

Mesopotamia, the land between two rivers (the Tigris and the Euphrates), has justly been called the “Cradle of Civilization.” Ten thousand years ago, this fertile land give rise to the agricultural revolution that would change human living patterns from small bands of hunter-gatherers to settled farming communities and, eventually, large urban centers. Today, this ancient land includes eastern Syria, southwestern Turkey, and most of Iraq.

Mesopotamia’s postal history goes back some 3,000 years to the days when letters were incised in cuneiform on clay tablets and sealed inside clay envelopes. From 1534 until the end of World War I, Mesopotamia was considered a province of the Ottoman Empire. The Ottoman Empire officially ceased to exist in 1922 and the following year the modern state of Turkey was established as a republic. The three former Ottoman *villayets* [districts] of Mosul, Baghdad, and Basrah were joined to form the modern state of Mesopotamia in 1919 under British Mandate. In 1932 the Mandate was terminated and the Kingdom of Iraq was admitted to the League of Nations.

Iraq Railway Post 1928–c1942

by Rainer Fuchs

The contemporary era of Iraqi postal history may be said to have its origins with the British Indian Field Post during World War I, followed by administration by the British Indian Post in Iraq during the years of the British Mandate. From 1917 until 1922 postage stamps were overprinted Turkish issues.

The period of the British occupation of Iraq saw some interesting stamp issues — like the I.E.F. “D” Mosul overprints on Turkish Revenue stamps (Scott N42–N49, issued 1919); the Baghdad overprints on Turkish definitive issues (Scott N1–N22, issued 1917) and Turkish semipostals (Scott

N23–N27, issued 1917); and the Iraq overprints on Turkish definitives (Scott N28–N41, issued 1918–1920).

In 1923 a private mail-forwarding operation was set up and run by the Nairn brothers of New Zealand: the Overland Mail Baghdad-Haifa. Their five-year contract with British and French officials authorized them to carry mail between Haifa and Baghdad on a weekly basis. The route they established across the Syrian Desert resulted in cutting mail delivery time from six weeks to 9–10 days. The service was expanded to include passengers and freight by 1926, and continued in active operation until 1956.¹

The form of government in Iraq saw several changes over



the next decades. The Kingdom operated under British mandate from 1921 until 1932 when Iraq became an independent nation. During World War II the country once again was occupied by British troops. This occupation ended in 1947. Finally, the Iraqi Republic was proclaimed in 1958. A little-known philatelic component of this period is the story of the Iraqi railway post, which issued stamps from 1928 until approximately 1942.

With the January 15, 1920, opening of a railway line between Baghdad and Basrah, mail between these two major cities began to be carried by rail. Mail was collected on a regular basis from the GPO in Baghdad, transported to the Baghdad West railway station, and sent on to Basrah. In 1928 the Iraqi Railway, under British administration, signed an agreement with the Directorate General of Posts and Telegraphs that allowed the receipt of letters at every railway station, to be forwarded on the next available train to the railway station nearest the letter's intended destination. Or the letter could be handed in to the Iraqi post at the railway station at the point of destination to be forwarded to the recipient by regular means. These options were available for both local and international mail, including air mail, and for forwarding by the Overland Mail Baghdad-Haifa service run by the Nairn brothers. The service was offered for letters up to a maximum weight of 80 grams.

The Railway Stamps

The fee the railway administration charged for this service was two annas (100 annas equaled one rupee, the currency units in Iraq at this time). To ensure proper payment of this fee, the first Railway stamps were issued in 1928, in the denomination of two annas. This stamp had to be affixed to the letter, along with the required postage. Three different Railway stamps were issued before the 1932 currency change:

First Issue, 1928

The stamp is inscribed "2 ANNAS / RAILWAY / I.R. / POST. / LABEL," and can be found in two variations — with and without a full stop (.) after the word "Label." It would seem that there was either a second printing plate used or else the full stop was removed or otherwise lost after some period of use. I lean towards the second conclusion, since



First issue, 1928, with a full stop after the word "LABEL."



First issue, 1928, without a full stop after the word "LABEL."



Third issue, 1929. The rouletted perforations on the left and bottom side of the stamp are clearly visible.



First issue, 1928. Booklet pane with two stamps.



Second issue, 1929. Partial cover with violet octagonal Railway Post cancel, Hamza, dated June 7, 1932.



Fourth issue, 1932. Partial cover with violet octagonal Railway Post cancel, Kirkuk, dated February 27, 1933.

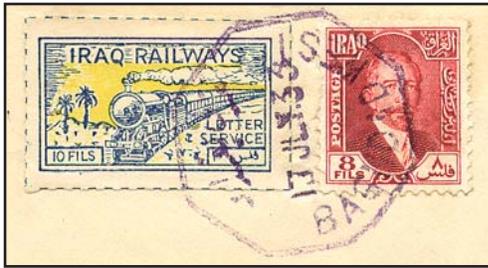
the stamps with and without the full stop are otherwise identical in size and design.

Second Issue, 1929

Inscribed "2 Annas. / IRAQ RAILWAY. / I.R. / POST STAMP. / 2 Annas."

Third Issue, 1929

Inscribed "2 Annas. / IRAQ RAILWAYS. / I.R. / POST STAMP. / 2 Annas."



Fifth issue, 1932–1942. Background color variations (a) blue and red, (b) blue and yellow, (c) blue and orange, (d) blue and ochre (partial cover with violet octagonal Railway Post cancel, Baghdad, dated July 1940)

All these stamps were sold in booklets containing sixteen stamps (eight panes with two vertical stamps on each pane). The stamp size was 41 x 33 mm. They were rouletted on the left side where the pane was attached to the booklet and between the printed stamps themselves. Up to now I have not seen a complete booklet (with cover). In fact, only one complete pane from the first issue is known to me, and I am happy to have it in my collection. As can be seen in the accompanying figure, the pane contains two stamps, both showing the variety with a full stop after the word “LABEL.”

Fifth issue, 1932–1942. Two sub-varieties exist with differing shapes in the upper line of the cloud of steam.



Fourth Issue, 1932

Following the 1932 currency change from annas and rupees to fils and dinar, a new Railway stamp was issued on April 1, 1932, in the denomination of ten fils. The stamp is inscribed “10 Fils. / IRAQ RAILWAYS. / I.R. / POST STAMP. / 10 Fils.” It is reported that this stamp was issued in a booklet of sixteen stamps, but up to now I have not seen any booklet panes.

Fifth Issue, 1932–1942

Shortly after the original 10-fils release, another stamp, also in a 10-fils denomination but with a completely different design, was issued. The new Railway stamp showed a steam locomotive of unidentified type. The stamps are known in several varieties with differing background color. The basic design, frame, and inscriptions are blue; however, the background can be found in red, yellow, and orange. I also know of one ochre-colored stamp. I have found no information about the sequence of printing for these various colors.

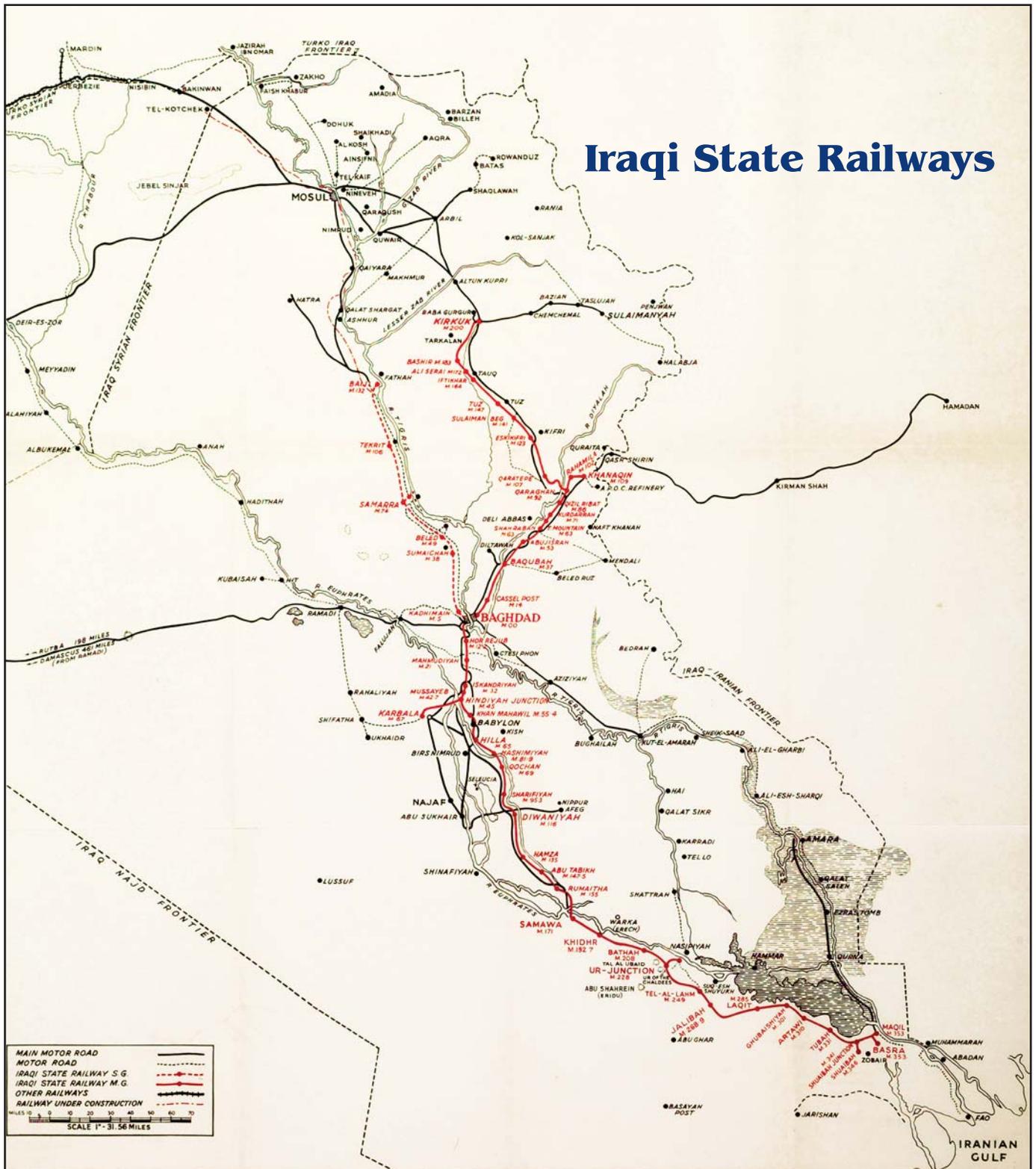
The stamps can be further differentiated into two sub-varieties, based on the shape of the upper line on the cloud of steam rising from the locomotive. Additional research is needed to determine whether these varieties were caused by aging of the printing plates, or if several printing plates, cliché types, or even re-engraving were responsible for the difference.

The new stamp is inscribed “IRAQ RAILWAYS / LETTER SERVICE / 10 FILS.” It was issued



Cover sent from Tuz Khurmatu to Baghdad, dated October 30, 1928. The stamps are canceled with the violet octagonal Railway postmark (one stamp lost). (Collection Sami Al Salman.)





Map of Iraq, ex Thomas, showing State Railways 1930.

in booklets containing sixteen stamps with four panes in blocks of four. The stamp size is 35 x 22 mm, and the stamps are rouletted on all four sides.

Again, I have not seen a complete booklet or booklet pane for this issue, but another collector has told me that he has seen a booklet pane of four stamps that had been split up.

Railway Stations/Halts and Railway Post Offices

The *Iraq Post & Telegraph Guide 1930*, issued under the authority of the Director General Post and Telegraphs, lists (under Section VII, article 283) the railway stations authorized to accept Railway Post letters. A total of fifty-five rail-



Partial with black octagonal Railway Post cancel, Baghdad, dated November 18, 1928.

way stations are named. The Arabic version of the *Post Office Guide*, issued in 1932, gives forty-nine stations and halts, but with different names than the English version. However, I question the accuracy of these lists, based on the following facts:

- The Railway station Kadhimain, in north Baghdad, also is listed in the *Post Office Guide* as Al Juwadain, which is only another name for Kadhimain.
- The listing for I.P.C. (Iraq Petroleum Company Camp) is another mail stop about which I have my doubts. This location is mentioned in the 1930 *Post Office Guide* as a railway station/halt where no other post office existed. However, the railway line from I.P.C. to Kirkuk wasn't completed until January 1947. Perhaps a postal agency existed at the I.P.C. location that sold Railway stamps, and the posted covers were then forwarded to the next railway station (in Kirkuk) for delivery.
- Ghuchan (alternate spellings Kojan, Quojan) is another mystery. So far I have not been able to locate this railway station for certain. My research has led me to two locations in completely different parts of Iraq: one in the north, close to Kirkuk,

and the other in the south, between Hillah and Diwaniyah. However, the detailed map of the Iraqi railway network available from the United Nations Logistics Centre places Quojan between Al Hillah and Al Diwaniyah.

- A railway map in my possession, dating, I believe, from 1930, shows a total of fifty-five railway stations, counting Baghdad as one station. The I.P.C. Camp is not listed, nor is the Hillah River Siding.

Despite extensive correspondence with the few known collectors of such stamps and intensive study of the material offered by various auction houses and dealers, I have only been able to find postmarks for thirteen of the fifty-five railway stations listed in the *Post Office Guide*. Clearly much research still needs to be done in this field.

Railway Postmarks and Cancellations

So far only three different types of postmarks or cancels are known:

Type 1

The most common postmark is an octagonal, mostly struck in violet but also known used in black.

Type 2

The round postmark used by the Iraqi State Post. Under what circumstances this postmark was used on Railway Post letters is not yet known to me.

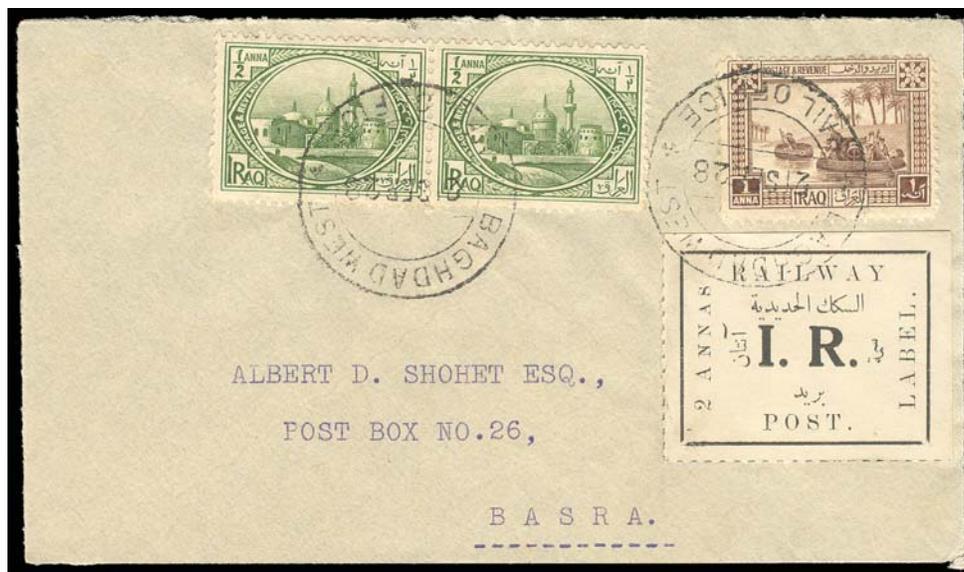
Type 3

This oval cancel has only been discovered by me and made public. Unfortunately, no complete strike of this cancel has yet been found, only parts of the strike — and these are from the upper half of the cancel. The cancel is inscribed "Iraq Railways."

In addition, in at least one instance a manuscript postmark is known from a railway station that normally used the octagonal postmark — a piece of mail from Ghuchan in 1932.

Conclusion

Around 1935–36 the railway system was sold to the Iraqi Government (at that time the Independent Kingdom). However, the Railway Post continued for some time longer — sources mention 1942. Future research and the ongoing registration of known covers, partials, and single stamps with clear postmarks hopefully will shed some light on



Cover sent from Baghdad West to Basra, dated October 21, 1928. The stamps are canceled with the round postmark of Baghdad West.





Oval "Iraq Railways" cancel discovered by the author. Only this partial is know to exist.

this. I appeal to every collector or dealer who might have such items in their collections or stock to contact me so that I can register them. Please send the information to Rainer Fuchs, Am Burkardstuhl 33, 97267 Himmelstadt, Germany, or by e-mail to rainer@fuchs-online.com.

Any additional information readers may have on the stamps and covers of the Iraqi Railway Post and the Iraqi railway from that time would be highly appreciated. Further information about my own research, including more images of stamps and covers plus supporting material (maps, photographs, postcards, etc.) can be found at <http://fuchs-online.com/iraq>.

Endnote

More detailed accounts of the Nairn brothers' fascinating story can be found at www.fuchs-online.com/overlandmail and at www.saudiaramcoworld.com/issue/198104/the.nairn.way.htm.

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The Author

Rainer Fuchs is a communications engineer, currently stationed in Abu Dhabi as a Site Project Manager for a large project with a governmental organization. He has traveled extensively and spent more than twenty years in Arab countries, including five-and-a-half years in Iraq, eleven years in Kuwait, and four years in the United Arab Emirates. Aside from the Railway stamps of Iraq, his collecting interests include Tibet (of which he has formed a large Gold Medal collection), Nepal (the classic Kukruis issues), Iran (Persia; the classic Lion issues), the Overland Mail Baghdad-Haifa, the provisional Registration stamps from SCADTA (Sociedad Colombo Alemana de Transportes Aéreo) of the 1921 issue, and the semi-official stamps of Colombia.



From the top: Partial canceled by manuscript "Ghuchan." Partial canceled by normal violet octagonal Railway postmark for Ghuchan.

