

other, [praying] to Him who hears Israel. [. . .] and he got upon a piece of wood.

(Here the first page of the manuscript breaks off. On the reverse side the remainders of six lines are preserved, which despite their entirely fragmentary character are not without interest. Line 2: “. . . much from the sea,” alluding probably to the fact that many of the goods were salvaged, as happened often with ships foundering near the seashore. Line 4: “Money is nothing . . . I shall replace,” which shows that the traveler had suffered losses, but felt himself able to recover. Finally, he announces that his companions would settle in Tyre, then the greatest port on the Lebanese coast, which he, however, defines as situated in the Holy Land,<sup>10</sup> and expresses the confidence that God would place him<sup>11</sup> there, too, to become “a plantation of pride.”

Thus it seems that the letter was written in Egypt. The disappointing teacher was perhaps Elhanan b. Shemarya (first quarter of the eleventh century), who created much publicity for his school, but whose eminent position was mainly inherited from his renowned father.

The persons in Italy to whom greetings were extended bore Hebrew names, with one exception: Benin(et)to, spelled *bynyntw.*)

#### 4 FROM AMALFI, ITALY, TO AL-MAHDIYYA, TUNISIA

Middle of the Eleventh Century

Both literary sources and the Geniza documents indicate that close relations existed between Tunisia and (then Muslim) Sicily on the one hand and the seaports of southern Italy, such as Amalfi and Salerno, on the other. But no correspondence illustrating these relations has been preserved, since the recipients of letters from either side had no reason to carry them all the way to Fustat, where the Geniza chamber was located. The fragment translated below

<sup>10</sup> This confusion originated through the ambiguity of the Arabic term *Shām*, which comprised Syria, Lebanon, Israel, and Jordan.

<sup>11</sup> The manuscript clearly has *we-yiḥā'ēnī*.

escaped destruction for a simple reason: its reverse side is almost completely blank. The recipient, on his way from Tunisia to Egypt (as anticipated in the letter), took it with him in order to use it as scrap paper; and he had already done so, as we see, for the upper part of the sheet (the reverse side of which also contained the address) is torn away.

The fragment begins in the middle of a sentence. The writer is a merchant from Alexandria who had bought pepper, *lubān* (see n. 9), and other Oriental goods in order to sell all or part of them in Amalfi on his way from Egypt to Tunisia. The ship in which he traveled, pursued by pirates or an enemy, was forced to flee as far north as Constantinople and again had to take refuge in Crete. Thus, instead of the fifteen to twenty-five days normally required for the journey from Alexandria to Amalfi (see *Med. Soc.*, I, 325-326), they were on the high seas for over seventy days. When they arrived in Amalfi they found the economy of the city ruined by a heavy imposition. The writer and his companion, or perhaps companions, waited now until business in Amalfi would revive and meanwhile sent instructions to his business friend in al-Mahdiyya regarding the disposition of his goods that had been sent directly from Egypt to al-Mahdiyya. He was sure that his business friend would leave for Egypt long before he himself would be able to leave Amalfi for al-Mahdiyya.

In a postscript, he reports that he and one of his companions went to see Yuḥannā (John, an exclusively Christian name), presumably a merchant in Amalfi who owed something to the person referred to, and that, as of that time, John had neither given a reply nor delivered anything.

Whether Yuḥannā was an Arabic-speaking Christian, perhaps originating from Tunisia, who had settled in Amalfi, or a native Amalfian, I am unable to decide. During the eleventh century, Christianity was still very much alive in Tunisia, as is evident from the material presented in Idris, *Zirīdes*, pp. 757-764, and index, p. 872, s.v. *christianisme*.

An Italian version of this letter was provided by me as an appendix to a paper by Armand O. Citarella, “Scambi commerciali fra l’Egitto e Amalfi in un documento inedito della Geniza di Cairo,” *Archivio Storico per le Province Napoletane*, 10 (1970),

3-II. See also Citarella's "Patterns in Medieval Trade: The Commerce of Amalfi before the Crusades," *JESHO*, 18 (1968), 531-555.

University Library, Cambridge, Taylor-Schechter Collection, TS 8 Ja 1, f. 5.

. . . we suffered hardship and did not hear about the escape,<sup>1</sup> for we came near<sup>2</sup> to the ca[pital] Qaṣanṭīnā (Constantinople). After we had cruised on the sea for eighteen days he<sup>3</sup> attacked us again. Then it became evident that they<sup>4</sup> were on their way to one of the coasts of the Muslims. So we returned to Crete.<sup>5</sup> We did not cease to gulp our blood<sup>6</sup> until we arrived in Amalfi after more than seventy days.<sup>7</sup> This was not enough: We came to a town whose property had been confiscated<sup>8</sup> and we did not find anyone who would buy any goods from us, be it pepper or olibanum (lubān)<sup>9</sup> or anything else, not even one dirhem's worth. We put our goods in warehouses and are now waiting for God's help. I do not worry for my own things. I worry for you and your goods that I am unable to sell. I really regret this very much.

(The writer now gives orders to the recipient in al-Mahdiyya to sell one bale of indigo and six bales of flax and smaller items which had been sent by him from Egypt to Tunisia directly. From the proceeds the recipient was permitted to take a loan of 280 dinars<sup>10</sup>

<sup>1</sup> The escape—probably of another ship which had reached al-Mahdiyya a long time ago and about which the recipient had written to the writer.

<sup>2</sup> Text: *ḡmā 'alā*.

<sup>3</sup> Pirates or an enemy previously referred to.

<sup>4</sup> Such a change from singular to plural is not uncommon. The writer now had in mind the ships of the attackers.

<sup>5</sup> This shows that they had already reached a point west of Crete.

<sup>6</sup> Text: *najra' dimā'anā*. I have not seen this phrase before. It probably means: we lived in utmost dread, but could also mean: we tried to inspire ourselves with courage.

<sup>7</sup> Text: *nayyif wa-sab'in*, usually defined as meaning: approximately 72-73.

<sup>8</sup> Text: *balad musādar*, mostly used in connection with the confiscation of the property of a high government official.

<sup>9</sup> Whether *lubān* really means here and in many other Geniza letters the frankincense plant cultivated in South Arabia and Somaliland, or something quite different (high-valued benzoin, as I learned from O. W. Wolters) needs further inquiry. As far as my memory goes, the term occurs only in letters going from Aden westward.

<sup>10</sup> The letter indicating 80 is not clear.

for himself and to leave the balance with a friend until the writer would arrive in the Tunisian port. The recipient was also to take with him to Alexandria a qintār, or hundredweight, of sarcocol, *anzarūt*,<sup>11</sup> belonging to the writer, as well as a pitcher with oil and a jug with soap for his family. After greetings to three other friends, overflowing to the margin, he adds:)

Please inform the elder Abu 'l-Faḍl b. Salmān that I went to see *Yuḥannā* (spelled *yhn'*), I and the elder Abū Sahl, and gave him the letter,<sup>12</sup> but he did not answer it. Until now I have been reminding him, to find out what he would say. If I get something from *Yuḥannā*, I shall send it to him.

## 5 REPORT FROM RAMLE, PALESTINE

*About Merchandise and Provisions Bought in Tripoli and Tyre, Lebanon, and a Disastrous Sea Voyage Back*

Shortly after 1065

Ramle, situated between the Mediterranean and the hills of Judea, served as the administrative and commercial center of Palestine until the advent of the Crusaders. Coastal Caesarea, the other Palestinian town mentioned in this letter, had occupied the same position in Roman and Byzantine times, but had decayed into insignificance by the eleventh century.

The writer of the letter was a Maghrebi merchant, who commuted between Egypt and the eastern shores of the Mediterranean, trading, since at least 1050,<sup>1</sup> Egyptian flax in exchange for the silk of Lebanon and Cyprus and the cotton of Syria. Our letter must have been written in 1066 or so, when Egypt was ravaged by a terrible famine, and the merchants were eager to secure whatever

<sup>11</sup> A plant used as a drastic purgative and as a medicament for the eyes. A common article in the Mediterranean trade.

<sup>12</sup> Sent by the recipient to the writer. The names Abu 'l-Faḍl and Salmān were common in the eleventh century and are not helpful in identifying the man.

<sup>1</sup> JNUL 1, *Nahray* 23, dated spring 1052, and referring to previous trips to the coasts of Lebanon and Syria.