

III, 57 *Letter from Joseph b. Perahyā Yijū to an Important Merchant, also in Sicily*

{Mazara, ca. 1154}

TS 13 J 6, f. 15

Long but damaged letter by Joseph b. Perahyā Yijū, introducing himself as a brother of Mevassēr, with whom the addressee was evidently acquainted. Joseph describes the disasters, which had befallen him and asks the addressee to pay him the balance of a deal in pepper still due him. This may refer to III, 41. His son Perahyā apparently wrote the letter for Joseph. Since verso is blank, with no address, this letter was evidently not sent.¹

{In III, 41, lines 26–31, Abraham Ben Yijū wrote his brother Joseph that he should be careful with the shipment of pepper and ginger that he was sending him and not lose it due to negligence, as he had done with a previous shipment of pepper. Our letter, III, 57, line 13, also speaks of a shipment of pepper sent to Joseph by his brother that had been lost. Joseph introduces himself here as 'Joseph b. Perahyā, known as Yijū, Mevassēr's brother.' Similarly, he is addressed as 'Mevassēr's brother, known as Ibn Yijū,' in III, 44 (written October–November, 1154), a note sent by the merchant Ḥajjāj, presumably from Messina, where Mevassēr had lived, to Joseph, who lived in Mazara, both in Sicily. There Ḥajjāj informed Joseph that his two older sons, Perahyā and Moses, had requested that Ḥajjāj forward a shipment to their father, obviously received from their uncle Abraham. Ḥajjāj delayed the shipment and claimed that part of it had been lost. In the meantime, Joseph was reduced to poverty, and he did not know exactly how much of the shipment had been lost and how much Ḥajjāj owed him. He wrote desperate letters of humble supplication to Ḥajjāj and to the notable Abu 'l-Faraj (Ibn) Masnūt, also of Messina. The latter finally persuaded Ḥajjāj to send Joseph some of the funds he owed him.² While the sums mentioned in our letter do not exactly match those in the other documents, III, 57 is an example par excellence of a letter of humble supplication written by Joseph, asking for information and assistance for recovering his lost shipment. It might have been intended to be sent to Ḥajjāj or Abu 'l-Faraj.

¹ {Only the above description taken from the Summaries and odd notes, together with a rough draft copy of the Judeo-Arabic text are preserved for this document in Goitein's papers.

² For all of this, see III, 48, lines 37–45; III, 49, lines 37–46, verso, line 26.

(3) (I) Joseph b. Perahyā—*may he rest in Eden!*—known as Yijū, Mevassēr's brother, humbly beg (4) my lord's generosity to allow me to devote myself to you and to be included in the assembly of your clients³ [...] (6) What I request of your benevolence and hope from your graciousness, is that you kindly write (7) in detail to your servant [...] the amount of the goods sent [...] (11) He wrote that part of it had been lost. I remain anxious⁴ and troubled (12) by every aspect. For my brother had written that he determined that the capital, which remained in Fustat after (13) most had been lost was 22 Egyptian dinars, from which was purchased pepper for us, (14) together.⁵ Then he said (= wrote) //to me//: "The total of your half is 64 pounds of pepper and 22 (15) Ducan *rubā'is*."⁶ But my agent says: "Only 65 *rubā'is* were given me."⁷ The verse "*What the cutter has left, (16) the locust has devoured*"⁸ has been fulfilled in me, as they say, "*Poverty follows the poor*."⁹ For Time has shot its arrows at me.¹⁰ (17) I have become impoverished and fate has struck me down.¹¹

³ Arabic *ṣanā'i'*, For the use of this term (sg. *ṣanī'a*) in letters of appeal for assistance, see Goitein, *Med. Soc.*, 5:81; Diem, *Geschäftsbriefe*, 61.

⁴ Arabic *mu'allaq al-khāṭir*. Cf. 694, n. 6.

⁵ Or 'both of us.' I assume Abraham intended that his gift be divided between his brothers Mevassēr and Joseph. See the continuation.

⁶ For these Sicilian quarter dinars, cf. III, 30a, line 5.

⁷ Perhaps the agent was Ḥajjāj.

⁸ Joel 1:4.

⁹ BT Bava Qama 92a and parallels.

¹⁰ This and the preceding phrase are quoted from this document by Goitein, *Med. Soc.*, 5:91, 531, n. 231. For Time as a personification of fate, see 268, n. 5.

¹¹ On blaming misfortune on fate, see 467, n. 26. Here, in the continuation, lines 17–18, Joseph states that his sins were the source of his misfortunes. These included (lines 18–19) an inflammation of the finger of his oldest son, namely Perahyā, who assisted him as schoolteacher.