

## Obock and Djibouti in the Age of Menelik II

Stamps as artwork shape how abstract countries are imagined. Postal routes are evidence of the infrastructure that makes them possible. Who was using the large, evocative stamps issued for Obock and Djibouti in 1894? Then, they were two neighboring French possessions soon fused, in 1896, into French Somaliland. Were they just propaganda glorifying a bleak, sparsely-settled colonial outpost while raising funds from collectors? Most were just canceled to order, but not all. This exhibit is an exploration of the postal routes where some were actually used.

Djibouti was at a crossroads. Ships stopped there between the Suez Canal and destinations in the Indian Ocean and beyond. Also, mail from Abyssinia/Ethiopia passed through Djibouti. Until it joined the Universal Postal Union (UPU) in 1908, French colonial stamps were added for further passage.

As for the stamps, the higher values were primarily for revenue or for collectors. The infamous triangles and diamonds were all printed 1893-1894 on the same quadrille paper left over from an experimental French 15c stamp. The squares are evident in the selvage in this millésime:



Parallel sets were issued for each town: the Colony of Obock and the Protectorate of Djibouti. They are what draws collectors to this area, and so are indispensable as an introduction to this exhibit. Here is an example of each design. The drawn perforations on imperforate stamps were as much a novelty as the shapes.



The lower values did find some postal use, though as for many colonial stamps, the rates were aspirational. Those for the Colony of Obock depicted Afar warriors. Those for the Protectorate of Djibouti depicted the town from three perspectives. The stamps include the Ethiopian Amharic script, which is evidence that the colonists' ambitions were already looking inland.



**TIMEFRAME**

In 1894, the same year most of the unusual stamps were issued, the colonial government relocated from Obock to Djibouti, a more promising site for a port. Also, the Abyssinian Emperor Menelik II hired some European contractors led by Alfred Ilg to organize infrastructure including a railroad and a postal system. Most were Swiss, as Switzerland was not among the threatening colonial powers. As Ethiopia emerged as a state capable of asserting its independence from the European colonizing powers, Djibouti developed as its primary outlet to the rest of the world. Defining this exhibit in terms of Menelik II's reign allows for eventual inclusion of material from his coronation in 1889 to his death in 1913, as well as stamps other than the quadrille pictorials.

**TAKEAWAYS**

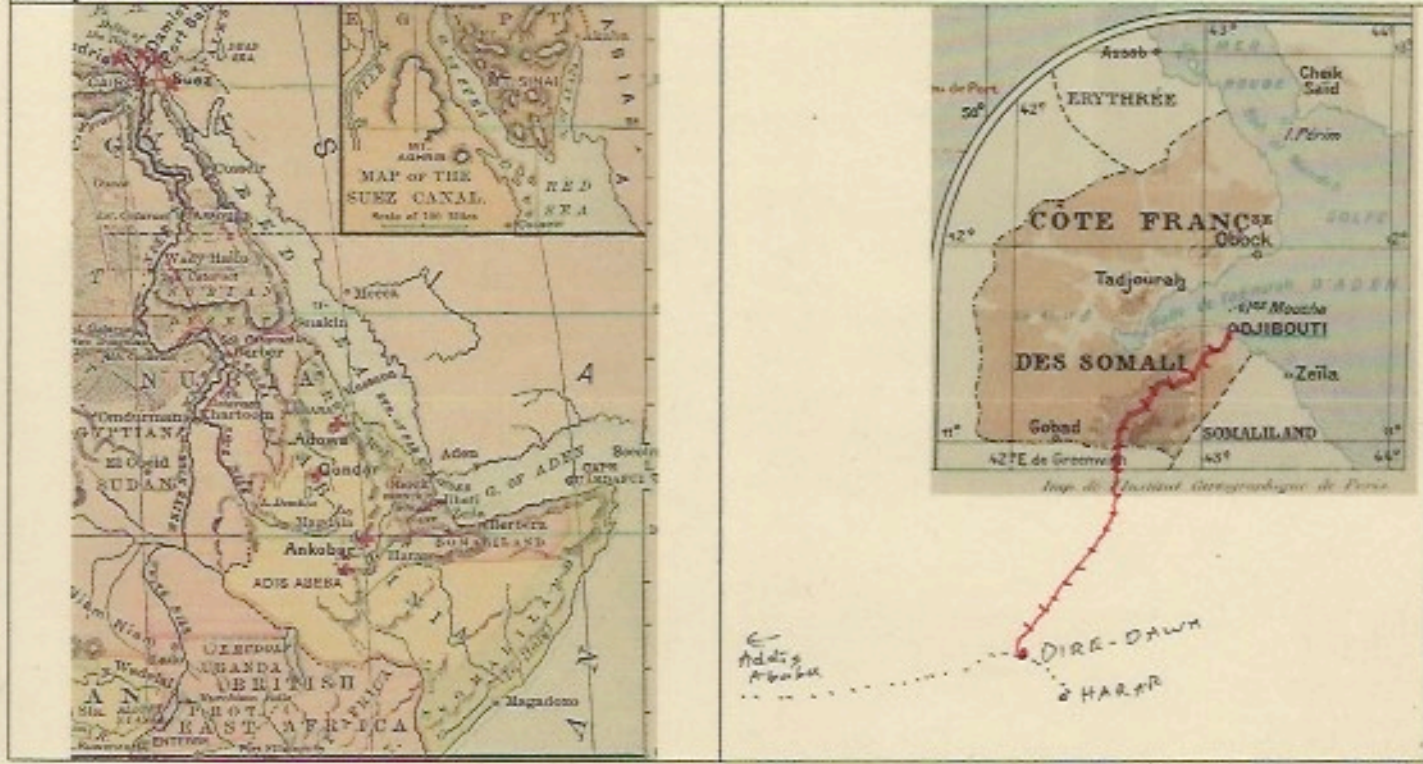
**Blurry Boundaries:** The stories of Obock, Djibouti, the French Somali Coast, and early Abyssinia are inseparable, even if the catalogs treat them as distinct countries. When the French moved their main port in the region, they took a stock of Obock stamps with them, so most were actually used in Djibouti. Abyssinian stamps prior to 1908 are locals analogous to those in Morocco. Local rates applied for traffic between Ethiopian cities and Djibouti.

**Blurry Origin:** Abyssinian postal stationary with Somali Coast stamps is often mistaken by auction houses for mail that originated in Ethiopia. Such cards may be spurious as artifacts of Abyssinian postal history, but are legitimate examples of mail from Djibouti.

**Stamp Design Romanticized a Bleak Outpost.** The artwork in an Orientalist style played into European fantasies of the exotic, though visitors found the port towns underwhelming. Stamps of the French Somali Coast might have inspired young collectors to grow up to be colonial officials.

# MAP OF THE REGION

Maps from 1896 and later:



## Towns relevant to this exhibit:

- Aden:** Main regional port. A British establishment, then attached to British India.
- Adowa:** Site of 1896 battle where Abyssinia defeated Italy and established its independence.
- Dir(r)e-Dawa:** Railroad stop close to Harar. Opened 1902. Site of French post office 1906.
- Djibouti:** Founded in 1888. Capital of French Somaliland 1896.
- Addis Ababa/ Entotto:** Capital of Abyssinia since 1887. Name change 1901. The railroad reached there in 1917. Entotto is the former name, which continued to appear in postmarks.
- Harar:** Ancient fortified trading post. French post office at Catholic Mission. Being too far uphill, the railroad stopped below it, at Dire-Dawa.
- Obock:** first colonized as a French alternative coaling station to British Aden. Britain had denied France access in wartime.
- Perim:** Island in Red Sea, belonging to Aden. Telegraph line from Obock.
- Port Saïd:** Suez Canal. Stamps of the French Office there were briefly used in Dire Dawa.
- Zeila:** Port in (British) Somaliland. Djibouti replaced it as Harar's caravan link to the sea. Some Abyssinian mail used British India stamps with a Zeila postmark.

## REGIONAL MAIL: 1897 Obock Postal Stationary to Perim

Mail from Obock is rare enough, but ships were already stopping there to restock coal. The passengers and crew would buy stamps and send letters home. To the right is a French General Colonies stamp from 1889. Most such postmarks are CTO. This exception is exceedingly rare.



Mail from Obock to an almost local destination is even rarer. Most communication was between colonies and the colonizing power, rather than between neighboring colonies of different countries.

This cover is groupe-type postal stationary, and is addressed to Alfred Rizzo at the Eastern Telegraph Company on the island of Perim. Perim was a rival British coaling stop, but it was also a station for the telegraph cable from Suez to Bombay. In 1889 there was an agreement to construct a cable from Perim to Obock. In 1895, that cable was extended to Djibouti. After France closed its post office in Obock in 1899, a few staff stayed on to maintain the cable.



At 5c, the rate was for printed matter. According to the previous owner (Ed Grabowski), the timing suggests a Christmas greeting. It was sent Dec 17, 1897. The backstamp is Aden Jan 6, 1898. Perim was administered through Aden.

The recipient's name appears again on a beautiful cover sent to him in Cairo, later in this exhibit. He was later listed among the non-career staff employed at the British Consulate-General in Istanbul, and had been born there.

### PAQUEBOT MAIL

Paquebots, or packet boats, were steamships carrying mail and passengers along defined routes following regular schedules. Each ship had its own distinct postmark. Djibouti was rarely anyone's final destination but it was a stop for coal and food, and passengers could send letters back.

Here is a registered cover from the company building the railroad into Ethiopia. It is addressed to the Princess of Monaco, Alice Heine, at the Chateau of Haut-Buisson. Sent Dec 31, 1900, Arriving Jan. 15, 1901. Note the paquebot mark for the Reunion to Marseilles line, Line U, Boat #2. 40c paid for the registered rate.



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## SURCHARGES

Registered and postmarked Feb 27, 1903 to Cairo, carried on paquebot Line N, boat #2. The addressee, Alfred Rizzo, is the same as for the 1897 Perim cover. It is too beautiful to not be philatelic, but the postal rate is correct: 50 centimes for registered mail to a non-French UPU country. One 25c Obock stamp still in stock on the back. A total of 25c in stamps that were surcharged with ordinary rates, as the original values were unrealistically high, especially a high-value triangle. Backstamps are from Suez and Cairo.



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**BISECTS and  
PRINTED MATTER**

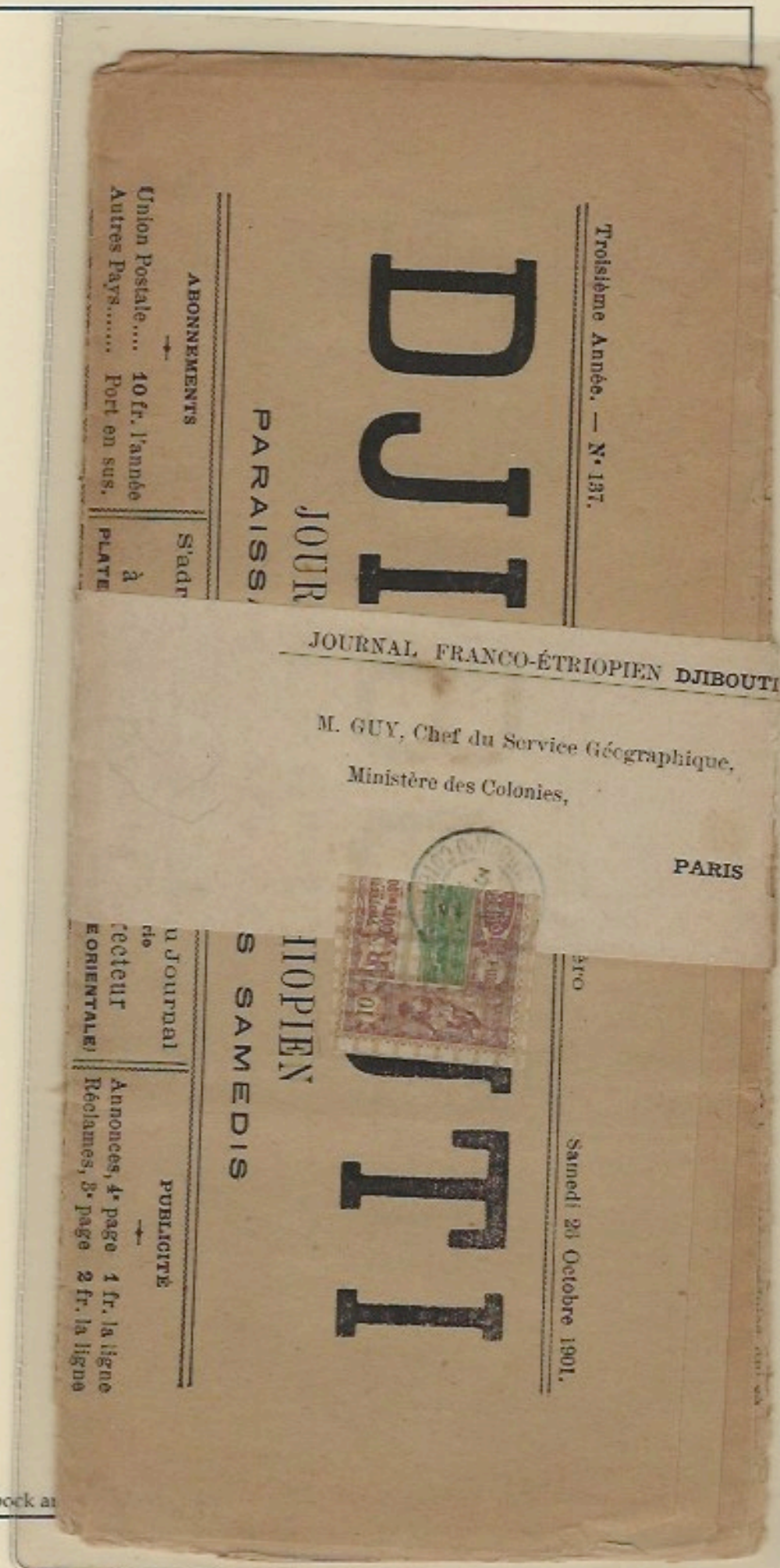
Stamps of Djibouti and Obock were bisected due to a shortage in June 1901. They were occasionally used until 1903. Stamps were split in half so a 10c stamp would become two 5c stamps.

**1901: Journal.**

Rate for printed matter. In this case, it is an issue of *Djibouti: Journal Franco-Ethiopien*, published in that city from 2 February 1899 to 10 October 1903. It covered gossip from Ethiopia.

Postmark is Nov 3, 1901. The issue is Oct 26. It is addressed to M. Guy, chief of geographic service for the Ministry of Colonies.

Obock at

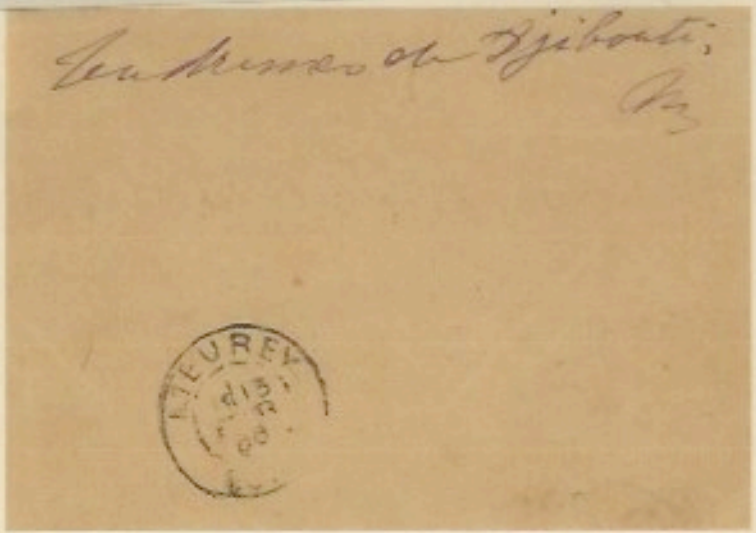






These postal stationary cards are often mistaken in auction catalogs for mail originating in Ethiopia. If there are a couple of years between the Ethiopian and Djibouti postmarks, and if the message says "greetings from Djibouti", it was not really sent from Ethiopia. Mail by camel or mule, still the predominant means of transportation, does not take quite that long.

Here is one using a 10 centimes postcard rate. The stamp is from the residual groupe-type stock of Obock:



Alas the inscription is only a greeting from Djibouti. The tragedy of so much mail from the period is how little people had to say about the places they lived and visited.



These two items are among the 11 known postal stationary cards sent from Ethiopia at the 1 guerche rate in 1899.



Unidentified woman, Alfred Ilg, Otto Gattiker, Fanny Ilg.

Photo: Völkerkundemuseum der Universität Zürich. Via <https://www.africantrain.org/>

These specific cards are discussed in Ulf Lindahl, "Two Post Office Pioneers: Henri Mühle and Otto Gattiker." *Menelik's Journal*, Vol 34, #1, 2018. The context was establishing the timing of Gattiker's stay in Ethiopia and his activity as a photographer.

**LETTERS FROM ETHIOPIA VIA DJIBOUTI: BOSTA**

The first Ethiopian stamps were really private locals that took mail as far as Djibouti, where a Somali Coast stamp was added for the journey to a UPU member. The locals were printed in France, designed by Lagrange, engraved by Mouchon. Most were sold to collectors by Maury at a steep discount. Unfortunately, someone brought a trunk of them to Ethiopia so as to cheat nascent postal service. As a solution, the postmaster overprinted them, changed annually.

From April 1, 1902- April 15, 1903, the overprint was "Bosta" in Amharic, meaning 'postage'. The cover is addressed to Mme Fanny Ilg, wife of Alfred Ilg, and sister of Otto Gattiger, sender of the previous cards, who at that point was back in Switzerland. It was stamped in Addis Ababa Dec 6, 1902; Djibouti 22 December 1902; Line N, Boat 6 on Jan 2, 1903. Zurich Jan 12.



After their period of validity, the postmaster Michel effectively forged the overprints, but used different color inks, and corrected some of the Amharic punctuation.

## LETTERS FROM ETHIOPIA: DAGMAWI

The railroad station reached Dire-Dawa, in the plain below Harar. France set up a post office there. Menelik refused to allow extension of the Djibouti office in Ethiopian territory, so France attached it to its office in Port Saïd. In 1906-8, stamps of Port Saïd and also of Levant were used in Dire-Dawa, Harar, and Addis Ababa.

The "Dagmawi" overprint, meaning "the second", as in Menelik II, was valid in 1907. Only three known covers have this 1 guerche overprint\*. This is the only commercial use, to a mining journal in Halle, Germany: Den verlag von Kali, Erz, und Kohle (The publishing house of Potash, Ore, and Coal); Aug. 1907. The sender was likely affiliated with a group of Germans hired by Menelik to coordinate mining operations.



On the back is a Djibouti transit mark.

Same postmark on Levant used only in Ethiopia:



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\* Lindati (2001) Menelik's Journal VI XVII, No. 3

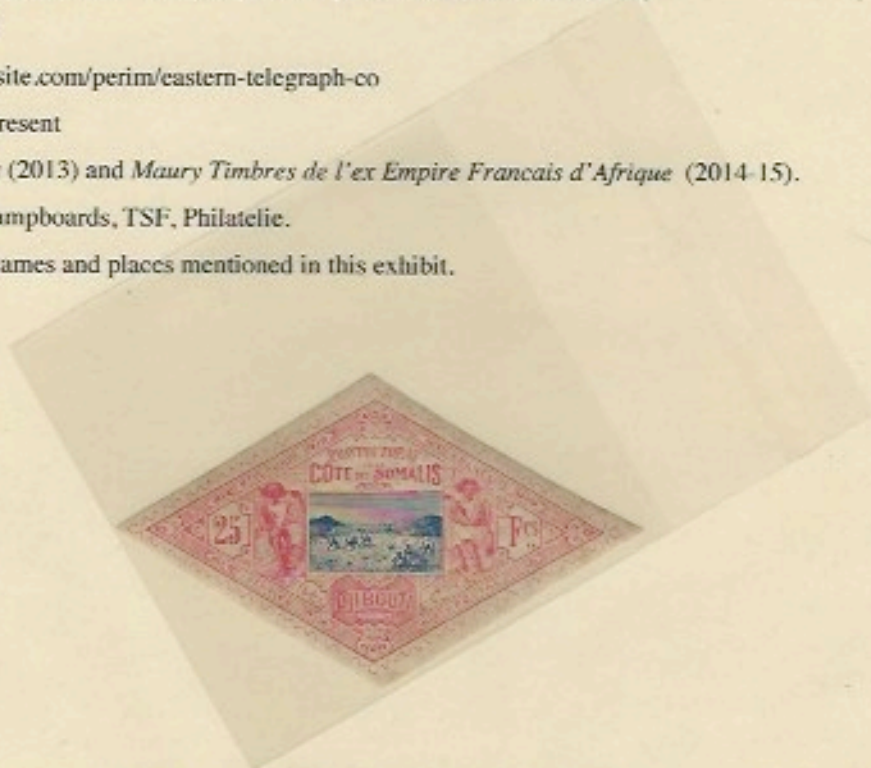
## AFTERMATH

After Ethiopia's UPU admission in 1908, postage between Djibouti and Ethiopia was no longer local, so postage rates between them were for foreign countries. Here is a cover sent April 27, 1910, arriving in Dire-Dawa April 29. It was presented in Ed Grabowski's Obock exhibit as a late use of an Obock groupe type stamp. 75c to Dire-Dawa was appropriate for a double-weight registered letter. The recipient also showed up in an auction catalogs for a cover using a late Obock triangle.



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- Wikipedia articles on all names and places mentioned in this exhibit.



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