

II, 56–57 *Letter from Mahrūz to Sulaymān b. Abū Zikrī Kohēn before Sailing Back to India*

Aden {ca. 1137–47}

II, 56. T6 16.345

II, 57. BL Or. 5542, f. 17

Letter from Aden by Mahrūz, shortly after his arrival from India, on the day he embarked to return there, to his nephew Sulaymān, Abū Zikrī Kohēn's son. By chance the letter has been preserved in two complete copies,<sup>1</sup> both written for Mahrūz by the same clerk. Among other things, the writer mentions in it that he had sent various presents, or commodities ordered, with a person traveling from Aden to Cairo {Fustat}, while he had brought for the addressee sixty manns of *tabāshīr* (crystals extracted from bamboos), which he had delivered to the representative of the merchants in Aden, Maḍmūn, *yunfidhuhā fi'l-kārim ma'a man yarā* "in order to forward it 'in the Kārim' with whomever he found suitable."<sup>2</sup>

{Mahrūz's first trip to India was probably ca. 1136; see 367. No. 56–57 seems to have been written before II, 55; see the note to line 22. The date is fixed accordingly ca. 1137–47, probably in the latter part of that period.}

{Translation

[A. Salutation]

*In Your Name, O Merciful.*

(1) The letter of your excellency arrived, my lord, the illustrious sheikh. May God prolong (2) your life and make permanent your well-being and safekeeping, your dignity<sup>3</sup> (3) and happiness, your ascendancy, highness

<sup>1</sup> {More specifically, II, 56 is complete, while the first few lines and conclusion are missing in II, 57. Variants in II, 57, are mentioned in the notes below. For sending multiple copies of letters or accounts, see page 9, n. 23.

<sup>2</sup> This description was supplemented from Goitein, *Studies*, 353. On the sending of the *tabāshīr* in the Kārim, see below the note to line 33, where the nature of the Kārim is also discussed.

<sup>3</sup> Arabic *zulfā*, which according to Dozy, *Supplément*, 1:599, means 'closeness to God'; but 'dignity,' for *zulfā* (without long *ā*), Hava, *Dictionary*, 294, fits the context better here. In fact, Sharoni, *Dictionary*, 683, equates *zulfā* with *zalaf*, one of whose meanings is 'position.'

and loftiness, your support and elevated station! (4) May He not deny you His superior gift of success! May He crush whoever is envious of you and destroy (5) whoever hates you and is your enemy! This (will be) with His favor and generosity,<sup>4</sup> God willing.

[B. The writer's recent arrival from India and impending return there]

You will be happy (6) to know—may God make permanent your honored position!—that I arrived from India in (7) complete safety. *Let them praise the Lord for His steadfast love, etc.*<sup>5</sup> I lack nothing but (8) looking at your upright appearance.<sup>6</sup> May God speedily facilitate our meeting (9) in the happiest of circumstances, when achieving the most delightful hopes, (10) God willing! God, the Exalted, has already facilitated my decision to (11) return to India. May God, the Exalted, make the outcome good!<sup>7</sup>

[C. Delivery of a slave, other orders and gifts to the addressee]

(12) You mentioned, my lord—may God make your honored position permanent!—that the slave<sup>8</sup> had arrived. (13) I, your servant,<sup>9</sup> am glad that he reached you in complete safety. (14) You mentioned also the arrival of the articles that were with Sheikh (15) Nahray b. 'Allān.<sup>10</sup> This made me happy. You had requested, my lord, a turban of (16) *lānas* silk.<sup>11</sup> I sent you an exquisite (or: delicate) turban of *lānas* silk, (17) embroidered. I also sent

<sup>4</sup> No. II, 57 begins here with the word *bi-rahmatibi*, 'in His mercy,' not found in II, 56.

<sup>5</sup> Ps. 107:8.

<sup>6</sup> Arabic *al-rashīda* can be translated 'intelligent,' etc. In II, 57: 'but looking at you.' The same felicitous figure of speech to convey longing for the addressee of a letter appears in other documents in our collection, among them V, 20, line 5, a letter to Abū Zikrī Kohēn (the father of the addressee of II, 56–57), written in Mahrūz's hand.

<sup>7</sup> No. II, 57 adds: God willing. Returning from Aden to India shortly after having arrived from there is somewhat unusual. Another example is in VII, 70; see Goitein, "Portrait," 453, where II, 56–57 is cited as a case of returning 'immediately.'

<sup>8</sup> Arabic *al-'abd*. From the context, I assume that a slave, whose purchase Sulaymān had ordered from Mahrūz, is intended.

<sup>9</sup> Arabic *'abdūh*, literally, 'his servant.' Use of the same word, *'abd*, for a slave and for the writer, in consecutive lines, is typical of the ambiguous style in the Geniza letters. In some cases, an effort was made to distinguish between the two, however, as in II, 45a, line 9, where the slave is called *'abd*, and in line 10, the writer *mamlūk*.

<sup>10</sup> See on him II, 32, line 4.

<sup>11</sup> For this kind of silk, see 307, n. 10.

another one for your father, and I wrote on (18) every side separately, the name of its owner. You (pl.) should take delivery of this from (19) Sheikh Abu 'l-Riḍā son of the boy of Sham'a.<sup>12</sup> May God decree his safe arrival!<sup>13</sup> (20) I sent with him also a fine *Qaṣṣī* foot carpet.<sup>14</sup>

[D. Greetings and plans for coming home to Egypt, next year]

(21) I had hoped this year to travel home<sup>15</sup> to Egypt, (22) but I was unable to come because of the state of gloom,<sup>16</sup> which occurred. May God make (23) the outcome good! Convey my best<sup>17</sup> wishes to your mother, (24) and tell her of my longing for her.<sup>18</sup> God willing, I shall strive<sup>19</sup> (25) to travel home to you<sup>20</sup> next year, at any rate, God willing. (26) Your excellency is greeted with best, profuse<sup>21</sup> wishes. Convey for me (27) to the whole family my best wishes. And all our coreligionists (28) and whoever asks for us are greeted with the best, profuse wishes.

<sup>12</sup> Arabic *Ibn ṣabī Sham'a*. *Ṣabī* probably means freedman here. It could also mean slave or employee; cf. Goitein, *Med. Soc.*, 2:440, no. 4–5. The name Sham'a ('Candle') is rare in Geniza documents. Another example can be found in TS NS 143, f. 5, a poem eulogizing Abu 'l-Wafā' Tamīm b. Sham'a, who died 1123, apparently in Damascus (see above, 284, n. 5).

<sup>13</sup> The wish is absent in II, 57. On the other hand, at the end of line 11, the same copyist added there, 'God willing.' This suggests that the clerk took liberties in adding such pious wishes, required by good etiquette, to the letter dictated to him.

<sup>14</sup> Arabic *qaṣṣī* is an Indian textile; see 373, n. 11. *Wata'*, is also used for a sleeping carpet (see Goitein, *Med. Soc.*, 4:462, n. 205), and it is accordingly designated here *li-rjlik*, 'for your foot.' *Wata'* means 'shoe' as well; see Dozy, *Supplément*, 2:819. *Wata' li-arjulihim*, 'shoes for their feet,' appears in Maimonides, *Responsa*, 1:51, no. 34 (for the translation see J. Qāfih's note, ib., 3:120). But because of the singular and the material, 'fine *Qaṣṣī* shoe(s) for your foot' would not fit here.

<sup>15</sup> Arabic *khurūj*, also in the next line (there translated 'come') and in line 25. For this use of *khanaḥ*, *khurūj*, see 372, n. 4. In 1131/2 Maḥrūz acquired a home in Fustat: II, 60.

<sup>16</sup> Arabic *'ubūs*. I assume that Maḥrūz alludes here to his gloom from the losses he suffered when al-Fawfalī's ship sank, of which he wrote in II, 55, lines 16–17. The compensation, which God subsequently gave him according to line 18 there, probably refers to his profits realized on the return trip to India, of which he writes in our letter. Accordingly, II, 55, was written after II, 56–57.

<sup>17</sup> No. II, 57 adds: profuse.

<sup>18</sup> Maḥrūz does not send greetings to Abū Zikrī Kohen, Sulaymān's father. He was probably abroad on business at the time; see II, 55. As noted above, Sulaymān's mother was the writer's sister.

<sup>19</sup> No. II, 57: I hope.

<sup>20</sup> Instead of 'to you,' II, 57 reads 'with them,' which may be an allusion to the merchants traveling in the Kārim, below, line 33.

<sup>21</sup> This word is missing in II, 57.

[E. Postscript on unfinished business]

Sheikh Abū Naṣr<sup>22</sup> had sent with me for your excellency a bag, in which were (30) red copper wires.<sup>23</sup> I sold it for seven *mithqāls*. Sheikh (31) Abū Naṣr has (for you) two *mithqāls*, the proceeds of myrrh,<sup>24</sup> which makes a total of nine *mithqāls*. (32) I purchased for you (pl.)<sup>25</sup> with them, sixty *manns* of *ṭabāshīr*.<sup>26</sup> I have already delivered it to the most illustrious (33) Sheikh Maḥmūn.<sup>27</sup> He will forward it in the Kārim with whomever he finds suitable,<sup>28</sup> (34) since I am about to travel, and I have written this letter on the very day [Margin] that I am sailing. This is for your information, my lord. Please honor me with whatever needs or services for your

<sup>22</sup> Several Abū Naṣrs were active in the India trade. This one may have been Abū Naṣr b. Elisha or Abū Naṣr b. Abraham, both of whom had ties with Abū Zikrī Kohen and Maḥrūz; see II, 59 introduction for the former and V, 2, lines 15, for the latter. Abū Naṣr is also mentioned in Abū Zikrī's memorandum to Maḥrūz, II, 58. Here Abū Naṣr, who may have been in Yemen, shipped merchandise for Sulaymān with Maḥrūz to sell in India; see the next note.

<sup>23</sup> Arabic *ṣufr*. For the meaning of this term, see 555, n. 11. For shipping red *ṣufr* from Aden to India, cf. II, 20, line 26; II, 26, lines 11–14. For yellow and red strings (wires) shipped from Egypt to Aden, see II, 61, line 49.

<sup>24</sup> This aromatic resin was exported from Africa and Arabia (also to India; see Watt, *Commercial Products*, 400). Myrrh had medicinal faculties; see Dols, *Islamic Medicine*, 161; Lev and Amar, *Medicinal Substances*, 150. In IV, 58v, lines 1–2, it was ordered to fill a prescription for someone sick. Myrrh is also mentioned in III, 20, line 17 (India); VII, 36v, line 15.

<sup>25</sup> The plural could be a polite form of address. Contrariwise, perhaps Sulaymān engaged in these ventures together with other family members or possibly with Abū Naṣr.

<sup>26</sup> Arabic *ṭabāshīr*, bamboo crystals or chalk, both imported for medicinal purposes. See Goitein, *Studies*, 353, n. 3; Dols, *Islamic Medicine*, 135, n. 37; Smith, *Studies*, chap. 10, 136, note d, and literature cited in these studies.

<sup>27</sup> Maḥmūn b. Japheth the Nagid of Yemen.

<sup>28</sup> For the translation of this line, see Goitein, *Studies*, 353. The meaning of Kārim (or Kāram), during this period, "a convoy or group of *nākhodās*, or shipowners, in whose ships merchants traveled and goods were transported" to and from India, is discussed by Goitein, *Studies*, 351–60 ("The Beginning of the Kārim Merchants and the Character of their Civilization" [the quote is from 358] and his earlier article "Kārim"). See further idem, *Yemenites*, 36–37 (our text is alluded to on 37), where it is noted that the Kārim convoy traveled together for reasons of security; see however II, 66, line 30, and page 509, n. 21. On the Kārim, see further, Labib, "Kārimi"; Serjeant, *Society*, 1:68–71; Wansbrough, Abulafia, "Asia," 437–43; "Kārim"; Meyer, *Glass*, 100–1; Rabie, "Geniza Documents," 74. Dasgupta, "Indian Merchants," 411, mistakenly places the beginning of the Kārim in the late twelfth century. Goitein notes that Braslavsky, "Jewish Trade," 137, n. 2, mistakenly read here (he cited our II, 57 as BL Or. 5542. f. 20, rather than f. 17) *fāris* for *kārim*, and took it to refer to a shipment to Persia. For letters from Aden to Egypt sent in the Kārim, see II, 67a, lines 10–11, and page 519.

excellency that may arise.<sup>29</sup> Your excellency is greeted with best, profuse wishes. *And abundant peace! Salvation is near.*<sup>30</sup>

[F. Address]

(To) His excellency, the most illustrious sheikh, my lord Sulaymān Kohen<sup>31</sup> b. Judah. May God guard his life!

(From) His servant Maḥrūz b. Jacob—*may the spirit of the Lord give him rest!*<sup>32</sup>

<sup>29</sup> Literally, 'whatever arises for your excellency of needs or services, honor me with them.' *Ma'a mā* seems to serve as the equivalent of *mahmā*, 'whatever.' The same usage, in similar context, can be found in II, 46 (there *ma'amā*, in one word; see 449, n. 72); III, 5v, line 5; III, 33, line 28.

<sup>30</sup> For this and other expressions of the urgency of messianic expectations, see Goitein, *Med. Soc.*, 5:395 ff.; Friedman, *Yemenite Messiah*, 14.

<sup>31</sup> Sulaymān and his father Abū Zikrī (Judah) used Kohen (rather than ha-Kohen) as a family name.

<sup>32</sup> Isa. 63:14.

II, 58 *Memorandum from Abū Zikrī Kohen to Maḥrūz*

Alexandria {ca. 1136–49}

TS 10J 16, f. 15

Memorandum sent by Abū Zikrī Kohen, sojourning on business in Alexandria, to his brother-in-law Maḥrūz in Fustat, who had arrived from Aden and, as in II, 56–57, was again preparing himself for a new journey to the East. The families of the two lived in one house in Fustat. The memorandum is written in the hand of a clerk.

{The memorandum is worded more or less like a regular business letter. Maḥrūz's reply might be found in the fragmentary V, 20. His first trip to India was probably ca. 1136 (see page 367). No. II, 58 can be divided into the following five sections, given below with selected translations:

A. Salutation (lines 1–4).

B. The writer's distress over his delay in Alexandria (lines 4–20).

(5) After I had written you and shipped a few commodities with Abu 'l-Riḍā (6) b. Hilāl,<sup>1</sup> all of the ships returned [...] and I had to (7) stay here, until I return my merchandise to the warehouse and lock it.<sup>2</sup> Then I'll come up (to Fustat),<sup>3</sup> (8) God willing. I hope that we extricate ourselves from here this week, God willing. Don't ask, (9) my brother, what aggravation I had from the return of the ships, because I lost many (10) dues, expenditures, provisions and sizeable custom fees, from which I cannot recoup (11) one dirhem.<sup>4</sup> I also shipped other merchandise to al-Mahdiyya, which came back. May God make (12) the outcome good! [...] (14) God knows how distressed I was (15) to have to stay here. I swear by these lines, were I to find a way not to sleep here (16) one night, I would not sleep here.<sup>5</sup> This is for your information, my lord.

C. Purchase of wheat (lines 21-margin, 5).

(21) If the wheat in the house is depleted, buy for me two (22) or three dinars worth, which we shall eat until the wheat, (23) which you wrote that

<sup>1</sup> {Mentioned in V, 13, margin, line 4. On shipping between Alexandria and Fustat, see Goitein, *Med. Soc.*, 1:298.}

<sup>2</sup> Abu Zikrī Kohen kept a warehouse in Alexandria for his Mediterranean business.

<sup>3</sup> {For 'coming up' when speaking of travel to Fustat, see 749, n. 4.}

<sup>4</sup> For the losses incurred by merchants by the return of ships after they had set sail, because of bad weather or similar circumstances, see the discussion in Goitein, *Med. Soc.*, 1:322–23, 483, n. 73, where this passage is cited.

<sup>5</sup> Abū Naṣr b. Abraham's remarks in a letter from Alexandria 1141, in IV, 78v, line 15, probably reflect other circumstances: "Were I just a little stronger, I would not stay in the city one hour."