

History and background

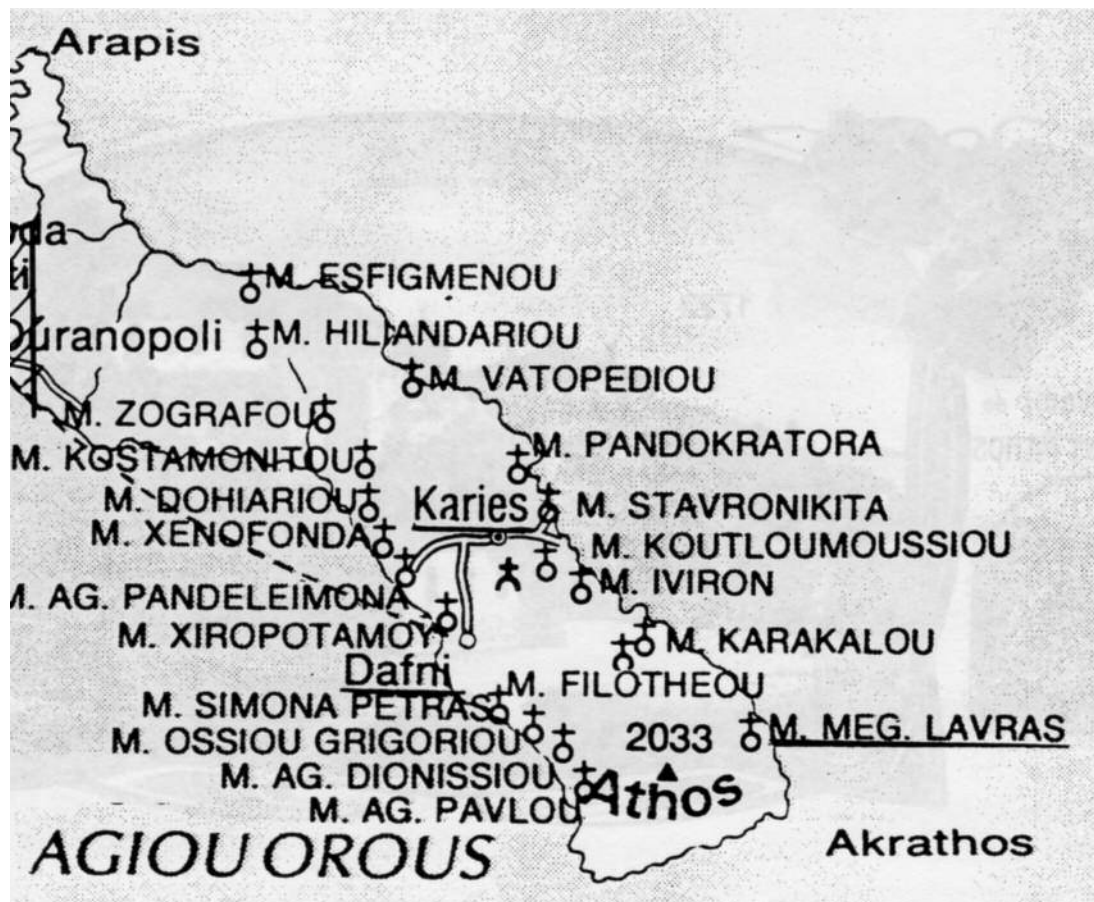
The peninsula of Chalkidiki lies to the SE of Salonica and contains itself three peninsulas. One of them is called "Agion Oros", which means "Holy Mountain" in Greek. In Turkish it is called 'Aynaros', 'Aynoros' or 'Ayion Oros'; and in French 'Mont Athos'. It is the only autonomous monk republic in the world; its origin dates back to the Byzantine Empire, therefore all its monasteries are "royal".

The historical forerunners of the monks in seclusion were John the Baptist in the desert and Egyptian desert saints like Antonius and Pachomios. The latter also started the conversion from heremite to monk living in cloisters.

As early as 870, the shepherds living on the "Holy Mountain" were driven away and the monks created their own state, with only male inhabitants and an administration of their own. This was first called the "Residence of the elder in a row" and later the "The Big Centre" at Karyés.

If somebody wishes to live in a hermitage, he needs a strong belief. That's why S. Athanasios, a man of noble descent from Trebizonde who had a powerful position in the monastic world ordered to build cloisters according to the rules of Pachomios. The monks should live in rows of similar cells ("laura"). In this way, between 961 and 1545, a community was created consisting of twenty large cloisters and some smaller ones, called "skites". The year 963, when they started building the first monastery called the "Biggest Laura" (Megisti Lavra) is considered the year of foundation of the state. Emperor Nikiforos Focas was the first abbot.

During the Western and Turkish rule (1360 - 1912) this state kept its autonomy, even from the Patriarch at Constantinople. Under the Turkish rule, the monks paid a yearly tribute. However, foreign affairs and public order stayed under jurisdiction of the sovereign. From 1783 onwards, the administration was regulated by the creation of a Holy Synod comprising of twenty members, one from each monastery. The executive board consisted of four presidents and resided at the capital Karyés.



¹ This article, a little updated by J. Meijer in cooperation with the author, was originally published in Hermes, periodical of the Hellenic Philatelic Society of the Netherlands, no.108 (2000), pg.17

Traditionally, a number of Russian and Georgian monks stayed on Athos. Around the middle of the 19th century the Russians became a majority, thanks to an active policy of the Czars, promoting the settlement of Russian monks on Athos. Moreover, the Russian cloisters were very rich thanks to collections and subsidies; the Russian monastery of St. Panteleimon were more than 3000 monks were living, resembled more the Kremlin than a cloister.

According to statistics, in 1902, there were in total 7521 monks on Athos. They were divided as follows:

3610	Russians	48%
3204	Greeks	42,6%
338	Bulgarians	4,5%
301	Rumanians	4%
53	Georgians	0,7%
15	Serbians	0,2%

With there 42,6% the Greeks formed a minority in relation to the Russians, Georgians and Serbians (53,4%).

On the second of November 1912, during the first Balkan war, the Greeks raised their flag on Athos, after the naval ships Averof, Pantir and Thyella entered the harbour of Dafni. The commander of the Greek marine troops, Captain George Papageorgiou, ordered by telephone the Turkish commander, Kaimakami Ali Talaat Bey, who was residing in Karyés, to surrender. He did so when the Greek landing party reached Karyés, after a march by foot for several hours. Later, an army detachment of 750 men under major Kareklis arrived over land.

Shortly after the liberation, the Russians started to use diplomatic pressure to make Athos an international territory to protect their interests. This pressure was however resisted successfully by the Greeks and the leaders of the monasteries. They sent a memorandum to the ambassadors of the Great Powers. In November 1913 the autonomy of Mount Athos was decided in London under the sovereignty of Greece; Russia recognised this decision in June 1914. The status was made official at the Lausanne Treaty of 1924.



The Turkish Mail on Mount Athos

The Turkish stamps that were used in the period 1868 - 1882 were cancelled with the double-ring seal no. 1, with the inscription in Arabic letters AYNAROS (AYNOROS or AYON-OROS = Holy Mountain). Because these stamps had to be purchased in golden liras, people started smuggling stamps bought with much cheaper paper liras in Constantinople to Mount Athos, which made the stamps at the local post-office unsaleable. To combat this smuggling, the stamps were overprinted with a small triangle containing the initials of the local postman (Σ.Χ.Π.), Sotirios Chatzi Petropoulos. Only these overprinted stamps were allowed for use on Mount Athos, notwithstanding that they were also found with the cancellations of other places.



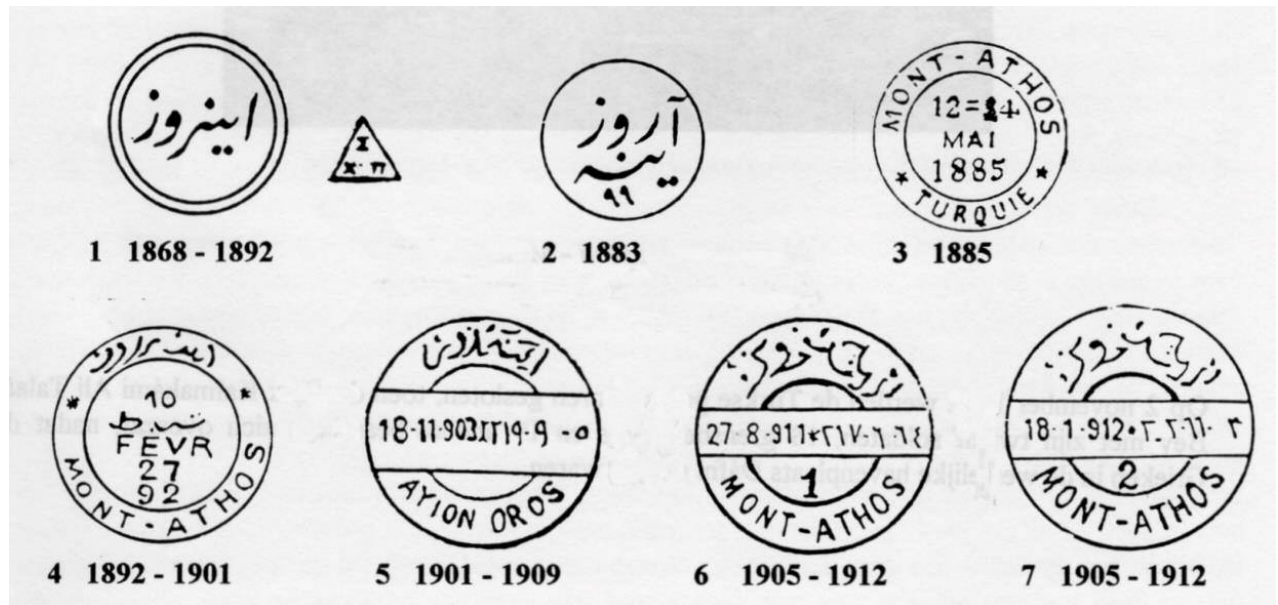
In 1883, a single ring seal was used (no.2).

From 1885 a new bilingual seal was introduced (no. 3) with "MONT - ATHOS" in the upper and "TURQUIE" in the lower part. As far as known, this is the only seal with two dates, one according to the Gregorian (OS) calendar and one in the Julian (NS) which before 1900 differed 12 days. No.2 and 3 were probably used only in 1883 resp. 1885, besides the older one (type 1).

The no.1 seal was replaced in 1892 with a bilingual one with Arabic letters in the upper part and "Mont-Athos" in Latin lettering in the lower section, with two rings (no.4); this type was in use till 1901.

Thereafter, seal no. 5 with two rings and a an date-inscription in the middle and AYION OROS in the lower section came into service.

Eventually, two seals with two rings and a balk were in use between 1905 and 1912, with the inscription MONT-ATHOS, in Arabic script in the upper and Latin script in the lower section. The only difference was the number (1 or 2), just below the middle, possibly because there were two post offices (no.6 and 7).



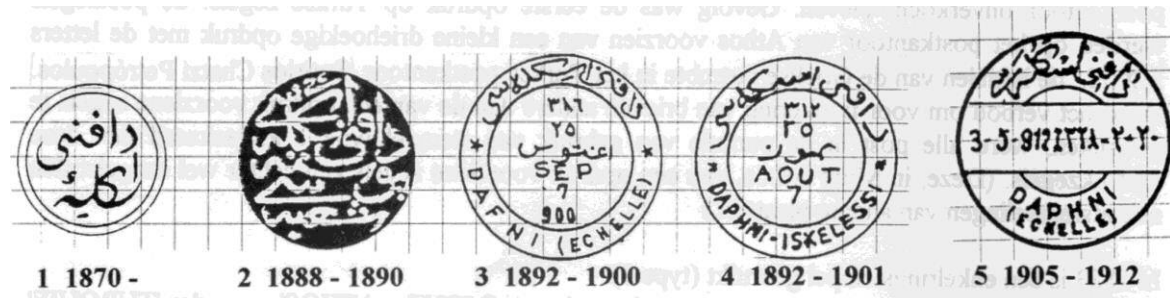
Another Turkish post office was to be found in the harbour of Dafni with cancellations reading Daphni (Echelle) of Dafni-Iskelessi.

The first type was a double ring one with Arabic letters, in use from 1870 (no. 1).

The second type, also with Arabic letters only, was a single ring of the so-called negative type (no. 2), in use between 1888 and 1890.

Between 1892 and 1904 cancellations were probably made by two new seals, both of the double ring type, with Arabic (upper part) and Latin (lower section) letters (nos. 4 and 5).

Finally, here also a seal with a balk over two rings was introduced in 1905 (type 5).



*Harbour of Dafni – Mount Athos
Residence of a Turkish Post-Office*

The Turkish post offices closed on November 2nd, 1912, after the Turkish Kaimakami Ali Talaat Bey surrendered with his 12 soldiers, 18 border guards and 19 other officials when the Greeks landed in Dafni.

The Russian Post-office

As an introduction to this chapter, I use a fragment from G. Smyrnakis' book about mount Athos. This book was published in Athens as part of the series "Ellinismos" in 1902. On page 193 he writes:

" Between 1857 and 1884 no post- or telegraph-office existed. For their post, the monks used the means of the messenger of the Holy Community. In these years, ships of the Russian Steamship Company called sometimes at the harbours of the monasteries such as Agios Panteleimon or Iviron and other places. These ships carried also mail. From 1884 on, a lot of merchants settled in Karyés. These merchants were excluded from this type of postal service and felt isolated so a state post- and telegraph office opened in the building of the Esfigmeno cloister, connected with the village of Polygiros, 22 hours away from Karyés via Vrasti, in 1889."

Three elements of this interesting account stand out:

1. The year mentioned for the opening of the Turkish post-office, 1884 must be wrong. The Brandt-Oran catalogue mentions 1868, Vlastos 1863, but anyhow there are envelopes sent from Athos far earlier than 1884. Maybe, the author refers to the re-opening of the post-office after a short closure because of its transferral from Dafni to Karyés. 1863 seems to be the most likable date for the inauguration of a Turkish post-office on Athos.
2. The mail service of the Holy Community is interesting, although this was possibly inefficient and even medieval. Anyhow this service existed and maybe for a long time before. But there are no letters known which were dispatched by this service nor do we know anything about any cancellation or other recognition marks to separate the commercial from religious mail.
3. Another point is the relation with the steamships of the Russian Navigation (P.O.П.и.Т.). This company was in fact an important exponent of Russia's politics in the Aegean Sea; present everywhere where Russian interests existed and on Athos they certainly were.

A long time before, in 1857 already, the ships P.O.П.и.Т called at Mount Athos and carried mail, although no Russian post-office was yet opened. Around 1870 a Russian maritime office should have been open, where the mail was cancelled with a negative cancellation: (P.O.П.и.Т. - ПОЧТА - АФОНЬ) (type 1). The first regular Russian post-office was established in 1890; this office used stamps of the Russian Levant.

Till 1917 the following cancellations were in use:

Seal with two rings, inscription P.O.П.и.Т. - АФОНЬ diameter 26 mm, between 1890 and 1908 (no. 2);

Similar seal, 27 mm. diameter and larger lettering, 1891-1908 (no.3);

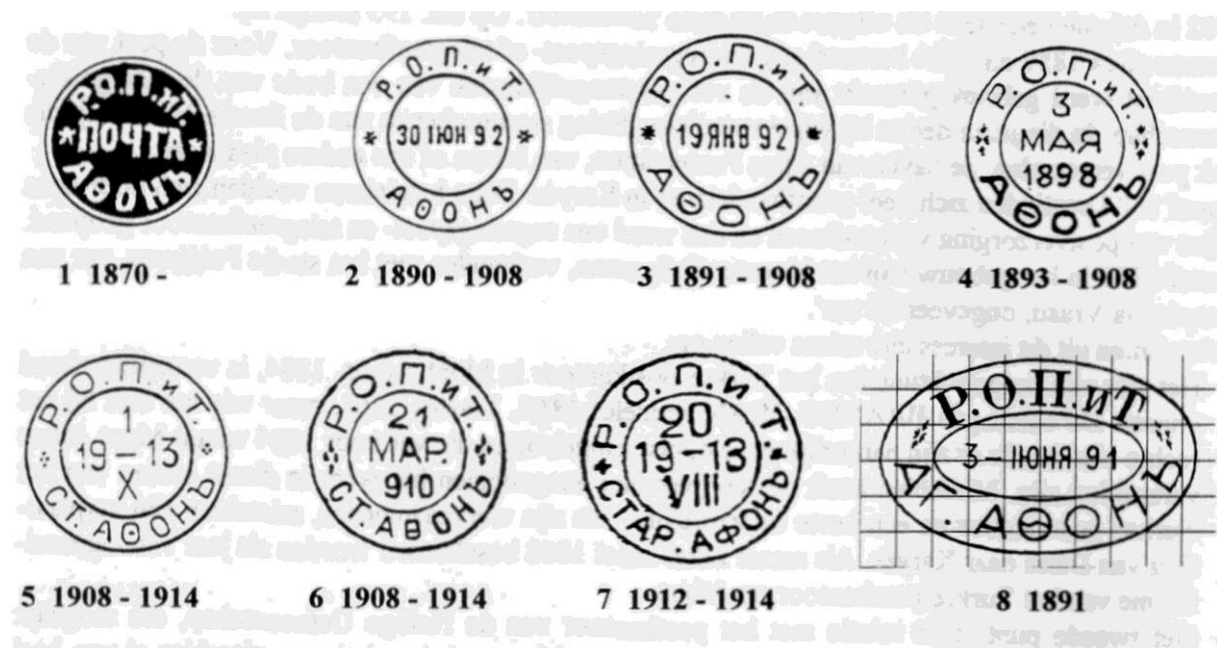
Similar seal, but different typeset, with two blossoms and date in three rows, 1893-1908 (no. 4);

Seal with inscription P.O.П.и.Т. СТАР АФОНЬ = Old Athos, in use from 1908 till 1914, no.5, from 1908 till maybe beginning of 1918 (latest cancellation found 20-12-1917).

Same sort of seal with different flowers and a three-row date (no. 6), used in the same time-span as type 5 (type 6);

Seal with the text P.O.П.и.Т. СТАР АФОНЬ (Old Athos), 1912 - 1914, no. 7.

For documents, a special oval cancellation was used in 1891 with the inscription P.O.П.и.Т. - АГ. АФОНЬ (no. 8).



The Russians put into circulation in 1909 - 1910 special stamps for use on Athos, as they had done for all P.O.Π.и.Т.-agencies. Two series were emitted: One comprising of nine values, a French "Mont Athos" overprint in black on the stamps of the series of Russian Levant with new currency in paras and piasters instead of kopeken and rubels. The 5 para of this series exists also with blue overprint.



A second series of 7 values with overprint on the Levant stamps in Cyrillic script of 'С(ТАРЪИЙ) АФОНЪ' and the new values in para's and piasters in Latin script.



In addition to the post office in the P.O.Π.и.Т agency on Athos, there was another one in the Russian cloister cell of Sint John Chrysostomos in the period 1891 - 1914. A cloister cell falls under the jurisdiction of the abbot and is allocated to three monks, of which the head is called "Jeron" (elder). The exact location of the cell was near the cloister of Chiliandario and father Cyrillos was at that time as elder the leader of the post-office. The monks of the cell distributed envelopes with their address to various places in Russia. They asked the believers to send the envelopes back with the necessary financial aid for the monks.

The cell used a special cancellation : a seal with double rings with inscription P.K.c.i.3 - АФОНЪ, i.e. ΡΟΥΣΚΑΓΙΑ ΚΕΛΙΑ ΣΒΙΑΤΑΓΟ ΙΟΑΝΑ ΖΛΑΤΟΥΣΤΑΓΟ - Russian Cell of Sint John Chrysostomos.

The Greek Post

Directly after November 2nd, 1912, the Greek Marine detachment took over the postal activities, cancelling the correspondence with ΝΑΥΤΙΚΟ ΑΓΗΜΑ (marine-forces). Later, until the official post-office arrived, the Greek post-office was established in the customs office of Dafni and probably also in that of Karyés.

Towards the end of 1912, two post-offices were opened, one in Karyés using cancellation type V with inscription ΑΓΙΟΝ ΟΡΟΣ and one in Dafni (inscription ΔΑΦΝΗ). Later on in Karyés the cancellation type V with inscription ΚΑΡΥΑΙ was used.

These post-offices used in the beginning like all the others in the New Territories, the series with the ΕΛΛΗΝΙΚΗ ΔΙΟΙΚΗΣΙΣ overprint and the 1912-13 Campaign series.



The stamps of the Holy Community

In the course of WWI Macedonia changed into a battleground with thousands of dead soldiers and the Greek sovereignty of the territory existed only on paper. For diplomatic reasons, the Greek government decided to emit a series of overprints of values from the Campaign and postage due series. The overprint read *Ι.Κοινότος Αγ. Ορους*.

These stamps were sent to Thessaloniki, but never reached Athos, because Russia capitulated in the mean time because of the Russian-revolution and therefore the pressure on Greece faded away.



The stamps went back to the warehouse for sealed paper;

some of them were however distributed by accident to a number of post-offices elsewhere in Greece but not on Athos, where they were used as regular Greek stamps; That is the reason three values of the set are known cancelled, 5, 10 and 25 lepta. Eventually the stamps were burned in 1931, although a small number escaped the fire and they now enrich the collections of a limited number of lucky philatelists.

They are:

Postage due-stamps (recess edition of 1913) 1, 2, 3, 5, 10, 20, 25, 30, 40, 50 lepta, 1 and 2 drachme and also the 5 lepta of the litho-issue of 1902.

Campaign (with a new value in lepta or drachme) 1 lepta on 20, 25, 30, 40 and 50 lepta and on 1 drachme; 15 lepta on all values of the set and 20 lepta on 2 lepta. Also the 1 lepton, 2 and 3 lepta and 2 drachmes exist with the overprint but without the new value.



The following errors and varieties are known:

1. *εισποακτεα* instead of *εισπρακτεα*, on plate number 34, 39, 84 and 89.
2. The *ς* of the word *Ορους* has fallen on plate numbers 4, 9, 14, 19, 24, 29.
3. Failing capital letters *I* and *A* on the first 5 vertical stamps
4. Failing letters *ou* in the word *Ορους*.

In addition to the stamps, a number of parcel forms with Flying Hermes 50 lepta and 1.50 dr. with the same overprint have been found.

This overprint has been the target of various forgers; in this context, the following curious story is worth mentioning: the commission charged with the burning of the stamps in 1931 discovered a sheet with a forged overprint among the genuine ones. Apparently the forger with the cooperation of an official, replaced the genuine one for the forged copy.

The British issue for Athos

When in the winter of 1915/16 the question of the independency of Athos became actual, a curious set of stamps was printed on board the British carrier "Ark Royal". This series would be used if the territory was to be declared independent or be placed under international jurisdiction. In the end the region was not occupied by allied forces and the stamps were not necessary anymore.

The set of stamps consisted of 6 values, in three different currencies:

1	½ penny	2 kopeken	5 lepta	Black on deep greenish blue
2	1 penny	4 kopeken	10 lepta	Black on carmine
3	2 ½ pence	10 kopeken	25 lepta	Black on rose-red or pale blue
4	4 ½ pence	18 kopeken	45 lepta	Black on yellow or rose
5	6 pence	24 kopeken	60 lepta	Black on lilac
6	1 shilling	48 kopeken	120 lepta	Black on buff or brownish pink



The stamps depict the two-headed eagle with the child Jesus in an oval on its breast, surrounded with the inscription THEOCRACY – ΘΕΟΚΡΑΤΕΙΑ ΤΟΥ ΑΓΙΟΥ ΟΡΟΥΣ - ΜΟΥΝΤ ΑΘΟΣ - СВ ГОРА ΑΦΟΗ. These stamps were never used and were destroyed. Nevertheless, some of these stamps have survived. The stamps are mentioned in the Hellas catalogue and sometimes offered at auctions. In the Hellas catalogue there is also an illustration of a “genuinely” used letter. As far as known, two or maybe three copies of these letters exist.

Having in mind the purpose of this issue it is at best a “never issued” set of stamps. According to Mr. Zeis these stamps were suspicious.

New stamps for Mount Athos

In 2008 the Greek post started with the issue of new stamps for Mount Athos. Every year four to six sets of stamps are being issued in low quantities. The stamps are available at the post-offices of Karyés and Dafni and the Philatelic bureau in Athens.

The issue of these stamps was not received happily by everyone. They have been officially submitted to the UPU, but the Hellenic Philatelic Society does not recognize them as official stamps. Nevertheless they form a nice illustration of the cultural and religious heritage of Mount Athos.



Literature:

- Postal history of Mount Athos - Dimitris Perdikis (kindly translated from Greek by Koos Mostert)
- MOUNT ATHOS-Land van kloosters en kerken - Ben Kruff
- GRIEKENLAND - Scholte's (Kosmos) reisboeken
- GREECE-HALKIDIKI - folder van Grieks verkeersbureau
- FOREIGN POST OFFICES - Alain Nicolas - Alexander Galinos
- Hellas 2016 - Catalogue