

## A Letter of Introduction from France, Sent to Egypt

London, British Museum, Or. 5544, fol. 1      Text partially in MJ II, p. 191

~~(Rodez, the town referred to today the capital of the department of Aveyron - lies in the very heart of southern France.~~ The unhappy man, for whom this letter of introduction was made out, went from his home town to Arles, once the capital of Provence, which is situated where the Rhone River flows into the Mediterranean. This maritime city had, of course, direct relations with Egypt; our letter is indeed addressed to a man bearing an Arabic name, although it was intended as a circular letter "to all the holy congregations overseas."

The letter is written on vellum in elaborate and dignified Hebrew, which does honor to the eleventh century Provençal who wrote it. It is preceded by a long alphabetical preamble and by another seven lines, containing an appropriate address to the communities for whom it was intended, and concludes, as is usual in such circular letters, with a discourse on the merits of charity. These sections are omitted here.

It is very likely that this letter found its way into the Geniza of Old Cairo not because the old man died there on his way to Jerusalem, but because a scribe, perhaps identical with the addressee, found it so well worded that he decided to use it as one of his models for similar occasions. This surmise is borne out by the fact that the reverse side of this sheet of vellum contains forms of letters to various dignitaries.)

Peace upon you from your junior brethren, who live in the town of A(rles).<sup>1</sup> We are writing to our brethren about the bearer of this letter, the elder M. Reuben b. Isaac, who has come to us from the city of Rodez in the land of France. This man was very wealthy, richer in silver, gold, and farm-lands than all...and workshops.<sup>2</sup> But he was caught in the snares of

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the evil-doers of his country and was despoiled of everything. One day, he sent his only son together with his servants to work in the fields; however, when they crossed a forest, he was suddenly attacked by wild, cruel gentiles, bent on <sup>his</sup> their destruction, and was killed together with his servants. When this became known to his father, he hurried to the scene, but found his son murdered in<sup>a)</sup> the forest, and nothing could be done anymore. Realizing the disaster which had befallen him, he was completely broken and struck by horror. He complained to the ruler of the country, but the latter did not respond; ...on the contrary, when he saw the man's misfortune, he robbed him of all he possessed and left him deprived of everything, like an empty vessel, saying to him: "You are an old man, and you no longer have a son; therefore, I shall take all your riches." Thus he remained lonely and poor. He left his place and came here to us, saying: "I was thrown out from my home town and have come here to you... You have heard what happened to me and you understand my barbaric language. Up till now, I have not needed a letter of introduction. But now, dear brothers, have mercy upon me and write a letter for me to all the holy congregations beyond the sea, containing an account of my misfortune, as I do not understand their language. In the name of Him who guides the steps of men, I intend to go to the Land of Israel, to Jerusalem, to die there, for times have come upon me in which I find no pleasure."

When we, the writers of this letter, saw his sorrow and his downcast mind, we felt compassion for him and wrote him this message.<sup>3</sup> And you, our brethren, our honored seniors, be quick to take care of him. Encourage him and help him to reach his destination. This will justify you on the

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day of Judgement, for he is like a dumb man, who cannot open his mouth.

Therefore, your reward from God will be double.

Address: To the elder Abū...(son of) the elder Abū Ishāq.

Notes

- a) The text has: "on, upon," perhaps under the influence of the French dialect spoken by the writer.

Comments

1. Only the first letter is clearly visible. Avignon, which could also be considered, had a less active Jewish community at that time, while relations between Arles and Rodez are known also from another source (cf. H. Gross, Gallia Judaica,
2. Text: hwrshth, which I take as harōsheth (cf. Exodus 31:5). As the preceding words are missing, the translation of this word remains doubtful. Hardly: (behēmā) hōresheth, ploughing cattle.
3. Hebrew mō<sup>c</sup>ēd, not known otherwise in this meaning. The usual meaning, "at this time," is less appropriate here.