

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.

B. PRICES IN ALEXANDRIA

Goods are selling well here: Indigo, 22 (dinars).⁶ Olibanum,⁷ around 7. Cinnamon, 12.⁸ Brazilwood,⁹ 60. But the quickest sales are those of pepper.¹⁰ The sale price is standardized at 46 per load leaving the city.¹¹ Here in Alexandria one has to pay 1 dirhem for each dinar's worth brought into the city, and for local sales beyond one-fourth (of the quantity imported), 5 dinars per load plus 1 1/2 dinars for the dragoman and the agent.¹²

C. VISITS TO GENOA AND MARSEILLES

I have made an agreement with Khuḍayr¹³ to carry this basket¹⁴

⁶ Meaning: a qintār, or 100 pounds of this commodity were sold for 22 dinars. Many types of indigo—Indian, Yemenite, Egyptian, Palestinian (called 'Amtānī, from 'Amtā, a locality in the Jordan valley), and Persian—were on the market, and used to be weighed with different types of weights. Their prices also differed widely. A price comparable to the one mentioned here is cited in an almost contemporary inquiry submitted to Maimonides, viz., 37 dinars for 1 1/3 qintārs = 27 3/4 per qintār (Maimonides, *Responsa*, I, 153). In the Geniza we also encounter prices of 20 dinars (TS 12.248, *Nahray* 75) and less per qintār.

⁷ Ar. *lubān* (see no. 4, n. 9, above). In an almost contemporary letter from Alexandria (TS 16.215, l. 35, *India Book* 187), the price is 6 1/2 dinars per qintār. But in a price list from Fustat dated 1133 (TS 13 J 33, f. 1, *India Book* 85), it is 12 dinars.

⁸ Almost the same price (12 1/2 dinars per qintār) occurs in a letter from Alexandria written about 170 years earlier. Bodl. MS Heb. a 2 (Cat. 2805), f. 18, l. 17, *Nahray* 44.

⁹ Ar. *baqqam* (see no. 1, n. 9, above). This dye was often traded in camel loads, *himl*. This must be the case here. In TS 13 J 33, f. 1, dated 1133 (see n. 7), a load cost 90 dinars, but two hundred years prior to our letter (Bodl. MS Heb. c 27, f. 82 [Cat. 2835, no. 44], top) the price for a qintār was 10-12 dinars in al-Mahdiyya, which is very close to the price quoted here. One standard load contained five qintārs.

¹⁰ For the prices of pepper see *Med. Soc.*, I, 220-222, and E. Ashtor, *Histoire des Prix . . . dans l'orient médiéval*, Paris, 1969, pp. 138ff.

¹¹ Text *wyqf b' (for bay') kl khrj 46 'l-hml*. For other slips see nn. 17, 21, 22, 24, 25, 31, 34.

¹² This thirteenth century customs tariff is considerably higher than those in force in Fātimid times. See *Med. Soc.*, I, 343-344.

¹³ Diminutive of *Khiḍr*, the Muslim name of the prophet Elijah, common in various derivations, also among eastern Jews (cf. the name *Khadduri*). This Khuḍayr operated a commercial mail service between Alexandria and Cairo. For example, see David Kaufmann Collection, DK IXv, l. 4 (a letter to the judge Elijah b. Zechariah).

¹⁴ With saffron. See n. 15.

and to bring it to you for 6 (dirhems)—he says for 8¹⁵—and I have notified you to keep the sum either with yourself or deposit it with our lord, the head (of the community).¹⁶ In the hand of your servant there are still . . .

If the saffron cannot be sold in its entirety, I suggest you place the rest with Abū 'Alī b. Dā'ūd, if this is all right with you, or anyone else in whom you have confidence. Any sale should be certified by a notary, except if my lord is present during the counting and weighing of the money paid and if it remains in your possession.

This consignment is the property of R. Isaac b. Ibrahīm al-Tu'ātī,¹⁷ but *no one knows this*¹⁸ except myself. I mention this to you, so that in case anything happens,¹⁹ our lord may give witness against me in favor of its real proprietor. By God, my only intention was to fulfill my duty. These are little matters, to reveal which would be embarrassing to me.²⁰ For²¹ the proprietor of this saffron happened to be in Genoa when I was in Marseilles, and when he heard of me, he traveled there and delivered my goods to me. May God grant him a good reward. No heedlessness is permissible with regard to his rights.

¹⁵ The final price would be fixed after arrival.

¹⁶ Unlike his father Moses Maimonides, Abraham presided over a rabbinical court in person. The writer thought that it would perhaps be proper to deposit the saffron or its price in the trust of a court other than that of his brother, the judge, since the latter was a silent partner in the business.

¹⁷ Tu'at, usually spelled *Touat* in the French way, is an oasis in the Western Sahara, formally inhabited also by Jews (see A. Chouraqui, *Les Juifs d'Afrique du Nord*, Paris, 1952, p. 34). Touaty is a family name still found among Jews from North Africa (see M. Eisenbeth, *Les Juifs de l'Afrique du Nord, démographie et onomastique*, Alger, 1936, p. 182). The person mentioned here is certainly the most ancient attested and datable instance of its use. The name does not necessarily mean that either the man involved or his ancestors had lived in that oasis, but might simply indicate that he or they used to travel there for business. Text: 'l-t'wty for 'l-tw'ty.

¹⁸ In Hebrew, indicating that this should remain a secret. Why the Maghrebi merchant wished that the shipment should not be identified as his, is not evident. The writer seems not to have ascribed much importance to this wish (see n. 20), but was resolved to act as asked.

¹⁹ If the writer should perish on his forthcoming business trip. See n. 27, below.

²⁰ This passage seems to mean that revealing the name of the real proprietor would not have made much difference.

²¹ Text: 'l', a slip for 'ln, li'ann.

D. MAGHREBI SILVER

May our lord not neglect the dirhems sent with Khudayr. Send a messenger to the Maghrebis²² as soon as the letters for them arrive. Charge my account for his payment and I shall charge theirs.²³ If they have already left for Alexandria, open the letters and read them. You will find in them the weights of the (various consignments of) silver indicated. Then may our lord—may God give him success—go up to Cairo to the sons²⁴ of his h(onor), and h(oliness), (our) m(aster and) t(eacher) Menaḥēm and supervise the change, since the Maghrebis will not be present²⁵ themselves, take the equivalent (in gold) immediately, send it with Khudayr and tell him that this sum is the price of the *qaṣab*.²⁶

Any service or request our lord may have, please honor your servant with it. And do not forget to include me in your prayers.²⁷

P.S. I. ABOUT TWO TURBANS

I also sent you with Khudayr a paper bag with two plain white turbans (to be sold at a) minimum price of 150 (dirhems). May our lord kindly place them with 'Imrān al-Marrākushī (Amram of Marrākesh, Morocco), if he is in town, otherwise, with al-'Afif al-Ḥarīrī,²⁸ who may give them to anyone for sale, but should not

²² Text: *ḳhlḳh*, a slip for *ḳhlḳhm*.

²³ Silver dirhems had been sent to Alexandria for Maghrebi merchants returning from an Oriental trip. The writer forwarded the dirhems with Khudayr to Fustat-Cairo according to instructions received. Letters for these merchants, also sent to him, were forwarded by him with a different mail carrier—a usual measure of precaution. The writer was informed of the contents of these letters, but he could not know where the merchants were at the time. He therefore asks the judge not to wait for an opportunity to forward the letters, but to send them with a special messenger, which could be expensive. If those merchants were still south of Cairo, the judge would have to await their instructions; if they had already arrived there, they would take care of the silver themselves. The writer gives instructions in case that they had already left for Alexandria on their way home.

²⁴ Text: 'wl', for 'wl'd, *awlād*.

²⁵ Text: *yṣrw*, for *yḥṣrw* (*yaḥḍuru*).

²⁶ Linen decorated with gold and silver threads. It seems that for reasons of safety the messenger had been told that he carried *qaṣab*.

²⁷ For the writer was again embarking on a sea voyage as announced no doubt in one of the two sheets lost.

²⁸ The first word is a title ("the honest"), mostly given to officials or agents

neglect the matter. They should obtain a price higher than here in Alexandria, namely 75 apiece, but in any case not less.²⁹

P.S. II. ABOUT SOME OTHER TEXTILES

I wrote to the elder al-'Afif concerning the shawl³⁰ of Ibrāhīm, but he is a poor letter writer. I have also mentioned to our lord that it is worth 3 (dinars). The mantles³¹ are with Khudayr or with 'Iwaḍ b. Jawhar al-Mubashshirī.³² He will arrive with the transport on Tuesday,³³ for he will leave Alexandria on the last day of the Holidays.

Your servant congratulates our lord on this feast. May God grant our lord *many pleasant years and may he live to behold the beauty of the lord and to visit every morning in his Temple*.³⁴

P.S. III. ABOUT PIOUS FOUNDATIONS

(Twelve, largely effaced lines and one long line running on the margin indicate that the writer was an almoner who supervised the collection of the rents of houses donated to the community and the distribution of the available funds to the poor and other deserving persons. He speaks about six collections of rents, his own letters to the Nagid in this matter, and about one Ma'ānī, of whom it was said that he was only a cantor.³⁵ A man with this name is mentioned

of low rank, the second a common family name, "Silkworker"; see no. 4, n. 24, above.

²⁹ The turbans were probably imported from Sicily (see S. D. Goitein, "Sicily and Southern Italy in the Cairo Geniza Documents," *Archivio Storico per la Sicilia Orientale* 77 [1971], 14). The price of 75 dirhems (approx. 2 dinars; see *Med. Soc.*, 1, 382, secs. 60, 61) is paralleled in the Geniza documents.

³⁰ Ar. 'arḳī, probably called so because its breadth was larger than its length. Used by both men and women and often sent as a gift. The price mentioned here was normal. In TS NS J 344, probably from the same time: "about 60 dirhems." See also Ashtor, *Prix*, p. 168. The examples could be multiplied.

³¹ Text: 'rdh for 'rdyh (*ardiyah*) plural of *ridā*.

³² 'Iwaḍ ("Compensation," so called when born after an elder brother had died) was the son of the freedman "Jewel," whose former master was called Mubashshir.

³³ Text: 'l-th'l'th, for 'l-th'l'th'.

³⁴ Psalm 27:4, a common good wish for the holidays in the Geniza letters. He writes "in the temples," *bhyḳlyw*, slips to the very end.

³⁵ Ar. *muṣallī*, a late term.

as an influential communal official in Alexandria in a letter from this period.³⁶ But the passage is too damaged for safe reconstruction.)

9 AFTER CAPTURE BY INDIAN PIRATES

A Representative of Merchants in the Capital of Egypt, Stuck in Broach, North of Bombay, after Having been Captured by Pirates, is Invited by his Brother-in-law in Mangalore, Southern India, to Join him in his own Ship on the Way back to Aden

Ca. 1145

The writer of this letter, Maḥrūz ("Protected by God") b. Jacob, was a *nāḥhodā*, or shipowner, who commuted in his own boat between Aden and India. Occasionally we find him in the capital of Egypt, where his sister was married to the recipient of this letter, Judah b. Joseph ha-Kohen, representative of the merchants there. Judah's own sister was married to Maḍmūn, representative of the merchants in Aden (see no. 37, introduction). Thus we see that these India traders bolstered their economic positions by carefully arranged family bonds.

Judah b. Joseph ha-Kohen was the grandson of his namesake, the Rāv, or Master, who was so prominent in the Jewish community of Egypt during the second half of the eleventh century (see no. 35, nn. 1, 2, below). In more elaborate addresses he, like his grandfather, is called "Scion of the Gaons," and, like the latter, he himself signs documents with the title "Scion of Yehōseph (same as Joseph), the righteous priest," referring to the first member of the family, who, after emigrating from Baghdad to Jerusalem, became president of the High Court there at the end of the tenth century.¹ Such transitions from religious and legal to commercial leadership and vice versa were natural to the bourgeois society of

³⁶ TS 13 J 21, f. 30, l. 12, ed. J. Braslavsky, *Eretz Israel* 3, p. 208.

¹ See the genealogical lists and discussion in Mann, *Jews in Egypt*, II, 62-63.

the medieval Middle East and common to the three monotheistic religious communities.²

Bodleian Library, Oxford, MS Heb. b 11, f. 22 (Cat. 2874, no. 21).
India Book 133.

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

*"Your hand shall be lifted upon your adversaries, and all your enemies shall be cut off."*³

I am writing to you, my lord and master, my chief, the illustrious elder—may God prolong your life and make permanent your prominent position, may he be for you and with you and guard you in all your affairs. I am writing to you out of a strong longing; may God make us meet together presently in the best circumstances in his favor and bounty, if God wills, for it is up to him and it is in his power alone.

I wish to inform you, my lord, that I had previously written to you at Tāna.⁴ Meanwhile the accompanying boat of the ship⁵ arrived, and its soldiers told us that the ship in which your excellency my lord traveled was taken by pirates, and I was very sad about this. But afterwards I praised God and thanked him, when I heard that your life was saved. *"O that men would praise the Lord for his goodness."*⁶ Everything can be replaced except life; I would indeed like to mention to you, my lord, that your servant had a large shipment in the boat of Fōfalī ("Betel-nut merchant"), then God ordained what happened (i.e., everything was lost); in the end, however, God compensated me—praise and thanks to him. Likewise, my lord, do not be sad. God will replace your loss to you soon;

² India with its castes might have been different.

³ Micah 5:8. Intended as a good wish for the pirates.

⁴ Spelled Thana today, "21 miles northeast of Bombay city," S. Maqbul Ahmad, *India and the Neighbouring Territories, etc.*, Leiden, 1960, p. 106, and passim (see index). This and the following Indian localities occur also in other Geniza letters.

⁵ A large, ocean-going ship carrying freight and passengers was usually accompanied by a smaller vessel serving as lifeboat. The soldiers stationed on it for the protection of the ship on which Judah traveled, made off as soon as the pirates made their appearance.

⁶ Psalm 107:8. Usually said on such occasions.