

THE PERUVIAN GUANO TRADE: BOOM AND BUST, 1845-1879

SYNOPSIS

Exhibit Focus

This exhibit has as its main focus the rapid development and equally rapid collapse of Peru's guano trade from 1845 to 1879. Also treated is the marketing of Peruvian guano, its blending with other materials and alternatives.

Exhibit Plan

Title panel: basic information about guano and the trade: 1. Peruvian Guano Trade; 1.1 United States; 1.2. France; 1.3 Great Britain; 4. Peru; 1.5. Guano Charters. 2. Marketing Peruvian Guano; 2.1 Post-boom Marketing. 3. Blends and Alternatives to Peruvian Guano. 4. Epilogue: End of the Guano Boom.

Challenge

Mail related to the guano trade, especially from the Chincha and Guanape Islands is scarce/rare and a major challenge to their acquisition. Items are included only if the letter specifically mentions guano. The location of an 1848 document related to the local Peruvian trade in guano was serendipitous, as was the British Callao Consular cover addressed to a re-flagged American ship during the Civil War. The acquisition of two pieces that mention the chartering of ships for the guano trade was just plain lucky!

Scarcity/Rarity and Condition

Scarcity and rarity pose a couple of problems in the exhibit. First, there is no census of mail during this period from Peruvian guano islands. Second, only ship letters that specifically reference guano are included. The mail from Guanape, a small island with miniscule population is certainly scarce, perhaps rare. Chincha mail that specifically mentions guano is scarce.

Ship mail from the islands is in very good to excellent condition, perhaps because they were safely filed in company archives after delivery. The condition of advertising covers is mixed, as is to be expected of their age and treatment.

Personal Research

Most of my research was conducted at Mystic Seaport Museum and its vast library of maritime-related material, including logbooks and company records. I was able to examine the log of the "Herald of the Morning" during her trips to the Chincha Islands. The library also holds much of the Magoun & Sons (Boston) archive. With these and other sources I could pinpoint which ships were involved in the guano trade and when they were in the islands. Then it was a matter

of finding the covers! Postal rates and images of Peruvian obliterations were found from books available in the APS Library.

Philatelic knowledge

The descriptions of items in the exhibit demonstrates general philatelic knowledge. Postal rates were somewhat of a challenge in that I had to find proper rates for the United States, Great Britain, France and Peru..

Historical note

Sparse rainfall, the cold Humboldt current and abundant sea fowl combined to make a high-quality guano-based fertilizer. Rain leaches out rich organic material, which was why Caribbean and South Pacific guano was far inferior to Peru's resource. This was why Peruvian guano was preferred in the United States and Europe. The trade in guano was Peru's most important source of revenue in the 19th century.

Key Bibliography

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Lamy, Georges and Jacques-Andre Rinck, *Perou: Obliterations Postales de 1857 a 1873* (Lyon: 1964), tri-lingual edition.

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