

II, 51 *Letter from Khalaf b. Isaac to Egypt about Turmoil in Yemen*

Aden {fall 1138}

ENA NS 48, f. 8<sup>1</sup>

Letter about turmoil in Yemen and measures taken by Abū Zikrī Kohen for ensuring Khalaf's rights after the death of Abū 'Imrān Nufay'.<sup>2</sup>

{This is the lower portion of a large business letter written in Khalaf b. Isaac's typical handwriting. Sec. D (lines 20–31) parallels a long passage in Khalaf's letter to Ḥalfon ha-Levi b. Nethanel in IV, 12, lines 16–53. There Khalaf described in great detail an affair, which illustrates the vicissitudes of international trade and its dependence on the personal circumstances of business partners. Khalaf had entrusted merchandise to two traders, Abu 'l-Yumn al-Maḥallī and Abū Zikrī al-Ṣā'igh (goldsmith), for delivery in Egypt to Abū 'Imrān Mūsā b. Ṣedāqā Ibn Nufay', a well-known India trader, who had been asked to sell the merchandise and buy other goods. Khalaf had written Ḥalfon, who too had been in Fustat at the time, and requested that he assist Abū 'Imrān in making the sales and purchases (see II, 46, lines 54–55). But Abū 'Imrān died, and Ḥalfon left for the Maghreb. Abū Zikrī al-Ṣā'igh also decided to set out for the West, while Abu 'l-Yumn, traveled to Qūṣ, fell ill and returned to Egypt, his fate being unknown. Khalaf then wrote to the representative of the merchants in Fustat, Abū Zikrī Kohen, to ask his assistance in retrieving the goods in Egypt. He also wrote Ḥalfon and requested that he assist Abū Zikrī Kohen in collecting the merchandise and in sending the goods purchased with the proceeds.

The text of II, 51 is severely damaged in sec. D. The details are unclear and may not be identical with those of IV, 12. The writer mentions Abu 'l-Yumn, Abū 'Imrān and Abū Zikrī (Kohen). He also remarks that the recipient, who was involved in the affair, had traveled (from Egypt). I doubt that the letter was sent to Ḥalfon (a possibility that Goitein mentioned in his notes), as there is no reference to the assistance that had been requested of him in IV, 12.<sup>3</sup> Perhaps it was sent to Abū Zikrī al-Ṣā'igh.

<sup>1</sup> {The manuscript was formerly listed 'JTS Geniza Misc. 8,' the number that appears in Goitein's writings.

<sup>2</sup> Besides a rough draft of the transcription, Goitein's India Book papers contain only sporadic notes on II, 51.

<sup>3</sup> Furthermore, the letter was probably sent to Egypt at the time that Ḥalfon was in North Africa or Spain (see the introduction to chap. 4).

No. IV, 12 is dated 3 Marheshvan, 1449 E.D. (October 20, 1137), and in it (lines 45–46), Khalaf wrote that he sent 'this year' a power of attorney to Abū Zikrī Kohen. 'This year' (rather than 'last month') hardly refers to the thirty-three days that had transpired since the beginning of 1449 E.D. or, for that matter, to the thirty-one days that had passed since the beginning of 532 A.H. Khalaf evidently intended the period of months that preceded the letter, that is, probably some time after the beginning of 1137. The whole affair is summarized in the text of our letter, II, 51, where it is noted that the power of attorney was issued 'last year' (line 29).

More specific information on the time can be found in sec. C, where we read of the armed struggle between the two sultans who ruled Yemen, which Khalaf briefly described in II, 48. A chronicle written several years later describes the conflict at length. Aden was ruled and its revenues shared by two cousins, 'Alī b. Abu 'l-Ghārāt, whose fortress was the al-Khaḍrā' castle,<sup>4</sup> and the *Dā'ī* (Fatimid chief propagandist of Yemen) Saba' b. Abū Su'ūd, who controlled the gates to the city. Of 'Alī's deputies it was reported:

{They} stretched forth their hands oppressively over the people. They created disorder and disturbance in the city... All who looked to him [Saba'] for protection were ill-treated and oppressed, the followers of 'Aly being the more powerful party. The Dā'y bore his injuries in silence, but when his patience seemed likely to lead to the extinction of his authority, he determined upon an open struggle with his enemies. He appointed his deputy, the Sheykh as-Sa'id al-Muwaffaq Bilāl son of Jarīr,<sup>5</sup> over Aden, and ordered him to stir up the people, and to promote war in the city... The war at az-Za'āzi'... endured for two years... The Dā'y Saba died at Aden, seven months after his conquest of az-Za'āzi'... The same day on which he [Bilāl] took al-Khaḍrā, the Dā'y captured the city of az-Za'āzi'... The Dā'y Saba entered Aden, but as we have stated, he lived in it for only seven months... His death occurred in A.H. 533...<sup>6</sup>

The year 533 A.H. corresponds to September 8, 1138–August 27, 1139, and its beginning serves as a *terminus ad quo* for our document, which mentions Saba's death in line 19, where the description impresses one that this was also a fairly recent event. Taking the above data into consideration

<sup>4</sup> See the introduction to II, 46 and page 439, n. 10.

<sup>5</sup> His freedman (*mawlā*) and Maḍmūn's partner in many business ventures. For his titles, see 362, n. 13.

<sup>6</sup> Kay, *Yaman*, 68 ff.; cf. 159, 272. The chronicler 'Umāra's informants were Bilāl and Muḥammad b. Saba'. Also see the remarks in the introduction to II, 46.

(see also line 6), we can reasonably conclude that our document was written in the fall of 1138.

Khalaf's brief account of the struggle between the two sultans contains little new information on the conflict, though his remarks concerning the destruction of the al-Khaḍrā' castle are certainly noteworthy. But because of his perspective, the eyewitness account of a resident trader provided by the Geniza is a valuable addition to the historian's record. Unlike the latter, Khalaf emphasizes the suffering of Aden's population: the reign of terror, houses burnt and warehouses plundered. His remarks in II, 48, lines 10–12, complement this: "... the two sultans fought each other. The inhabitants of the city were very frightened, and there were robbery and plunder (*nahb*) in the city."

I assume that the complaint in paragraph B of II, 51 (line 7), concerning the 'oppression at the hands of the rulers' is also to be understood against the background of the conflict between the two sultans. The Hebrew *hāmās*, 'oppression,' conveys violence and robbery. This is likely to be an allusion not only to the exorbitantly high taxes demanded by the sultans, but to the high-handed tactics used by the combatants to finance their struggle. As the chronicler 'Umāra informs us:

Saba expended upon the war... three hundred thousand dinārs. His means were then exhausted, and he borrowed money from the merchants of Aden who supported his cause.<sup>7</sup>

Whether or not the 'loan' was voluntary in theory, in practice the merchants obviously felt compelled to make their resources available to the sultan who expected their support.

Despite 'Umāra's remarks on how Saba' took advantage of the wealth of the merchants to finance his campaign, Khalaf identified 'Alī as the oppressor and he thanked God for Saba's victory (lines 17–18). Conflict between the two cousins may have been a recurring event. See the discussion in the introduction to III, 32, for the continued struggle between 'Alī and Saba's son Muḥammad. In any case, the crisis, to which II, 51 and presumably II, 48, refer, seems to have no direct connection with the attack on Aden by the ruler of Kish (Qays), described in II, 46, which evidently took place at an earlier date.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>7</sup> Kay, *Yaman*, 72.

<sup>8</sup> See the introduction to II, 46. Note that despite the great detail in which II, 23 and II, 46 describe the battle with the forces of Kish, neither says a word on the pillage of Aden.

### Translation

#### [A. Request to be at the service of the recipient]

(1–4) I [hope] to receive [from you, my lord—may] God [make permanent] your honored position!—[a letter, in which you honor me by asking me to take care of any of] your needs and propitious affa[irs<sup>9</sup>...]

#### [B. Personal tragedy, government oppression and scarcity of food]

[This is to inform you of] (5) my (his excellency's servant's)<sup>10</sup> hardships [caused by the illness of my father in the month of... until] (6) *his death*, which was *in the month of Adar*<sup>11</sup>—*may he f[ind mercy!* And I suffered, after] (7) his death, *oppression at the hands of the rulers*.<sup>12</sup> And aside from that, [...] we have suffered (8) here in the city and the entire land of Yemen tremendously high prices (9) and scarcity.<sup>13</sup> Millet<sup>14</sup> and wheat reached here a dinar for three *mikyāls*,<sup>15</sup> (10) and even for a smaller quantity. All

<sup>9</sup> A similar phrase is used by the writer in II, 46, line 51. The request to fulfill future orders, etc., comes towards the end of the letter, at least after the large section dealing with business affairs. This suggests that the missing, upper part of the letter comprised most of its text.

<sup>10</sup> Khalaf uses the same phrase in II, 48, lines 5 ff.; see 455, n. 10.

<sup>11</sup> Feb. 14–March 13, 1138; see the introductory remarks. Khalaf's father, Isaac b. Bundār, whose death was reported here according to the restoration in line 5, is known to have died sometime between October 20, 1137, when IV, 12, where his name appears with the blessing for the living, was written, and the Hebrew month beginning on October 14, 1140 or close to that date, when IV, 13 (see there for the date), where his name is followed for the blessing for the dead, was written. Khalaf thanks Abraham Ben Yijū for condolences expressed for the death of his father in III, 11, lines 1–2 and Ḥalfon ha-Levi b. Nethanel for the same in II, 48v, line 41.

<sup>12</sup> Such an expression is written in Hebrew (*hāmās min al-shalliṭīm*, with the Arabic definite article *al-*) as a precaution, since it was assumed that the secret police could read Arabic written in Hebrew script, but did not understand Hebrew (see Goitein, *Med. Soc.*, 1:271); cf. below, line 18. Cf. II, 59, line 11: *al-balad hāmās*, 'oppression abounds in the country'; IV, 60v, line 11: *wal-hāmās harbē*. On the likely background of the 'oppression' here, see the discussion above.

<sup>13</sup> Arabic *qaḥṭ* also means famine.

<sup>14</sup> Arabic *dukhn*. Wheat (*burr*) was scarce in some places in Yemen, and the Yemenites substituted *dukhn* for it. See Abraham Maimuni, *Responsa*, 126–29, no. 84.

<sup>15</sup> A *mikyāl* is a dry measure, also mentioned in II, 24, line 12. According to Pianta (*Dictionary*, 441, 388), it is equivalent to either one or two *thumnas*, viz., eighths of a *qadah*, while the *qadah* held approximately 36 liters. Three *mikyāls* would thus be equivalent to either approximately 13.5 liters or 27 liters. The usual measure for wheat was the *irdabb*, which held some 90 liters (it weighed some 70 kg.; see the detailed discussion in Ashor, "Weights," 479–80; cf. Gil, "Masse," 168, according to whom an *irdabb* weighed ca. 130 kg.; see II, 58, margin). Three *mikyāls* were thus slightly less than a sixth or third

of the foodstuffs are costly, from the first to (11) the last. May God, the Exalted, make the outcome of all these (12) matters good!

[C. Hostilities between the sultans and pillage of the city]

The land has again become frightful<sup>16</sup> now (13) for us, because of Sultan 'Alī b. Abu 'l-[Ghārā]t, since (14) Sultan Saba' waged war with him and too[k...] (15) and destroyed al-Khaḍrā', which was his ('Alī's) stronghold [... He] (16) left it only after extreme hardship<sup>17</sup> [... which included...] (17) and burning houses and plundering warehouses. Thank God, w[ho saved (?)] (18) the land. He ('Alī) had been a great *oppressor* of the people.<sup>18</sup> The (19) Sultan Saba' died shortly after this.<sup>19</sup> And the land is still frightful. (20) We pray that God, the Exalted, make the outcome good.

[D. Reclaiming assets after death of a partner]

I sent (21) with Abu 'l-Yumn<sup>20</sup> a shipment to you and to *the late*<sup>21</sup> Abū (22) 'Imrān b. Nufay'. You, my lord, happened to travel,<sup>22</sup> with the protection (23) of God,<sup>23</sup> and Abū 'Imrān passed away. And the condition of my lord al-Ḥalabī<sup>24</sup> [...] nor (24) what he had with him and that with which he transacted, by God's de[cree].<sup>25</sup> All of this is because of my bad

an *indabb*. As Goitein (*Med. Soc.*, 4:239, 244) has demonstrated, the cost of an *indabb* of wheat fluctuated widely above and below one dinar, and in times of scarcity two dinars or so was fairly common. (According to al-Maqrīzī, *Itti'āz*, 3:140, in 1129 prices in Cairo were particularly high and an *indabb* of wheat cost one dinar.) This suggests that here the *mikyāl* was equivalent to two *thumnas*.

<sup>16</sup> Arabic *mukhīfa*, also in line 19.

<sup>17</sup> Arabic *ba'd ṣa'ūba 'aẓīma*. Cf. Kay, *Yaman*, 159, "He (Saba) wrested Aden from his ('Alī's) hands, after the infliction of much suffering," etc. (117 in the Arabic text: *ba'd muqāsāt*).

<sup>18</sup> Arabic *alā al-nās nōgēs* (the last word is Hebrew; cf. above, line 7). Cf. Kay, *Yaman*, 51 in the Arabic text: *ẓulm al-nās*.

<sup>19</sup> Arabic *'aqība dhālīka*, lit., 'on the heels of this.' Wehr, *Dictionary*, 626, translates *'aqība* 'immediately after, subsequent to,' but as noted above, Saba' died seven months after his victory over 'Alī.

<sup>20</sup> Abu 'l-Yumn al-Maḥallī (from Maḥalla, Egypt) is also mentioned in II, 47, line 16. As noted above, according to IV, 12, merchandise was also sent with Abū Zikrī al-Ṣā'igh.

<sup>21</sup> Hebrew *hay*; see 394, n. 31.

<sup>22</sup> Arabic *fa-wāfā mawlāyā musāfir*. Cf. Maimonides, *Responsa*, 1:50, no. 34: *ittafaqa li-akhūhā (!) sāfara*.

<sup>23</sup> Arabic *fi dā'at* (= *wadā'at*) *allah*. See Dozy, *Supplément*, 2:792 (*wadī'a*).

<sup>24</sup> The word is corrected and the decipherment doubtful.

<sup>25</sup> The decipherment of the last sentence and its translation are uncertain.

(25) luck.<sup>26</sup> Then the man die[d].<sup>27</sup> I received a letter from Sheikh Abū (26) Zikrī, who wrote that in a court session<sup>28</sup> I, your servant, obtained (was awarded) seventy-seven (27) dinars minus one sixth. Perhaps this is one half of the (value of the) goods. But, (28) thank God, the Exalted, whatever was obtained from it is profit.<sup>29</sup> (29) Last year I wrote a power of attorney to the illustrious Sheikh (31) Abū Zikrī,<sup>30</sup> who acts in kindness to me and all [our comrades], (32) because of his esprit de corps, generosity<sup>31</sup> and virtue.<sup>32</sup>

[E. Closing greetings]

Please accept for [your] esteem[med self...] (32) best wishes for your well-being.[...] [Margin] [...] Your s[ervants] my children, all of them, greet your excellency with best wishes for your well-being.}

<sup>26</sup> Arabic *sū' qismi* ('my bad fate'). Here *qism* = *qisma*. In the parallel passage in IV, 12, line 25, Khalaf writes, *wa-kull dhālīka li-sū' bakhtī wa-qillat qismi*, 'and all of this is because of my bad luck and ill fate.' These attributions of calamities (including others') to one's ill fate can be added to the discussion of responses to challenges and bad times in the Geniza found in Goitein, *Med. Soc.*, 5:45 ff. Also relevant are II, 2v, line 10; II, 61, line 34; III, 57, lines 16–17.

<sup>27</sup> Perhaps the individual named in line 23.

<sup>28</sup> Arabic *fi mawḍi' bet dīn*.

<sup>29</sup> Even though he realized only half of his investment, the writer considers anything salvaged to be pure profit. Such statements are found elsewhere, e.g., III, 9, line 19.

<sup>30</sup> A power of attorney was sent to Abū Zikrī Kohen to recover Khalaf's assets. See the discussion above.

<sup>31</sup> Arabic *nakhwa*. For this virtue in the Geniza papers, see Goitein, *Med. Soc.*, 5:193–94.

<sup>32</sup> Arabic *muruwwa*. For this virtue in the Geniza papers and its various shades of meaning, see Goitein, *Med. Soc.*, 5:191–93. Khalaf does not request here the addressee's assistance, as he did in IV, 12, when writing Ḥalfon ha-Levi b. Nethanel, but the implication is evident.}