

53-56 LETTERS OF ISAAC NĪSĀBŪRĪ,
A PERSIAN RESIDING IN ALEXANDRIA

Isaac b. Simḥā ("Joy," Heb.) of Alexandria was not only named Nīsābūrī (from Neyshābūr, as it is spelled today, in the most remote northeastern corner of Iran), but certainly was a man whose mother tongue was Persian. Persian, like English, is an Indo-European language. Therefore Isaac, while writing Arabic, incurs difficulties similar to those that are familiar to American students trying to learn that Semitic language. He has troubles with the sounds specific to Arabic, makes many mistakes, and, in particular, always mixes up masculine and feminine. For Persian, like English, but unlike Arabic, has no feminine endings in nouns, adjectives, and verbs. Not rarely is his syntax blurred and sometimes one must try to retranslate his Arabic into Persian in order to find out what he intends to say. But his letters are worth reading.

A short description of Isaac Nīsābūrī's variegated business is provided in *Med. Soc.*, 1, 153. More extensive letters of his, such as DK XI and Bodl. MS a 3 (Cat. 2873), f. 23, cannot be translated here because they contain too many details requiring lengthy comments. But it is hoped that the first selection from his correspondence presented here gives a fair idea of his mercantile enterprises.

The first three specimens translated are addressed to Abu 'l-'Alā' Šā'id ("Topnotch," in Heb. 'Ullā) ha-Levi b. Joseph, almoner and trustee of the court, the Damascene, in the capital of Egypt (mainly Fustat). The nature of the communal offices and the business activities of this man are explained in *Med. Soc.*, II, 78. I should add here that Jews from Damascus and Aleppo often appear as bankers (and, of course, merchant-bankers) in Egypt and the West, and appropriate individuals among them were therefore appointed as trustees of the courts, to whom the property of orphans and widows and collateral deposited with the courts were entrusted. This position of confidence gave them approach to the leading men of the community, in which capacity we find indeed the recipient of the letters translated below.

The writer of the letters belonged to a slightly lower stratum of the society, but since he dealt with communal matters in nos. 45 and 46, I assume he occupied a leading position in the "Iraqian,"

that is, "Eastern," Jewish congregation of Alexandria, of which he, as an Iranian, probably was a member.

One letter (no. 54) contains the date 1117. The merchant Abu 'l-Faraj ("Delivery") Ḥamawī, that is from Ḥamāh in Syria, whom we find here in the Maghreb, was about ten to fifteen years later active in the India trade. Taking the whole correspondence of Isaac Nīsābūrī together, it should be attributed to the period 1100-1130, approximately.

53 WESTERN AND EASTERN GOODS AND
FRIENDS

March 1119

University Library, Cambridge, Taylor-Schechter
Collection, TS 13 J 22, f. 30.

(Five lines of conventional introductory phrases.)

A. STANDSTILL OF THE SILK TRADE BECAUSE OF
BAD SAILING CONDITIONS

As to the silk. At the arrival of the Spanish ship, all business stopped, no one sold and no one bought. After some days, small quantities were sold at the price of 21-22 (dinars) per ten (pounds).¹

When, however, all the ships tarried in coming, the merchants were eager to buy, but those who had silk kept it. Today it is thirty-three days that only one ship has arrived and only one ship has sailed. Now there is much confusion and worry about the ships. For today it is twenty-three days from the Feast of the Cross² and

¹ The standard price for silk in Alexandria was 20 dinars for 10 pounds. See *Med. Soc.*, 1, 222.

² The Coptic Feast of the Cross, meaning the rediscovery of the Cross, corresponds to September 26 or 27 of our calendar (see E. W. Lane, *The Manners and Customs of Modern Egyptians*, Everyman's Library edn., p. 547). It was a great date for seafaring, and is often referred to as such in the Geniza. "From the Feast of the Cross" must mean, to my mind, *before*, because the Maghrebi ships normally set sail for the return westward slightly before the 'Īd al-ṣalīb. Sometimes people are warned *not* to travel in the *marākīb ṣalibiyya*, which does not mean "Crusaders' ships," but ships setting out shortly after the Festival of the Cross.

not a single ship has arrived from the Maghreb, nor has any news come from there.³ The winds are adverse, neither east nor west. On this very day they paid for coarse silk 23 dinars. No one sold or will sell until it is known what will be. So please, do not move with the silk except in the event that trustworthy unravelers are available to whom you might give a small reel to unravel, good only for the countryside.⁴

B. SALE OF ORIENTAL AND WESTERN PRODUCTS IN FUSTAT

As to the cubeb,⁵ if it reaches a quotation of 6 dinars, to be sold on credit, sell it, don't leave it.

I have instructed the elder Abu 'l-Khayr Salāma ("Solomon, the Good")⁶ to sell the ambergris if it is worth 1 1/2 dinars. Otherwise, he should leave it.⁷

C. THREE BUSINESS FRIENDS

I wrote to his excellency, my lord Abu 'l-Riḍā, and did not receive an answer, which surprised me, since it concerned one of his own affairs. But you understand that I cannot send him a reminder.⁸

When any news or letter arrives from Shām (Syria and Palestine), kindly inform me.⁹

³ When ships were sighted off the coast of western Egypt runners were sent to Alexandria to alert the merchants, for in fall ships were often kept back by east winds.

⁴ Meaning that these *naqqāḍa* would pick out the inferior silk which was good only to be sold in the Egyptian Rif. See *Med. Soc.*, 1, 104.

⁵ The *fāghira*, a spicy berry of the pepper family, coming from the East Indies and used in medicine and in cooking. Often mentioned in the Geniza (see Maimonides-Meyerhof, p. 151, no. 307). The unit traded, as suggested by other texts, probably was 10 mann (slightly over 20 pounds).

⁶ The name Salāma was common. Of those noted by me, the son of the writer of no. 28, above, would best fit the time and the circumstances.

⁷ Probably the Atlantic variety of ambergris is intended. In no. 6, above, the Alexandrian merchant Abu 'l-Barakāt b. Khulayf, a friend of our writer (see no. 54, n. 7, below) carries ambergris from Alexandria to Fustat.

⁸ Abu 'l-Riḍā Solomon b. Mevōrākh was a son of the late Nagid Mevōrākh and brother of the incumbent Nagid Moses and representative of the merchants in the Egyptian capital. The writer politely requests the recipient to talk to the great man and to remind him.

⁹ Travel from Palestine to Cairo by land was as common as the voyage

I received a letter from Abu 'l-Faraj al-Ḥamawī¹⁰ from the (Nafūsa) Mountain.¹¹ He is now in 'Ānāt and they expect to cross the sea soon. May God ordain safety for them.

I received also a letter from Isaac Nafūsi,¹² and your honor, too, mentioned this in your letter, namely, that he is in a hurry to get what he has ordered from me in his memo. But in order to be properly executed, this order requires proceeding slowly, for here there is plenty of cash for buying, but little to buy. Moreover, the holidays are another impediment: in this week there are only two business days.¹³ Notwithstanding, most of the things ordered are already in and the rest will be acquired soon. I shall send them with someone who travels there.¹⁴

What you asked me to buy for you, he had already asked.¹⁵ I do not take any remuneration from anyone and do not want people to say that this travel of mine is only for my own business.

D. CORALS AND CONCLUSION

Loose corals¹⁶ are being sold on this very day in the customs house¹⁷ for 11 1/2 dinars and some even for 8 dinars, while my

by sea from Alexandria to the eastern shores of the Mediterranean. Mail especially was sent overland.

¹⁰ For this traveler to the West and on the India route see the introduction. His personal name was Hiba ("Gift").

¹¹ The Nafūsa mountains southwest of Tripoli, Libya, as is indicated by the place name 'Ānāt, following immediately (see Yāqūt 3, p. 594). See next note.

¹² I have the impression that three different Isaac Nafūsis appear in the Geniza papers of this period. (We had above four cousins bearing the uncommon name Barhūn Tāhertī.) Here the India trader bearing this name is probably intended.

¹³ The writer clearly refers to the year 1119, when the Muslim "Great Festival" (which coincided with the pilgrimage to Mecca) was celebrated on March 24-26, and the Jewish Passover on March 29-30.

¹⁴ He would not carry them himself, although he intended to travel to Cairo, so that people should not say that he charged his own expenses to his business friends whose goods he carried.

¹⁵ 'Ullā traded in both western and eastern goods.

¹⁶ As opposed to corals on strings. Text: *marjān turāb*. I assume the correct Arabic word escaped the writer. But this might be a term not otherwise found in the Geniza.

¹⁷ Ar. *ṣn'h*, which I take as *ṣinā'a*, the customs house of Fustat, which served also as bourse. The term might have been used by that time also in Alexandria since the European word *arsenal* is derived from it.

corals are worth 20 dinars, and none have arrived thus far either from Europe¹⁸ or from North Africa.¹⁹

kindest regards to you and to all the friends.
And may your well-being wax indefinitely.

Two P.S.'s: Textiles from Alexandria

The scarfs²⁰ are with the bleacher. God willing, I shall send them as soon as they are ready.

(In the margin:)

I am sending three brocaded robes with the muleteer Kāfūr ("Camphor").²¹ They are for Isaac Nafūsī. Give them to him.

(Address, right side, five short lines:)

(To) his honor, my lord, the illustrious elder,

Abu 'l-'Alā Ṣā'id), (*our*) *master*,

Joseph, *the almoner, the trustee*,

the Friend of the yeshiva,

may God make his honored position permanent.

(Left side, four lines:)

(From) his grateful Isaac *ha-Levi, son of Simḥā al-Nisābūrī*, (*may the m(emory of the) r(ighteous) be b(lessed)*).

(*I*) *h(ope for your) s(alvation, oh) G(od)*.²²

(Third P.S. beneath the address:)

Do not move with the silk. Leave it as it is, unless you find . . .

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¹⁸ Ar. *Rūm*. Corals are found especially on the shores of Sardinia.

¹⁹ He seems to say that his corals were of a particularly fine quality.

²⁰ Ar. *radda*. My card index of textiles contains about sixty entries of this item from Geniza lists of trousseaux, but the word seems not to be mentioned elsewhere. Its meaning can be established through the combinations in which it appears. One of many which might be of interest here: "An Alexandrian cloak, *milḥafa*, with a *radda*—6 dinars." Bodl. MS Heb. f 56, f. 48, l. 15.

²¹ A slave or freedman, as his name indicates. Transport by land was regarded by our writer as safer for precious textiles than the treacherous voyage on the Nile.

²² This use of the verse Genesis 49:18, abbreviated *LQI*, must have been common to "Easterners," for the Baghdadi who wrote the selections 47-49 follows the same usage. In later centuries it became customary to write *LQI* on the top of a letter, and many Oriental Jews still do so.

54 PROVISION FOR THE FAMILY OF A MERCHANT ABROAD

When a merchant traveled abroad for a prolonged period, he did not leave cash for the maintenance of his family, for cash in those days did not mean paper, but gold and silver, the supply of which is limited by nature and therefore possessed an incomparably higher purchasing power than our so-called money. Even a well-to-do merchant set his gold working all the time and carried very little with himself even for his own needs (see *Med. Soc.*, 1, 200). The requirements of the family were provided for through monthly payments by a business friend, often fixed in an official document made out by a notary before the husband would set out on his journey. The business friend would take care also of additional needs of the family, often also foreseen in the legal instrument safeguarding its well-being. In addition to a fixed sum the family often was provided with such basic requirements as wheat, oil, and firewood. Several such notarial documents have been preserved. Our letter shows how the arrangement worked in practice.

Our Isaac Nisābūrī of Alexandria took care of the family of Abu 'l-Faraj al-Ḥamawī, who traveled in the Muslim West (see no. 53, n. 10). Ḥamawī remained there for two winters at least, for our letter refers to provisions for three periods of five months each. The payments were made twice by bookkeeping arrangement and once by sending gold. The family lived in Fustat where it was looked after by the addressee, who was an important merchant, but also an almoner and trustee of the court. The accounts were made with Abu 'l-Riḍā, representative of the merchants (see no. 53, n. 8).¹ But he could not be bothered with such matters as payments to the family of a merchant abroad. This was left to a man one rung lower on the socioeconomic ladder.

University Library, Cambridge, Taylor-Schechter
Collection, TS 13 J 21, f. 26.

¹ A document referring to a commenda of 300 dinars given by this man to three partners traveling to Yemen "and other countries" is contained in *India Book* 156. It is dated January 1118, that is, during the period of our nos. 53 and 54, here. The document, pieced together by me from four different fragments, is the longest referring to the India trade, but is still not complete.