

25 JOSEPH TĀHERTĪ OF AL-MAHDIYYA,
TUNISIA, CONTINUES A PARTNERSHIP*Alexandria, Egypt*

Ca. 1063

University Library, Cambridge, Taylor-Schechter
Collection, TS 16.163.A. THE ADDRESSEE'S ILLNESS AND PROSPECTIVE TRAVEL
TO TUNISIA

I am writing to you, my master and lord—may God prolong your life and always keep you well and happy, from al-Mahdiyya on the 5th of Elul (August). I am well and prosperous, thanks to God, the lord of the worlds. Your letters, which were sent in the ships, arrived, and I was happy to learn from them that you were well and healthy, for which I thanked God. Only he, the exalted, knows what I felt when the courier arrived without a letter from you, and when R. Nahray wrote me that you were seriously ill. Then I saw a letter of Ibn al-Samarqandī¹ to Khallūf,² mentioning your illness, which worried me very much. Finally, your own letters arrived with the ships, whereupon I praised God and thanked him for what he had bestowed upon me³ and you, and I am asking him to continue his beneficence to you, until you are restored to complete health. I was also glad to learn from your letter that you will be coming to us next year—may God ordain a safe journey for you and unite us under the best of circumstances in his grace and generosity.

¹ A family name, derived from the town of Samarkand in Central Asia. About this person see no. 23, n. 15, above.

² The writer's maternal uncle who sent no. 22, above.

³ In accordance with the refined courtesy of the age, the addressee's restoration to health is a particular favor of God bestowed on his friend, the sender of our letter.

B. THE PROPOSED DISSOLUTION OF PARTNERSHIPS
SHARED BY THE ADDRESSEE, THE SENDER'S FAMILY AND OTHERS

I had, indeed, intended to make a list of all that arrived here from you and of what I had dispatched to you, and to send it on. When, however, your letter with the announcement of your coming arrived, I decided to leave it until you arrive. I intend to dissolve this partnership, insofar as it still exists, to settle the accounts of all concerned and to send them with the couriers. For I have refrained from going overseas this year only in order to clear up my accounts with everyone, and in particular with the daughters of my brother⁴—may God, the exalted, enable me to do so. You, too, with God's help, should dissolve what is in your care, buying and selling for whatever prices God may grant, and come down⁵ with the first travelers. Do not tarry, coming with the last.

C. ACKNOWLEDGMENT OF GOODS DISPATCHED
BY THE ADDRESSEE

The goods sent by you arrived safely through God's grace, namely: two *barqalūs* (small bales)⁶ of pepper in the ship of the Sultan, four bales of flax in the ship of al-Jinānī ("Gardener"), and one bale of brazilwood, in partnership with R. Nahray, in the barge (*qārib*) of Mufaḍḍal.⁷ The large boat (*qunbār*) of Ibn Yūnus ("Son of Jonah") arrived in Sfax with one bale of flax. [. . .] You wrote that you assigned a part of the four bales of Ṭamāwī flax⁸ and of the two *barqalūs* of pepper to the sender of the 300 *rubā'īs* (quarter dinars). One of the two *barqalūs* was damaged in the ship, and I had great trouble with it, for it was above wheat, and when I gathered it, it had become discolored with whiteness, and was therefore difficult to sell.

⁴ Barhūn, our Joseph's elder brother, had died (see sec. G), and his heirs were entitled to his share in the family business. According to Jewish law—unlike the Muslim—daughters inherit the entire estate of their father in the absence of sons.

⁵ Traveling from Egypt to the West was called "coming down."

⁶ About this term see *Med. Soc.*, 1, 335.

⁷ About the types of boats see *Med. Soc.*, 1, 305-308.

⁸ An appellation derived from Ṭamā, a village in the Asyūṭ district of Upper Egypt.

D. SALE OF PEPPER IN AL-MAHDIYYA IN
FOREIGN CURRENCY (SICILY AND PISA)

The price of pepper this year is very low, a qintār being sold for 25 dinars, one half to be paid in rubā'iyas and the other in Pisan currency. On the former, there is an agio of half a qīrāt (approximately 2 percent) and on the latter of two-thirds. In fact, they charge more than a half for the rubā'iyya dinars, and I have to make this allowance. Most of the discolored pepper was sold by me for rubā'iyas. . . . I changed all money I received into fresh Nizārī dinars⁹ and sent them on with a detailed account. May God ordain their safe arrival and unite me with you.

E. DIFFICULTIES OWING TO THE BANKRUPTCY
OF A BIG MUSLIM MERCHANT

The owner of half of the 300 rubā'īs claimed his share of the pepper. I told him, however, that I was unable to fix the amount before our final account. The four bales of flax have not yet been sold, for Ibn al-Shiryānī is in arrears to the merchants with 4,000 dinars, and I had sold him a load of flax, in partnership with the elder Abu Ṣhāq, for 100 dinars. The merchants complained to the Sultan, may God give him eternal rule, who decided that he was obliged to pay all that was due to the foreigners, while the local people should grant him a delay until the foreigners would leave. We obeyed the Sultan's ruling, but I was kept back from all my other work owing to my dealings with him together with the other merchants, and who knows what worries I shall have with this [. . .] He was required to leave one third, to accept responsibility for another, and to pay the rest (immediately), but up till now nothing definite has been done. I sent one of the four bales to Sūsa¹⁰ and asked him to sell it, if there was a good market for it, and I shall send the rest there, if I am satisfied with the sales.

⁹ Dinars struck under the rule of the Fatimid caliph al-'Azīz (976-996), whose personal name Nizār also appeared on his coins. Al-Mahdiyya was one of the towns where his coins were struck. Coins some eighty years old could remain "fresh" because they were kept in sealed purses.

¹⁰ A seaport on the Tunisian coast, north of al-Mahdiyya. By "him" is meant a business friend of the sender active in Sūsa, who was also well known to the addressee.

F. QUERIES ABOUT THREE DIFFERENT PARTNERSHIPS

You wrote that you had dispatched mastic attached to R. Nahray's shipment. I have no exact knowledge about this partnership, I mean, whether that item has remained in Alexandria, or was dispatched to Sicily. Likewise, I find in your letters that you have sent sal ammoniac attached to a cargo of M. Abū Zikrī Judah¹¹ and of Abū 'Imrān Mūsā b. Abi 'l-Ḥayy; of this, too, I did not hear anything last year. Please in your letters to me explain the situation with regard to these packages, for I am worried about them. Furthermore, you mentioned that you bought two bales of S.rq.nāwī flax and another two bales of flax in partnership with R. Joseph, of which I also have no knowledge.

G. ABOUT A LIABILITY OF THE SENDER'S
LATE BROTHER

You noted that R. Nahray claimed from you the price of goods carried for him by my brother—(*may he*) *r(est in) E(den)*—out of the 100 rubā'īs paid to you by Ḥayyīm b. 'Ammār¹² on my account. He wrote me that he had assumed that the account was lost in the ship of Ibn Shiblūn,¹³ but was informed by Judah b. [. . .] that it was in Sicily and that he would forward it to him as soon as he arrived there. I answered Nahray that he should take no action before the arrival of the account from Sicily, whereupon full payment would be made to him . . . , if God will. Therefore, in case you have paid anything to him, take it back.

H. NOTE ABOUT MARKET CONDITIONS IN
AL-MAHDIYYA (ONLY PARTLY PRESERVED)

This year, the price of flax was very low in al-Mahdiyya and in Sicily. However, the spices sold well because of their rarity; likewise, nothing of the striped materials (*sanad*) and the fine linen (*sharāb*) came here either from Egypt or from Syria.

(In the damaged part, mention was made of goods which arrived at Qarqanna, an island ten miles off the Tunisian coast town

¹¹ Judah b. Moses Ibn Sighmār, the recipient of no. 28.

¹² Representative of the merchants in Palermo.

¹³ Family name, derived from *shibl*, "young lion."

Sfax, and in this town itself and how they sold. The writer further remarks that the list of prices, to be given on the reverse side of his letter [sec. K, below] was not reliable, as it came from the "people," meaning the merchants, and not from authorized officials.¹⁴ Finally, he states that he was unable to sell the *succus lycii* [*ḵhawḵlān*], as it was believed to serve only as a medicament for eyes.)¹⁵

I. DISCREPANCIES BETWEEN THE ACCOUNTS OF THE ADDRESSEE AND THAT OF ONE OF HIS PARTNERS

I had informed you that the account of Abu 'l-Faḍl Baruch Ibn al-Shāma¹⁶ was received by me, specifying what he had sold and what he had sent to you with each man. I compared it with your account, which was forwarded to me, and found that in the year 53,¹⁷ he had sent you a purse worth 25 dinars and 2 qīrāṭs in the boat of Ibn Abī 'Aqīl.¹⁸ You do not mention it however, in your account, either because you forgot to list it or because it has not arrived. Please let me know whether this purse has arrived or not, then I can write to Baruch and ask him to send me the name of the bearer, so that I can claim it from him.

(In the following, only partly legible, paragraph of this sec., are listed three other ships on which money was sent to the addressee by Baruch and also other seeming discrepancies between the two accounts.)

J. PURSES WITH DINARS SENT TO THE ADDRESSEE AND THROUGH HIM TO OTHERS

I sent you three purses, containing a total of 300 dinars, in Muḥammad's ship¹⁹ with Ḥassūn Ibn al-Ghazzāl ("Spinner"), one of

¹⁴ The reading of this word (*nās*), the first on the reverse side of the letter, is uncertain.

¹⁵ A medical plant frequently mentioned in the commercial correspondence of both the eleventh and twelfth centuries. Actually used for eye treatment. ULC Or 1080 J 5^v, margin.

¹⁶ "Beauty Spot," a nickname which became the name of a family represented in the Geniza by many of its members.

¹⁷ The Muslim year (4)53, which began on January 26, 1061.

¹⁸ The qādī of Tyre, Lebanon. Often mentioned.

¹⁹ Ar. *markāb*, probably different from the same shipowner's barge, mentioned in sec. C, n. 7, above.

200 for Mūsā b. Abi 'l-Ḥayy, one of 50 for Nahray, and another one of 50 for Ibrāhīm. Likewise, three purses in Ḥiṣn al-Dawla's²⁰ boat with Ibn al-Shanṭanalī, one for you, containing 100 dinars, one for Nahray with 50, and one for Mūsā b. Abi 'l-Ḥayy with 60 less one-eighth . . . , all coins whose legend is arranged in lines.²¹

K. LIST OF PRICES IN AL-MAḤDIYYA²²

The prices: Buṣīrī flax, first quality, from 18 to 16. "Bandages" (flax), from 7 1/2 to 6 1/2 [. . .],²³ Pepper 25, like Hell.²⁴ Brazilwood 17 sells slowly unless one gets a Spaniard for it. Lac 40, because of its rarity. Sal ammoniac, 2 manns cost 1 dinar; its price has fallen by now. Mastic, 1 qīntār, 25 dinars. Betel-nut = myrobalan, a mann as from half a dinar; yellow myrobalan, one qīntār—10 dinars. Both are in small demand. *Succus lycii*, 3 1/2 pounds—1 dinar because of its rarity. The . . . are not to be had, likewise tamarind. Sweet costus is generally in demand, but does not have a good price. As far as the . . . are concerned, from *qāquḷla* (cardamom) to *harnawa* (aloe) and nutmeg—buy whatever God puts into your mind.

(Two other, not clearly legible items are mentioned next. In the remaining three lines, which are badly damaged, the sender speaks about an account attached to this letter and about shipments forwarded by him in the ships of the Sultan and of al-Jinānī, mentioned above.)

(*Address*, as usual, written upside down on the bottom of the page:) To my master and lord Abu 'l-Faraj Yeshū'ā, son of Isma'īl—(*may he*) *r(est in) E(den)*—may God prolong his life, and make him always safe and happy.

²⁰ Honorific epithet of the Ketāmī-Berber general al-Mu'allā b. Ḥaidara Ibn Manzū, who, during his governorship of Damascus (1068-1075), played a fateful role in the dismemberment of the Fatimid empire.

²¹ Legends on coins were arranged in concentric circles or in parallel lines. The difference did not affect the value, but could serve as an identification mark.

²² When not otherwise stated, the quantities are in qīntārs, or 100 pounds. About the nature and significance of such lists see *Med. Soc.*, 1, 218.

²³ The barely visible text seems to say that for this commodity, as in the case of pepper (see sec. D, above), an agio of 1/2 qīrāṭ had to be paid per dinar.

²⁴ I.e., a very bad price.

From Joseph b. Mūsā, son of Barhūn, (*may he rest in Eden*).
 (The draft of the settlement, referred to in the introduction to nos. 23-26, above, is written in the space left blank between the end of the text and the address. The senior partner Khallūf b. Mūsā "Goldsmith," who is described here as Ḥamawī, that is, native of Ḥamāh in Syria, but still as resident in Palermo, Sicily, had made Moses Samarqandī [see no. 1, above] his attorney against Yeshū'ā. The matter came before the court of Mevōrākh b. Saadya, later Nagid, or head, of the Jews in the Fatimid empire, but was finally settled by "elders," who took the trouble to go through all the accounts and came up with a complicated settlement. Since the draft is in the hand of Yeshū'ā, we do not know, of course, whether this was the end of the story.)

26 WEAVING OF A *maqṭa'* CLOTH IN ALEXANDRIA FOR A BUSINESS FRIEND IN AL-MAHDIYYA

This note from a business letter sent by Mūsā b. Abi 'l-Ḥayy (see no. 25, sec. J) to Joseph Tāhertī, the writer of the preceding selection, no. 25, illustrates the personal services accompanying the overseas trade. R. Yeshū'ā, mentioned in the first line, is, of course, the recipient of no. 25, who had traveled to al-Mahdiyya as announced in that letter.

Alexandria was famous for its *maqṭa'*s, and here we learn that they were woven from cotton and linen, or linen alone.

Bodleian Library, Oxford, MS Heb. c 28 (Cat. 2876), f. 34, l. 29,
margin and top of page one.

From the threads belonging to R. Yeshū'ā I had two pieces of *maqṭa'* garments and one *baqyār* turban¹ woven. I took them from the weaver and handed them over to the blancher.² The rest of the (linen) thread is coarse, while the cotton is fine, so that it does not fit in with it. Therefore, if he wishes to have two *maqṭa'*s made

¹ Large-sized turban. A *baqyār*, 25 cubits long, was made in Alexandria for Nahray b. Nissīm (TS 13 J 15 f. 19, l. 3, *Nahray* 108).

² "Whitening" or "blanching" was different from bleaching.

all in linen,³ from the rest of the thread, let him inform me accordingly.

If he prefers, however, that I buy him some coarse linen to fit his thread, I shall have it made thus.

Together with the cotton he also had eight ounces of fine (linen) thread, which I did not notice when I gave them for whitening.⁴ Thus, if he wishes, I shall buy, in addition to it, five or so ounces, which will make roughly two *maqṭa'*s, the woof of which will be the cotton owned by him.

27 A DEDICATED PARTNER

From Tunisia to Egypt

This short letter of Nissīm b. Isaac Tāhertī, the cousin of Joseph (nos. 25 and 26, above) and brother of Barhūn (no. 30, below), is presented here partly as a contrast to no. 25 and partly as an illustration of the vicissitudes of prices and the total expenses for one single item. The recipient was the sender of no. 16, a prominent merchant, much of whose correspondence has been preserved.

University Library, Cambridge, Taylor-Schechter
Collection, TS 10 J 9, f. 3.

A. THE ARRIVAL OF A LATE BOAT

I am writing to you, my master and lord, . . . on the 25th of Elul (August-September)—may God bring this month to a good end for you, and accept these coming days from you and from me.¹ *May you be inscribed in the book of life, atonement and forgiveness, you, and I, and all Israel.*

My preceding letters have been sent to you in the boats, may God ordain their safe arrival. The boat of Ibn Mu'ajjir ("Lessor")² ar-

³ Lit., linen by linen, i.e., both warp and woof being linen.

⁴ This seems to imply that both the threads before weaving and the woven material were "whitened."

¹ That is, the prayers and the fast during the subsequent month of the High Holidays.

² A man who has apartments for lease. Such persons appear in the Geniza, but not the word in this form (could be read also *mu'jir*).