

Fabulous Firsts:

Greece, October 1861

by John F. Dunn

Although being the oldest European civilization, a postal system as we know it today was late in coming. By 1850 only a limited domestic civil postal system existed.



As with other postal systems, postal markings predate postage stamps. This 1852 pamphlet bears a municipal post marking with “DH-MARXIA -- ORXOMENOU” within the two concentric circles, plus a boxed “Δ.Τ. 124”



in the center, with the manuscript marking above and below the box applied by the postman who delivered the pamphlet.

The first Greek postage stamps were issued in October 1861. The first Greek stamps were produced in France. The “Hermes Heads” were engraved by Albert Barre, son of Jean Jacques Barre, who was the chief engraver to the Paris mint. The elder Barre had created a design for a French coin using the head of Ceres. Albert chose Hermes, “the messenger of the gods,” as an appropriate subject for a stamp design, but used France’s Ceres stamp frame.



The blending of the designs of two nations into one is seen in the composite essay above, which shows the frame from a French 1853 20 centimes stamp (with the inscriptions at the top and bottom blacked out) placed over a hand-drawn head of Hermes, the two pieces blended together with ink, all mounted together. Note the signature of the Greek stamp’s designer, Albert Barre, in the lower right; also, in the upper right, the inscriptions that were destined to be used at the top and bottom of the first Greek stamps.

Barre’s design was the identifying element of Greek stamps

for 25 years. In the next illustration, we see an original die proof in black without denominations. (Note the colorless rectangles at the bottom where the values would be placed.)



The first stamps were printed using a typography process, and were issued in 1861. The denominations were 1 lepton and 2, 5, 20, 40, and 80 lepta.

During the 25 years the first design was used, there were numerous changes in ink, paper, gum and the security control numerals that were printed on the back. This and the fact that many of the Hermes Heads varieties are still reasonably priced makes study and specialization possible.

There were two printings of the first Hermes heads. The first “Paris” Prints and the second “Athens” Prints. All seven values were printed in both Paris and Athens. There are shade differences that can help to identify the printings, but collectors usually look to the sharpness of the image and the shading, particularly in the neck.

This is because the first Paris, “Fine,” printings were sharp while the first Athens “Provisionals” printings were not very good,



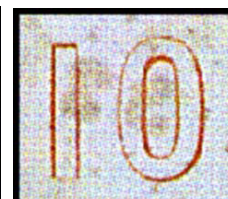
and are identified as the Coarse printings (left). But later Athens Prints also are Fine printings (right), so you need to be careful that you are not mistaking a



later Athens Fine printing for the first Paris printing. (Note, as well, that because Scott assigns the major number to the most common variety—not necessarily to the earliest—except for the 20L, the Athens Fine printings are assigned the major numbers.)

Another characteristic of the Hermes Heads is the absence or presence of a security control number on the back. Except for the 10L, the first Paris Prints did not have the control number, and none of the early Athens Prints, including Fine printings as well as the first Coarse printings, had the security numbers. We refer you to the Scott Catalogue for information on which printings and values should have control numbers.

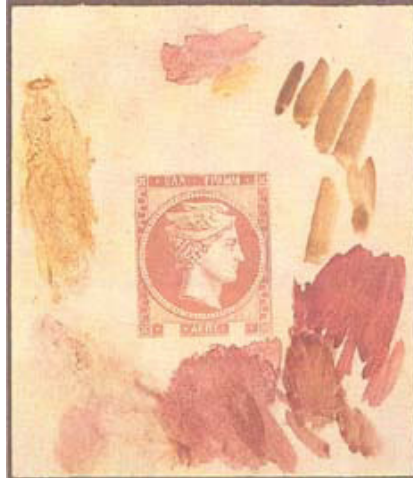
And while we are on the subject of security numbers on the back, we can point out that among the many collectible varieties, the



control numbers show double printings, one or both digits inverted, missing digits and other variations on

the basic theme. Shown above is the standard “10” on the left, and an inverted “1” in the “10” on the right. (If you look carefully at the shading outside the “1” you can see the differences between the two.)

As was customary, the various denominations were issued in different colors. This interesting piece shows a working die proof without the value tablets. It was printed in reddish brown, with various comparative color samples and mixes applied in the margins.



Still another interesting aspect of the early Hermes Heads is the use of different color papers for the various denominations. For example, the 1L chocolate was printed on brownish paper, the 5L yellow green on greenish paper, etc.



The stamps were printed in sheets of 150. Shown here is a full sheet of the 80 lepta from the 1862-67 Athens Printings.

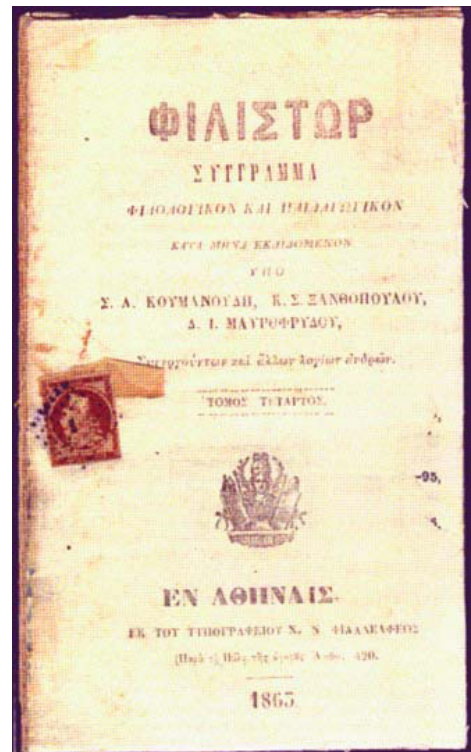
Although there was some government and private experimentation with perforations as far back as the 1862-67 issue, the early Hermes Heads stamps were regularly issued without perforations.

The rates in effect when the first Greek stamps were issued included a “Newspaper” rate that applied to pamphlets and other circulars of 1 lepton up to 30 grams, 2L up to 50gm, and 1 lepton for each additional 20gm.

Seen in the upper right is an 1863 copy of the pamphlet “Filistor” with the rate paid by a 1L chocolate.

Other rates that were met by the new stamps were 20 lepta for inland mail up to 15 grams, 40L up to 30gm, 60L to 60gm (which was not met by a specific stamp), and 80L for every additional 100gm.

Another category of interesting usages is country combinations. Covers with Greek and Egyptian stamps are popular; even the earliest covers are “modern” when compared to the age of those ancient civilizations.



Another meaningful usage shows the Hermes heads in combination with the stamp from which its design was adapted: France’s Ceres head. On the top cover, the Ceres Head is to the right of three Hermes Heads on an 1873 cover from France to Athens.



Among other interesting usages that can be found, the bottom cover shows four different Hermes Heads denominations (40L, 10L, 20L, 5L) on a cover to Trieste. (To add to the appeal, the 40L and 20L are from the May 1862 Athens printing, the 5L is from the 1861 Paris Printing, and the 10L is from an 1861-62 Athens “Provisional” Printing.

Yesterday in STAMPS:

The Greece Large Hermes Heads

(by N. S. Alfieris, from STAMPS Magazine, April 19, 1952, with images added)

A specialized collection of stamps of the first type of Greece (the Large Hermes Heads) deserves the greatest attention. In spite of the difficulties of classification encountered from the very beginning, these stamps offer a particular charm which is not found in any other classic stamps of Europe.

The innumerable varieties which exist in each value of the first type of Greece, 1861, are due to the process employed by the engraver, Albert Barre, in designing and engraving the cliches for all the stamps separately (150 in bronze for each value) in such a fashion that there are 150 varieties for each shade.

It is a fact that no issue of any country, either early or modern, can rival in richness and in varieties the examples of the first type of Greece. Moreover, the combination of tinted papers with a single colored ink has created an almost indefinite range of shades.

Here is why these stamps offer specialists of the entire world, with respect to engraving, colors, papers and other elements in their manufacture, a vast field of research and comparison.

In order to illustrate what I have just described above, I will limit myself to cite only one of my first discoveries, that of the 10 lepta Paris printing, the "error" in which the two control numerals are inverted.

During the Luder-Edelmann sale at Zurich in 1929, the vendors had the happy inspiration to photograph all of the sheets, including both front and back of the 10 lepta. For many years these sheets decorated the stairway and first floor landing of the home of Albert Barre, and they were examined in 1907 by Georges Brunel.

The printing at Paris was made with great care. Only the control numeral varieties "1" and "0" inverted



Fig. 1. Numerals reversed (not inverted). This error occurred once on the sheet at the left hand margin of the printings named, and is not due to whole sheets being printed upside down as is the case with h. It was evidently corrected early in 1867.



Fig. 2. Missing 1. Apparently the numerals were re-set early in 1873. From the examination of pairs and strips showing this variety it would seem that there were two on each sheet with the numeral 1 missing. One is the ninth stamp in a horizontal row, as I have seen marginal pairs in which the "0" error occurs on the left hand stamp, and the minor variety "1 0" spaced on the right hand (marginal) stamp. Other pairs prove that there must have been another of this error somewhere nearer the center of the sheet.

had been known, that is to say, the shaded part of the figure is found at the left instead of at the right (there are two inverted "0s" and a single inverted "1". as well as a "1" broken at the top).

At Berlin in 1930 (IPOSTA) a collector exhibited a specimen with the numeral "01" instead of "10". What was the significance of this solitary, unknown variety?

The photograph of the back of the 10 lepta does not show the error "01" yet those who examined the exhibited stamp are of the opinion that it is genuine. What is the explanation?

After the Berlin exhibition I had the occasion to buy the stamp in question. This stamp had the two control numerals inverted, an error which does not occur in the plate used for printing the backs of the 10 lepta.

The argument put forth by the previous owner, in his description at the Berlin exhibition, was that the stamp in question had been the 54th in the plate and that the error which had occurred during the composition, was immediately noticed and corrected.

I made a careful examination of this error and, after an intensive study, I am convinced that an entire sheet of the Paris 10 lepta was printed with inverted numerals, and that my stamp with the error in question is from the 103rd position in the sheet (face) and the 48th position in the control numeral plate (back).—III. 1.

This discovery has been reported in:

1. *Echo de la Timbrologie*, July 15, 1931.
2. *Etude sur les Timbres de Greece*, published by the Hellenic Philatelic Society of Athens, p. 260, chapt. 292.
3. *Kohl Briefmarken Handbuch* supplement, p. 1009.

I quote a part of a letter from Dorn-ing Beckton, ex-President of the Royal Philatelic Society of London:



Fig. 3. 00. There were also two of these on the sheet of the last printing. One occurred on the first stamp of the bottom row but there is no evidence to show the position of the other.



Fig. 4. This is a curious error. The numeral 1 is shorter than in the normal. It no doubt occurred only once on some sheets of the last printing.



Fig. 5. 110. This was intended to correct the previous, "small 1" (left). It sometimes reads 110, as this, but more often shows the second 1 covering the first (and smaller) numeral. Why the printers should have taken the trouble to correct this and leave the other errors on the sheet is a mystery.



Fig. 6. 10 inverted, not to be confused with reversed numerals, illustrated in Fig. 1, above. The inverted "10" variety is the commonest of all the errors. It is due to entire sheets being printed upside down. Curiously enough, it did not occur (in my experience) until 1872.



Fig. 7. The "Zante" error, with the numeral 10 inverted on the face of the stamp. Because it is so hard to see, I also show at right the location of the numerals. JFD.

"You are quite correct in saying that you mentioned the 10 lepta, Greece, Paris print, with inverted 10. I also had it for some years. It is unfortunately a poor specimen in point of condition, but it is, I believe, perfectly genuine."

After the death of Dorning Beckton, H. R. Harmer sold his Greek collection in 1935. There, among other pieces purchased, I acquired the error mentioned in his letter, the 10 lepta with inverted numerals (01).

I examined this error carefully and was able to determine the exact position which it occupied in the sheet it comes from the 110th position (face) and the 41st position in the plate of numerals (back). Ill. 2.

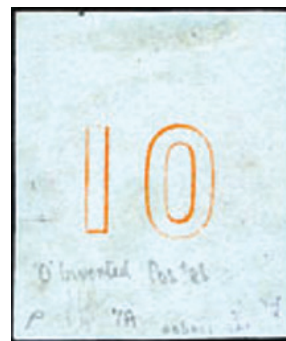
Now, the two specimens of this famous error of inverted control numerals form a part of my collection and to this day they are the only copies known.

In conclusion, permit me to cite here some names of celebrated philatelic authors who, during a half century have made a constant eulogy of these classic stamps: Glasewald, G. Brunel, Dorning Beckton, Colonel Napier, Pemberton (*), Fernand Serrane, Dr. Herbert Munk, Paul de Smeth, Nicolaides and others.

(* Figures 1 through 6 and the descriptions are from a wonderful article, "The Stamps of Greece," by P. L. Pemberton at: <http://hermesheads.home.comcast.net/~hermesheads/pemberton/pemberton.htm> JFD.)



Inverted 10 on the upper right stamp—which shows at the upper left from the back of the block. On a close look you can see the shading differences between the inverted 10 and the three normal 10s.



Left, inverted 0; right, inverted 1. Again, you can see the shading differences.