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Unissued Philatelic Essays of Basutoland 1933, and the Lesotho Crocodile Stamp Issues

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Basutoland, a British Crown colony from 1884 to 1966, received its independence and is now the Kingdom of Lesotho, a landlocked nation in southern Africa. The earliest postage stamps used in the colony were those from the Cape of Good Hope (since 1876), and subsequently, those of South Africa (from 1910 to 1933). A philatelic history of the region is in Proud (1996).

On 1 December 1933, Basutoland issued its first stamps, a pictorial set of 10 definitives under the King George V definitives, of face values ½ penny (= d), 1 d, 2 d, 3 d, 4 d, 6 d, 1 shilling (= s), 2 s 6 d, 5 s, and 10 s (Stanley Gibbons, SG catalog numbers 1–10). Figure 1 shows stamps from the series, that incorporates a profile of the then ruling monarch (George V, 1865–1936) and a lateral view of the Nile Crocodile (*Crocodylus niloticus*), against a backdrop of mountains.



Figure 1. Basutoland's first pictorial definitives from 1933, comprising 10 values from the King George V set (SG 1–10).

Four essays (Figure 2) were apparently not accepted and replaced, and show proposed face values of 2 d and 10 s. These were attached to a card, measuring 120 mm × 39 mm, and each of



Figure 2. Four unissued essays from Basutoland's 1933 pictorial definitives.

the proofs affixed is 26 mm × 32 mm. All include the crocodile and incorporate either a profile or a fronto-lateral view of the monarch. These essays are in the daily record book (dated “19.4.33”) of the official postal agency of the time, Bradbury Wilkinson Ltd, England-based engravers and printer of banknotes, postage stamps, and share certificates, established in the 1850s (see Dyer, 2015). It is unclear why the designs were not approved, apart from the significantly finer details of the crocodilians depicted in the final versions.

In 1938, a replacement set of 11 values was issued, featuring a new monarch (George VI, 1895–1952), bearing identical face values, except for an additional 1½ pence stamp (SG 18–28; Figure 3). It is important to note that mountainous Lesotho is home to no living crocodilian species, although a protosuchian crocodyliform, †*Orthosuchus stormbergi* Nash, 1968, was found in the Early Jurassic rocks of the country. Nonetheless, a crocodile on a Basotho shield and flanked by two horses appears in the country's coat of arms (adopted on 4 October 1968), following the country's independence, and retained in the arms of Basutoland. Lesotho's largest ethnic group, the Sotho or Basotho, are descendants of the Sotho-Tswana expansion southward from the Great Lakes region of East Africa in the 5th century C.E. and presumably carried the cultural significance of the crocodile with them into the high elevation and crocodile-free inland of southern Africa. With the establishment of



Figure 3. Basutoland's reissued pictorial definitives from 1938, comprising 11 values from the King George VI set (SG 18–28).

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Figure 4. Basutoland 1961 postage-due stamps, showing those of 1d and 5d values, overprinted for use in Lesotho (SG D3 and SG D7a).

Basutoland in the 19th century, the Sotho people brought the imagery of their totemic animal into their newly inhabited country (Riep, 2011). This may not be so surprising, given the widespread recognition of water creatures with crocodile-like characteristics in the folklore of several other southern African ethnic groups now living in areas that have never supported crocodiles, or did so only centuries ago (Feely, 2010). The nearest crocodile records to Lesotho are in the area of the upper Tugela River in KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa (Marais, 2014), where they occupy artificial dams. These records lie only ~ 25 km from the northeastern border of Lesotho, but the international border in this area straddles the highest portions of the Drakensburg Mountains, reaching elevations of over 3,000 m, forming an absolute barrier for crocodilians.

Basutoland's coat of arms featuring a crocodile, has appeared on postage-due stamps (two representatives from the design depicted here: SG D3; 1d and SG D7a; 5d) from 1961, which was overprinted for use by the Kingdom of Lesotho (Figure 4) in 1966.

Fresh designs of four Lesotho coat-of-arms stamps, where the crocodilians take center stage, have since been issued by the Kingdom: the first two (SG 135 and SG 202), both of Rand 1 value, issued sometime in 1967 and on 4 January 1971, from definitive series (Figures 5a-b); the third (SG 143), on 4 October 1967, commemorating the first anniversary of independence, a 25c triangular stamp (Figure 5c); the fourth (SG 375), issued in 1979, issued on the occasion of the centenary of death of Sir Rowland Hill (Figure 5d), that incorporated the George V definitive (2 pence, SG 2); the fourth, a miniature sheet (SG MS604), issued on 5 September 1984, for the occasion of Ausipex84, International Stamp Exhibition, held in Melbourne, Australia (Figure 5e), and the fifth (SG 514a), of 30s value,



Figure 5a. Kingdom of Lesotho, showing the motif within the national coat-of-arms, issued 1967, from a series on national definitives (SG 135).



Figure 5b. Kingdom of Lesotho, showing the motif within the national coat-of-arms, issued 1971, from a reissued series of national definitives (SG 202).



Figure 5c. Kingdom of Lesotho, issued 1967, to commemorate the first anniversary of independence (SG 143).



Figure 5d. Kingdom of Lesotho, issued 1979, on the occasion of the centenary of death of Sir Rowland Hill (SG 375).



Figure 5e. Kingdom of Lesotho, issued 1984, on the occasion of the Ausipex84, International Stamp Exhibition, Melbourne (SG MS604).



Figure 5f. Kingdom of Lesotho, issued 1982, to commemorate the 21st birthday of Diana, Princess of Wales (SG 514a).

issued 1 July 1982 to commemorate the 21st birthday of Diana, Princess of Wales (Figure 5f). The crocodilian coat of arms also occurs on printed envelopes for first day covers (Figure 6a) and on a contemporary aerogramme from Lesotho (Figure 6b).

It is by no means uncommon for countries to issue stamps depicting exotic amphibians and reptiles, particularly when postal authorities commission independent agencies to design and produce philatelic products. Indeed, non-autochthonous herpetofaunal species have been common since at least the 1970s on the issues of many countries, primarily for the purpose of philatelic sales. Basutoland/Lesotho may be unique in the prominence held by a non-indigenous species in its postal imagery, the crocodile stamps here discussed being issued for real postal purposes. Although depicting non-native species, these issues gain their legitimacy through the cultural relevance of *Crocodylus niloticus* as an important symbol of the Sotho people.

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Figure 6a. A printed envelope serving as an official first day cover issued 23 September 1991 for the single stamp under the theme “Say No to Drugs Campaign” (SG 1031), showing the coat-of-arms of the Kingdom of Lesotho.

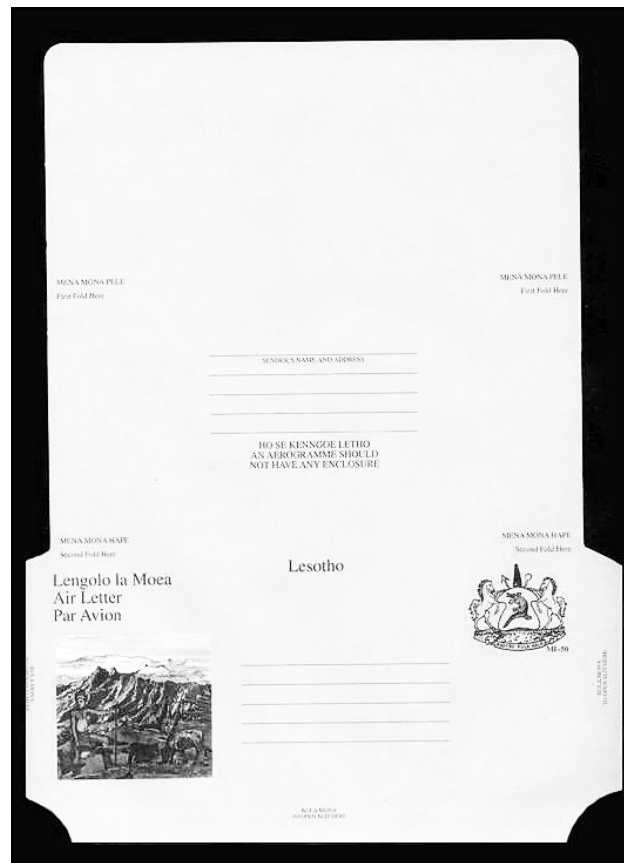


Figure 6b. A modern aerogramme from Lesotho, showing the coat-of-arms of the kingdom.