

1870-71 Boules de Moulins Mail to Besieged Paris

Background: The Franco-Prussian War culminated in the siege of Paris from September 18, 1870 until January 28, 1871. Maintaining postal communications from unoccupied France to besieged Paris was difficult. Balloons could not be steered to land within the Parisian siege lines, and messages by pigeongrams were too limited in size.

A Novel Solution: Three entrepreneurs proposed a patented process whereby small zinc balls (or “*boules*”) containing letters could be floated just below the surface of the Seine River to be caught on nets in Paris. On December 24, they received a postal contract for this service, which was announced on December 27. Letters prepaid one franc (20 centimes for the post office, and 80 centimes for the entrepreneurs) were directed to the town of Moulins-sur-Allier, where they were loaded into *boules*. Those *boules* were then taken via Cosne to be launched in occupied territory southeast of Paris.



The Results: About 53,000 letters were sent to Moulins, with most postmarked between December 30 and January 7. Moulins transferred about 38,000 letters to the entrepreneurs, and about 29,000 - in 55 *boules* containing about 500 letters each - were launched in the Seine from January 8 to January 30, 1871 at the points marked by red arrows. When the Paris siege ended on January 28, about 8,000 letters in unlaunched *boules* were still at Cosne, and 14,600 letters were still at

Moulins. About 30 launched *boules* have been recovered to date. Mail from the earliest recovery arrived in Paris just after the siege ended, and the most recent recorded recovery was in 1982.

The Mail: There are four classes of *Boules* mail. The letters remaining at Moulins were smuggled in sacks of rice into Paris on February 12, 1871, and the letters left at Cosne were delivered after the February 14, 1871 re-opening of postal relations with Paris. Both of these types of mail have February 1871 Paris arrival marks, and are scarce.

Letters in the *boules* recovered in the 1871-1882 period were delivered to the addressees, and show contemporary Paris arrival marks. A small number of letters from the *boules* recovered in 1968 and 1982 were delivered to descendants. These letters with Paris arrival marks are rare.

Mail recovered in the 1910-1956 period was not delivered, and much of it entered the philatelic market. Consequently, letters without Paris arrival marks are not rare unless they have notable frankings or content.

1870-71 Siege of Paris

Boules de Moulins Mail to Paris

February 12, 1871 “Sac de Riz” Mail

On February 10, 1871 14,600 letters were forwarded from Moulins-s-Allier to Paris, hidden in sacks of rice. These letters, with postmarks of January 6-February 1, had arrived at Moulins after the January 19 cessation of the *boules* service.



Datelined Brussels, Belgium December 28, 1870 and posted January 6, 1871 in Bordeaux
Franked with **Belgian 20c stamp** and French 80c stamp - held at Moulins for inadequate postage
Postal service to Paris was not restored until February 14, so this mail had to be smuggled in

Fewer than five mixed frankings known on *Boules* mail

1870-71 Siege of Paris

Boules de Moulins Mail to Paris

"Sac de Riz" Mail Frankings



Posted January 23, 1871 in Granville - February 12, 1871 Paris Centrale arrival mark

Bordeaux Issue 20c type III stamp unusual on *boules* mail - issued December 26, 1870



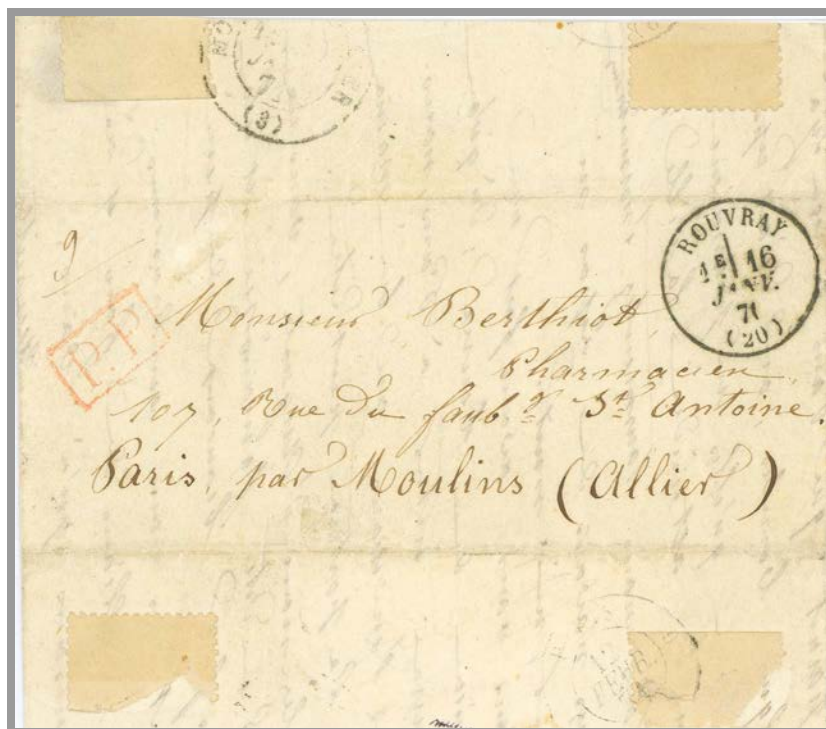
Posted January 24, 1871 in Bordeaux - **Bordeaux Issue 20c type III** and 80c stamps

February 12, 1871 Paris Centrale arrival mark

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Boules de Moulins Mail to Paris

Prepayments in Cash



Posted January 16, 1871 in Rouvray - **red PP** to indicate one franc postage paid in cash
January 19 Moulins transit mark - February 12, 1871 “Sac de Riz” Paris Route 6 arrival mark



Posted January 5, 1871 in Carentan - **ms. “perçu 1f en numéraire”** with **red PP** - no arrival mark
Prepayment in stamps obligatory until January 13 postal notice - regulation was not always observed

1870-71 Siege of Paris

Boules de Moulins Mail to Paris

Late "Sac de Riz" Mail



Dateline Belgium January 19, 1871 and posted February 1 in Moulins-s-Allier
Latest known origin postmark on boules mail - February 12, 1871 Paris arrival



Posted January 30, 1871 in Villers-s-Mer - franked 1 franc in Bordeaux Issue stamps
February 12, 1871 Paris arrival - forwarded back to Villers-s-Mer with 3 décimes due

1870-71 Siege of Paris

Boules de Moulins Mail to Paris

February 1871 “Cosne” Mail

Cosne was used as the staging point before launching the *boules* in the Seine River. About 8,000 letters in unlaunched *boules* left at Cosne were forwarded normally after the February 14, 1871 restoration of postal service to Paris.



Datelined Holland December 29, 1870 and posted January 2, 1871 in Bordeaux

Surviving letters show December 29-January 15 postmarks and arrivals of February 15-18

Boules found at Cosne were among the last group made up at Moulins on January 18, 1871

Most “Cosne” mail shows Paris arrivals of February 18, 1871

1870-71 Siege of Paris

Boules de Moulins Mail to Paris

February 18, 1871 "Cosne" Mail



Posted January 2, 1871 in Vatan - February 18, 1871 Paris Route 5 arrival mark

Four-color one franc franking - only known example of this franking on boules mail



Posted January 10, 1871 in Mazamet - Bordeaux Issue 20c type II and 80c for one franc postage

February 18, 1871 Paris Centrale arrival mark - addressed to 7th Regiment of *Gardes Mobiles* of Tarn

1870-71 Siege of Paris

Boules de Moulins Mail to Paris

“Cosne” Mail Delivered During Armistice

Most “Cosne” mail was delivered in Paris on February 18, 1871.
A small amount of mail shows earlier arrivals of February 15-17.



Posted January 6, 1871 in UGINE - **docketed receipt on February 15, 1871** - no arrival marks

“Cosne” mail shows origin postmarks of December 29-January - most are January 6-15



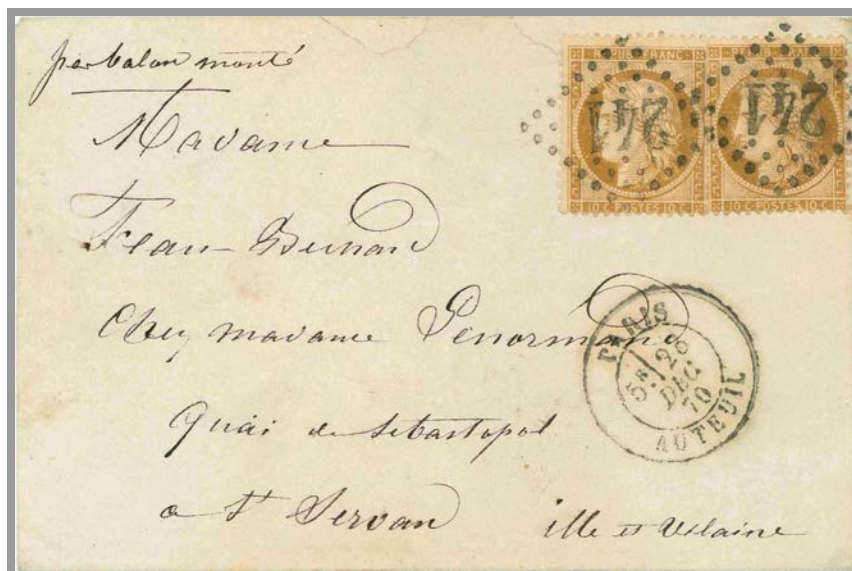
Posted in Villefranche-Saone on January 15, 1871 - **February 17, 1871 Paris arrival mark**

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Boules de Moulins Mail to Paris

Balloon Letter and Reply by Les Andelys Boule

On March 6, 1871, a *boule* with 450 letters was recovered west of Paris at Les Andelys. The only surviving letter known is shown below.



Posted December 23, 1870 at Paris Auteuil post office - prepaid 20c with Siege Issue 10c stamps

Carried on **balloon "Tourville"** which landed near Limoges - arrived December 31 in St Servan



Reply by *boule* posted in St Servan on January 2, 1871 with **Bordeaux 20c type I stamp** and two 1863 40c stamps

From March 6, 1871 recovery at Les Andelys - passed underwater through Paris - **March 8, 1871 Paris postmark**

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Boules de Moulins Mail to Paris

March 1871 Recovery at Quillebeuf

On March 26, 1871, a *boule* was recovered at the mouth of the Seine near Quillebeuf, and the mail was processed at Pont-Audemer on April 5. Deliveries in Paris were delayed until June because of the Paris Commune.



Posted December 31, 1870 at Civray with one franc postage - Bordeaux Issue 20c Type II and 80c
This *boule* was launched in the Seine River around January 12 and passed through Paris underwater
Quillebeuf prepared a special cachet: "*Trouvée dans une boîte échouée sur les bords de la Seine..*"

Fewer than twenty covers from this recovery known, all with frankings intact

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Boules de Moulins Mail to Paris

June, 1871 Undocumented Recoveries



Posted January 4, 1871 at Montbrison with one franc postage - **delivered in Paris June 2, 1871**, just after Commune
Recovery point is unknown, but probably on May 15, 1871 - **fewer than 10 letters known** postmarked January 2-5, 1871



Posted December 30, 1870 at Espalion with a rare **Bordeaux Issue 20c type I strip of five** for one franc postage
Delivered June 23, 1871 in Paris - **fewer than 5 letters known** postmarked December 30 to January 3

1870-71 Siege of Paris

Boules de Moulins Mail to Paris

1871 Recoveries



Posted January 8 at Lessay with **imperforate 1859 80c** and 20c Bordeaux type II - recovered at **Ponthierry June 8, 1871**

No arrival mark in Paris due to disruption from Commune - **only three covers from Ponthierry recovery are known**



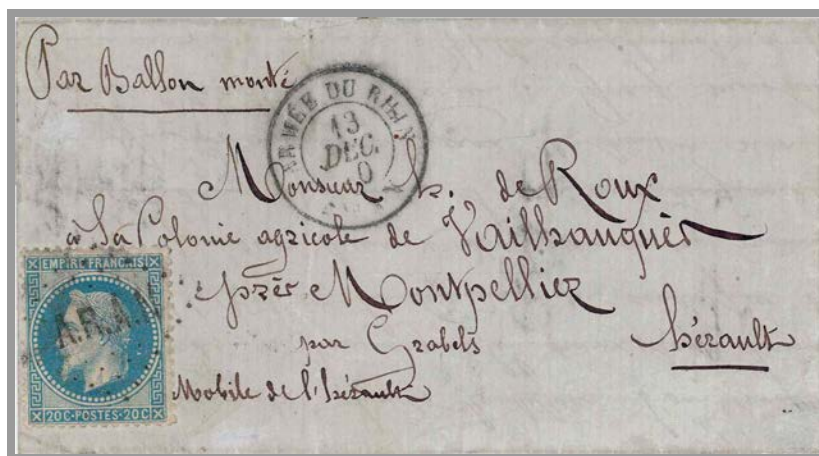
Posted January 3, 1871 at St Gervais-les-Bains - **January 6 Moulins-s-Allier transit mark**

Undocumented July 13, 1871 recovery - **fewer than ten letters known from this boule**

1870-71 Siege of Paris

Boules de Moulins Mail to Paris

Balloon Letter from Soldier and Reply by Boule



Dated *St Maur* December 12, 1870 - used obsolete 13th Corps *Bau AN* fieldpost bureau

Carried on balloon "*Parmentier*" - arrived December 29 in Montpellier - *ex-Gilbert, Dubus*



Reply to above letter posted in Montpellier on January 2, 1871 - **June 22, 1871 Paris 7 Poste Restante postmark**

From undocumented June 1871 recovery - **fewer than 5 examples known** with postmarks of January 2-5

Franked by Bordeaux Issue 20c Type II stamps - forwarded back to Montpellier in August 1871 - *ex-Francois*

1870-71 Siege of Paris

Boules de Moulins Mail to Paris

1871-72 Recoveries



Posted December 31 at Vannes with laureated 80c and 20c Bordeaux type II - **August 26, 1871 arrival**
Boule launched mid-January - **fewer than ten covers from this undocumented recovery are known**



Posted January 4, 1871 in Dijon - from a *boule* recovered at Le Havre in January 1872
Delivered January 13, 1872 in Paris - fewer than five letters are known from this *boule*

1870-71 Siege of Paris

Boules de Moulins Mail to Paris

April 1872 Recovery at Corbeil

A *boule* was recovered in April 1872 at Corbeil, southeast of Paris. The mail had suffered from its immersion in the water, and all but two of the surviving letters lost their frankings. All were marked with a blue P.P. paid marking.



Posted December 29, 1870 in Pau - **December 31 Moulins-s-Allier transit mark**

20c of franking lost - May 2, 1872 Paris RC arrival and May 2, 1872 *Rebuts* bureau marking



Posted January 1, 1871 in Laval - 20c of franking lost during immersion - **May 2, 1872 *Rebuts* bureau marking**

Boule launched January 5 with letters postmarked December 29-January 3 - **fewer than 10 covers known**

1870-71 Siege of Paris

Boules de Moulins Mail to Paris



1872 Recoveries at Corbeil



Posted January 5, 1871 in Toulouse - 30 centimes of one franc postage lost during immersion
Arrived in Paris June 22, 1872 - **only letter known from this recovery at Corbeil in June 1872**



Posted January 5, 1871 in Bordeaux - **arrived in Paris March 18, 1872 - fewer than ten letters known**

1870-71 Siege of Paris

Boules de Moulins Mail to Paris

1872-1873 Recoveries



Posted January 4, 1871 in Angoulême with one franc postage- **arrived in Paris November 29, 1872**
November 1872 recovery at Corbeil - less than 15 survivors known with December 31-January 6 postmarks



Posted December 30, 1870 in Bourges - **January 1, 1871 Moulins-s-Allier transit mark**
May 13, 1873 recovery at Mantes-s-Seine - arrived in Paris May 15 - fewer than ten letters known

1870-71 Siege of Paris

Boules de Moulins Mail to Paris

June 1873 Undocumented Recoveries



Posted December 31, 1870 in Bordeaux - **arrived in Paris June 25, 1873** - one franc franking intact

Boule launched around January 10 with letters postmarked December 30-January 6 - **fewer than 10 covers known**



Posted January 10, 1871 in Nice - 1 franc franking lost during immersion - **black P.P. added to show postage paid**

Arrived in Paris June 5, 1873 - fewer than 10 covers known, all with P.P. markings to reflect lost frankings

From the last *boule* launching, on January 22 with letters postmarked December 31-January 16

1870-71 Siege of Paris

Boules de Moulins Mail to Paris

December 1873 Undocumented Recovery

A *boule* was recovered in December 1873 at an unrecorded location. It contained letters postmarked January 4-8, and was launched in the Seine River around January 12.



Posted January 4, 1871 in Dives - Bordeaux Issue 20c type II strip of five for one franc postage

Arrived December 10, 1873 in Paris - classic Paris datestamp with missing '73' year date

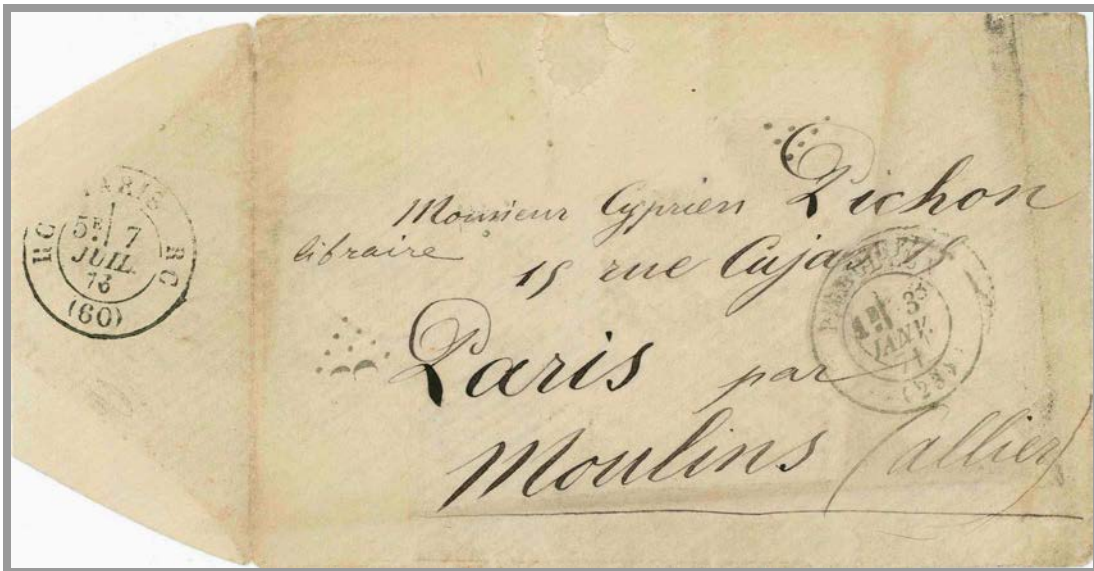
Fewer than ten covers known, most with frankings intact

1870-71 Siege of Paris

Boules de Moulins Mail to Paris

July 1876 Undocumented Recovery

A *boule* was recovered in July 1876 at an unrecorded location. The mail had suffered from its immersion in the water, and the few surviving letters lost their frankings.



Posted January 3, 1871 in Périgueux - **arrived in Paris July 7, 1876** - franking lost during immersion
Boule launched around January 10 with letters postmarked January 3-4 - **fewer than 5 covers known**

Many letters from this boule could not be recovered due to water damage

1870-71 Siege of Paris

Boules de Moulins Mail to Paris

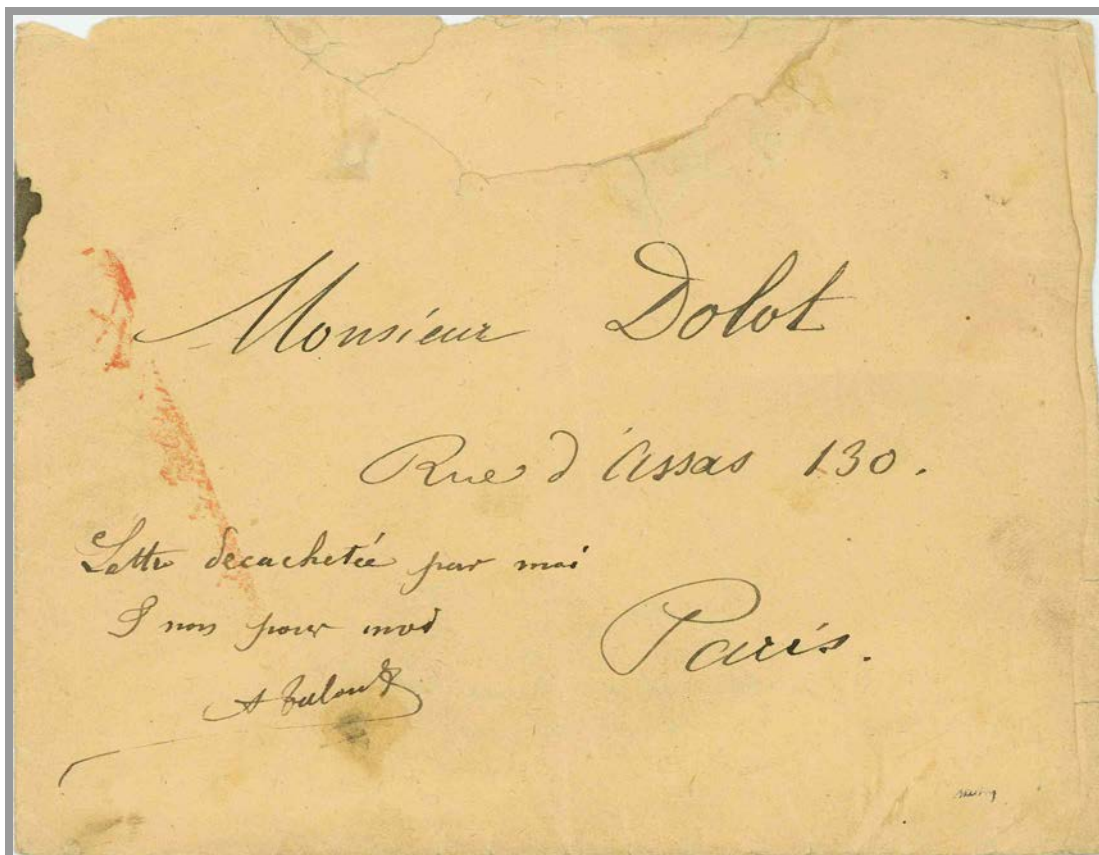
April 1882 Recovery at Choisy-le-Roi

On April 18, 1882, a *boule* was recovered east of Paris at Choisy-le-Roi. The mail had suffered from its immersion, and only two survivors are known.



Posted January 5, 1871 in Pornic - one franc franking lost during immersion

This was the last recovery from which the Post Office delivered the mail until 1968



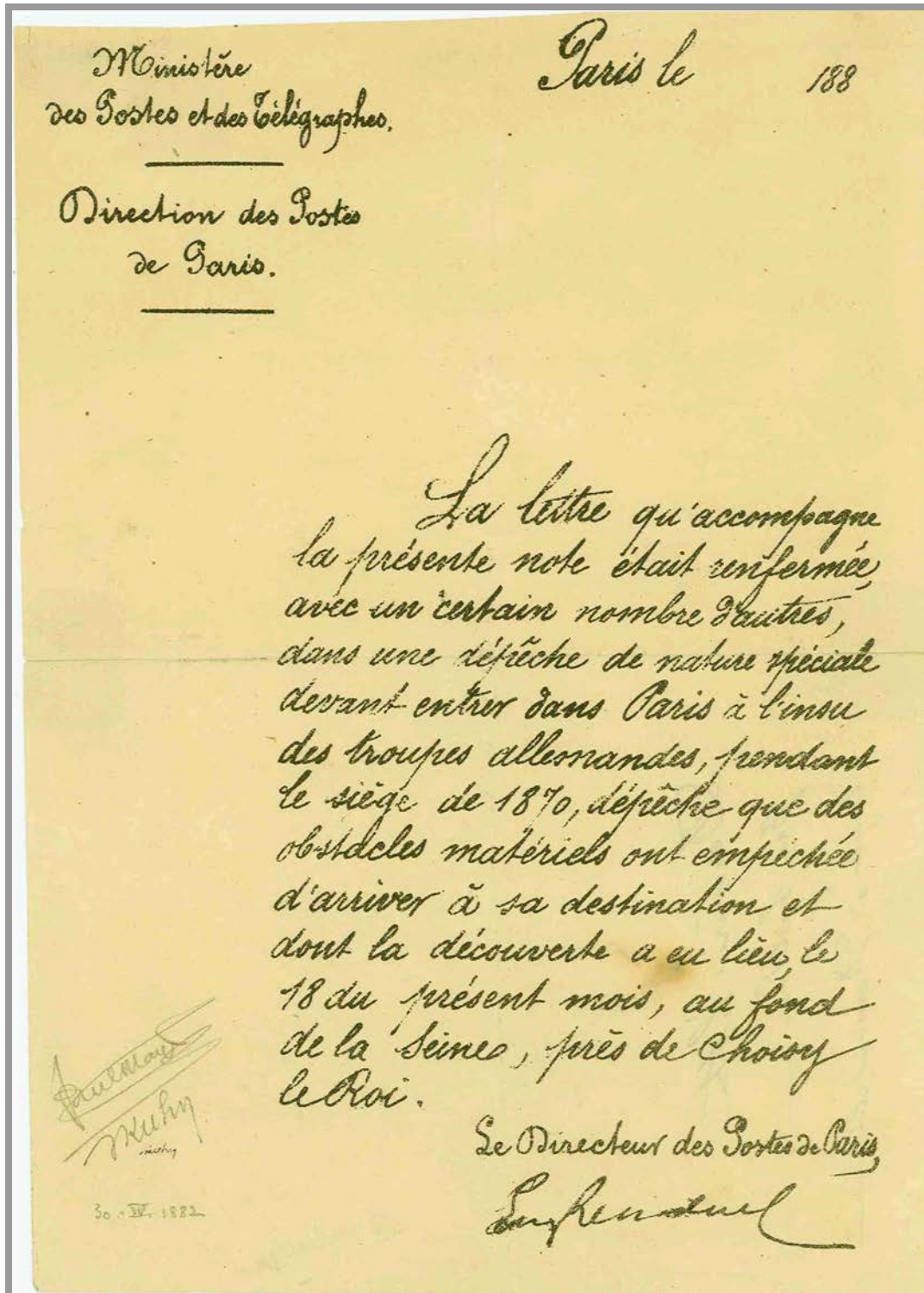
Forwarding envelope used for above letter and circular on next page - endorsed *Direction des Postes de Paris*

1870-71 Siege of Paris

Boules de Moulins Mail to Paris

April 1882 Recovery at Choisy-le-Roi

The mail recovered on April 18, 1882 at Choisy-le-Roi was delivered in another envelope along with a printed circular explaining the delay in delivery.



Printed Post Office circular delivered on April 30, 1882 along with the *boule* letter on the preceding page

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Boules de Moulins Mail to Paris

August, 1968 St-Wandrille Recovery



Reverse of envelope with special red cachet prepared for letters from ***boule*** recovered **August 6, 1968 at St-Wandrille**

Recovered over 97 years after submersion - legal problems took two more years before this letter was delivered

Only 20 of the 540 letters in the *boule* reached descendants or "ayants droit" - remainder in Postal Museum



Photocopy of envelope front - posted January 7, 1871 at Rennes with one franc franking in Bordeaux Issue stamps

1870-71 Siege of Paris

Boules de Moulins Mail to Paris

Rare Bordeaux Issue Frankings



Posted January 7, 1871 in St. Meloir-des-Ondes - no arrival mark - 20c type I Report 2 block of 4 & single



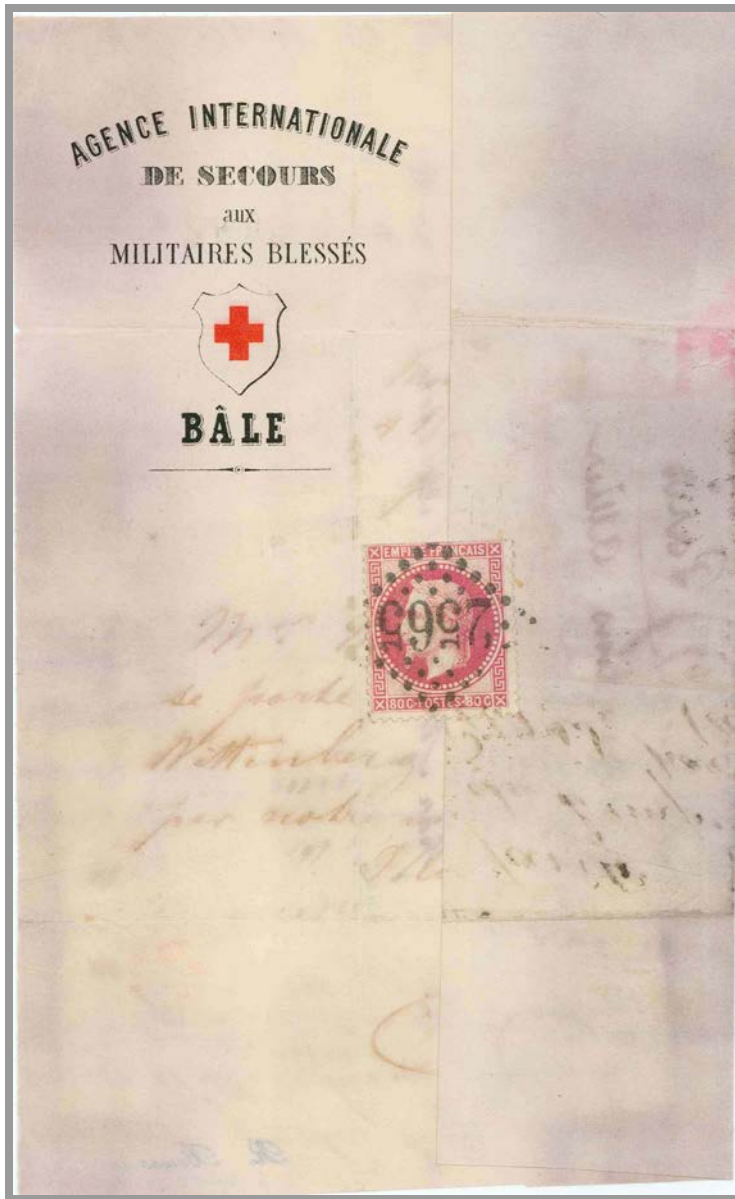
Dateline London Dec. 29, 1870 and posted January 6 in Moulins - double rate franking with 20c type II block of 10

1870-71 Siege of Paris

Boules de Moulins Mail to Paris

Letter From Red Cross in Basel

Mail from other countries was usually forwarded under cover to Moulins-s-Allier or Bordeaux for re-mailing, although other cities in France were also used occasionally.



Datelined Bâle, Switzerland January 2, 1871 and posted January 8 at Moulins-s-Allier - no arrival marks

80c stamp on reverse of letter, and 20c stamp on front (**photocopy at right above**) - *ex-Boussac*

Only known Red Cross letter carried by *Boules de Moulins*

1870-71 Siege of Paris

Boules de Moulins Mail to Paris

1862 Empire Dentelé Issue Frankings



Posted January 4, 1871 in Pontarion - no arrival marks, and no signs of immersion in water
Obsolete **1862 80c stamp** and Bordeaux 20c type II stamp used to make up one franc rate



Posted January 7, 1871 in St Brieuc - no arrival marks, and significant signs of immersion in water
Obsolete **1862 40c pair** and Bordeaux 20c type II stamp used to make up one franc rate

Only 2% of all boules mail franked by 1862 Issue stamps

1870-71 Siege of Paris

Boules de Moulins Mail to Paris

Unusual Usages



Posted December 30, 1870 in Bressuire - no arrival marks, and signs of immersion in water

Bordeaux Issue 20c Type II block of five used to make up 1 franc franking



Dated *Marseille*, 1 Janvier 1871 and posted January 6 at the rare **Bureau Ambulants Méditerranée** railroad office

Endorsed by Director of the Railroad - no arrival marks and extensive signs of immersion in water

1870-71 Siege of Paris

Boules de Moulins Mail to Paris

Usages from Foreign Countries



Dateline Belgium December 29 and posted January 5, 1871 in Bordeaux - no arrival marks

No signs of immersion in water - addressed to officer in 7th Defense Sector of Paris



Dateline Geneva 2 January 1871 and posted January 2 at nearby St Julien-en Genevois in France

No arrival marks and no signs of immersion in water

1870-71 Siege of Paris

Boules de Moulins Mail to Paris

Bordeaux Issue Frankings



Posted January 4, 1871 in Fernex - no arrival marks, and some signs of immersion in water

Bordeaux 10c and 30c strip of three used to make up one franc rate



Posted December 30, 1870 in Lille - no arrival marks, and significant signs of immersion in water

First day usage of Bordeaux Issue 30 centimes stamp

Bordeaux Issue ten centimes stamp not commonly seen on *boules* mail

1870-71 Siege of Paris

Boules de Moulins Mail to Paris

December 23, 1870 Postal Decree

The initial *boules* service called for 1 franc 20c postage, of which 1 franc was to be retained by the private operators. This was reduced to 1 franc by the December 23, 1870 Postal Decree, with 80c going to the operators.



Posted January 1, 1871 in Granville - no arrival marks and extensive signs of immersion in water

Original franking included Bordeaux 80c (positive impression on front) which soaked off
40c in Bordeaux 10c stamps was added on the back, of which 20c was removed before sending
Sender added endorsement "Decret du 23 Xbre 1870" to reflect the proper one franc postage

Operators received 40c upon dispatch and 40c upon arrival in Paris

1870-71 Siege of Paris

Boules de Moulins Mail to Paris

Official Post Office Correspondence

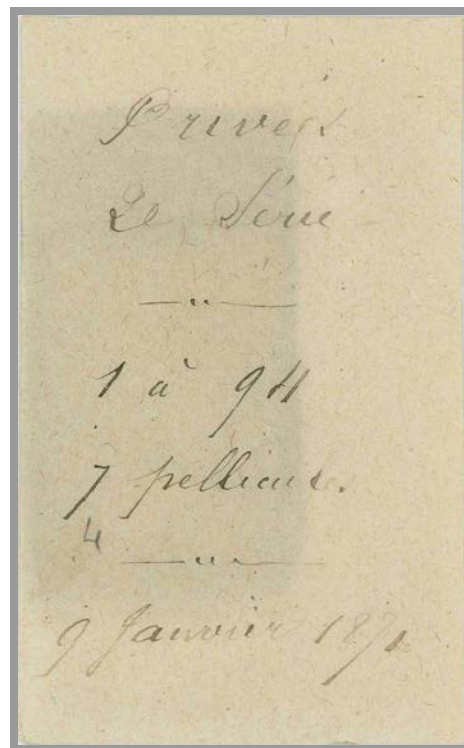
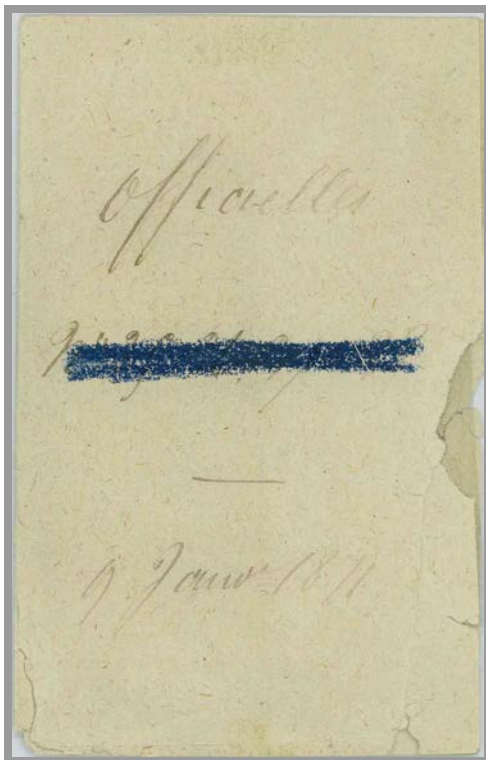


Letter dated January 10, 1871 **from Steenackers, P.T.T. head in Bordeaux, to Mercadier, P.T.T. head in Paris**

Only known official letter carried by *boule* - **official free frank** - probably from *boule* recovered in 1910

Letter contained 25 pigeonram pellicules - copies of those sent by pigeon but which had not arrived in Paris

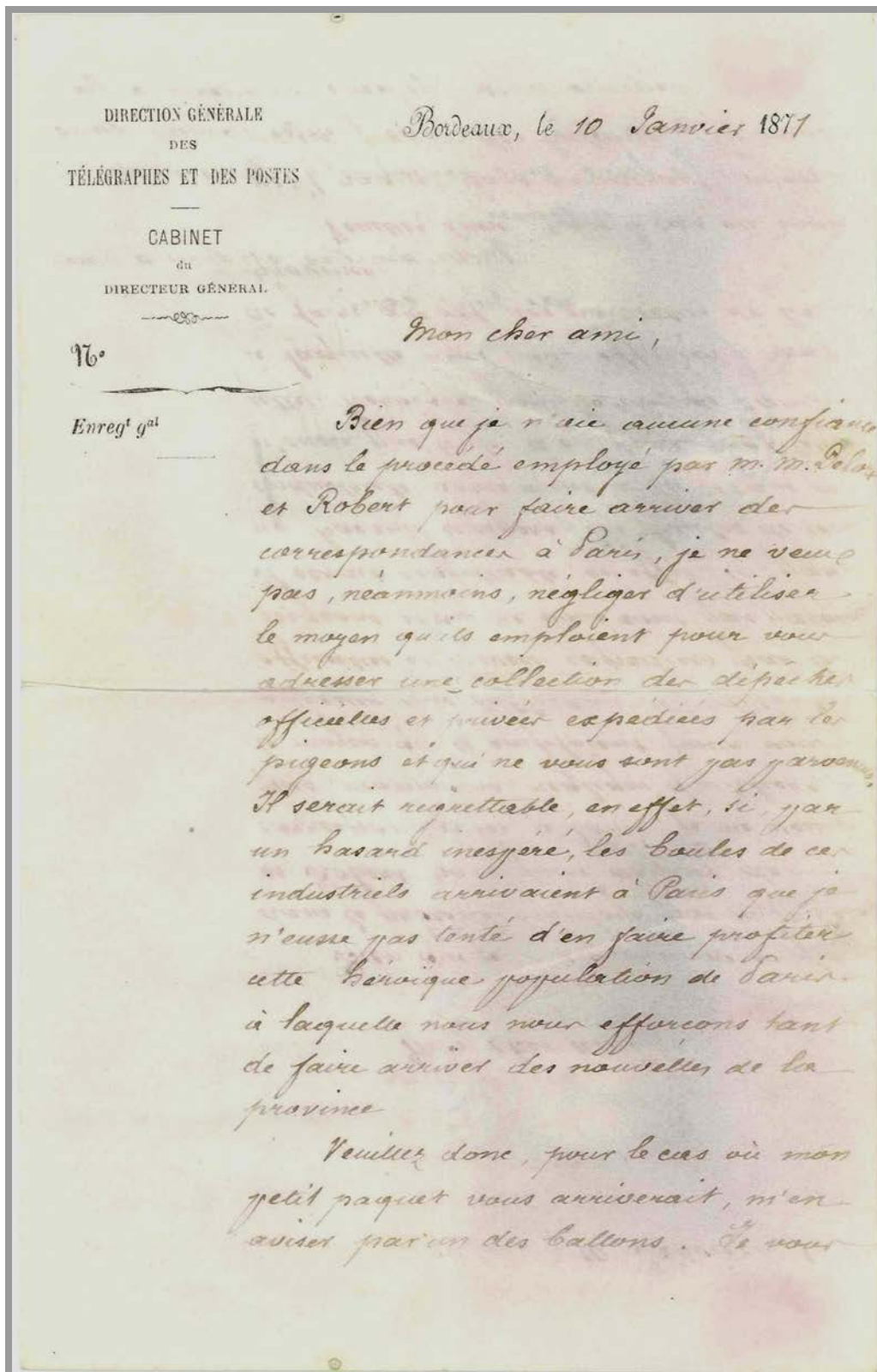
Envelopes below were used to hold the various official and private series of pigeonrams



1870-71 Siege of Paris

Boules de Moulins Mail to Paris

Pigeongrams Carried By Boule



Steenackers letter to Mercadier (see preceding page) and examples of enclosed pigeongrams