

## Hermes - A specialist in rapid messaging, already for 3000 years



Act of the Greek state (in the making) from 1828: creation of a Government-mail service (ταχυδρομείον) for everyone

### Greece: the beginning of the postal service.

When Greece issued the first postage stamp on October 1, 1861, this was the result of a long period of considerations, deliberations and a large amount of frictions. Other countries had preceded the Greeks: England (1840), Brazil (1843), Switzerland (1844), The United States (1846), Russia (1848), Belgium and France (1849), Spain (1850), The Netherlands and Denmark (1852) and Finland (1856). However, that is not to say the Greeks had been passive in the time between: Already on the 9<sup>th</sup> of February 1822 the deputy Dimitrios Ypsilantis had submitted a bill to the provisional government proposing a thorough revision of the old Ottoman postal system and to put it under government control. On February 26th, 1822 the bill was passed as Act 42, stating that a national postal service would be created ("available for use also by the common man / woman if he / she wished"), and to that end the various districts had to provide for 40 horses and two ships. But then things slowed down! Only in September 1828 a joint decision was taken to introduce central post offices in Argos, Aegina (where the provisional government resided), Tripolitsa, Epidauros and the island Syros (**Fig.1**). In addition, local supervisors / directors would be appointed, who had to provide for "postmen on foot" and "postmen on horseback" (**Fig.2**). Needless to say (obviously "quick as thought"! ) plenty of detailed laws and rules had to follow to handle with practical problems. To name a few:



1: Abuse continued on both sides, both the receivers and deliverers of mail. To give an example: despite ministerial orders and prohibitions private payments to postmen continued to occur.

2: In 1837, the Minister of the Interior, Johannis Kolettis, told the local authorities that the "right of way" or free passage through their territory was a ministerial order and not a free advice! From now on the arrival- and departure-times of the postmen also had to be registered. Moreover, the postmen should be provided, if necessary, with "bed and breakfast".

3: The law of 1845 gave the postmen the right to carry a weapon to defend themselves! And behold: the new postal system was a great success: as the number of postal items in 1840 had been more than 585,000 pieces, in 1855 this had increased to 1.000,000. 1855 was also the year that the government took the decision to introduce stamps with different values. This came only into effect by the Postal Act of May 21st, 1860, after endless discussions.

### The image on the first Greek issue.

The countries that preceded Greece gave their first stamps the image of the head of the king (or queen), (England, Belgium), the Roman Ceres, Goddess of all that lives and flourishes (France), and others used the national coat of arms (Finland), simply a crown (Denmark) or value only. Greece had a large number of subjects to choose from: it could draw on its rich mythology. There were two candidates:

1: Iris, goddess of the rainbow and as such the direct connection between heaven and earth. In the myths she often assumes the role of messenger between the gods (**Fig.3**).

2: Hermes, also a god and messenger of the gods, but his attributes and his broader job-description made him more suitable (**Fig.4**): he was, after all:

- The patron of shepherds and flocks;
- The patron of anything that had to do with trade: merchants, carriers, travelers but
- (!) also highwaymen could implore his protection;
- The supervisor of the dead to the underworld;
- The guardian of boundary stones and signposts (called Hermen) and maintainer of the "right of way" (through private property - especially this could be a source of frustration for the new post!);
- The inventor and formulator of the alphabet;
- The inventor of weights and measures.

His attributes were:

- His helmet or travel hat, with or without wings;
- His caduceus or staff; In ancient times this was a sign of a messenger, a teacher, a speaker;
- His winged shoes (talara).

All in all, reason enough to let Hermes continue his work in modern times! (**Fig.5** - a Dutch stamp from 2011, postally used!).





## Hermes was worshipped far and wide.

In Roman times Hermes was identified with Mercury, originally the god for the trade in grain; According to ancient sources, in 495 BC. a temple had been founded in his name in Rome and the foundation day, May 15th, became an annual holiday for merchants, traders and travelers. His nickname was "alipes" = with winged feet. And along with his attributes, hat, wand and purse he looked rather similar to Hermes. Julius Caesar, general and writer of the first century BC, tells us in his writings that Mercury was the chief god of the Gauls and Germans; often the name of a local deity was added to his name.

A long list of the places where he was honored with a temple, altar, image or the like and names of cities proves Hermes/ Mercury was a well-known deity. Greece: Hermoupolis, capital of the island of Syros; Tegea, a temple; Olympia, an altar; Athens, a stoa (portico). In Turkey Halicarnassus (Bodrum), a temple of Venus and Mercury. Egypt: Hermoupolis, a temple. The Netherlands Nijmegen, a temple of Fortuna and Mercury on "Maasplein" (the river square).

## The designer of the first Greek issue.

For the design of the first Greek stamps the government contacted the famous French mint master Albert Barre, son of the equally famous Jean Jacques Barre, who had designed the first French stamp, Ceres. Albert proved himself equally capable, as evidenced by the fact that he was, inter alia, requested to design medals, coins and stamps for Colombia, Ecuador, Honduras, Romania and Venezuela.

Albert Barre relied entirely on the design of his father (**Fig.6**), although he replaced the head of the goddess Ceres with that of Hermes, and, naturally, adjusted the value and name of the country: the top bar reads in abbreviation ΕΛΛ. ΓΡΑΜΜ, i.e. "Greek stamp" (**Fig.7**).

The French sent the first printed edition of the stamps ready for use to Athens. But thereafter the Greeks wanted to be independent of the French printers, also to cut costs. On request they received from Paris the original plates, paper, ink and gum. But in Greece, printing was carried out with a hand press, instead of the more modern cylinder-press that was in use in Paris. The first Greek printing result of the first issue (October 1, 1861) was therefore disappointing.

Through trial and error, the quality became better, and the design was maintained (1861 to 1886) for 25 years.



In 1886 it was time for a new design. New, yes, but nevertheless Hermes remained the focal point on a design that was used until 1900. (**Fig.8**)

## The biggest international success: "Flying Hermes".

In 1901 a completely new design was produced: the "Flying Hermes" (**Fig.9 and 10**).



It contained an image of a 16th century bronze, created for the powerful Medici family in Florence. One can find examples i.e. in Paris and Florence. (**Fig.11**)

Flying Mercury, as the statue is officially called, was designed by Giovanni da Bologna (1529-1608), originally a French Fleming, Jean de Boulogne, who worked in Italy. The result of using this sculpture are beautiful Greek stamps, whose image was then widely adopted by other countries. Later in this article you will encounter this design regularly, among others in stamp-issues of the countries of the British Commonwealth.



### Wings

If you look closely, you can see that Hermes carries wings in two places. He wears winged shoes, and often has a cap or hat with wings.

Viewed from all sides the image radiates elegance and speed. The proportions are somewhat stretched, which increases the speed, as it were. The picture does not follow the lines of Classical Antiquity, but has a more Baroque appearance. The Greek stamps with values in lepta and drachmai give the impression that Hermes touches the ground with one foot, as to take off from a peak, the top of a mountain. If that were the case, he would not be flying, but is only about to take off.



Further examination of the image yields a surprise. Hermes flies indeed and that's illustrated in a very subtle way. The peak is in fact a cloud with a mouth, a wind god blowing upwards. It is Zephyros, god of the pleasant west wind. (Fig.12)

Thus, the stamp can also get a place in a thematic collection of meteorology.

(A Thank You to Olav Petri for these observations).



New Year card.

To present this new Greek series of stamps a luxury New Year's card was printed in 1901, "Happy New Year". (Fig.13)



**Fig.14**

Postcard, sent in 1903 from Syros (?) to The Hague.



### Later Greek airmail stamps

In 1933 two series of airmail stamps were issued, which were ordered by the airline Aero Espresso Italiana. On these stamps Hermes can be seen in a completely different design (Fig 15). In 1936, an airmail series of the Greek post itself was issued, with among others, a traditional image of Hermes (Fig.16).



### Airmail of The Netherlands and colonies

In 1929 the Netherlands issued airmail stamps with an image of Mercury, the Roman name of Hermes (design J.Jongert - (Fig.17). Also on Curacao (1931 - Fig.18, 19) and Surinam (1930 - (Fig. 20) we find Mercury stamps, designed by A. van der Vossen but with different images.



### Hermes stamps from other countries

Other countries also used Hermes to promote their rapid transport. Some used the image created by Giovanni da Bologna, others made their own designs.

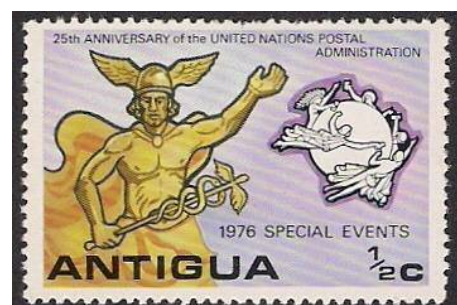
A complete series, published in 1949 on the occasion of the 75th anniversary of the Universal Postal Union Federation (UPU), appeared in many countries of the British Commonwealth. This is an example from Cyprus.



Pictures (Fig.21):

- 1½ piastres - Hermes and trumpet (i.e. postman and horn);
- 2 piastres - transport by sea and air;
- 3 piastres - Hermes as a postman "all over the world";
- 9 piastres - Monument in Bern, created in 1909 by René de Saint-Marceaux.

Here's a small selection of stamps from other countries. (Fig.22-28)



The espresso series of Italy from 1945 shows a very special image of Hermes (Fig.29), as we see only one foot with wings, with a suggestion of speed. In mythology Hermes always carries wings on his feet or shoes.



The reader can find many more images of Hermes in his collection. Have a look in your albums!

September 2016 by Frans van Limpt and Frans Bruna

Also published (in a slightly different version) in Maandblad Filatelie of October 2016, pag.614-616