

*r(ighteous) be b(lessed)*,<sup>1</sup> a decree was obtained from the lord of lords, al-Afḍal<sup>2</sup>—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,<sup>3</sup> and with his excellency, my lord, the illustrious elder Abu 'l-Mufaḍḍal<sup>4</sup>—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 Israel<sup>5</sup> 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,<sup>6</sup> 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.*

<sup>1</sup> The Nagid Mevōrākh b. Saadya (died March 30, 1112).

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

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

<sup>4</sup> 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.

<sup>5</sup> And not only your own community in the capital of Egypt.

<sup>6</sup> 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)*),<sup>7</sup> 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

<sup>7</sup> 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."

bout was introduced in order to explain why the writer could commit such a folly as to send an unexperienced youth abroad. On second reading it was felt that such a detail was not commensurate with the dignity of an "illustrious elder."

University Library, Cambridge, Taylor-Schechter  
Collection, TS 10 J 16, f. 19.

(The seven lines of introduction are much damaged. The letter is sent from "my home, Tripoli.")

[. . .], son of our master and teacher Joseph, (*may the memory of the righteous be blessed*), arrived this year by boat<sup>1</sup> and told me much about you, my lord, about your exertions for your friends and your noble character traits, all of which, of course, I knew before. I ask God to grant you fame for your virtues and merits and to let you never lose that *good name*. May he bless you with a *male child*, who will be like you or even better<sup>2</sup>—Amen, oh Lord of the universe.

I wish to inform you, my lord, that it so happened that, while I was drinking, my boy asked me to let him travel overseas. I swore to him that he would travel this year unless no ship set sail.<sup>3</sup> But God, the exalted, had willed that there was one. Thus I sent him and ordered that at arrival in Miṣr (Fustat), he should follow in everything the instructions of my lord, and ask you to guide him with your good advice. If a bahār of lac which had fallen into the water comes your way, buy it for him. In case it does not, and the boy goes down to Alexandria, kindly advise him to leave with you the money for such a buy, until the occasion for it arises. Then you will buy it and send it to him. Naturally, you will act according to your own judgment.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Interesting, because it shows that travel overland had again become common. During the half-century following the invasion of North Africa by the Arab bedouins, travel had become practically confined to the sea.

<sup>2</sup> The wish that the addressee's children should become better than he himself is somewhat strange to us, but natural in a society with strong family affection. The same occurs in no. 11, n. 12, above.

<sup>3</sup> Remarkable that such a possibility was taken into consideration. The Geniza mentions a case when no boat sailed from Alexandria to Tripoli. One had to take a boat to Palermo and from there back to the Libyan coast.

<sup>4</sup> The father wished the boy to come home with a big sack—a bahār normally comprised 300 pounds—but he did not want to spend much money on

Buy him also two mann of clove bark.<sup>5</sup> If it is expensive, buy one. Also a quarter mann nutmeg, and a quarter mann odoriferous wood of middle quality, for the family. Kindly do me this favor—may I never be deprived of you, and may God keep you for your friends. (Some greetings.)

## 58 SHIPPING CARAWAY FROM ALEXANDRIA TO FUSTAT

### *The Gaëta Boat*

Bodleian Library, Oxford, MS Heb. c 28 (Cat. 2876), f. 55.

(Conventional but beautifully styled introduction, seven lines.)

#### A

I congratulate your high excellency on these noble days of festivals approaching you.<sup>1</sup> May God let you reach similar ones for a long time and during many consecutive years. *May you be blessed to behold the beauty of the Lord and to visit constantly in his Temple.*<sup>2</sup>

#### B

In your precious letter to Abū Ishāq Ibrahīm you asked that I send you the bale of caraway.<sup>3</sup> I acted in accordance with your instructions, asked God for guidance and loaded it on the boat of

---

that venture. Therefore he asked to buy lac damaged by water, which had little value.

<sup>5</sup> This fragrant spice was often sent as a present and is intended as such here, too, as is expressly said. The father wanted to train his son also in this important task of a traveler: selecting presents for those at home. Three qualities of clove are mentioned in the Geniza: "heart of clove," "cleaned clove" (namely from its bark), and "the bark," which is the meanest.

---

<sup>1</sup> They were approaching the writer as well. But all good things had to be related to the recipient.

<sup>2</sup> Psalm 27:4. A common wish for those feast days, like Passover or Pentecost, with which a pilgrimage to Jerusalem was connected.

<sup>3</sup> Caraway seed (the English word is derived from the Arabic) came from Spain or North Africa.