

The Italian Levant 15 Piastres Air Mail Stamp

by Nicola Luciano Cipriani and Claudio Ernesto Manzati

The Italian postal administration issued the 25 cent express stamp on June 1, 1903, and it was overprinted in Constantinople at the beginning of 1922 (approximately in January) (Figure 1) for the conveyance of airmail. It is the rarest stamp of the Italian collecting area. This issue has always had a great fascination for collectors, even if at that time some of them did not believe in its official status.



Figure 1. The 1903 25 cent express overprinted in Constantinople.



Figure 1A. The aircraft overprint.

came Air France. The first survey flight was made on September 20, 1922, from Prague to Constantinople, followed by a second flight on October 3 from Bucharest. The latter flight was considered the semiofficial opening flight for the connection Paris-Constantinople. The official opening was on October 29, followed by an interruption

In Figure 1A we present the overprint characterized mainly by a biplane silhouette. Some writers who described the stamp attributed the silhouette to the Vickers Vimy design, an English aircraft extensively converted after World War I for use as an early airliner. However, communication with the Office of Air Force History of the Italian Ministry of Defense brought forth the observation that the design was meant to be generic and not follow any particular prototype aircraft.

The first company to conduct flights between Paris and Constantinople was C.F.R.N.A, established on January 1, 1920. In 1925 it became C.I.D.N.A., and in 1933, in combination with other companies be-



Figure 1B. The Vickers Vimy aircraft on a South African postage stamp.

on November 15. The aircraft of the company were (numbers of aircraft owned in parentheses):

SALMSON (10) POTEX VII (9) POTEZ IX (14) SPAD 33 (16)
 SPAD 46 (39)

OUVERTURE (probable) DES ESCALES

Année	1 ^{er} vol	Paris	Strasb.	Prague	Vienne	Budapest	Arad	Bucarest	Istanbul	Dernier vol
1922	1/5	✈	✈	✈	✈	(✈)				
	13/5	✈	✈	✈	✈	✈				
	15/9	✈	✈	✈	✈	✈	✈	✈		
	30/9	✈	✈	✈	✈	✈	✈	✈	✈	15/11

(✈) sans courrier de France pour Budapest

Table 1.



Figure 2. The ten stamps registered by A. Piermattei and B. Naddei.

The SPAD 46, number 01, registry F-ARAD, six places, 370 CV biplane Lorraine, made an experimental flight from Paris to Constantinople and back from October to December 1921. The Director of the Constantinople Italian post office hurried to fix, in time, an arrangement with C.F.R.N.A. as, at the end of 1921, only the experimental flight had been made with the SPAD 46. The opening flight would be made a year later. In the following table we show the first dates of some flights in 1922. Table 1 was kindly provided by C.A.F. (Cercle Aérophilaelique Français, Supplement no 41) by the effort of Fiorenzo Longhi, whom we wish to thank for his high spirit of col-

laboraion.

Getting now to the story of our stamp, its first occurrence and mention originate in the catalogs of 1924. In 1930 Francis J. Field acquired one and reviewed it in his catalog of airmail stamps. In the following years there wasn't much known about this stamp (the information in the catalogs was sparse and sometimes even controversial), and the mystery about the stamp remained. It is even more incomprehensible that the Italian catalogs begin to mention it only in 1972, even if the first interested person was Lucio Sorgoni of Rome who wanted to understand pedantically if the stamp were official or not.

There is no doubt that this stamp has been covered by a mysterious halo, and it fascinated many people like all unique stamps, not only for its high price and for its rarity, but also, because today we are able to see only its reproduction in books and catalogs. Piermattei and Naddei gave us the stimulus to study these stamps (Figure 2). We offer our congratulations to the two authors, particularly to Piermattei, who was the first to make the census of rarities. In this way he revealed the approximate quantity of the 3 liras of the Grand Dukedom of Tuscany. He revealed the quantity of the Constantinople 15 piastres. This census was made by searching the stamp in auctions, stamp catalogs, and in museum collections. In our opinion this research is very important for the knowledge about the number of rare stamps. Up to now, nobody has ever studied this overprint, and consequently, nobody knows its characteristics. It is very difficult to try an analysis without information about the print method, the construction of the cliché and, in particular, without any experience to make a comparison with a verifiable original.

With this paper our aim is to analyse all the overprints discovered by Piermattei and Naddei. We know that analyzing real overprints or their images is different, but we would like to give a contribution to a better knowledge of these stamps. For a correct analysis we are convinced that we also have to rebuild the history by old documents and the most important Italian and international catalogs, because this history is the basis for understanding.

In 1924, the fourth edition of Champion air mail stamp catalog reports on page 295:

one air mail stamp was prepared in 1922 by Italian Post Office in Constantinople. For superior order, this special stamp was designated for air mails and used for the French air line Bucharest-Paris.

4000 Italian express stamps of 25 cent were overprinted with an airplane silhouette and a new value: 15 piastres.

At the last moment, the headquarter of the Ottoman Post Office denied the authorization to establish a regular foreign air line on its own territory. The Italian stamp wasn't issued and we think that all were burned.

On March 8, 1930, the *Stamp Collector's Fortnightly* published a notice given by the well-known English merchant and editor of the homonymous airmail catalogs,

Un timbre pour la poste aérienne a été préparé en 1922 par les soins de la poste italienne à Constantinople qui, agissant sur ordre supérieur, destinait ce timbre spécial à l'affranchissement des aérogrammes devant emprunter la ligne de la Compagnie Franco-Roumaine : Bucarest-Paris.

4.000 timbres exprès d'Italie à 25 c. avaient été à cet effet surchargés d'un petit aéroplane et d'une nouvelle valeur : 15 piastres.

La Direction des postes ottomanes ayant refusé à la dernière minute l'autorisation d'établir sur son territoire une ligne aérienne régulière, le timbre en question ne fut pas émis. Nous croyons savoir que le stock existant a été brûlé.

Figure 3. The 1924 Champion catalogue does not display images.

Francis J. Field (Figure 4).

The *Fortnightly* announcement was reported by the Italian *Corriere Filatelico* in March 1930, and Lucio Sorgoni, a Roman collector, intended to find more clarification about the official issue of this stamp.

During the XIX Italian Philatelic Congress in Venice of May 4–7, 1932, Lucio Sorgoni explained the history about this stamp, its surrounding situation in which it was planned and his experience he made some time before.

...Finding myself one afternoon in an aero-philatelic discussion with Comm. Oreste Palumbo, General Director in the Ministry of aviation, a distinguished philatelist, and passing in review all the air stamps issued by our Government, we fleetingly touched the Express of Constantinople, the stamp under discussion in this article, and I naturally concluded that it probably was only a fantasy. To my great astonishment and pleasure, the General Director, Comm. Palumbo, after a moment, replied simply, "no, the stamp exists, and I possess a sample!" and in addition he showed me the stamp which I had never expected to see up to that moment.



Figure 5. The Brunetti pair and single stamp of Mrs. Ferrara in 1948. Inside the red circle is the white point on the wing.

An Italian Air Rarity.

SOON after the end of the Great War the Italian postal officials prepared a special stamp, by overprinting as described below, for use on temporary air mail services in the Levant. It is said that 4,000 copies were produced. Specialists have known of the existence of this issue although actual examples had not come to light and it does not appear in any catalogues, specialised or otherwise, but it now appears that the printing was destroyed, with the exceptions noted below as the Turkish Post Office objected to its use in Constantinople.

We had been informed that three copies only were retained, one for state archives and one each for two high placed officials, but in spite of extensive enquiries only two have been traced: one is government property and the other was offered to a philatelist some years ago. We have been fortunate enough to purchase the latter specimen during the owner's visit to this country.

Description.—Italian Levant, 15pi. on 25c. The overprint was made on the 25c. rose "Espresso" stamp of 1903, in black, and consists of a biplane silhouette, 36 mm. wide above which is "SERVIZIO POSTALE AEREO" in sans serif capitals, and below "Piastra 15."

FRANCIS J. FIELD

Figure 4. F.J. Field communication, March 8, 1930.

Furthermore, he gave me abundant information which proved in combination with my own sources, that, in my humble opinion, we had in front of us a genuine and correct stamp, authorized and not issued; and, therefore, an authentic rarity.

We continue with the main information that Lucio Sorgoni received from Oreste Palumbo.

The Officina Carte Valori di Torino was authorized by law to print and overprint the Italian stamps, also for the Italian post office in Constantinople. Sometimes, the Italian Minister of Post and Telegraph authorized the Italian post office to overprint the necessary stamps, according to the Italian Embassy in Turkey. This short way was repeatedly used between 1919 and 1923, with great dismay of Italian collectors who frequently had to run after stamp varieties, which often were not accidental. In this situation, the Post Office Director, Alberto Solaro, in accord with the Italian Embassy, agreed with C.I.D.N.A. (France-Rumanian air lines, recently established) for the transport of the Italian mail. Subsequently, making use of the Italian Minister's authorization, Director Solaro delegated the Italian D'Andria typography in Constantinople for the overprinting of 1903 express Italian stamps. But, within a week, the whole project was stopped by

the Director of the France Post Office in agreement with the France Embassy. They forbade the French air company the transport mail for other than the French Administration. The interruption of the agreement with the French air company caused the cancellation of the stamp issue, of which, according to the information Palumbo gave to Sorgoni, only one sheet of 50 stamps was overprinted, although the provision had been 4,000 stamps. Five stamps have found a new owner, three of them for Fratelli D'Andria, one for Director Solaro and one for Post Office Supervisor Bonomo. After the Lausanne Treatise (July 24, 1923), the Capitulations ceased to exist and with them all foreign offices on the territory of the Ottoman Empire. At the end of September 1923, the Italian post office was about to close and a commission was constituted, composed by Director Solaro and Supervisor Bonomo, to prepare the administrative processes. They also decided to burn the 45 express overprinted stamps of 15 piastres that remained in the office. They sent the cliché and all other documents to the Lecce Provincial Direction, which the Constantinople office was depending on.

In May 1932, *Corriere Filatelico* published a summary of Lucio Sorgoni's speech at the XIX Italian Philatelic Congress in Venice and reproduced the overprinted stamp with the overwritten "specimen" without any comment about the overwriting, not even by Lucio Sorgoni himself. It seemed to be the first public appearance of this stamp. A strange silence on the part of Lucio Sorgoni, who had spent a lot of time to understand the official issue of this stamp.

Letter of Colonel Nerio Brunetti to Alberto Diena.

Riccione, October 23, 1948.

Dear Mr Diena,

After a repeated exchange of letters with Mrs. Ferrara, I finally was able to have the photograph of the stamp which is in her possession. I have got the picture of my pair and I send you both images as you may analyze the three stamps even if I send you only the images.

I have no doubt about the similarity between the stamp of Mrs. Ferrara and the lower part of my pair (they have the same small white point on the lower wing and I think that this element could be a good evidence), even if the overprint is a little bit shifted to the right.

In the first letter that I wrote to Mrs. Ferrara, I gave a vague hint that the stamps could be forgeries. But in her responding letter she replied that Mr. Goliani was a very respectable person and incapable to make a fraud; then she said she had shown the stamp to a stamp merchant of Smyrna who declared that the overprint over the stamp was the same as the reproduced sample in the Champion Catalogue. In Riccione I have no opportunity for comparing, but I am sure you have got the catalogue and certainly you may be able to control it.

If this information is true, it could be interesting to know where Mr. Champion found the image of this stamp. May it be possible to ask him? In your opinion, could Champion give his response by analyzing only the photo or should I send him the stamps?

Mrs. Ferrara is available to sell the stamp she has got, but, she claimed a very high price and I remain perplexed. I don't know which powerful expertise she may have as a support. However, I answered that I reserved the right for a decision to expect more information about the genuineness of the stamps.

Before I left Rome, in September, I called you, but I couldn't reach you. I talked to your brother and told him about the negative result concerning my research at the Postal Museum where the archive has only few folders without any philatelic interest. Who knows where the Constantinople archive is now! I would appreciate very much if you communicated your

opinion about the genuineness of the stamps.

Yours sincerely

Colonel Nerio Brunetti

The images of the stamps attached to the letter of Nerio Brunetti are very well recognizable. The pair is the unique well-known one without the letter "E" of POSTALE, while the single one corresponds to n. 7 of figure 2. The pair reappears at the International Exposition of Palermo in 1959. Please note that Colonel Brunetti emphasized a white point on the base of the right wing (from the perspective of the pilot), which is present in the single stamp and in the lower stamp of the pair. Certainly we don't know how many stamps are affected by this character.

Due to the reply of Alberto Diena, we understand that they had tried to get more information about the Constantinople Post Office, but we have no further information about real actions of Diena apart from his control at the Postal Museum, which also applied to Nerio Brunetti.

Even if this stamp was present in some foreign catalogs, we can say that at the XIX Philatelic Italian Congress nobody gave any notice about the 15 piastres overprint stamp until 1948 (Nerio Brunetti's letter) and we had been waiting for a publication until 1963. In this year *Il Collezionista* published a paper of Mario Onofri (Rastaban) who talked about a similar history that we explained before, but only to find the better classification for this stamp: *essay, a semi-official stamp, not issued*.

Now we check recent and modern catalogs. When they report an image, we will refer it to Figure 2.

In Figures 6A and 6B, we report two different editions (1948 and 1953) of the *Sanabria Air Mail Catalogue* in which the 15 piastres was published also in other

ITALIAN LEVANT, Europe
Former Offices of Italy in Constantinople (Turkey).
PIASTRE = 40 PARAS.

SEMI-OFFICIAL STAMPS
Issued 1922 for flight from Bucharest to Paris. Prepared by Italian Post Office at Constantinople, carried to Bucharest by rail, and thereafter by airplane to Paris. These stamps were ordered suppressed by the Italian Government in accordance with the Lausanne Conference edict. Three copies are known.

Italian Stamp Surcharged.



SO1
B — D.

1922. Wmkd. Crowns (#34). Perf. 14.

301	SO1	15p on 25c red	2,500.00
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Figure 6A. Sanabria Air Mail Catalogue, 1948.

ITALIAN LEVANT Europe

Former Offices of Italy in Constantinople (Turkey).

PIASTRE = 40 paras.



501

1922. For flight Bucharest-Paris. Prepared by the Italian P. O. at Constantinople. Mail carried to Bucharest by rail, then by plane to Paris. Following an Int'l. Conf. at Lausanne all Foreign Post Offices in Turkey were closed and the Italian authorities had the stamps destroyed. Three copies are known to have survived. Italian Special Delivery stamp surchgd. Wmk Crown. P14.

501 SO1 15p/25c red 1,750.00

Figure 6B. Sanabria Air Mail Catalogue, 1953.

used (Cat. Sanabria n. 301): pair in which one of two stamps has the error «Postal» instead of «Postale». Only two stamps of this pair are known, one was recently bought by the British Museum and the other one is in the archives of Palazzo Chigi at Rome, as the exhibitor kindly communicated.

Therefore, as Dimitri Tziracopoulo communicated to Giulio Bolaffi, the stamps, overprinted in Constantinople and saved from the fire, were only four.

In 1972, the *Italian Air Philately Catalogue* written by Fernando Corsari and Ugo De Simoni, number 1269.00, a description of this stamp is reported without any image:

Air mail stamp of the Italian Levant. This stamp, which was not issued, is the Italian express (n. 1) with the black overprint with the inscription «Servizio Postale Aereo/Piastre 15» in two lines and between them a biplane silhouette (probably referring to the Vickers Vimy IV twin-engine in which Ross Smith in 1919 flew the Raid London-Port Darwin).

The stamp was overprinted to cover the tax for Italian air mail delivery from Constantinople; for this service they planned to use the C.F.R.N.A. (Compagnie Franco-Roumaine de Navigation Aérienne) air line Paris-Belgrade-Bucharest. This Company used Potez 9 biplane and the flight started on 21.9.1921; this line reached also Constantinople starting from 15.10.1922. The accord between the Italian Post Office Director of Constantinople, Solaro, and the representative of C.F.R.N.A. seemed to have reached a successful conclusion and Solaro committed to the Italian D'Andria typography the overprinting of 4.000 stamps. The overprinting was made with a lithographic method. Only a few days later, the French Post Office Director forbade the accord and the overprinting was stopped, but one sample sheet (50 stamps) had already been overprinted. When the Italian Post Office of Constantinople closed, the printing plate and all connected documents were delivered to the Provincial Post and Telegraph Direction of Lecce (Italy) which the Constantinople Office was depending on.

The already overprinted stamps were destroyed apart from five: three remained in the

editions. According to this catalogue only three stamps exist. The reproduced stamp in it refers to n. 10 of figure 2; the reproduction shows a missing tooth at the right upper corner that, in time, could have been restored.

In 1955, Giulio Bolaffi published a paper on the *Il Collezionista* (n. 8) in which he underlined and emphasized the wonderful air mail collection that Dimitri Tziracopoulo showed in "Sockholmia 55". The collection receives the first prize and the award of honour. In the collection there was the famous pair without the letter "E" of POSTALE. Giulio Bolaffi wrote about this stamp:

Italian Levant 1922: 15 piastre over 25 cents Express overprinted for Bucharest-Paris flight and not

possession of the typographer D'Andria, one (on which «specimen» is written and underlined with black ink) in the possession of the Office Director Solaro and the fifth in the possession of Supervisor Bonomo. Later Solaro gave his stamp to the General Director of the Aviation Ministry, Oreste Palumbo and in 1933 from him to the collector Fitzgerald.

In 1953 two of the five overprinted stamps were in the collection of Dimitri Tziracopoulo (in 1959 they were shown at the International Exposition of Palermo); the sample with the overwritten «specimen» still is in the Fitzgerald collection; the fourth is in the collection of Sandro Taragni, while the fifth is in the Postal Museum Collection of London. During a London auction in May 1968, one of these five stamps was bought by the Florentine merchant Orlandini.

Footnote – The information about this stamp – up to now never mentioned in the Italian catalogues – are not sure and for some aspects also contradictory. For example, the period in which the sheet was overprinted, is not secured; it was said in 1921 and also in 1922, even in 1923; somebody supported the idea that the stamps had not been issued because of the end of the Capitulations accord (Lausanne Conference, 2.10.23). Others said that the stamp had not been issued because of the opposition of the Ottoman Post, but we think, as Sorgoni said, that this opinion is unfounded.

In March 1930 the *Corriere Filatelico* wrote about this stamp and even more in May 1932 referring to the speech of Luca Sorgoni at the XIX Philatelic Italian Congress (Venice 4/7.5.1932). The Sanabria, Field and Champion catalogues classified this stamp as semi-official. In an article published by *Il Collezionista* in March 1963, Mario Onofri (Rastaban) upholds the thesis that we had to consider this stamp «not issued»; we fully share it.”

The two authors spoke about five existing stamps, and they said that the stamps were overprinted by the lithographic method. Please note that the authors indicate Oreste Palumbo as the owner of the «specimen» (n. 2). This statement is a bit strange because Lucio Sorgoni saw Palumbo's stamp in 1932 and he didn't mention the overwriting; if it had been there, he certainly would have pointed it out. We also have to say that in London two stamps could be presented because the Fitzgerald collection today is in the property of the British Museum and another one could be in the Postal Museum.

In 1974 Cherubino Cherubini and Sandro Taragni published the *Italian Air Mail Catalogue* (Editor G. Orlandini) in which they mention this stamp and report the image of Figure 7.



Figure 7. From Cherubini Taragni Catalogue, 1974.

CONSTANTINOPLE / EXPRESS DELIVERY OF THE ITALIAN LEVANT

Because the air mail stamps are shown in all philatelic catalogues, we consider it necessary to present the Italian express delivery stamp issued in the Italian Levant, as it doesn't appear in any of the Italian catalogues. At the beginning of 1922 the Italian Post Office in Constantinople decided to make use of the Bucharest-Paris air service, directing to Bucharest all letters addressed to Western Europe.

The 25 cents Italian express delivery stamp issued in 1903 (Yvert Italia expr. N. 1) was chosen and overprinted «SERVIZIO POSTALE AEREO» on the first line, a biplane silhouette in the middle, and «15 PIASTRE» in the lower part.

There are two different kinds of overprinting: one in typographic characters, the other one in a handwritten inscription cliché, probably because they didn't find enough characters.

The issue of these stamps was revoked because of the closure of the postal offices of the western nations in Turkey after the decision of the Lausanne Conference and by the opposition of the Italian Post Direction of Rome.

Italian 25 cents Express delivery stamp overprinted «SERVIZIO POSTALE AEREO», a plane at the center and new value of 15 piastres.....RRR

The authors talk about four, at most six stamps, and two different types of overprint: one typographic and one a cliché not well defined with a handwriting due to the lack of characters. We have to think that the authors considered the overwriting not handwritten and with this second type a complete sheet was overprinted. We could deduce that the authors thought that there existed two overprinted sheets.

This stamp is related to n. 3 of Figure 2.

In 1975 *D'urso Catalogue* includes this stamp (Figure 8), classifies it “air mail essay” and refers to it “not issued.” The catalogue gives a description and some historical information and it writes about only one overprinted sheet: only five existent stamps and forty-five burned. The reproduced stamp corresponds to n. 6 of figure 2.



Figure 8. From the *D'urso Catalogue*, 1975.

In March 1992, Antonio Caldiron published a paper in *Filatelia Veneta*. Following some auction catalogs, he noted that these stamps have different centring of the perforation and different position of the overprint on the stamp. He wonders how many sheets were really overprinted and how many stamps were burned. In this paper Caldiron shows six different overprinted stamps, but the images are not well defined, among them you also can find the pair. He mentioned the overwritten specimen, too, but he declared that he never has seen its reproduction.

We report Caldiron's doubt:

and moreover (another doubt over doubts) is it really true that in a sheet, comb perforated and then overprinted, all stamps must necessarily have the same position of the perforation and the overprint related to the vignette? Often we can note that an overprinted sheet of 50 stamps has a different position of the perforation in both sides of the sheet; we can observe the same variation for the overprint, but the shifting may be different in respect of the perforation. In this way we can have different characters for similar stamps in the same sheet. It is evident that the precision of the perforation, the one of the overprinting and the position of the sheet under the press could produce some differences.

The *Encyclopaedic Catalogue* includes this stamp in the edition of 1992-93 and it shows the pair (Figure 9). Even this catalogue gives the description of the stamp and some historical information that are very similar to the *D'urso catalogue*. Even the classification is the same: “not issued”, as well as the number of the existent stamps: five. The published pair is the same of figure 2 (stamps n. 8 and 9).

In *The Notebook of an Amateur Collector of Early Souvenirs of the Air Post – ITALY*, one of the three volumes of the British Museum in which the Fitzgerald collection is described, the Luca Sorgoni's speech at the XIX Italian Philatelic Congress (Venice 4/7.5.1932) is reported. In a footnote it is put in



Figure 9. From Encyclopaedic Catalogue, 1992-93.

evidence that Alberto Solaro, Director of Constantinople post office, presented the specimen to Oreste Palumbo, but as we highlighted before, Lucio Sorgoni saw Palumbo's stamp, and he didn't mention anything about the overwriting. This silence is very strange because Lucio Sorgoni found clarity about this stamp and he should surely have put in evidence any character with the aim to understand the origin of the overprint.

At the end, there was the census of A. Piermattei and B. Naddei with which the two authors declared that these stamps were ten. This number is clearly in contrast to what history states. Furthermore they put in evidence the two different types of overprint (thin and bold), and they presume that the sheets were two.

None of the authors, that had written about the two overprint types, advanced the hypotheses that one of two could be a forgery; instead, everybody hypothesised that the overprinted cliché were more than one and that the overprinted sheets were at least two; but these hypotheses are in contrast to the historiography we studied.

This plethora of bibliography surely is incomplete, but we think it offers a relatively comprehensive overview of the history and it is sufficient for the aim we would like to achieve. Furthermore, it also reveals that the stamps saved from the fire might be counted on the fingers of one hand. Today they are more than twice as many as the historical number, and also of two different types. It should make people think and not only a little bit. But before we think badly, other hypotheses could be submitted. Also the information about the print method appears uncertain. In fact, F. Corsari and U. De Simoni (1972) wrote that the overprint was made in lithography, while C. Cherubini and S. Taragni (1974) declared that it was made in typography. However, these two methods were the most common printing systems of that time. But which of them was really used? The question is necessary because it is unthinkable that both were used. We would like to point out that the lithographic overprint is recognisable by a major homogeneity, while the typographic one is characterized by an evident contour of the letters and other elements of the overprinting. For us the problem remains unresolved because there is no possibility to see in reality this stamp. Consequently, we have no assured information about the overprinting method used in Constantinople. It is not easy to start from this position. In our opinion, we only can do the graphical analysis of the ten stamps. Nobody has ever tried the graphical analysis of the overprints. Some authors pointed out the different centering of the stamps and the different position of the overprint on the stamp. All of us know very well that these two characters do not help because the centering may be differentiated inside the same sheet, and the same we may observe for the overprint. The position of this last could differentiate by the positioning of the sheet and also by the spacing between



Figure 10. Position of the overprint chosen for graphical analysis.

be possible to plate the express on each used sheet, but we need one sheet for each reprinting of the express stamp. This solution is only useful theoretically. Nothing remains but the use of the graphical analysis of the overprint, which may help us to unravel this intricate situation.

For a good start, we orientated the overprint in such a way that the writing “Servizio Postale Aereo” has to be horizontal (Figure 10). During the analysis we put attention to give the right value to small and more evident differences.

The first subdivision could be made on the basis of the writing thickness; it is very intuitive and evident. Into the first group we included the stamps, that have thin characters (n. 1, 3, 4, 5 & 6 of Figure 2); into the second one that with bold characters (n. 2, 7, 8, 9 & 10).

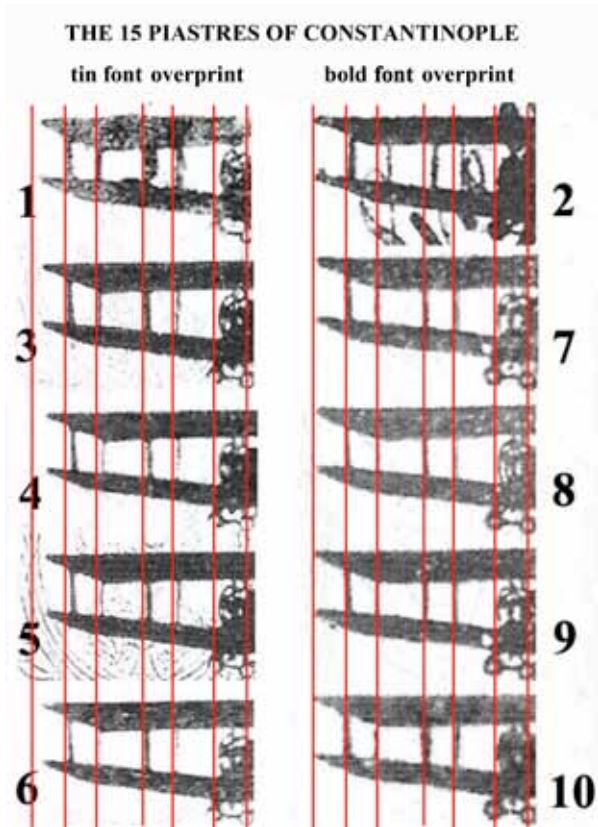


Figure 11. Right wing dimension.

the stamps on the sheet and between the overprinting on the cliché. We may also try a chromatic study of the red for each express stamp, but we need the ten stamps. This idea resulted from the observation of Figure 2, in which the stamps number 3 and 5 have a color of more black ink mixed with red than the others. We are convinced that this study could lead to good results for the understanding of the number of sheets from which they derived. It also could

In all the figures we present, we divided some detail of the overprint in two columns, one for the thin characters and one for the bold ones; each detail has the number of Figure 2. We chose n. 8 to start our observations, the upper stamp of the unique existent pair and recognisable by the absence of the letter “E” of POSTALE. This choice had really been reasoned even if its meaning is relative because every overprint has the same value as the differences would have been equally visible. We analysed all the overprinting details, we measured corners, tilt angles and others, but we present only images in which the differences are clearly visible and incontrovertible.

In Figure 11 we show the dimension of the right wings (from the pilot’s point of view) of the ten overprintings. As zero reference measurement we chose the front left wheel of the n. 8 detail and we aligned all the others of the right col-

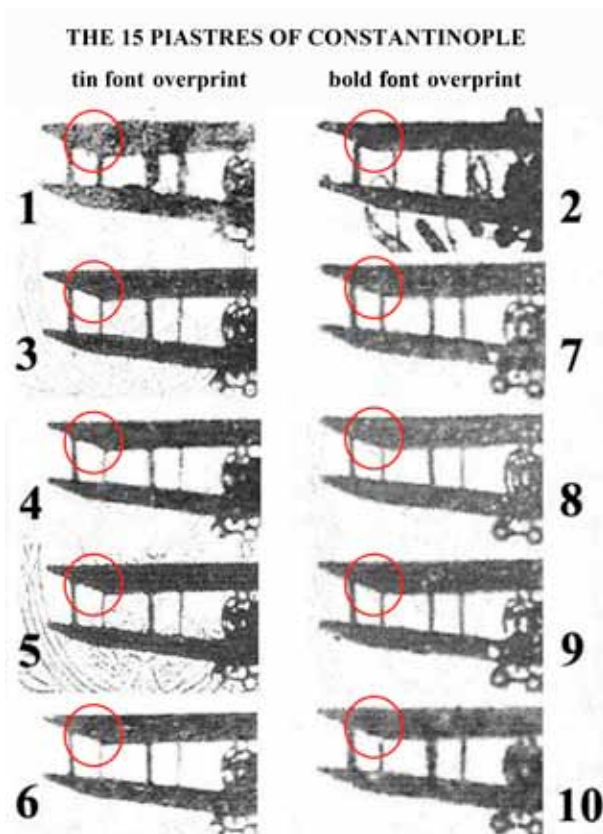


Figure 12. Perspective view.

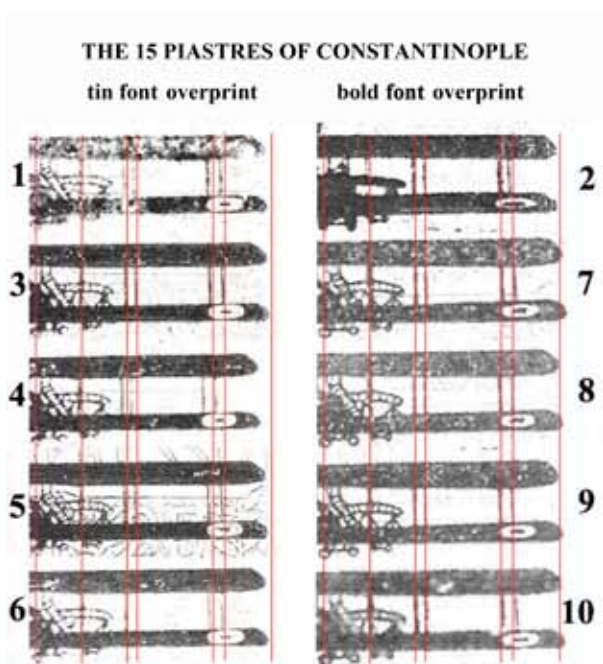


Figure 13. Left wing dimension.

umn. Then we designed seven red segments starting from the wheel, the second is at the border of the helix circumference, the following four in coincidence with the struts between the wings and the last with the front corner of the wing. After that, without changing any distance between the segments, we copied this succession of segments over the left column, fixing the first in the corresponding front-wheel of the right column. We notice that n. 7-10 are very similar; n. 2 (specimen) has the same wing extent, but no strut between the wings is in the correct position. N.1, 3-6 have a shorter wing extent and no strut is exactly coincident. This last difference could be considered as not being significant, but if we evaluate both wing extent and the struts' position, we clearly notice that the right part of the biplane of n. 1, 3-6 is narrower than 2, 7-10. Furthermore n. 2 is the only one in which the back corner of the upper wing is not coincident with the strut (Figure 12).

Figure 13 shows the same graphic procedure for the left wings. The first red segment is coincident with the posterior right wheel; the following five segments are in coincidence with the interplane struts and the last one at the end of the upper wing of n. 8 detail. In this figure we also can see the perfect coincidence of the elements in n. 7-10 overprint, while n. 2 the segments with the struts are only a little bit non-fitting, and both wings are a little bit shorter. The others (n. 1, 3-6) have more non-fitting of the struts' segments and particularly the wings are shorter than n. 2 detail.

The following two figures show the geometry of the right wings (Figure 14) and the left ones (Fig-

ure15). We have emphasized the border of the wing of n. 8 overprint with four different coloured segments: red (above) and yellow (below) for the upper wing and green (above) and light blue (below) for the lower wing. We copied these segments over each overprint detail without changing the length, the distance between them and the slope. In Figure 14 we see again a perfect similarity for the n. 7-10 details, while we observe just few variations for all the other overprints. Particularly n.1 and 3-6 have shorter wings and different slopes; whereas n. 2 has less evident differences.

The left wings (Figure 15) of the n. 1 and 3-6 are clearly narrower than the others and n. 2 has an evident different slope in contrast to n. 7-10.

The other two images show some detail of the fuselage. In Figure 16 we put in evidence the prospective distance between the fuselage and the base of the upper wing. This detail also reveals the clear identity of n. 7-10 overprint. In comparison to the other ones, the distance in n. 1 and 3-6 is bigger, in n. 2 the two elements are in contact. One might assume that this contact could have been caused by an excessive inking which caused also the occlusion of the wheels. In any case, the excess of the inking allows us otherwise to distinguish n. 2 overprint from the others. We are aware that this last sentence could be questionable, but we have to add that the front wheels axle is more tilted than the one of n. 7-10.

In Figure 17, the two red segments mark the distance between the first and the fourth porthole of the n. 8 overprint. The same segment couple is copied on column 1 and 3-6. It is clearly visible that the dimension of the porthole of n. 7-10 overprint is gradually decreasing for a perspective effect, and they are spaced evenly. The portholes of n. 2, however, have the same dimension and the occupied space is narrower

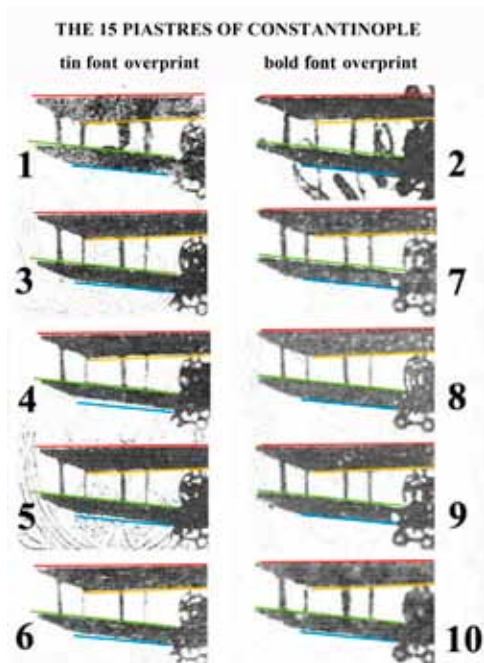


Figure 14. Right wing geometry.

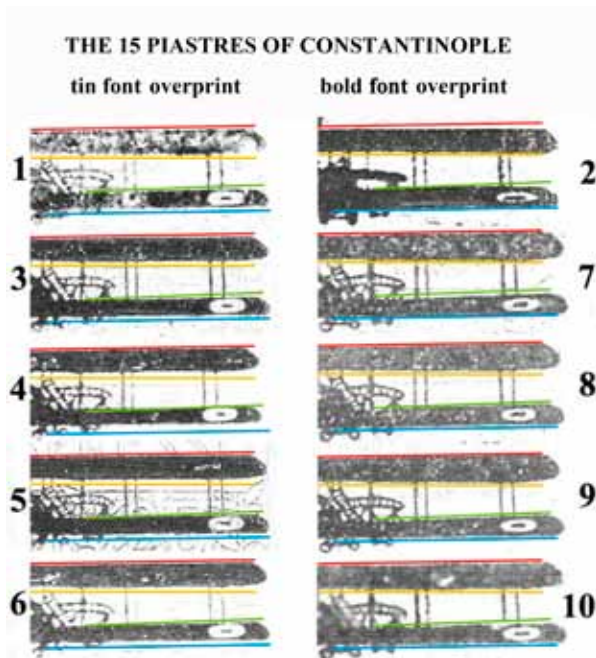


Figure 15. Left wing geometry.

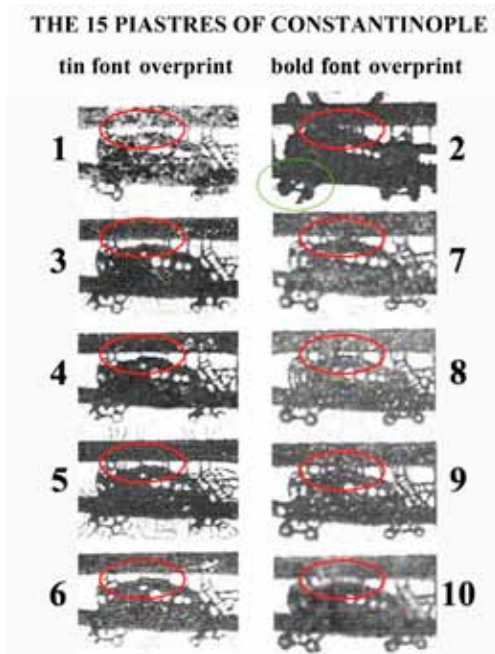


Figure 16. The prospective difference between the fuselage and the upper wing.

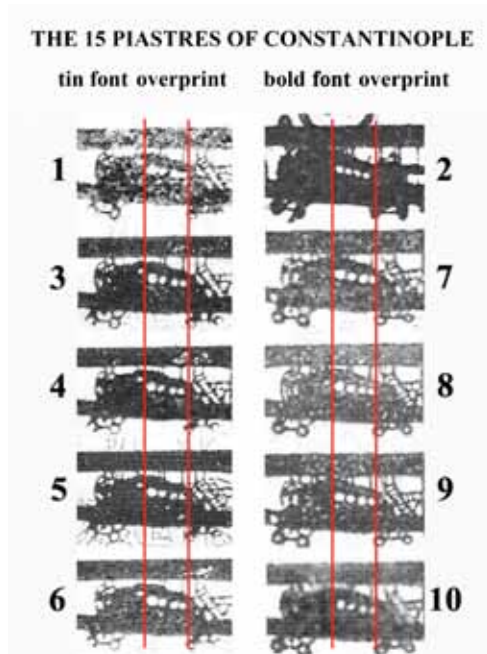


Figure 17. Shape and position of the porthole.

than the one of n. 8. The portholes of n. 1 and 3-6 have a perspective effect and they are more irregular; furthermore they also have a large black interval between the first two and the second two portholes.

Now we present the inscriptions. The letters of the overprints do not reveal evi-

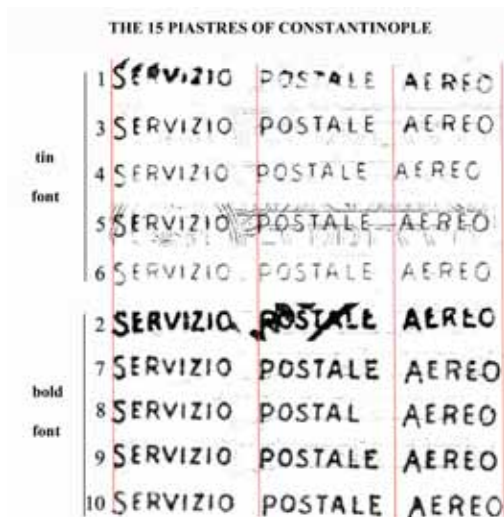


Figure 18. Length of the inscription SERVIZIO POSTALE AEREO.

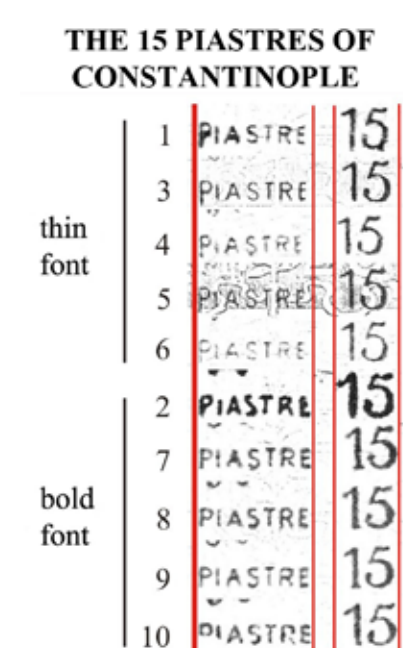


Figure 19. Length of inscription PIASTRE 15..

dent geometric differences with the exception of the bold font of n. 2 and 7-10, and at n.1 some letters are partially smudged.

In Figure 18 we show the inscription «SERVIZIO POSTALE AEREO» and we separated, as before, the group of thin letters (upper part of the figure) from the group of bold letters (below). In the figure we added four red vertical segments to control the length of each word and of the whole sentence. We see that the words «SERVIZIO» and «POSTALE» do not show evident differences. The position of the word «AEREO», however, is quite variable inside the group of thin letters (n. 1, 3-6), and this variation causes the different length of the sentence. In contrast, the group of bold letters (2, 7-10) has a more uniform length both of the single words and the sentence, a part from n. 8 in which the “E” of «POSTALE» is missing; the space between each word is constant, too.

In Figure 19 we reported the inscription «PIASTRE 15» with the same aim of the previous figure. In this figure we also note that the 7-10 overprints are more uniform than the others. N. 2 confirms its independence of all, and the group of thin letters is more variable, particularly the space between «PIASTRE» and «15». We also note that the ciphers of n. 2 have a different shape and dimension. Cipher “5” has a short head and a big rounded part. These details are more visible in Figure 20, in which only the ciphers are shown to make the differences more visible. The horizontal red segments put in evidence the height of the ciphers and that of the head of cipher “5”.

The n. 2 overprint has the highest ciphers and we recognize the short head in comparison with the entire number. The group of thin letters shows an evident variation

THE 15 PIASTRES OF CONSTANTINOPLE

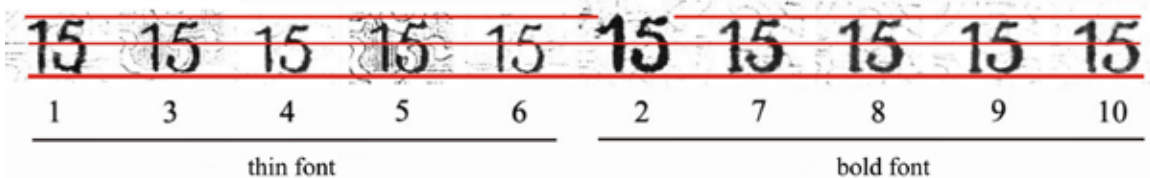


Figure 20. Comparison between the shape and dimension of the numbers.

of the ciphers’ dimension, while the bold one is more uniform. The heterogeneity of the first group is really evident and we identify three subgroups: the first one is composed by only n. 1 overprint, the second one by n. 3 and 5 and the third one by n. 4 and 6. Particularly evident is the black ink component mixed into the red color of the Italian express stamp of n. 3 and 5, as we can see at the black line of the image’s background.

In Figure 21 we compare the height of the overprints. Once again we note the

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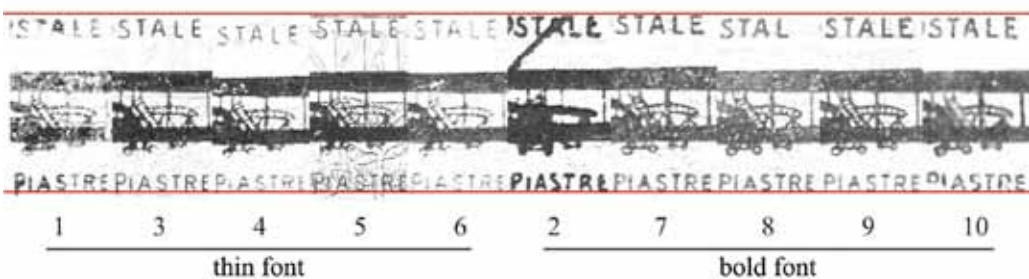


Figure 21. Comparison between the height of the overprints.

homogeneous data for the group of bold letters and some variable data for the group of thin letters.

At the end of our research, Gino Biondi found in his archives an enlarged photocopy (almost x4) of a stamp which he examined some years ago (Figure 22). The centring of the stamp and the position of overprint revealed that this is the 11th overprinted stamp. As the photocopy is B/W and enlarged, we decided not to include this image in our comparison of the details reported in the figures 11-21. As everybody



Figure 22. The eleventh discovery.

can note, the overprint has thin letters and, as far as the centering and overprinting position is concerned, it is very similar to n. 5 stamp of figure 2; only the overprint is slightly displaced upward.

After this long series of images, we finally reached the conclusion. All presented images reveal that the group of the bold letters is really homogeneous; whereas n. 2 overprint (specimen) is clearly outstanding for a lot of features. In contrast, the group of thin letters is clearly inhomogeneous and you certainly may wonder if these overprints had been part of the same sheet/cliché. It would be interesting to study the color of the original stamps with the aim to evaluate the composition of the stamps' red colour, but the color of the stamps of Figure 2 is not original.

Once again considering the overprints, all of us know that in a complete sheet the occurrence of very small differences is relatively common, but not as evident as in the group of thin letters. These last ones induce us to think that these overprints were made with a different cliché, perhaps two or three. There is, however, a high probability that the overprint n. 7-10 derives from the same sheet/cliché. It is well known that typographic overprint produce very similar images and that only some very small details can be distinguishable. These very small differences allow us to plate single stamps on the sheet, but it is very rare to find different dimensions and shapes on the same overprinted sheet, especially with the typographic or lithographic printing method.

Regarding the printing method, we could say something about the bold letters overprint, the other one we don't comment on. The bold overprint was probably made with the typographic method; our opinion could be supported by some errors that are relatively common with this kind of overprinting. In fact, the missing letter "E" of POSTALE in n. 8 overprint is a typical error deriving from losing a component from the plate or from an omitted inclusion of a single letter. Furthermore, the partial lack of the "PI" of PIASTRE of n. 10 is a typical defect of damaged or worn letters. The lithographic overprint could have defects, but the lack of single letters is not common. Moreover, it is important to note that the differences, between the specimen (n. 2) and the group of bold letters overprint (n. 7-10), do not allow us to insert all in the same sheet. If the specimen is a genuine stamp, it surely is independent of the unique 50-stamp sheet of which history was speaking. In respect of the attribution of the five stamps to the historical sheet, overprinted in Constantinople, of which a lot of authors were speaking, in our opinion that plate could not have printed such different overprints.

We do not know the quality level of the D'Andria typography in Constantinople, but we do not think that they were bunglers - and an Italian post office in a foreign

country could not engage bunglers. However, it could be sufficient to control a sheet overprinted by a private typography of that time to realize that no private typography produced irregular overprinted stamp sheets. This means, that, in our opinion, the 4-5 stamps, of which history is speaking, are n. 7-10. We found four and we have no information about the fifth. As support of our study, for 7-10 overprints applies the great similarity of the centering and the overprints' position. These characters, however, are very variable in the group of thin letters overprinting, as it applies to all the others we presented in this paper.

Basing on the graphical analysis we showed above, we summarise as follows:

- N. 7-10 overprints are consistently and strongly similar,
- N. 2 overprint is clearly distinct from all the others,
- N 1 and 3-6 overprints constitute a specific variable group.

Now we feel right to express our opinion about the varied typology of the observed overprints.

In our opinion the bold overprints are referring to the historical events told by Lucio Sorgoni who, referring to the story of Oreste Palumbo of the Aviation Ministry, associated them directly to the overprints of Constantinople.

The stamp with the overwriting "specimen", which has almost been known since 1932 (*Corriere Filatelico*), seems to be at the same age. We are not able to say if this overprint is genuine or not, or if it was really a proof. No official document speaks about it.

The thin letters overprints among each other are too different to assign them to the same sheet. At the same time, it is unthinkable that so many different plates had been used. We would like to suggest that 4000 overprinted stamps had been planned, corresponding only to 80 sheets. It is really difficult to think that the plate was broken or that more than one proof plate was set up to prepare this small quantity of sheets which, *inter alia*, never seems to have been overprinted.

Credits:

We sincerely would like to thank the friends who supported us with the bibliographical search, in particular Fiorenzo Longhi for flight information and for very important published and unpublished documents, Baasil Wilder (Branch Librarian Anacostia Museum and Branch Librarian National Postal Museum, Smithsonian Libraries) for his great availability, Danilo Vignati for his great and infinite patience, Michele Caso, whom we admire for his great philatelic culture and Gino Biondi for our long friendship. There is no order of importance to the mentioned friends for whom we feel a great respect. We also thank Domitilla D'Angelo, Angelo Piermattei e Bernardo Naddei for their authorization to use the iconography of "Sono dieci i 15 piastre".

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