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The iconography of Tunisian postage stamps

Ton Dietz & Dick Foeken

Postage stamps can be interpreted as a window on a country's identity, as viewed by the authorities in charge of issuing these stamps. Often they express images of a country's leaders' 'state of mind' as stamp issuing authorities are generally close to the country's leadership. As leadership changes, and also the opinions about what elements of a nation's identity should be highlighted, the images on postage stamps can also be seen as an expression of changing cultural and political identities. Stamps are miniature advertisements, both for internal consumption (people using these stamps get constant reminders of the preferred 'national identity' as expressed on stamps), and for foreign consumption (people abroad get messages of a country's self-expression, both culturally and politically).

Iconography and iconogeography

The description of these advertised images of self-expression can be called iconography, as each image can be seen as an icon of national pride. Stamp images are also showcases of what part of a country's geography is seen as important enough to iconize (we could call that the iconogeography of postage stamps), as also historical and cultural/religious images on stamps show which historical periods, persons and objects are (or: should be) part of the country's portrayed image (we could call that the iconohistoriography of postage stamps). Stamps are also used to show the country's place in the world, either by highlighting international events happening in the country, or by showing a country's allegiances to political, cultural or economic 'blocks' or to the global or regional community of states and nations. Elsewhere one of us presented a comparative overview of the images on Dutch and German stamps (Dietz, 2007), and – although rare – some other geographers have recently (re-)discovered this interesting form of cultural geography as well (e.g. Raento & Brunn, 2005; Covington & Brunn, 2006). In this paper we will present an analysis of the iconography of Tunisian stamps and we will present a Tunisian example of philatelic iconogeography.



Figure 1 Stamp 507, 1282

Historical overview

Tunisia was a French Protectorate when its first postage stamps were issued, in 1888. At the time, also Italy had post offices in the country (since 1880, taken over from Sardinian state post offices which had already started in 1853; the Italian post offices lasted until 1897), Great Britain operated a sub-office of the postal authorities of Malta. Before 1888, some French post offices existed as well, using French postage stamps. In 1955 Tunisia became politically autonomous, followed by full independence in 1956, first as a kingdom (under Bei Mohammed VIII Al Amin; 1881-1962), soon as a republic. In 1957, Habib Bourguiba (1903-2000) became its first president (stamp 507 in figure 1), followed in 1987 by Zine El Abidine Ben Ali (*1936) (stamp 1282 in figure 1). In total, 1707 stamps have been issued between 1888 and the end of 2004 (Table 1).

Table 1 Tunisian postage stamps, 1888-2004¹

Period	Number of stamps issued
French protectorate, 1888-1955	529
Autonomy, 1955-1956	28
Independent kingdom, 1956-1957	31
Independent republic, 1957-	1119
Total	1707

¹ Using the German language Michel Katalog Nord- und Ostafrika, 2005, pp. 1300-1377, and ignoring the separate blocks (which did not get separate catalogue numbers), but including so-called ATM stamps, postage due stamps, and stamps for packages.

Themes on Tunisian stamps

We identified six so-called major themes and fifteen themes and we will first present an overview of the numbers of stamps per theme for the period as a whole. We measured the themes by looking at the image on each stamp and at the reason for issuing the stamp, and we then identified which theme or themes were included. If two themes were included, each would get a value of 0.5; if three themes were included each would get a value of 0.33; in exceptional cases four themes were included on a stamp and in that case each would get a value of 0.25. After that, we will identify changes through time. The categorization of the themes is given in Table 2.

Figure 2 shows the distribution of all 15 themes shown on Tunisian stamps. If we look at the six major themes, 'geography and nature' is by far the dominant theme (with 36 percent of all Tunisian stamps), followed by 'cultural images' (20 percent), 'political images' (15 percent), 'social images' (13 percent) and finally 'symbolic representations' and 'economic images' (both 9 percent). Looking at the 15 themes for the period as a whole, images of buildings/landscapes were most important (theme 13; 19 percent of all images on stamps) (stamp 1516 in figure 3), followed by nature/fauna/flora (theme 15; 15 percent) and art (theme 5; 14 percent). Social themes have been important as well (theme 3; 9 percent). Less prominent, but still important were symbols (theme 2; 7 percent) (stamp 1496 in figure 3), politics (theme 8; 6 percent), and economics (theme 11; 6 percent).

Table 2 Categorization of major themes and themes on postage stamps

Major themes	Themes		
Sym	Symbolic images	1	Letters (Arab or Latin) or figures
		2	Symbols, arabesques, postal symbols
Soc	Social images	3	Social issues (e.g. education, health, children, scouting) and its history
		4	Sport and games
Cul	Cultural images	5	Art, culture, artists
		6	Science, technology
		7	Religion (including mosques)
Pol	Political images	8	Politics (and political history; including state agencies)
		9	Head of state (and family)
		10	National symbols (e.g., flag, coat of arms and other state symbols)
Eco	Economic images	11	Economic issues (and history; including labour unions)
		12	Means of transport
Geo	Images of Geography & Nature	13	Buildings and landscapes
		14	Maps, globes, satellite images; geology
		15	Nature, plants, animals, environment

Almost a quarter of all Tunisian stamps refer to historical periods and/or religious themes, with most attention (47 percent) for Islamic icons (the Sidi Okba or Great Mosque of Kairouan and the Great Mosque of Tunis often appear), followed by attention for the Roman past (34 percent; for instance the Roman amphitheatre at El Djem) and for the pre-Roman Karthago era (16 percent; e.g. Hannibal) (stamp 1318 in figure 3). One stamp has ever been devoted to a Christian theme (a symbolic picture of the four evangelists as part of a stamp series to rescue the ruins of Karthago, in 1973.

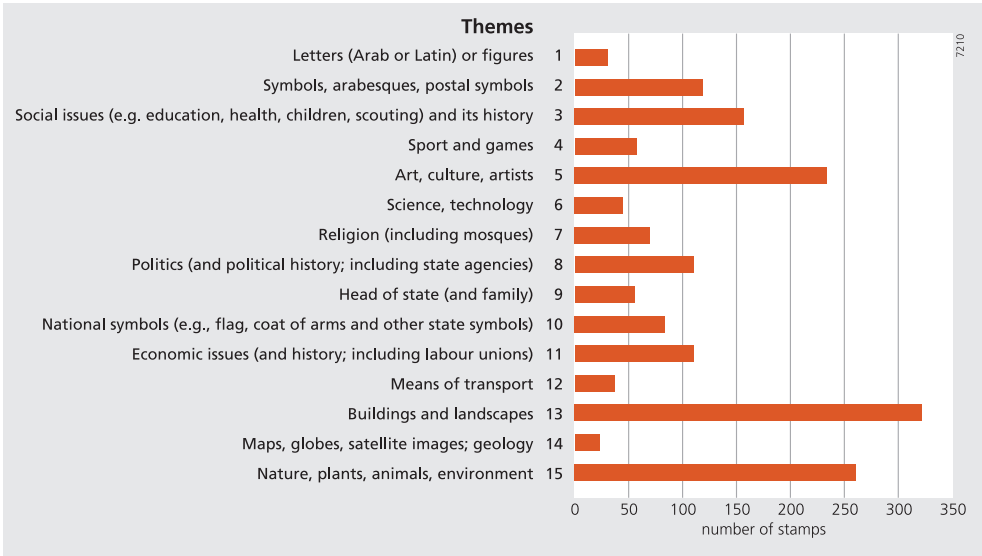


Figure 2 Overview of themes on Tunisian postage stamps



Figure 3 Stamp 1516, 1496, 1318, 1584

There is also another way to look at images on stamps: many of these images refer to things or people that are clearly ‘Tunisian’. But in some cases stamps also deal with international themes, either because an international conference or sports activity takes place in the country (stamp 1584 in figure 3), or just referring to an international or global phenomenon, or to foreign people or events, which are regarded as important for the country (or to earn money because it is perceived that foreign stamp collectors are willing to buy these images). In total, 17 percent of all Tunisian stamps refer to something ‘international’, either happening in Tunisia itself (but that is rather limited) or referring to events or issues elsewhere. The latter can be Olympic Games or support for Palestine or, for example, to commemorate the 100th birthday of Lenin. During the final period of the French administration quite a number of French stamps with images of France were overprinted with “Tunisie”, and hence automatically refer to the colonial dependency in a very direct way. These references to France in fact started in 1943, when the Parisian sculpture of the Marseillaise was shown in a stamp that was issued to support the war effort (“Un seul but. La Victoire”).

An analysis per historical period

Tunisia as a French Protectorate, 1888-1956

The first stamps issued by the authorities in the French Protectorate showed a stylish political representation of the protectorate, followed by many stamps with geographical images (landscapes or buildings), often referring to either Islamic objects or the Roman and Karthagian past. Between 1905 and 1914 and after 1925, geography/nature (and particularly buildings and landscapes) was the most dominant theme, namely between 25 and 71 percent of all stamps per period (mostly decades; see Figure 4). Before 1905 first ‘political images’ and then ‘symbolic images’ were the dominant themes. Between 1915 and 1924, economic images have been most important, showing a phase of colonialism in which economic exploitation became more visible. Some images of economic life have a clear political message (like the idyllic stamps of 1906 with Arabs and French together behind a plough). This series of 1906 also has the first mosque and the first (Karthagan) ship. During and after the First World War, social themes become more prominent, and a series of postage due stamps in 1923 shows the first object of art. In 1926, the first tree appears on a stamp (a date-palm) and in 1928 the first animal (a camel, used for postal services). Between 1925 and 1945, religious objects (mosques in particular) were the second most

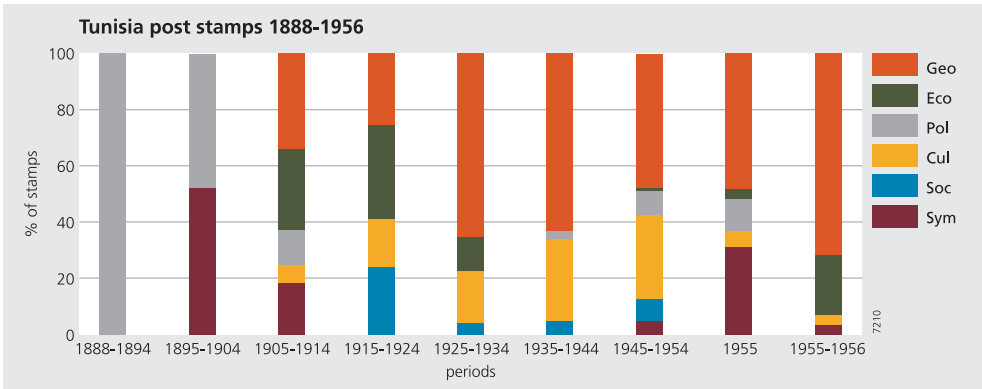


Figure 4 Tunisian postage stamps under French Protectorate and Autonomy by major theme and period, 1888-1956

important theme, as if the French postal authorities would like to emphasise their acceptance of the Protectorate as an area with a Muslim identity. During and after the Second World War, the themes became more diverse, and also more political, and with more references to symbolic images (which were an important theme during the last years of French Protectorate rule). In 1954, for the first time in Tunisian postal history, a political leader was shown on a stamp (the Bei of Tunis), as a first step to autonomy, which was granted in 1955. During the brief period of the autonomy, geography (buildings and landscapes) completely dominated again (71 percent). One of the most remarkable characteristics of Tunisia's pre-Independence stamps was their reference to historical identities, which completely changed after Independence (or in fact after being granted Autonomy). Between 1915 and 1955, more than half of all stamps (and in some periods even 84 percent) referred to Karthagian, Roman or Islamic identities. On the other hand, compared to post-Independence times very little international themes were covered, although there was a gradual increase (3 percent around 1940 and 10 percent around 1950).

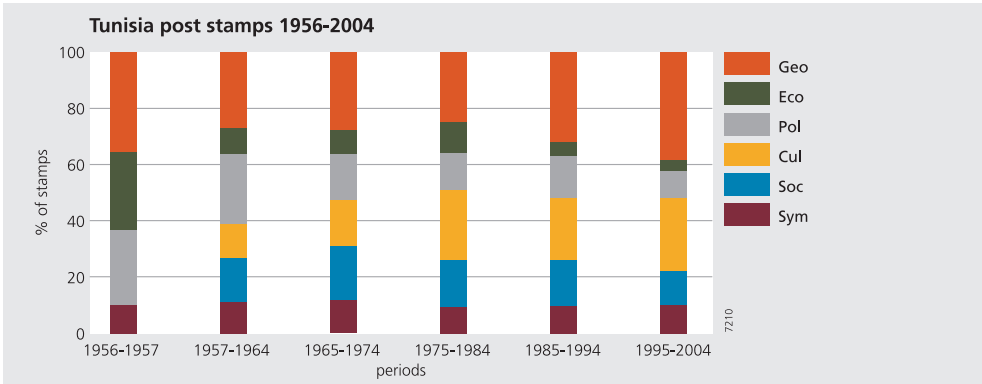


Figure 5 Tunisian postage stamps during its period of Independence by major theme and period, 1956-2004



Figure 6 Stamp 1526, 518

Tunisia as an independent state, 1956-2004

During the brief period under King Mohammed VIII (1956-1957) the images became quite different (Figure 5). Allegoric animals (e.g., a pigeon set free) and economic products from the land became important, but also the head of state (the King, but also – even before the Republic became official – Habib Bourguiba, the later long-serving President), and a prominent labour leader who was killed during French times. During the brief Kingdom era suddenly no reference whatsoever was made to historical identities, and there were more references to international themes.

During the Republican period (since 1957), geography/nature have always dominated Tunisian stamps (31 percent of all stamps of which most – 20 percent of all Tunisian stamps during this period – devoted to fauna, flora and nature/environment themes (stamp 1526 in figure 6). Political and cultural (stamp 517 in figure 6) themes followed with 18 percent and 17 percent respectively. Interestingly, political themes (the head of state and general political themes) gradually lost their importance and cultural themes gradually became more prominent. However, compared to the era of the Protectorate, very little attention was given to religious themes (only 1 percent of all Tunisian post-Independence stamps against 7 percent of pre-Independence stamps). Stamps with maps/globes (part of ‘geography/nature’), and stamps with economic and social themes were more important in the early years of Independence and far less so in more recent years.

Unlike in Protectorate times, historical identities are no longer prominent at all during the Republican period. Until 1995 it was never more than 10 percent. During the most recent decade references to historic identities increased somewhat (to 16 percent), which was mainly a result of a sudden increase of the references to Islamic identity. International themes were far more important compared to French times, particularly during the first twenty years after Independence (up to 34 percent around 1970). During the two most recent decades the international orientation of Tunisian stamps went back to less than 20 percent of all stamps issued.

Philatelic iconography: the example of Tunisia

In Tunisia, stamps with geographical images (landscapes, buildings, globes and maps) have been very important for most of its postal history. In total we found 516 of its 1707 postage stamps referring to geography: 30 percent of all stamps. But what are these geographical images and

Table 3 Geographical images on Tunisian postage stamps

Geographical theme	Sub-theme/place	nr	%
Globes or world maps		17	3
Specific maps	Africa	19	4
	Africa and other	4	1
	Tunisia	18	3
	Other	6	1
	Not specific	104	20
Landscapes and buildings	Foreign	25	5
	Tunis	107	21
	El Djem	72	14
	Dougga	20	4
	Kairouan	17	3
	Zaghouan	14	3
	Monastir	12	2
	Sidi bou Said	10	2
	Other places in Tunisia	74	14
	Total		519

what do they tell us about the way stamp-issuing authorities used ‘geography’ as expressions of identity? Table 3 gives an overview.

The maps on Tunisian stamps suggest some interesting features of Tunisian self-image. It is not surprising that the map of Tunisia itself is visible on Tunisian stamps (stamp 1278 in figure 7), but always as one territory, never only part of it (like a region or a city). References to Africa as a whole (stamp 1581 in figure 7) (and once only South Africa, for an anti-Apartheid stamp in 1978) are important on Tunisian stamps, but only once the Maghreb is presented (in 1998 (stamp



Figure 7 Stamp 1278, 1581, 1391, 1265, 1182



Figure 8 Stamp 1361, 1176, 1224, 1557

1391 in figure 7), only twice the Mediterranean (in 1997 and 2003), and only once Africa and the Middle East (in 1993 (stamp 1265 in figure 7).

Stamps with landscapes and buildings are also messengers of identity even if they are not specific and give only images of a silhouette of a city (often with minarets), a desert landscape (with an oasis) or (part of) buildings (often unmistakably 'Arab') (stamp 1182 in figure 7). However, in very many cases the images are specific and in 326 cases refer to a place somewhere in Tunisia and in 22 cases to a foreign place. Let us start with these foreign places. Europe is most important: Paris, Venice (4x), Geneva (1x) and Moscow (1x). But the Middle East does feature as well, with six stamps devoted to the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem, one to the Kaaba in Mecca, one to Sanaa in Yemen (stamp 1176 in figure 8) and one to the Nile in Egypt. Also places in North America are present on Tunisian stamps: Montreal (4x, but those refer to the Tunisian building on an international fair), New York (the UN building) and San Francisco (the Oakland Bay bridge) (stamp 1361 in figure 8). The rest of America, the whole of non-Arab Asia, and – remarkably – other Maghreb countries are completely absent.

References to Tunisian places gives prominence to Tunis, where during French Protectorate times both the Central Mosque and the Mosque on Halfaouine Square feature very often as iconic images of Tunisia. During Protectorate times also the Roman amphitheatre of El Djem, the Hadrian aqueduct of Zaghouan and the Roman forum of Dougga are very frequently used as iconic images of a Tunisian identity that links it historically to the Roman empire (and hence to France as well ...). Since Independence, the geographical representation is much more diverse. Kairouan (stamp 1124 in figure 8), Sidi-bou-Said, and Monastir become important as images connecting old and new Tunisia, but there are many other places which get a chance to show their beauty (for tourist purposes) and their identity (for self-esteem). As tourism has become an important economic activity, and many foreigners buy Tunisian stamps for their post cards and stamp collections, the images of a large variety of Tunisian places, objects of art and images of its flora and fauna together have become the majority of current images on Tunisian stamps (stamp 1557 in figure 8).

Conclusion

Cultural geography currently has a lot of attention for the construction of images about places, countries, regions and peoples. In the era of globalisation, reflection of (self-)identification and cultural specification has grown. Postage stamps are one of the windows on a country's identity and self-expression and – as we hope to have shown – a window with ever-changing displays behind its frames. The Tunisian postage stamps illustrate this quite well.

Note

- 1 The numbers of the stamp illustrations in this paper refer to the catalogue numbers in the Michel Katalog Nord- und Ostafrika, 2005.

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