Seals had no franking powers, is that by Ibrahim Chaftar, the prominent Egyptian philatelist. Chaftar authored a series of articles in *L'Orient Philatélique* between 1965 and 1973 in which he examined archives of the early postal system and was the first philatelist to publish photographs of every Interpostal Seal known at the time. In the [April-July 1965 issue of 'L'Orient Philatélique'](#), he listed all instances in which an Interpostal Seal was known to have been used by the postal administration. At the time he wrote, these amounted to only six different usages of Interpostals fixed to covers or bulletin boards and none used for franking a cover or correspondence. He provided illustrations of each usage, as shown *below* [*Click the link to go to the original publication*]:

"1. Covers between a post office and another post office. (See Photo No. 2).



Photo No 2. – This cover is an example of an official envelope bearing the printed heading "POSTE KHEDEVIE EGIZIANE / DIREZIONE GENERALE" (It was Alexandria at that time). Written on it is:-

"No. (3) *Trois lettres recommandées France*".

Securing the flap on the reverse is a single Interpostal seal Type VI. There is no postmark on any part of this container, which has been neatly slit open half way up the flap so that the seal is undamaged.

*(Collection J.R. Danson)*

2. Covers sent by the Postal Administration to individuals. These are rare cases. (See Photo No. 3).

Photo No. 3. – The earliest cover seen is dated "19 Marz 67" and passed between Benha and Cairo. The envelope is an official one, headed "REGIE POST EGIZIANE" with the word "Servizio" printed diagonally across the left lower corner. On the front are also struck the postmark of Benha and the marking "RACCOMANDATE" in a frame.

On the reverse are five Interpostals, all of Benha, placed as though to secure complete closure of the letter. One of these seals has been just touched by the Cairo arrival postmark.

In this instance the Interpostals were used as seals, pure and simple, and were applied to the cover in the five positions ordinarily fastened by sealing wax when a letter was registered at this date.

This cover is also an example of an official sending by the Postal Administration to an individual. (Collection J.R. Danson)



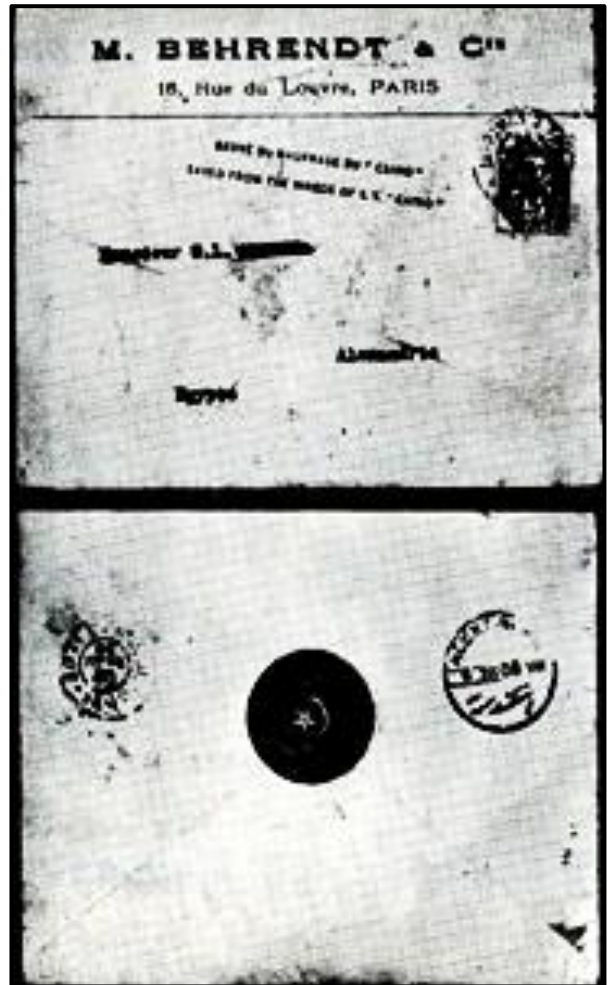
3. Covers sunk in a shipwreck and then when saved were closed by Interpostal Seals because they had been damaged (especially the shipwreck the SS Cairo in 1905). To be noted in this last case, the covers bear different types of Interpostal Seals as if the Postal Administration had used all the remaining stock at hand for the said operation). (See Photos No. 4 & 5).

Photo No. 4. – Letter that was saved from the shipwreck of the SS 'Cairo' and re-closed by an Interpostal Seal type 6: "POSTE KHEDIVIE EGIZIANE – GABINETTO DEL VICE DIRETTORE". Probably despatched from Asnières (Seine), it lost its stamps in the water. It is delivered to an address in Schutz-Ramle / Alexandria on 7 III 06 VII

(Collection Ibrahim Chaftar)

Photo No. 5. – A wreck cover from Paris 25 2 05 franked with 5c France type Blanc, addressed to the exchange firm of Mortera at Alexandria by Behrendt & Co, 15 Rue du Louvre, Paris. Having been salvaged from the wreck of S/S. 'Cairo' it reached Alexandria (6 III 05) and was stamped with bilingual "Sauve du naufrage du S/S Cairo". To the back was applied the Alexandria Interpostal Type VI b inscribed "Direzione Generale delle Poste Khedevie Egiziane. Alessandria".

(Collection Ibrahim Chافتar)



4. Covers opened by the Postal Administration to trace the name of the sender and re-closed by Interpostal seals. An illustration of a cover of this kind is shown. (Photo No. 6)



Photo No 6 – A letter addressed in Arabic and French by Hadjy Mirza Abdel Gawad to Mr Christrillaki at Alexandria franked with a 2pi stamp of 1879 postmarked Cairo 25 OTT79 and handstamped "Raccomandato". The Alexandria arrival marking is dated the same day. On the back is written in French "Not claimed although punctually notified" signed by the postman. That the letter was returned to the sender in Cairo is indicated by a marking which reads Rebut a remettre a l'envoyeur" dated by hand beneath in red ink 5 1 80. It is resealed with the Alexandria Interpostal Type O, May VII. There is also a postmark with a double circle inscribed POSTE K.E. DIREZIONE LOCALE ALESSANDRIA with a large star and crescent in the centre (ESC Type). There are two Cairo arrival markings dated 11 GEN 80 and 11 JAN 80.

This letter was undoubtedly returned to the sender Abdel Gawad as it was found in 19421 among the archives of this important Persian trader. (Collection Ibrahim Chافتar)

5. Covers censored during the Arabi Pasha campaign of 1882 and sealed by the Interpostal Seals. The military censorship opened the mail addressed to Ismailia. In case it did not deal with political matters it was re-closed and delivered to its destination (See report of the Postal Administration for year 1882). An illustration of covers of this category are given here (see photos 7 and 8).

Photo No 7. – A letter bringing another echo of Arabi Pasha’s campaign. Sent from Ghouria Cairo sub-post office 3 AO 82, it is franked with a pair of the 1 PT rose 1879. It is addressed to Hadji Mirza Mohsen Ispahani Smirne. On the back is written “Arrivee a Port Said a cet état a suppose ouvert par ordre d’Arabi Pacha”. The signatures of both the local postal official and his clerk are appended and the cover has been closed by the Port Said Interpostal Type O May VII. There is also the Port Said Caisse marking 6 AO 82. (General Wolseley arrived in Alexandria on 15 August 1882). On arrival at its destination the letter received the Turkish Smyrna postmark dated 15 August 1882.

(Collection Ibrahim Chافتar)

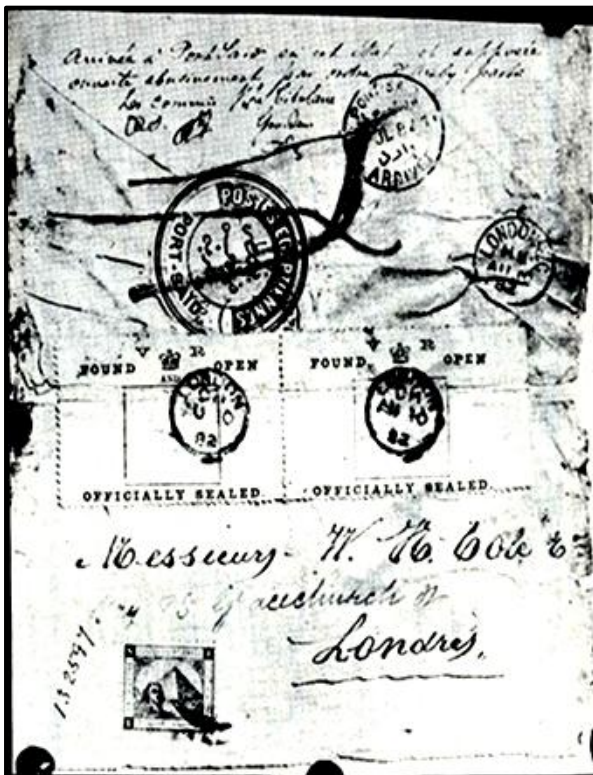


Photo No. 8 – A letter addressed to Messrs. W.H.Cole & Co, London, franked with an 1879 1pi rose, the cancel of which is impossible to determine. Arriving at Port Said open, it was reinforced with string and sealed with a Port Said type VII Interpostal Seal postmarked Port Said JU i82.

Port Said postal officials attest on the reverse that it arrived open and assumed that it was thus treated by order of Arabi Pasha.

The curious thing is ... that it arrived in London open again and that the English post office had to reseal it with two “FOUND OOPEN AND OFFICXIALY RESEALD” LABELS WHIXH WERE DATESTAMPED London 10 April 82

6. For sticking the "Notice to the Public" on the notice boards of the local post offices or repairing the torn mail between a post office and another. I (Chaftar) have seen two similar cases between the Assiut and Aswan post offices and the Money Orders Department Main Office at Cairo. (See Photos No. 9 and 10).

Photo No 9. – Envelope 1885 from Korti to Cairo, with manuscript "arrive au bureau du Caire en cette état" and initialled. Postmark of Cairo on arrival 23 MR 85 T VII. Cairo Interpostal Type on reverse affixing two pieces of string to close and consolidate the envelope.

(Lot 812 of Byam's Egypt sale)

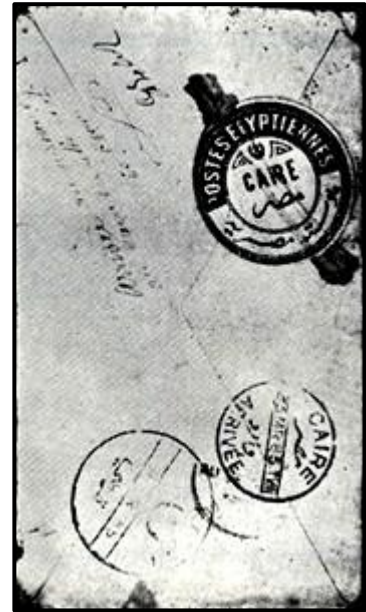


Photo No 10 – A particularly interesting cover, addressed to M Henrie Barriere at the Direction Generale of the Egyptian Post at Alexandria (via Port Said). It bears on the front the circular postmark of ATFE 29 JL 82. On the reverse DAMANHOUR 2 (MONTH?) 82, CAIRE 30 JL 82, PORT SAID 2 AO, ALEXANDRIE 3 AO 82. It is impossible to say whether the letter originated at Atfe because the left top corner of the cover has been torn away in such a manner which suggests the removal of an adhesive stamp by some previous owner, as beneath the lower torn edge is a minute portion of what appears to be a postmark. The circuitous route followed was necessitated by military operations then proceeding, Alexandria having been bombarded by the British Fleet on 11 July 1882; the battle of Tel el Kebir was fought on September 13 of the same year. On the back of the envelope is written

"Arrivée ouverte a Port Said", followed by initials. Folded around the top margin of the cover is the red Interpostal for CAIRE headed "POSTE EGYPTIENNES". The seal is not postmarked. It is noteworthy that someone at Port Said felt obliged to endorse the letter as having "arrived open", even though it had apparently been previously closed by the Interpostal Seal. This does not appear to be an official envelope though it is addressed to the head post office. This seal may have been used to close mail "found open in the post" or the letter may have been subject to censorship at Cairo. (Collection J. R. Danson)"

With Chaftar's list covering every known use of Interpostal Seals, he demonstrated to the world of philately that the seals were never intended for use as official or franking stamps. He concluded, in the same article:

*"Apart from the (..use by) Postal Administration, no cover bearing an Interpostal Seal used to frank mail has ever been seen till now, whether sent by a certain government administration to one of its departments, or to another government administration or*

*to private individual which will prove, without ambiguity, the general franking status of these Interpostal Seals."*

After Chaftar published his article, and until recently, several other covers bearing Interpostal Seals have appeared in philatelic publications and stamp auctions, but none has been shown to have been used for the franking of correspondence.

**Conclusion; the Interpostals were used 'as needed' but never to frank covers**



*Ibrahim Chaftar and Ernest Kehr, specialists on each side of the long Interpostals argument*

In 1996 Luca Daniele Biolato, an Italian diplomat and author who lived in Alexandria, chronicled in detail the history of the Posta Europea in an Italian book written in Italian, *La Posta Europea Nel Contesto Della Storia Postale Dell'Egitto Nel Sec. XIX 1820 to 1865*" (The Posta Europea in the Context of the Postal History of Egypt in the 19th Century 1820-1865). Biolato was witness to the disagreements philatelists had on the subject. He reviewed the history

behind the two theories on the use of Interpostal Seals and sums up with the following observations:

*" ...Looking closely at the reported analyses and, if we want to add a bit of logic to them, we feel that the great dispute on this subject could be overcome by a more realistic view of things: the Interpostals were designed and put into operation for multiple uses by the Postal Administration. So, the supporters of both theories might be right, only in part.*

*Let's explain why 'in part'. There is no firm evidence of the use of the Interpostals as government franking stamps or for official correspondence. In 1864, when the managers of the Posta Europea invented them, they had been under obligation to carry government mail free of charge for two years. Certainly, there was the problem of how to identify those entitled to this service by the postal officials at the arrival locations, who had to apply the postal fee, whenever applicable. We know of no example of correspondence of such services carried by the Posta Europea between 1862 (the act granting the monopoly) and the end of 1864 (the sale to the Egyptian government), so we can only infer that some system may well have been in place.*

*The earliest Interpostals bore the words "Office of...", and therefore their use must have been designed only for the needs of the Posta Europea Office, in the sense that it must be ruled out that the labels were in the possession of the public offices benefiting from the franchise: they were applied only by the Post Office and its employees."*

Biolato then describes what he thought a normal day for the Director-General of the Postal Administration, Giacomo Muzzi, would have been like, managing the day-to-day activities:

*“Let us also try to imagine the scenario here. Muzzi has before his eyes packages containing correspondence to be sent sealed with sealing wax and seals of the postal administration. The same seals were used to close official correspondence which is destined to be carried free of charge.*

*Muzzi then most probably decides to have circular and gummed paper seals made, separated by office, to close the packages containing correspondence of the same origin in a simplified and inexpensive way and to facilitate the identification of their origin, especially for the purpose of rapid and precise sorting. Then he thinks of sealing his correspondence with outlying offices containing directives, instructions, notes, or anything else, with these labels; and he instructs postal agents to do the same with their replies, so that such correspondence is at once identified as official and forwarded without the problem of levying charges. He finds it convenient to identify with an ‘ad hoc seal’ office correspondence officially received. Finally, he tolerates Interpostals being used for repairs of deteriorated mail or for resealing authorized openings. All this casuistry is encompassed in one concept, beyond doubt: the Interpostals were intended exclusively for the service and use of the Postal Administration.*



*Giacomo Muzzi*

*We have no examples of the use of Interpostals in the Posta Europea period, but their later use confirms this diagnosis, also because it was always Muzzi who reigned.”*

This vivid description of a typical day at the post office leaves us with a logical explanation of why the Interpostal Seals were created and used. And it is clear that they were not used as official stamps to defray the cost of mail delivery.

### **The Interpostals today**

Collectors have relied mainly on the Kehr catalogue, which lists more than 1,000 items, to identify their Interpostal Seals. In the absence of official records, Kehr relied on his own collection and those of others to list and describe each entry of his catalogue, which he revised three times between 1943 and 1984. He marked with an asterisk any item he has not seen but was listed by others such as Moen in 1880 and May in 1914. Several Interpostals described by Kehr, however, have never been seen while a few others proven to exist are missing from his catalogue. The Egypt Study Circle and the Philatelic Society of Egypt have commented on several of his catalogues until its last revision in 1984.

None of the general stamp catalogues include a listing of Interpostal Seals, perhaps because of the sheer number and variety of colours, but also no doubt because they are no longer considered regular or official stamps. Zeheri’s *Catalogue* listed the various British Forces seals but was silent on Interpostals, and others such as Feltus, Balian and Smith provide no more than a few pages or a table of Interpostal types against the issuing post office. May, Chapier and Kehr catalogues are all long ago out of print.

But this void was filled when eBay appeared, It was instantly embraced by the worldwide philatelic community, delivering a convenient alternative to the local stamp shop or auction house where Interpostal Seals were rarely on offer. Rich and often rare material appeared

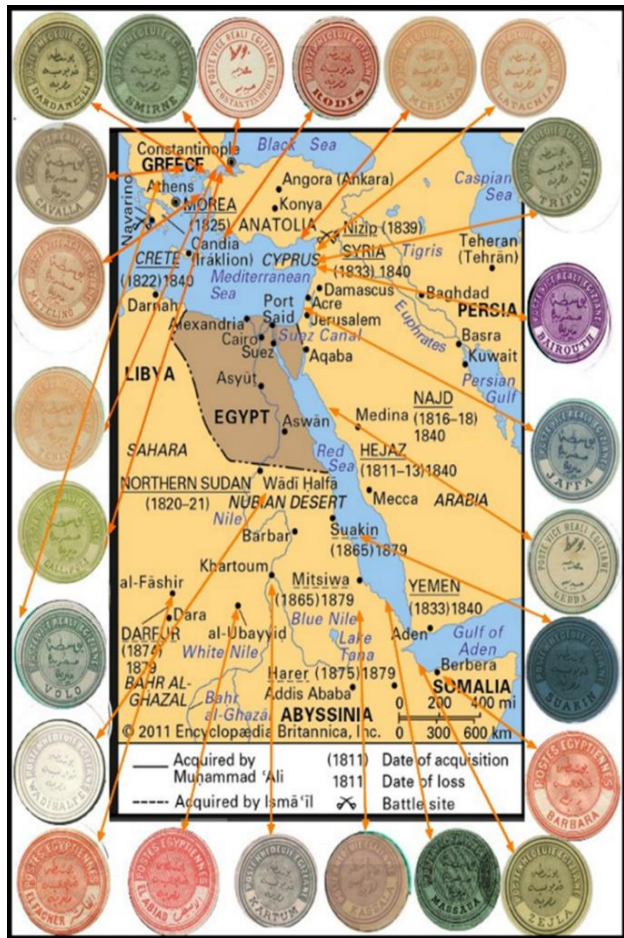
on this auction site and forums of eBay buyers and sellers connected online to exchange Information.

This was when this writer decided to create a website dedicated to Interpostal collectors in which catalogues and information are freely accessible. The owner of Philip Cockril's copyrights granted me permission to use Kehr's work on the website which was registered in 2006 as [www.interpostalseals.com](http://www.interpostalseals.com) or [www.interpostals.com](http://www.interpostals.com). Soon after, Google.com delivered a stream of collectors searching for information or providing input. Interpostals never seen before were posted, literature long ago lost or out of print became available and the findings of the Egypt Study Circle and the Philatelic Society of Egypt were incorporated in the online catalogue.

And finally, in 2025, a complete body of information was elegantly put on paper when in March Joseph Chalhoub issued his second edition of *The Nile Post, Handbook and Catalogue of Egyptian Stamps*, featuring a comprehensive 33 pages listing every Interpostal known to collectors, with current and realistic price estimates.

With the 19th century foreign post offices of Egypt scattered across several countries, today's collectors hail from Egypt, Greece, Turkey, Eritrea, Somalia, Israel, Sudan, Ethiopia, Syria, Palestine, Lebanon, Saudi Arabia and an island or two in the Mediterranean, all looking for seals with the name of their town, often misspelled and in several colours and languages.

Regardless of the struggle over their function and the mystery behind their creation, these colourful circular adhesives will continue to attract wide interest among philatelists and have aroused the curiosity of collectors who continue the search for that phantom Interpostal Seal known by Ernest Kehr but seen by no one else.



**Foreign post offices of Egypt  
in the 19th century**