

SOME ANOMALIES FOUND ON GREEK BANK NOTES

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Greece, the Mother of Democracy, was at its peak during the 5th century B.C. No other culture has contributed more to civilization than the ancient Greeks. To them we owe our modern form of government, art, drama and architecture. In the 2nd century B.C. Greece fell under Roman domination, and from that time on experienced a troubled and often turbulent past. Greece remained part of the Byzantine Empire until it was subjugated, in turn, by the Crusaders in the year 1202. When Constantinople fell to the Turks in 1453, Greece became part of the Ottoman Empire. Greece did not gain independence from the Ottomans until the revolution of 1821-1827, at which time the country became a monarchy. A lengthy power struggle developed between the monarchists and democratic factions which lasted for the next century, at the conclusion of which Greece was proclaimed a republic. The first Greek republic was not to last however, as the monarchy was restored by plebiscite in 1935. The Kingdom of Greece was again invaded, this time by its neighbor Italy, in 1939. Peace would not return until after World War II.

During the 1930s Italy, under the fascist dictator Benito Mussolini, was engaged in colonial expansion. Mussolini's dream was to create a modern Roman Empire by subjugating weaker countries, thereby exploiting their resources for "Greater Rome". He had great success in Africa; quickly over-running Libya, Eritrea, Somalia and Ethiopia. Emulating Adolph Hitler of Nazi Germany, who had already embarked upon the conquest of Europe, he next turned his attention to Europe and the impoverished nation of Albania. Albania was occupied by Italy in 1939. After Albania's king Zog I fled the country, king Victor Emanuel of Italy was declared king of Albania also. Driven by ambition and Hitler's initial successes, Mussolini then turned his attention to Greece which was invaded from Albania in October 1940. During the winter campaign the Italian army was driven back across the Albanian border. A stalemate existed between Greek and Italian forces until spring when Germany invaded Greece. The Germans quickly drove a British Expeditionary force, sent there to assist the Greeks, from the mainland and then from the island of Crete to which they had fled. The Kingdom of Greece was then occupied by German-Italian forces who remained until November 1944.

The first Greek paper money appeared after independence was declared in 1831. Notes of the National Finance Bank, the Bank of Greece and the National Bank of Greece issued prior to the banking law of 1885 are so rare as to be generally noncollectable. In this article we will focus on Greek notes issued by the Kingdom of

Greece in the 1935-1941 time frame and those of the Bank of Greece during the German-Italian occupation, as it is among these issues that the anomalies are to be found.

Aside from the many nuances of color variation found on all notes throughout this series, I have broken down these anomalies, or inconsistencies, into seven groups:

1. Error notes
2. Revaluation overprints
3. Picture title inconsistencies
4. Watermarks
5. Under-print inconsistencies
6. Basic color changes
7. Identical serial numbers

Table 1 enumerates the various inconsistencies to be found on Kingdom of Greece inflation bank notes, as well as the serial number colors and varieties which are explained later on in this article.

First let me describe an error note which is the only instance of this kind to occur on a Greek bank note to my knowledge. The note in question is the Bank of Greece 500 drachma of 1939. The error occurs below the written denomination which is located at the center of the note. The first line of text beneath the denomination box contains four words, the second of which should read epsilon pi iota (EΠΙ). In the error note this is displayed as epsilon nu iota (ΕΝΙ). The note is the product of the printer Bradbury Wilkinson and Company of London. This error is not particularly rare but does demand a premium over non-error notes. I have never heard of an explanation as to how this inconsistency came to be.

There is also only one instance in which a bank note was overprinted to increase its value. This occurred on the 100 drachma note of 1939 which never found its way into circulation. In 1940 these unissued notes were withdrawn from the Bank of Greece treasury vaults and overprinted as 1,000 drachma. Presumably this was done because the 1,000 drachma notes then in circulation had been printed in England and it was impossible, due to the war, to order additional replacement stocks.

The fact that there was a shortage of currency circulating in Greece at the time is attested to by the fact that an emergency re-issue of notes took place in 1941. Old Bank of Greece notes which had been hole punched and were awaiting destruction were brought back into circulation to alleviate the shortage. These notes, as can be imagined were all well worn examples. These tattered notes remained in circulation for about a year before being replaced with a new issue in 1942. Some specimens bear hand-stamps



The only text error to be found on Greek bank notes occurred on this Pick 109 five hundred drachma issue of 1939. The text below the center written denomination should read “ΕΠΙ” (epsilon, pi, iota). When preparing the first plates the British printer erroneously substituted “ΕΝΙ” (epsilon, nu, iota) instead.



Correct inscription “ΕΠΙ” at left, error “ΕΝΙ” right.

of the various banks which had originally prepared the notes for destruction. They are actually rather rare and difficult to find today – but don't expect to find one in anything above poor to good condition!

Picture title inconsistencies are to be found only on two notes (Pick 117 and 120) as noted in *The Standard Catalog of World Paper Money*. Both inconsistencies occurred on German occupation notes. In the first instance, the 1000 drachma note of 1941, the picture caption was originally engraved upon the illustration of a waterfall upon the reverse of the note. This resulted in a rather indistinguishable title. To rectify this, the printer modified the reverse plate so that the picture title was contained within a “box” with a white background, making the title plainly legible. In the second example, a 10,000 drachma note depicting a farm couple on its obverse and the Athenian treasury on the reverse, the same situation arose when the original engraving produced an obscure title. This was rectified in the same way, by producing a shadow box around the caption in order to make it stand out from the background.

The Greek inflation series does not employ watermarked paper with but one exception that I know of. This contradiction occurs on the 5,000 drachma issue of 20 June 1942, (Pick 119). Most 5,000 drachma notes do not contain a watermark. Those with a watermark were printed on paper consisting of rows of adjoining circles and lines giving it an overall “honeycomb” effect. This is the same watermark that may be found on Greek agricultural treasury bonds and, perhaps, other fiscal paper. Whether the watermarked paper ended up on Greek bank notes intentionally or by accident is one of pure speculation. If by accident, perhaps through carelessness, the wrong paper could have been withdrawn from treasury stock; if on purpose, perhaps the move was dictated by a shortage of un-watermarked paper at the Treasury.

Another interesting deviation appears on the 200 million drachma note of 9 September 1944 (Pick 131). This takes the form of two different under-prints. On the more common the under-print consists of a lathe work containing alternate horizontal rows of open and shaded oval, similar to a cotton “Q tip” in appearance. The scarcer version consists of interconnecting circles and dots.

Table 1.

| Pick Catalog Number | Serial Nr. Variety | | | | Serial Number Color | Inconsistency |
|---------------------|--------------------|---|---|---|---------------------|---------------|
| | a | b | c | d | | |
| 109 | | | | | | (1) |
| 108, 111 | | | | | | (2) |
| 116 | x | | x | | red | |
| 117 | x | | x | | red | (3) |
| 118 | x | x | x | | red | |
| 119 | x | x | | | red | (4) |
| 120 | x | | | | red | (3) |
| 121 | x | x | | | red | |
| 122 | | x | x | | red | |
| 123 | x | x | x | | red | |
| 124 | | | x | | red | |
| 125 | x | x | x | | red | |
| 126 | x | x | x | x | red | (5) |
| 127 | x | x | x | x | red | |
| 128 | x | x | x | x | red | |
| 129 | | | x | x | red | |
| 130 | x | x | x | x | red | |
| 131 | x | x | x | | red | (6) |
| 132 | x | | | x | black | (7) |
| 133 | x | | | x | black | (7) |
| 134 | x | | | x | black | (7) |
| 135 | x | | | x | black | (7) |

Inconsistencies noted:

- | | |
|---------------------|-------------------------------|
| (1) engraving error | (5) under-print inconsistency |
| (2) revaluation | (6) basic color change |
| (3) picture title | (7) identical serial numbers |
| (4) watermark | |



After the German occupation of Greece, a severe shortage of thousand drachma notes occurred. To remedy the situation, the Bank of Greece overprinted 100 drachma notes which had never been issued, raising them to the new thousand drachma denomination before putting them into circulation.



In 1941 the shortage of bank notes became so severe that the government authorized an emergency re-issue of old, worn-out notes from previous issues which were awaiting destruction at the Bank of Greece. The notes remained in circulation for another year before finally being replaced. These punch canceled notes are rarely encountered today.

One of the most interesting inconsistencies in the German occupation note series involves a major color change on the obverse of the same note. This note happens to be the 500,000 drachma issue of 20 March 1944 which bears a bust of Zeus on the obverse (Pick 126). I have handled hundreds of this particular note over the years and have always found it to have the characteristic black and brown color combination on the obverse. The reverse of the note is always found in black and green. Therefore, you can imagine my surprise when handling a stack of these common notes to discover a major color change. On this note the under-print is green, not brown. By green I mean unmistakably green; I am not talking shades here or perhaps a faded note, but rather an entirely new 500,000 drachma color. So one must ask one's self "How can this be"? Since my green note bears the series letters ZZ (zeta zeta), at first I theorized that, being at the end of the alphabet run, so to speak, perhaps the printer just ran out of brown ink and substituted the green to finish the printing run. After all, by autumn 1944 inflation was running rampant with denominations increasing from hundreds of thousands of drachma to millions and eventually billions all within the span of a few months. What other explanation could there be? I was smug in my conviction until a friend gently pointed out the error of my ways. He reminded me that zeta was not the last letter in the Greek alphabet. The last Greek letter being omega (Ω), not zeta, so that blew my theory. Since zeta falls somewhere near the beginning of the alphabet, we must now ask ourselves "Why a color change in the middle of a production run?" I have no answer for this dichotomy. To my knowledge only one other such example of a green 500,000



New issue 1000 drachma note of 1941 with indistinct picture title (left) and retouched title (right).



10,000 drachma note of 1942, depicting the Treasury of the Athenians at Delphi on the reverse, with indistinct picture caption (left) and retouched caption (right).



The 5,000 drachma note of 1942 showing a statue of Nike of Samothrace on the obverse and Greek farmer on the reverse, may be found on both plain paper and watermarked paper. The watermarked paper is of the same type as that used in printing agricultural bonds.

drachma note has been reported, this one with the Greek prefix letter eta (Η). Maybe some day this little mystery will be cleared up.

The last and perhaps most fascinating of the aforementioned inconsistencies is the phenomenon of identical series and serial numbers. This condition is peculiar to the black serial numbers commencing with Pick 132. I have never seen an identical series/serial number in red. To put the matter into historical perspective one must remember that by October 1944 the German occupation of Greece was nearing its end. In fact, the last of the German forces were cleared from Greece on 25 November, their supply lines having been cut by Greek and Yugoslav partisans and British paratroopers.

Once liberated, one of the first laws passed by the restored monarchy was one aimed at redeeming this near worthless paper. The exchange commenced shortly thereafter at a ratio of fifty billion inflation drachma to one new one (50,000,000,000:1). Thus, one 100 billion drachma note (pick 135) was exchanged for two new 1 drachma ones (Pick 320).

When examining notes containing identical serial numbers one soon discovers that several different varieties exist. These varieties concern the positioning of the series letters in relation to the serial number, and the size of the serial number itself. This creates four distinct varieties of notes. The four types may be described as follows:

- a. large serial number with series letter prefix
- b. small serial number with series letter prefix
- c. large serial number with series letter suffix
- d. small serial number with series letter suffix

All notes do not necessarily contain all four varieties. The serial number itself is always limited to six digits, for example: ΚΔ 327940. If the number applied to the note contains less than six digits, the balance is made up with zeros (ΓΒ 000037). The large size serial number measures 4.5mm, while the small number is 3mm tall. The Greek series letters may be either single or double combinations, although the single series letters are, as one might expect, difficult to find. As to color, all serial numbers are found in red until one gets to Pick 132 at which point the color changes consistently to black. It is only within this latter range (Pick 132 through P135) that ones finds identical serial numbers on the same note.

The series P132-135 serial numbers, while all 3mm in height, contain two sub-types of their own - those which appear to be applied to the finished note, and those where the serial number is part of the plate itself. Years ago, in an effort to discover more about the identical serial number phenomenon, I surveyed my follow collectors as to what they held in their collections. The results were enlightening. With many



The mystery 500,000 drachma of 1944. This note has the characteristic brown and black obverse as seen above. Millions of these notes were printed, yet several green notes have surfaced which were printed in the middle of the production run. How do we account for this?

collectors reporting their holdings, I was able to “match” identical serial numbers which appeared in different collections. In some cases only two of the same serial numbers appeared to form a match, while in one case seventeen of the same serial number were reported!

So how did this situation come about? In the absence of any proof, one can only speculate. At first the original practice of adding serial numbers to the notes after completion by the printer continued. However it is my guess, with inflation running rampant, that it became more expedient to engrave the series/serial number into the plate itself. Apparently, at this point, with inflation out of control, all attempts by the treasury to maintain serial number accountability went out the window. From this point to the



Examples of identical series and serial numbers to be found on Greek inflation notes. This anomaly is confined to the notes contained in Table 2. The 100 billion drachma (100,000,000,000!) note was the last one issued in the Greek inflation series.

end of Nazi occupation all notes appear to bear repetitious serial numbers. What matter that the wool was being pulled over the eyes of an unsuspecting public? By the time Greeks became aware of the deception their money had sunk to a near-worthless state. Table 2 enumerates multiple serial number combinations known to exist for notes issued during the last days of occupation.

Table 2.

| Pick Catalog Number | Denomination | Old Type Series Observed | Series In Plate Observed |
|---------------------|---------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|
| 132 | 500 Million drachma | KZ | ΕΠ, ΖΡ |
| 133 | 2 billion drachma | ΚΕ, ΚΖ | ΕΠ |
| 134 | 10 billion drachma | ΚΕ, ΚΖ | ΑΑ |
| 135 | 100 billion drachma | ΚΕ, ΚΖ | ΑΑ, ΕΠ |

Almost all collectors have some of these notes. They are still plentiful today and are nominally priced. Therefore, the search for serial number varieties and inconsistencies among the Greek inflation series is within the reach of everyone. So get out that stack of old discards and your trusty magnifying glass. Your search will be both exciting and rewarding!



At the end of the inflationary chaos caused by the war, one 100 billion drachma bank note was exchanged for two of these newly printed Bank of Greece 1 drachma notes at a ratio of 50,000,000,000:1!