

For many collectors a 'mutilated' stamp would never make it in to their albums. However, there is one collecting field where torn and otherwise damaged stamps are very much sought-after items. This article attempts to explain the unusual Afghan system of cancellation and how, despite a lack of place name, the origin of a cover can usually be deduced with a little detective work. It then describes how the Afghan postmark developed during the early years of the twentieth century up to the time the country joined the UPU in 1928.

Afghanistan: The Development of the Cancellation

By Robert Jack

Damaged stamps usually find no place in any self-respecting philatelist's album, however for collectors of one country this rule does not apply and damaged stamps are actively sought out. That country is Afghanistan where 'mutilation' was the standard form of cancellation for 20 years after its first stamp appeared in 1871. In the 1890s a dumb cancel was introduced but the first postmark incorporating a place name and date did not appear until 1907. So for these 36 years how do you tell where a letter was sent from?

When the Afghan postal service commenced in 1871, there were only three post offices. One at Kabul, one in the north of the country at Tashkurghan, and an extra-territorial post office at Peshawar in what was then the North West Frontier Province of India. Afghanistan was a strict Islamic state and so it was not permitted to feature the head of the Amir Sher Ali on the new stamps. Instead a lion's head was featured as 'Sher Ali' in Dari translates as 'Ali the Lion'. The first issues (SG 1-111) followed the same basic design – a circular stamp featuring the lion's head in the centre with surrounding text in Dari script. One common feature of the method of cancellation employed by all three offices until about 1891 was 'mutilation' or 'the bite' – the tearing off of a part of the stamp. This mutilation is not random – the text on the first issues reads 'Tax *tiket* [the Dari word for stamp] of the Kingdom of Kabul' and it is the word 'Tax' which is torn off, as by purchasing the '*tiket*' the tax has been paid. The mutilation was carried out after the stamp had been affixed to the envelope, often resulting in part of the envelope being torn away as well. This mutilation generally does not aid identification as to the post office of origin as it was common to all of them. Fortunately, as well as mutilation, each office also employed additional methods of cancellation as follows:

Kabul – (Fig 1) a straight-line pen cancel, often with a loop at the end. This is known as the 'Kabul sword stroke' as the loop resembles the hilt of a sword.

Tashkurghan – (Fig 2) a squiggle over the lion's head, which resembles the head of a trident. This is known as the '*tamma*'.

Peshawar – (Fig 3) a red seal. Always utterly illegible.

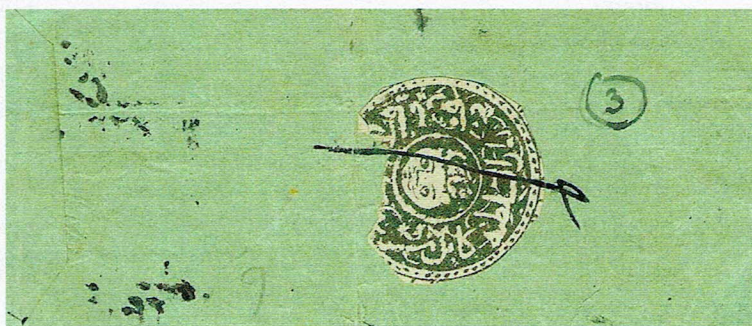


Fig 1. The Kabul swordstroke
Internal cover bearing a 1290 (1873-4) Plate B shahi (13, position 36), showing mutilation and the distinctive Kabul sword stroke

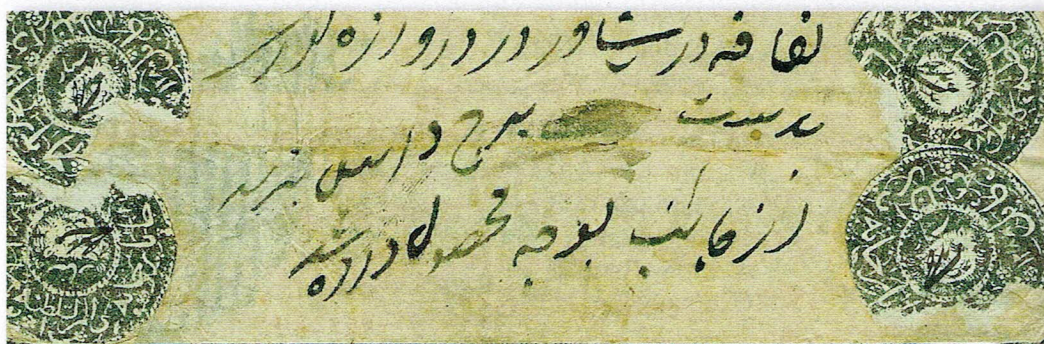


Fig 2 The Tashkurghan *tamma*
Cover to India bearing 4 x 1288 (1871-2) Plate C Sanar value (6, position 5, 8, 11, 14), each with *tamma* over the lion's head.

Truly horrendous

In 1872-3 – 1289 by the Afghan Islamic Lunar Calendar then in use – two higher values were issued (10-11). Today these are scarce stamps, not least because contemporary collectors often discarded used copies as being unworthy of putting in the album, assuming a copy with a better cancel would come along. It never did. This issue is generally obliterated – in the true sense of the word – with a brown daub said to consist of a mixture



Fig 4
1289 cancel

of mud and rifle oil (Fig 4). This analysis may be apocryphal but whatever it was composed of, the result is truly horrendous and it is not



Fig 3
A Peshawar seal cancellation on a cover to Kabul bearing 1288 (1871-2) Plate D Shahi value (4, position 6)



Fig 5 Kabul swordstroke and scissor cut.
Cover bearing 1293 (1876-77) Shahi value in brown (62, position 20)

surprising that few have survived. Fortunately, the cancel was only ever used on these two stamps.

By about 1876 each of the original methods of cancellation had evolved.

Kabul introduced new technology . . . in the form of a pair of scissors to neatly cut a segment out of the stamp rather than tear it out. This was done either with or without the 'sword stroke'.

Tashkurghan introduced a small black seal, although a manuscript *batila* cancel is also found.

Peshawar stopped using the red seal and replaced it with a red stain.

A new post office was also opened at Jalalabad, which meant a new form of cancellation—

Jalalabad – a diamond hole cut out of the stamp with blue ink smeared across.

It is Jalalabad, the office which had perhaps the most distinctive cancel of all, which is the most difficult post office to find covers from at this period.

Colour can aid identification

Sometimes, identification by method of cancellation alone fails. On the cover illustrated at Fig 9, the stamp has been mutilated, but there is no other additional cancellation method used. On issues from 1876-77 however, the colour of the stamp can also aid identification as to where a cover was posted as different coloured stamps are associated with different post offices. Gibbons *Part 16* usefully sets out which colours were used where. Unfortunately, brown stamps were used at Tashkurghan, Kabul and Jalalabad, so further help is needed to pin down where this one originated.

The next clue to look at is the postage rate at which the letter has been sent. The basic rate was 1 Shahi per postal stage. When there were just the three post offices, Kabul was in the centre, so a letter going from Kabul to either of the other two travelled one postal stage. A letter from Peshawar to Taskurghan (or vice-versa) had to pass through Kabul and so travelled two postal stages. When the new office was opened at Jalalabad – between Kabul and Peshawar – there was concern that this would double the cost of sending a letter between Kabul and Peshawar, but the authorities decided to retain that route as one postal stage. The cover in Fig 9 is franked 1 Sanar (= 2 Shahi) and it was sent to Peshawar, the gateway for onward transmission to India.

Fig 8

Cover bearing 1293 (1876-77) Shahi brownish black, with distinctive Jalalabad cancel consisting of a diamond-shaped piece cut out of the stamp, with a blue ink smear applied across the hole once the stamp had been affixed to the cover. Stamps in brownish black are described by Dietrich as 'exceedingly scarce'. Only the shahi and half rupee values have been seen used, although all values (except the shahi) are known unused. This example is position 20 on the sheet of 24.

Fig 6 Tashkurghan seal (right)
A cover bearing 1298 (1880-81) 2 Abasi dull purple (121)

(Below) Cover bearing 1298 (=1880-81) 1 Abasi dull purple (116) cancelled by Tashkurghan manuscript *batila* mark

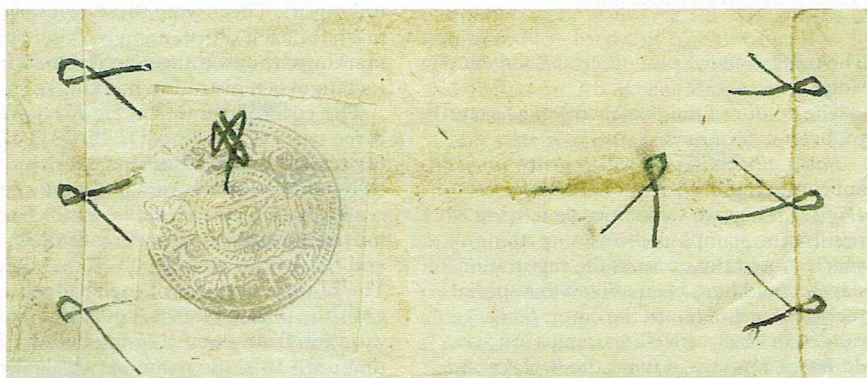


Fig 7 The Peshawar distinctive red stain cover bearing two 1293 (1876-77) Shahi types in grey (38, positions 7 and 23).

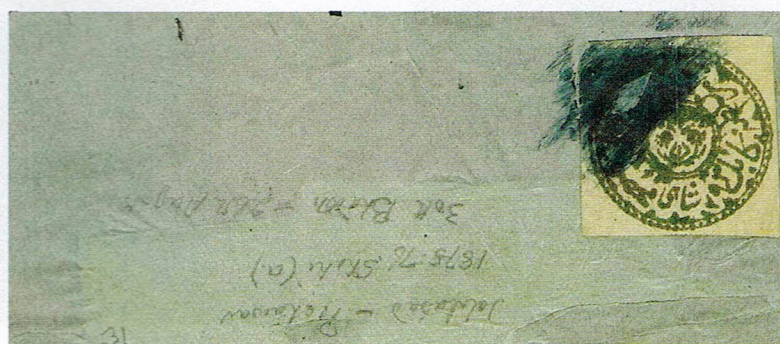




Fig 9
Note—At this time, any 'postmarks' on an Afghan cover are Indian. In this case, Peshawur 22 January; Jhelum 23 January and Bhera 24 January (1877).



Fig 10
Tashkurghan green *batila* cancel on cover bearing 1309 (1891-92) 1 Abasi grey.

So it is either a double weight letter from Kabul or Jalalabad to Peshawar, or a single weight letter from Tashkurghan to Peshawar. Afghan and Indian rates were not identical, but the $\frac{1}{2}$ Anna rate for transmission within India suggests a single weight letter within Afghanistan: so the cover is most likely from Tashkurghan.

In 1891-92 (stamps dated Islamic Lunar Year 1309), Afghanistan issued its first rectangular stamps, and at the same time introduced a cancel. However, it was a dumb cancel, a grid design which, if you have a good imagination, is said to be a geometric representation of the Dari word '*batil shod*' meaning 'cancelled'. It is known as the *batila* cancel.

Despite the lack of wording it is still possible to assign this dumb cancel to individual post offices as each used a different colour as follows:

Kabul, ruby-red (sometimes called brick-red)
Peshawar, orange-red
Tashkurghan, green

Fig 11
Kabul ruby-red *batila* cancel on cover bearing 1310 (1892-93) 1 Abasi magenta.



The newly opened post office at **Kandahar**, violet

The colour of the **Jalalabad** *batila* has not yet been determined

Batila cancels in grey with a gritty appearance and thick lines are forgeries (Fig 12). They are sometimes seen 'tying' registration stamps to covers, something which should not occur as the registration stamp would have been affixed to a special registration slip, not to the cover. *Batila* cancels in black cancelling stamps are also doubtful, however at times the *batila* cancel was used on its own to indicate that postage had been paid, without the need for stamps, and these cancels are known in black. Two occasions when this happened were reported in the British press. On 21 March 1904 the *Daily Telegraph* reported that:

'The stock of postage stamps in Afghanistan being exhausted, the Amir proposes to introduce a new issue that will be prepared on the lines of the stamps used in Europe. In default of the stamps, a postal seal is now being placed on letters.'

Two years later, on 6 March 1906, *The Times* reported that:

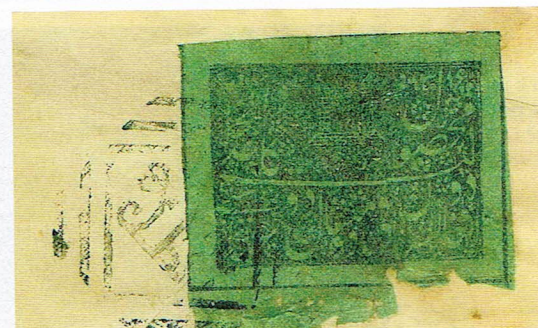
'Up to the present, the Amir's postmaster at Peshawar (India) has been in the habit of removing Kabul stamps affixed on letters coming from Afghanistan and selling these used stamps at high prices to philatelists. A new order has now been issued declaring that no stamps are to be affixed to letters, which will be marked with a four-cornered handstamp showing that the letter has paid postage. The traffic in adhesive stamps by the Amir's officials will consequently cease.'

Expansion

The new issue 'prepared on the lines of the stamps used in Europe' duly arrived in 1907 and the first postmarks to include a date and place name were introduced to coincide with them. There was also an expansion of the postal system at this time with new offices opening in Mazar-i-Sharif (1907), Herat, Khushk, Maimana and Ferah (1908), Charikar (1909) and Ghurayin, Ghazni and Gardez (exact date of opening unknown). There were three types of mark for each office, namely: regular oval markings; round transit/arrival markings; rectangular registration markings.

The cover illustrated at Fig 13 shows all three types of marking. On the oval cancels, the top line reads '*batil shod*' i.e., 'cancelled', except on the mark used in Kabul where it reads 'Mark of the Postal Service'. The top line of the circular cancel reads 'Received', and that of the rectangular cancel 'Registry'. The bottom segment of each cancel gives the place name. Again Kabul had a variation from the rest of the country in that until 1916 the name was flanked on either side by five-pointed stars. The central segment of each cancel gives the date in the format: year/month/day. The month is given as an abbreviated word, the year and day in figures. For Kabul the month is in parentheses until 1916. The year was initially given using the Islamic lunar calendar, but on 21 March 1921 (lunar year 1339), this was changed to the Islamic solar calendar (21 March was the Solar New Year's Day 1300). The changeover was not applied uniformly across the country and

Fig 12
Forged *batila*



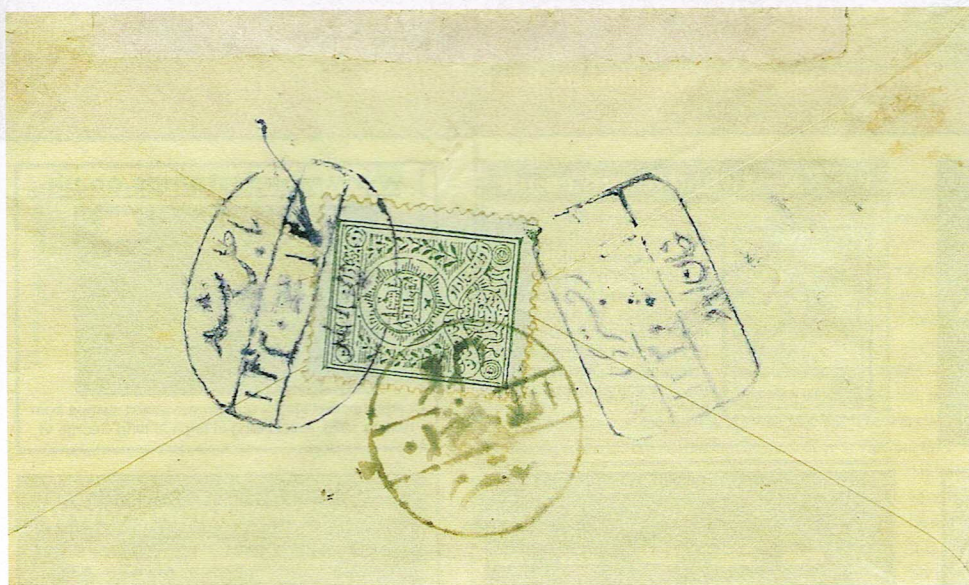


Fig 13
Registered cover from Khanabad to Kabul, 1912, with regular oval and rectangular registration marks of Khanabad, and circular transit/arrival mark of Kabul.

indeed the following year the post office in Peshawar reverted back to using the lunar calendar, which it continued using until the office was closed by the Indian authorities on 1 January 1925. As a result, it is possible to find covers which apparently arrived 39 years before they were sent, or conversely appear to take 39 years to reach their destination.

Forged postmarks

There is a forgery of the Kabul oval no stars postmark. It is usually quite indistinct and unfortunately it is frequently found, especially on items which are relatively common mint, but harder to find used... such as *tête-bêche* pairs, high face value stamps which were remaindered, and *Bacche Saqqao* provisional overprints. The date on the forged cancel is always 1321 Muharram 25, which is four years before this type of oval cancel was introduced, and 12 years before the genuine *Kabul without stars* appeared. As with the forged *batila* cancel, the ink is more grey than black and appears 'grainy' (Fig 14).

Fig 14
Forged Kabul cancel



In the mid-1920s four offices in the north of the country received new regular cancels which broke with the established system by being round instead of oval. These are easily identified as they each incorporated the national coat of arms (Fig 15). The offices known to have used this type of cancel are Mazar-i-Sharif, Qataghan, Badakshan, and Turkestan. All except Mazar are quite difficult to find.

This system of different-shaped marks for different purposes continued in use until Afghanistan joined the UPU on 1 April 1928. At that point new postmarks inscribed in French were introduced for international mail from/to Kabul and Kandahar. The date uses the western calendar with the month abbreviated in words. Initially, the date was separately impressed with a rubber stamp. Cancels may be in purple or black. After 1929, and especially from 1931, the month can be found in numbers.

Spelling mistakes (such as the missing 'A' from 'AVR' illustrated at Fig 16) are often

Fig 15
Arms cancel of Turkestan



Fig 16
UPU type



found, as are mixtures of upper and lower case letters (e.g., 'NoveM'). The year may be given as one digit or two. Clearly struck cancels with legible dates are uncommon. The equivalent KABOUL ARRIVEE postmark is rare with the DEPART mark usually being employed even on incoming mail. All Kandahar marks are difficult.

The old-shaped cancels continued in use for internal mail until replaced in the 1930s.

References and further reading

Robert Jack is the author of the newly released *Afghanistan 1901-1933, A Specialised Catalogue*

The book covers stamps (including plate flaws, errors, proofs, specimens and forgeries), covers, postal stationery, postcards, postmarks and postal rates. 98pp, A4 spiral bound, full colour.

Price £29.50 + p&p

ISBN 978-0-9562630-1-8.

Available from: Robert Jack, 97 Burton Stone Lane, York, YO30 6BZ; email afghanphilately@aol.com

Other titles to consider

Patterson, *Afghanistan, Its Twentieth Century Postal Issues*, Collectors Club, New York (1964)

Uyehara and Dietrich, *Afghan Philately 1871-1989*, George Alevizos, Santa Monica (1995)

Wilkins, *Afghanistan 1840-2002 Postal History Handbook*, Royal Philatelic Society of Victoria (2002)