

# COUNTERFEIT GOLDPIECES IN THE HOUSE OF EXCHANGE

(In the 1070's)

Two central monetary institutions are constantly mentioned in this document: the mint and "the house of exchange."

The caliphal mint was headed by a high Muslim dignitary, referred to in the last line of the document as mutawallī al-sikka, "superintendent of coinage." It was actually run by a Jew, styled sāhib dār al-dārb, "manager of the mint," who probably was not a salaried government official, but an agent, ‘āmil, namely, a capitalist who farmed out its revenue. For money was not "issued" by the government, but sold in "the house of exchange."

The proprietor of the counterfeit money was a highly respected merchant and certainly himself the victim of a fraud. But this did not protect the persons involved from severe punishment and even the danger to lose their lives, had it not been for the intervention of the powerful manager of the mint.

The purpose of our document, which, ~~although written by a court clerk,~~ <sup>before a notary</sup> was not a deposition in court, but a ~~private~~ declaration, was to shield its issuer from any accusations which might be brought against him by the proprietor of the counterfeit money.

The document bears no date. But on its reverse side several drafts are written, one of which is dated October, 1081. Our document must therefore be earlier and cannot refer to Nizār, so famous in the history of the Isma‘īlī sect, who claimed the throne of his father al-Mustansir after the latter's death in 1094. The proper name of the second Fatimid caliph of Egypt, al-‘Azīz (975-996), was also Nizār;

coins minted under his reign are often referred to as Nizāriyya, and this must be the case here.

All the persons appearing in this document are known from other Geniza papers. Sāsōn b. Nathan, the proprietor of the counterfeit coins, was a party to, or signed, documents in great number between 1072 (TS 20.14) and 1106 (TS 13J2, f. 14). The "judge"<sup>1</sup> Yā'īr (often called by his Arabic name Azhar) is mentioned in court records dated 1072 (TS 18J1, f. 10) and 1079 (TS 28.6) and numerous others. The one witness whose signature is not effaced, Nethanel b. Japheth, signed documents in 1082 (TS 24.1) and 1094 (TS 13J2, f. 4, TS 28.5).<sup>2</sup> The name of the main figure, Nissīm b. Shemarya, has been found thus far only in business letters.

Thus, our document most probably hails from the 1070's and the "King" referred to in it was none but Badr al-Jamālī, the Armenian viceroy of Egypt, who after a long period of anarchy restored order in the country. The fact that "new, fresh" coins should be available eighty or more years after the sovereign whose name they bore had died is nothing surprising, for coins were often put into purses when they came fresh from the mint and the sealed purses then circulated for decades, see, for Nizāriyya, Med. Soc. I, pp. 233, 237, 240.

The manuscript is effaced in many places, but most of these can be restored.

→ R. Nissīm, son of R. Shemarya, (may he) r(est in) E(den)  
appeared before those who fixed their signature at the end of this document and said to them:

# TS 12.1

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R. Sāsōn, <sup>son of</sup> R. Nathan, (may he) r(est in) E(den), before leaving for Alexandria, left with me 17 new Nizāriyya dinars as a deposit. I needed to make use of them [with the intention] to restitute their equivalent. After they had remained with me for three months, I bought for [R. Sāsōn's] dinars gold in the house of exchange to the amount of 10 dinars. I did this in good faith not knowing what they were. But the broker<sup>3</sup> [became suspicious] of the dinars and showed them to Abū 'Alī in the (Street of the) Alchemists.<sup>4</sup> He found that they were all counterfeit, newly made in the same coinage and same workshop. In that very moment the matter reached the soldier<sup>5</sup> guarding the house of exchange, while (our) M(aster and) T(eacher) Yā'ir, son of R. Abraham, the judge, was not present. I was seized, apprehended and threatened. The circumstances forced me to say that the dinars belonged to R. Sāsōn, son of R. Nathan, ..., since my life was in danger, and ... Yā'ir, the judge, son of R. Abraham, was absent. Later, the soldier sent for ... Yā'ir, the judge, son of R. Abraham, (may he) r(est in) E(den),<sup>6</sup> since he was the manager of the royal mint and its agent appointed by the government. The soldier said to ... Yā'ir, the judge: "Send the police to raid the house of that man." But ... Yā'ir, the judge, did not cease to tackle the affair until he prevented by bribes the raid of my place. He continued to handle the matter until it was settled.<sup>7</sup>

He returned to me 10 of the 17 dinars, for when I was apprehended, my pocket was searched and the rest of the 17 dinars, all new and fresh, made in one coinage in the same workshop, were found. Of these, the soldier took 7 dinars, all cut up, and I paid to the mounted police,

the police on foot, and the [...] 7 excellent dinars. The 7 dinars taken by the soldier were returned, less 1 dinar, but I could not say a word. Had it not been for ... Yā'ir's [handling of] that affair, the matter would have reached the King, and a multiple of the original capital would have been lost, in addition to being beaten and pilloried.<sup>8</sup> But God, the exalted [...] smoothly. I make this deposition before you [...] neither coerced nor compelled, but out of my free will. And this story is famous and well known. The dinars returned by ... Yā'ir, the judge were received by him from Abu 'l-Qāsim, the superintendent<sup>9</sup> of the coinage.

(Signatures) Ephraim ha-...

Nethanel, son of Japheth, the Ḥā[vēr].<sup>10</sup>

Notes

1. Always the biblical word for judge, shōfēṭ, is used which mostly designated a lay judge without rabbinical scholarship, see Med. Soc. II, p. . The title is probably a family name, borne first by our Yā'ir's grandfather, who had the same first name.
2. Not to be confounded with his namesake and contemporary, a prominent communal leader, whose signature is identical in wording, but different in script. About the latter see Med. Soc. II, ~~see~~ Appendix C, <sup>c.</sup> seq 18.
3. Ar. munādī, lit. market crier, a middle man who was not himself a professional moneychanger.
4. A money assayer known from a document dated 1081, see Med. Soc. I, pp. 83, and 411, n. 8.
5. Ar. hāmī, a man belonging to the regular army. Might be translated also as "officer."
6. The blessing over the dead normally is written at the first mentioning of his name. Here it is added at its third occurrence. A similar slip is made by the same scribe in TS 28.6 (dated June, 1079), ll. 3 and 9, with the same name.
7. Ar. inḥallat. Could be translated also: "melted away."
8. Ar. ishhār, "being conducted through the streets and exposed to public scorn."
9. Ar. mtly, a slip for mtwly.
10. See n. 2, above.