

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,<sup>32</sup> 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.<sup>1</sup> 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

<sup>32</sup> 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."

<sup>1</sup> 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.<sup>2</sup> 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.<sup>3</sup> 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.*, I, 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

<sup>2</sup> See *Med. Soc.*, I and II, 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.

<sup>3</sup> 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.

that he confuses the genders. Quite a number of Persian names have been preserved in the Geniza (see *Med. Soc.*, 1, 400, n. 2), but the majority of the Persian Jews living around 1000, as far as they had no Hebrew names, must have borne Arabic names, just as did their compatriots, the Persian Muslims.

University Library, Cambridge, Taylor-Schechter  
Collection, TS 13 J 25 f. 18.

#### A. ACKNOWLEDGMENT OF LETTER

May God prolong the life of my lords, the noble elders, and always help and support them and make their prominent position permanent.

I am writing to you from al-Ahwāz on Friday the 12th of Muḥarram of the year 417.<sup>4</sup> I am well, praise and thanks to God.

God knows the strength of my longing for you—may he always support you—and I ask him to ordain our coming together when his sanctuary will be built.<sup>5</sup>

Your letter has arrived—may God always support you. I took notice of its content and was happy to learn that you are well. I praised God, the exalted, for this. I understand that you have most kindly dispatched that consignment and hope it will arrive with God's support and gracious help. May he reward you well.<sup>6</sup>

#### B. SPECIFICATIONS OF GOODS SENT

My impositions on you are manifold, but I am no stranger to you. I have sent you through my lords the elders, the sons of Zakariyyā—may God make their honored position permanent—four chests, two of them sewed up, each containing ten robes, a third chest with a complete set of . . .,<sup>7</sup> a fourth one with four gilded

<sup>4</sup> March 5, 1026, the Muslim date. Only letters which were supposed to be on their way for many months were dated with such exactness. The text has "seven and ten," *sb' w-'shr*, instead of "seventeen."

<sup>5</sup> This pious wish does not mean that the writer defers the hope for a meeting to the time of the Messiah, but implies his confidence in seeing the Temple of Jerusalem rebuilt during his own lifetime.

<sup>6</sup> The meaning of this phrase: your service is of such great value that only God is able to reward it adequately.

<sup>7</sup> Two holes in the manuscript. Visible: *zr 'wy*, probably a Persian word beginning with *zar*, gold.

mantles<sup>8</sup> of first quality. My lords know better than I how to handle this.

I also sent with them, I mean, the sons of Zakariyyā, may God keep them, a box covered with leather containing a Šāḥibī<sup>9</sup> robe of *khazz* silk and a gilded Šāḥibī garment of *khazz*, first class, with *ibrīsim* silk.<sup>10</sup> I hope that, with God's support and gracious help, everything will reach you in good condition and that after arrival you will handle its sale at your discretion and then purchase with its proceeds whatever you deem fit.

I am upset about the sinking of the consignment. Please handle this matter as you deem fit, for your money and mine are one and all profit I make comes from your pocket.<sup>11</sup>

#### C. AN APOLOGY

You wrote me [about] the two stores. I have nothing further to add in this matter. I know well that this and other property are exclusively yours, while the elder Abū Ṭayyib has no share in this or other possessions.<sup>12</sup> I noticed that the price offered for the property was insufficient, but people were eager to get it for that value. For this reason I told the messenger that it belonged to Abū Ṭayyib,

<sup>8</sup> Text: *r'd't*, which I take as an attempt to form an Arabic plural of *ridā*, mantle.

<sup>9</sup> The term is not noted in Serjeant, *Islamic Textiles*, but I have little doubt that it refers to the famous Būyid vizier Ibn 'Abbād al-Šāḥib, who died on March 30, 995, and who used to distribute robes of honor made of light silk (*khazz*; the same word as used here). See Mez, *Renaissance*, ch. 7, p. 96. Steingass in *Persian-English Dictionary*, p. 779a, says "kind of striped silk."

<sup>10</sup> *Khazz* was a light and *ibrīsim* a heavy type of silk; see Mez, *Renaissance*, p. 96, and Serjeant, *Islamic Textiles*, pp. xv-xvi, 65.

<sup>11</sup> Goods were sent from Egypt by sea to Tyre or another port on the Lebanese coast and from there overland to Iran. Losses by shipwreck were variously the responsibility of the sender, recipient, or carrier, depending on the condition on which the consignment was sent.

<sup>12</sup> The Tustarī brothers had sent a messenger to handle their possessions in their native city, among them the sale of two stores. The writer wished to preserve them for one Abū Ṭayyib ("Mr. Good"), no doubt identical with Tōv (Heb. "Good") b. David, a nephew (sister's son) of the Tustarīs (see Ms. Meunier, ed. I. Ben Zvi, *Zion* 3 [1938], 182, ll. 15-16). When the Tustarīs heard that the writer had informed their representative that the stores belonged to Abū Ṭayyib, they were furious. Obviously these stores were inherited, and according to Jewish law, a sister does not inherit together with her brothers.

may God keep him. Had I known that you did not like this, I would not have said so. I did it out of compassion for him so that it should not slip out of his hand. But I hope that God will grant the return of the messenger; then I shall personally assist him in the sale so that it will bring whatever God will grant.<sup>13</sup>

#### D. RECAPITULATION OF A PREVIOUS ORDER

In a previous letter I had asked you,<sup>14</sup> may God always be your support, to kindly buy certain textiles for me, namely: a Dabīqī<sup>15</sup> robe with a border, first class; a Dabīqī turban,<sup>16</sup> forty cubits long<sup>17</sup> with sparkling fine . . . and beautiful . . . and a Dabīqī cloak (*izār*), first class, . . . (7-8 words) eleven by eleven. It was sent to me by you and in its basket there was a robe.

Also, three sets of *qaṣab*,<sup>18</sup> one pistachio-colored, one "ample,"<sup>19</sup> and one khalūqī.<sup>20</sup> The veils should be large.

Also a sumac-red veil, a lilac turban, a Dabīqī kerchief, and a towel.<sup>21</sup>

<sup>13</sup> The source referred to in n. 12 states that Ṭōv received a loan of 4 1/2 dinars. The writer assures the Tustarīs that he would try to get a good price and would pay no attention to Ṭōv's claims. People mostly preferred to keep business and charity separate, albeit religion taught otherwise. See *Med. Soc.*, II, 142.

<sup>14</sup> Here the writer goes over to the dual. Whether the original letter had been addressed to only two of the three brothers, or whether this change is due to the faltering Arabic grammar of the writer, cannot be decided.

<sup>15</sup> Fine Egyptian linen.

<sup>16</sup> Persian *sarpič*, lit., what is wound around the head. The Hebrew alphabet possesses no sign for č (tsh); it is expressed here by *g*, representing Ar. *j*, which substitutes for Persian č.

<sup>17</sup> During the time of the Fatimid caliph al-'Azīz (thirty years prior to the writing of our letter), Dabīqī turbans 100 cubits long were the great fashion in Egypt (see Mez, *Renaissance*, ch. 25, p. 433). Our business letter shows that the Muslim antiquarian Maqrīzī reporting this knew what he was talking about. The incredible fineness of the Dabīqī together with the predilection for huge, bulging turbans explains these strange measures. It is impossible to define the length of the cubits intended here exactly since they varied from town to town. Two feet might be a reasonable average. See Hinz, *Masse*.

<sup>18</sup> A wide-meshed linen interwoven with gold or silver threads, often mentioned in the Geniza. "Set," i.e., complete attire of a woman, containing at least one robe, hood, and veil.

<sup>19</sup> A *mawfūrī*, not yet found elsewhere.

<sup>20</sup> Khalūq is an aromatic plant (*galia muscata*, Wahrmond, *Handwörterbuch*, s.v.); probably its color is intended.

<sup>21</sup> Text: *mshfh*, which is either *mishshafa* with *n* assimilated, or *minshafa*

Please do not stop writing me about your welfare and your concerns so that I may, God willing, deal with them as is incumbent on me.

(Address in Arabic characters:)

(To) my lords, the noble elders, Abu 'l-Fadl, Abū Ya'qūb, and Abū Sahl, (that is,) Sahl, Joseph, and Abū Sahl,<sup>22</sup> the sons of Israel b. *Hdr*.<sup>23</sup>

(From) their servants Ephraim b. Sa'īd and Šāliḥ b. Ephraim.

### 3 ITALIANS TRAVEL TO THE EAST

#### Beginning of Eleventh Century

This unusual letter is written on vellum in large, calligraphic characters, the like of which were used in books and Torah scrolls, not in letters. The writer no doubt was a professional scribe himself, for he sends greetings to his teacher, a copyist (*sōfēr*), and to another scribe. He was an Italian, whose native city cannot have been situated far away from Amalfi, for he refers to persons living there by their first names only and asks to forward greetings to a person in Naples. Since he was so pathetically shy of water, he was perhaps a landlubber, which would suggest Benevento, known as having a Jewish community as his hometown. His Hebrew betrays the high standard of biblical and talmudic studies among the Jews of Italy at the turn of the first millennium, to which this letter must be attributed.

with *n* omitted by the scribe. One "towel," often described as imported from Europe (Sicily), regularly appears in lists of trousseaux. It was large enough to serve as a wrapper for clothing sent overseas (TS NS Box 323, f. 1). This ceremonial family towel probably was destined only for guests wiping their hands after washing them before and after meals.

<sup>22</sup> Abu 'l-Fadl was the kunya of Sahl; Abū Ya'qūb, that of Joseph; and Abū Sahl, that of Sa'īd. The repetition of the kunya Abū Sahl instead of inserting the name Sa'īd probably was a mistake.

<sup>23</sup> The father of Israel was called Jacob. I take *Hdr* as Heb. *Hadar* (*hayešivā*), "Splendor (of the yeshiva)," an honorary title conferred on him because of his donations.