Yesterday in STAMPS:

Afghanistan

by A. Eugene Michel

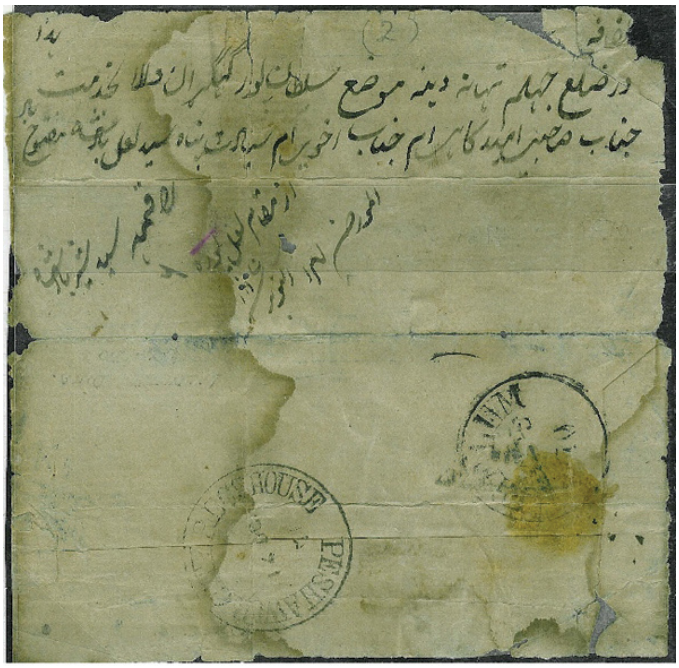
(From STAMPS Magazine, September 21, 1940, with images added)

Afghanistan, until recent years almost a stranger to the rest of the world, has few cities, and these are isolated from each other by rough mountainous country. Outside communication is mostly via the rail head at Peshawar, India, over poor roads, which extend as far as Kabul, the capitol, and Kandahor. Almost everywhere else the communication lines are mere mountain trails.

The indifference of the natives to peaceful pursuits including commerce, makes the domestic mail light and the inland transmission uncertain. Around the beginning of this century most of the incoming first class foreign mail was despatched twice a week from a branch post office maintained by the Ameer in Peshawar, and the trip of 190 miles to Kabul was made in about three days. Packages and merchandise were handled in about twelve days. The letters were carried by foot or mounted runners working in three-mile relays, while the bulky material traveled in caravans of heavily laden camels, oxen and mules.

As the route was always dangerous from bandits, caravans were escorted to the Indian border by armed horsemen in the employ of the Ameer, and further through mountains in India by a guard selected from the Khyber Mounted Rifles. In recent years, the main routes have been improved and motor trucks and motorcycles introduced as the forerunners of greater civilization. Most of the inland mail routes, however, are still traversed by runners on foot or camel back.

In the olden days, the mails were repeatedly robbed and couriers murdered in spite of all precautions, and seldom were marauders ever brought to justice. The whole postal system was a farce. The postal officials



Pre-stamp mail from Afghanistan is scarce. Before the start of the postal system in 1870, mail was carried either by State Couriers (on behalf of the Amir); Government Couriers (on behalf of high government officials); or Private Messengers. Only one correspondence carried by private messenger is believed to exist. This is a group of twelve letters sent to a religious recluse named Sayyed Ali Abbas by his family. Abbas had settled at Sultanpur, a village near Dina in Jhelum District, India. His family lived at Lalpura, a village on the Kabul river not far from the Afghan/Indian border. Of the dozen surviving letters, which cover the period 1869 to 1883, only two come from the period before the introduction of the postal system. This example is the second of those two and is dated in manuscript October 14, 1870. The letter has the Peshawar City Receiving House cancel of the same date, a Jhelum mark dated (1)5 (10) 70, and a faint triangular postage due marking. This is also the earliest known example of a Christian date being used on an Afghan cover. The distance from Lalpura to Peshawar, where the letters were put into the Indian postal system, is about 44 miles, but because of the mountainous terrain, the journey by land usually took three days. This series of covers covered the distance in either one or two days, indicating they were carried by raft down the fast flowing Kabul river.

affixed the stamps to the letters themselves, and the commonest form of cancellation up to 1891 was to cut or bite a piece out of the stamp (see page 3), a procedure which very effectively prevented fraudulent reuse. When the used stamps were discovered to be valuable to collectors, the practice was changed to cancellation with a greasy ink, and the Afghan postal agent at Peshawar peeled off the incoming Afghan stamps, sold them, and

the extra profit probably went into his own pocket. The Ameer stopped this for a time, by withdrawing the use of adhesive stamps and by having a mere impression stamped directly onto letters indicating that the postage was paid.

Front and back of piece with Scott 2 (there is no Scott 1; see page 4). Stamp shows the familiar "bite" cancel.

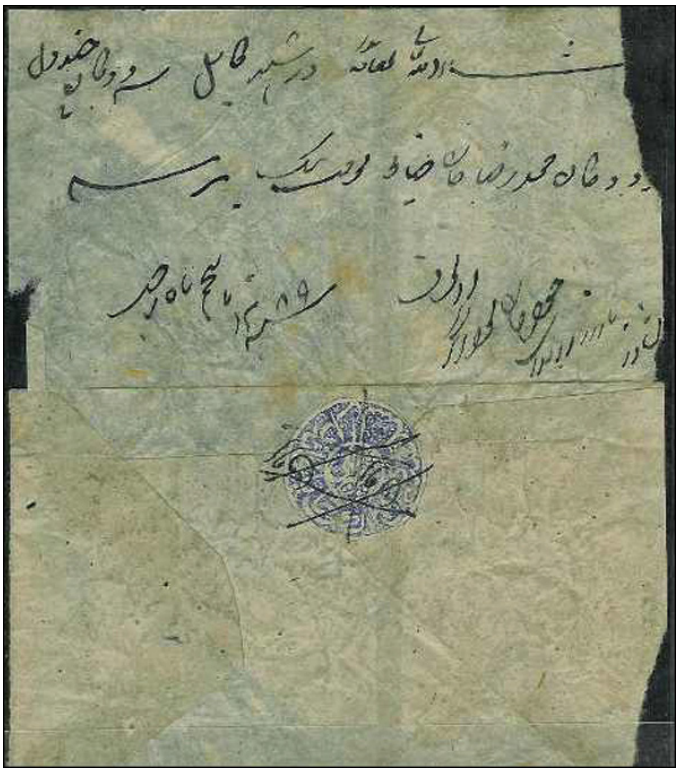
The old Afghan postal agency at Peshawar and its method of procedure enable one to draw fairly accurate conclusions about the whole postal system. The building contained no sign on its dilapidated facade, and a visitor first had to send in a servant to find out if the postmaster would receive him. There was really no doubt, but this form of flattery always helped afterward in getting the business transacted. Upon receipt of the answer, a heavy nail-studded door was opened into a rubbish-filled court, where a few postal ponies were tied to scrub trees. Beyond was an enclosure used as a storeroom and as a sleeping apartment and kitchen for the runners.

Afghanistan Sc. 2. While these early stamps are called "Tiger" stamps because of the central design, we are told [1], "The first stamps of Afghanistan are known as the Lion Stamps, after the lion's head which appears in the centre of the stamps. The lion itself represents the ruler at that time Sher Ali, which translates from Dari as "Ali the Lion". Being a strict Muslim country, an image of Sher Ali himself could not be allowed on the stamps."

1. http://www.afghanphilately.co.uk/

Want to know why there's no Afghanistan Scott 1? Here's why, from http://www.afghanphilately.co.uk/

The 1868 Issue



These "stamps" first appeared in 1890 when they were brought back from Afghanistan by a German, Captain Griesbach. He showed them to Thomas Tapling, then vice-president of the Royal Philatelic Society whose collection was later to form the basis of the British Library collection. On analysing the stamps and a few covers Tapling declared that "their history seems satisfactory" and that they were "an unknown and bona fide issue of Afghanistan" apparently pre-dating the first Afghan stamp by four years. Stanley Gibbons included the stamp in their 1891 Catalogue as Afghanistan number 1. [Scott also listed the stamp as #1.] Doubts were soon raised about their authenticity. The two foremost experts of the day—Masson and Jones—concluded that they were bogus. The characters were faulty, and the shape irregular indicating an illiterate engraver. All 21 examples examined were identical, indicating a handstamp (like the 1880 issue) rather than a lithograph stamp (like the 1871 issue). The design, paper and ink were also more similar to the 1880 issue than the 1871 issue. Stanley Gibbons [and Scott] eventually deleted the stamp from their catalogue. This example has been (fraudulently) added to a letter dated 1289 (1872-73). Shown below, left to right: the 1871 stamp, Sc. 2; a computer enhanced rendition of the 1868 stamp on the cover; and the design for the 1881-1890 stamps. (Reminder: you can use the pdf magnifier tool for a closer look.)

Afghanistan Abdur Rahman Period circa 1882 cover franked on the reverse with the 1 abasi lake of the 1880/90 issue in a se-tenant pair with an 1882 redrawn issue 1 abasi lake, cancelled by pen strokes as normal.

What appeared to be long rolls of dirty rags along the wall occasionally moved, and proved to be tired-out runners trying to get a little rest on the hard floor. Scattered about everywhere in disorder were the postal packets, consisting of all sorts and sizes of packages, sewed into bags which bore wax seals and undecipherable inscriptions. The postmaster with his two assistants, squatted barefooted and cross-legged on a rug, and in approaching, a native was expected to take off his sandals. The European might keep his on, but in recognition of being extended such a great courtesy, he was expected to bow several times with right hand placed to the forehead.

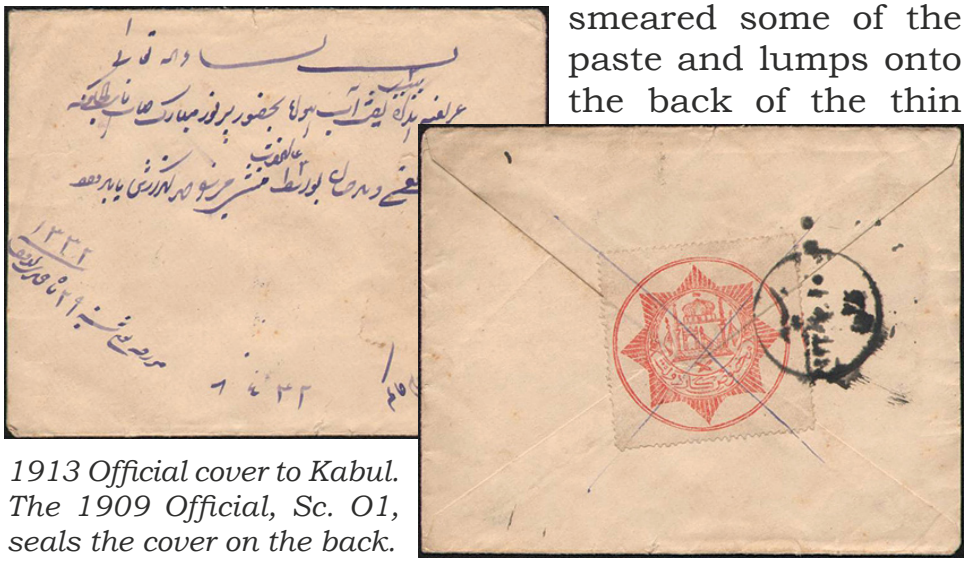
UPU 75th anniversary, Sc. 394 and 397, Tiger Head stamp and Amir Sher Ali Khan (who was Amir when the postal system was formed).

Sc. 840, 1st Tiger Head stamps, postal centenary.

The elegantly dressed postmaster and his humble assistants solemnly and silently examined the prospective mail and the latter laid

1870s cover with three cut-round examples of the 1sh black with a piece from each one either scuffed or removed as was customary to show "cancellation", used in combination with India 1/2a Blue (Sc. 31).

the letters on a rough board. One attendant then stuck his finger into a cup of very dirty and lumpy paste, smeared some of the paste and lumps onto the back of the thin



1913 Official cover to Kabul. The 1909 Official, Sc. O1, seals the cover on the back.

paper stamps, and with a clean (?) thumb pressed the stamps onto the letters. The cancellation was then applied from a wooden die in the hands of the other assistant.

Telephone lines now exist between six Afghan cities, but only within the last few years, an Amir lost his life, largely because of his efforts to introduce too much Western modernization.