

About the Estate of a Drowned Silkmerchant, Handed Over by the
Government to the Jewish Court

(Alexandria, January 1143)

T.-S. 13 J 3, f. 4

(The fate of the property of merchants who died in a foreign country was one of the main problems of international trade in the Middle Ages (cf.). In our document we find quite an orderly procedure: The Fatimid Government in Cairo instructs its "Officer of Inheritances" in Alexandria, who had first taken charge of the belongings of the drowned merchant, to hand it over to the Jewish court in that town. The court settles the liabilities of the deceased foreigner and draws up an estimate of his remaining assets in cash and kind. This document - as we know from many other similar instances - was then forwarded to the Jewish court in the hometown of the deceased for further action.

To be sure, the Government did not act automatically. Someone had to take the matter into his hands, and securing the rescript ordering the release of the foreign merchant's estate involved expenditure. However, the sum required was comparatively moderate and stood in favorable contrast to what was usual in more rapacious periods and states. Our document is valuable also for its details about the silk trade.)

A. ...A rescript was received from the sovereign - may God enhance his glory and exaltedness - with regard to the estate of Joseph b. Samuel Ben Šabāh, who was drowned in the sea near Alexandria. The estate was to be handed over by the Muslim officer of inheritances to the (Jewish) court of justice in Alexandria, which derives its authority from our lord and Nagid Samuel...(titles and epithets)... The rescript was brought by M. and R. Solomon ha-Levi, son of the