

5-6. TWO LETTERS ON THE CONQUEST OF JERUSALEM
BY THE CRUSADERS (JULY, 1099).

5. A FRUSTRATED PILGRIMAGE TO THE HOLY CITY.

A Maghrebi Writes from Egypt during the First Crusade.

(Early summer, 1100)

This is a family letter of a Jerusalem pilgrim, who had arrived from North Africa or Spain in Alexandria a number of years before 1099. He was unable to proceed to Palestine because of the complete chaos into which the country had fallen long before the arrival of the Crusaders ^{through} ~~because of~~ the incessant wars between the Fatimids and various factions of the Seljuks. Moreover, Alexandria itself was ravaged by civil war. After the death of the caliph al-Mustansir on January 10, 1094, al-Afdal, his viceroy, placed the caliph's younger son, al-Musta^{li}, on the throne instead of the elder Nizār, who, however, succeeded in having himself acknowledged in Alexandria. Al-Afdal twice laid siege to the city, until it acquiesced in rendering homage to his protégé. After having restored peace at home, al-Afdal turned to Palestine and, in September 1098, took Jerusalem. Now, our pilgrim was sure that the time for the fulfilment of his vow had come and moved to the capital of Egypt, in order to travel overland from there to the Holy City. However, before he was able to do so, Jerusalem fell into the hands of the Crusaders on July 15, 1099. Still, he did not abandon all hope: he assumed that the armies were certain to join in battle "this year", i.e. summer 1100, and the Sultan, al-Afdal, because of his righteousness, was assured of victory. After Jerusalem had changed hands several times in one generation - as we have seen,

the Fatimid viceroy had conquered it less than one year before the Crusaders - it was perhaps natural for the ordinary man in Cairo to expect that the city would soon be wrested again from the Crusaders.

Our simple letter is a precious historical document, because it reflects the divided impression made by the conquest of Jerusalem on the population of the adjacent countries: horror because of the carnage of the civil population of the city, mitigated by the erroneous assumption that the conquerors soon would be liquidated.

Two other points are of interest: the great attachment of the pilgrim to his homeland, or rather to the burial ground of his forefathers, which clearly was sacred to him not less than the Holy City; and, secondly, his report about the devastating plague in Egypt, which lasted full four years and was also an economic disaster. One wonders whether these catastrophic events were not the cause which prevented al-Afdal from putting up an effective resistance to the Crusaders.

Since the Egyptians did attack in 1101,¹ while our letter seems to imply that no action had been taken thus far, and since the situation with regard to the persons captured in Jerusalem was similar to that described in no. 6, spring or early summer of 1100, is the most likely date for the writing of the letter.

Bodl. MS Heb. b 11 (Cat. 2874), f. 7.²

In (Your) n(ame), (You) Mer(ciful).

If I attempted to describe my longing for you, my lord, my brother and cousin - may God prolong your life and make permanent your honored position, success, happiness, wellbeing, and prosperity; and ... crush your enemies--all the paper in the world would not suffice. My longing will but increase and double, just as the days will grow and double.

May the Creator of the World presently unite us in joy, when I return under his guidance to my homeland and to the inheritance of my Fathers³ in complete happiness, so that we rejoice and be happy through his great mercy and his vast bounty; and thus may be his will!

You may remember, my lord, that many years ago I left our country to seek God's mercy and help in my poverty, to behold Jerusalem and then return to my homeland. When I was in Alexandria, God brought about circumstances which caused a slight delay. Afterwards, however, "the sea grew stormy," and many armed bands made their appearance in Palestine; and he who went forth and he who came had no peace,⁴ so that hardly one survivor out of a whole group came back to us from Palestine, and he that succeeded in doing so told us that scarcely anyone could save himself from these armed bands, since they were so numerous and were gathered [on all the roads] around every town. There was also the journey through the desert, among [the bedouins], and whoever escaped from the one, fell into the hands of the other. Moreover, mutinies spread throughout the country [and reached] even Alexandria, so that we ourselves were besieged several times and the city was ruined; The troubles came to an end when the Sultan - may God bestow glory upon his victories - conquered the city and caused justice to abound in it in a manner unprecedented in the history of any king in the world; not a dirhem was looted from anyone. Thus I had come to hope that because of his justice and strength, God would give the lands into his hands, and I should thereupon go to Jerusalem in safety and tranquillity. For this reason I proceeded from Alexandria to Misr (Fustat-Cairo), in order to start my journey from there.

When, however, God had given Jerusalem, the blessed, into his hands, this state of affairs continued for too short a time to allow for making a journey there. The Franks arrived and killed everyone in the city, whether of Ishmael or of Israel; and the few who survived the slaughter were made prisoners. Some of these have been ransomed since, while others are still in captivity in all parts of the world.

Now, all of us had anticipated that our Sultan - may God bestow glory upon his victories - would set out against them (the Franks) with his troops and chase them away. But time after time our hope failed. Yet, to this very present moment we hope that God will give his (the Sultan's) enemies into his hands. For it is inevitable that the armies will join in battle this year; and, if God grants us victory through him (the Sultan) and he conquers Jerusalem--and so may it be, with God's will--I for one shall not be amongst those who will linger, but shall go there to behold the city and shall afterwards return straight to you--if God wills it. If, God beware, this expectation will come to nought like the previous ones, God~~x~~ will exonerate me, since at my age I cannot afford to delay and wait any longer; I want to return home under all circumstances, if I still remain alive--whether I shall have seen Jerusalem or have given up the hope of doing it--both of which are possible.

You know, of course, my lord, what has happened to us in the course of the last five years: the plague, the illnesses, and ailments have continued unabated for four successive years. As a result of this, the wealthy have become impoverished and a great number of people have died of the plague, so that entire families have perished in it. I, too, was

affected with a grave illness, from which I recovered only after a year; then I was taken ill the following year and during four years I did not recover⁵ from the illness. Indeed [true is] what the Scripture has said of the dreadful diseases of Egypt.⁶ And this is something He who hiccups will not escape from it.⁷ [About 20 words missing] ... ailments and will die from them [... ..]. Otherwise he will remain alive.

(The writer had filled 43 lines and the margin. What happened then, we can only guess. As the exquisite script indicates, this is a clean copy, not a draft, but it was not dispatched, as is proved by the fact that it has been found in the Geniza in Fustat, where it was written).

Notes

1. Lane-Poole, History of Egypt, p. 164.
2. Ed. S. D. Goitein, Zion, 17 (1952), 144-147. Engl. trans. by same in JJS, 3 (1952), 162-177. Several new readings and interpretations are provided here.
3. The same wish is expressed in a letter of another Jerusalem pilgrim, and even with the use of the same Heb. phrase, in TS 12.347, l. 32, ed. Mann, Texts, I, p. 385.
4. Zechariah 8:10.
5. Instead of the dots read [m]ā ufiq.
6. Deuteronomy 7:15. Before, the MS has [al-]kitāb.
7. This indication of the deadly character of the illness was already commonplace in Greek medical lore and passed from there into Arabic and European medieval medicine (communication by Dr. S. Muntner).

Notes

1. S. Runciman, History of the Crusades (Cambridge, 1951), I, p. 333.
2. Runciman, ibid., p. 287. R. Gros^uset, Histoire des Croisades, I, p. 161. Kenneth M. Setton and Marshall W. Baldwin, A History of the Crusades, (The University of Wisconsin Press, 1969), I, 337.
3. Ed. S. D. Goitein, Zion, 17 (1952), 136-144. Transl. same, JJS 3 (1952), 162-175. In several instances, new readings and interpretations are provided here.
4. The words "captives" and "refugees" are mostly written in Heb. in order to emphasize the religious character of the duty to help them.
5. ~~A conjecture~~ According to the blank space available.
I read q[ar fukha].
6. Ar. wabā, fana, balā, whose exact medical description evades me. The Crusaders were also afflicted with this epidemic.
7. About this fate of the captives see R. Röhricht, Geschichte des ersten Kreuzzuges, 1901, pp. 195-196.
8. I read now nastatimm, see Zion, 17, p. 140, n. 5.
9. This scion of the noble bankers family of Sha'ya (Isaiah) had a good reason for being present in Ascalon during the winter of 1099/1100: he married there on Jan. 23, 1100, see Bodl. MS Heb. e 98, f. 60, where he is called "Shēlā, the prince of the house of Israel" (Shēlā is a Heb. equivalent of Ar. Sahl). ~~"Banker of the Sultan",~~
mutaṣarrif ma'a 'l-Sulṭān.
10. Read (in l. 16) wa-tasaddad fi hādhihi 'l-nawba.
11. Possibly identical with the boy from a noble family, reported as still being held by the Crusaders in TS 24.65, l. 15, ed. S. D. Goitein, Eretz-Israel, 4 (1956), 148-149.

12. Probably a scholar, but hardly identical with the Karaite scholar Yashār Tustarī, who lived in Jerusalem at that time, see Mann, Texts, II, p. 40.
13. Reports from the eleventh century preserved in the Geniza show that, at the conquest of a place, its women and boys were raped. The letter emphasizes that the Crusaders (called here, for a change, by a Heb. name) acted otherwise.

The two terms for rape discern probably between complete and incomplete cohabitation. In the latter case, the ransom was higher.

14. Egypt.
15. Sahl traveled overland with the ransomed persons from Ascalon to Egypt. As Jews did not travel on the Sabbath or holidays, Sahl had to make halts and to stay with them, which involved additional expenditure.
16. Heb. qōdesh, that is, they were taken from synagogues, and no private person had a claim on them.
17. The ransom for any free ^{person} ~~man~~, whether Christian, Muslim, or Jew, was 33 1/3 dinars, Med. Soc., I, p. 329. The Crusaders acted differently, certainly not out of ignorance of this international customary law, but because they wanted to get rid of their prisoners as quickly as possible owing to their precarious military situation.
18. Four Ar. and four Heb. terms.
19. Psalm 44:12-3. Followed by Isaiah 1:9.
20. An allusion to the economic disaster wrought by the plague. See no. 5, p. , above. Followed by about fifteen words, obliterated or torn away.
21. Deuteronomy 33:21, said of the tribe of Gad.

22. The idea behind this pious vow was that he might be less worthy than anyone else who might receive a smaller gift. Therefore the community addressed is asked to earmark for him a special contribution.
23. The writers had been certainly in closest business, and probably also family connections with the community addressed.
24. The almost entirely illegible phrase is perhaps wa-yastakhrijū min al-ḡaʿīf quwwa "get out strength from the weak", meaning making a great effort, a phrase used in such a connection.
25. The writers would like that one or several of the greater merchants of the community addressed would issue a bill of exchange on the entire sums vowed and collect them later.
26. The verses quoted: Isaiah 14:2, Jeremiah 50:33-34a, Isaiah 61:9.
27. A Karaite title. This man and probably also the third (actually first) signatory were Karaites. The Rabbanite community of Jerusalem had dwindled to a small group long before the Crusades.

The writer apologizes for having written not beautifully or politely enough.

This note is followed by three or four signs of which I am not sure that they belong to the texts.

28. Since the writer does not use diacritical points, the name could be read also Hanina. But since this name occurs nowhere in Geniza time, I prefer Hananiah, which is common.
29. Read ikrām for ilmām, as in Zion 17, p. 40.