

letter from you in this matter carried by Barakāt al-Ja'fari;² he has arrived, but no letter of yours was with him. Please honor me with your letter whenever you have any need or concern.³

B. THE SCRIBE

I ask you also to meet with R. Abraham the Rūmī, *the scribe*, who wrote a *Torah scroll* in Tinnīs,⁴ and this year, too, I have heard that he wrote two others in Fustat. Formerly we did not have here in Alexandria a *Torah scroll* on *parchment*.⁵ But now, with the support of the *Creator*, we have obtained parchment and are resolved, with the help of the H(oly one, be), he p(raised), to carry this matter through. Therefore I ask your honor to meet with the aforementioned R. Abraham and make an agreement with him regarding his remuneration and all his expenses. He should come here as early as possible. Here are many *scribes*, but our endeavor in this matter is that the scroll of the *congregation* should have the very best script.⁶

I intend to go up to Fustat, but wait for the answer to this letter of mine and the arrival of that man. Immediately afterwards I shall travel to Fustat where I have many things to do. So please have this matter done quickly.

Kindest regards to you and to all who inquire about me. I have learned what you have done to extricate that load of brazilwood.⁷ May I never be deprived of your kindness. *Peace in plenty*.

(Address is on the otherwise blank verso, as in the preceding selections, with the variation indicated in the introduction. *Peace in plenty* is repeated.)

² His full name was Abu 'l-Barakāt Berākhōt ("Blessings," in Ar. and Heb.) b. Nathan. *Ja'fari* was a type of paper, in the manufacture or sale of which he specialized (TS 16.207).

³ Mats were one of the main products of Alexandrian industry. They were exported overseas to Sicily and Tunisia.

⁴ Once a famous center of the linen industry on an island east of Damietta. Very often referred to in the Geniza. See, e.g., the indexes of *Med. Soc.*, I-II, s.v.

⁵ This translates Heb. *gevil* (spelled by Nisābūrī *gevil*), which is written on the side of the hair, not on that of the flesh.

⁶ Torah scrolls usually were donated by private persons, often by women, and donations naturally are not always of the best quality. The congregation (the biblical word *'ēdā* is used) made a special effort.

⁷ Probably from the customs in Fustat after arrival from India.

56 REQUEST FOR GOVERNMENT INTERVENTION IN ALEXANDRIA

Late 1110s

The first part of this letter (ll. 6-36) deals with a partnership in a boat, in which the writer, the recipient, the representative of the merchants Abu 'l-Riḍa Solomon (see nos. 53 and 54, above), and several other persons, one of them already dead, were involved and on which the Nagid himself was expected to make a decision. The fact itself is interesting, since the Geniza is surprisingly reticent about partnerships in boats (see *Med. Soc.*, I, 309). But the details provided refer to a pending lawsuit not otherwise attested and do not sum up to a meaningful complete unit worth translating.

The second section, translated below, is concerned with a topic of vital importance to the Christians and Jews living under Islam, namely, whether they were permitted to regulate their matters of inheritance according to their own laws or had to refer them to Muslim courts. The Geniza contains much material on this question (see *Med. Soc.*, II, 394-399). The passage presented here is of some specific interest since it shows that the government had no "policy" in this matter; rather, it acted when a community, and each local community separately, took the appropriate initiative.

The addressee was a *nā'ib*, or deputy director of some government office. Such people usually conducted their correspondence in Arabic script, wherefore there was no reason to deposit its remnants in the Geniza. Thus far I have not found any other item referring to him.

University Library, Cambridge, Taylor-Schechter Collection, TS 18 J 4, f. 6, as from l. 38.

A very serious matter occurred here, which should not be passed over in silence or slackness. A foreigner, a teacher, died here and left some gold. One of our coreligionists took it, but there was some dispute about it, and one of our fellow Jews went to the qadi and to the director of the (Muslim) office of inheritances and informed them. The qadi sent five policemen, who took the money.

In the times of our lord the Nagid (*may the memory of the*)

r(ighteous) be b(lessed),¹ a decree was obtained from the lord of lords, al-Afḍal²—may God give him victory and make his government stable—to the effect that no one was permitted to interfere in the affairs of a dead Jew and that these were to be settled by the Jewish authorities.

Now, if those people here in Alexandria are successful in this matter, the community will perish. For people here are not like those in Miṣr (Fustat): if they get their hands on something, it is lost to them completely.

Therefore it is imperative that you meet with his high excellency, the Ra'īs,³ and with his excellency, my lord, the illustrious elder Abu 'l-Mufaḍḍal⁴—may God make his honored position permanent—and deliberate on this affair. A new decree should be issued declaring the action taken here as unlawful and forbidding the like of it in the future. You will do this because of your concern for the whole of Israel⁵ and because this is a meritorious action rewarded in this world and the world to come.

Not long ago the Christians here obtained a decree in the same matter, namely, that no one should interfere in their affairs. I have also heard that similar decrees were issued for Upper Egypt, Tinnīs, and Damietta,⁶ namely, that no one should interfere in their affairs. Similar action should be taken with regard to the Jewish communities.

Kindest special regards to your honor and please convey my service and greetings to his excellency, my lord, the illustrious elder Abu 'l-Mufaḍḍal, may God let his prominence endure. Kindest regards to my lord, the illustrious elder, your father.

Please answer this letter quickly and if you have any concern, please honor me with it. *May your well-being increase forever.*

¹ The Nagid Mevōrākh b. Saadya (died March 30, 1112).

² The viceroy and actual ruler of Egypt al-Malik al-Afḍal (murdered 1121).

³ The official head of the Jews of Egypt, Moses, the son of Mevōrākh. See n. 1, above.

⁴ Chief Jewish judge in Cairo (not Fustat) and, like the Muslim qadis, also a great merchant (see *Med. Soc.*, II, 442, sec. 16; 477, sec. 18, 478, 503, sec. 119). The same kunya, or byname, was also borne by a nephew of the Nagid Mevōrākh. See *ibid.*, 478.

⁵ And not only your own community in the capital of Egypt.

⁶ All these were regions with large Christian communities.

(The address is in the same style as in the previous letters. The recipient: Ṣadaqa ("Alms"; namely, given by God), son of R. Yahyā, (*may his e(nd be) g(ood)*),⁷ the Deputy.)

57-58 LETTERS FROM SA'DĀN BAGHDĀDĪ

A Trader Active in Spain, North Africa, and Egypt

Sa'dān b. Thābit ("The two auspicious stars," that is Jupiter and Venus, son of "Steadfast") was another Easterner who had settled in the West. In a letter not translated here we find him in Spain, in our first selection his home is Tripoli, in the second Alexandria, and from that city other letters of his were dispatched. His father, Thābit b. Sa'dān, is already mentioned as being in the West, whether as a visitor or on a more permanent basis is not evident. Sa'dān's script and style are beautiful and his letters have mostly a fine human touch. They may be dated around 1130.

57 SA'DĀN'S SON ELICITS

A PROMISE OF OVERSEAS TRAVEL

The thirst for adventure is innate in man. At a time when the art of war was exercised solely by foreign mercenaries it was the noble profession of the overseas merchant which quenched that thirst for those who felt it most strongly. In the Geniza letters we see repeatedly sons urging their fathers to send them abroad. Our letter shows in particular how a father, caught by a promise given while drunk, proceeded to introduce his boy into the mysteries of the overseas trade.

Our letter was never sent, certainly for the same reason as that assumed with regard to no. 45, above. The reference to the drinking

⁷ This strange Aramaic blessing, *Ṣ(āfēh) Ṭ(āv)*, is to be understood in the spirit of Job 8:7: "Though your beginning was small, your end (that is, your latter days) will be great."