

The “Essays“ of King George I¹

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Introduction

When you buy a mixed lot of Greek stamps at an auction now and then, or scroll through stock books with surplus stamps, you will probably have seen them, those brightly coloured imperforated stamps with the image of a young man and the facade of a temple. These are called the "essays" of King George I of Greece. The Vlastos catalogue lists them (Vlastos 2012, U1 and U2). I will hereafter refer to them as essay type I. In addition, a second variety is listed in the catalogue (U3-U5) with the same young man, but now without the image of a temple. I will refer to them as type II. The Vlastos catalogue indicates that both these types of stamps are "unofficial Issues".



Fig1a and 1b-d: Type I and type II of the essays

About these essays a lot has already been written in the past. The most recent and most comprehensive article was written by Louis Fanchini. Here the author discusses in detail the history of these stamps and the different types. In addition, Bill Ure, in his book on forgeries of the 19th century, also dedicates a chapter to these stamps and their forgeries.

In this article, gratefully using the works of these two authors, but also on the basis of other sources, I will give my views on the history and status of these (and some other) "essays".

The reason for the “essays”

In October 1862, King Otto of Greece, Bavarian by birth, was forced to resign after a rebellion. A troubled period followed in which a successor was sought. After other candidates had refused to accept the throne, finally on 18/30 March 1863 Prince William of Denmark, 17 years of age, was elected by the Greek Parliament to become King of the Hellenes. He was given the official name of King George I. On 18/30 October 1863 he arrived in Athens and he would remain king until he was assassinated in 1913.

With regard to the stamps of Greece, philatelists had high expectations for a change due to the arrival of the new king. Jean-Baptiste Moens, the famous Belgian stamp dealer and one of the founding-fathers of philately, wrote in his journal “Le Timbre Post” as early as April 1863 regarding the arrival of Prince William to Greece: "The acceptance of the Crown of Greece by Prince William of Denmark, which seemed a fact, is again not certain. This is not without significance for collectors,



Fig.2 The portrait of the young King used as an example for the “essays”

¹ This article is a slightly updated version of “Die “Essays” von König George I“ in Rundbrief 122 (9/2016) of the ArGe Griechenland.

because the new king will no doubt want to make his effigy popular and replace the old stamps (JM: The Large Hermes heads) by others bearing his image."

So, there seemed to be an opportunity for designers and printers to come up with proposals for new Greek stamps.

The first reports of the "essays"

As far as the first reports of the "essays" in philatelic journals are concerned the existing publications on our subject rely on the English periodical "Stamp Collector's Magazine".

In the May 1864 issue, the editors state: "One of the choicest collections in London has just been enriched by a set of essays for Greece, nine in number, same design and value. The colours are green, pink, mauve, orange, blue, black, yellow, chocolate and scarlet. They are more attractive than beautiful; and from their large size, which is about that of the Pacific Steam Navigation Company's stamp, are not likely to be accepted. A medallion portrait of King George I blockades the centre of a view of the Parthenon; underneath which, "Ell. Gramm", in Greek characters; and the value (20 lept.) in each of the four corners." In addition to this, in the June edition of the magazine an image of the "essay" was published.

A similar text (with illustration) is included in the May 1864 issue of "Le Timbre Poste". Moens writes, "In Paris, a stamp for Greece is being designed, resembling the illustration next to this article." He then describes the stamp which, according to him, at that moment was printed in eight colours, black, orange, lilac, straw, light green, light red, bistre and blue. Then follows an extensive article in which he discusses the choice of the design, which according to him combines ancient Classical Greece (Parthenon) with modern Greece (the young King). He also declares he would like the designer to be a Greek and says that in his opinion the design is very primitive. Then he continues with an extensive treatise on the Parthenon.

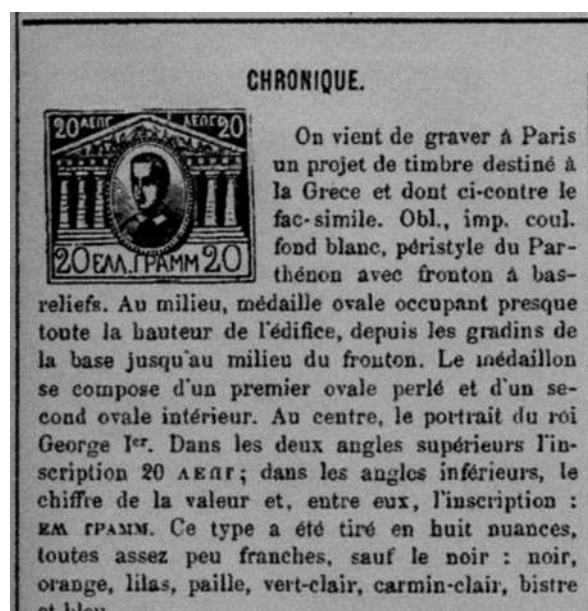


Fig 3a and 3b: Text from Le Timbre Post of May 1864, with detail

All in all I think we may conclude that the first reports of the "essay" type I were published in May 1864, with Moens giving us the most specific details, showing an image of the stamps in his magazine and reporting that the stamps were printed in Paris.

According to the existing literature, the second type of essay was first mentioned in the July 1864 issue of "Stamp Collector's Magazine", again without providing an image. "Le Timbre Poste" however, reports them a month earlier in the magazine, at the same time adding an illustration. Moens writes: "Essays for Greece have been presented to us. They are by the same maker as those of Mexico (JM: I will come to that in the next paragraph) with whom they share a number of qualities. They are printed in black, bistre, vermillion, green, pink, violet and golden (doré). They are printed in three values: 5, 20 and 40 leptas. The 5 and 40 values look similar to each other. Rectangular, printed in lithography in colour against a white background. Then a description of the image follows. Moens ends with the conclusion that these essays are better executed than the other one (type I).

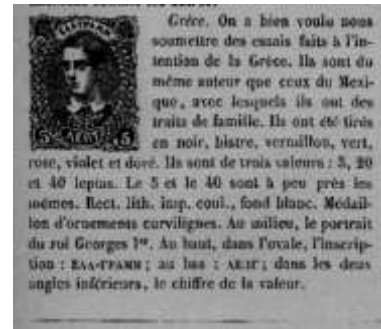


Fig.4: Detail of the text of Le Timbre Post of June 1864

The second type of essay therefore did not follow much later than the first type of essay, in June 1864.

In January 1865 Moens reports (at the instigation of the collector Dr. Alexander Ritter von Volpi) that in Munich they were working on another essay with the image of King George. We will call this type III.

Finally, in January 1866 the "Stamp Collector's Magazine" reports: "A letter from Athens announces the advent of a new series of stamps for unpaid letters only similar to the current set in size and colour, but the head of Mercury replaced by large figures of value. These are repeated at each corner, and the inscription ELL. GRAMM., in Greek characters appears at top, bottom and sides." Although there is no mention in this text of these stamps being essays, the text seems relevant for another type of essay that will be discussed later in this article, which I will refer to as type IV.

The designers of the essays

Louis Fanchini mentions in his article that the authors of the essays are not known. Regarding the essay of type I I agree with him. The only thing we know is that the design was probably made in Paris. One author, Nicolaïdes, gives us some extra information on the designer. He argues that the engraver of the stamp lived near what is now the Place de la Republique in Paris, but otherwise he does not give further details.



Fig.5a-d: Examples of type I

Regarding the essay of type II, more information is known. Both articles mentioned before, in "Stamp Collector's Magazine" and "Le Timbre Poste", referred to designs for stamps of Mexico that were issued at around the same time. There too, a new monarch (Maximilian) had accepted the throne in 1863, which seemed a good occasion for creating new stamps. According to both articles the creator of these essays (and thus also the creator of the Greek essays) came from Milan. The editor of "Stamp Collector's Magazine" adds that he assumes that this Milanese was also responsible for a number of previous Italian essays.



Fig.6: Essay for Maximiliaan of Mexico

Around this time, there were at least two printers actively designing stamps in Milan. In 1861 the Kingdom of Italy was proclaimed and King Victor-Emanuel ascended the throne. At the request of the Italian postal service a number of printers then made designs for stamps for the new kingdom. Amongst them there were two Milanese printers, Francesco Grazioli (Wench), who offered his designs to the postal service in April 1862 and Luigi Ronchi, who proposed his essays in July 1863.



Fig.7: Ronchi essays for Italy (1863)



Fig.8: Ronchi essays, type II

The designs of the latter show striking similarities with the essay of type II of Greece. The frames used, the colour and the printing of the essays in sheets, in my opinion form sufficient evidence to believe that Luigi Ronchi is also the designer of the essay of type II. He was a printer in Milan in the middle of the 19th century, editing prints, maps and guides. He was also publisher of, amongst other things, patriotic books and pamphlets.

Nothing is known about the author of the essay of type III. The same goes for a fourth essay-type, we will encounter in the following paragraphs.

Essays or vignettes

The term "essay" is much discussed and a lot has been written about it. For this article, I will use an old definition that Dr. Otto Carl Alfred Moschkau, one of the founders of German philately, already proposed in 1875: "Essays are "try-outs" used by Postal administrations concerned, for the final selection of a new issue, made in various types by the official stamp printing houses or in open competition." The essence of this definition is that the stamps were submitted as a proposal to the Postal authorities and were later accepted.

The question is whether this happened with the essays of King George. I can answer this question briefly: as far as I know, they were not submitted, let alone accepted.

An anonymous letter writer (and essay collector) from Brixton writes in the 1864 December issue of "Stamp Collector's Magazine": "I am informed by Mr Mavrocordato, most probably of the Athenian post-office, that the so-called Greek essays have never been seen in Greece, that they have not been suggested, and that it is not the intention of the authorities to issue other stamps than those in use at the present time. Pemberton mentions that he suspects that this Mavrocordato was the same person as the collector from Odessa of that name, whose beautiful collection of Greek stamps (which included essays) was bought by Mr Jonas in 1900. The Mavrokordatos family was an important family in Greece. The best known of the Mavrokordatoi, which held significant positions in the 18th century in the region of Odessa, was Alexandros Mavrokordatos, who was one of the leading figures in the War of Independence in Greece in 1821 and later in life became Minister of Finance and several times Prime Minister of Greece. Perhaps he was the Mavrocordato the letter writer was referring to, or else certainly one of his influential relatives.

A little later, Moens also became convinced that the stamps were no essays, but fantasy-printings for the philatelic market. In June 1865, he renounces his announcement about the essay of type III. In addition, he says, "After obtaining direct information (JM in Greece) we can be certain that there has been no thought as to changing the stamps. It looks like the following issue of a series of stamps will be with numbers (no doubt for postage due)." Furthermore he sighs that all Greek essays "which are incessantly flooding the market must be classified as "Garibaldi essays," by which he means that they were fantasy-stamps.

The collection of essays in the 19th century

The hobby of philately, very young, had still to develop. Collectors collected every piece of paper that they could get hold of. The essays too did not remain unnoticed, neither by collectors nor by dealers.

In 1906-7 Pierre Mahé published a series of articles in the "Stanley Gibbons Monthly Journal" under the title "My souvenirs - Reminiscences of a Veteran" that include stories about the first postage stamps of Greece. In one of those articles Mahé describes inter alia the 19th century history of the collection of essays. He writes:

"The genuine interest that is possessed by Essays failed for a long time to be recognized by collectors. A certain number of the latter, it is true, had appreciated them as they deserved. They had commenced by collecting a few specimens, and, as they found them interesting, they continued to do so, and no doubt would have always continued, if certain manufacturers had not thrown themselves, as it were, in the way of this movement, drowning it in a deluge of little pictures of all the different kinds that their inventive brains and their greed of gain led them to conceive.

No sooner had some not entirely disinterested idealist composed (with or without any serious intention) a design, good or bad (usually the latter), and in any case rejected whenever it was actually offered, than, in spite of all the circumstances attending its invention, it was reproduced in innumerable combinations of all the colours of the rainbow

and others besides and these impressions were offered to collectors, not as proposals -not to use too harsh a term- but under the more pompous and attractive designation of essays. And even this was not all. These productions, whilst tending to prejudice philatelists against the real essays, sold extremely well for all that, not only among a few of the serious collectors, but more especially among that multitude of good people who believed that an essay must be something infinitely higher and more precious than a mere stamp. The next step in the exploitation of this credulity was to invoke the assistance of the nearest lithographer, either calling upon him to compose a design from a sketch furnished by the customer, or leaving both composition and execution in his hands, merely indicating the country to be worked. And thus the game went on!

The flood developed into a Slough of Despond, ever growing deeper, until all its victims were submerged. Essays were abandoned by collectors, who were confused by the superabundant supply, and were no longer able to distinguish between that which might be accepted and that which should be rejected. A few philatelists, however, of more robust faith, persisted in the collection of genuine essays, and they have good reason to congratulate themselves, for they now possess collections of inestimable value, which is would be almost impossible to replace on the same lines now that essays proper have regained the favour which they never ceased to merit."

It is clear from the story of Mahé that the dividing line between real essays and fantasy-stamps was a thin one during the course of the 19th century.

The catalogue of essays by Dr. Moschkau

That there was a serious market for collecting essays is evident from the special catalogue Dr. Moschkau issued in 1875. Here, based on an analysis of all major philatelic magazines of that time (including "Le Timbre Poste" and the "Stamp Collector's Magazine") and on the basis of collections (amongst whom the one by Dr. Alexander Ritter von Volpi was the largest), he gave a summary of all the known and accepted essays at that time. He also mentions that next to the "real" essays there also existed speculative or fantasy-essays.

For Greece he mentions four groups of essays.

The first group are the essays for the Large Hermes Heads. He states: "1861. Head of Mercury to the right in a circle. Type of the official stamps, surface printing, various types of paper. Without denomination: light blue, black and brown, one lepton black, brown, red, green, black on green, black on yellow, 2 LPT. black, 5 LPT. rose red, brown, 20 LPT. Dark blue, black, blue, light blue, 40 LPT. rose red, orange, olive brown, rose red on white tissue paper. NB. These essays also exist with the sheets being printed on both sides with essays, so that the back also includes a portion of a print of an essay."

The second group he calls "Parthenon"; he describes: "1864 Parthenon (temple with pillars), in the same picture King George in an oval medallion, denomination above and below, surface printing, white paper, 20 LPT. orange, green, blue, black, yellow, brown, pink, seal-red." On the first page of his book there is also an illustration of this "essay". It is clearly our type I.

The third group he describes as follows: "1864 King George in ornate oval frame to the left. Text above. Denomination down, surface printing, white paper, 5 LPT, 20 LP, 40 LPT, black, green, brown, orange, pink. He also states: "This essay is also available in a black print on coloured paper (light blue, green, etc.)." It is clearly type II.

Finally, he describes another group: "1866. Size of the official stamps, denomination in the middle, text Ell Gramm in Greek characters, at top, bottom and sides. I will call this essay type IV.

Later writers on essays

After Dr. Moschkau, Arthur Glasewald was the first to write again about the essays of King George, in 1896, but then the confusion about different types begins.

Glasewald starts off with a new version of the essay of type I. In this version, the king has a broader head, the locket is a bit wider and lower, and the columns of the temple of the Parthenon look more solid. Of this variety he mentions a copy in steel engraving on white paper, which he knows only in blue, and a lithograph version in up to 16 colours. I will refer to them as type Ia (white paper) and type Ib.



Fig.9a-c: Type Ia and Ib and a copy of type I for comparison

Next to this he mentions the essay of type I itself, but only in the colour blue. In addition to the essays of type I, Ia and Ib, he also mentions the essays of type II and IV, stating that he obtained his data from Dr. Moschkaus publication (with the addition of a lilac copy of the 5 lepta of type II). Regarding type IV he mentions never actually having seen one in print.

In 1903 A. Reinheimer published a booklet, in which he describes the essay-collection of the German collector Martin Schroeder (collected in the period 1893-1902). Schroeder possessed the essay of type Ia in six different colours, type I in twelve colours and of type II four strips of three, 12 loose copies on white paper and 21 pieces in a less fine impression on different coloured papers, again including three strips of three. In the annex the author includes an illustration of each type.

Percival Loines Pemberton, from the year 1911 onwards, writes an extensive article on the postage stamps of Greece in the "Philatelic Journal of Great Britain". He also refers to the essays. Like Glasewald he first mentions the essays of type Ia (in a dozen colours), type Ib (in up to 20 colours) and then remarks that there is also a (much rarer) variety with a smaller head of King George (our type I). He also mentions type II in twelve colours. Furthermore, he also refers to the reporting of type III in "Stamp Collector's Magazine" and type IV in Glasewald. He has never actually seen either of these essays. Finally, he addresses the question whether these stamps are in fact essays or fantasy stamps, referring to the above-quoted letter writer in the "Stamp Collector's Magazine" regarding the communication by Mavrokordatos. Pemberton clearly has his doubts about the status of the essays.

The next author I must mention is Nicolaos Nicolaïdes. He also devotes a chapter in his book to the essays. According to him, type I and type Ia appeared at the same time (1863). According to him type 1a was printed in ten colours. Moreover, he has a unique specimen containing no denomination.



Fig.10: The unique Nicolaïdes-copy

Then there is type Ib. According to him this was printed in 20 colours, ten engraved and ten executed in lithography. In addition, he indicates that the philatelic market was flooded in 1898 with poorly-made reproductions of type Ib. I will call them type Ic. Type Ic is easy to recognize by the letter Gamma in the word Gramm, which has a hook, as opposed to type Ia and Ib.



Fig.11a-b: Gamma, type Ib and Gamma, type Ic

Whole sheets of this variety were offered for sale at EBay in the past years, showing that they were printed in large sheets of 11x10 stamps. This type Ic (printed in eight colours), is the one most offered on the philatelic market, in singles, pairs, and large blocks.



Fig.12a-b: Two examples of type Ic

Nicolaïdes also mentions he has seen a handmade design of type I that he could not buy (it could be a copy in the Ferrary collection also reported by Silberstein/Truman).

Finally, he also mentions type II in several varieties.

In 2010, for the first time in many years, a thorough and comprehensive analysis of the essays was published by Louis Fanchini. He divides the essays into three groups, which division I also used as the basis for this article. My type I and his type 1 are the same. The special stamp of Nicolaïdes he called type 2a. His types 2b, c and d then correspond to my types Ia, b and c. Like Bill Ure he believes that type Ic (his type 2d) is a reprint and the other types are "originals".

Finally, his type 3 is my type II. He points out that there are two different types II (3a and 3b); One has a fine print (fig.1b-d), the other a somewhat coarser printing on thick white paper (Figure 13).

For the sake of completeness I must mention that Bill Ure (and Louis Fanchini) also name a few clearly identifiable and very crude forgeries of both type I and II. It is interesting to note, a forgery of type I is already mentioned by Arthur Maury in his "Le Collectionneur de Timbres-Poste" of September 1864. He states: "The Greek Essays, representing the new King and the Parthenon, have been roughly forged by copying them. Mister B. from Le Havre, please be careful!"



Fig.13: Type II, 5 lepta, coarser print on thick white paper

Final Verdict

Based on the foregoing, I come to the following classification.

I think type I is the original design from 1864, conceived in response to the arrival of the new Greek King George I. The types Ia, Ib and Ic are of a later date, probably around 1885-1900. I deduce this from two things. First there is the image of King George himself. As clumsily drawn as type I seems to be, the narrow, slightly bowed head is more consistent with the original photograph that served as a basis than the broader image, used on type Ia, b and c. Furthermore, it is only from Glasewald, from 1896 onwards, type Ia and Ib are mentioned in the philatelic literature. Following Nicolaïdes, type Ic only came on the philatelic market around 1898. I therefore conclude that the types Ia, b and c are in fact all three imitations of the original type I design, made for the eager collectors at the end of the 19th century (type Ic being a late reprint of type Ib). It certainly fits the essay-collector's market at that time as described by Mahé.

Type II is also an original design from 1864, made by the Milanese printer Luigi Ronchi.

With respect to type III we may be brief. After the report by Moens that a stamp was prepared in Munich, he quickly renounced this statement in 1865. Besides, no one else has ever seen this type. I therefore believe that it belongs to the realm of fiction.

The same goes for type IV, reported by Dr. Moschkau to be made in 1866, but there is also another (and in my opinion more likely) theory. As Moens said in 1865, and evidenced by the text in "Stamp Collector's Magazine" in January 1866, the Greek Post Office considered making postage due stamps, with a number in the middle of the stamp. This seems to be confirmed by the German "Magazin für Briefmarkensammler" which was informed by a befriended Greek tradesman in 1865 that no stamps with the portrait of the King would be issued and no definitive decision had been taken about the issue of stamps at all, but the intended new stamps would be of a value of 1, 2, 5, 10, 20, 25, 40, 80, 110 and 220 lepta; the 25 lepta being intended for the Ionian Islands, the 110 lepta for Germany and the 220 lepta for France. Postage due stamps would eventually be issued only in 1875. But might it not be true that the essay of type IV was in fact a very early draft for the later postage due stamps? On the other hand, what happened to this essay, as it was never seen?

Then we have the final question, are these essays, or are they just fantasy stamps?

Louis Fanchini concludes in his article that there is no evidence that the essays of type I and II have ever been in Greece, let alone have been offered to the Post Office. He is therefore convinced they do not qualify as essays but are merely "vignettes". Based on my study, I can only wholeheartedly agree with him.

Finally, I would like to thank Mr. Galinos for his kind permission to use some images from his Collectio auction 74 from 2013 (fig.1b-d, 8 and 9a).

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