

ETHIOPIA 1895-1913

Postal History of Ethiopia during the Reign of Emperor Menelik II

This six frame exhibit presents Ethiopia's postal history from the opening of the first post offices, in 1895, to the end of 1913 when Emperor Menelik II, founder of the Ethiopia Posts, died. In the next three years, there were no changes in the Ethiopian Posts until 1917 when an overprinted set of stamps announced that Ras Tafari, future Emperor Haile Selassie I, had become Regent.

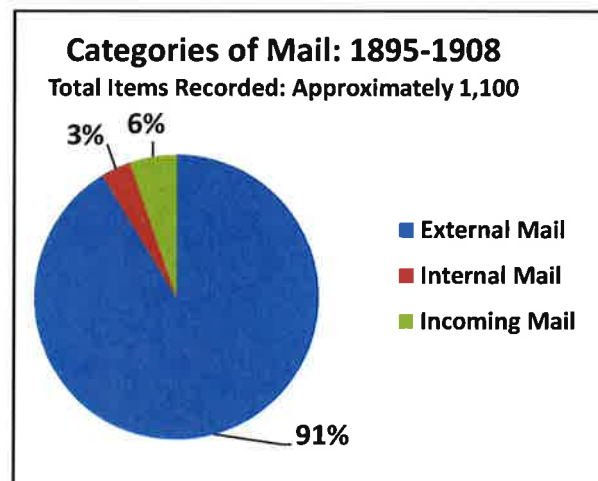
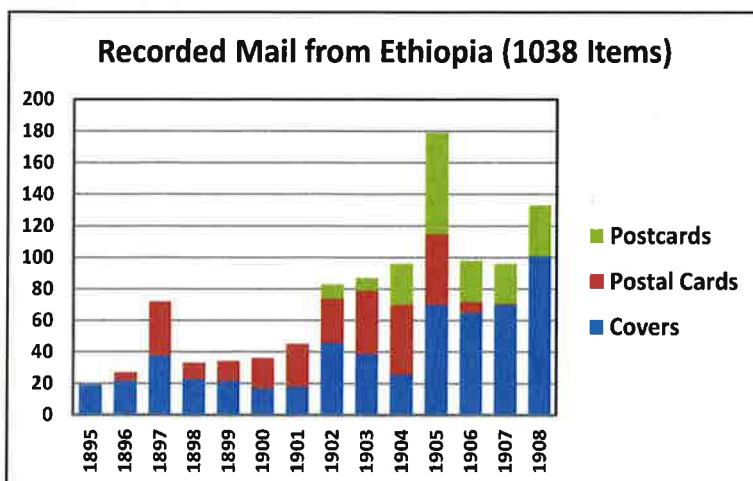
Ethiopia was not a European colony in 1895. As an independent nation, Ethiopia's postal history followed a unique path that was shaped by the French, who strove to gain influence in Ethiopia, by Alfred Ilg, Emperor Menelik's Swiss advisor and owner of the Ethiopian Posts into 1906, and by Jean-Adolph Michel, the Swiss Director of the Ethiopian Posts in 1904 into 1908. Then, again by the French who reorganized the Posts.

The material is organized chronologically and is anchored in the different overprints that were issued annually starting in 1901. Each frame, as listed below, displays a distinct phase in the evolution of the Ethiopian Posts as indicated with **headlines in blue**. Included in the exhibit are rare covers from the consular mail services of the French, British, Italian, and American Legations that deprived the Ethiopian Posts of much needed revenues. Particularly important or rare covers are **framed in blue**. Research articles written and published by the exhibitor in **Menelik's Journal** are listed in blue at the bottom of the relevant page.

Frame 1: Ethiopian Posts - French Management [1895-1899] **Frame 4:** Imperial Ethiopian Posts [1906-1908]
Frame 2: Independent Ethiopian Posts [1899-1904] **Frame 5:** Reorganization & U.P.U. Membership [1908]
Frame 3: Ethiopian Posts Managed by Michel [1904-1906] **Frame 6:** 1909 Issue and Legation Mail [1909-1913]

Ethiopian Philatelic Society member, Luciano Maria, has for two decades recorded covers and cards from Ethiopia's pre-U.P.U. period (1895-1908) that are preserved in collections or have been illustrated in auction catalogues in the past several decades. So far, about 1,100 items have been recorded from those 14 years. They provide a picture of the growth of the Ethiopian Posts and a measure of the rarity of items prior to 1902 (see graphs below). Internal mail (38 items) and incoming mail (61 items) are particularly rare prior to 1905. This exhibit includes several of those rare items as well as many one-of-a-kind or two-of-a-kind covers and cards; many of them discovered in recent years and never exhibited. A total of 140 items are exhibited, including 10 internal covers, 18 incoming covers, and 10 Legation items.

For the first time in philatelic history, the commercial use of all stamp issues with their various overprints (regular, provisional, and postage due) issued in 1895-1913 along with all postal cards with their various overprints issued in the same period, are show-cased in this exhibit – a feat previously not achieved by gold-medal winning exhibitors of classic Ethiopia in the past.



ETHIOPIA 1895-1913

Ethiopian Posts - French Management

FIRST MAIL FROM ADDIS ABABA

MAY 29, 1895

Ethiopian stamps were used for the first time on January 29, 1895 in Harar on covers addressed to France to announce the opening of the Ethiopian Posts, but it had not yet been organized. Regular mail couriers between Addis Ababa and Harar were not organized until May 1895. Mail from Addis Ababa was carried by donkeys for 10-12 days over 320 miles to the French Catholic Mission in Harar, responsible for the mail between Harar and Djibouti that was carried by camels. In 1895 to March 1896 the mail was sent from Djibouti to Obock and then by ship to Europe, directly or via Aden. The mail between Addis Ababa and Harar was managed by the French Legation in Addis Ababa.



Seal of Empress Taitu on the flap.

[Reduced 50%]

ONLY KNOWN SURVIVING COVER FROM THE FIRST MAIL FROM ADDIS ABABA MAY 29 (?), 1895

From Empress Taitu to Alfred Hg

Ethiopian postage: 2 guerches canceled Entotto between May 29 and June 3 based on the most likely Amharic date in the faint postmark.

No fee for internal registration; it did not exist.

International postage: 75 centimes Somali Protectorate (double weight 50c + registration 25c)

Djibouti, June 14

Obock, June 16

Then to Aden and British steamer to Brindisi

Modane à Paris, July 8

Arrival: Zurich, July 9

ETHIOPIA 1895-1913

Ethiopian Posts - French Management

EARLY COMMERCIAL MAIL

1895

Only two post office existed in Ethiopia until May 1899 when a private Independent Ethiopian Posts was organized: one at the French Catholic Mission in Harar; the other at the French Legation in Addis Ababa. The earliest commercial mail was sent by merchants in Harar to their counterparts in Djibouti. [Only 19 covers have been recorded from 1895.](#)

POSTAGE RATES

Letters (domestic and abroad) up to 15 grams: 2 guerches; 2 guerches for each additional 15 grams

Letters to Djibouti treated as domestic mail and did not require franking with Somali Coast stamps

Letters addressed outside Ethiopia required franking with Somali Coast stamps:

25 centimes for a single weight letter; 25 centimes for next weight unit; 25 centimes for registration

10 centimes for postcards



December 4, 1895

Harar to Djibouti

2 guerches (4*1/2g)

Single weight

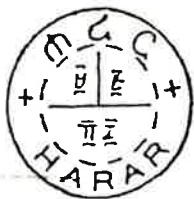
Only Ethiopian franking required for Djibouti.

FIRST POSTMARKS

JANUARY / MAY 1895

The first two cancelors had the date and town in Amharic on top and the town in Latin below.

The postmarks from Harar and Entotto (used in Addis Ababa) are typically faint making dates difficult to read.



HARAR

Used:

January 29, 1895 to
May 17, 1896.



ENTOTTO

Used in Addis Ababa:
May 29 (?), 1895 to
January 1896

ETHIOPIA 1895-1913

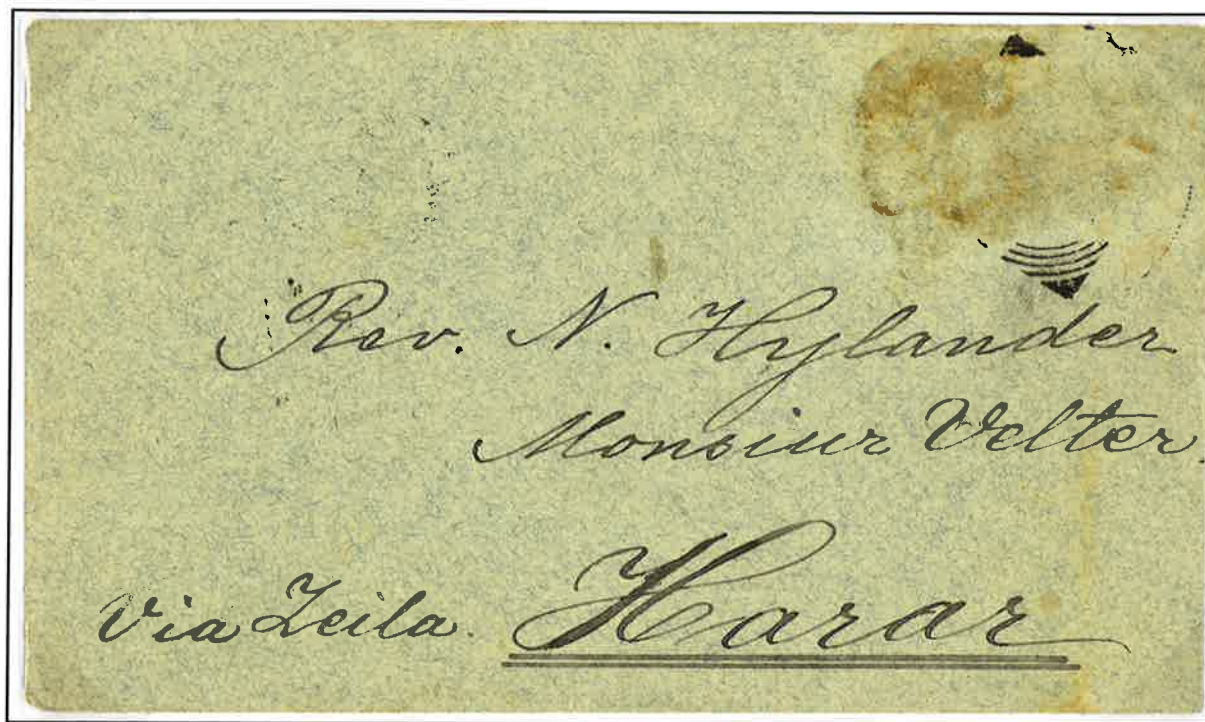
Ethiopian Posts - French Management

EARLIEST INCOMING MAIL

MARCH 1895

Only one incoming cover has been recorded from 1895. It arrived in Harar by private camel caravan from Aden's sub-post office in Zaila in the British Somali Protectorate. It was not handled by the Ethiopian Posts; it had not yet been organized in March 1895, hence no arrival marks. The Harar-Zaila route became known as the "British Way" and was used into 1904 for mail that originated in Harar and in Addis Ababa franked with Ethiopian and Indian stamps.

ONLY RECORDED INCOMING COVER IN 1895



February 18, 1895, Lamu to Harar: transit in Zanzibar on February 21 and in Aden on March 12.
Delivered to the Italian Consul in Harar addressed to Swedish Missionary Nils Hylander.

The missing stamp was likely a 2 1/2 anna Imperial British East Africa Company stamp.



[Scan reduce to 90%]

Cover sent by Edna Hylander (EH), Nils Hylander's wife.



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ETHIOPIA 1895-1913

Ethiopian Posts - French Management

ITALIAN POW & REGISTERED MAIL

1896

Italy had invaded Ethiopia from Eritrea in 1895. Menelik's victory at Adwa on March 1, 1896 crushed the Italians and preserved Ethiopia's independence. Over 1,900 Italians were taken prisoner and held until a peace treaty was signed in October 1896. Most of the recorded mail from 1896 was sent by Italian POWs franked with Ethiopian stamps only. Djibouti stamps were not sold in Addis Ababa; residents had to obtain them privately from Djibouti. The POW mail was marked as under franked in Djibouti since Ethiopia's stamps were not valid internationally.



ITALIAN POW MAIL

August ?, 1896

Addis Ababa to Ancona

2 guerches

Internal postage

(1g on front, 1g on back)

Canceled ANKOBER

Although marked postage due in Djibouti the tax was not paid. Italy had decreed that POW mail was exempt from postage due.

ANKOBER CANCELOR

The Entotto cancelor had been temporarily lost in 1896; a cancelor made for Ankober, the former capital, was used instead in August and September.

Only 4 covers recorded canceled with the ANKOBER cancelor.



REGISTERED MAIL

August ?, 1896

Addis Ababa to Zurich

4+2 guerches = 75 centimes

Stamps canceled ANKOBER

Ethiopian registration did not exist.

75c Djibouti stamp on reverse
(double weight + registration 25c)

R for Registered applied in Djibouti.
Manuscript registration number "287"

Less than 30 covers recorded from 1896.



ETHIOPIA 1895-1913

Ethiopian Posts - French Management

POSTAL CARDS & NEW CANCELORS

1896

Postal cards were introduced in September 1896 and were used into 1905 when they sold out. The 1 guerche card was used for mail abroad; the 1/2 and 1/4 guerche values were intended for internal use. New cancelors for Harar and Entotto arrived with the cards. The Harar cancelor was first used in 1896; the Entotto cancelor was not used until 1897. Djibouti's port opened in February 1896. The mail was now sent to Europe from Djibouti instead of Obock; a change noticed on mail from Ethiopia by the absence of transit marks from Obock.



EARLIEST RECORDED USE OF POSTAL CARD IN ADDIS ABABA

September 24, 1896
Addis Ababa to Zurich
1 guerche with faint Entotto postmark partially covered by 25c Djibouti stamp paying registration next to 10c post card rate.

EARLIEST RECORDED USE OF POSTAL CARD IN HARAR

December 9, 1896
Harar to Paris
1g postal card canceled with Harar's new cancelor.
Earliest known date:
October 28, 1896.
Used into December 1911.



Card sent by the French technician installing the telegraph line to Addis Ababa.
10c Djibouti stamp to pay post card rate not applied.

ETHIOPIA 1895-1913

Ethiopian Posts - French Management

POSTAL CARD USED TO DJIBOUTI

1896

The 1/2 guerche card was intended for internal mail between Addis Ababa and Harar but it was also valid to Djibouti. The green 1/4 guerche card was intended for messages inside towns but has not been recorded used that way; its earliest recorded use is in 1898 addressed abroad.



EARLIEST RECORDED USE ½ GUERCHE CARD

November 24, 1896
Addis Ababa to Djibouti
Correct rate for card to Djibouti
Harar transit December 5.

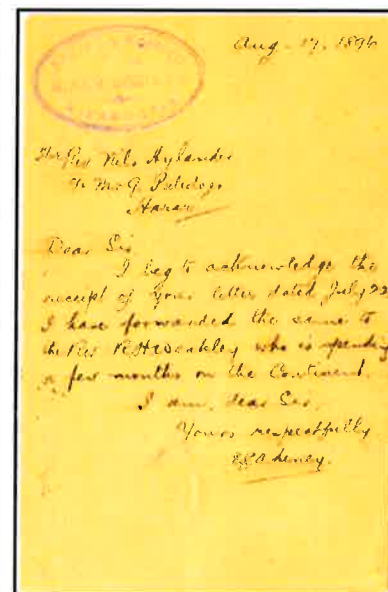


[Reduced 40%]

INCOMING MAIL VIA ZAILA

AUGUST 1896

Only one incoming item has been recorded from 1896, a card that arrived in Harar from Alexandria via Aden and Zaila.



[Reduced 50%]

August 17, 1896, Alexandria to Harar: Private camel caravan from Zaila to Harar.

ETHIOPIA 1895-1913

Ethiopian Posts - French Management

COMMERCIAL MAIL FROM HARAR

1897

The post office at the French Catholic Mission in Harar received its first supply of Djibouti stamps in February 1897.



June 24, 1897

Harar to Lyon

2 guerches, Single Weight

The French PO in Harar would later supply Addis Ababa with stamps from Djibouti since Ethiopia's stamps were not valid internationally; all mail for abroad had to be franked with stamps from a U.P.U. country.

The Ethiopian stamps were canceled in Harar and Addis Ababa; the Somali Coast stamps in Djibouti until June 1908 when both the Ethiopian and Somali Coast stamps were canceled in Ethiopia.

RARE USE OF A LION DESIGN 4 GUERCHES STAMP

March 10, 1897

Harar to Djibouti

4 guerches

Double Weight

Somali Coast stamps not needed for Djibouti.



ETHIOPIA 1895-1913

Ethiopian Posts - French Management

EMERGENCY USE OF MALTESE CROSS IN ADDIS ABABA

JANUARY-MARCH 1897

Entotto's first cancelor was lost at the end of 1896; a mute "Maltese Cross" was used instead for three months to cancel the mail in Addis Ababa until the new Entotto cancelor (delivered in 1896) began to be used in April 1897.



MALTESE CROSS CANCEL

Manuscript dated in Addis Ababa, February 24, 1897

Addis Ababa to Zurich

Canceled with "Maltese Cross" in Addis Ababa.

Franking should have been 35c (10c post card rate + 25c registration).

It was franked 50 centimes due to a lack of 25 centimes stamps in Addis Ababa.



Used in Addis Ababa:
January-March, 1897

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Ethiopian Posts - French Management

NEW ENTOTTO CANCELOR / MAIL FROM ADDIS ABABA

APRIL 1897

A new Entotto cancelor replaced the first Entotto cancelor in April 1897 when the temporary use of the Maltese Cross in January-March 1897 in Addis Ababa ceased. There were two Entotto cancelors with minor differences in the Amharic. The first one was used from April 3, 1897 to August 1899; the second from August 12, 1899 to January 1901.

EARLIEST RECORDED USE OF THE NEW ENTOTTO CANCELOR



April 3, 1897

Addis Ababa (Entotto) to Basel

2 guerches for internal postage

50 centimes for registered, single weight cover

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Ethiopian Posts - French Management

FIRST RECORDED INTERNAL MAIL

1897

French scientific and diplomatic missions arrived in 1897 to establish ties with Menelik. Members of the French missions corresponded with each other while in Ethiopia. This is the earliest recorded internal mail which is very rare. Only 38 internal covers and postal cards have been recorded to date from 1895 through 1908, half of them in 1908.



EARLIEST RECORDED INTERNAL MAIL

TWO OF THREE RECORDED INTERNAL COVERS FROM 1897

May 12, 1897

Harar to Addis Ababa

2 guerches, internal postage

Arrived Entotto May 25

Redirected to Paris but delivered in Harar, June 5

(postmarks on back)

Bonvalot was the leader of a French scientific mission but after arriving in Addis Ababa he left it. The redirected letter caught up with him in Harar on his way back to France.



June 25, 1897

Addis Ababa to Harar

2 guerches, internal postage

Harar arrival on back: July 4

Comte de Choiseul was the Italian Red Cross representative sent to deal with Italian POWs.

ETHIOPIA 1895-1913

Ethiopian Posts - French Management

ITALIAN RED CROSS MAIL VIA ZAILA—THE BRITISH WAY

MARCH 1897

Ethiopia's peace treaty with Italy (October 1896) opened the way for the Italian Red Cross to repatriate Italian POWs from Addis Ababa via Harar and Zaila. One Italian Red Cross camp was located outside Harar in 1897 to assist the prisoners to get to Zaila where ships waited to return them to Italy and Eritrea. Mail was taken to Zaila and forwarded to Aden where the Indian stamps were canceled.



[Reduced 50%]

March ?, 1897

Harar to Rome via Zaila and Aden

2 1/2 Anna letter rate

Italian Red Cross Seal:

"Spedizione del Prigionieri d'Africa"

Rome arrival, April 2

MAIL FROM THE BRITISH MISSION TO MENELIK VIA ZAILA

MARCH-JUNE 1897

Britain sent a diplomatic mission to Emperor Menelik in 1897. It went from Zaila via Harar to Addis Ababa. A special British courier service was organized from Zaila for the duration of the Mission (March 19-June 9). It was suspended when the Mission returned to Zaila. It was resumed as a consular mail service after the British Agency had been established in Addis Ababa in 1898. It was used by British subjects and competed with the Ethiopian Posts.

Pre-canceled in Harar
April 6, 1897 two days
before the mission left for
Addis Ababa. Written on
the way to Addis Ababa.

1 Anna post card rate
Indian stamps canceled in
Zaila with mute B
Zaila, April 26
Aden, April 29
Suez, May 5
Cairo, May 5

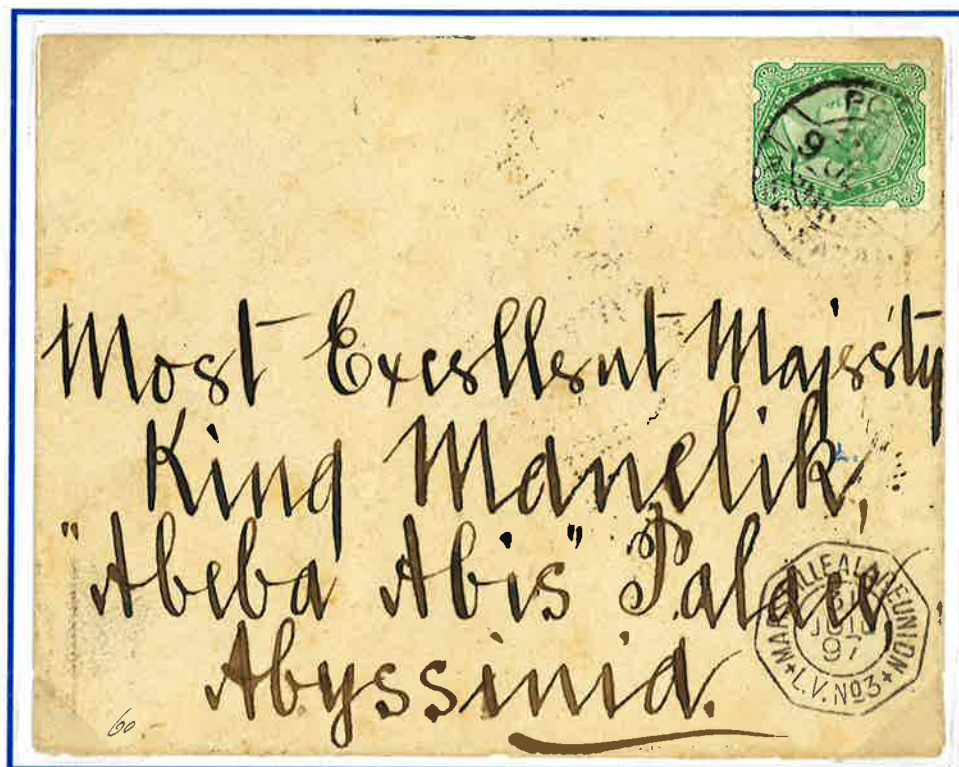
Message on back written
in French with hieroglyphs.
Card sent by Captain
Tristram Speedy, the
Mission's translator.



INCOMING MAIL TO EMPEROR MENELIK

JULY 1897

The British Diplomatic Mission to Menelik in 1897 was escorted by a contingent of Indian soldiers. Its success was reported in the news, which likely inspired the sender of this rare incoming cover from India to Emperor Menelik II.



July 9, 1897

Poona, India to Emperor Menelik in Addis Ababa

Franked Indian 2 Annas 6 Pies, single weight

Bombay-Suez Sea Post Office, July ?, on back

Suez, July 26, on back

"Marseille à La Reunion L.V. No 3", July 31

No arrival in Djibouti were the steamer arrived August 5 or 6

The cover received special treatment in Djibouti since it was addressed to Emperor Menelik.

ETHIOPIA 1895-1913

Ethiopian Posts - French Management

MAIL FROM ADDIS ABABA AND HARAR

1898

Fewer visitors came to Ethiopia in 1898; the volume of mail declined. The recorded number of surviving covers and cards dropped to 34 in 1898 from 72 in 1897, suggesting a decline in the volume of mail of around 50%. Relations between Alfred Ilg and the French Colonial Administrators deteriorated in 1898. By the end of the year they had agreed that Ilg would organize an Independent Ethiopian Posts between Addis Ababa and Harar. The French PO in Harar would hand over incoming mail to the Ethiopian PO in Harar.



August 20, 1898

Harar to Paris

2 guerches internal postage

25c Côte des Somali on back

canceled August 25

August 12, 1898

Addis Ababa to France

No Ethiopian Franking

25 centimes

(15c + 10c on back)

Harar, September 5

Djibouti, September 8

FIRST CIRCULAR

DJIBOUTI POSTMARK

Djibouti introduced a new circular cancelor in 1898 with a solid inner circle now used to cancel the Ethiopian mail.



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Ethiopian Posts - French Management

MAIL FROM HARAR

1898 / 1899

The French restricted the Catholic Mission and the Legation in Addis Ababa in early 1899 to accept mail from the public except mail by French subjects, Alfred Ilg, and the Russian Legation. Ethiopian stamps were not required on this mail. Mail from early 1899 is scarce since Alfred Ilg's Independent Ethiopian Posts between Addis Ababa and Harar was not organized provisionally until May 1899 and permanently as of August 22, 1899.



October 14, 1898

Harar to France

Registered

50 centimes on back

No Ethiopian franking

Harar departure

marks on both covers

February 16, 1899

Harar to France

25 centimes

No Ethiopian franking.

Only mail by French subjects was permitted to be transported by the French Legation's couriers; Ethiopian postage was not needed.

SECOND CIRCULAR DJIBOUTI CANCELOR

A additional circular Djibouti postmark was also introduced in 1898 with "Djibouti" below.



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Ethiopian Posts - French Management

MAIL FROM THE RUSSIAN LEGATION IN ADDIS ABABA

1899

Russians in Addis Ababa were allowed to use the French Legation's mail couriers between Addis Ababa and Harar in 1899 when the Ethiopian Posts, managed by the French, restricted the public's use of its Posts. The Russians did not need to frank the mail with Ethiopian stamps since the mail was carried by the French Legation's mail couriers.

MAIL FROM THE RUSSIAN MISSION TO ETHIOPIA ONE OF THREE COVERS TO RUSSIA RECORDED FROM 1899



June 1899

Addis Ababa to Tikhvin Gub,
Novgorod via St. Petersburg in Russia
Registered

Cover carried by the French Legation's
courier; Ethiopian postage not needed.

Dr. Nicolas Brontzine came to Ethiopia
in October 1898 and became Menelik's
doctor. He returned to Russia in 1900.