

62 BUYING PALM BRANCHES

Letter to a Qadi

The Islamic *dār waqāla*, or warehouse, like the Roman basilica, was a hall where goods were traded and stored and where judges and notaries had their seats for the settlement of disputes and arrangement of formalities connected with business transactions (see *Med. Soc.*, I, 187-189, and here, introduction, sec. 3, above). Even a small town like Qalyūb (northwest of Cairo) possessed such a semipublic building.

Palm branches are frequently mentioned in building operations, and in our letter this type rather than the one used for religious purposes is intended. It is interesting that the permission of the chief of the police was required, probably because payment of a tax was involved. The letter is written in beautiful, clear Arabic characters, in many cases even equipped with diacritical marks.

University Library, Cambridge, Taylor-Schechter Collection,
TS Arabic Box 40, f. 126.

(*Verso*:) To the warehouse, to be delivered to the illustrious and excellent qadi Ṣadr al-Dīn,¹ who acts there as a notary,² may God always give him success.

(*Recto*:) God is the best of helpers.

Your servant Omar b. 'Iwaq³ serves the high seat of our master and lord,⁴ my master Ṣadr al-Dīn, may God let him prosper all his days, and informs him that your servant went to Qalyūb, but did not find the chief of police. Then your servant met with the "Learned and Practicing" sheikh⁵ and he kindly settled the matter after great

¹ A title, not a name. "Leader of Islam."

² Ar. *shāhid*.

³ "Long-lived, son of Substitute," not necessarily a Muslim. Other derivatives of the root 'mr, "life," such as 'Ammār and 'Umayr, were very frequent Jewish names.

⁴ Thus a judge is officially addressed ("our master").

⁵ Ar. al-'ālim al-'āmil, a title, which around 1200 became extremely popular. This man was the local *faqīh*, or juris consultant, who, like everyone, engaged also in business. Since he was a public figure, he could sell without waiting for permission.

exertion. We did not find any waxed palm branches, and the green branches are sold for 70 (dirhems) a thousand. I paid the *waraq* dirhems and he took a few branches from each orchard.⁶ I paid him 60 dirhems, on condition that he transport the palm branches to the (Nile) river. But when I arrived again in Qalyūb, he still had to bring them to the river, and there they had only a small boat able to carry just a few victuals. I am sending now a messenger to my lord, and ask you to send him to the sheikh "The Learned" with a request that he deliver the palm branches to you, and you will keep them for your servant in Qalyūb.

(The verso contains also the beginning of the draft of a petition in Arabic language and Hebrew characters of the dyers in Qalyūb. The words are crossed out, probably because the clerk realized that the sheet would not be sufficient for the text dictated to him.)

The servants, the dyers in Qalyūb, kiss the ground and announce that they perish because of the high price of the wheat, the scarcity of work, the heavy license fee,⁷ and the rise of the exchange rate . . .

(On the same page there is also a calligraphic trial of the pen: "Said the Khazarī." "Said the scholar." This shows that in this little town there was a scribe who tried to copy the theological *magnum opus* of the Spanish Hebrew poet Judah ha-Levi. Learned scribes were often found in small towns, where life was less expensive than in the big cities. See *Med. Soc.*, II, 239.)

⁶ No palm branches cut some time earlier and preserved by being covered with wax were available for sale. Therefore they had to be cut wherever possible, and fewer than a thousand were brought together. The low-value silver coin of the Ayyūbid period was called *waraq*. See *Med. Soc.*, I, 384, 388.

⁷ Ar. *ḍamān*, meaning the sum they had to pay to the tax farmer.