

top of the verso, here it is arranged as a broad band almost in the middle of the completely blank reverse side, creating an aesthetic effect similar to certain artistic Iranian dishes from the same period.¹ Such care for the outward appearance of the letter shows the esteem in which 'Arūs was held by the writer. He was called Ḥalfōn ha-Kohen b. Judah, and describes himself as the recipient's friend (*muḥibb*). I have not yet traced him elsewhere.

University Library, Cambridge, Taylor-Schechter
Collection, TS 10 J 13, f. 4.

(Six lines of the usual introductory phrases.)

I was leaving you with the understanding that I would travel overseas. But on the way² I had an accident, all my things were drenched, and the sugar was spoiled in its entirety; by these lines, not more than about twenty pounds were saved.³ I was overcome by a great depression and refrained from going abroad.⁴ I dispatched my things, but the boats are still in the harbor. May God—be he praised and exalted—grant them a smooth passage.

Now to the story of Abū 'Imrān Mūsā ("Moses, Father of Amram"). He arrived, and people tried to arrange a settlement between us. He swore solemn oaths that he did not owe me more than those 100 dinars.⁵ I thought, even if I forced him to give an oath in court,⁶ he would not concede more than this. Therefore I made a settlement with him and took from him those 100 dinars and issued him a release. Please take notice of this. May God never deprive me of you and your kindnesses and keep you for me and for all

¹ A similar, and even more artistic, arrangement in TS Box K 6, f. 189, a letter from Jerusalem addressed to Abū Naṣr Faḍl al-Tustarī. See no. 30, B, above.

² From Cairo to Alexandria.

³ One traveled on the Nile, and goods often fell into the water. See *Med. Soc.*, 1, 297ff.

⁴ The wording seems to mean that it was not the material loss, but the depression that induced the writer to give up his travel plans. He perhaps took the accident on the Nile as a bad omen.

⁵ He had already conceded on a previous occasion that he owed this debt.

⁶ Giving an oath in court was a very serious matter and regarded as damaging to one's reputation. Respectable merchants avoided it, if possible (see *Med. Soc.*, 11, 240). Conceding part of a debt entailed an oath expressly provided for in the Torah.

other people who need help.⁷ May he give you *male children studying the Torah and fulfilling commandments in Israel. May your well-being increase and never decrease. Amen, in eternity, Selah.*

Kindest regards to you and the elder Abu 'l-Wahsh⁸ and to all under your care. *And peace be upon Israel.*⁹

52 A STRAY LETTER

Business During an Epidemic

Ca. 1080-1100

The letters of traders translated thus far make the impression that they are all preserved in groups. This impression should not be generalized. The mass of unconnected material is very considerable. But the translation of an unrelated letter often requires much guesswork and lengthy comments, which are better left for a full-fledged edition of the original. The letter presented below, which is roughly contemporary with, or slightly preceding those addressed to 'Arūs (nos. 48-51), is such a case. The persons mentioned in it might or might not be identical with others found in approximately contemporary letters or documents, but the weighing of the pros and cons would be time-consuming without being rewarding. Despite this drawback the letter translated here is by no means without interest.

Abu 'l-Faraj Nissīm ("Miraculous Delivery"), the recipient of this letter, was an India trader, against whom, while in India selling precious Western textiles and mercury, a power of attorney was issued in Fustat.¹ The date of that document is not preserved, but the names of the signatories, known from other sources, put it around 1090. The sender of the letter shared with him the family

⁷ Clearly 'Arūs had been influential in inducing the debtor to concede that he owed 100 dinars.

⁸ See no. 49, n. 4, above.

⁹ This quotation from Psalm 128:6, often found in the mosaic pavements of ancient synagogues, was not used as conclusion of a letter, but refers here to the peaceful settlement of the lawsuit.

¹ TS 12.19, *India Book* 163.

name, and since he writes in a style possible only among close relatives, he was most probably his nephew. Both clearly were Maghrebis; therefore, their family name must be read as al-Ruqqī, derived from a little town in Tunisia named Ruqqa, and not al-Raqqī, from Raqqa, the ancient city on the Euphrates in northern Mesopotamia.²

The letter was sent from Fustat to Alexandria, for the writer refers to goods brought by him from North Africa ("the West"), but still remaining in the town of the receiver of the letter (sec. D). Many other details in this letter tally with this assumption. The writer most probably left Alexandria on a Thursday and passed the Sabbath in Fuwwa, where he embarked on a Nile boat; or he could have made the whole journey on a boat, using the Khalij canal, which connected Alexandria with the Nile. See *Med. Soc.*, I, 298-299.

David Kaufmann Collection, Budapest, DK 3.

A. AN UNEVENTFUL NILE VOYAGE

I am writing to you, my lord and master—may God prolong your life and grant you permanent well-being and happiness—to inform you that I arrived on Friday, after an eight days' journey, and unloaded my cargo on Sunday, the day I am writing this. Everything which I carried with me arrived completely intact.³

B. CONFUSION ON THE MONEY MARKET

Now, what you wish to know: Business here is slow and practically at a standstill. For there is much confusion in the rate of exchange and, at the present time, 50 dirhems are to be had for 1 dinar, more [or less]. An epidemic⁴ is raging in the environs of the town,

² For Ruqqa (from medieval Latin *rocca*, from which also English *rock* is derived?) see Idris, *Zirides*, p. 446. This family name was quite common in the Geniza. It is found also in a Muslim document from the eleventh century. See Idris, *ibid.*, n. 366.

³ The Sabbath begins an hour before sunset on Friday afternoon. The writer explains that not enough time remained to unload on Friday. In view of the accident on the Nile reported in no. 51 (paralleled by many Geniza letters) one understands the express remark that everything arrived safely.

⁴ Ar. *byh*, derived from *waba'*. An epidemic ravaged the capital of Egypt in 1111-1112. Bodl. MS Heb. 75, f. 13.

and because of this, the flow of good dirhems has been cut off so that everyone is having difficulties with his business.⁵

C. THE WESTERN IMPORTS: TEXTILES AND OIL

As to the textiles: The reddish material,⁶ first class, is worth 4 1/2 (dinars) at most; other qualities, less than 4. Unbleached saris (*fūṭa*) 7 1/2,⁷ but the red ones are selling poorly; Abu 'l-Surūr informed me that he sold for you ten red saris for 7 (dinars) and 10 qīraṭs, on one month's credit. The cloaks (*malāḥif*) are selling very poorly. As to the small pieces of reddish material and the fine saris, I do not know the situation, for I did not sit on the market.

Oil is being sold 25 pounds for a dinar; so I am holding my oil back, in the hope that the situation will improve a little.

D. THE REPRESENTATIVE OF THE FIRM IN FUSTAT

I met with the elder Abū Sa'd ("Fortunate") with regard to Salmān and learned that Salmān had gone to Palestine. He, Abū Sa'd, will write you a letter to be sent simultaneously with my letter, for I told him that you were very much upset about this matter and took a very serious view of it.

I talked to him about the textiles which I had brought with me from the West; he said that he had sent a letter with instructions to bring them here, but the letter had crossed me on my way. Therefore, my lord, if someone can be found to transport them, please do so; for he has no way of explaining to you what happened, as he does not write with his own hand, and there is someone staying in his house, in whose presence things cannot be discussed.⁸

⁵ This seems to mean that the city was dependent for its silver money on the environment (Ar. *jihāt-hā*), which is rather unusual.

⁶ Ar. *shuqra*.

⁷ Meaning, as the continuation shows, that *ten* saris cost 7 1/2 dinars.

⁸ This rather obscure paragraph seems to imply that the Fustat business correspondent recommended bringing the Maghrebi textiles to the capital despite the poor market situation.

E. ARRANGEMENTS WITH A PARTNER

Al-Shayyāl ("Porter")⁹ received what was sent for you and will inquire as to what was lost and what remained. He requested me to ask you whether this involved the partnership. As to his own merchandise—whether (textiles) from Sicily or Majorca, or oil—whatever has been sold of this, he will receive the price agreed upon. As for everything else, after it is sold, each partner will get his share in accordance with his investment. Please take notice of this, my lord.

F. SOME BUSINESS INTELLIGENCE

The silk (*khazz*) robes do not fetch a thing, one robe being worth less than 4 (dinars). Please inform Abu 'l-Ḥasan accordingly. Likewise, Joseph al-Fāṣī (of Fez) asked me about this. Please also tell Abu 'l-Ḥasan Ibn al-Shāmī (Syro-Palestinian) not to move with his oil; he will only regret it.

My master, the elder Abū Sa'd informed me that the elder Abu 'l-Bishr ("Good tidings") sold his silk (*harīr*) to the government and received its price. However, I was in no mood today to ask him how he sold it. I shall sell what I have with me, for I do not see that there is much hope (for a better price).

My lord, the elder Abū Sa'd talked to me about the textiles, namely, which of them had not been sent and had been left with him. I understood that he wanted to get rid of them; so I said perhaps he could find someone to send them with and get them out of his sight.¹⁰

G. URGENT REQUEST: SEND THE RECEIPT FOR THE POLL TAX

My lord, I left my cotton robe, which I used to wear above my iridescent¹¹ robe; in its pocket there is the tax certificate together with a paper bag in which there are some dirhems and a letter

⁹ A family name still common among Muslims in Egypt. But in the Geniza period many Jews were porters; the term used mostly was *ḥammāl*. An Ibn al-Shayyāl is in a list of poor people of the eleventh century. See *Med. Soc.*, II, 467, sec. 108.

¹⁰ Probably textiles for which no market could be found in Fustat. Perhaps cotton fabrics coming from India.

¹¹ Ar. *fākhīṭī*, having the color of the ring-dove or wood pigeon.

given to me by Salāma, the agent of our master, the Nagid—(may his) R(ock) p(reserve him). Please send me the tax certificate as soon as you have read this letter, for I have given a bail bond on it until it arrives.¹²

H. CONCLUSION AND A P.S.

Whatever needs you have, please write me about them. Please write me in detail about the price of oil at your place and how things are, for I am very much worried. May God let me receive good tidings, as is his bountiful custom.

Accept my best greetings, and likewise, my best greetings to the elder Abu 'l-Ḥasan; if he needs anything, let him write me about it. Greetings to Rachel¹³ and her mother and to everyone in the house. Greetings also to Abu 'l-Ḥasan,¹⁴ to the son of my paternal aunt, and his sons. *And Peace. And may your life be prolonged!* And look for the storax¹⁵ for me, for I did not find it in the package.

(Address, written upside down, as usual:)

(To) my lord, the elder Abu 'l-Faraj Nissīm, son of Solomon, (*may he*) *r(est in) E(den)*—may God grant him permanent well-being and happiness—Ruqqī.

(From) his "son" and protégé Solomon, son of Abraham, . . . Ruqqī.

¹² No Christian or Jew could travel without carrying with him a certificate proving that he had paid the poll tax.

¹³ Jewish women in Egypt did not have biblical names. But among the learned Jews of the Maghreb female Hebrew names were common. Rachel, no doubt, was the writer's wife and the addressee's daughter. She is greeted before her mother, referred to as *sitt-hā* "her mistress." Good form required that the lady of the house be greeted as mother of her children, not as wife of the recipient.

¹⁴ This is a member of the family. The Abu 'l-Ḥasan greeted before was a merchant, probably identical with one of the two mentioned in sec. F above.

¹⁵ Ar. *m'h*, for *may'a*, storax, much used in medicine and perfumery and frequently mentioned as exported on the India route.

53-56 LETTERS OF ISAAC NĪSĀBŪRĪ,
A PERSIAN RESIDING IN ALEXANDRIA

Isaac b. Simḥā ("Joy," Heb.) of Alexandria was not only named Nīsābūrī (from Neyshābūr, as it is spelled today, in the most remote northeastern corner of Iran), but certainly was a man whose mother tongue was Persian. Persian, like English, is an Indo-European language. Therefore Isaac, while writing Arabic, incurs difficulties similar to those that are familiar to American students trying to learn that Semitic language. He has troubles with the sounds specific to Arabic, makes many mistakes, and, in particular, always mixes up masculine and feminine. For Persian, like English, but unlike Arabic, has no feminine endings in nouns, adjectives, and verbs. Not rarely is his syntax blurred and sometimes one must try to retranslate his Arabic into Persian in order to find out what he intends to say. But his letters are worth reading.

A short description of Isaac Nīsābūrī's variegated business is provided in *Med. Soc.*, I, 153. More extensive letters of his, such as DK XI and Bodl. MS a 3 (Cat. 2873), f. 23, cannot be translated here because they contain too many details requiring lengthy comments. But it is hoped that the first selection from his correspondence presented here gives a fair idea of his mercantile enterprises.

The first three specimens translated are addressed to Abu 'l-'Alā' Šā'id ("Topnotch," in Heb. 'Ullā) ha-Levi b. Joseph, almoner and trustee of the court, the Damascene, in the capital of Egypt (mainly Fustat). The nature of the communal offices and the business activities of this man are explained in *Med. Soc.*, II, 78. I should add here that Jews from Damascus and Aleppo often appear as bankers (and, of course, merchant-bankers) in Egypt and the West, and appropriate individuals among them were therefore appointed as trustees of the courts, to whom the property of orphans and widows and collateral deposited with the courts were entrusted. This position of confidence gave them approach to the leading men of the community, in which capacity we find indeed the recipient of the letters translated below.

The writer of the letters belonged to a slightly lower stratum of the society, but since he dealt with communal matters in nos. 45 and 46, I assume he occupied a leading position in the "Iraqian,"

that is, "Eastern," Jewish congregation of Alexandria, of which he, as an Iranian, probably was a member.

One letter (no. 54) contains the date 1117. The merchant Abu 'l-Faraj ("Delivery") Ḥamawī, that is from Ḥamāh in Syria, whom we find here in the Maghreb, was about ten to fifteen years later active in the India trade. Taking the whole correspondence of Isaac Nīsābūrī together, it should be attributed to the period 1100-1130, approximately.

53 WESTERN AND EASTERN GOODS AND
FRIENDS

March 1119

University Library, Cambridge, Taylor-Schechter
Collection, TS 13 J 22, f. 30.

(Five lines of conventional introductory phrases.)

A. STANDSTILL OF THE SILK TRADE BECAUSE OF
BAD SAILING CONDITIONS

As to the silk. At the arrival of the Spanish ship, all business stopped, no one sold and no one bought. After some days, small quantities were sold at the price of 21-22 (dinars) per ten (pounds).¹

When, however, all the ships tarried in coming, the merchants were eager to buy, but those who had silk kept it. Today it is thirty-three days that only one ship has arrived and only one ship has sailed. Now there is much confusion and worry about the ships. For today it is twenty-three days from the Feast of the Cross² and

¹ The standard price for silk in Alexandria was 20 dinars for 10 pounds. See *Med. Soc.*, I, 222.

² The Coptic Feast of the Cross, meaning the rediscovery of the Cross, corresponds to September 26 or 27 of our calendar (see E. W. Lane, *The Manners and Customs of Modern Egyptians*, Everyman's Library edn., p. 547). It was a great date for seafaring, and is often referred to as such in the Geniza. "From the Feast of the Cross" must mean, to my mind, *before*, because the Maghrebi ships normally set sail for the return westward slightly before the 'Īd al-ṣalīb. Sometimes people are warned *not* to travel in the *marāḳīb ṣalibiyya*, which does not mean "Crusaders' ships," but ships setting out shortly after the Festival of the Cross.