

Detailed letter of Ḥalaf b. Isaac, Aden, to Ben Yijū, India

Almost complete fragment

Most probably 1140

University Library Cambridge 18 J 5, folio 1

Breadth 11, 5 cm. Of the height, 35, 5 cm have been preserved. The upper part, containing the polite phrases of the preamble, has been carefully detached. On the backside of that part, the address has been written, which thus also is lost. Likewise, the left lower corner, running through fifteen lines (ll. 39-54), has been torn away, which truncated also the two lines of a postscriptum, written overleaf.

The identity of the writer and the receiver can be fixed with certainty despite the lack of the address. For lines 1-49 are written by the same clerk who wrote No. 58, while the postscripta and the remarks on the margin and between the lines are in the hand of Ḥalaf b. Isaac, see the Introduction to No. 56. The receiver of the letter is addressed as Abū Ishāq, l. 2, the honorary by-name given to Ben Yijū in the addresses of Ḥalaf's letters Nos. 56, 57, 58, but never, e.g. by Joseph b. Abraham. In addition, obviously there are in this letter a number of references to No. 56, see here ll. 11, 13, 21, 32. This provides us also with the date of our fragment. If No. 56 was sent in 1139, as we assumed No. 60 must have been written in 1140 and some time after August 15, the last day of the month of Īv of that year, cf. l. 8.

Although the same clerk wrote Nos. 58 and 60, he did not use the same paper. No. 60 is of smaller size and light grey, while No. 58 is light brown. The latter is smoother, while the paper of our letter is rather woolly, with the effect that the ink shines through on the back-side - which was the reason that, unlike No. 58, it was not used by the receiver for making notes.

In accordance with the narrower size of the paper, the elaborate characters of this clerk are here somewhat smaller than in No. 58, an aesthetic rule followed by all better scribes.

C o n t e n t s

- A. Thanks for condolence upon the death of the sender's father. Regret over the drowning ^{of three persons} mentioned and announcement of the death of the sender's mother. (ll. 1-10)
- B. Acknowledgement of the receipt of consignments of "eggs" (kind of cardamom), iron, bronze covers, and betel-nuts, sent through various agents. (ll. 10-16)
- C. Assurance that there was no harm in the cardamom (hail) coming late that year and that steps had been taken in the matter by Maḡmūn, the Representative of the merchants in Aden. (ll. 16-20)
- D. The sender had forgotten to dispatch an iron pan the previous year. (ll. 20-22)
- E. Enumeration of presents sent. (ll. 22-25)

- F. The ordered glass cups and candles could not be had, as Maḡmūn had monopolized all glass manufactured in the town for his new ship which was sailing to Ceylon. In case H. would release some quantities, the writer would list them at the end of his letter. (ll. 25-31)
- G. Owing to the lack of Egyptian mitqāls and the devaluation of the local dīnārs, the writer sent silk and asks to buy for it iron - but only the smooth variety out of four ones mentioned, as well as pepper, "eggs", betel-nut, and cardamom. The carrier of the consignment should be paid for it in advance. (ll. 31-47; partly damaged)
- H. Greetings. (ll. 47-49; largely damaged)
- I. Postscripts concerning the sendings of glass (see F.) and other commodities (ll. 49-margin; mostly lost)
- J. Request to forward letters. (margin-verso)

T r a n s l a t i o n

A (1) ((I took notice)) of your words of condolence over the death of my lamented (2) father, ma(y he find) me(rcy). I never doubted your friendship, dear Sheikh Abū Ishāq, (3) and know well that what happened at your place is like what happened (4) with us. Those young men, the sons of Mūsā, namely (5) Judah and Aaron, journeyed to Broach, but the ship was struck in the Ḥaur (the gulf); thus, (6) the two perished together with the Sheikh Abu 'l-Paraj al-Maḡallī - God forbid (7) that we should be forgetful of them.

Furthermore, there occurred this year the death of my mother (8) in the month of Āv; thus, even more grief has come to your servant. However, at all times (9) everything is in the hands of God, the exalted. He does whatsoever pleases Him (10) and who may say to Him, what are You doing. God, the exalted, may turn all matters to a good end.

B There (11) arrived the "eggs" and the "refurbished" iron, which were sent in the ship of Ibn Abu (12) 'l-Katā'ib, many thanks for your kindness.

There arrived also four (13) bronze covers; they are very heavy. I wanted to have them (14) lighter.

The betel-nuts, which you kindly sent with Sheikh (15) Abu 'l-Surūr and Muwaffaq al-^oAḡā'irī, arrived - may God reward you well, (16) my master, and satisfy your needs and never rob me of your existence.

C As to the cardamom, (17) about which you wrote that it came late this year, do not worry about it, my master. (18) I talked with my master, the most illustrious Sheikh Maḡmūn and suggested (19) to him to write in this matter to Ibn al-Marīḡa and to the Fadiyār, (20) but he said that you had made the same suggestion in your letter to him.

D You (21) inquired, my master, in your letter with regard to the iron pan. As a matter of fact, I (22) forgot it in my house on that day and did not send it.

E God, the exalted, made it possible for me to forward (23) to you for your household two bottles of raisins, a sieve, and two stone pans, (24) the two in one case, and a raḡl Maḡribī antimony. Please, my master, take

delivery (25) and excuse me (for not sending more).

F You ordered, my master, twenty bowls and four lamps. (26) By my faith, I paid for this in advance two months before the sailing of the ships. (27) However, it happened that my master Sheikh Maḡmūn and Sheikh Bilāl (28) were fitting out in partnership a boat for Ceylon and sent the servants to detain all that (29) was being manufactured so that they could take all they needed, but before I wrote this letter, they (30) all the time promised me some of it. If I get some, I shall send it and note it at (31) the end of the letter.

G Making a bold demand on your kindness, I sent (32) five mann silk of the kind known to you. I was forced to do so, because of (33) the devaluation of the Maliki (dīnār) and by chance I had no mitqāls, the price of which is here (34) higher even than last year. Thus, please, my master, sell it for whatever God, (35) the exalted, assigns and buy me for it a little pepper or "eggs" and betel-nut (36) and cardamom. However, "ordinary," //shining,// or refurbished iron - please do not buy me of this (37) not even for one dīnār or one dirham. But, if you happen to get smooth iron, packed (38) in bārbazāt, it will be allright. For when there are vapours, the iron becomes (39) rusty. Thus, please do not buy me ordinary, //shining (40) or// refurbished iron, but only smooth long (bars) or pepper and "eggs" (41) and betel-nut and cardamom.

Please hire for these wares some space (in a ship) and were it for much money (42) either from a ship's owner or a captain or if you happen

to find a trustworthy ((merchant;)) (43) and were it for much money and do not postpone ((.....)) (44) what God, the exalted, assigns, and do not postpone to sell it ((.....)) (45) (as soon as) my master will have taken delivery and when you buy ((.....)) (46) even if its price should be high. There is no need, my master, ((to give you advice. A hint is sufficient for a)) (47) wise man.

H Accept, my lord, for your honored self the best greetings)) (48) and give in my name to my lord, your son, and Sheikh ((Bama and those committed)) (49) to your care the best greetings. And Peace.

I (Continued in Halaf's handwriting) (50) I got thirteen bowls and two lamps and th((ey are in such or such a package. I sent)) (51) the silk and the sieve and the antimony, ((the Magribī, with Mawaffaq al-)) (52) ^CAs ^Vā'irī and the two bottles of raisins and the two stone pots)) (53) in the ship of Ben al-Muqaddam ((with, and I)) (54) ask you to assist them, m((y master,

Margin

((????)) and excuse me for not sending sugar, there is none to be had this year; and you, my master, are most prone to excuse.

J Together with this letter you will receive a letter for Sheikh Isaac Tilimsanī. Please deliver it to him without delay.

Verse

And another letter to ((..... - please deliver it)) (2) to him, for I have heard th((at he is in.....And Peace))

C o m m e n t a r y

1 The death of Ḥalaf's father occurred in February-1139, see No. 235 (91x), l. 6.

lamented - Hebr. ḥayy, lit. "the living," see No. 36, l. 25.

3 what happened at your place - In his letter of condolence, Ben Yijū obviously had mentioned cases of young people, who had perished while setting out from India. This implied that Ḥalaf should bear the death of his old father with composure. Here, Ḥalaf retorts by quoting cases of other young men who died on the high sea in the prime of their lives, merchants who had set out from Aden to Broach on the Northern part of the West coast of India.

For our knowledge of the traffic on the Indian ocean, this passage is most revealing. For Ḥalaf reports here from Aden about a case of shipwreck on the Indian coast to a merchant living on the same coast, but far more south, which means that Aden at that time was in closer connection with all these ports than they were among themselves.

9 Part of a verse from Ecclesiastes (Kohemoth), ch. 8, v. 3.

10 Part of a verse from Ecclesiastes (Kohemoth), ch. 8, v. 4. The two sayings occur together in a Jewish prayer of mourning.

After everybody mentioned in the previous lines was dead, it is difficult to see how everything could end well. However, up to the present day, one concludes in the Near East with similar phrases, when one discusses a hopeless situation. After all, man expects a better life in the world to come.

11 "eggs" - Most probably, a kind of cardamom, see No. 26 verso, l. 20; No. 51 verso, l. 6, etc. About the various types of iron here and in ll. 36-40, see volume I, s.v. Ibn Abu 'l-Katā'ib - Cf. No. 26, l. 17.

13 covers - see No. 56, l. 20.

15 Abu 'l-Surūr is too common a name to lend itself for identification.

Muwaffaq was a name common among Jews, cf. No. 183 passim (thirteenth century), J. Mann, Texts and Studies, I, p. 449 (twelfth century), E. Strauss, Archiv Orientalni 8 (Prague 1936), p. 98 (thirteenth century). ^cAsā'ir was a great confederation of Arab tribes in South-West Yemen around Zabīd, cf. O. Löfgren, Ar. Texte zur Kenntnis der Stadt Aden, Uppsala 1950, p. 216, ll. 6-12. It was common for Jews to bear as family name the name of a tribe under whose protection they lived, cf. the name Ben Yijū (Iṣū being a big Berber tribe living around Meknes in Morocco, see vol. I, s.v.). Muwaffaq could hardly have been a Muslim, cf. the request to assist him and his companion in l. 54, which, as Muslims, they hardly needed.

Again, we see that merchandise was carried by two merchants in joint responsibility. See vol. I, ch. Transport.

17-20 The import of this passage seems to be the following: cardamom did not grow in the vicinity of the port where Ben Yijū lived. He used to order it, e.g. from Fandarīnā, see No. 64, ll. 3-4. At the time of the departure of the ships from India that year, it was ^{no} ~~not~~ to be had at Ben Yijū's place. Thus, the suggestion is made that the Representative of the Adenese merchants should apply to other merchants out in India for

that commodity.

Ibn al-Marīḡa - "the son of the sick woman", certainly identical with Abu 'l-ḡasan ibn al-Marīḡa al-Qarawi, a Tunisian Jewish merchant mentioned in No. 64D, l. 1.

21 See No. 56, ll. 39-41, and here, l. 23.

23 a sieve - In No. 14, l. 34, we find seventy sieves exported from Hirbāt in South-East Arabia to Aden. A sieve of fine quality is a very important implement in a household, where grain is ground continuously.

24 Maḡribī antimony - Cf. No. 51 verso, l. 11.

25 bowls and lamps - Certainly made of glass, see No. 56, l. 42.

27 master - one expects masters, Ar. mawāliya.

Bilāl was at that time already vizier and actual ruler of Aden and the whole of Southern Yemen, cf. No. 32, l. 24. This did not hinder him from forming a partnership with the Representative of the Jewish merchants in Aden. However, in the same high-handed way, in which the two partners acted here, we see Bilāl act against all the other merchants, see No. 225, ll. 4 and 7.

29 Glass was manufactured in Aden, see No. 56, l. 42.

31 See l. 50.

a bold demand - Ar. dalāla. The usual form is dalāl, while dalāla or dilāla means brokerage, cf. No. 81, l. 29.

32 the kind known to you - Lit. "of that silk," certainly a reference to No. 56, l. 48, where also the same quantity was sent, a year before.

33 devaluation - Ar. fasād, "damage."

38 For bārbaza (or bārbuza) perhaps Persian bārbūga, "a load or baggage" (Johnson, Steingass, Pers.-Engl. Dictionaries) or "small wares" (Steingass) is to be compared.

34 Reference to the high price of the Egyptian mitgāl in Aden also No. 225, l. 12.

36-41 See above, l. 11 and vol. I s.v. Iron.

41 hire some space - Ar. taktarī. Ḥalaf prefers the renting of a definite space in a ship to the payment of the naul or freight, see vol. I, Transport.

46-7 The phrases were restored after No. 58, l. 46 and No. 56, l. 72.

47-8 The greetings were filled in according to No. 56, l. 73-4 and other letters of Ḥalaf to Ben Yijū.

50 See above, l. 25 ff.

53 Most probably Abu 'l-Surūr was mentioned here, see l. 15. He and Muwaffaq certainly were Yemenites; this explains Ḥalaf's special interest in them.

Margin-Verso

One of the two merchants, to whom Ben Yijū is requested to deliver letters, was a North African, like himself; most probably this was the case also with the second, whose name is lost. To his Muslim and Indian correspondents, Ḥalaf perhaps would send letters and consignments through their respective compatriots and correligious. See about this matter above No. 199 (=29x) verso, l. 1 ff.