

1 AN ANGRY LETTER FROM QAYRAWĀN

the Capital of Ifrīqiya (Tunisia), to Fustat, the Main City of Egypt, about Business in Spain and in the Writer's Place

Ca. 1000

Joseph b. Jacob Ibn 'Awkal, the recipient of this letter, was a merchant prince active in the capital of Egypt from the end of the tenth century through the first third of the eleventh. One of his offices was in the *Dār al-Jawhar*, the gem bourse, of Fustat, and he specialized in luxury articles such as pearls, gems, and crystals. But his business encompassed practically all the goods usually traded between the western and eastern Mediterranean during the eleventh century and which on a smaller scale were simultaneously handled by merchants of far lesser stature. These included many varieties of flax, then the staple export of Egypt, also sugar, its main industrial product, and, of course, textiles, manufactured in or brought to that country; pepper and other spices, medical herbs, and odoriferous woods, also dyeing materials, such as brazilwood, indigo, and lac, coming from the Far East and reexported to the Muslim West and Europe; the products of Spain and Sicily, above all silk of various types and qualities, and metals such as copper and lead; textiles, olive oil and soap, wax and honey, imported from Tunisia; and last, but not least, specie, which, drawing on the rich sources of Sudanese gold and Spanish silver, was abundant in the West but scarce in Egypt. The difference between a great merchant like Ibn 'Awkal and less prominent members of the profession consisted in the quantity and quality, but not in the variety, of the goods traded.¹

In addition to his manifold commercial activities, Ibn 'Awkal played an important communal role as the representative of the *yeshivas*, the two Jewish high councils and academies of Baghdad, which were the spiritual centers of the Diaspora. The questions on points of religious law of the Jewish communities of North Africa and Egypt as well as their donations were forwarded by him to Baghdad, and the answers and accompanying letters were sent by him to the addressees, after first having been copied in his offices as

¹ A more detailed list of items handled by a less prominent merchant is presented in *Med. Soc.*, 1, 154.

a matter of precaution. Hundreds of such copies have survived in the Geniza, but not a single letter showing Ibn 'Awkal in *commercial* relations with Iraq or Iran has been found. For one letter from southern Iran addressed both to his father and to him, and written partly in Arabic and partly in Judeo-Persian, includes a request that they transmit 90 gold pieces worth 100 mithqāls, or dinars, to an acquaintance in Fustat, but contain no indication of commercial activity.²

How, then, are we to explain the strange geographical dichotomy between Joseph Ibn 'Awkal's commercial and communal activities? His family, like many other Jewish families in the West, originated in Iran, as is proved by the fact that father and son are addressed in the Persian language. Further family ties connected them with Tunisia and Sicily. Thus it stands to reason that Joseph's grandfather had emigrated to the Muslim West, where his father and he himself acquired that high standing in the North African communities which enabled them to become the representatives of the North African diocese when the family moved to Egypt, following the Fatimids who conquered that country in 969. Joseph himself had personal experience solely in Spain, Sicily, and North Africa. Therefore, when taking up residence in Egypt, he restricted his business activities exclusively to the Muslim West. Among the fifty or so items addressed to him which are preserved in the Geniza there is none from Asia, not even one from the ports of the eastern Mediterranean. The Judeo-Persian letter mentioned before is an exception which confirms the rule.

Forty-six letters and accounts destined for Joseph Ibn 'Awkal, partly also for his father and sons,³ have been edited by me with Hebrew translations and comments, or, if they were too much damaged, described and discussed in the periodicals *Zion* and *Tarbiz*.⁴ An excellent and most useful analysis of the entire material, including the few texts edited by others, and an English trans-

² TS Arabic Box 42, f. 176, not yet edited at the time of the writing of these lines. See also no. 2, n. 1, below.

³ Four sons and two daughters are referred to in the Geniza papers. He might have had more.

⁴ *Zion* 27 (1962), 156-165. See also *Tarbiz* 34 (1965), 162-182; 36 (1967), 366-395; 37 (1967-1968), 48-77, 158-190; 38 (1968), 18-42. See also letters nos. 3 and 4, below.

lation of seventeen major items have been provided by Norman A. Stillman.⁵

The letter presented here well illustrates Mediterranean trade at the opening of the eleventh century. Tunisia naturally had lost much by the transfer of the Fatimid court and army to the newly built imperial city of Cairo, Egypt. But it still served, together with Sicily, as a commercial intermediary between Muslim Spain, western North Africa, also Christian western Europe, and the Muslim East. The caravans of Sijilmāsa, the desert entrepôt in southern Morocco, which imported the riches of sub-Saharan Africa, still passed through Qayrawān, then the capital of the country now known as Tunisia. Our letter exhibits both the first intimations of decline and the pride of a city which once was the hub of the Mediterranean.

The main types of business cooperation: informal "friendship" based on reciprocal services, formal partnership, and outright commission, are represented here with the first being the most prominent. Another recurring problem of overseas trade, namely, whether the correspondent should follow the instructions of the sender of a shipment or act according to his own lights in view of changing market conditions, is much ventilated.

The family name of the writer of our letter, Ibn al-Siqillī, shows that one of his ancestors had emigrated from Sicily to Qayrawān. Two of his sons were engaged in the trade between Spain and Egypt, one of them acting as business correspondent of Ibn 'Awkal, like his father.

The letter is one of the earliest addressed to Ibn 'Awkal. For in another letter, sent from Qayrawān in July 1008, his two sons Hillel and Benjamin, to whom greetings are extended here, appear already as partners in the family business (see n. 23, below). Moreover, the tone of our letter, despite its repeated emphasis on Ibn 'Awkal's high rank, is rather disrespectful, which also suggests an early stage of his career.

David Kaufmann Collection, Budapest, DK 13.⁶

⁵ *East-West Relations in the Islamic Mediterranean in the Early Eleventh Century: A Study in the Geniza Correspondence of the House of Ibn 'Awkal*. Ph.D. dissertation, University of Pennsylvania, 1970, pp. 69, 416. Cited hereafter as Stillman, *East-West Relations*.

⁶ Ed. S. D. Goitein, *Tarbīz* 37 (1968), 64-70, trans. Stillman in *East-West Relations*, pp. 267-279.

I am writing to you, my esteemed elder, master, and chief, may God prolong your life and make lasting [your honored position],⁷ well-being, and security, on Elul 23.⁸ I am safe and in good health, many [thanks be to God]. [I am yearning for] the sight of your blessed countenance; may God unite us in the best of circumstances and in perfect happiness.

A. BRAZILWOOD⁹ SENT TO SPAIN CONTRARY TO THE INSTRUCTIONS OF IBN 'AWKAL

Your enjoyable letters have arrived and I have gathered from them that you are fine; may God ordain that it should always be so; may he ever increase his boons to you and shower upon you his favors.

My elder and master, you say that I *took* the brazilwood and sent it to Spain. I did not take it for myself, nor have I made any profit from it. Rather, it caused me losses. I acted thus because I rely upon you and because you are helpful to me with your high rank in matters of the goods sent by me to you on my account. I was sure that you would write me exactly the opposite of what you have written, which offended me so much and for which I do not know any reason. Your shipment was sent in Iyyar (April/May) and mine was sent to you in Av (July/August); could your consignment possibly have come from Spain and made all this in two months? And even if this was possible, would you not have acted similarly?¹⁰

⁷ Here and throughout, the manuscript is damaged by little holes. Standard phrases are restored without comment.

⁸ Late in August or early in September, in time to be sent with the very last boat sailing.

⁹ This Indian red dye, also called sappan wood, was an important item of medieval international trade and is mentioned in countless Geniza papers. See also *ET*² s.v. *Bakḳam*.

¹⁰ Ibn 'Awkal obviously had insinuated that the writer had profited from sending his brazilwood to Spain. Between the Jewish months of Iyyar (April/May) and Av there are two other months. What he seems to say is this: You sent your brazilwood from Egypt in May; now, you assume, it has arrived here, was forwarded by me to Spain, sold with great profit, and other goods bought there had been brought here, which helped me to finance my shipments to you, which were sent early in August. Is this technically possible?

B. SILK SOLD IN QAYRAWĀN INSTEAD OF BEING
SENT TO FUSTAT

You w[rite in your letters that] I should send you the 420 pounds of silk. But one-third of this is my brother's investment, besides which he is entitled to a third of the profit along with you. Moreover, the merchants are unanimously of the opinion that silk sells in Qayrawān better than in Fustat. Here (a pound) sells for 1 1/2 dinars of Qayrawān standard weight.¹¹ I wished I had immediately forwarded to you your share, as you instructed me, for most of the proceeds are still outstanding and I have debited myself with all that is due my brother and due you. I have received payment for 100 pounds from Salāma of al-Mahdiyya only eight days before the writing of this letter. With Ibn al-Ṣabbāgh ("Mr. Dyer") there is also a debt outstanding, for I sold to him on credit. I also lost much money which was due us from the colorists,¹² but did not charge anything to the two of you, for my brother settled his accounts with me before his departure and took what was due him. And this is my reward from you after all this.

C. CASH SENT IN THE SIJLMĀSA CARAVAN

I sent you 100 less one-quarter 'Azīzī dinars¹³ in the caravan of the Sijilmāsis¹⁴ with Abu 'l-Surūr b. Barhūn.¹⁵ This was taken from my own money, for at that time I had not received a penny from the price of the silk. I acted thus because of my esteem for

¹¹ There was only a negligible difference between a gold dinar struck in Qayrawān and one in Egypt. The standard price for a pound of silk around the middle of the century was 2 dinars. See *Med. Soc.*, 1, 222.

¹² Ar. *lawwānīn*, repeated at the end of the letter, but not found by me anywhere else. The word is derived from *lawn*, "color," and it stands to reason that these "colorists" had to do something with the dyeing of silk, but exactly what, I do not yet know.

¹³ Coined under the Fatimid caliph al-'Azīz (975-996).

¹⁴ See the introduction. The ship which was to carry this letter was expected to travel faster than a caravan which moved slowly and made prolonged halts during which the merchants would do business. It seems, however, that at that early time travel by land was regarded as safer.

¹⁵ This is Isaac b. Abraham of the famous Tāherī family. The biblical Isaac, which means "the one who laughs" (Genesis 21:1-6), had as its Ar. equivalent Abu 'l-Surūr ("Joyful"), while Barhūn was the Maghrebi form of endearment for the name Abraham.

you and because of your illustrious position, your noble character, and piety.¹⁶ All I ask from you is that you act with respect to my goods sent to you in the same manner as I acted with your goods sent to me.

D. NO SHARE IN A MOST PROFITABLE SALE OF PEARLS

Then you sent those pearls and I worked hard collecting their price. For how long shall this go on?! Should I not have taken one quarter of the profit? Through me you have made a profit of close to 1 dinar per dinar, and all this was of no advantage to me. I expected only that you would exert yourself for me, at least that you would send me what you owe me. Had I owed you 2,000 dinars, would I withhold them from you? Would they not reach you (even) by sea to your satisfaction?¹⁷ If you had sent my money, I would have made good use of it—as you have made of yours. And what had happened if, God forbid, your goods had traveled a second time and entered my account?¹⁸ How would I then stand before you? But God, may he be praised and exalted, knows my good intentions, and he rewards every man according to his intention.

E. IBN 'AWKAL FAILED TO SATISFY THE
WRITER'S CREDITORS

What disturbed me most was your failure to pay to Ibn Yazdād¹⁹ and Salāma, the son-in-law of Furayj,²⁰ the sum that I asked you to pay them or to give them the equivalent in goods, although I had advised you expressly to do so. You have withheld payment from them, while this is a debt upon me. And this, at a time when your merchandise was in Spain!²¹ Their letters vituperating me have

¹⁶ "Piety" (*diyāna*) in a business letter means meticulous behavior toward one's fellow merchants.

¹⁷ Ibn 'Awkal had withheld some sums owed the writer in view of the unsatisfactory brazilwood transaction (sec. A, above). Ibn Siquillī retorts that he would honor any obligation and send even a very large sum by sea, meaning quickly and on his own responsibility.

¹⁸ This refers to a second shipment of brazilwood (sec. G, below).

¹⁹ A Persian name, meaning "God has given." This man is probably identical with Joseph Ibn Yazdād, mentioned in a Karaite document dated 1004 (ed. Mann, *Texts*, II, 196-198).

²⁰ Probably a diminutive of the common name Faraj, "delivery, salvation."

²¹ That is, not in my hand.

now come here to everyone and my honor has been disgraced. Had you only made promises to them and said: "He has given instructions for you," they would have been patient and I would have been spared those vituperations.

F. FALSE RUMOR THAT THE WRITER HAD ASKED IBN 'AWKAL
TO BECOME HIS REPRESENTATIVE IN QAYRAWĀN

Our Maghrebi friends²² told me what they had heard in your name from Abu 'l-Khayr b. Barhūn,²³ that I had written to you asking you to replace Ibn Majjānī²⁴ by myself. I have not wanted this. I am not prepared to undertake it, nor have I any need for this. What I do need is to benefit from your high position and that you exert yourself for my goods as I do for yours. What I did say is that you should entrust me with your affairs just as I entrust you with mine. But after having taken care of someone else's affairs or having formed a partnership with him, God forbid that I and my honor should then be treated in this improper way. I never withhold a penny from anyone else, nor is any claim made against me at any time.²⁵

G. SPECIAL ARRANGEMENTS FOR A SECOND SHIPMENT
OF BRAZILWOOD TO SPAIN WHICH DID NOT MATERIALIZE

I had made an agreement with Farah ("Joy") of Fez with regard to the remainder of the brazilwood, to the effect that I take it and send it to Spain [at a c]ommission, but on the condition that I will bear *responsibility* (for its loss). Each qintār (100 pounds) was appraised at 12 dinars in the presence of a number of our friends.

²² Ar. *aṣḥābnā*, which usually means "coreligionists," that is, Jews. But since so many Maghrebi Jews participated in the Mediterranean trade, the literal translation "friends" is perhaps more appropriate here.

²³ This is Moses, called Abu 'l-Khayr ("The Good One"; see Exodus 2:2), son of Abraham Tāhertī, who, like his brother Isaac (see n. 15, above), often traveled to Egypt. The letter dated 1008, mentioned in the introduction, was written by a third brother, Sālih. See *Tarbiz* 37 (1968), 158.

²⁴ This is the father of the writer of letter no. 18, below.

²⁵ My Heb. translation of lines 33-34 (*Tarbiz* 37 [1968], 68), must be revised according to the version provided here.

You, not I, had to have the choice since all this was to be on your behalf.²⁶ Finally, Farah did not do it.

Thank God that this did not materialize, for you would have treated me in this matter as you have done before. But, by God, my master, the profit with this would have been even greater than with the first shipment. For this year brazilwood which I had bought in Qayrawān for 265 dirhems was sold on my behalf for 125 dinars.²⁷ God knew my good intentions and spared me many troubles in a matter from which I would not have had any advantages.

H. CONCLUSION AND P.S.

(Another twenty-four lines reiterate the arguments made before. Three times the writer again emphasizes the urgency of satisfying his creditors; see sec. E, above.)

I do not dare to say to you: "Send me your things and I shall handle them,"²⁸ fearing that you may tell stories about me that I have asked you to put me in Ibn al-Majjānī's place.²⁹ I do not need this. The little we have here in the Maghreb is worth the abundance you have over there. But after all, I am your servant and prepared to deal, for your profit and without advantage for me, with anything you might send me. By God, my lord, this will give me only pleasure. God knows.³⁰

Kindest personal regards to my master, the elder, and to his two sons Hillel and Benjamin, may God protect and keep them.

(In the margin:)

I copied for you from my account book³¹ the account for the sale of the silk, and the expenses involved from beginning to end,

²⁶ It was agreed that Ibn 'Awkal should be free to decide which form of business cooperation he preferred.

²⁷ Even if we assume that the dirhems referred to were of highest silver content and worth about 1/12 of a dinar (see *Med. Soc.*, 1, 370, sec. 4; 377, sec. 30), a profit of over 500 percent would have been made here. Even a profit of "almost 100 percent" (sec. D) was exceptional. As a rule, their profits were surprisingly low (see *Med. Soc.*, 1, 202ff.).

²⁸ The usual conclusion of a business letter.

²⁹ See sec. F, above.

³⁰ Here is a short note about a payment of 1 dinar to one Ibn 'Allān. About this family see no. 17, below.

³¹ The account book, *daftar*, was accepted by the courts as a legal proof.

including a description of each item and showing how it was sold without any loss for you. May God replace that which has gone . . . for what has remained with the "colorists" can never be recovered. Please examine the account and take notice of all its details. If you have any doubts, let me know and I shall give you the necessary explanations, if God wills.

(Address:)

To my master and chief, the [illustrious] elder, Abu 'l-Faraj,³² may God prolong his life and make permanent his honored position and prosperity, Yūsuf (Joseph) b. Ya'qūb (Jacob) Ibn 'Awkal—(may his) s(oul) r(est in peace). May God be his friend, protector, helper, and shepherd.

From Samḥūn b. Dā'ūd Ibn al-Siqillī ("Generous," son of David, the son of the Sicilian). Miṣr (Fustat) i[f God wills].

(In Arabic characters:) In Miṣr, if God wills.

2 FROM IRAN TO EGYPT

March 5, 1026

Geniza letters sent from Iran to Egypt are conspicuous by their absence. A note written partly in Arabic and mostly in Hebrew characters and Persian language was sent around the year 1000 from southern Iran to Jacob Ibn 'Awkal and his son Joseph in Fustat.¹ A few letters entirely in Persian have also been found, but these were mostly written in places west of Iran.

The reason for this deficiency was the same as that accounting for the scarcity of regular business letters from Spain to Egypt despite the manifold commercial ties between these two countries. Given medieval travel and market conditions, the distances between Egypt and Iran or Spain were too great for the smooth conduct

³² This byname, "Delivery" was given to Ibn 'Awkal later in life, probably after he recovered from a serious illness. Originally he, like any other Joseph, was called Abū Ya'qūb, "Father of Jacob."

¹ TS Arabic Box 42, f. 176. About Ibn 'Awkal see no. 1, above. The note gives also Baghdad as Ibn 'Awkal's address, probably a branch of his firm to which the consignment from Iran was sent.

of day-to-day commerce, for which constant adaptation to an ever fluctuating market was required. An analysis of this letter implicitly illustrates this situation.

The letter was sent from al-Ahwāz, the capital of a province of the same name in southwestern Iran. It was addressed to the three senior Tustarī brothers in Fustat, who conducted one of the most prominent firms in that city.² Tustar, the city from which their name is derived, is also situated in that Iranian province. But it seems that before moving from Iran to Egypt the Tustarī family lived in Ahwāz, as is evidenced by a Judea-Persian law record from that city, dated January 18, 1021, reporting that their sister Hannah made a certain claim there in her own name and that of her brothers. Our letter also indicates that they possessed property there.³ Thus the business conducted between Iran and Egypt actually was an inner-Persian affair: that is, it was emigrants from Iran who maintained relations with their native country and who still had relatives and possessions there.

Furthermore, the goods traded, both those sent from Iran and those ordered from Egypt were so-called *a'lāq*, choice textiles of high value which could be easily transported. It was a trade of limited volume. It is interesting to note that all firms concerned, the senders, addressees, and the carriers of the consignments, were family businesses, consisting either of brothers or of father and son, for which see *Med. Soc.*, 1, 165, 180-183.

All names in this letter and the contemporary law record from Ahwāz are either Arabic or Hebrew, but the writer of the letter was Persian, as is betrayed by his faulty Arabic grammar. For instance, Persian, like English, has no masculine and feminine endings; Arabic has them in abundance. Therefore our writer makes the same mistakes as American students trying to learn Arabic in

² See *Med. Soc.*, 1 and 11, indexes, s.v. The Tustarī brothers mentioned by the Muslim historians (see Fischel, *Jews*, p. 72), were the sons of Sahl, the eldest of the three addressed here.

³ Bodl. MS Heb. b 12 (Cat. 2875), f. 24, ed. D. S. Margoliouth, "A Jewish-Persian Law Report," *JQR* 11 (1899), 671-675. For further study of this document see Jes. P. Asmussen, "Judæo-Persica II," *Acta Orientalia* 29 (1965) 49-60, trans. D. N. MacKenzie in *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* (April 1966), p. 69. Additional comments in Shaul Shaked, "Judæo-Persian Notes," *Israel Oriental Studies* 1 (1971), 180-182.