

Prosperity  
23

Algeria, to Tustat, Egypt

II. A Letter from Tlemcen, Morocco

(ca. 1050)  
1040

T.-S. 8 J 22, f. 23

Algeria

(Next to nothing of private correspondence from Morocco has been preserved in the Cairo Geniza. ~~This strange fact is discussed on p.~~

The letter translated below tells us that the trade caravans from that country to the East, which had loomed so large in the Geniza letters of the beginning of the eleventh century, had ceased many years before its writing. This is the more surprising, as the writer describes Morocco as a prosperous and secure country. his

The receiver of the letter, Menasseh b. David Ibn Al-Abrāt<sup>a)</sup> al-Qarawī (i.e. of al-Qairawān in Tunisia) is known from various documents written in, or addressed to, Old Cairo, as having lived in that town. One of these documents<sup>1</sup> is dated 1050. It seems, however, that the letter was written <sup>some</sup> a few years before that date, for the writer's question "Who is now Head of the Academy (of Bagdad)?" obviously refers to Hai Gaon,<sup>b)</sup> whose death in 1038 was much lamented in Spain and Morocco. North Africa

The polite phraseology used in this letter differs markedly from that in vogue in Tunisia and the East and resembles more that known from letters written in Spain.)

In Your name!

To be delivered to Abā<sup>o)</sup> Sahl Menasseh b. R. David, the Elder - m(ay his soul rest in) p(eace). Sent by Sulaimān b. Samhūn - m.p. - Ibn Al-

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Sahl. To be delivered in Old Cairo.<sup>d)</sup>

My lord and ~~my~~ succour, my strongest defense,<sup>e)</sup> my most precious treasure, with whose friendship God has honored me. I am writing to you from Tlemcen, in the land of the Maghrīb<sup>e</sup>. As you know, I have not had any letter or news from you for years, and I do not know anything of you and yours. It is appropriate that you, my elder, send me an answer to this letter with its bearers,<sup>f)</sup> the pilgrims from the Maghrīb<sup>e</sup>, informing me about all of you, young and old, telling me who is still alive and who has died, and who was born since my separation from you. Write to me in detail concerning all of you, and tell me also what you have heard of my maternal uncle Abraham, the sons of my maternal aunt Sittāt, and other members of the family; for I have not heard from them, as the caravans ceased years ago. Pray God, be not negligent in this matter.

I am in good health, thank God; I have <sup>one</sup> wife<sup>g)</sup> and two boys. I possess a mill and shops and capital at my free disposal to the amount of 500 dinars.<sup>2</sup> God has not let me lack anything except the pleasure of seeing you. My sister - may God's mercy be upon her<sup>h)</sup> - has two sons, who are in Qal'at Hammād,<sup>i)</sup> and one grown-up daughter. As to news from the West, there is prosperity and security and the roads are safe.

I am astonished that your son - may God preserve him - has not found it possible to write me a letter since he has been there. I should be happy if he would kindly write me a letter in his own handwriting.<sup>3</sup>

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explaining in detail all his affairs.

In your letter, kindly write me about the state of the academies (of Bagdad<sup>h</sup>): who is the head of the academy? We would like to write them from our town.<sup>k</sup>) Peace in plenty!

Accept, my lord, my best greetings, you and your sons and all yours, young and old. In eternity, Selah.

(Address, written on the reverse side in Arabic characters and in different ink:)

To the House of Exchange in Old Cairo - if God will - to Abā<sup>4</sup> Sahl Ben-ash-Shā<sup>1</sup>) b. Dā'ūd, known as Ibn Al-Abrāṭ al-Qarawī and his son, Abā Zakariyya. Sent from the town of Tlemcen.

(The address is repeated in Hebrew characters, written upside down and in the same ink as the letter itself. However, on this page, the ink has almost entirely faded. Contrary to the general rule, the name of the sender is written on the right, i.e. it precedes that of the addressee.)

Notes

- a) This is a less frequent form of the common North African name Labrāṭ.  
See, e.g., No. 13, p. 10.
- b) Two pastoral letters of this famous and prolific scholar are translated below under No. 14.
- c) This is not a misprint. Whereas in the East Abū and in Tunisia Abī were preferred, here both the writer and the Muslim friend, who wrote the address in Arabic characters, used the form Abā to render the concept "father of."
- d) Today, we generally write the address at the top of our letters, as is done here. However, in ~~our letters~~, the Geniza letters from Tunisia and further East, this custom does not obtain.
- e) Literally: justification. This phrase, which also occurs in Spanish letters, obviously means that being a friend of such an illustrious person was the best proof that the writer was a worthy man.
- f) As usual, the letter was entrusted to a number of persons travelling together. The pilgrims referred to were probably not Jews on their way to Jerusalem, but Muslims proceeding to Mecca. See Note 1.
- g) Probably this simply means: "I am married." However, as polygamy seems to have been more common in Morocco than in other Jewish communities of that time, perhaps the expression "one wife" is to be taken literally, as emphasizing that the writer was monogamous.

- h) I.e. she died.
- i) The capital of (middle) Algeria in those days.
- k) In order to submit to them questions of legal, ritualistic, or theological character, of the type treated below in No. 14.
- l) The Hebrew name Menasseh was unfamiliar to the Muslim who wrote the address. He spelled it phonetically, taking the first part of the word as Ben, the Arabic for son.

Answers to legal queries submitted by the scholars of Tlemcen to the academies of Baghdad have been preserved, Harkavy, Responsa des Geonim, pp. 14, 15, 221. Comments

- 1. T.-S. 20.7. Cf. MJ II, 245.
- 2. The manuscript is damaged here. Text: wahawānīt(?) warūs(?) qīmat 500 dīnār 500 dīnār, danānīr nataṣarrāf bihā. It seems that the writer repeated the words 500 dīnār erroneously. Or did he mean that each shop had 500 dinars as working capital?
- 3. Text: bikhattihi, which could also mean "his signature."
- 4. The manuscript has here Abī, which is, of course, the correct grammatical form after ilā. However, as the writer later uses Abā (also dependent on ilā), he, like his Jewish friend, certainly used this form in common speech.