

A Letter to Falfos from his partner Abū Zikrī Kōhēn reporting the prices of the commodities coming from the East.

Cairo - Aden 9th January 1133.

University Library Cambridge 15 J 33, fol. 1

29 x 20 cm

Dark brown paper, written in Abū Zikrī's hand, with a finer pen than that used in No. 84. The same distribution of the writing on the page as in the two preceding letters, with the difference that the margins here are even broader (approximately $\frac{2}{5}$ of the total breath of the page, as against $\frac{1}{4}$ in No. 84 and $\frac{1}{3}$ in No. 83). As against 25 lines written horizontally, there are 26 on the right margin and 13 on the top, with the result that there is more writing on the margins than on the main part of the page. There are also a few lines on the backside, in addition to the address.

The letter is dated exactly according to day, month and year. This was done very rarely, normally only in letters going overseas and when there was a special reason for doing so. The main contents of this letter is the list of prices for oriental commodities, which Abū Zikrī sent to his partner in Aden in order to enable him to organise his purchases effectively. Possibly the bearer of the letter was not sure whether he would travel to Aden direct or stay, as many

did, for some time in one or more of the towns and ports on his way. On the other hand, Abū Zikrī wanted his partner to know when exactly did the goods listed in his letter reach the prices marked. For the market was subjected to fluctuations. The year referred to in our letter: 1132, was very bad, for "nobody came from the Magrib (North Africa) and only a few Byzantines arrived", margin, 11.12-13; however, the following year, 1133, was a boom year, where 100 - 150 % profits were made even by inexperienced young men, cf. No. 83. The letter was written about 7-8 months after Halfon had left Cairo, while it was due to travel for several months in addition. Therefore exact dating was conducive to the purpose for which the letter was sent. Owing to its importance, and for the purpose of easier orientation, we shall first discuss the list of prices contained in our letter and then translate and comment on its remaining sections.

Altogether 39 commodities are listed (l. 15 - margin, l. 26). With the exception of pearls and two varieties of lālas fabric, all are medical or dyeing plants, spices, condiments and perfumes, with other words, all articles destined for the bazaar of the druggists.

It seems strange that for each commodity only one price is given. This contrasts most blatantly with a similar letter sent from Cairo to Aden, which also contains such a list, but notes in most cases maximum^s and

minimums, in one case even 4 different prices. The reference is to No. 193, which is probably about thirty years earlier than our letter and which, by the way, also was written at the time of a slump. The Sultan had imprisoned the Genoese, wherefore the Rūm (Byzantines and Italians) became worried and refrained from trading (No. 193, ll. 13-15.)

The reason for the difference lies in the months in which the two letters were written. No. 85 was sent in January, when the season of ^{after the arrival of the spring convoys and again} overseas trading was concluded; for prices were ~~finally~~ fixed ^{in fall} shortly before the ships set sail, cf. No. 29, ll. 27-28. However, No. 193 was dispatched on the first day of the month of Sīwān, which during the first decade of the twelfth century fell between 30th April and 28th May. At that time, the season was just beginning; naturally the prices were fluctuating, especially in a year of crisis, as the writer of that letter himself remarks.

Nevertheless, a comparison between the two documents, which were perhaps divided from each other by a full generation, reveals that despite great discrepancies in details, as a whole the prices showed a high degree of steadiness. 16 out of the 39 commodities listed in No. 85 occur also in No. 193. Therefore, while there is of course no purpose in discussing here all the prices mentioned in our document - this has been done in vol. 1, chap. "Prices" - the main section of No. 85 l. 15 -

margin, 1.26, will be reproduced here in form of a comparative table, in which also the relevant details from No.193 will be listed. The reader has to keep in mind that in the letter itself the prices are given in words and not in numerals and not in the form of a table, but as a consecutive text. The commodities listed will be discussed here only where a special reason calls for it. For all further details see vol. 1 Index.

Prices in Cairo on 9th January 1133 (No.85) as compared with May, about 30 years earlier (No. 193).

All the prices are in Egyptian gold dīnārs.

Line	Commodity	Quantity	Price	Price	Line
15	Lac	<u>lāk</u> bahār (300 raṭl)	50 Not selling	40-45- 50-70	7-9
16	Pepper	<u>fulful</u> bahār	60	50-70	9-10 also see V.16
16	Odoriferous Woods	<u>a^cwād tayyiba</u>	sale well	scarce	22
17	Clove, cleaned	<u>qaranḡul munaqqā</u> <u>1 mann</u>	3 3/4	3 1/3- 4 1/12	18-19
17	Nutmeg	<u>jauza</u> <u>1 mann</u>	1	3 and less	17-18
18	Mace	<u>bisbāsa</u> -	7 1/12	-	
18	Civet perfume	<u>zabada</u> <u>10 ūqia</u>	7	-	
19	Musk	<u>misk</u> <u>10 mitqāl</u>	20	-	

	No.85					No.193
Line	Commodity	Quantity	Quantity	Price	Price	Line
20	Camphor	<u>kāfūr</u>4	100(1 mann) v.,	16-17
20	Brazilwood	<u>baqqam</u>	1 camel's load	90	90? 50?	15
20-1	"Mixture"	<u>hulṭa</u>	(ḥiml)			
20-1	"Mixture" (of pepper and ginger?)	<u>hulṭa</u>	1 camel's load	64	-	
21	Abyssinian (cubeb?) <u>Ḥabašīya</u>		1 qintār	9	-	
21-2	Costus	<u>qust</u>	-	6 1/2	7	20
21-2	Zedoary	<u>zurunba</u>		8	-	
21-2	Good olibanum	<u>lubbān ṭayyib</u>	1 qintār	12	10	v 14
23	Spikenard	<u>sunbul</u>	100 mann=20 raṭl	40	36-40	15-16
24	Galangal	<u>ḥūlanjān</u>	10 mann=20 raṭl	8	-	
24-25	Cinnamon in packages (?)	<u>qirfa al-laff</u>	10 Mann=20 raṭl			
				(2) →	1-1/2	19

Margin

1-2	BK'R		<u>1 qintār</u>	4 1/2	-	
3	Pearls of middling quality	<u>lūlū wasaṭ</u>		sale well	-	
4	"Swallow-wort"	<u>ḥumāmīrān</u>	1 raṭl	1 1/2	-	
4-5	Rhubarb, good	<u>rāwand ṭayyib</u>	<u>1 mann</u>	5	5	v., 13
5-6	Turmeric	<u>hurḍ</u>	1 qintār	4	"nothing of it to be had"	17
			not selling		sales well	

Line	No.85 Commodity	Quantity	Price	Price	No.193 Line
6-7	Bamboo-crystals ^v ṭabāsīr "without the dust" <u>turāb</u>	10 m. #20 r.	8		
7-8	Borax <u>dinkār</u>	10 m. #20 r.	4	-	
8-9	Betel leaves <u>tanbal</u>	10 (!)	4	5	20
9-10	? <u>Maḥlūb</u>	1000	3 1/2	-	
10	A <u>Ḥumāsīya</u> musk <u>musk</u>	not selling	1	-	
11	<u>Lālas</u> (red silk) fine quality piece <u>jayyid</u> (<u>taub</u>)		2	-	
11	" " " poor " <u>dūn</u> "		1 1/2	-	
17	Emblie myrobalan ^v <u>sīr amlaj</u>	scarce		-	
17-18	"Indian" (myrobalan) <u>hindī</u>	100 mann	20	-	
18	"The Distilled" <u>al-qāṭir</u>		scarce	-	
19	Socotran aloe <u>ṣabir suqutī</u>		not selling	-	
19-20	Succus lycii <u>hūlān</u>	100 (!) ^x	40	-	
20-22	<u>Qāqullā</u> cardamom <u>hāl qāqwly</u>	100m. #200r.	25	30 actually	17
22	<u>Mḡwwf</u>	100 (!)	11	sold for 25v.11	
23-24	Yellow mirobalan <u>ihlailaj aṣfar</u>				
		1 <u>qinṭar</u>	7	5-6	21
24-26	Cowry shells <u>wad^c</u>	1 <u>dabba</u> (a vessel)	2 3/4	-	

^x
 Je, = x 250
 T S 16. 163 v 14
 where in al-Mahdiyya
 100 D + 28,57 Dinars

Notes on the List of Prices.

17 In this list, the mann weight is given four or five times without any qualification (ll. 17 twice; margin ll. 5. 18), but six times with the remark that it equates 2 raṭl (ll. 23. 24. 25.; margin; ll. 7. 8. 22.). In l. 23 the writer possibly forgot to add this detail or regarded it ^s unnecessary.

As is well-knownⁿ, the very definition^s of a mann is a weight of 2 raṭl. In Egypt, during the Fatimid period, a raṭl comprised 140 dirhams⁼ 406, 25 grms. Cf. W. Hinz, *Isl. Masse und Gewichte*, Leiden 1955, p.16 and 29.

Our document seems to indicate that for certain goods the mann equalled two Egyptian raṭl, weighed t^e herefore not $2 \times 406.25 = 812.5$ grms, but $2 \times 437.5 = 875$ grms.

We find a similar way of indicating the weight of the mann for certain commodities in 193, l.16 "Spikenard = from 40-36 the 100, two hundred", which is to be understood as follows: 100 mann = 200 raṭl cost 36-40 dīnār.

18 One ūqiya was in Egypt = 12 dirham = 37.5 grms. cf. Hinz, p.35.

19 One miṭqāl = 24 qīrāṭ = 4,68 grms - ; lb., p. 4

20 The camel's load, hīmal, was not a unified weight. It varied according to the merchandise carried. The weight for a load of brazilwood was 600 raṭl = 270 kg; Hinz ib. p. 13.

The brazilwood (bois de campêche), which was used as a red dye, was one of the most common commodities of the Indian and Mediteranean trade. Its price in Aden in 1134 was according to No.20 b.8: 6 bahār

Civet perfume - In 1149 a merchant writing from Aden estimated that 50 ūqiya would be worth in Cairo 40 d., see No. 68, l. 8.

20-21 Mixture - Almost certainly of pepper
and ginger, see No. 73, ll. 27-8; 156, ll. 8-9.
as well as No. 55, l. 2; No. 208, l. 36. ^{85/8}

100 d. (Malikī).

21 Abyssinian (cubeb) - complemented according to No. 149, l. 33. A

bitter aromatic, Xanthoxylum, of which various species are known, still used in India as a tonic and febrifuge, cf. Meyerhof, Maimonide, Matière médicale, Cairo 1940, p. 151, No. 307 (clavelier). It is called Abyssinian, because it was brought from Sofāla on the southern East African coast of present day Mozambique, cf. Ibn Sīnā (Avicenna), Cairo 1294, I 406, quoted by Meyerhof, ib.

24-25 Cinnamon in packages laff? - The same expression in No. 193 p. 19 cf. No. 32, l. 53: sixty packages (ṣurra) of Ceylon cinnamon, each package weighing 100 raṭl.

In No. 187, l. 30, which is contemporary with our letter, a man writing from Alexandria complains that the price of 100 mann cinnamon was only 16 d. and still nobody asked for it. Again, approximately the same price as here and in No. 193. In Aden in 1134, two bahāre cinnamon (600 raṭl = 300 mann) cost only 29 Malikī d., No. 20 B. l. 9.

1 The reading of the letters BK is sure, while a long drawn R seems to fill the empty space up to the margin. (the same R below l. 18). BK'R could be read buḥār 'vapour', which may be the name of an odoriferous wood. However, so far, I was unable to identify it.

Addition to 85/9, line 4 from bottom

certainly is another myrobalan and identical with halilajj hindi in No. 149,1.32
(letter sent in 1135 from Aden to Cairo). It is probably the same which is still
sold in the bazaars under the name hindi sa'iri, "the Indian,

4. The māmīrān, "swallow-wort" (chélidoine) was traded in raṭl or halves of a mann, cf. No. 33, l.4 and No.176 v. margin, l. 59 (a letter from the Coromandel coast). One sees how strictly organized and well developed that trade in the Oriental spices was at that time.

Rhubarb - 5 mann of this commodity cost in Aden 1134 only 15 Malikī d. (cf. No.20 B. 1.10.

9 Maḥlūb - according to Dozy, Supplement 1 314 (= Muḥit al-Muḥit) maḥlūb stands for miḥlab, milk-pail. However, it can hardly be regarded as an equivalent ^{or mistake} for maḥlab, Prunus Mahaleb L. see Meyerhof, Maimonide, Matière médicale p. 109, No. 220. In ^{for} addition, the Prunus Mahaleb (cerisier de Sainte-Lucie) grows in Europe and the Near East and was not brought from India or the Far East.

17-8 "The Indian" is to be understood in connection with the preceding item - sīr amlaj. ^vSīr is the Persian word for milk; amlaj, derived from Sanskrit through Persian, denotes the Emblic Myrobalan, Phyllanthus Emblica L. Its fruits, similar to small blackish plums, are still on sale in the bazaars of Cairo and used against stomach troubles. See Meyerhof, Maimonide, p.187, No.374. Sir G. Watt, The Commercial Products, of India, 887. The fruits were brought from India preserved and candied (^vsīr). Thus, hindī, "the Indian," which has the form of the wye." See Meyerhof, Maimonide p.56, No.112.

18 "The Distilled" al-qāṭir al-mub'ar, literally "the discharged dripping". The qāṭir is identified by Maimonides with the dam al-aḥawain

"the blood of the two brothers", a red resin coming from various liliaceae, especially the *Dracaena Cinnabari* Balf. (Socotra) and *Calamus Draco* Willd. (Malaya), the so called dragon's blood, see Meyerhof, Maimonide, p.50, No.96. Meyerhof quotes Abd al-Razzāq Kaṣf al-Rumūz, transl. by L. Leclerc, No.134, Paris 1874 an Algerian Arab author, who relates that the dragon's blood was used in that country against heart and lung troubles.

22 Mṣwwf It is not clear, whether al-Mṣwwf refers to al-hāl in 1.20 and represents a variety of cardamom or whether it is a separate type of merchandise. In the former case, the word could mean 'hairy' (from ṣūf), although this form seems not to be testified by the dictionaries (in Yemen 'hairy' is muṣwif, which also could be meant by the spelling mṣwwf). Some of the cardamoms seen by the present writer had quite a hairy surface.

It is also not clear whether a "hundred" means here mann or simply pieces. *In the latter case, the reference could not have been to cardamom.*

26 Cowry shells were traded not by weight, but by measure of capacity, cf. No.152, 1.22 - v.1. 1 kailuhum mudd, "their measure is one mudd". Thus dabba is not merely a vessel made of skin or glass, as the dictionaries have it (Hava; Dozy; Steingass, Persian-English), but a measure.

TRANSLATION

A 1-6 (With a few omissions, exactly the same polite phrases as in No.83. See Notes.)

B And what you wish to know: From the day I parted with you (7) I did not see from you an answer or a letter. I had sent you (8) to Qūṣ the effects which you had had no time to take with you, but remained (9) worried about them, until there arrived Sheikh Maḥrūz and announced me that they had arrived. (10) I sent you also a letter together with the effects, in which I informed you (11) about everything, as well as about the balance of the small account which I paid for you after (12) your departure. I asked you also to buy for me a little ambergris for (13) the boy, your servant. I have no doubt that it (the letter) has reached you.

C And what (14) you wish to know about the news of the country - everything is well, thank God. (15) The prices of the commodities in the town are as follows:



(15 - margin 1.11 List of Prices, see above pp. 4-10.)

(margin 12) The town is at a standstill, for this year (13) nobody ^{have arrived} has come from the West and only very few Rūm (Byzantins^e and Italians). I announce you this (14) my master and you buy whatever God puts in your heart and sail back). (15) You need nobody to instruct you what to buy, (16) for you are an old timer in those parts. Try to get (17) a

little emblic myrobalan, for here it is scarce (1.17-26 List of
Prices continued)

Top

D (1) I express to your exalted (2) "presence" my best greetings
and please express to my master, (3) the most illustrious Sheikh
Maḍmūn, my best greetings, (4) measured by my longing for him, and
give him my utmost (5) thanks for what he has done for me in the
affair of B. Ḥamāma (6) and the selling of the corals. Our lord does
not know that I (7) had trouble in this matter....at (8) all times, for,
(had you not been there), there would have been nobody to take care (9)
of the things like you.

Please express to my master, Sheikh (10) Joseph B. Abraham - may
God make him honoured - my best (11) greetings, and to my master, the
Sheikh Isaac (12) the best greetings, and the Sheikh (13) Ḥalaf likewise.

Verso

E (1) Our lord - may God keep him alive - sends you his choicest greet-
ings - and his letter will reach you. (2) Your wife and all your brothers
and Sibā^c and his boy and all those who seek your protection (3) are well
and in the best of health.

Your brother has got the position of which (4) you know, together-..
....I inform you herewith of this. Please express to all (5) friends
.....my choicest greetings.

Written on the first of Ševāṭ 1444 (=9th January 1133)

Address - Right side:

Top

3 M Madgūn - the representative of the (Jewish) merchants in Aden,
see Chap. 3 and Index.

5 B. Ḥamāma - In the fragment of a letter addressed to Abū Zikrī
Kōhēn, No.227 v., 1-7, reference is made to the same person, who obviously
was entrusted with a sending of corals by Abū Zikrī, but misused the latter's
confidence.

6 Our lord - refers to Maḥmūd, who was styled Nāgīd or "Prince" of
Yemen.

10 Joseph B. Abraham - the well known Adenese merchant, see Index.

11 Issac - the father of Halaf b. Isaac, see No.81, Introduction and
No. 60, ^{h.}1 - 10.

Verso

1. Our lord - i.e. the Gaon Maḥlī'ah, the head of the Palestinian
Academy, which then had its seat in Cairo.

2 Your wife - she died childless, see No.124 Introd. Only intimate
friends reported to each other about their wives' well being. All your
brothers - From that time only two brothers of Halfon are known to us,
Eli, see 1.3, and Ezechiel, cf. No.86 Introduction.

Sibā^c - the name means wild beast, lion or rather lions. A close
relative of Halfon, probably a brother-in-law, see No.83, margin, 11, 20-21
No.86 v. margin 1. 27.

To his "presence", my master, the illustrious Sheikh Abū Sa'id Halfon, son of Netan'el Hallēvī, m(ay he rest in) E(den), the Dimyāṭī (of Damiette) - may God make permanent his honor.

Left side:

Acknowledging your kindness

Abū Zikrī Kōhēn. Peace.

Notes on the Translation.

- 1 - 6 There is one word more than in No.83; (3) "may God keep you alive." In 1.4, the word Allah is omitted, most probably by mistake.
- 6 yaum an fāraqtuka - see Vol. II Index s.v.an.
- 7 "answer" - jawāb. almost synonym with letter.
- 7-13 These lines refer to No.84. See there the Introduction.
- 9 Maḥrūz - The writer's brother-in-law, the well known Adenese merchant and ship's owner, See Index.
- 11 Small account - al-ḥusayyib, a diminutive of the word ḥisāb.
- 15 The prices of the commodities - as^{VC}ār al-balad fi 'l-biḍā^Ca a rather strange phrase; fi 'l-biḍā^Ca means perhaps by wholesale.

Margin

- 12-13 The absence of the merchants from abroad may have been caused by the bloody rivalries between the Reihāniya and Juyūsiya guards of the Fatimid Caliph, which disturbed the peace of the country in that year (1132), see Stanley Lane - Pool, A History of Egypt in the Middle Ages, London 1901, 168.

5 Your brother - Eli - By a strange coincidence, a most beautifully preserved legal document on parchment, signed by this man as president of a rabbinical court two days before our letter, on 6th January 1133, (see the Introduction to No.86) has come down to us. See ib.