

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.¹⁰

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 me¹¹ . . . 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.¹²

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 family¹³ 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.¹⁴ 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-Ḥasan¹⁵ sends greetings to you all, and so does the dweller of my house¹⁶—to everyone, young and old.¹⁷

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

¹¹ Such repetitions are frequently found in similar contexts. One word is illegible here.

¹² 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.

¹³ Text: *wa-nata'āwanū fī 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."

¹⁴ Falling in the month of May.

¹⁵ So called after his grandfather.

¹⁶ His wife.

¹⁷ 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, Peraḥyā¹ 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.² After some mishaps—Moses was captured by pirates—the two finally arrived and were later

¹ 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.

² See, for instance, no. 57, above.

followed by the rest of the family. Many letters concerning this family have been preserved in the Geniza, which is to be explained by the fact that the youngest brother, referred to in this letter, became a judge of the rabbinical court in Old Cairo.

The writing is effaced in several places, but can mostly be restored by reasonable surmise.

Jewish Theological Seminary, New York, E. N. Adler
Collection 151 (2557).

This is to inform you—may God . . . keep you—that we arrived in Messina in safety and good health—for which we must thank God, and not ascribe it to our own merit or good deeds—after we had passed eight days on our journey. For a rainstorm kept us back in Baqṭas (Patti).³ We paid the Christian skipper of the boat a fare of 2 rubā'īs⁴ less one-quarter and stipulated that he should let us disembark at the lighthouse near Messina⁵—the town is, indeed, visible from it.

We embarked on Friday night, in the company of a Jew, a Kohen, from Salerno, and were at sea until . . . day, when we arrived at Baqṭas (Patti). There, however, a rainstorm befell us, and we stayed until Friday. We boarded the boat again in the morning and arrived at a place called Milāṣ (Milazzo).⁶ There, the above-mentioned Jew, along with Isaac, the son-in-law of Giovanna's son, disembarked and continued their travel by land. The Christian skipper told us that we would not reach the lighthouse—the place where we had agreed that he would let us off—before Sabbath⁷ and added that we could disembark there whenever we arrived, but that he could not take a shortcut. As I was afraid of desecrating the Sabbath, and of other things (as well), I took another boat for two-thirds of a rubā'ī, and we arrived in Messina on Saturday.

On the following Sunday, I inquired about my uncle Mevassēr⁸ and found him there. He did not fall short (of his family duties),

³ A town and a gulf of the same name on the northern shore of Sicily.

⁴ A quarter of a gold dinar, the standard coin of Sicily at that time.

⁵ Spelled here, as in other Geniza papers, *msyny*, which indicates that the name was pronounced Messīnī or Messēnī by the writer.

⁶ A town on the eastern end of the gulf of Patti, the ancient Mylae.

⁷ The Sabbath begins on Friday evening with nightfall.

⁸ This is Abraham Yijū's brother, to whom no. 41, above, is addressed.

and we stayed with him. Then I inquired about Ben Siṭlūn and Ben Baruch⁹ and found them. Ben Siṭlūn said: "I shall take care of your fare, and you will go up (i.e., to Egypt) with me, if God wills." Then I consulted my uncle and Ben Siṭlū(n) about Moses' travel, and they said: "There is nothing to be gained by it. He had better go back to his father." But he insisted on setting out with me, so that he would not come back empty-handed. Thus I am uncertain with regard to him, and I have not received a letter from you giving instructions, or about your well-being, as might be expected. Now, please do not neglect to send a detailed letter with information about your well-being and that of my mother and my brother, and do not worry about us, for we are well.

Ben Siṭlūn let me copy the commentary on 'Eruvin by Rabbēnū Nissīm for him,¹⁰ and most of the people in the town have asked me to serve as a schoolmaster in his house, for the town lacks everything. Were not the town unfit for you to live in (you could find a good job here). However, the town is mediocre; one cannot live here. (. . . Here, it requires an) effort to study and to pray. Since we arrived, there has been no public prayer in the afternoon and the evening, while the morning prayer is said before dawn; at daybreak, they are already through with it. If we lived here . . . , we would miss the prayer; and it is impossible to walk in the streets here because of the (dir)t.¹¹

(After dealing with some sundry items, the writer asks his parents not to worry too much about their absent sons and, in particular, not to fast too much for them—it was customary to fast as a means of enhancing the efficacy of prayer for relatives on travel. He then

⁹ Business friends of his uncle, the India trader. The usual spelling of the first name was *Ṣiṭrūn* (citron), a family name still common among so-called Sefaradi, or Spanish, Jews.

¹⁰ The frequently quoted book of the great Tunisian Jewish scholar is lost, except for three pages found in the Geniza, which are indeed in the handwriting of our Perahyā! Obviously, they were his first attempt before he made the copy mentioned here and he carried them with him to Egypt. MS ENA 2936, ed. B. M. Lewin in *Jacob Freimann Jubilee Volume*, Berlin, 1937, pp. 72-80.

¹¹ Both Muslim and Jewish writers used to decry the low standard of their coreligionists in Sicily in Norman times. Mazara, the town to which this letter was directed, was of a different type, owing to its close connections with Tunisia (see above).

reiterates a medical prescription for his mother, which he had previously sent from Palermo, and concludes with a series of greetings, which shows that the community in Mazara must have included quite a number of scholars.)

(Address:)

To our dear father, may God keep him with his never ceasing watch, Joseph, the teacher, b. Peraḥyā Yijū, God is his protector! From his sons Peraḥyā and Moses, who are longing for him.

*May salvation be near!*¹²

76 DIVERTED TO TARSUS

From Alexandria to Cairo

Ca. 1212

Reading this fragmentary thirteenth century letter one regrets that not more material of a similar type has been preserved. A Jewish shipowner from Alexandria, Egypt, was on his way to Cyprus. At that time the island was under Christian domination, and he, coming from a Muslim country, certainly possessed a letter of safe-conduct, permitting him to land at Cyprus and to do business there. But a storm diverted him to Tarsus, the birthplace of the apostle Paul, in southeastern Asia Minor—Turkey today, but at that time the capital of Lesser, or New, Armenia, a Christian kingdom ruled by Leon II, “The Great” (1187-1219).¹ In these unforeseen circumstances the shipowner was without protection and afraid that the king would force him to take up his residence in Tarsus instead of Alexandria. For Leon II was eager to attract the maritime trade to his city, as is known from Venetian and Genoese sources.²

¹² Published first in *Archivio Storico per la Sicilia Orientale* 67 (1971), and revised here.

¹ He received a crown from the Pope of Rome, but was recognized as king also by Byzantine and Muslim rulers. See, for instance, Jacques de Morgan, *The History of the Armenian People*, trans. E. F. Barry, Boston, 1965 (reprint), pp. 222-225.

² Heyd, *Commerce du Levant*, 1, 369-372. At that time the river on which Tarsus is situated was still navigable and accessible to seafaring vessels. See

But a Christian business friend, most probably himself a native of Egypt,³ helpfully secured a strong letter of safe-conduct: the writer had a good time in Tarsus and would have remained longer, had not illness forced him to hurry back to Alexandria.

The second part of the letter reports the successful treatment of the writer (most Geniza letters report the opposite) and mentions the names of four physicians, but is otherwise fragmentary.

In the third section we find ourselves again in a larger historical context. The writer recommends an “illustrious” person, “a scion of the noblest families” of Sicily, who, for reasons not indicated, had lost everything and was forced to leave his home. The community in Alexandria was unable to take care of him, for at the same time a large company had arrived from France, and the cost of their stay in the town and the expenses for their travel (to the Holy Land) put a heavy strain on public charity. It has been recognized long ago that the exodus of “300 rabbis” from France to Palestine did not happen in the one year 1211, for which it was reported, but was a more protracted process.⁴ This is confirmed by several Geniza papers. Here, too, the arrival of a large group of needy travelers from France is reported as nothing very extraordinary. It was common practice to send persons whom the community of Alexandria was unable to take care of to the far more populous and richer capital. Letters to this effect have been preserved from the eleventh to the thirteenth century.

The beginning of the letter, and with it the address, which was written on the reverse side, is torn away, but not much can have been lost, since the first two lines contain the end of the introductory blessings.

University Museum, University of Pennsylvania E 16 522.

*May He keep your boys, the esteemed notables, the brilliant*⁵

Heyd, p. 367, and G. Le Strange, *The Lands of the Eastern Caliphate* (Cambridge, 1905), p. 133.

³ He is introduced in a way which shows that he was well known to the Cairene recipient of the letter.

⁴ S. Krauss, “L’émigration de 300 rabbins en Palestine en l’an 1211,” *Revue des Études Juives* 82 (1926), 333-352; E. N. Adler, *ibid.* 85 (1928), 70-71.

⁵ Heb. *h-mhyrym* is a slip for *h-mhyrym*. The letter was written by a clerk.