

or Indochina and the Malay archipelago. It is addressed to a merchant bearing the family name of al-'Afsī, which means a trader in gall, an important commodity brought to Egypt from northern Syria. Even more remarkable than the geographical diversity of the origin of the products mentioned is the extremely casual way in which the writer speaks about his safe arrival in Alexandria from Spain. It is also noteworthy that both the sender of the letter and its recipient, as well as the three merchants mentioned in it, are known from other Geniza documents.

Bodleian Library, Oxford, MS Heb. d 66 (Cat. 2878), f. 52.

IN (YOUR) NAME, O MERCI(FUL).

A

I am writing these lines to my lord, the illustrious elder—may God prolong your life and make permanent your exaltedness and high position—to inform you that the Kohen al-Fāsī¹ sent to me a bar of gold for you from Fez with the notification that he sold civet perfume for you for 7 1/2 and 1/8 Andalusian mithqāls. He asked me to sell the gold in Almeria² and to buy silk with the proceeds. However, I did not think that this was the right thing to do, and decided to leave the gold as it was sent to me. Now, God in his mercy decreed my safe arrival, whereupon I sent it to you with Binyām al-Rashīdī,³ the perfumer. Kindly compose my mind by the acknowledgment of its arrival. When I come, I shall, God willing, deliver the letter addressed to you in person.

B

One of the friends of the aforementioned Kohen sent a quantity of ambergris with me and asked me to sell it through you; you are to buy me good "fivers" of musk⁴ for the money—may I never be deprived of you and never miss you. The weight of the ambergris

¹ A family name derived from the town Fez in Morocco. Here, we find that merchant actually living in Fez.

² A port on the east coast of Spain.

³ A family name derived from Rosetta, Egypt. Binyām is Benjamin.

⁴ Musk was traded in "fivers," *ḫhumāsiyyāt*, perhaps a package weighing 5 dirhems (*India Book*, passim).

is 225 dirhems, together with the piece of cloth and the canvas. It will be brought to you by my brother Abu 'l-Barakāt. As soon as you take delivery, sell it without any slackness or delay for whatever price God grants and apportions.

C

Accept from me the best of greetings, *and may the welfare of my lord continue to increase forever*. As soon as the ambergris is sold, buy "fivers" of good musk with the money. If I can do anything for you, please honor me with the task. Do not be offended by the form of these lines.⁵ I wrote them *on the Eve of the Sabbath*, after having taken my bath. Therefore, please—may God honor you—excuse me and remove any blame from me. *And Peace!*

(Despite this polite request, the writer repeats a third time the demand that the ambergris should be sold immediately after its arrival. He also asks to be informed about its weight without the wrapping.)

(Address, written upside down, as usual:)

To Miṣr (Fustat), may God protect it, to my lord, the illustrious elder Abū Sa'īd al-'Afsī⁶—may God prolong his life and make permanent his honored position and prosperity.

His grateful Abu 'l-Ḥasan, son of Khulayf, the Alexandrian—*m(ay he rest in) p(eace!)*

7 FROM A SPANISH MERCHANT IN FEZ,
MOROCCO, TO HIS FATHER IN ALMERIA, SPAIN

1140 or slightly earlier

This rare specimen of a business letter going from Morocco to Spain provides interesting information on several points. Cheating

⁵ The letter is written calligraphically, but its style is somewhat brusque and importunate.

⁶ "The Merchant of Gall." This was a family name. The person concerned, as we learn from this and other Geniza letters, was a "perfumer," a dealer in perfumes and drugs.

at customhouses seems to have been uncommon in the eleventh and twelfth centuries, probably because the rates, as the Geniza data show, were reasonable. Customs were paid not only at frontiers, but at the gates of any larger city, and no discrimination was made between local people and foreigners. When, however, such discriminations were introduced, as was done in Sicily at the end of the Muslim rule, then we often read in the Geniza papers about attempts of foreigners to pass off their baggage as belonging to local people. Here, we learn the same about Fez.

The letter also gives us a good general idea of the writer's business. He dealt with precious textiles, probably manufactured in Cairo, or even farther east; with copper imported from Spain; with products of the eastern Mediterranean, such as indigo and scammony; and with the staples of the Orient, such as lac. Naturally, he exported Moroccan local products, for instance, antimony, which is expressly mentioned. The letter also casts interesting sidelights on his commercial techniques and his general frame of mind.

The letter is written with a thin pen, then in common use in Spain, on good quality, whitish paper. But the form of the Hebrew script is entirely different from the fleeting cursive cherished by the more literate men of that country and is similar to the types used in the Muslim East. In his Arabic usage, however, the writer, even if originally an Easterner, had adapted himself to his environment; he writes *hlw*, "sweet," meaning "good," and *mly*, "full," meaning "rich"—usages not found in the contemporary Geniza letters from the eastern Mediterranean. He might be identical with the writer of letter no. 60, but that one is written with a thick pen, which makes it difficult to compare the two scripts.

The first five lines are badly damaged, but most of the missing words can be safely restored.

How did this letter find its way into the Cairo Geniza? It is reasonable to assume that the recipient, like countless others, fled to escape from the Almohad persecutions (as from 1145, approximately) and found his refuge in Egypt.

University Library, Cambridge, Taylor-Schechter
Collection, TS 12.435.

IN (YOUR) NAME, O MERCI(FUL).

To my master and lord, my succor and supp[ort], may God prolong your life and m[ake permanent your high rank] and lofty position. May he crush those who envy you and not withhold from you [success]. May he substitute me [as ransom for all evil that might befall you and may he] never leave me [alone, being without you]. May he let you suc[ceed] in obeying him and eliciting his favor. May he unite us in happiness, soothe my solitude by your appearance and relieve my grief through your presence. Lo, he listens to our prayers and answers quickly.

I arrived in Fez on Friday, 2nd of Marheshvan.¹ At our arrival we were met by the *informers* and they found out exactly the number of the loads (belonging to us). They went to the superintendent of the customs and told him. On Sunday morning he sent for me and for Ibrāhīm and said to him: "Are you prepared to give an oath that all that arrived with you is entirely your property and that this man has no share in it?" Then he said to me: "Are you prepared to swear that nothing at all was brought by you to this place?" There was much talk, but he clearly knew that five camel loads had arrived with me. After great troubles it was agreed that the governor² would take 10 mithqāls; the superintendent of the customs, 3; the informers, 2; and the employees, 1/2. I was sick for three days out of anger and sorrow. Had I possessed here the same courage as I usually have in Almeria, I would have escaped with less than this. But I consoled myself with the solace of one who has no choice. I also said to myself, perhaps God may grant us some compensation for the loss. On the day of my arrival it was 3 and 2; today it is 2 and 4.³

By God, if you can avoid it, do not go abroad. If God wills, I shall set out for Marrākesh with the very first company⁴ traveling

¹ Late September, early October.

² Ar. *qā'id*, corresponding to *amir* in the East. Large cities, such as Alexandria or Fez, were administered by a military governor.

³ Obviously an example of profit already made. I understand the numbers thus: on the day of the writer's arrival a certain standard commodity was worth 3 dinars and 2 qirāts; at the time of the writing, it was already (3 dinars and) 2-4 qirāts.

⁴ The long way between Fez and Marrākesh led mostly through inhabited country, not through deserts. Therefore, one traveled not in a big caravan,

there, and, if necessary, inform you about the situation, whereupon you may make your decision. I have no other aim, by God, than saving you from trudging along the streets and traveling overland.⁵ May God turn everything to a good end!

I should also like to inform you that I spread out the *nişfiyya*⁶ clothes, and the very first garment that fell into my hands was spoiled by water in all its folds. I went out of my mind, but God, the exalted, had willed that only this one was spoiled. This happened because we had much rain on the way, but God, the exalted, granted rescue. As of late today I sold ten pairs of them for a total of 80 dinars, inclusive of the ten bad ones⁷ and the one spoiled by water.

I bought first-class, excellent antimony (kohl), about twenty qintārs, the qintār for 1 dinar. If you think that I should buy more, send me a note and let me know.⁸

For the lac I was offered 24 (dinars). I am holding on to it, perhaps I shall get 25.⁹

The good elastic (?)¹⁰ copper is worth here 9 dinars a qintār.

but in smaller groups, called *ṣuḥba*, large enough for protection but of limited size, making for mobility. See *Med. Soc.*, I, 277.

⁵ Although one had to cross the sea to get to Morocco from Almeria, it was not the sea voyage, but the uncomfortable locomotion by land which was disliked most.

⁶ A precious piece of clothing, ordered in Cairo by a merchant from Aden (*India Book* 50), or sent as a present from Fustat to Lucena, Spain (*ibid.* 102). *Niṣfiyya* was apparently sold in pairs. See Dozy, *Supplément*, II, 680b, and Serjeant, *Islamic Textiles*, 15-16 (1951), 66.

⁷ Ar. *wakhsh*, a Maghrebi word. The receiver of the letter knew of course that the clothes sent were of differing quality.

⁸ Morocco was a country of export for kohl. In Egypt the price of this commodity was five times as high. See MS Westminster College, Cambridge, England, Fragmenta Cair. Misc. 50 (dated 1098) and TS 12.434 (approximately the same time).

⁹ Lac was an Oriental commodity very much in demand in the Mediterranean countries and referred to in scores of Geniza letters and accounts. Its price per qintār varied from 15 dinars (TS 13 J 29, f. 10, l. 16 from al-Mahdiyya, Tunisia, eleventh century) to 50 (TS 13 J 19, f. 29v, l. 6, from the same place, early eleventh century).

¹⁰ Copper was one of the great exports from Spain to the East, and many types are mentioned in the Geniza. But "elastic (lit. palpitating) copper," *raṣīf* or *riṣīf*, has been found only here. Prices varied from 5 to 25 dinars, certainly depending on quality, place, time, and circumstances.

Scammony¹¹ is worth 3 dinars a pound. Inquire, and if it reaches that price in Almeria, sell it. Otherwise send me one half (of what we have) and leave there the other half.

All our lac and *niṣfiyyas* are in the house¹² of Ibrāhīm, for I did not want to leave anything at all with me in the house. I may be able to sell all the *niṣfiyyas* in Fez.

Please take notice that indigo is very much in demand here in Fez.

I should also like to inform you that everyone, Muslims and Jews, tell me that Ibn Ṭalw¹³ will pay me all he owes us, as soon as I arrive,¹⁴ for he is very rich today.

Hatred (of Jews)¹⁵ is rampant in this country to a degree that, in comparison with it, Almeria is a place of *salvation*.¹⁶ May God the exalted grant rescue and a good end in his mercy.

(Address, right side:)

To my lord, succor, and support, my father,

Japheth ha-Levi b. 'Ullah (may he) r(est in) E(den).¹⁷

¹¹ Scammony, called in Arabic and in the Geniza letters by its Greek name *saqamūniya* (from which the English word is derived, too), or more frequently, as here, *maḥmūda*, "the praiseworthy (medicament)," is a plant growing in the countries of the northeastern Mediterranean, whose resin was and still is used as a strong purgative. It was exported as far as Morocco in the West and India in the East. The price given here is paralleled by other data in the Geniza papers.

¹² Ar. *bayt*, which, in the East, then meant "room." But here, I believe, the meaning "house" is more appropriate. Since these Spanish merchants constantly traveled to Morocco they possessed a house there. Many other such instances are alluded to in the Geniza papers. See *Med. Soc.*, I, 61.

¹³ Could be pronounced also *Ṭilw*. This old Semitic word has many meanings in Arabic, designating in general a young mammal.

¹⁴ In Marrākesh, it seems. One sees again that collecting one's assets was as time consuming as selling one's merchandise.

¹⁵ The problem of medieval "antisemitism" is treated in *Med. Soc.*, II, 278-284.

¹⁶ This remark is sarcastic, meaning that Almeria itself had a bad reputation in this respect. A letter from that town (*India Book* 129, l. 24 and top, l. 4) says: "The 'hatred' has eased a little."

¹⁷ It is likely that this man was a son of 'Ullā ha-Levi al-Dimashqī, the recipient of nos. 53-56, below. That a Damascene merchant settled in Fustat should send one of his sons to Almeria, Spain, to take care of his business there, was natural in the early twelfth century when the direct route between Spain-Egypt had become much frequented.

Forward, and you will be rewarded!¹⁸
 (Left side):
 His son [¹⁹
 May he become his ransom.

8 MERCHANTS FROM EGYPT AND THE MAGHREB VISIT GENOA AND MARSEILLES

Early thirteenth century

The fragment translated is the third sheet of a business letter. This is very uncommon, since merchants and clerks used to cut their paper in such a way that one sheet, at most two, provided sufficient space for what they intended to write. Equally uncommon is the content: Mediterranean trade in the thirteenth century. Very little material about this subject has been found in the Geniza. This is mainly to be explained by the fact that by that time most of the well-to-do merchants had moved from Fustat, where the Geniza was located, to Cairo. But since references to the India trade are found from this period in considerable number, a shift from the Mediterranean to the India trade must have occurred in the course of the twelfth century.

Script and style, and, in particular, the reference to the Jewish judge Menaḥēm of Cairo and the mail carrier Khudayr assign this sheet approximately to the second or third decade of the thirteenth century.¹ The recipient of the letter is constantly addressed with

¹⁸ Namely, by God, who will grant you a safe journey as reward for your kindness. Ar. *balligh tUSDā*, for which in Tunisia and the East they wrote *tu'jar*.

¹⁹ The end of the line is torn away, but I believe nothing was written here. Not mentioning one's own name was an expression of particular affection and intimacy.

¹ *Med. Soc.*, II, 514, sec. 26.

the title "our lord." This address could refer either to the Nagid, or head of the Jewish community, or its chief judge. Abraham Maimonides, the Nagid at that time, was a court physician and was not involved in business as was the person addressed here; moreover, he is expressly mentioned in the letter. On the other hand, the chief judge, Hananel b. Samuel,² like his father, appears in several Geniza documents as a munificent benefactor.³ From the profession of Jewish judge alone one could not acquire riches. Our letter shows him as a kind of silent partner with a brother, presumably Solomon (b. Samuel), to whom greetings are extended in the letter of a French rabbi, writing in 1211, after Hananel, but before Abraham Maimonides, who, at that time, was still very young.⁴

After having written four pages of about forty lines each, the writer was obviously tired and made a great many mistakes (see n. 11). But his handwriting is of remarkable clarity and regularity.

Strange as it may seem, this letter is the only instance known to me from the "classical" Geniza period of Jews from Islamic countries doing business in Genoa and Marseilles.

University Library, Cambridge, Taylor-Schechter
 Collection, TS Arabic Box 53, f. 67

A. STUDY, NOT BUSINESS

... he should neither sell nor buy, and your servant imposes this on you since you are in a position like that of the tribe of Issachar.⁵

² *Ibid.*, 515, sec. 31.

³ TS 10 J 17, f. 4, *India Book* 37. Mosseri L 291, l. 10, ed. Mann, *Texts*, I, 463, TS NS Box 321, f. 13. He is referred to as "our lord" in ULC Add. 3415, dated 1237.

⁴ TS 24.41, l. 29, ed. Mann, *Texts*, I, 410.

⁵ Deuteronomy 33:18. This biblical passage was applied to two brothers, one dedicated to study and staying at home like Issachar (cf. 1 Chronicles 12:32), and the other traveling abroad and earning money for both (see Ginzberg, *Legends of the Jews*, II, 144). The writer of our letter had a son in Fustat who was supposed to study, but obviously was more interested in business. His father admonishes the judge to look after him, since he, the judge, stayed in Fustat and derived profit from his business connection with his widely traveled brother.