

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.<sup>18</sup> 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.<sup>19</sup> 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

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

<sup>19</sup> 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

called Abū Saʿīd ("Blissful") b. Abu 'l-Ḥasan al-Abzārī ("Dealer in Seeds," the family name), and, as his beautiful hand and good style indicate, was a well-educated man. The earlier letter (TS 8 J 23, f. 13) tells us that Abū Saʿīd had traveled from Egypt on a Christian ship, which met the warship (or fleet, *uṣṭūl*) that had conquered Jerba. This, no doubt, refers to the conquest of that Tunisian island by the admiral of the Norman king Roger II in 1135, an event echoed in several Geniza papers.<sup>1</sup> Abū Saʿīd and his non-Christian fellow travelers were horrified, but no harm befell them. He arrived safely in Bijāya (Bougie), Algeria, where he did profitable business. He intended to return to Egypt that same year, but "the Rūm rammed and toppled the ship of the Laqantī [that is, one belonging to a man from Alicante in Muslim Spain], "and a war was on," *wa-waqa 'at as-sayf*. Whether, as a result of that obstacle Abū Saʿīd remained in the West, married there and had two children, as evident from our letter, or whether he had commuted between Egypt and the West some years between the two letters discussed here, cannot be said.

Our letter, sent from Palermo to Fustat, reflects the situation around 1140, when the Normans cut Ifrīqiya from its life line, the trade route to Egypt. For a merchant like Abū Saʿīd, who specialized in the export of Oriental spices to the West, this meant that he had nothing further to do in the countries of North Africa. The distance between the town of Tunis and the shores of Sicily is very small, but bad storms could have a devastating effect: instead of one day or so our traveler needed thirty-five to reach his goal, and most of those who had set sail simultaneously with him perished.

University Library, Cambridge, Taylor-Schechter  
Collection, TS 13 J 26, f. 10.

*"And say to him: All your life—peace upon you, peace upon your house, etc."*<sup>2</sup>

*"The Lord will guard you from all evil, he will guard your soul."*

<sup>1</sup> "Today [October 14, 1136] there arrived the prisoners of Jerba," namely in Egypt, to be ransomed (TS K 6, f. 47). "The captive cantor, of the Jerba captives" (TS 10 J 15, f. 26).

<sup>2</sup> I Samuel 25:6. This translation is in accordance with the commentaries contemporaneous with the writer of the letter.

*"The Lord will guard your going out and coming in, from this time forth and forever."*<sup>3</sup>

To the presence of my brother, the delight of my eyes, my lord and leader, most esteemed by me, the crown of my head, and the one on whom I rely. May God prolong his life in happiness, guard and keep him and never deprive him of his good guidance.

Dear brother, may God protect and never forsake you, may he be *your help and sustainer, your support and trust from this time forth and forever*.

I entered Sicily with my family coming from Tunis because of the privations suffered there and the horrors witnessed in Ifrīqiya and also because of my longing for you. I intended to travel to Egypt via Sicily, for it is no longer possible to travel to Egypt directly from Ifrīqiya. I planned to arrive in Egypt this very year, but God had willed otherwise. The obstacle to my travel and coming to you was illness in the family, which lasted four months. By Israel's religion, my misfortune<sup>4</sup> forced me to spend 50 Murābiṭī dinars,<sup>5</sup> for the wife fell ill and also the two little ones, and God willed that one of them died, the baby, he was one and a half years old—may your life be prolonged!

Then on the voyage to Sicily I was overcome by a disaster (see n. 4, above), the like of which I have never witnessed. A great storm seized us on the sea and we were forced to land on an island called Ghumūr.<sup>6</sup> We stayed there for twenty days with no food other than nettles.<sup>7</sup> When we set out from there we did not have the look of human beings any more. The seas tormented<sup>8</sup> us for thirty-five days and we were regarded as lost.<sup>9</sup> For we set sail in four barges (*qārib*), but only ours survived. After arrival in Sicily we were so exhausted from our sufferings at sea that we were unable

<sup>3</sup> Psalm 121:7-8. These verses may allude to the writer's own successfully concluded adventures.

<sup>4</sup> The word *ḥaraka*, lit., movement, is used here and below in the sense of *événement grave*, as in the *Arabian Nights*. See Dozy, *Supplément*, 1, 276a.

<sup>5</sup> The "dollars" of that period. See *Med. Soc.*, 1, index, s.v.

<sup>6</sup> Presumably one of the little islands between Tunisia and Sicily.

<sup>7</sup> Nettles: *ḥurrayq*. The tender stalks of the nettles are edible during spring-time. As the date of our letter shows, this voyage was undertaken approximately in April in order to catch the boats going from Sicily to Egypt in May.

<sup>8</sup> Lit., "the seas wanted to get at us," *ṯamannatna 'l-bihār*.

<sup>9</sup> These words are repeated in the text, albeit in different order.

to eat bread or to understand what was said to us for a full month.

This is the reason which prevented me from coming to Egypt this year. After all we have endured this year we are not prone to travel. You must see us with your own eyes; no description can do justice to our state.<sup>10</sup>

Furthermore, it is now three years since I have seen a letter or an answer from you. I am very much upset, and this, too, makes me reluctant to come. Dear brother, by God, do not withhold your letters from me, for I am waiting for them. I am staying here in Sicily, by God, do not withhold your letters from me<sup>11</sup> . . . for I am yearning after you and my mind is very much perturbed since the time your letters ceased to come. Write also about the poll tax.<sup>12</sup>

If you intend to move, the best thing is to come to Sicily (or, Palermo), for the spices of the Orient sell here well. Thus, it will be for both pleasure and business. We shall help one another in enhancing the prestige of the family<sup>13</sup> and shall be happy with one another.

(Greetings to four persons and to "my paternal aunts," which suggests that the family had been settled in Egypt for at least two generations.)

This letter was written on the New Moon day of the month of Sivan.<sup>14</sup> By God, I need not entreat you again to answer quickly, if God wills. Peace upon you and God's mercy and his blessings. *And may your welfare increase forever and never decrease. Amen.*

My son Abu 'l-Ḥasan<sup>15</sup> sends greetings to you all, and so does the dweller of my house<sup>16</sup>—to everyone, young and old.<sup>17</sup>

<sup>10</sup> Text: *lays al-khabar kal-'iyān*, a proverbial expression.

<sup>11</sup> Such repetitions are frequently found in similar contexts. One word is illegible here.

<sup>12</sup> Although the writer had been away from Egypt for at least four years, he was afraid that he was still registered as resident, and, at arrival there, would have to pay the poll tax for the years of his absence, although he had certainly paid the tax at his domicile in the Muslim West.

<sup>13</sup> Text: *wa-nata'āwanū fi rufū' al-ahl*. I am not entirely sure about the correctness of the translation; *rafa'* means "move someone up in the row of seats of honor."

<sup>14</sup> Falling in the month of May.

<sup>15</sup> So called after his grandfather.

<sup>16</sup> His wife.

<sup>17</sup> Published first in *Archivio Storico per la Sicilia Orientale* 67 (1971), 24-27. Revised here.

(The address on the reverse side is largely effaced, but the main elements are recognizable.)

To my brother . . . Abu 'l-Barakāt, son of . . . al-Abzārī . . . Fustat. From his brother Abū Sa'īd.

## 75 SKIPPING ALONG THE COAST

*From Messina, Sicily, to Mazara, Sicily*

Ca. 1153

The warm invitation extended by the India trader Abraham Yijū to his family in September 1149 (no. 41, above) did not find immediate response. Letters were exchanged, but no action was taken. Finally, after a lapse of about four years, we find here Yijū's nephew, Peraḥyā<sup>1</sup> b. Joseph, on the first leg of his trip to Egypt, where, again after considerable time, he finally married his cousin, the only remaining child of the India trader.

Peraḥyā's family had left Tunisia, probably in 1148, when it was partly occupied by the Normans, and settled in Mazara, a port on the southwestern coast of Sicily. During the eleventh century, Mazara was a lively entrepôt, serving as a bridgehead to Tunisia and a terminal for ships going to the Levant. After the Norman conquest of Sicily, however, and the subsequent severing of close relations between Tunisia and the island, Mazara lost its importance as a seaport. Peraḥyā had to look for another way to get to Egypt. He turned first north overland to Palermo and from there went by boat to Messina on the east coast of Sicily. This voyage is described in our letter.

With a craving for adventure—attested in the Geniza for other young men, too—Peraḥyā's younger brother Moses insisted on accompanying him to the foreign country.<sup>2</sup> After some mishaps—Moses was captured by pirates—the two finally arrived and were later

<sup>1</sup> No such Heb. name exists in the Bible. This is one of the pseudo-biblical names invented during the Geniza period and I suspect that the verb contained in it was understood as Ar. *farah* ("Joy in God") rather than Heb. *perah*, "flower," which makes no sense.

<sup>2</sup> See, for instance, no. 57, above.