
The Eleventh Century

THE ELEVENTH century was the golden age of the overseas trade on the Islamic side of the Mediterranean. Over half of the letters translated in this volume originated in that period (see the Introduction, sec. 1). Most of the details on international commerce provided in *Med. Soc.*, I, refer to that century and the same is true of the general Introduction to this book. Thus, there is no point in providing this chapter with another introduction. Letters 11-14 and 17 illustrate the affairs of the leading merchants, while nos. 22 and 25 are typical examples of full-fledged business letters of the middle class. The reader is advised that these two groups represent the most numerous and most instructive business letters in the Geniza. A short summary of my finds with regard to the Mediterranean trade of the eleventh century is found in my essay "Mediterranean Trade Preceding the Crusades," *Diogenes* 59 (1967), 47-62.

11 FROM THE CORRESPONDENCE OF TWO GREAT MERCHANT FAMILIES

Ca. 1010

Great families, strong through their wealth, far-flung connections, and sheer manpower, loom large in the Geniza correspondence of the eleventh century. But even in letters directed from one family partnership to another, it was customary that an individual, normally the senior member of one family, addressed his opposite number personally. Thus, in our letter, the address is written in the name of the two firms: the three senior Tustarī brothers in Cairo-Fustat are addressed by two Tāhertī brothers in

with a hidden

Qayrawān, Tunisia.¹ Two other Tāhertī brothers were in Egypt at that time. But throughout the letter Mūsā (Moses), the dean of the Tāhertīs, speaks to Sahl, the eldest of the Tustarīs (and father of the famous Abū Sa'd, who later became a most influential person at the Fatimid court).²

The goods referred to in this letter mostly were high-priced textiles, each of which was traded individually. Such items were given at weddings and other special occasions and transmitted from parents to children as precious heirlooms. Our writer emphasizes that the most valuable textiles were the old ones.

The warm words of admiration and friendship in this letter are by no means commonplace. They are all the more remarkable as the writer was a prominent representative of rabbinical Judaism—he became indeed a “member” of the Jerusalem yeshiva in, or around, 1022³—while the Tustarīs belonged to a dissident sect, the Karaites.⁴

As our letter shows, the two Tāhertī brothers then in Egypt were still novices in the Eastern trade at that time, while in 1024 they were already well established there.⁵ The junior Tustarīs, the three sons of Sahl, are referred to here as “your boys” and the writer clearly had known the father of the three senior brothers. Thus our letter was probably written during the first decade of the eleventh century.

University Library, Cambridge, Taylor-Schechter Collection, TS 12.133

A. WORDS OF THANKS AND APPRECIATION

I am writing to you, eminent elder and leader of the profession—may God prolong your life, make your welfare and happiness per-

¹ For the Tustarīs see no. 2, above, and no. 69, below; for the Tāhertīs see *Med. Soc.*, 1, 181, and no. 1, n. 23, above, and nos. 12, 13, 25, 26, 27, 30, 63, 71, below.

² Killed in 1047. See *Med. Soc.*, 1, 165 and here, no. 20, sec. B, below.

³ TS NS Box 320, f. 16, ed. S. D. Goitein, *S. W. Baron Jubilee Volume* (forthcoming).

⁴ S. M. Stern, “A Petition to the Fatimid Caliph al-Mustansir Concerning a Conflict within the Jewish Community,” *REJ* 128 (1969), 211.

⁵ See no. 63, below.

manent, and increase his b[enefactions] to you and for you—on Marheshvan 9th.⁶ I am well and in good health, thank God.

Your letters have arrived, my lord—may God support you—and I was happy to learn that you were well. I praised God for this and asked him to make this permanent in his grace.

Likewise, my lord, [the letters] of my two brothers—may God keep them—have arrived reporting how kind you have been to them and how much care you have given to their affairs. [They] thanked God⁷ for this, my lord, in the presence of all those who know you⁸ and those who do not know you.

And I ask God to multiply people like you in the nation,⁹ for you are its ornament. By my father—(may he) r(est in) p(eace), although I am now back with my family, I am extremely unhappy¹⁰ to be separated from you. For being with you makes the soul strong with God. I ask God to make your present state permanent, and to keep you alive until you see your boys as my lord, the elder,¹¹ (may he) r(est in) p(eace), has seen you, namely that they will presently become even more successful than you.¹²

B. SHIPMENT FOR THE TOP MERCHANT IN THE CITY

Your shipment for the elder, my lord Abū Zikrī¹³—may God support him—has arrived, my lord. These are unique, exquisite pieces, each having feathering¹⁴ on its . . . ,¹⁵ incomparable. The festive

⁶ Early October. The letter was sent overland, not in a boat.

⁷ Instead of saying: “He praised him,” one said: “He thanked God for having created such a man.”

⁸ From here to the end of the next paragraph “you” is in the plural.

⁹ *Umma*, meaning Jews, whether Rabbanite or Karaite.

¹⁰ Ar. *mutanaghghiḍ shadīd al-tanaghghud*, a strong expression.

¹¹ The addressees’ father.

¹² Saying to a father that his sons were or would be “better” than he made him happy. But the construction of the sentence is awkward: *ḳamā annahum al-sā'a ḳhayr minḳum ḳull waq[ḏ]*. There is a dot on the first *ḳ*, meaning perhaps that *ḳamā* is to be deleted.

¹³ About him see the next selection, no. 12, below.

¹⁴ Ar. *murayyash*, a common term in the Geniza trousseaux (also in the form *murāyash*). Perhaps derived from *rīsha*, lit., “feather,” a needle with precious stones. See Dozy, *Supplément*, 1, 575a.

¹⁵ Text: *fi m'z'h*. The reading is clear.

with a bird

costume¹⁶ is even finer. It has been said that he was [offered] 60 dinars in cash for it. But he refused to sell it, for he wished to wear it himself. The lead-gray robe is better than everything. I have forwarded your letters to him.¹⁷

The servant, my lord, did not have this much inconvenience.¹⁸ The man¹⁹ seeks your friendship, [. . .] and (marital) connection with you and wishes to derive profit from your honored position and your advice for his undertakings. Had he a son fit to serve you as an apprentice, he would have been honored by this.

His letters will be sent to you in the pilgrims' caravan.²⁰

C. THE WRITER'S OWN SHIPMENT AND ORDERS

The cloaks²¹ sent by you have arrived, and I wish to thank you for your kindness and exertion in this matter. You noted also that the rest of the order had been carried out. All you have sent, my lord, is fine, but I wish to ask you to buy everything all over again, for the three robes striped with curved lines,²² as well as the white robe which I wanted to have for me as a mantle, were taken from me by a man who imposed on me. Present circumstances make such

¹⁶ Ar. *ḥulla*, denoting the complete festive attire of either a man or a woman. For 60 dinars a family could live in those days for about three years. One could have a *ḥulla* of course for a fraction of this price. The highest price for a *ḥulla* found thus far in the Geniza outside this letter was 20 dinars for one ordered in Tinnis by Nahray b. Nissim. See TS 10 J 20, f. 16, l. 12, *Nahray* 128, where his correspondent writes somewhat incredulously: "If you are serious about the order of the *ḥulla* for this price write how you want the color and other details."

¹⁷ Refers to letters received after the shipment referred to before. The Tāherīs served as representatives of the merchants and as such received letters for persons momentarily out of town.

¹⁸ The Tustarī had apologized for causing some inconvenience to Abū Zikrī's *ghulām*, slave or employee, presumably by charging him with some errand for himself. Our writer replies that Abū Zikrī would not mind; had he had a son fit to serve the Tustarīs as an apprentice, he would have sent him to them.

¹⁹ Abū Zikrī.

²⁰ Abū Zikrī had sent letters to Moses for forwarding to Egypt. Moses did not enclose them with this letter, but waited for the caravan of the pilgrims to Mecca which, although moving slowly, was regarded as safer.

²¹ Ar. *ḳisawāt*, could serve also as robes (see below) and bedcovers.

²² Ar. *mu'arraġ*, the translation according to Steingass, *Persian-English Dictionary*, p. 1271a, and Wahrmund, *Handwörterbuch*, II, 841b.

things necessary; I cannot go into detail about this. May God save us from what we fear. All I could say was that those garments were for sale.²³

I would like the robe to be deep red, as red as possible, and the white and yellow also to be of excellent color. I did not like the color of the yellow which arrived. Also, the white robe which is to serve as mantle should be of the same quality. The best robes manufactured are the old ones. It should be cut in two pieces.²⁴ Its price should be 2[5 dinars], or as you deem proper; 1 dinar more on a robe having your approval is preferable to one not so good.

The Sig[laton]²⁵ robe is of extreme beauty, but it is not the color which they ordered. For this is white and blue, but instead I w[ished to have] one of the blue onion color,²⁶ an open color, according to your taste. I wish to have the very best, as chosen by you.

I wish also to have two lead-gray robes with borders "filling your eyes," each worth about 25 dinars, or a little more, provided they are first class. Act according to your own judgment. I know that you, may God support you, are eager to save a dirhem for me more than I do, and you have also the capacity to do so.

Also (buy me) a white *rāzī* robe.²⁷

The festive costume which I have ordered before, should be like the one you sent to [my lord] Abū Zikrī Judah—may God support him.²⁸ If you cannot obtain one like that, then it should be red, striped with curved lines, like the robe which (my lord) Abī

²³ Tāherī wanted to have these pieces for persons who had individually ordered them and partly also for his own family. But he was forced to sell to Muslims under the veiled (or open) threat that the old discriminatory laws on clothing for non-Muslims would be invoked. They were indeed renewed, perhaps only temporarily, under the Zirid ruler of Qayrawān, Mu'izz b. Bādīs (1016-1062). See Idris, *Zirides*, p. 767.

²⁴ While the robe, *ṥhawb*, used as upper garment, was cut in one piece, this one, which should serve as a *ḳiswa*, or mantle, was to be cut in two.

²⁵ This heavy fabric of damask silk was extremely popular in the Middle Ages, and, in later times, almost regularly deep blue (see Heyd, *Commerce du Levant*, II, 700). In our period, it used to be, as here, of two colors.

²⁶ Ar. *baṣālī*. I assume the reference is to the pale purple color of an onion cut open. The term "open color," *maftūḥ*, seems to mean "light."

²⁷ Made in Rayy, a great industrial center in Iran of those days, or in the style imported from there.

²⁸ See n. 13 above.

with a hulla

Ibrahīm 'Ayyāsh²⁹ had had made for himself and I do not care if it costs 1 or 2 dinars more.

The package forwarded by my lord Abi 'l-Ḥasan (?) 'Alī, the son of the sister of the elder 'Allāl,³⁰ has arrived. But the 'attābī³¹ does not have such good going here. All that was obtained for the package of 'attābī was 20 dinars.

(There follow about twenty partly effaced words).

D. URGENT APPEAL FOR THE WRITER'S BROTHERS

I have another wish, my lord. Should a caravan set out in which trustworthy Muslims, who have given you sureties, will travel, let the merchandise of my brothers be sent with them as if it were yours. They would profit from this in many respects.³²

The balance for the garments ordered will be sent to you with the pilgrims' caravan in a purse of gold dinars.³³

My lord, I do not need to entreat you to take care of my brothers—may God keep them—their soul lives only³⁴ . . . because they are with you. In a place where you are they are no strangers. May God protect me through you.³⁵

(There follows a short, only partly preserved passage dealing with a lawsuit concerning a flask worth 22 dinars, probably containing musk).

²⁹ Meaning "Long-lived," one of the many Ar. equivalents of Heb. *Hayyim*. This 'Ayyāsh was a brother-in-law of Abū Zikrī and his commercial representative in Egypt (see no. 12, below). He should not be confounded with his namesake, frequently mentioned in the Geniza, who lived a generation later.

³⁰ It was common practice for a young man to serve as an apprentice with an uncle. Long after having become an independent merchant he still would be styled "the nephew of Mr. So-and-So."

³¹ 'Attābī (from which Eng. *tabby* is derived). A silk taffeta, originally produced in Baghdad, was manufactured at that time in many different parts of the Islamic world. See Serjeant, *Islamic Textiles*, index, s.v., and no. 60, n. 4, below.

³² It would be safer, cheaper, and also quicker. For otherwise they would have to wait for the next seafaring season opening late in April.

³³ Meaning that the payment would be in cash and immediately and not by calculating the reciprocal debts and assets.

³⁴ Partly effaced and torn away and followed by four other effaced words.

³⁵ Meaning: By keeping you alive and prosperous God protects also me.

E. CONCLUSION

A letter from you, my lord, with a report on your state and welfare and any order you may have will give me pleasure and will be sure of my recognition and thanks. Best regards to your dear selves and to my lords Abū Naṣr, Abū Sa'd, and Abū [Maṣṣūr]³⁶—may God let you see all your hopes fulfilled in them—and to all encompassed by your care.

(Address. Right side:)

To my elder and illustrious leader Abu 'l-Faḍl, Abū Jacob, and Abū Sahl, Sahl, Joseph, and Sa'id, the sons of Israel, may God prolong their lives.³⁷

(Left side:)

From Mūsā and Isaac, the sons of Barhūn, (may his) s(oul) r(est in peace).

12 RECIPROCAL SERVICES

Ca. 1020

This short letter, written on vellum, illustrates well what has been described in *Med. Soc.*, 1, 164-169, as *informal business cooperation*. Abū Zikrī Judah, the leading Jewish merchant of Qayrawān, referred to in sec. B of the preceding letter, asks one of the Tāhertī brothers sojourning in Egypt to assist his brother-in-law in the management of his, Judah's, affairs in that country. On his side he had taken all the necessary steps to ensure that the Tāhertī's goods would be sent from Tunisia to Egypt safely and quickly.

Judah was able to do so because he was closely connected with the

³⁶ These were the sons of Sahl, the eldest of the three senior Tustarīs, who alone is spoken to in the letter. See, e.g., Mann, *Texts*, 1, 375.

³⁷ It was customary to address a person first with his honorific byname, the *kunya*, followed by a blessing, and then to give his full name. The names are to be understood therefore as follows: Abū 'l-Faḍl Sahl, Abū Jacob (rather Ya'qūb, but spelled here without *w*) Joseph, Abū Sahl Sa'id.

It should be noted that in Tunisia, in this period, the *kunya* was often introduced by Abī, not Abū. Since there was no complete consistency in this matter and in order to avoid confusion I spell it Abū throughout.

with a h