

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] Qaṣanṭinā (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 muṣādar*, 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 qinṭār, 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.

victuals they could lay hands on for their families and friends.<sup>2</sup> To be sure, figs, raisins, and other fruits were staple exports of southwest Asia to Egypt.

The recipient was Nahray b. Nissim, a Tunisian merchant-banker, scholar, and communal leader, who spent most of the last fifty-one years of his life (1045-1096) in Egypt. Chapter IV is dedicated to him.

University Library, Cambridge, Taylor-Schechter  
Collection, TS 8 J 19, f. 27, *Nahray* 84.

I trust in God.<sup>3</sup>

*Praised be the Lord who resurrects the dead.*<sup>4</sup>

My master and lord, may God prolong your life, make your well-being and happiness permanent, and keep away from you all evil in his mercy. I am writing from Ramle on the 8th of Teveth (approximately: January), feeling well in body, but being worried in my mind.

#### A. THE SEA VOYAGE

I set sail<sup>5</sup> for Jaffa, the port of Ramle. But a wind arose against us from the land. It became a storm, chasing and driving us out to the high sea,<sup>6</sup> where we remained for four days, giving up all hope for life. We were without sails and oars, the steering rudder and the sailyards were broken, and the waves burst into the barge (*qārib*). We cried: "Allāh, Allāh," for our ship was a mere riverboat (*'ushārī*), small as a ferry (*ma'diya*). We threw part of the cargo overboard, and I gave up all hope for my life and my goods. I vowed 1 dinar from the proceeds of the *silq*.<sup>7</sup> Finally, God in his glory and

<sup>2</sup> The writer emphasizes this in a letter, sent seven weeks earlier from Tripoli, Lebanon (TS Or 1080 J 17, *Nahray* 85).

<sup>3</sup> The use of this verse from the Qur'ān (11:56) as superscription of a letter written in Hebrew characters was rare and confined, if I am not mistaken, to Maghrebis.

<sup>4</sup> A benediction pronounced when someone had been rescued from a great danger.

<sup>5</sup> From Tyre, Lebanon, whereto he had traveled from Tripoli, as announced in the letter referred to in n. 2, above.

<sup>6</sup> Text: *ḵharaj lanā riḥ min al-barr bi-naw sayyabnā* (see Dozy, *Supplément*, 1, 710b) *daḵhal bina waṣṭ al-baḥr*. East winds blowing from the desert in November are occasionally very pernicious.

<sup>7</sup> The strange use of the biblical word *shēsh* for silk as a kind of secret

majesty granted us to reach Caesarea, but my clothes and goods were completely soaked. I did not find a place to stay and to spread out my things. So I took domicile in the synagogue, where I remained for five days.

#### B. IN RAMLE

When I arrived in Ramle, I had to pay customs to a degree I am unable to describe. The price in Ramle of the Cyprus<sup>8</sup> silk, which I carry with me, is 2 dinars per little pound.<sup>9</sup> Please inform me of its price and advise me whether I should sell it here or carry it with me to you in Miṣr (Fustat), in case it is fetching a good price there. By God, answer me quickly, I have no other business here in Ramle except awaiting answers to my letters. About 3 dinars worth of goods of mine were jettisoned from the barge; may God, the exalted, restore the loss. If you want me to carry the silk with me, instruct Makhlūf b. Muḥsina<sup>10</sup> (write him!) to pay me 2-3 dinars, or have Abū Barhūn<sup>11</sup> write to his brother Ya'qūb (Jacob) to give me this sum so that I do not have to sell my clothing or the silk.<sup>12</sup> A man like you does not need to be urged. I know that my money and yours<sup>13</sup> are one. Moreover, you have a share in this. I need not stress the urgency of a reply concerning the price of silk from Shām (Syria-Lebanon) and from Cyprus, and whether I should sell it here or carry it with me.

code originated perhaps in the time when the trade in this commodity was not without danger.

<sup>8</sup> Spelled here *q'brsy*, which expresses, I assume, a pronunciation of the word as *qēbris*. Below: *qbrsy*.

<sup>9</sup> Meaning the Egyptian pound, which had approximately the weight of the present day USA pound; see *Med. Soc.*, 1, 360. The pound of Ramle weighed about five times as much (see Hinz, *Masse*, p. 30). The standard price for an Egyptian pound of silk was 2 dinars (see no. 1, n. 11, above). Understandably, our traveler hoped to obtain more.

<sup>10</sup> "Substitute" (given by God for a child that had died), "son of The Beneficent Woman."

<sup>11</sup> "Father of Abraham," meaning a man called Isaac.

<sup>12</sup> Even important merchants did not carry much cash with them. The price of the jettisoned goods worth 3 dinars had been sufficient for the traveler to cover his expenses, had they not been lost.

<sup>13</sup> Text: *al-mālayn*, literally, "the two moneys."

## C. CONSIGNMENTS FROM TRIPOLI

I wrote you from Tripoli and informed you that I had sent four bundles of cotton and twenty-one pieces<sup>14</sup> of figs to Alexandria. I wrote to M. Mardūk,<sup>15</sup> asking him to receive this shipment. With Yaḥyā b. al-Zaffāt<sup>16</sup> I sent two bags and one basket with wheat, red earth,<sup>17</sup> and two baskets with raisins and figs. I instructed him to deliver these to Mardūk. Your share in the basket (of wheat)<sup>18</sup> and the figs is 8 dinars, and your share in the silk also 8 dinars. I hope you have written to Alexandria instructing Mardūk to take care of the matter, and also to attend to the sacking (*ḳhaysh*). Also write him to send you either the proceeds, or the goods to be bought for them, or broken dinars.<sup>19</sup> And by God, answer. I have no business other than waiting for your letter. By God, do not neglect this. By the bread (we have eaten together), as soon as this letter arrives, send the answer to the warehouse of the representative of the merchants, Abu 'l-Barakāt Ibn al-Ḥulaybī.<sup>20</sup> A man like you needs no urging.<sup>21</sup>

## D. NEWS FROM FUSTAT

Describe to me the prices in the city (Fustat), and especially with regard to wheat and bread—I need not urge you to write me about this—as well as concerning the state of my father and the family. Special regards to you, and also to those who ask about me. Please honor me with any concern you might have. Regards also to Joseph

<sup>14</sup> The dried figs were pressed into huge cakes.

<sup>15</sup> The Ar. equivalent of Mordechai, a name common in those days only among Persian Jews. This Mardūk (b. Mūsā) was from Tripoli, Libya, and a representative of the Maghrebi merchants in Alexandria.

<sup>16</sup> "Trader in pitch, tar," an important commodity (used, e.g., for caulking ships).

<sup>17</sup> Ar. *maḳra*, mentioned in the Geniza letters regularly as used for writing on bales.

<sup>18</sup> This is clearly evident from the letter written in Tripoli (n. 2, above). The recipient's share might have been very small, as little as one-tenth. That letter made mention also of a consignment of rice.

<sup>19</sup> To be sold to the caliphal mint. In one way or another, the writer wished to have his money in Fustat, and not in Alexandria. It was winter, wherefore he intended to travel overland direct to Fustat.

<sup>20</sup> "The little man from Aleppo," known also from other Geniza documents.

<sup>21</sup> Such importunate repetitions were the rule, not the exception.

and his mother.<sup>22</sup> How are they? Regards also to our friends. And Peace.<sup>23</sup>

(Address:)

To my lord and master Abū Yaḥyā Nahray, son of Nissīm, (*may he r(est in) E(den)*), may God prolong his life and make permanent his honored position, strength, and happiness.

From Ya'qūb (Jacob) b. Salmān al-Ḥarīrī<sup>24</sup>

(Repeated in Arabic characters. What follows is also in Arabic characters:)

To Fustat, the House of Exchange, the office of Ibrāhīm b. Ishāq, the Jewish banker.<sup>25</sup>

(Note of the mail agency; in another pen and script:)

To my lord, the shaykh Abū 'Alī al-Ḥusayn b. Mufrij, from 'Abd b. Muḥammad b. Qaysar.

Fustat, if God will. Deliver and receive reward.<sup>26</sup>

## 6 NOTE FROM ALEXANDRIA

*About an Errand Done in Spain for a Business Friend in Fustat*  
Ca. 1110

This short note is perhaps more characteristic of Egypt's role in the Mediterranean trade than the many long business letters preserved in the Geniza. It speaks of gold from Morocco, silk from Spain, ambergris, which was found in the Atlantic Ocean, and of musk and civet perfumes, which were imported from far away Tibet

<sup>22</sup> The writer's wife and son. This shows that the recipient was a close friend and, most likely, a relative.

<sup>23</sup> Written in Ar. characters, in abbreviated form.

<sup>24</sup> "The Silkworker," a family name.

<sup>25</sup> This is Abraham b. Isaac the Scholar (see *Med. Soc.*, II, 512, sec. 10), whose intimate friendship with Nahray is evident in Geniza documents through forty-five years (1050-1095).

<sup>26</sup> The receiving mail agency is identical with that mentioned in *Med. Soc.*, I, 292, bottom. The Ramle agency was different from that forwarding the letter (TS 13 J 36, f. 6). Qaysar is derived from Caesar, but is a good old Arabic name. "Deliver and receive reward" obviously means here "Payment after delivery."