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The Ionian Islands are situated alongside the coast of western Greece in the Ionian Sea, as part of the Adriatic Sea.

It is a collective name for the following islands: Corfu (Kerkyra), Paxos, Lefkas (Santa Maura), Cephalonia, Ithaki, Zakynthos (Zante); Kythira (Cerigo) and Anti-Kythira between Greece and Crete form a separate group.

These islands have an eventful history, not in the least from a postal point of view. The first preprinted letter, dating from the final years of the 18th century, comes from Cephalonia, then part of the Venetian Republic.

It would take us too much time to describe the full postal history of the islands, interesting as it is, but we will try to lift the veil over the period from 1941 until 1945.

All the islands have always been very much in the interest of the Italians, who took every opportunity to occupy one or more of them.

Immediately after the surrender of Greece in WWII, the first paratroopers landed on Cephalonia on 30-4-1941. They occupied the island without a struggle. Corfu and the other islands would soon follow.

After the parachute landings, the occupation by the Italian armed forces commences.

1. Corfu and Paxos

The Italian commander is General Machini. On 30-5-1941 he issued an order: that the Greek stamps used on the islands of Corfu and Paxos should be overprinted with "Corfu", the Italian name of the Greek island. Thus, the available stamps were overprinted with great speed by the local printing company of Spyridon Loisios (Hellas III, 1-45). On 5 June 1941 these overprinted stamps were put into use at various post offices. The next order is that all stamps with the image of a member of the Greek Royal House are declared invalid from June 15, 1941 onwards and must be returned to the post offices.

Many Italian high authorities and officers try to earn a little extra with the stamps. The stamps with the surcharge remain valid until 16-8-1941. Afterwards, the remnants are diligently given to senior officials.

The numbers printed vary greatly from more than 36,000 for the 20 lepta of the "history" issue of 37/38 to 62 stamps of the 100 Drachma airmail issue of 35/39.



Many false overprints of this last stamp exist. Of the 10 lepta, a total of about 19,000 are overprinted, largely from the Tyrinthos-variety. Stamps with Tirinthus are scarce.

This overprinted postcard with a normal additional franking of 1 Drachma (fig.1) was sent from Gaios on

¹ This article was first published in Hermes, Journal of The Hellenic Philatelic Society of The Netherlands, nr.18 (1975) p.1-12, with a number of corrections and additions (in particular paragraphs 2, 6 and 8 and some colour illustrations) by J. Meyer;

the island of Paxos to the Belgian Consulate on Corfu, to inform them that the Red Cross Packages have arrived well. The number 3 in brackets is the military censorship mark used on Corfu.

On August 16, 1941, the stamps were revoked by the Italian Head of Political Affairs (Piero Parini) and only Italian stamps with the overprint Isole Jonie may be sold at post offices in preparation for the final annexation by Italy (Hellas III, 315-327). The Greek prefect (G. Makropoulos) refuses to use these stamps because the issue is contrary to international law. He refers, among other things, to the 1907 The Hague Convention.

Parini, furious, bans Makropoulos from the office, appoints a new head of the prefecture and forces the post offices to use the stamps, under a threat of military intervention (fig.2). The Greek government in Athens later also will officially protest, but again without any results.



In Corfu the censorship was established for all islands. Next to the military censor (nr.3) a civil censorship was in use (fig.2a).

After the capitulation of Italy on 8 September 1943, the post is transferred to the Greek civil authorities.

2. Cephalonia

The first paratroopers arrive on 30 April 1941 and occupy the island without a struggle. From that moment the occupation by Italian army units commences.

During the occupation, the postal traffic with the Greek mainland is very difficult. The Ionian Sea is made unsafe by English and allied submarines.

For postal traffic only a motorboat is available that crosses from the port of Sami to Patras.

Following the day order of General Machini dated 1-5-1941, the stamps on this island are overprinted.

Use is made of a typographical surcharge applied to pairs of stamps in blocks of 4 pairs. The first printing is made on 15-5-1941, but instead of "occupazione" it reads "occupazione" (fig.3). The overprinting takes place partly in red and partly in black (Hellas III, 46-52). In total there are 3 different printings of this overprint.

The typo is corrected and a new series of surcharges (now only in



black print) is released (Hellas III, 53-87) (fig.4a). The plate used comprises of 15 overprints, which run over two stamps per print and thus is used for partial sheets of 30 stamps. On this printing there is an error in the letter "C" from Cephalonia, which is located at positions 15, 23 and 29 (fig.4b).



In addition to the imprint on two stamps, a number of stamps are also overprinted separately (Hellas III, 89-103).

The stamps with the typographical surcharge corresponding to the corrected plate I are also known used on letters that went through the mail.

In addition to these copies of the typographical surcharge, there are other variants. However, the opinions of various experts have been divergent for many years. Vlastos, Drossos and Exarchos are of the opinion that the stamps described above are the "real" stamps. However, Italian experts like Diena and Raybaudi mention other varieties.

For example, in their view a total of 10 plates of the corrected overprint were used for the typographical overprinting of the stamps, with a series of additional printing errors (including Italaia, Cefalonta, _efalonia etc.).

A well-known philatelist lives near Argostolion in Makrotika in these years, Mr Theodoratos. He has many friends, also among postal officials and many correspondences with printing companies. He gets a lot of printing-error and double overprints, or has them made, sticks them to sheets and has them stamped in Agia Euphemia on 17-8-1941 (fig.4c). Which role Mr. Theodoratos played in the production of various plates is not certain; at least we know for certain that plate I is real.

Another point of discussion are the stamps in parts of sheets with less than 20 stamps with an overprint of a black-gray hand stamp with the same text as the typographical surcharge, except for the word "isola" instead of "isole" (Hellas III, 104-170).

These too are not accepted as genuine by Vlastos and Drossos, but they are accepted by the Italians plus the Michel and now they are also in the Hellas catalogue (fig.5-6).



ITALIA
Occupazione Militare
Italiana isola
Cefalonia e Itaca



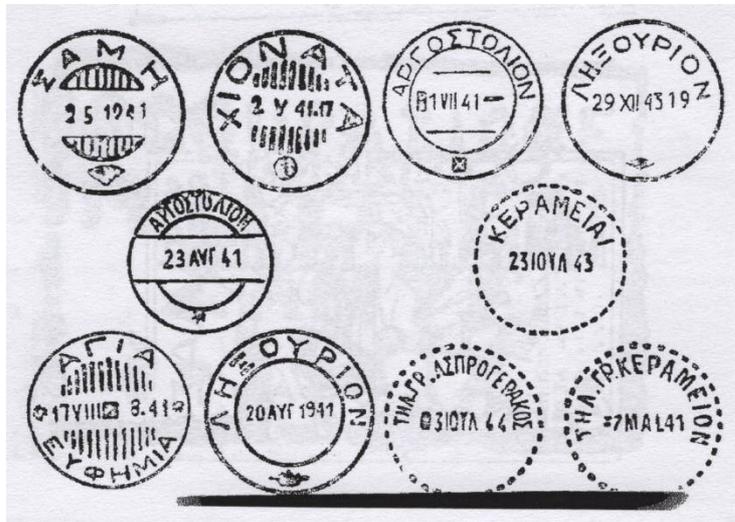
The classical Greek interpretation of the facts was mainly based on the remaining stocks of stamps that fell into Greek hands after the Italian occupation, the Italian interpretation on the Italian stock. The true story may never come to the surface anymore.

Another manually applied overprint is known. The text is the same as the above-mentioned hand stamp, only it says "isole" instead of "isola" and the "M" is different from "Militare". This would have been used locally in the places of Sami and Fiscardó. These stamps are mentioned separately in the Michel, but it is

generally accepted that they are in fact purely fantasy forgeries (fig.7).

The following post offices are in function during this time.

Argostoli, Asprogheraka, Chionata, Fiscardó, Keramies, Lixouri, Sami, Agia Euphemia (fig.8).



After August 15, 1941, only Italian stamps with the overprint Isole Jonie may be used.

In August 1943 a German detachment of around 3,000 men arrives. 8 September 1943 Italy capitulates and the Germans on the island demand the complete surrender of the Italian troops. The Italians refuse to surrender their weapons; a shot is fired. The Germans then massacre the Italian occupants.

The censorship takes place in Corfu, Rome or Athens.

The post is then transferred to the Greek civil authorities.

3. Ithaki

There was very little postal traffic during the Italian occupation. The only connection to the Greek mainland consists of a motor boat that sails up and down to the village of Astakos. Local overprints were in use here too. These are applied to the stamps with two hand stamps. The first has a small first "o" in the word "occupazione" (Hellas III, 171-219), the second imprint a large "O" (Hellas III, 220-267). The vertical distance of the text is 17 mm for both types of overprints (fig.9).



There are dangerous counterfeits of both varieties. Regarding the forgery of the stamps with the large "O" the vertical distance of the text is 20 mm (fig.10), regarding the small "o" the horizontal distance between the letters is different.

Only two post offices are available for the mail: Ithaki and Stavros.

These local overprinted stamps are sold until 15 August 1941, although they are very rarely used postally. After August 15, only Italian stamps with the print "Isole Ionie" may be sold.

4. Kythira (Cerigo) and Lefkas (Santa Maura)

Greek stamps without an additional overprint have always been used here. On Lefkas, from September 1, 1941 onwards the official Isole Ionie series was sold. On Kythira no special stamps for the occupation have ever been made available in this period.

5. Zakynthos (Zante)

On May 1, 1941 the 60th Battalion "Black shirts" supported by 50 paratroopers occupied the island. The Greek postal official flees. The Italian military commander appoints a new director and organizes a civilian mail.

The Greek stamps are overprinted with an oily blue, purple or black-violet hand stamp (Hellas III, 268-314) (fig.11 a-b) with the text:



There have only been three shipments of mail for soldiers. Citizens were not allowed to write abroad. The overprinted stamps are soon sold out and very little were actually used postally. Some letters to Athens are known.

On 1 September 1941 the stamps with these local overprints are withdrawn and are replaced by the Italian stamps with the surcharge "Isole Ionie" in preparation of the annexation of the island by Italy.

After the capitulation of Italy, the Germans occupied the island and then handed the post on 2-10-43 to the Greek civil authorities. Because no Greek stamps are available, some Italian Isole Ionie stamps are overprinted with the text "Ellas 2-10-43" in black or red (the date the Greek flag is hoisted) (Hellas III, 1-8) (fig.12a-b).



These stamps have not been recognized by the Greek government but have been used and accepted by the post. They were officially in circulation from 22-10-1943 to 29-10-1943 when Greek stamps reached the island and they were printed in an edition of 7,000 stamps each.² The mail reaches Athens on 5-11-43.

6. Military post

In addition to the civilian post there was of course the military mail from the Italian soldiers. Various army units had their own field post markings. From 6-8-1941 the 33rd Division "Acqui" under the leadership of General Antonio Gandin is active on the Ionian Islands. The headquarters are in Corfu, later in Lefkas (21-12-42 till 3-8-1943) and finally briefly in Cephalonia (4-8-1943 till 9-9-1943). This division uses the Posta Militare 2 mark (fig.13). A separate field post office is set up in Corfu at the end of 1942

² This is the official number given by the Greek authorities. The actual numbers may have been higher, due to the fact formerly "sold" stamps were returned to the post office also for an overprint.

for mail to Lefkas and mail from Cephalonia to Prevesa (on mainland Greece) (Posta Militare 2 Sezione A).

From 15-7-1942 the Posta Militare 412 field post office is also active on Cephalonia.

Finally, the Posta Militare 82 field post office, belonging to the 29th infantry division "Piedmont", although located on mainland Greece (Patras), is responsible for the mail of the units on Zakynthos.

After the conquest of the Ionian Islands by the German army (at the end of September 1943), a number of German field post offices were also active there. It goes too far to elaborate on this. Reference is made to the standard work of B. Tesapsides, "Die Deutsche Feldpost in Griechenland im II. Weltkrieg, 1941-1945" pp. 209-213 and 313-314.



7. Partisan mail

September 12, 1944, Lefkas was liberated by Greek partisans commanded by General Zervas. The liberation army E.D.E.S. orders its own overprinted stamps, which are not recognized by Athens. Regular postage stamps must be added. They are regarded as welfare stamps for financial assistance to war victims (Hellas I, R19-R21).

Every pair or block of 4 stamps should have a purple control marking on the back.

8. Fantasies and nice curiosities

As can be seen from the above, the islands of Lefkas (Santa Maura), Paxos and Kythira (Cerigo) did not have their "own" overprinted stamps. There was no reason for that either; on Lefkas and Kythira stamps were in use that were also used on the mainland of Greece, on Paxos the stamps with the "Corfu" surcharge were used. Nevertheless, speculators saw a good opportunity to produce "overprinted stamps" for these three islands as well.

The first variety are the stamps for Kythira. A number of stamps from the "history" issue from 1937 (Vlastos U1-U9) and air stamps from 1937-39 (Vlastos U9-U13) were overprinted with "Cerigo / Occupazione Militare / Italiana" in blue, red or brown. They are also known on counterfeit envelopes, addressed to a certain Spyridon Raftopoulos (fig.14). Whether he is also the (co) inventor of these curiosities cannot be said with certainty. Remarkably, the stamps also have a black imprint with an image of the fascist rod bundle (fasces) on the backside (fig.15).





The stamps of Paxos are provided with the surcharge (in various colours) "Isola Italiana di Paxo / Anno XIX". "Anno XIX" is the Italian indication for the year 1941; Mussolini had started counting again in 1922. For this "issue" also stamps from the series "history" from 1937 (Vlastos U27-U34), and the air stamps from 1935 (Vlastos U35-U38) and 1937-38 (Vlastos U39-43) were used as well as the welfare stamps from 1939 (Vlastos U44-U46). These stamps are printed on the backside (again in various colours) with the text in Greek or Italian: "Η νικη του Αξονος είναι η νικη της Ευρωπης" or "La vittoria dell'asse, La vittoria dell'Europa" (the victory of the Axis powers is the victory of Europe) (fig.17a-b).



Finally, there are the stamps for Lefkas. They are provided with a black overprint "Isola di Santa Maura XIX" with the red surcharge "Italia" (Vlastos U14-U26) on top of it. They also exist without the latter overprint. These stamps have no imprint on the back (fig.18).



These issues are pure fantasy, but nevertheless a nice curiosity.

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