

The Post Offices in Albanian cities during the Ottoman Empire

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By the 1800s, European states began to open their liaison services - closed for centuries - through their official missions in the Ottoman Empire, in order to allow mail delivery between these countries and Constantinople. After 1839 and the "Peace of Adrianople", nine countries (some earlier and some others later) gained privileges in the framework of the "capitulations" agreement signed with the Ottomans. One of the privileges they gained was the agreement that allowed Austro-Hungary, France, Germany, Russia, Great Britain, Greece, Italy, Poland, and Romania to perform on their own all the public postal services in the Ottoman territory. Consequently, consular post offices of several states performing mail services were established in Shkodra and Ioannina. These were two out of the four post offices opened in the central areas of the Albanian vilayets. By the end of the century, post offices of this kind were also opened in Manastir and Pristina.

Until 1840, the Ottoman Empire did not have a regular public mail service. Only transport and delivery of official documents were duly organized. The establishment of the Ministry of the Empire Post Offices, shortly after the Tanzimat proclamation in 1840, made it possible for the civilian population living in the vast geographical area of the empire to receive a regular postal service. At this time, a transport and correspondence delivery service and other postal facilities were established between Istanbul and other big cities of the country.



The Ottoman Empire in the early 19th Century

In 1850 there were only 63 post offices throughout the empire, and 1500 post offices were set up all over the country within a few years. Shkodra post office was one of these 63 offices and, according to assumptions based on the stamps on the correspondence envelopes, it was opened in the year 265 of the Islamic calendar, Hijri (1265) that coincided with the year 1849 of the European calendar. Further on, 17 other post offices were established and operated in the four Albanian-populated vilayets until 1875. Post office stamps were engraved in the Arabic alphabet writing and in the form the offices were named by the Turks. Thus, for example, Durres was named Dıraç, Gjirokastra-Ergiri, Korça-Görice, Kukës-Kökes, Lezha-Les, Dibra-Debre, Shkodra-Iskodra, Vlora-Avlonya, etc.

A series of treaties signed during that time led to the Ottoman Empire losing part of its economic independence. The Crimean War, which lasted from 1853 to 1856, further exhausted the empire. In 1856, the independence of the Ottoman Empire was recognized by the Congress of Paris. Stamps with an "Albania" overprint appeared during this period. "Lloyd's" posts had begun their services in 1854 in Vlora and Durres. Austro-Hungarian post offices started their services in Shkodra in 1855 and in Shengjin in 1870. When the stamps of Italy with "Shqipnia" overprint were initially used in the Albanian territories occupied by Turkey, the Sublime Porte requested that this overprint was not practiced, but their protest was ignored.

During this period, cancellations (stampings) aroused a special interest. These cancellations, as a phenomenon of Turkish post offices, have been extensively studied by philatelists, who have catalogued several thousand of them used in the Ottoman Empire. Post office stamps in Albanian cities are encountered in five forms:

- 1] Circular: one circle with a diameter of 20 mm; with two circles (outer and inner), 24 mm, 26 mm, 29 mm, in an equidistance of a 2 mm space. Fig.1-2 (one circular); 3-15 (two circulars)
- 2] Quadrilateral (outer and inner), with a 2 mm space, 24x26 mm; 20x20 mm.
- 3] Oval, three circles with a diameter of 22x26 mm and 25x29 mm.
- 4] "Negative stamps", which were usually circular, of 24 or 26 mm, in which the Arabic letters appear uncovered, against a dark background (black or other colours depending on the ink,
- 5] On July 1, 1875, the Ottoman Empire became a founding member of the General Postal Union, soon to be renamed as "Universal Postal Union-UPU" and it is still keeping this name even nowadays. The Ottoman Empire hoped that joining UPU would eliminate the foreign post offices operating in the country, but its expectations were not fulfilled as the foreign post offices continued to be competitive. With the intention to facilitate and standardize the mail transport between members, the UPU required that the stamps were printed in two languages - Arabic and Latin.

The first stamps to be cancelled at Albanian cities post offices were "the Tughra-s" issued for use in 1863. Their main feature was the Tughra over a crescent. Tughra, a kind of monogram, was the signature of the Sultan. The series had 4 values, 20 para, 1, 2 and 5 grosh. They were not perforated.



Examples of the 'Tughra' stamps issued in 1863

Two years later, in 1865, the perforated emission was issued with 6 values, 10, 20 para(money), 1, 2, 5 and 25 grosh(pennies). They were called "Duloz's" because they were named after a French craftsman who was the designer of these stamps. The stamps designed by "Duloz" consisted of a central oval closed with a moon and a star with radiating lines and lateral arabesques indicating their distinctive oriental character.



Examples of the Duloz stamps issued in 1865

Each value was printed in a single colour. Arabic writing is overcharged with a black oval, "Postai devleti Osmaniye" or "Post Office of the Ottoman Empire". The inscription at the bottom emphasizes the denomination in para or piasters (kuruş-grosh), and thus it changes with each value. They were reproduced from 1865 to 1882, being used for 17 consecutive years. Scott lists them in 46 primary catalogue numbers, plus 29 numbers for postal taxes. Michel lists them in 38 catalogue numbers and 14 tax numbers. The first two emissions belong to the period under Sultan Abdul Aziz. Likewise, the production of stamps in 1876 took into account the Union's demand for printing.

In 1892 the Ottoman Empire, under Sultan Abdyl Hamit II, issued a series of stamps with an intricate design known by philatelists as the "Weapons and Tughra" series. The only Western writing was the value both in the number and in the text (in French language).



1 Piastre value of the 'Weapons and Tughra' issue

Travelling envelopes with these four emissions described above and bearing seals of Albanian cities, are rarely encountered. This is also due to the fact that domestic and foreign letters and even packages were accepted abroad only in 1901, a weighty reason why the travel envelopes could have been better stored in European countries, as it really happened. Some emissions with five values were issued later and the last emission, the one with 10 values was issued in 1908 under Sultan Abdyl Hamit II. The greatest number of traveling envelopes are found from this emission that was followed by two other similar emissions in 1908 and 1911, under Sultan Muhammad V's rule. They are well known among Albanian philatelists because of the "Shqipnia" overprinting that was put on by the Ministry of Post Offices during the Vlora Provisional Government. Albanian philatelists have specified it as "The Third Emission".

Bibliography-Index of resources and literature

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