

Written on 17th Tammuz<sup>18</sup> 1513 of the Documents (July 9, 1202).  
Salvation is near.

Two copies were made and sent by way of the Hijāz.<sup>19</sup>

#### 45 AN INDIA TRADER WRITES TO HIS WIFE

Ca. 1204

A voyage to India necessitated an absence of two years at least, but often of many more. When the trader, as happened frequently, suffered shipwreck, or was plundered by pirates, he had to work first to replace the capital entrusted to him by others and, of course, his own, and then to make gains which would make his toilsome and dangerous trip rewarding. Years would pass in this endeavor. So long an absence put an intolerable strain on the trader's wife, a situation reflected in a number of Geniza documents. The letter translated here was selected because of its personal tone, the like of which is rarely found.

The writer was closely connected with another India trader whose son is mentioned, as traveling to India also, in a document from the summer of 1226 (see sec. F). The letter opens with a condolence on the death of Judge Manasse. In a deed from January 1214, reference is made to a house "formerly known as the home of the late Judge Manasse."<sup>1</sup> Section B reveals that the family back in Fustat was

<sup>18</sup> A day on which fasting is obligatory. I have found many letters written on that fast in July: perhaps the merchants were too exhausted to do much business and passed the time in letter-writing.

<sup>19</sup> Overland, and not, as usual, by sea, probably because all the ships of the season had already sailed.

This note makes sense only if we assume that what we have is the original draft which was destined to be retained in Maḍmūn's office. The manuscript gives the definite impression that this is indeed the case. It is written with utmost carelessness and the main letter lacks any conclusion. This draft found its way to Fustat as scrap paper: on the reverse side the Jewish calendar for the years 1207-1212 is jotted down. Someone who used that calendar took the paper with him to Egypt. After it had lost its practical value, he threw it away into the Geniza.

<sup>1</sup> TS 13 J 4, f. 14, ll. 9-11. This judge was active in the time of Moses Maimonides. Another judge Manasse, most probably his grandson, was a member of the court of Abraham, Moses' son. *Med. Soc.*, II, 124 and 514, sec. 27, are to be corrected accordingly.

saved "from the great terrors, the like of which have not been experienced for many generations," no doubt alluding to the famine and plague which ravaged Egypt in the years 1201-1203. Thus the summer of 1204 is the most likely date for this letter.

No address is found on the space destined for it. The writer might have had second thoughts about his own frankness (see sec. E) and not sent the letter off after all. In view of the poor state of preservation, some omissions, always indicated, have been necessary.

Jewish Theological Seminary, New York, E. N. Adler Collection,  
ENA 2739, f. 16, *India Book* 176.

In (Your name!)

#### A. DEATH OF THE JUDGE

Just is the Lord in all his ways, etc. (Psalm 145:17)

The righteous man has gone, etc. (Isaiah 51:1)

Comfort, comfort my people, etc. (Isaiah 40:1)

From their father who is yearning after them,<sup>2</sup> Solomon, son of Japheth, (may he) r(est in) E(den).

I am able to express only a fraction of my grief over the passing away of my lord, the illustrious leader, (*his*) *honor*, *greatness*, and *holiness*, our master and teacher Manasse, the wise and prudent judge, whose demise has hurt the hearts and caused pain to the souls. (*May the*) *memory of the* *righteous* be *blessed*. How deeply was I afflicted by his death and by his being taken away from those who relied on him. May God assign him a place with the saints, may he grant consolation to his mourners and heal their wounds and comfort them *in his great mercy*.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Decency required that a husband should not address his wife in a letter, a piece of paper which could fall into anyone's hand. Most Geniza letters destined for wives are addressed to another relative. Our letter, which is entirely directed to the writer's wife, starts in the third person plural masculine, continues in the second person plural, but ends in the second person feminine singular. The reader will be alerted on the transition to the latter.

<sup>3</sup> The judge was also a spiritual leader and as such his death was felt by the community like that of a father (see no. 34, above, and no. 60, below). The remarkable thing is that our writer, who had been away from Egypt for years and was facing manifold adversity, should express himself in such a way.

## B. ESCAPE OF THE FAMILY FROM THE PLAGUE

Would I try to describe the extent of my feelings of longing and yearning for you all the time, my letter would become too long and the words too many. But He who knows the secrets of the heart has the might to bring about relief for each of us by uniting us in joy.

Your precious letters have arrived; I have read and scrutinized them, and was happy to learn from them that you are well and healthy and that you have escaped from those great terrors, the like of which have not been experienced for many generations. Praise be to God for your deliverance and for granting you respite until you might be recompensed in a measure commensurate with your sufferings.

## C. THE DEDICATED HUSBAND

In your letters you alternately rebuke and offend me or put me to shame and use harsh words all the time.<sup>4</sup> I have not deserved any of this. I swear by God, I do not believe that the heart of anyone traveling away from his wife has remained like mine, all the time and during all the years—from the moment of our separation to the very hour of writing this letter—so constantly thinking of you<sup>5</sup> and yearning after you and regretting to be unable to provide you with what I so much desire: your legal rights on every Sabbath<sup>6</sup> and holiday, and to fulfill all your wishes, great and small, with regard to dresses or food or anything else. And you write about me as if I had forgotten you and would not remember you had it not been for your rebukes, and as if, had you not warned me that the public would reprove me, I would not have thought of you. Put this out of your mind and do not impute such things to me. And if what you think or say about my dedication to you is the product of your mind, believing that words of rebuke will increase

<sup>4</sup> This seems to show that the letters had been written by the trader's wife herself. In a letter dictated to a clerk or a relative she would not have gone to such length.

<sup>5</sup> Every time third person plural masculine, but I feel it would be odd to translate here "them" instead of "you."

<sup>6</sup> A Jewish scholar is bound by law to visit his wife once a week, namely on the night of the Sabbath, that is, Friday night (Talmud Bab. Ketubot 62b). For other occupations other rules are set, but our India trader and his wife clearly regarded themselves as belonging to the learned class.

my yearning—no, in such a way God will not let me reach the fulfillment of my hope, although in my heart there is twice as much as I am able to write. But he is able to have us both reach compensation for our sufferings and then, when we shall be saved, we shall remember in what situation we are now.<sup>7</sup>

## D. TRAVEL BEYOND THE COROMANDEL COAST

You rebuke me with regard to the ambergris.<sup>8</sup> You poor ones!!! Had you known how much trouble and expenses I have incurred to get this ambergris for you, you would have said: there is nothing like it in the world. This is the story: After I was resurrected from the dead and had lost all that I carried with me I took a loan of [. . .] dinars and traveled to countries beyond al-Ma'bar.<sup>9</sup> I checked my accounts<sup>10</sup> and found [ ] with "the decimals."<sup>11</sup> I took them and paid to one of our coreligionists who traveled back from al-Ma'bar to Aden . . . . . and for it he bought for you . . . (Three lines and the beginning of the words written in the margin damaged.)

## E. DRUNK BUT PIOUS

This was my way of life from the moment I left you until I arrived in Aden (and from there to India) and from India back to Aden.<sup>12</sup> Day and night I was constantly drinking, not of my free will,<sup>13</sup> but I conducted myself in an exemplary way<sup>14</sup> and if any-

<sup>7</sup> I am not sure that I have correctly understood the last two sentences.

<sup>8</sup> A highly valued perfume and medicine, one variety coming from the Indian ocean and one from the Atlantic (see *EP*<sup>2</sup>, s.v. 'Anbar). The wife was not satisfied with the quality or quantity of the ambergris sent.

<sup>9</sup> This is the Coromandel coast of south-east India. Very few of the thousand or so Jewish India travelers mentioned in the Geniza went as far as the Coromandel coast, but *beyond* it next to none. Our traveler had to take this exceptional trouble in order to replace his losses.

<sup>10</sup> An Arab proverb says: "When a Jew is broke, he checks his grandfather's old accounts," meaning that he always finds someone owing him something. This seems to be the situation alluded to here.

<sup>11</sup> Ar. *deqāi*. A counting machine, it seems, derived from Greek *deka*, ten. See S. D. Goitein, "Side Lights on Jewish Education from the Cairo Geniza," *Gratz College Anniversary Volume*, 1971, p. 98, n. 62.

<sup>12</sup> It seems that our letter was written there.

<sup>13</sup> But because of the grief over the separation from his beloved wife.

<sup>14</sup> No slave girls or whores.

one poked fun in foul speech in my presence, I became furious with him, until he became silent, he and others. I constantly fulfilled what God knows, and cured my soul by fasting during the days and praying during the nights. The congregations in Aden and in India often asked me to lead them in prayer,<sup>15</sup> and I am regarded by them and regard myself as a pious man.

(Here begins the reverse side; the twenty-four first lines are damaged beyond repair. Maḍmūn, meaning no doubt Maḍmūn b. David the trustee of the merchants in Aden, [see nos. 43 and 44, above] and a shipment of clove are mentioned.)

#### F. AS TO DIVORCE—THE CHOICE IS LEFT TO THE WIFE

Now in one of your letters you adjure me to set you free, then letters arrived from the old man<sup>16</sup> saying the same. Later Maʿānī (“Eloquent”) b. al-Dajājī (“Seller of Fowl”)<sup>17</sup> met me and told me that you<sup>18</sup> came to his house before he set out on his travel. You had given him nutmeg paste as a collateral<sup>19</sup> on a loan of 100 dirhems, but he released 20 dirhems to you. Please let me know whether this is correct, in which case I shall return this sum to him. He reported also that you had asked him to return to you letters which your late father—may God have mercy on him—had sent with him, but he had said to you: “I have already packed them away on the boat.”<sup>20</sup> Then you said that these letters were not written with your consent and you asked him not to deliver them to me. On this Maʿānī had replied: The judge might have meanwhile sent a message demanding something from the elder,<sup>21</sup> in which case the delivery of these letters might be useful to him.

<sup>15</sup> Distinguished guests were often given this honor. See *Med. Soc.*, II, 161-162.

<sup>16</sup> Her late father.

<sup>17</sup> See no. 46.

<sup>18</sup> From here to the end of this section she is addressed, as natural, in the second person singular feminine.

<sup>19</sup> Text: *duhn*, which can mean many different things. But since this is the wife of an India trader, I assume that here (as often) *duhn bān*, nutmeg paste, is intended.

<sup>20</sup> From Cairo-Fustat up to Qūṣ (see no. 42, n. 4, above) one traveled on the Nile.

<sup>21</sup> The writer of our letter.

Now, if this<sup>22</sup> is your wish, I cannot blame you. For the waiting has been long. And I do not know whether the Creator will grant relief immediately so that I can come home, or whether matters will take time, for I cannot come home with nothing. Therefore I resolved to issue a writ which sets you free.<sup>23</sup> Now the matter is in your hand. If you wish separation from me, accept *the bill of repudiation* and you are free. But if this is not your decision and not your desire, do not lose these long years of waiting: perhaps relief is at hand and you will regret at a time when regret will be of no avail.

And please do not blame me, for I never neglected you from the time when those things happened and made an effort to save you and me from people talking and impairing my honor. The refusal<sup>24</sup> was on your side, not on mine. I do not know whether this<sup>25</sup> is your decision or that of someone else, but after all this, please do not say, you or someone else: this<sup>26</sup> is our reward from him and our recompense. All day long I have a lonely heart and am pained by our separation. I feel that pain while writing these lines. But the choice is with you; the decision is in your hand: if you wish to carry the matter through, do so; if you wish to leave things as they are, do so. But do not act after the first impulse. Ask the advice of good people and act as you think will be the best for you. May God inspire you with the right decision.

#### G. GREETINGS, ERRANDS, GIFTS

(The concluding part is very much damaged. It began in the margin, much of which is lost, continued in the main part of the page, and returned to the margin, but was never completed. Clearly the letter was not dispatched; see also the introduction. Only continuous sentences are translated.)

<sup>22</sup> Meaning a divorce.

<sup>23</sup> A conditional bill of repudiation, which becomes valid as soon as she agrees.

<sup>24</sup> To accept a divorce offered by him before when his absence from home became too protracted.

<sup>25</sup> Demanding a divorce.

<sup>26</sup> The dispatch of the conditional bill of repudiation.

[Best regards to my sister]<sup>27</sup> and her husband, the illustrious elder Abu 'l-Faḍā'il, the scholar, to Ma'āni, the scholar (?), and his son. I have exerted myself for him to a degree that only God knows. The elder Abu 'l-Khayr ("Mr. Good") agreed to pay him 10 mith-qāls (Egyptian dinars), which the elder Abu 'l-Makārim ("Noble Character") will deliver to him.<sup>28</sup>

Convey my greetings to the elder Abū Ishāq, the son of your paternal uncle, to his mother, to the elder Abu 'Imrān and his children, to [. . .], the daughter of your paternal uncle, and to all those whom you<sup>29</sup> know, my most sincere regards.

I sent you 7 1/2 mann of nutmeg, which is better than anything found in the Kārim<sup>30</sup> and worth more than other sorts of it by 1 dinar; 11 mann of good galingale;<sup>31</sup> two fuṭa cloths for the children; 2 1/2 of celandine and 25 of odoriferous wood; fourteen pieces in number.<sup>32</sup>

(Repetition of some greetings and other matters from above. The end of the story can be restored with a high degree of probability. The letter was not sent, but reached Fustat nevertheless, which can only mean that the writer succeeded in coming home. I do not believe that he would have returned to Fustat had his wife accepted the repudiation. He then would have stayed in Aden and married there. Thus the long years of suffering had not been in vain. The India traveler was finally united with his wife.)

<sup>27</sup> See below.

<sup>28</sup> Probably a case of inheritance of a merchant who had died in Aden. Abu 'l-Khayr was in Aden and Abu 'l-Makārim in Cairo-Fustat.

<sup>29</sup> Feminine singular!

<sup>30</sup> The goods going from India to the West. See no. 43, n. 9, above.

<sup>31</sup> Ar. *khawlanj*, from which the English word is derived; a plant from the ginger family serving as an aphrodisiac or as a constituent in narcotics.

<sup>32</sup> These quantities of costly Oriental products were not really "gifts," but destined to be sold and to serve for the upkeep of the family.

## 46 DEATH IN MALAYA

July 7, 1226

This and the following short piece are not letters, but are translated here in order to alert the reader to the fact that countries from which we do not have a single letter still were visited by traders who belonged to the same group of people who have left us hundreds of letters in the Geniza. It was not customary to send letters over very great distances. Almost no letters sent from Iran to Egypt or from Spain to Egypt have been found despite the manifold and close relations connecting these countries (see no. 2, above). Likewise, in the India trade one would write from India to Aden and from there to Egypt, but rarely, if at all, directly. The medieval seafarer needed a month to reach Malaya or Indonesia from India.<sup>1</sup> He would send a message from there to the southeastern coast of India, as is implied here, but not farther. Thus it is natural that no letters from those distant parts have found their way into the Geniza.

The document translated below is a draft containing the gist of a court record and is written on both sides of a tiny piece of paper measuring 4 x 2 1/2 inches. It is in the hand of the Nagid Abraham Maimonides in his most cursive style, which we are able to read safely only because so many of his holographs have been preserved. A court clerk would write out a complete record, or rather two, one of which would be written in Arabic characters, to be submitted to the government office of inheritances.<sup>2</sup> These copies, of course, would be signed by witnesses.

University Library, Cambridge, Taylor-Schechter Collection, TS Arabic Box 30, f. 42, *India Book* 322.

*We, the undersigned members of the court, were assembled in a session of the court, in Miṣr (Fustat) on Tuesday, 10th of Tammuz, 1537 of the Documents, corresponding to the 10th of Rajab of the year 623 (July 7, 1226), when Abū Sa'īd, the Levi, son of the elder*

<sup>1</sup> See Jean Sauvaget, *Relation de la Chine et de l'Inde, rédigée en 851*, Paris, 1948, pp. 8-9, 43.

<sup>2</sup> For this purpose the Muslim date was added here.