

I, 25 *Letter from a Merchant in Egypt to the Maghreb on Lebdi's Arrival in 'Aydhāb*

Egypt, probably 1101

ENA 2730, f. 7

This tiny fragment is a typical example of the vagaries of Geniza research. At first sight it appears to be completely useless. The middle part of a letter, torn from all sides, measuring, as far as measurements are possible, only some 9 × 10.5 cm., and defaced by countless holes—what information may be culled from such a piece? Yet, it is not devoid of interest.

The writer sends this letter from Egypt to a merchant whose family lived there and who had traveled to the Maghreb. Peace and prosperity had been restored to the country after a period of anarchy, and agriculture benefited from a satisfactory rise of the Nile. Dinars had been sent with Dā'ūd (David) Ibn Sughmār (I, 16–18) and the recipient was asked to buy for them corals of the very best quality, for the writer was about to travel to far places to recoup losses suffered during four years, in which, for reasons known to the addressee, he was *battāl*, unable to earn money.¹ The 'far places' where corals were in demand were Aden and India; in contrast to I, 16–18, we see here that merchants did not expect to do serious business with inferior materials even in the 'Orient.' The writer also requests in urgent terms that the recipient, or one al-Qurtubī (a man from Cordova, Spain), "who had passed the winter in al-Mahdiyya," form a partnership with him.² I try now to translate verso, lines 4–16.

¹ {Or unable to conduct business.}

² Verso, lines 1–4: . . . *al-Qurtubī kān shatā fi 'l-Mahdiyya*. This man of Cordova can hardly be identical with the Jacob of Cordova mentioned in IV, 75, line 11, which was written in 1140, when he traveled from Alexandria to Cairo. Because of the hopeless state of the manuscript and the habit of the letter writers to address the recipient alternately in the second or third person, it is impossible to decide with whom the partnership was requested. Abū Sa'īd Makhlūf in lines 10 ff. is not necessarily identical with Makhlūf b. Mūsa, VI, 21–25. {For Makhlūf b. Mūsa, see II, 21, line 1; II, 24, line 13; II, 26, margin; II, 58, margin, line 5.} Several merchants with this name are known from that period.

Translation

Your family (5) is well and safe, as you wish and desire. Of late, (6) all the population of the land of Egypt is enjoying justice and safety.³ (7) The . . . (harvest?) this year was indescribable. The Nile had been perfectly beautiful. (8) The people⁴ had remained in Qūṣ as from that time.⁵ They say now (9) that the roads, God willing, have been opened, for the merchants (10) who had been in 'Aydhāb have arrived after having received governmental prescripts⁶ and got through. (11) There had been 3,000 bales in 'Aydhāb,⁷ and now an additional (12) 10,000 {or read: 6,000} bales have arrived. Among the very first arrivals was Joseph Ibn al-Leb[di],⁸ (13) who had with him 80 bales of lac, packed in Nahrwāra,⁹ and 50 bales of pepper (14) [. . .] 600 [. . .] Faraj arrived [. . .] (15) [. . .] and those who arrived among those latecomers reported that [. . .] (16) [. . .] was lost,¹⁰ and now the goods are. . .

Comments

For the dates of this journey of Joseph Lebdi (1099–1101) see the Introduction IIA, sec. 6. Because of recurrent plagues and the threat of an invasion by the Crusaders (1100 C.E. {Jerusalem was conquered in July,

³ {Compare, for example, the good news about the land in II, 65, lines 48 ff.}

⁴ That is, the travelers. {Arabic *al-nās*. This term is used regularly in the documents of this book for 'merchants' or 'traveling merchants.' See, e.g., II, 20, line 19, II, 22, line 16, II, 23, line 27, II, 29, line 12.}

⁵ When there was a breakdown of public authority.

⁶ Guaranteeing their safety. Arabic *wa-akhadhū sijillāt al-sultān*. {Cf. II, 28, line 19, which concerns Ben Yijū's intended travel from India to Yemen: *wa-akhadha minhu dhimma*, 'he took from him a pledge of protection.' A written grant of safe conduct to a foreign, non-Muslim merchant enabled him to stay in the lands of Islam for as much as a year in a protected state, without paying the poll tax. See Khalilieh, "Amān." These grants may have also been intended to free foreign traders from special taxes imposed on them; see Goitein, *Med. Soc.*, 1:344–5.

⁷ Note that approximately in the 1130's, Mahrūz b. Jacob reported from the Red Sea port of Sawākin, that the Kārim contained 3,000 bales (V, 4, lines 6–8; cf. Goitein, *Studies*, 354). Evidently there was certain consistency in the bulk of imports transported by the Kārim over a period of decades.}

⁸ The restoration 'al-Lebdi' {written a-Lebdi, with one l} is certain, since the 80 bales of lac form the subject of the lawsuits discussed in I, 26–28. The bales arrived in 'Aydhāb with Lebdi's partners, when he had already left the town. See I, 27, lines 14–15.

⁹ The fact that the lac had been bought and packed in Nahrwāra, its country of origin, and had not been purchased somewhere else, increased of course its value.

¹⁰ {As I read the text of the beginning of the line, translate: 'I would like to inform you of this.'

1099) Egypt found itself in a dire situation, which the always-unruly Beja tribes might have used for making the desert roads between 'Aydhāb and Qūš even less safe than usual.¹¹ During the period of anarchy only a few goods were dispatched from Aden and other places to Egypt. As soon as the situation improved, the imports more than tripled. It is interesting that the shipments of Joseph Lebdi and his partners amounted approximately to one percent of the total arrivals (130 + out of 13,000 bales).¹² Lebdi was not only one of the first to arrive in 'Aydhāb, but left his partners there while traveling to Fustat; see I, 27.¹³

¹¹ See Holt, "Beja."

¹² Or 4.33 percent of the 3,000 bales that comprised the cargo of the first flotilla.

¹³ The writer of the letter knew only of Lebdi, who probably was the leading spirit in the partnership of three involved in this business venture. {According to I, 28a_v, line 3, I, 28b, line 12, Lebdi seems to have invested twenty-nine thirtieths of the capital}. The murder of Lebdi's partners and traveling companions had either not yet occurred, or the bad news had not yet reached Cairo.

I, 26 *Session of the Rabbinical Court of Fustat: al-Wuḥsha vs. Joseph Lebdi*

Fustat, June 30, 1104

TS 8J 5, f. 5

The manuscript is much effaced. But the handwriting of the scribe (Ḥalfon ha-Levi b. Manasseh) is so excellent and his style so well known that the text is completely legible. On the other hand, the record refers to a previous session, which undoubtedly was preceded by several others. The content of the document can be fully understood only in the context of I, 25 and 27–28.

The colorful story of 'al-Wuḥsha, the Broker' is known from a number of Geniza documents.¹ Here, her attorney sued Lebdi for her share of 300 dinars ('more or less') already realized from the investment by her dead brother Abu Naṣr in a partnership with him worth 800 dinars and for the goods not yet sold. Lebdi argued that the 300 dinars had nothing to do with that partnership. He was, however, prepared to include them, if al-Wuḥsha, on her side, would do the same with "the 22 bales of lac,"² claimed by her representative to represent a separate venture, unconnected with that partnership.³

Besides Isaac b. Samuel, one of the two chief judges in Fustat, and the clerk, the document is signed by Eli ha-Levi b. Nethanel (the brother of Ḥalfon, chap. 4), who was judge in Cairo, wherefore next to no documents signed by him have been preserved in the Geniza (which, we remember, was situated in Fustat).⁴

¹ See Goitein, *Med. Soc.*, 3:346–52.

² See I, 27–28.

³ {On I, 26, see further Goitein, *Med. Soc.*, 3:348, where it is explained that al-Wuḥsha was represented by an agent in this suit, not because she was a woman, but because the checking and sale of such large quantities of wares required handling by an expert.}

⁴ For a document signed by him in January 1133 in Cairo see Goitein, "Court Records," 268–71. At the time of the writing of our document his father was still alive. {See concerning him, Goitein, *Med. Soc.*, 2:513, no. 16; Gil & Fleischer, *Yehuda ha-Levi* (index).}