

II, 31 *Letter from Maḍmūn b. Ḥasan to Abraham Ben Yijū: Freight Jettisoned*  
Aden {ca. 1137–39, 1145–49}

ENA NS 48, f. 9<sup>1</sup>

Letter in Maḍmūn b. Ḥasan's hand, almost certainly to Abraham Ben Yijū, about Maḥrūz's arrival back from India with loads of iron and cardamom and about equal distribution of losses between the owners of freight on a boat, from which consignments had to be jettisoned.<sup>2</sup>

{The fragment comes from the beginning of a letter, where one or two lines are missing. It was undoubtedly sent to India, as proven by mention of the receipt of goods imported from there and the attack of pirates off the coast of India. This fragment resembles II, 30, which comes from the end of a letter and which has been identified as sent to Ben Yijū. Since of Maḍmūn's correspondence with India only his letters to Ben Yijū have been preserved, we can assume that also II, 31 was sent to him. Further evidence can be found in the notice concerning the arrival in Aden of some of the raw materials that were needed by Ben Yijū for his bronze factory (lines 16 ff.). This section is of interest, as it illustrates how the Adenese merchants imported from the West (here from 'Aydḥāb the Sudanese port) copper, which they in turn exported to India. The remark concerning Maḥrūz's return from India and the information available on the years Ben Yijū was there (see pages 367 and 648) make it possible to fix the boundaries for dating the letter.

Of special interest is the section (lines 8 ff.) describing how freight from the boat had been jettisoned when pirates arrived to attack it 'alā fam al-khawr (line 10), 'in the Fam al-Khawr, the entrance to the gulf of Broach and Cambay,' on the way out of India.<sup>3</sup> Ben Yijū presumably did not know of the attack, and Maḍmūn, who must have heard the story from the captain when the ship arrived in Aden, informs him of it. Communications concerning events off the northern coast of India thus arrive in Malabar to the south via Aden! This exact state of affairs is evidenced also in III, 11, line 5, where Khalaf b. Isaac writes from Aden and informs Ben Yijū of the foundering of a ship 'in the gulf' (al-khawr), when it sailed to Broach.

<sup>1</sup> {The manuscript was formerly listed 'JTS Geniza Misc. 10,' which number alone appears in Goitein's writings.

<sup>2</sup> Besides this description, the draft of the text transcription and a few scattered notes (see next note here), this is all that remains in Goitein's papers on this document.

<sup>3</sup> So identified by Goitein in his introduction to III, 22. See the discussion below. Also cf. Barbosa, *Description*, 64: "the navigation of these places is very dangerous."

The words in quotation marks above concerning II, 31, appear in Goitein's introductory remarks to III, 22, which also describes the loss of freight jettisoned off the Indian coast.

The identification of 'alā fam al-khawr in II, 31, as the entrance to the gulf of Broach and Cambay, made in the preliminary edition of III, 22 (written in the 1950's), can be seen as a provisional suggestion. It is evidently based on the unequivocal use of al-khawr for that particular gulf in III, 11.<sup>4</sup> But it is not obvious that any al-khawr, with the definite article, in the India Book, is a toponym for the same gulf.<sup>5</sup> Arab geographers and navigators described numerous gulfs (akhwār) approaching India or for that matter on the way out of Aden. In II, 31, 'alā fam al-khawr, literally, 'on the mouth of the gulf,'<sup>6</sup> may just as likely, if not more so, refer to the gulf of Aden.<sup>7</sup>

In his capacity as representative of the merchants in Aden,<sup>8</sup> Maḍmūn distributed the loss from jettisoning Ben Yijū's consignment and applied it to owners of all of the ship's freight. The same procedure is followed in other cases of which we read in the India Book papers.<sup>9</sup> As mentioned above, it is not certain what Indian export commodity, a kind of cardamom or a form in which iron was shipped, the word bayḍ, 'eggs,' denotes.<sup>10</sup> Since II, 31, mentions only the jettisoning of 'eggs,' this suggests that iron was intended. Further corroboration can be found in Meera Abraham's identification of the iron and steel, which, as she learned from Goitein's publications, were exported by the Jewish traders in India:

The steel he refers to is in all probability wootz which George Pearson described [in the eighteenth century] as being marketed in the shape of cakes one inch thick and five inches in diameter.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>4</sup> No. III, 11, line 5: sāfarū ilā barūj fa-uṣīb al-markab fi 'l-khawr, 'they journeyed to Broach but the ship was struck in the gulf.'

<sup>5</sup> In his geographical card index, for al-khawr, Goitein quotes Yaqut, 1:506, line 1: ... kanbāya khawr tadkbul minhu ilā barūs, literally, '(from) Cambay a gulf (khawr) from which one enters Broach.' In my opinion khawr is not intended as a toponym in this passage.

<sup>6</sup> Note that besides 'gulf,' among other things, khawr can mean 'canal' (Piamenta, *Dictionary*, 139); cf. Tibbetts, *Arab Navigation*, 523; Maqbul Ahmad, *India*, 112.

<sup>7</sup> See Tibbetts, *Arab Navigation*, 423 (where he notes that the whole Gulf of Aden was sometimes referred to as the Gulf of Barbara). For the abbreviation of al-khawr al-sa'īd, literally, 'the auspicious gulf' (see Tibbetts there), to al-khawr, compare the abbreviation of al-dar al-sa'īda to al-dar in II, 23, line 31, also written by Maḍmūn to Ben Yijū.

<sup>8</sup> Maḍmūn was also nāzīr, 'superintendent of the port' (see 343, n. 37; 372, n. 10).

<sup>9</sup> See page 163.

<sup>10</sup> See 326, n. 32.

<sup>11</sup> Abraham, *Merchants Guilds*, 171 (Abraham consistently misspells 'Goitein').

Al-Kindī (ninth century) in fact referred to a type of iron called *byd*. Al-Hassan, read *bid* (pl.) white,' but since al-Kindī wrote repeatedly *byd* and this spelling is found frequently in the Geniza documents, rather than *abyad* (sg.), 'white,' Goitein's vocalization, *bayd*, 'eggs,' is preferable. This can be substantiated by passages from al-Bīrūnī (d. 1048), who described shaping crucible steel in the form of *baydāt*, 'eggs,' and al-Jildakī (fourteenth century), who described caste steel in the shape of ostrich eggs.<sup>12</sup>

The contents of the fragment can be summarized as follows:

- [A] Conventional opening of letter (lines 1–5).  
 [B] Arrival of imports from India and jettisoning of freight when attacked by pirates (lines 5–15), hereby translated:

I, your servant, took notice (6) of what you—may God preserve your well-being!—wrote (7) concerning the shipment of 15 *bahārs* of 'standard'<sup>13</sup> iron (8) and seven *bahars* of belts (?) of 'eggs.'<sup>14</sup> This is to inform you that the sailors (9) jettisoned some of the 'eggs' when the pirates (*al-surrāq*) [approached] (10) the gulf Fam al-Khawr (alt. tr.: on the mouth of the gulf). But I, your servant, already distributed it (the loss) (11) according to the freight of the ship, and I collected this for you. (12) And I, your servant, already sold for you the 'standard' iron, the 'eggs' and the cardamom, (13) which arrived with Sheikh Maḥrūz.<sup>15</sup> All of this (14) is detailed in the copy of the account,<sup>16</sup> accompanying this letter, (15) that you are reading, God willing.

- [C] Arrival of copper<sup>17</sup> from 'Aydhāb in two small *maṭiyya* boats<sup>18</sup> to be followed by other commodities in four ships (lines 15–20).}

<sup>12</sup> For these sources, see Al-Hassan, "Iron."

<sup>13</sup> Arabic *rasmī*, also in III, 11, lines 36, 39. It is not certain what kind of iron the word denotes. According to Goitein's notes it is probably a mediocre type (in III, 11 Goitein translated 'ordinary'), but the word can also be translated 'legal,' 'official,' etc.

<sup>14</sup> Arabic *bayd maḥājīm*. According to the dictionaries, *maḥājīm* (sing. *maḥjam*, *mihjam*) are cupping-glasses (Hava, *Dictionary*, 113) or belts (Piamenta, *Dictionary*, 85). I assume the 'eggs' (cakes of iron) were joined together in strips.

<sup>15</sup> Maḥrūz b. Jacob, for whom Maḥmūd had asked Ben Yijū's assistance in India, in II, 30, lines 22–23.

<sup>16</sup> Arabic *nuskhat al-ḥisāb*. See 362, n. 11.

<sup>17</sup> Arabic *ṣufī*. For the meaning of this term, see 555, n. 11.

<sup>18</sup> For this type of vessel, see 476, n. 18.}

II, C. *Letters and Memoranda Sent by Maḥmūd to Egypt (Cairo-Fustat)*

II, 32 *Letter from Maḥmūd b. Ḥasan to Abū Zikrī Kohēn*

Aden, ca. 1130{–40}

Bodl. MS. Heb. a. 3 (Cat. 2873), fol. 19

Ed. Goitein, *Yemenites*, 84–92. English translation in Goitein, *Letters*, 181–85, on which the following is based.

This important and large fragment (69 lines preserved) lacks both the beginning and the end, and {because the beginning is torn away} consequently the address {opposite it on verso} is also missing. But it is in the unmistakable, characteristic handwriting of Maḥmūd b. Ḥasan. The evidence from penmanship is confirmed by many details, which also indicate that the letter was addressed to Maḥmūd's counterpart as representative of the merchants in Fustat, Abū Zikrī Kohēn, who also happened to be his brother-in-law.<sup>1</sup>

This letter presents an excellent illustration of the activities of a Jewish representative of merchants in a port city. He takes care of the estate of foreign traders who perished in a shipwreck (sec. A of the letter) and collaborates closely with the most prominent Muslim merchant in town (secs. B, C). This man, Bilāl b. Jarīr, later became a general and ruler of Aden, a transition natural in medieval mercantile nations, such as the Arabs and Italians. Maḥmūd {and his partner Bilāl} constructed a ship, presumably an especially strong one, for the of 2,100 mile route to Ceylon {Sri Lanka}, the island near the southern tip of the Indian subcontinent, from which cinnamon and other Oriental products were imported.<sup>2</sup> It is remarkable and perhaps not without interest for the

<sup>1</sup> {They are identified as brothers-in-law in III, 29, line 9. The many details which indicate that the letter was addressed to Abū Zikrī were enumerated by Goitein in his book *Yemenites*, 85: the size of the letter and its handsome execution; the large number of business dealings imposed on the recipient; requests to handle various affairs connected with different merchants, including legal matters and charitable donations; and the information concerning other merchants, both those dealing in the India trade and others. All of these are suggestive but not conclusive. Corroborating evidence for Goitein's identification of Abū Zikrī as the recipient can be adduced from the liturgical selections written on verso of III, 32. In the same yet-unidentified handwriting and evidently from the same prayer book are the liturgical selections written on the blank spaces on verso of V, 11, a letter sent to Abū Zikrī, II, 61, whose recipient Goitein identified as Sulaymān b. Abū Zikrī, and II, 45a (presumably also sent to him); see the introductions to these documents.

<sup>2</sup> No. III, 11, lines 27–28, speaks of a partnership between Maḥmūd and Bilāl to outfit a ship—probably the same one—which belonged to them, to Ceylon. That document has been dated ca. 1140.}