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18 Escape from the Mongols

A Letter from Mosul, Written in December 1236

Oxford, Bodl., Ms. Heb. a 3 (Catal. 2873), f. 24

Text in Goitein, Studi Orientalistici in
onore di Giorgio Levi Della Vida I (1956),
pp. 405/8

(Although letters containing the learned opinions of the heads of the Jewish Academies in Iraq form a considerable part of the texts preserved in the Cairo Geniza (cf. above p.), only very little has been found in it of private correspondence from countries east of Palestine and Syria, the eastern fringes of the Mediterranean. The following example was chosen both because of its content and its date. It is far later than any of the texts translated on the preceding pages, a fact reflected, for example, in the exaggerated use of honorific epithets.)

The letter was sent from Mosul in December 1236. At that time the Near and Middle East were at the mercy of the Mongol hords, who, after the defeat and death of the Khwārizm Shāh Jalāl ad-Dīn, encountered no military force which was able and willing to oppose them. Jingiz Khan was already dead, but it was under his successor Ogothay (1229-1241) that the Mongol armies became the undisputed lords of the Eurasian continent. Kiev fell (1240) and ancient Russian history came to an end. The joint German and Polish armies were routed at Liegnitz (1241) and it was only inner Mongolian developments which prevented the victors from pursuing their enemies

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more deeply into their territory. Likewise, in China the Mongols made headway.^{a)}

In this document, we hear the voice of the harrassed population, and it is instructive to compare it with other reactions to the Mongol terror described to us in the literary sources.

Both the sender and the recipient of the letter claimed relationship to the royal house of David, the ancient King of Israel, from which "the Heads of the Diaspora" of Babylonia-Iraq had been chosen for at least one thousand years. At that time, however, the Davidic family had become extremely ramified and its members were like some Muslim Sharifs or Sayyids, who traced their origin back to the Muslim Prophet and to some half-forgotten dynasty, which was, or pretended to be, of the Prophet's family. The main section of the letter, which is not printed here, concerns restorations to be carried out in the family mansion in Mosul.

Since his return to his hometown, Mosul, the writer says he had thrice endured danger from the "Tatars,"^{ab)} the last time when an attack was made by them "on the day of fasting." As the letter was written in the month of Teveth 1548 of the ~~Seleucid~~ ^{of the documents} era--which corresponds to 30 November to 28 December 1236, only the fast of the 10 of Teveth, which coincided with 9 December 1236, could be meant. On the day of fasting, the writer and some other people held their prayers in the village of al-Imrāniyya, obviously because the synagogue of that place was particularly holy. The

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Muslim geographer Yāqūt (ed. Wüstenfeld, III, p. 723) tells us that in al-ʿImrāniyya east of Mosul there was a cave called David's cave, which served as a goal of pilgrimage. Yāqūt does not say for which religion; but such holy legendary places connected with the heroes of the Old Testament were normally visited by the adherents of the three monotheistic religions and it is not farfetched to surmise that the presence of a large number of Davidids in Mosul gave rise to the local sanctuary. In another volume (II, p. 388, ll. 14-15), Yāqūt makes another reference to this village, which is very useful for the understanding of the document under discussion. While describing the Khāzer river--so famous in Muslim history--Yāqūt says that its source rises near a village called Arbūn and then flows between the village of al-ʿImrāniyya and the mountain Khilibtā. It is not amiss to assume that the mountain which is repeatedly referred to in our letter is none but that Khilibtā.

As to the Mongols, there is, of course, nothing new in the report that they killed everyone they could get hold of. It is, however, interesting to read that they rode in compact detachments of 25⁵⁰, or "approximately" 100 riders. That they disappeared as suddenly as they came and that there is no mention of any attempt at resistance is also characteristic. Unlike the stories, reported by Muslim and other historians, about the terror-stricken population, which was paralyzed by fear, one clearly sees here that the writer did not lose his head despite utmost danger. Of

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course, he recited "the confession of sins," as one should do when one expects death, but he managed to escape three times. Obviously, the Mongols had the habit of reappearing soon after they had devastated a region, for our writer and his companions remained for full eight days on the mountain, nourishing themselves with the leaves of oak-trees and bread made of bran, before they dared to appear in the open country on their way back to Mosul. As is well-known, the Mongols were not keen on penetrating hills covered with dense vegetation. That the writer devotes only 22 out of 86 lines of his letter to his narrow escape from the Mongols possibly indicates that by that time the population of the countries adjacent to the Western boundaries of Persia had already become accustomed to the terrible visitation.)

In Your Name, Oh Merciful! Do not ask--my lord and master, the illustrious, noble benefactor, the doyen of the House of David and the Sharif of the Jewish community, the great prince, fortress, tower, Prince of the Diaspora of Israel, our h(onored), g(reat), and h(oly) m(aster) ^{l(lord)} and Solomon, may God exalt the throne of ^{your} ~~his~~ rule and grant ^{your} ~~him~~ his wishes and desires in eternity--what happened to your servant (...) at the time when he arrived in this country, after he had been in danger from the Tatars three times. The last was that they arrived on the morning of the Fast, when we were in al-⁶Imrāniyya. They remained outside the town°)

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killing everyone who was on his way to or from the town, while we stayed in the synagogue waiting from hour to hour for what the enemy would do. Indeed, God had mercy upon us and they went away from us. When night had fallen, we tried to get to the mountain, still without having eaten. However, we did not find the way. Thus we passed the night under the hedge of an orchard right until morning, when we again tried to reach the mountain. However, as they came between us and the mountain, we turned back to get to the farm,^{d)} but on our way we saw fifty riders and when we tried another route, we saw about a hundred on it. I and those who were with me said the confession of sins, for we were sure we would be killed. However, God inspired me to cross over to a hedge of raspberry--a thick one, and I took cover under it, I and the boy; the Tatars went by the hedge--twenty-five riders; had one of them stretched forth his whip, it would have reached us. We remained there till noon, when they rode away from the vicinity and went up to the mountain, where we remained for eight days, eating the leaves of oak-trees and bread made of bran.^{e)}

Finally, we went down and found the country full of dead. When we arrived, we learnt that in that night rumor spread that we had been killed. But God helped, had mercy, and saved us. However, the fact that I arrived and did not find you and thus was not privileged to see you was as though I had been killed. May God unite us, as He has separated us.

Notes

- a) Cf. B. Spuler, Die Mongolen in Iran, Leipzig 1939, p. 34 ff. The same, Die Mongolenzeit, Berlin 1948, pp. 14-5. Percy Sykes, A History of Persia, II, pp. 90-1.
- b) The most common name for Mongols in the Arabic of that time.
- c) It is difficult to see why the writer uses Hebrew words for saying "outside the town." While the use of Hebrew and Aramaic words is natural in formulas, technical terms, and good wishes, it was not common in the Geniza papers to mix the languages. The writers use either Hebrew or Arabic.
- d) The way of describing the writer's escape clearly indicates that the addressee was thoroughly familiar with the landscape. The word translated here as "farm", could mean also "village" (Ar. dai'a).