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# Geography in philately

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**Abstract.** The authors present 225 samples of stamps from 92 countries as interesting cartosemiothic examples. Their texts, numeracy and other modules including maps, atlases, and satellite images of our Earth, are an area of common interest of geographers and philatelists.

## 1. Introduction

Where is the country shown on a postage stamp? We may occasionally ask this question without being a stamp collector. However, philately is a popular hobby pursued in all age categories, and putting stamps into worldwide stamp albums is an education in geography. The present-day geography offers a broad range of new techniques and findings [1]. Within a country or state, the realistic geographic data may not be in agreement with those presented on postage stamps issued there. Neither historical nor political maps of any region are bound to take that region's postage sovereignty into account.

Since the first postage stamp appeared in 1840, stamps are reported to have been issued by over 780 countries, of which only about one third still exists [2]. The two thirds belong to the past and their names, often in the local language, are a historical question mark for stamp collectors. These countries were often small and existed only temporarily and, after they had perished, their stamps became the last witnesses of their existence.

Philatelic geography is concerned with gathering information on every stamp-issuing country and also showing its geographical boundaries. In addition to paying for postal services, the stamp used to have a territorial role. The oldest evidence of this is the historical map published in the USA in 1895 [3]; this involved stamps of the countries shown in the map. The maps published in Germany in 1906 [4] and 1917 [5] were completed with hard pages made ready for the relevant stamps to be stuck on them. The Leipzig atlas from 1921 was similar [6] and was soon followed by an atlas of political maps, each surrounded by stamps corresponding to the countries presented, printed in Italy [7].

Before World War II, stamp atlases were published in Chicago in 1933 [8] and in Vienna in 1935 [9]; the war atlas prepared in Leipzig in 1941 remained unfinished [10]. Changes in the post-war world were also reflected by numerous provisional or overprinted postage stamps and resulted in increased collectors' interests supported by more postage stamp atlases issued [11, 12, 13, 14], including a high-quality Czech publication [2], and several monographs [15, 16]. Philately involving geographic issues provides a broader scope of interests for hobbyists than the traditional stamp collecting. A closer link between these two areas of interest has been growing thanks to new findings depicted on stamps. Since the Barcelona FIP World Stamp Exhibition in 1995 [17], which drew attention to the relationship between cartography and stamp collection, this pastime activity has attracted many more collectors [18]. The role of postage stamps in spreading information, for instance, on the latest achievements in astronomy [19] or prevention against cardiovascular or cancer diseases,

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has been documented in the Czech literature [20, 21]. The historical maps mentioned above and their analysis may also be of use in teaching geography [22].

## 2. Methodology

Out of an extensive worldwide philatelic production, 225 postage stamps, miniature sheets and stamped envelopes involving geographic issues, historical topics, political events, colonisation in continents, discovery voyages and world travel have been collected and is exhibited here; 45 will be mentioned in this presentation.

## 3. Results

### 3.1. Geographic topics

Geographic topics are presented on 34 stamps. The most interesting ones include British stamps with the Greenwich Meridian, stamps issued by the Island of Jersey, presenting maps of the origin and growth of continents and telescope images of the satellite Europa. In the envelopes, of interest is FDC with a map of Australia issued in 1981 (figures 1 to 3).



Figure 1.



Figure 2.



Figure 3.

### 3.2. Historical themes

Of a total 28 stamps with historical themes are presented some of miniature sheets issued by the Vatican Post Office on the occasion of the 500<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the evangelisation of America, the coast of Finland, the autonomous regions of the Kingdom of Spain. A miniature sheet of Gibraltar is reminiscent of the Empire whose 58 territories, in 1947, started to get reduced in numbers followed by reduction in its postage stamps (figures 4 to 7).





Figure 4.



Figure 5.

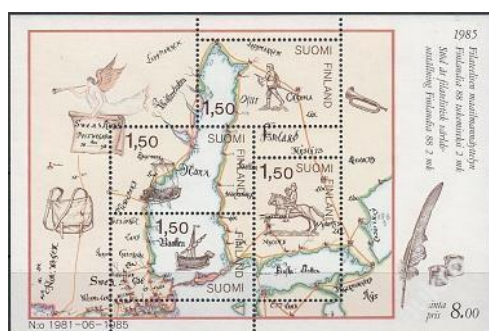


Figure 6.



Figure 7.

### 3.3. Political maps

Political maps on postage stamps often present symbols of national unity, territorial changes or ideology. Out of 85 examples are presented miniature sheets issued by the Slovenia, stamp of the Greece with the territorial changes during one century, or the map of united territories of the Federation of Malaysia. The China Post issued stamp with the map of the republic including Taiwan (figures 8 to 11).

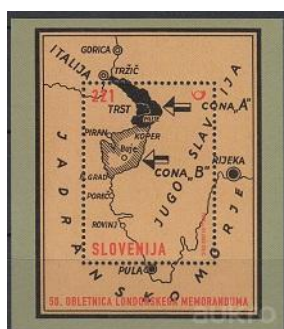


Figure 8.



Figure 9.

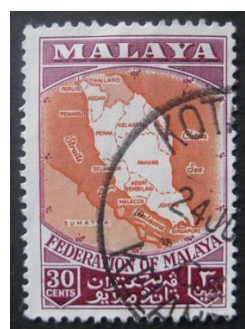


Figure 10.



Figure 11.

### 3.4. Colonisation

Presented 43 stamps, are associated with colonisation processes in the countries building their overseas territories. The 1898 Christmas stamp of Canada shows the British Empire territories with the words: "We hold a vaster empire than has been". A number of postage stamps were issued with the British Kings' and Queens' portraits, such as British Guyana, Fiji Islands. Montserrat, Ascension and French Réunion are showing their geographical position in the oceans (figures 12 to 17).





Figure 12.



Figure 13.



Figure 14.



Figure 15.



Figure 16.



Figure 17.

### 3.5. Discoveries and world travel advancements

The discoveries and world travel advancements depicted on 35 stamps include, stamps reminding us of Eriksson's boat navigation in 1000 and the 500<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Columbus' (1492) discovery of America. The stamp commemorates the French Antarctic exploration and the miniature sheet issued by the Mongolia. The history of road, railroad, sea and air travel is documented on thousands of stamps showing old-time trains, cars, ships, hot-air balloons, zeppelins and aircrafts with their inter-continental air routes; the stamps worth mentioning here show air travel in the USA and Europe, air routes in the Mediterranean issued by the Greece, the route of Tour de France on a stamp issued by Monaco and the ancient history stamp issued by the Crete (figures 18 to 25).



Figure 18.

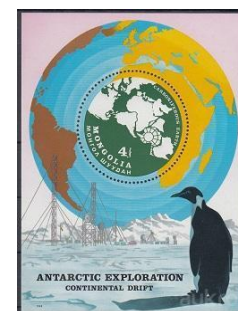


Figure 19.



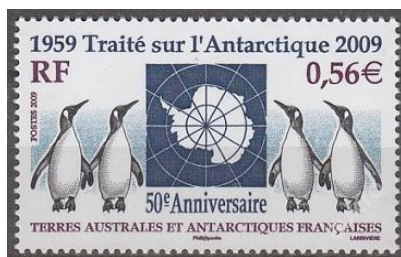
Figure 20.



Figure 21.



Figure 22.

**Figure 23.****Figure 24.****Figure 25.**

#### 4. Discussion

From the examples here it is apparent that stamp collecting has a broader meaning than simple stamp gathering; it can be regarded as a sort of cartosemiotics, i.e., the map language based on text, numerical, pictorial and other information modules. Geographic or cartographic themes combined with other topics such as sports, animals, tourism, portraits, discoveries, etc., or with special cancellation marks or the first day cover process, markedly extend the field of knowledge and encourage cooperation between experts from various branches of science and stamp collectors.

The growing number of postage stamps often having very peculiar topics makes us wonder whether these are still postage stamps serving their original purpose. The names such as Aitutaki, Johore, Kedah, Melaka, Nevis, Niue, Pahang, Penrhyn, Pitcairn or Sabah, whose stamps may be very colourful in appearance, raise the question of whether these countries really exist, have postal communication or at least one post office. A country with the rights to issue stamps must have its own postal administration and a capacity to provide mailing services in the country, and also be part of the international postal network. These principals should hold for member countries of the Universal Postal Union (UPU). The UPU constitution defines the international organisation of postal services. Some member countries delegate their postal rights and duties to other postal administrations; for instance, the United Nations issue their stamps in Vienna, Geneva or New York. The UPU directive declares that each postage stamp must bear the name of its country in Latin and the monetary value.

Stamp collectors occasionally come across postage stamps issued by organisations not authorized to provide postal services in a country which has its own postal administration. These are usually only labels, rather than postage stamps, advertising non-existent states, exile governments, transport corporations or armies of occupation. Postal stamps may also function as commodities for collectors and are issued in such limited editions that they cannot serve their purpose. They infrequently travel from the printing office via specialised shops directly to collectors to whom they are valuable for their non-typical shapes (circular, pear-like, irregular, such as in geographical contours of the country), unconventional materials (gold foil, silk) or attractive themes (fairy tales, film stars, dinosaur skeletons).

The latest developments in communication, using electronic mail, text messages and internet social networks, have markedly interfered with traditional mail services and, consequently, the use of postage stamps. Only the future will show whether effective measures can be found and implemented to prevent non-postal subjects from creating virtual existence of postal services by issuing stamps and thus degrading their original role in shipping services. Due to recent restricted interests in this area, the future generations will be devoid of valuable cultural heritage related to stamp creation [23] for which the themes have been taken from various spheres of life including geography.

#### 5. Conclusion

Stamps involving map presentation can be regarded as a system of cartosemiotic models illustrating geographic, historical, cultural and political developments in the countries or states of their origin, or even in whole continents. In each country, they provide evidence of its technical advancements, cartographic potentials and cultural heritage, and may significantly contribute to international awareness of this country.

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