

Arriving in Palermo, I found that a man from Barqa had pulled down my small house⁹ and built there another. I quarreled¹⁰ with him, but, by God, I had no dinar or even a dirhem to spend (on a lawsuit). Then I did not find my brother here so that I could not get from him part of what he owes me.

I sent you ten pounds of silk with Ḥayyīm b. Sa'āda and sent you also 6 dinars gold, numbering 6 1/4.¹¹ With you I left 2 dinars and with them in the house 1 dinar and the olive oil I bought from you. As you know, 10 dinars are due the girl¹² as her second installment (of her marriage portion). I wrote her a *bill of divorce* fearing the vicissitudes of fate, nor do I know whether I shall be able to return to them in the course of two or even three years, for this town is menaced by enemy attack, and, at present, I do not have a thing.

I left with you promissory notes of: the "Son of the Swollen Woman," 6 1/2 dinars; Isaac Qābisī,¹³ 1 1/2 dinars; Ḥayyīm Ibn Jāsūs,¹⁴ three qintārs of tragacanth gum;¹⁵ all this besides what is owed me by Muslims.¹⁶ Collect these debts and keep the proceeds for the *alimony* of the boy. If she accepts the *divorce*, I shall send every year the *alimony* for the boy. But if she prefers not to accept the *divorce*, deal with this matter cautiously in a way deserving my thanks: ask her whether she is prepared to settle with me in Sicily. (In case she does), let her confirm this by oath and inform me accordingly. I shall then sell my apartment¹⁷ and bring her here

⁹ This might imply that a larger house in the neighborhood of the smaller one also belonged to the writer. But it could mean also that he possessed only that small house.

¹⁰ Text: *mutashārīr*. Dozy, *Supplément*, I, 739a, has form 7 in this meaning.

¹¹ He sent 25 (Sicilian) quarter dinars. The silk was worth about 20 dinars. See *Med. Soc.*, I, 222.

¹² His wife. The second installment was due at divorce or death of husband.

¹³ Family name derived from the town of Gabes in southern Tunisia. This man, Isaac (b. Abraham) al-Qābisī, bought in about 1044 a house in Qayrawān from a lady divorced by an Ibn Jāsūs (see next note). Bodl. MS Heb. c 28 (Cat. 2876), f. 41, ed. S. Assaf, *Tarbiz* 9 (1938), 214.

¹⁴ "The Spy"—a Maghrebi family name often found in the Geniza at this time.

¹⁵ Ar. *kathīrā* (here, *ā* is missing). A medical plant much traded in the Geniza period. In TS 8 J 21, f. 29 (ca. 1050) the price of 4 1/4 dinars for a qintār was regarded as bad. Thus the quantity sent here was worth about 15 dinars.

¹⁶ In Damsīs. For these he presumably wrote to a Muslim business friend.

¹⁷ Text: *rū'y*, which could mean also "my quarter," namely of a house.

together with my boy. By God, I did not write her the *bill of divorce* because I do not love her, but because I was afraid of the punishment of the Creator.¹⁸

And, o God, o God, my lord, the little boy! Concern yourself with him in accordance with your [religiosity], so well known to me. When he becomes stronger, let him pass his time with a teacher.¹⁹ I shall write to you and i[n]form you about my situation]. By God, at this moment I have nothing, [. . .] But as soon as [. . .].²⁰

(Address on verso, which is blank otherwise.)

To my elder and master Abī²¹ Ibrahīm Isma'īl b. Abraham, may God be his protector.

From Joseph b. Samuel, known as al-Dny.²² *Many greetings!*
To Damsīs, if God will.²³

72 REPORT ABOUT BOATS EXPECTED FROM THE WEST

Alexandria

Ca. 1050-1065

The letter was written on the third day of Av, which, in the period concerned, and practically always, fell in the month of July, when the seafaring season was at its height. A total of over 52 ships is reported here as being on their way from the Muslim West to Alexandria or as having already arrived (see n. 9). Most of the ships mentioned by name are known from other Geniza letters.

¹⁸ This is a religious alternate for the "vicissitudes of fate," mentioned in the same context before. A violent death was normally regarded as a punishment for a sin.

¹⁹ Instead of wasting time playing in the streets.

²⁰ Only a few words seem to have been lost. Obviously, the writer wanted to emphasize that, at the moment, he was unable to pay for tuition.

²¹ This might be an attempt at correct Arabic grammar or a fixed usage (Abī for Abū) in some Maghrebi circles.

²² Probably for al-Dny, that is, Dānī, a family name derived from the town of Denia, Spain.

²³ Published first in *Archivio Storico per la Sicilia Orientale* 67 (1971), 20-23, but thoroughly revised and adapted.

The recipient of the letter was Nahray b. Nissim in Fustat (about him see *Med. Soc.*, I, p. 153-154, and nos. 5, 29-35, 64, 66, 67, above), its writer Ibrāhīm b. Farāḥ (Ibn al-) Iskandarānī, who operated a mail agency in Alexandria (see *Med. Soc.*, I, p. 304, and no. 28, n. 24, above). Like the imperial postmasters, the commercial mail agents served also as transmitters of news.

University Library, Cambridge, Taylor-Schechter
Collection, TS 13 J 15, f. 9.¹

I am writing to you, my lord and master, . . . from Alexandria, on the 3rd of Av, may God let this month be a most propitious time for you.² . . . I received your letter, . . . in which you announced to me the arrival of my letter to you. Meanwhile I have written two other letters to you—I hope they have arrived—in which I informed you about the arrival of the *Shāmī*,³ one of the ships of Ibn Abī 'Aqīl.⁴

The day before yesterday, on Monday, several boats arrived, among them that of Muhammad al-Ghazzāl ("Spinner"),⁵ the proprietor of the small *Shāmī* barge. They had set sail from Tobruk⁶ twenty-five days ago. The passengers told me that there were fourteen ships in Tobruk, four Sicilian⁷ boats in Shaqqat al-Wa'r ("The Rugged Crevice") and seven in Rās Tīnī ("Cape of the Figs"),⁸

¹ *Nahray* 61, ll. 1-19 and *verso*, ll. 4-8.

² Av is a month of mourning, and the proper blessing would have been "may God convert it into a month of joy," as in many other Geniza letters.

³ *Shām* was the region comprising approximately the present day states of Syria, Lebanon, Israel, and Jordan. The meaning of the term *Shāmī* in relation to a ship meant that its home port was Tyre, Lebanon, or any other of the sixteen or so more prominent harbors on the east coast of the Mediterranean.

⁴ Ibn Abī (so spelled here) 'Aqīl was an affluent Muslim judge of Tyre whose ships, frequenting Sicily, Tunisia, and Egypt, are often mentioned in the Geniza. See *Med. Soc.*, I, 296, 310-311.

⁵ Mentioned, e.g., in TS Arabic Box 18(1), f. 101, ll. 5-6, as arriving in Alexandria from the West.

⁶ Tobruk, of World War II fame, is a small port in eastern Libya. Strong winds blowing from the east (see n. 19, below) must have accounted for the extraordinarily long time spent on the comparatively short passage from Tobruk to Alexandria.

⁷ The word is only partly visible.

⁸ So also in TS 12.372v, l. 17, and other Geniza letters. On modern maps of Libya: Ra's at-tīn. The name originally was perhaps a Greek word.

among them⁹ Ibn al-Shārī,¹⁰ Ibn al-Baladī,¹¹ Mufaḍḍal,¹² Ibn al-Aṣ-fāṭī ("Chest maker"), the Nile barge, Ibn al-Barr ("The Godly"), and Ibn al-'Uḍī ("Trader in odoriferous wood").¹³ May God, the exalted, in his mercy grant them an easy passage.

A man arrived with them¹⁴ who had sailed from Tripoli in a barge carrying oil to Barnīk,¹⁵ which got stuck in Bandariyya.¹⁶ He brought good tidings from your family and reported that prices in Ifriqiya were very low: 25 thumna of wheat cost in Qayrawān 1 dinar, and oil from one-half dinar upwards.¹⁷ He had left behind twenty ships loading cargo in al-Mahdiyya and five in Sfax. Reports from Sicily were now better than they had been before. The man had traveled ten days from Tripoli to Bandariyya and twenty days from there to Alexandria.

I have no doubt that God the exalted—if God will—will bring

⁹ This must refer to the ships sighted, not those already arrived, for them the writer would not have to rely on the report of one single unnamed man. Jewish passengers frequently traveled on the ships named.

¹⁰ "The Buyer," or rather, "The Quarrelsome" (TS 20.122, ll. 16, 20, and *verso*, ll. 16-17); arriving in Palermo and sailing from Mazara, Sicily, to Egypt.

¹¹ *Balad* means "place," "town." Several localities bear this name.

¹² Mufaḍḍal, a shipowner from Haifa, possessed both a *qārib*, or barge (see *Med. Soc.*, I, 305), and a ship, *markab*. They appear together in TS 16.163, l. 14, and *verso*, l. 9.

¹³ Frequently mentioned as sailing on the route Palermo-al-Mahdiyya-Sfax-Alexandria.

¹⁴ The ships that arrived on Monday, as reported before. The writer mentioned only one of those ships by name, because the others probably did not carry goods in which the recipient of the letter was interested.

¹⁵ The ancient (Greek) Berenike, today Benghazi, the main city of eastern Libya. This district was called Cyrenaica in ancient times and Barqa in the Middle Ages.

¹⁶ Presumably because of the adverse winds (see n. 6, above). A letter written about half a century later (ULC Or 1080 J 178v, l. 1), reports that all the ships on their way from al-Mahdiyya to Alexandria had to take refuge in Bandariyya and were waiting "for rescue by God," that is, propitious winds. A sign over the name of that place in ULC Or 1080 J 178 might mean that it was pronounced Bundariyya.

¹⁷ Wheat was measured, not weighed. According to Hinz, *Masse*, p. 52, the *thumna*(a) contained 6,318 liter. Thus, 25 thumna would correspond to approximately 2 1/2 American bushels of wheat, for which 1 dinar would indeed be an extremely low price. Several different measures of oil are mentioned in the Geniza papers of this period. The writer either forgot to specify or assumed the recipient knew to which measurement he referred.

these ships here soon in safety. I shall keep you informed about any new happenings. May they be good.

(Several smaller business matters.)

Some people say that the barge of Yusr al-'Attāl ("Ease, the Porter") is coming back.¹⁸ If it does, I shall take receipt of what you have in it, if God will. Of all the other ships no one has reported that they are coming back. May God, the exalted, make it easy for all in his mercy. The wind we had a short time ago was of no avail for the ships, for all those in which you have goods have not yet moved from their moorings.¹⁹ May God ease in his mercy.

73 AN ATTACK BY THE ENEMY'S NAVY

*Postscript to a letter in the hand of
Ibrāhīm b. Farāḥ al-Iskandarānī
Ca. 1060*

Of the letter itself, only the end, providing no self-contained information, has been preserved. For the writer see no. 72, above.

University Library, Cambridge, Taylor-Schechter
Collection, TS 8 J 24, f. 21, ll. 20 - verso, end.

Then there happened something which I am not able to describe to you. It is not something which (often) occurs. The people felt safe as if they were in their own city. I have never seen nor even imagined what happened. I had rolled out my sleeping carpet and spread my bedding, as if I had been at home. My money bag was under my head and I felt safe and calm—until hell broke loose.

Ten galleys had penetrated the roadstead, each carrying 100 warriors, part of whom disembarked, while the others remained aboard. People said there were 200 galleys. This happened when the moon rose, but the sky was overcast. Land and sea became crammed. They

¹⁸ The returning of boats to the port of embarking was a calamity very frequently mentioned in the Geniza. See *Med. Soc.*, 1, 322-323.

¹⁹ In a previous letter, the writer had reported that a favorable east wind was blowing in Alexandria. But before the ships carrying most of Nahray's goods started moving, the wind had already ceased.

threw firebrands into all the ships to burn them, but the fire did not catch.

(Added in larger letters:)

Praise be to God that the end was good! Thanks to God, the exalted! *And Peace*. Accept special greetings for your noble self. And greetings to my lord, the Rāv.

(Continued in writer's regular script:)

They cut loose the ship of the Damascene and towed it behind them. But the wind was against them, so they turned it back, took out all they wished and left it on the rough ground. The two rudders of the ship of the employee of Ibn Shiblūn were on its stern and without sailyards and sails. The rudders of the ships of the 'Aṭṭār ("Perfumer") and of the Khammār ("Wine-seller") were on land. All this was the cause that they could not take them. The firebrands thrown into them were not effective, for the wind there was not strong. Finally the people quenched the fire, working in shifts. But I am unable to describe what happened. *And Peace!* I threw the firebrands into the sea with my own hand!

74 THE HORRORS AND AMENITIES OF TRAVEL

*Sicily to Egypt
Ca. 1140*

Despite the horrors experienced by the writer and his family on the short voyage from the town of Tunis to Sicily, he invites his brother in Egypt to make the long journey to Palermo "for both pleasure and business," *nazāhan wa-tijāran*. Life in the Norman capital appeared to him attractive, economically and otherwise, after it had become so miserable in the once-flourishing country of Ifrīqiya ("Africa," designating present-day Tunisia and some adjacent districts).

The fragment of an earlier letter by the same writer (TS 8 J 23, f. 13), establishes his full name and provides more of his personal history. That letter, like the one translated here, was addressed to his elder brother Abu 'l-Barakāt ("Blessings"). He himself was