

Official Mail service from 1866 to 1883

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In the postal history of Egypt, one of the least explored topics deals with the development of the official mail service during its early period. A number of scholars such as Peter Smith, McNeille and Byam attempted to fill in the gaps in this area.

Before the purchase of the *Posta Europea* by the Egyptian Government in 1866, Egyptian official mail bore no postal markings. With the establishment of the Egyptian Mail Service, intaglio seals were introduced for use on official mail and datestamps came into use for regular mail carried through the Egyptian postal network. In some consular offices intaglio seals were used provisionally for non-official mail while awaiting the arrival of datestamps¹.



Though the research conducted by the scholars mentioned above reflects correctly the pre-marking period, their descriptions, theories and ideas about the development of the official postal service that followed are based mostly on assumptions. This statement should not be a surprise if we take into consideration the lack and scarcity of material to study.

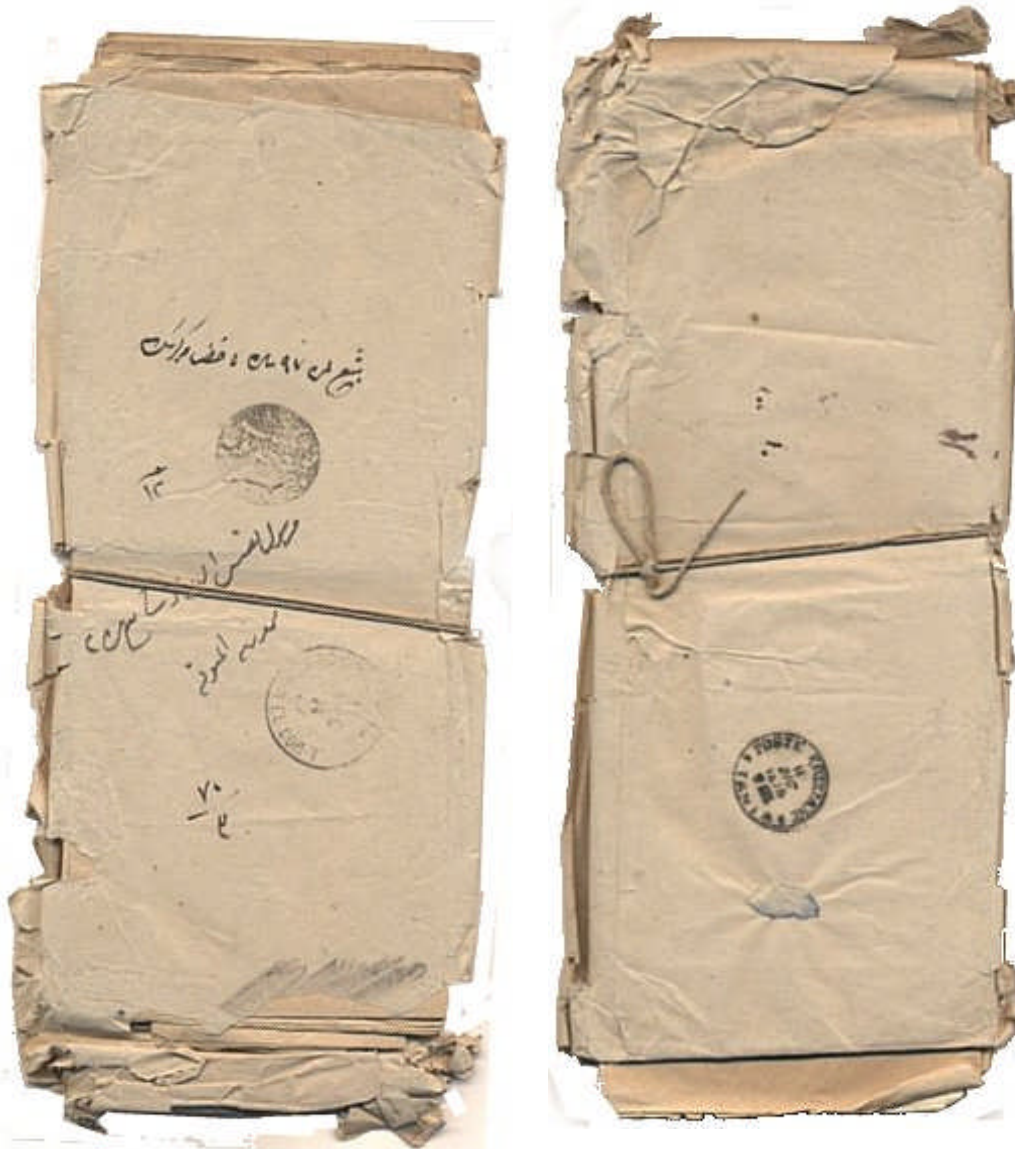


Fig 1: front and back of wrapped envelope

Recently I have come into possession of a number of previously unknown and unrecorded official letters and documents that gave me a chance to analyze and study the work of the government courier service in its early period. It allowed me to clarify some misconceptions about this topic and to draw conclusions based on factual information. I should like to share my findings in this article that describes the standard procedures for handling official mail.

Envelopes sent from governmental offices used to bear the following markings: the number of documents inside an envelope, the name of the sending department, the addressee, and the subject of the documents, together

with its archival index. Envelopes were not as we know them now, but usually comprised a sheet of paper wrapped around a stack of rolled documents and sealed by string or sealing wax (Fig. 1).

Envelopes and documents were carried from governmental offices by a *moawen* (an official administrator) to the local post office, where they were handed in at the *miri* section (the section for handling official mail in larger post offices). The correspondence was accompanied by a *hafzeh*, or a detailed list in duplicate (Fig. 2). This was considered to be both an invoice and a payment receipt and it contained handwritten information about documents inside envelopes, stating the name of each document, its weight in grams, and the postage fee.

Envelopes of the official mail were subject to the postage fee used for regular letters while the postage fee for the documents inside was the same as for non-periodical printed matter.

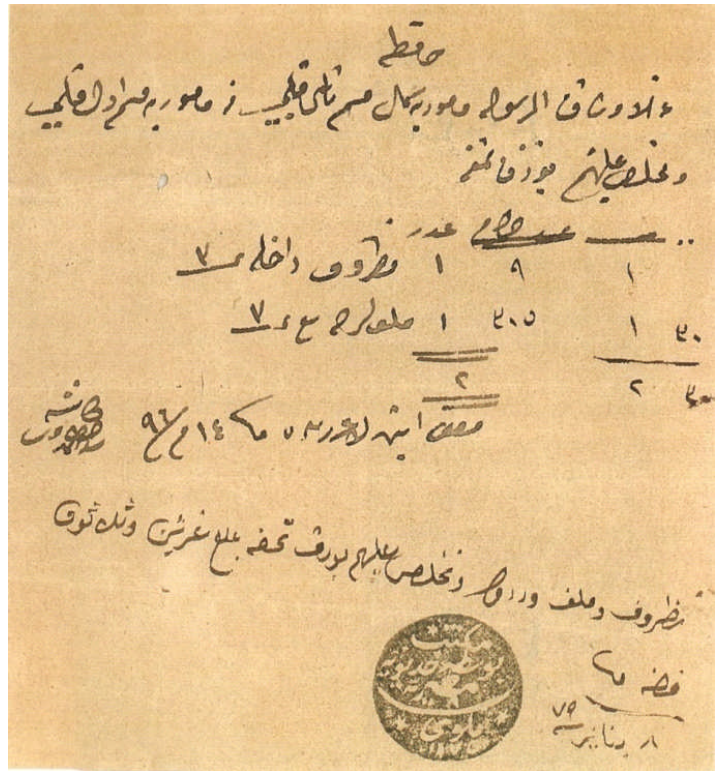


Fig. 2

After verifying the information on a *hafzeh*, the postal clerk would impress the official stamp (intaglio seal postmark reading *post office / Khedivial Egyptian official / office name = city name*²) on both lists and hand one to the *moawen*, who would pay the total postage fee either in cash or with mint postage stamps.

The *moawen* would take his copy of the *hafzeh* back to the office. If there was a need to send more letters the next day or later, the *moawen* could use the same *hafzeh* to invoice more correspondence (Fig 3).

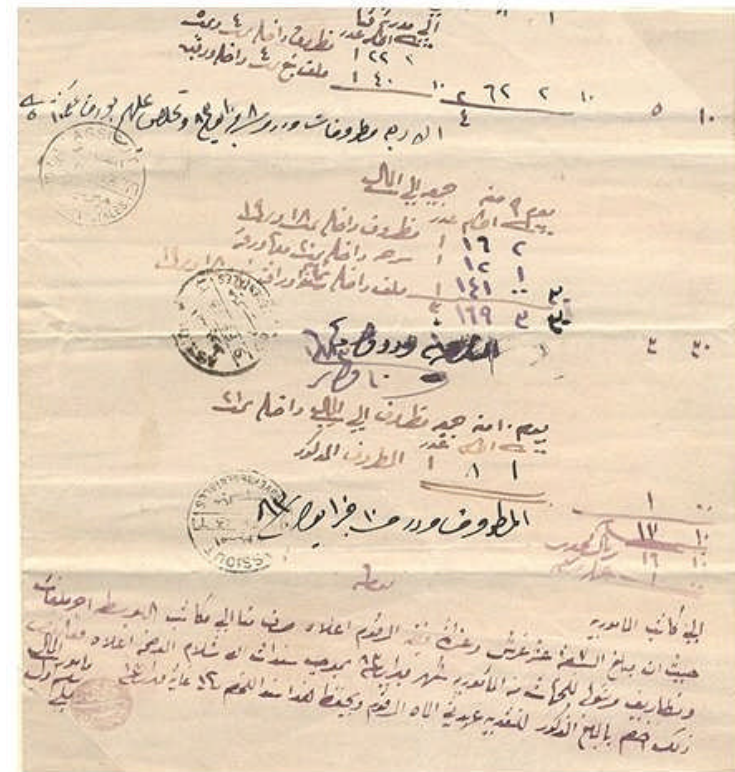


Fig. 3. This *hafzeh* shows lists of documents sent on different occasions, indicating the weight in grams of each document and the postal fee for its delivery. Each payment is confirmed by an impression of the postal datestamp.

In cases when official mail originated from a small town (Fig. 4), the *hafzeh* would be carried through all towns of the postal route, from one post office to another until it reaches the central post office of that route. On the way, official letters from small towns would be added to the same *hafzeh* with the postmark of each town.

The *miri* handstamp was then impressed on the front of each envelope before it was passed to the regular mail section of the post office to be struck by the postal datestamp of that post office (on the front as well). After that, the correspondence

was sent to designated destinations where it received the arrival CDS on the back of each envelope and the hour of arrival at the post office that was usually inscribed on the front.

It was common practice at that time for governmental departments to receive an *ohda*, or some amount of money on account for correspondence expenses. When an *ohda* was about to finish, the Treasury office of the department would collect all the *hafzehs* and telegram receipts and attach them together, using a metal clip (Fig. 5). The Treasurer's trustee would write on the front page a request addressed to the accounts department to approve the deduction of the amount of money detailed in the list from the *ohda*.

All official mail was registered, but exempt from the registration fee.

In cases when a post office did not have a *miri* section, the governmental authorities dealt directly with the post office, which stamped both the *hafzeh* and the envelopes with its CDS.

From 1879, official mail envelopes bore the official administration seals of the governorates from which they were sent. This fact makes us conclude that new regulations on official mail were introduced at that time. Later in 1880, intaglio seals were replaced by official datestamps.

The same procedures and regulations applied to official mail to foreign destinations, as official correspondence was carried abroad by the Egyptian steamship company (Azizieh at that time) to Egyptian consular or territorial post offices. In cases where the country of destination was outside the Egyptian postal network, the official mail would be franked.

In his study on Egyptian Official Postal Matter, Douglas McNeill refers to an undated document entitled "Free Postage of Government Correspondence" that constitutes free delivery of official mail. He wrongly assumes that the date of publication was between June 1877 and March 1884 and that the regulations described in this document were in use even as early as 1865.

The analysis and study of the newly discovered items described in this article leads us to a conclusion that official correspondence did not pass free by post until 1884, when it is clear that the document "Free Postage and Government Correspondence" with its new regulations for official mail must have been published.

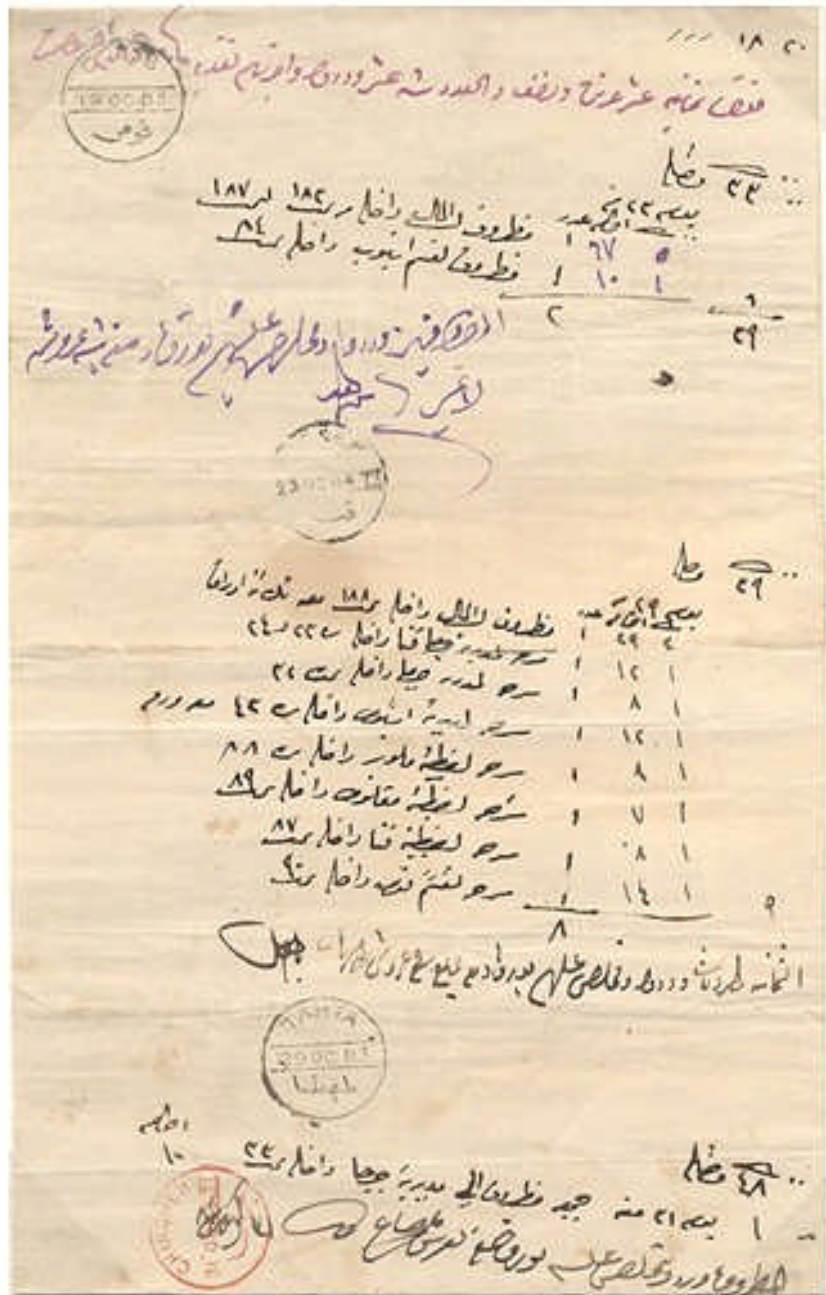


Fig. 4: This hafzeh originated from a small town and shows the postal route it took (Qus-Qena-Tahta-Girgeh). It contains handwritten lists of envelopes and postal handstamps of each town it passed through.

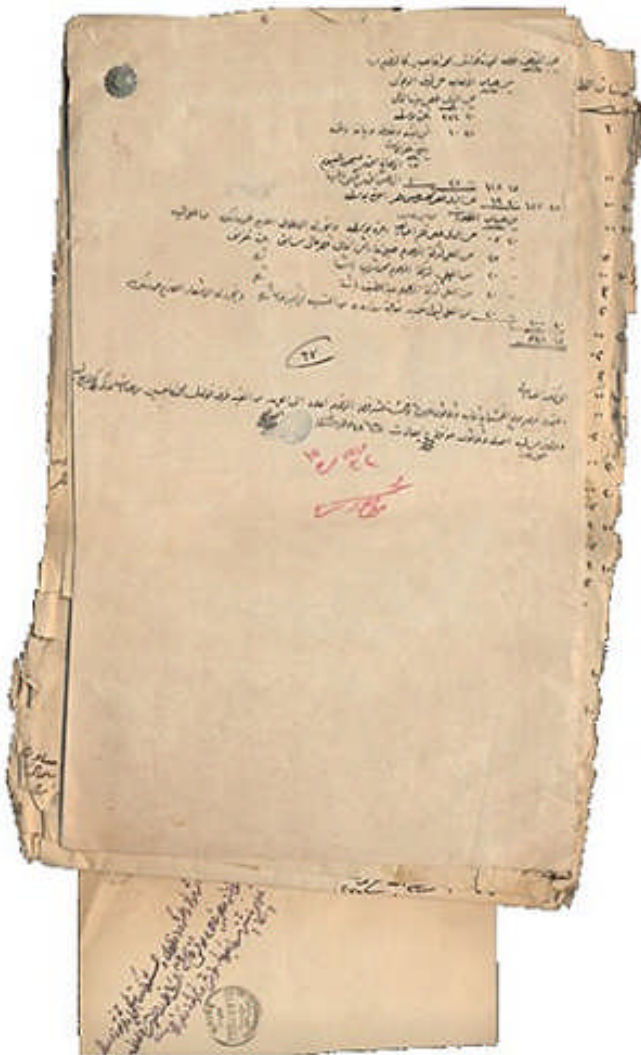


Fig. 5: Accumulated hafzehs pinned together, with a written request for the money expended to be set against the ohda amount



Fig. 6: In 1880, intaglio seals were replaced by official circular datestamps. This envelope shows both in use

The list of newly discovered official postmarks (see next page):

1 Intaglio Seals, Type A

- **Cairo oval:** *misr / maktab aarabi posta khedeveieh masreya* – two found, both on *hafzehs*; both are clearly legible but the inking is slightly faint
- **Assiout:** *maktab posta khedeveieh masreya / Assyut* – one found, on envelope; excellent condition.
- **Minya:** *maktab posta khedeveieh masriya / El Menie* - three found, all on *hafzehs*, two of them are clear and one partially unclear
- **Shibin el Kom:** *maktab posta khedeveieh masriya / Shebin El Kom* - eight found, all on envelopes; two are clear but the inking is faint; one is partially unclear; five are unclear with faint inking.
- **Suez oval:** *El Suez / maktab posta masreya miriya* – two found, both on envelopes; one envelope was sent from the governorate of Massawa, transiting Suez, struck on the front by the Suez official postmark and PO CDS on arrival in Suez, and then struck on the reverse by the same postmarks on departure to Cairo one day later; both postmarks are partially unclear. The other envelope is sent from Suez to Cairo; the postmark is very unclear.
- **Mallawi:** *maktab posta khedeveie masriya / Malawi* - one found, on *hafzeh*, excellent condition.
- **Benha:** *maktab posta khedeveie masreya/Benha* - 1 found, on envelop; extremely unclear.
- **Tanta oval:** *Tanta / Maktab.....* - one found, on envelope; only Tanta clear.

2 Type GS datestamps (the earliest found is Assiout / Gouvernmentales, dated July 30, 1880)

- **Khartum** Gouvernmentales datestamp - one found, on *hafzeh*



Mallawi



Suez oval



Assiout



Cairo oval



Minya



Shibin El Kom



Tanta.

Footnotes:

1. In Antonini's collection there was a cover sent from Chios in 1867, three years before the opening of the Egyptian Post Office. It is franked with a 1 pi Penasson and tied by official negative seal. This fact allows us to assume that the official mail service preceded the regular mail service and also handled private and commercial mail before post offices became functional.

2. The word "miri" was in use on intaglio seals produced before 1869. Intaglio seals produced in later years no longer read "miri" on them.
