

II, 48 *Letter from Khalaf b. Isaac to Ḥalfon ha-Levi b. Nethanel: Plunder of Aden, Losses at Sea and a Servant not Purchased*

Aden {October 14–November 11, 1140}

TS Misc. 28, f. 256

{A long fragment of a letter from Khalaf b. Isaac from Aden to Egypt, written on both recto and verso.¹ The end of the recto and beginning of the verso have survived, but the beginning of the recto and the end of the verso, including the address with the names of writer and addressee, are missing. Goitein identified the writer by his handwriting. As to the identity of the addressee, as Goitein observed, the nature of the goods ordered and other considerations indicate that the addressee resided in Egypt. Furthermore, in line 4, Khalaf writes that the addressee had a credit of 45 dinars from the sale of spikenard. Since according to IV, 12, Khalaf's letter to Ḥalfon ha-Levi b. Nethanel dated October 20, 1137, this is the same sum credited to Ḥalfon ha-Levi b. Nethanel and credited to his partner Mubārak [b. Judah]² of Malaga, Spain, for the sale of spikenard, which had been delayed in India after their departure from there, II, 48 was evidently written to one of the two partners. Goitein suggested identifying the addressee as Ḥalfon. I have indeed now identified II, 48 as probably being a fragment of a large letter written by Khalaf to Ḥalfon, of which IV, 13 and IV, 14 are additional fragments, a letter written October 14–November 11, 1140.³

The upper part of the extant fragment of recto has survived almost intact, but the lower part is torn and badly damaged; the condition of the verso is the reverse. The text in the torn sections has been preserved, of course, only fragmentarily, and it is generally impossible to restore the content and determine the writer's intention there. Despite its damaged state, the letter yields several interesting pieces of information, some more complete than others. Perhaps the most intriguing part is a long section [B] on the recto, lines 5 ff. (It is difficult to pinpoint the end of the section, and our subsequent paragraphing is fairly arbitrary.) Among other things, this passage

¹ Goitein identified the handwriting, made a draft copy of the text and added a few comments, incorporated in the following notes.

² His father's name Judah can be deduced from VII, 22.

³ Goitein's suggestion appears in his introduction to III, 10. The identification of these three fragments, II, 48, IV, 13 and IV, 14, as parts of the same letter was made when this book was already in proofs, and details will be given in chap. 4.

refers to an episode involving a person called al-Dughaym⁴ and to interne-cine strife between the forces loyal to the rulers of Aden. The two topics are interconnected, since al-Dughaym had placed in the writer's safekeeping a large chest with goods from the Far East, which the writer had opened and whose contents he had sold for fear of looting in the city. The letter's addressee had apparently undertaken to guarantee the safety of the goods. While the two correspondents clearly understood the situation, the whole episode presents us, for the time being, with an intriguing puzzle. On the other hand, we know of episodes indicative of the chaos in Aden from three other documents (II, 21–24, II, 46, both concerned with an attack on Aden by the ruler of Qays; see also II, 51) and from Arab historians' accounts. In connection with the 'al-Dughaym' affair, our letter mentions the struggle between forces of 'the two Sultans' (obviously, the cousins 'Alī b. Abu 'l-Ghārāt and Saba' b. Abū Su'ūd, who ruled Aden), which was accompanied by widespread robbery and banditry. This is discussed in greater detail in II, 51 (apparently written in the autumn of 1138).⁵

The letters in this book furnish abundant evidence of shipwrecks and merchants who perished at sea. Our letter, too, refers to such tragedies in sec. D. The writer mentions the loss of property before the loss of human life, primarily because he first apologizes to the addressee in case a previous letter, consoling the latter for someone's death, had not reached its destination because it had been lost at sea. In addition, the correspondents were preoccupied first and foremost with their business affairs. The writer prays that the deceased—a certain Jacob Ibn al-Shamūm and 'a group of our coreligionists'—should be considered worthy of resurrection.

Before the end of the letter [E], the writer refers to an unsuccessful attempt on his part to buy a servant for the addressee from a batch of new slaves, brought to Aden on the festival of Sukkot from *bilād al-Zanj*, that is, the Land of Zanj, in East Africa. This piece of information is noteworthy for several reasons. Many Zanjis were captured and sold into slavery in medieval Muslim society, and a famous 'Revolt of the Zanj' took place in

⁴ As shown by the definite article *al-* this is not a proper name here but a by-name. The (by-)name Dughaym is listed in Ibn al-Zubayr, *Asmā'*, where it is explained as a diminutive derived from *adgham*, meaning Black-Nosed or One who Nasalizes.

⁵ See above, introduction to II, 46; and cf. Goitein, *Med. Soc.*, 5:525, n. 110, for a brief description of the relevant information from II, 48. Elsewhere in the same volume (5:68–69) Goitein refers to another letter from Khalaf, but without specifying the number (that volume, it should be remembered, was published after the author's death); he may have meant II, 51. See further the introductions to II, 46 and II, 51.

Iraq between 869 and 883.⁶ The Zanjis are also known to us from Gaonic literature in Iraq. Indeed, according to an ancient tradition in *Halakhot Pesuqot*, it was permissible for a Jew to marry a converted Zanj ("Those Zanjis—if they convert [to Judaism], they may be admitted into the congregation"). Later, however, some authorities prohibited this. Rav Hai Gaon, in the standard form of a deed of sale for a slave in his *Formulary*, refers to the sale of so-and-so 'the Zanj slave.'⁷ To the best of my knowledge, however, other Geniza documents do not refer to Zanj slaves.⁸ We have few references in the Geniza to the purchase of slaves, who worked as household servants; all the Geniza documents that treat the purchase of male and female slaves by Jews seem exclusively to concern transactions among private individuals.⁹ Possibly, therefore, this evidence of a shipment of Zanj slaves, from which a rich Jew of Aden wanted to buy a servant, is unique. The vendor was presumably a dealer who had bought the slaves from their captor or from the latter's agent. An enlightened modern reader will probably be shocked by the writer's unemotional, indifferent attitude to this unsuccessful transaction. However, slaves were an important component of the economy in the society of the Geniza period, and trusted household slaves played an active role in the India trade. As far as the correspondents were concerned, slavery was a routine phenomenon.

Following is a summary of the document's contents, with select translations:

- [A] Expenses and other details belonging to the account of Khalaf's correspondent (lines 1–5).
- [B] The 'Al-Dughaym,' affair, the plunder of Aden and various business matters (line 5-verso, line 2).

⁶ For the Land of Zanj and Muslim trade in slaves from that country, see Martin, "Medieval East Africa," 128–30. Cf. Wink, *Al-Hind*, 1:26–27, 29–31. According to Wink's map (ibid., 26), 'Zanj' is Zanzibar and the neighboring region of the mainland, in today's Tanzania. However, the map in Hourani, *Arab Seafaring*, 85, places *bilād al-Zanj* farther to the north, in the region of modern Somalia. On the revolt see Waines, *The Revolt of the Zanj* (and see ibid., 29 n. 117, for the origin of the Zanj). *Bilād al-Zanj* is also mentioned below, II, 71, margin, lines 3, 16.

⁷ For sources from Gaonic literature, the relevant scholarly literature and an exhaustive discussion of these topics, see Danzig, *Introduction to HP*, 234–36.

⁸ At least, there is no such reference in the study of slavery in the Geniza documents in Goitein, *Med. Soc.*, 1:130–47.

⁹ See Goitein, *Med. Soc.*, 1:140; Gil, *Ishmael*, 1:603–4 and n. 337; Wink, *Al-Hind*, 1:98.

It (the container) remained with me, his excellency's servant,¹⁰ for a long time, until the two Sultans fought each other. The inhabitants of the city were very frightened, and there were robbery and plunder (*nabb*) in the city.¹¹ I was afraid that something would happen to it (the container), and all¹² would be lost. Then there would be only his word against mine, and I would not be able to prove that I spoke the truth. So I opened the container and found in it 30 *manns* of clover, and just a little more than half of aromatic wood [...]

- [C] Instructions for sales and purchases (verso, lines 2–9).

Please purchase for me a good [*fūṭa*], one large Sūsi¹³ [...] Alexandrian, exquisite [...] and average Ṭālī¹⁴ *thawbs* (robes), neither [exquisite nor inferior].

- [D] Losses at sea and other business matters (verso, lines 10–37).

I, your servant, already received the Ṭālī *thawb* (robe), which you, my lord, had mentioned. [...] Sheikh Jacob Ibn al-Shamūm¹⁵ and a group of our coreligionists were lost at sea. May God, the Exalted, have mercy on them and resurrect them together with *the pious of Israel!*¹⁶ Sheikh Isaac al-Sijilmāsi¹⁷ wrote that the corals were lost at sea together with the other things. This is for your information, my lord.

- [E] Failed purchases and consolation (verso, lines 37–43).

Further news about me, your servant, and my purchases: Our coreligionists arrived when the ships were ready to sail, and nothing remained with them.¹⁸

¹⁰ Arabic *'abd ḥaḍratihī*. The writer refers to himself in this excessively obsequious fashion a number of times in the letter, expressing his extraordinary esteem for the addressee. Khalaf uses the same expression in his letters, II, 51 and IV, 12. The equivalent *mamlūk ḥaḍratihī* appears several times in III, 31, III, 33, III, 38.

¹¹ Cf. Goitein, *Med. Soc.*, 5:525, n. 110.

¹² Arabic *al-aṣl*. Another possibility would be to take the word to mean 'the (original) account book'; cf. Goitein, *Med. Soc.*, 1:209, 452, n. 84 (who suggests a slightly different interpretation for *aṣl*).

¹³ See I, 1, line 8.

¹⁴ For Ṭālī linen, see 422, n. 29.

¹⁵ Jacob Ibn Shamūm (without *al-*) is mentioned also in V, 13, margin, line 2. In both documents, it is possible to read Shamūs, as well, but I assume he is the same as Ibn al-Shamūm, mentioned as having drowned in VI, 32v, line 1, where the reading (with *-m*) is preferable. *Shamūm* means 'fragrance' (Pianta, *Dictionary*, 265).

¹⁶ The discussion on resurrection in Goitein, *Med. Soc.*, 5:411, implies that such prayers for resurrection of people who recently died (found also in II, 61, lines 11, 24), are rare in the Geniza papers. See Friedman, *Yemenite Messiah*, 137.

¹⁷ Isaac b. Aaron al-Sijilmāsi (from Sijilmāsa, Morocco), wrote VI, 31–33, addressed to Ḥalfon ha-Levi b. Nethanel; in VI, 32, he mentioned losses at sea.

¹⁸ The Egyptian Jewish merchants arrived when the ships to India were ready to sail. The Egyptians sold all of their merchandise to the traders setting out for India, and nothing was left for the writer's business.

During Sukkot (the Feast of Tabernacles) a *qintir* (?)¹⁹ arrived from the Land of the Zanj, which had in it new slaves.²⁰ I tried to purchase a servant²¹ for you, my lord, but was not successful...}]

¹⁹ [Obviously *qintir/qantir* is some kind of vessel, but I have not found the word in any dictionary. *Qanṭara* is a bridge. The reading *qntyr* is certain, despite a correction in the letter *ṭ* (possibly from *b*, which calls to mind *qunbār*, a large merchant vessel, for which see Goitein, *Med. Soc.*, 1:306). Note that *qaṭira* is a small vessel found in the Red Sea; see Kindermann, *Schiff*, 82–83 (Prof. Werner Diem kindly called this to my attention).

²⁰ Arabic *raqiq*. Hava, *Dictionary*, 264: 'slave newly caught.' According to Wehr, *Dictionary*, 352, the word is both singular and collective. Ibn al-Mujawir (*Al-Mustabṣir*, 141) noted the customs, two dinars, paid in Aden for *raqiq*.

²¹ Arabic *wasif* means a slave engaged for household work. See Goitein, *Med. Soc.*, 1:131–32, where he comments on the infrequent mention in the Geniza papers of male menials.}

II, 49 *Letter from Khalaf b. Isaac to Ḥalfon ha-Levi b. Nethanel*

Aden {ca. 1134}

TS AS 148, f. 9

Fragment of a large letter sent to India, mostly about textiles and pepper, and reporting that because of peace in Egypt many merchants arrived from there.

{This is a tattered and effaced fragment of a letter written in Khalaf's typical handwriting. The beginning of the letter and its left side are missing. Because of the document's poor state of preservation, not one sentence is intact. There are fragmentary data on such subjects as the sale of merchandise imported from India, including some prices; the sinking of a ship at the entrance to the city; the failure of Maḍmūn b. Ḥasan to ship anything (to Egypt, so it seems) that year; the arrival of Jewish merchants (from Egypt), with family names pointing to Syria, Palestine and the Maghreb, bearing good news about relations with the government;¹ the arrival of two ships from India, one small and one large; the writer's request that the recipient leave India and return to Aden (Margin: "Buy whatever God grants you success in and set out this year. Do not delay again; livelihood is apportioned [by God]");² the writer's illness and other business and sundry affairs. From the fragmentary greetings extended to friends and associates in Broach, it is reasonable to conclude that the addressee was then residing in that northwestern Indian port city.

Goitein identified the recipient as Abraham b. Yijū, though he may have later changed his mind on the identification.³ In any event, we can now establish with certainty that the addressee was someone else, namely, Ḥalfon ha-Levi b. Nethanel. Incontrovertible evidence of this can be adduced from IV, 1, written in Khalaf's typical hand and entitled: "Account of my lord, Sheikh Abū Sa'īd Ḥalfon b. Nethanel." As several lines in II, 49 verify, IV, 1, is unmistakably the account, a copy of which accompanied that letter, referred to in it repeatedly. The match is unequivocal and makes it possible to restore in part many of the truncated passages in the letter.

¹ {See Goitein, *Med. Soc.*, 5:50, 519, n. 26, where he cites this passage.

² Margin, line 3, *fa'-l-rizq maqsūm*. See Bosworth and McAuliffe, "Rizq." See the brief discussion below.

³ Goitein, *Med. Soc.*, 5:50, 519, n. 26. Goitein's working papers for this book point to his uncertainty concerning the identification, which does not appear in the Summary for the New List of texts. I do not know whether his final conclusion (or indecision) is to be found in these papers or in the fifth volume of *Med. Soc.*, which was published posthumously.