
Iceland's 16-Aur Í Gildi with Red Surcharge: A Forensic Study Provides Answers

By Ellis Glatt

Conspicuous by its absence from listing or even mention in major catalogs, e.g., Scott, Gibbons, Michel, and Yvert, is an especially interesting and relatively rare Iceland Í Gildi overprint color variety. This is the controversial 16-aur stamp, perforated 14x13½, overprinted in red instead of black. The stamp is often referred to as one of the Í Gildi “Ferrarities,” having first appeared among the collection of well-known stamp collector Philipp la Rénotière von Ferrary. It was accompanied there by three other red-instead-of-black surcharge color varieties (on the perforated 14x13½ 50- and 100-aur stamps and on the perforated 12¾ 10-aur stamp), which were lumped into the same “error” category and thought to be unique.

Unfortunately, Ferrary's massive collection, which was auctioned off in the early 1920s following his death in 1917, included not only some of the world's greatest rarities, but many fakes as well. As a result, for many years thereafter, all four of these red-surcharged varieties were viewed by many prominent Iceland philatelic experts, including Lundgaard in his 1941 unpublished report and subsequently by Pihl in his 1946 publication, *Islands Frimerker*, as outright fakes.

Apparently, major dealers and catalog publishers, such as Gibbons and Scott, were unaware of the existence of 16-aur red-surcharge stamp until years after authorized overprinting of the original Í Gildi stamps ceased in July, 1903. This is in sharp contrast to the 25-aur Í Gildi with black surcharge, another overprint color variety recently demonstrated to be an unauthorized after-production from late 1903. (See the May and August 2004 issues of *The Posthorn* for a detailed analysis of the 25-aur black surcharge by the author.) Gibbons already had a listing for the black-overprinted 25-aur in the Addenda to its 1904 catalog. The fact that the red-surcharged 16-aur did not surface until years later certainly may have added to the skepticism by collectors and dealers regarding the authenticity of this stamp.

Changing Views

Somewhere along the way, more examples of the 16-aur with red surcharge began to surface. And, as additional Í Gildi reference material accumulated in the hands of some researchers, not everyone remained convinced that these 16-aur stamps were bogus. Pelander's November, 1952, auction catalog, for example, describes its offering of this 16-aur stamp as a rare “trial print in red.” However, Carøe's last update on the '02-'03 overprint issue in 1959 in *London Philatelist* still makes no mention of the stamp.

Apparently, listings for the 16-aur Í Gildi stamp with red surcharge first appeared in at least two specialized catalogs in the mid- to late-1960s. The 1967 edition of *Islenszk Frimerki* lists this Iceland variety as number 50A, while AFA's 1971 *Danmark, Grønland, Island, Dansk Vestindien Specialkatalog* has the stamp as Iceland 29X. In researching the basis for these initial listings, Sigurður Þorsteinsson, publisher of the former, informs this writer that he first encountered the stamp in 1965 and, notwithstanding the listing, both he and AFA had some doubts at the time about the stamp's authenticity. Finally, in the late 1970s, Facit also began listing the 16-aur red-surcharge variety in its Special catalog edition as Iceland 46A. Yet to date, none of the other major catalog publishers has followed suit nor recognized the stamp.

With initial listings for the 16-aur Í Gildi with red surcharge in a few specialized catalogs, more examples of the stamp soon surfaced. From 1976 to date, the variety appeared in dozens of major auctions. Well aware of the on-going controversy in some circles regarding the status of this overprint color variety, I continued to canvas auction catalogs for photos and other information that might shed more definitive light on its origin.

Emerging Evidence

Then, in late 1994, an unusual holiday greeting card from a fellow Í Gildi collector and enthusiast brightened my day. It was essentially an enlarged color photo of a red-surcharged 16-aur from my



friend's collection, captioned appropriately for the season. The red overprint depicted in the photo looked remarkably similar to one I had seen in a photocopy of a sheet of normal Í Gildi stamps ex Setting V. Although the underlying 16-aur stamp exhibited no discernable plate flaws, the overprint did display a defect in the accented "I" character (lower left serif cut off) that compared well with plate position 13 in Setting V (Figure 1a).

With fewer than 200 sheets estimated (by Lundgaard) to have been surcharged in the mid-May, 1903, overprinting session, surviving sheets and large multiples from Setting V are indeed rare, with only a handful remaining in private hands today. Unfortunately, none was available at the time to this researcher. Still, the photocopy comparison looked like a promising lead, which would later be confirmed via a comparison with the corresponding overprint from an actual Setting V sheet (Figure 1b).

The real breakthrough came with Høiland's May 3, 2000, Iceland Specialized auction (Part II ex the collection of Gene Scott). Included in the sale was a full sheet of the 100-aur stamp overprinted with

the scarce Setting V plate. The sale also included another lovely example of a 16-aur with red surcharge (Lot 6134), with an accompanying Møller certificate stating that the stamp was genuine and from Setting V position 41. The plating was based on a unique attribute of the final "I" in GILDI, which exhibited a small spot of color immediately above the character (Figure 2a). Again checking my photocopy of another Setting V sheet, I knew the Møller certification for this stamp was absolutely correct. Moreover, the same

collection also contained that intact Setting V sheet for direct comparison. What better evidence could exist to authenticate the stamp? Figure 2b shows the overprint from position 41 of that Setting V sheet. There was absolutely no doubt that at least some of the known red-surcharged 16-aur stamps were not only genuine, but also were produced during the authorized overprinting period (which ended with Setting VI in July, 1903).

Still to be determined was whether all of the other known red-surcharged 16-aur stamps also originated in Setting V and, if so, how many might have been produced? To help research these issues, I acquired the Setting V sheet at the Høiland sale.



Figure 2a: Lot 6134 from Høiland's May 2000 auction.



Figure 2b: Í Gildi overprint from Position 41 from a Setting V sheet.



Figure 1a: 16-aur with red surcharge ex T. C. Jensen.



Figure 1b: Í Gildi overprint from Position 13 from a Setting V sheet.

In the March 23-24, 2001 Postiljonen sale (Lot 90), I spotted yet another red-surcharged 16-aur example (Figure 3a). The overprint exhibited an unusual anomaly—a pronounced indentation in the upper serif of the "D" in GILDI. With an actual Setting V sheet in hand this time, I had no doubt that the overprint was from position 7 of that setting (Figure 3b shows position 7 ex the Setting V sheet). The Postiljonen stamp also exhibited a small cliché flaw in the upper frame line of the underlying 16-aur stamp, which I thought would help in the upcoming computer-





Figure 3a: Lot 90 from Postiljonen's March 2001 auction.



Figure 3b: 1 Gildi overprint from Position 7 from a Setting V sheet.

based analysis I had in mind to tackle those remaining issues. But, I also would need accurate plating information for the underlying 16-aur stamps.

Plating the Underlying 16-Aur

A comparative analysis of color photos and actual examples of 16-aur stamps with red surcharge was made against examples of 16-aur stamps from each of its four printings to determine which printings received the overprint. Based on all of the data evaluated, it appeared that most, if not all, of the red-surcharged stamps originated with the fourth and final printing of the perforated 14x13½ stamps. This particular 16-aur printing (1891) is also the most common one and is easily

recognizable by its “unclean” print on medium thick paper and varnish-like print surface.

Shortly thereafter, a book by the late Henry Regeling, *Stamps of Iceland 1872 -1904*, was published. Drawing primarily on a study of full sheets of the various aur stamps remaining in official Danish and Icelandic archives, Regeling set out to document the various cliché flaws found in each of the individual printings by plate position. However, according to Regeling, neither Denmark nor Iceland had a 16-aur sheet from the fourth printing in its archives. He, therefore, attempted to reconstruct one, largely from photocopies of various pairs and blocks obtained from fellow collectors.

Recognizing the importance of accurate information re the research task at hand, I spot-checked the published fourth-printing plating details with various auction catalog photos and other available reference material. Unfortunately, Regeling's fourth-printing reconstruction, as published, turned out to be in error with respect to a number of positions. However, by that point in the process, sufficient fourth-printing examples had been uncovered to enable me to make the necessary 16-aur plate corrections and move forward with the study of the overprinted stamps.

Methodology Overview

With at least three red-surcharged 16-aur stamps already definitively plated to overprint Setting V, how many other examples might also plate correctly? If most of the other known examples could also be plated to Setting V, it might be possible to reconstruct the specific sheet portion that received the red overprint to estimate a likely production quantity. With a full sheet of 1 Gildi stamps ex Setting V to draw upon, and the corrected cliché plating information re the underlying 16-aur stamp also in hand, I set out to resolve those remaining issues.

The next step in the research process was to collect photos of all known examples of the subject red-surcharged stamp. Hundreds of auction catalogs listing Icelandic material dating back from the early 1950s to the present were canvassed for examples of the stamp. To facilitate the study, computer scanning and imaging software was used to record and store the various stamp images and also to conduct the “on-screen” reconstruction of the overprinted 16-aur unit.

After making a high-resolution scan of each catalog image, duplicates were sorted out and each of the unique specimens was studied and plated, where possible, with respect to overprint plate position. The various scanned images were then adjusted to a standard size and aligned on the screen according to those plate positions. The reconstructed sheet section was analyzed for consistency, first with respect to overprint placement, and then with respect to positions of known cliché flaws and perforation anomalies in the underlying 16-aur stamp (fourth printing). Essentially, a computer-based forensic analysis of the overprinted stamps was performed.



Findings

An extensive auction-catalog search covering the last 50 years or so turned up only 20 examples of red-surcharged 16-aur stamps. More importantly, the overprints on 17 of those stamps (including the three examples previously cited) plated extremely well with corresponding positions from Setting V (overprint positions 2, 3, 4, 7, 10, 13, 16, 17, 22, 27, 29, 31, 32, 33, 34, 41, 43). Another two examples were also very consistent with Setting V positions, but here the plating was a little less certain (one possibly overprint position 21 and the other probably 39, but possibly 28). And, of course, all 19 stamps passed the basic “thin/thick zero” combination test for their respective overprint positions. Only a single example, where only a poor-quality image was available to evaluate, did not appear to plate at all. However, although inconclusive, certain characteristics of that stamp suggested it may have been a fake. Also extremely noteworthy is the finding that all of the overprint positions detected were different, i.e., none is repeated among the stamps. This suggests that no more than half of a sheet of stamps likely received the red surcharge from the overprint plate of 50. However, more about that subject next.

The results of the on-screen reconstruction of the 16-aur unit, which was based on the overprint plate positions of the 19 verified examples, yielded some surprising results. Although there was reasonably good alignment of the overprints among adjacent stamps in most sections of the unit, the underlying 16-aur stamps failed to plate correctly based on the updated and verified cliché-flaw positions for the stamp’s fourth printing. Actually, this was not at all surprising, upon review of adjacent stamps in the reconstructed layout. Cliché centering, as well as adjoining perforations, appeared totally inconsistent and unrelated in most sections of the reconstruction.

Clearly, the 16-aur unit that received the red overprint had to have been a reconstruction in its own right, made up largely of singles, perhaps with a pair or two worked into the mix. The fact that some of 19 red-surcharged examples are reported to be either without gum or re-gummed certainly supports the notion that the stamps may have been mounted or fastened together in some manner prior to overprinting. Moreover, other evidence suggests that all 50 overprint plate positions may not have been occupied with 16-aur stamps. For example, the 19 plated examples of red-surcharged 16-aur are not well distributed across the 50 overprint plate positions, but seem to be grouped in certain areas and absent from others. Also, an example of the red-surcharged 16-aur stamp with the 02’-’03 error, which occurs in overprint position 50 of Setting V, has never turned up. And, the lower right portion of the reconstructed unit is generally lacking of known 16-aur examples (with the possible exception of overprint position 39).

On the other hand, a single example of the rare 20-aur stamp perforated 14x13½ with 02’-’03 error and red surcharge ex Setting V is known to exist and its overprint placement appears to be generally consistent with the current 16-aur reconstruction. Although yet to be confirmed by this researcher, it would seem logical that some or all of the remaining stamps used to assemble the reconstructed unit must have comprised aur stamps that would have normally received the red surcharge, such as the 20-aur. The fact that the 16-aur is still the only known authenticated stamp with wrong-color overprint in red certainly supports this premise.

Conclusion and Call for Listing

Based on the overwhelming plating evidence just presented, including the three pictured examples, there is absolutely no question about the origin and authenticity of the 16-aur Í Gildi with red overprint. The overprint was applied to a reconstructed unit during the officially authorized period (ca mid-May, 1903) using the Setting V overprint plate, and, therefore, had to have been done at the Reykjavík printing office. More than likely, only one-half sheet of stamps was involved. Whether the overprinting took place during a “midnight” session at the behest of an influential stamp collector or dealer or otherwise is only of academic interest. The 16-aur stamp with red overprint is genuine and not a trial print or after-production (as was determined to be the case for the 25-aur Í Gildi with black surcharge previously written about).

The fact that a forensic analysis shows that a reconstructed unit was involved in the production of the 16-aur variety merely confirms what others have written as far back as 1903. As highlighted again by Jónsson in his book *One Hundred Years of Icelandic Stamps 1873-1973*, reconstructed sheets (and half sheets) of aur stamps with small perforations were not uncommon, including those with mixed aur values, ▶

since few intact sheets from the overprinting period survived, and units of less than one-half sheet generally were not accepted from the public for overprinting.

With only 19 verified examples of the red-surcharged 16-aur uncovered to date by this researcher (based on a thorough review of some 50 years of auction listings), and with the strong likelihood that a significant number of 20-aur stamps were mixed into the reconstructed half-sheet, it is probably safe to say that this count is not likely to increase substantially due to further revelations. The 16-aur Í Gildi perforated 14x13½ with red surcharge is indeed a rare stamp, which, in my opinion, deserves the same recognition status as the corresponding 20-aur variety.

In view of the insurmountable evidence currently available, it is now time for each of the remaining major catalog publishers to include a major-stamp listing for this authentic Icelandic stamp. For consistency with current listings by the publishers for other Iceland Í Gildi stamps, the following proposed catalog numbers would seem to make sense for the red-surcharged 16-aur stamp:

Scott – 65C; Gibbons – 47A; Michel – 29 F; Yvert & Tellier – 28a.

Hopefully, these latest findings will reach most catalog publishers in time for their 2006 editions. It will be interesting to see how each responds.

The study of Iceland's rare Í Gildi stamps can be an extremely challenging undertaking, often leaving researchers with many unanswered questions. Fortunately, in the case of the 16-aur with red surcharge, nearly all of the puzzle's pieces fell nicely into place. Through the use of digital imaging and computer-based forensic analysis, we can now set the record straight regarding this particular stamp. ■

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(Editor's Note: The author may be contacted at Ellis Glatt, PO Box 80628, Las Vegas, NV 89180-0628 (USA), or email ellisglatt@att.net.)

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