

17. A PHYSICIAN AND POET URGES HIS RELATIVES IN FATIMID EGYPT
TO JOIN HIM IN BYZANTINE ASIA MINOR.

A Letter from Seleucia (Cilicia)

Dated July 21, 1137

An exciting episode in Byzantine history is reflected in this letter. The Emperor John II Comnenus was on his way to Antioch - held at that time by Raymond of Poitiers - and a part of his powerful army passed through the town in which this letter was written. The Byzantines arrived before the gates of Antioch on August 29.¹ Our letter, however, reports a rumor that the city had already fallen forty days earlier. The writer, a physician, even expresses the expectation that the Emperor might take Aleppo and Damascus as well and already placed an order for medical books which would be looted there from the homes of his colleagues. In addition to this touch of living history, the letter also contains a number of other details of import for Byzantine studies.

As usual with correspondence of Arabic-speaking Jews of that period, the letter is written in Hebrew characters, but in the Arabic language. There are many quotations in Hebrew and allusions to verses from the Bible or to post-Biblical Hebrew literature. The beginning of the letter, as well as the address are lost. A combination of the facts provided in sections E and F shows that it was written in Seleucia, then the capital of Isauria in south-east Asia Minor (called today Silifke). It is evident from the content that it was sent to Egypt, most probably to Fustat, where it was found. A letter addressed to Seleucia has also been preserved in the Geniza. It is written in Hebrew, which proves that the recipient was a local, Byzantine Jew and

not one coming from an Arabic speaking environment.² No other sources seem to mention Jews as living in that town in the period under consideration.³

Besides Seleucia, a Byzantine town about seventy five miles distant, "as far as Cairo is away from the Fayyūm", is referred to in the letter. Its name, unfortunately, is preserved only in part. It reads Ba.ya, which probably represents a Greek Palia or Palaia.⁴ There were several towns of this name in Asia Minor, one in the province of Isauria, of which Seleucia was the capital.⁵ Since approximately fifty Jewish families lived there, it must have been a town of some size.

Constantinople is mentioned twice, once with its Arabic name al-Qusṭantīniyya and once under the Biblical designation "the royal city" (cf. 2 Samuel 12:26). Rhodes and Chios, the latter written Shion, cf. below, are also referred to.

The writer was a physician who nourished an exaggerated confidence in his medical skill, but had to concede that his prescriptions were not always successful. He sent precious drugs to Egypt and ordered from there seeds of medical herbs which were not available in Asia Minor, see sections A, C, and G. Both he and the father of the recipient, who had died in Byzantium, wrote religious poetry, in Hebrew of course, cf. see sections A and D. The type of religious poetry represented by the examples given in the letter is called Piyyūt, a Hebrew word derived from Greek poiētes. It originated in Palestine during the Byzantine period, but continued to be cultivated by the Jews in the lands of Islam. For his medical practice, the writer relied on Arabic books, cf. section E. It is not excluded, however, that during his stay in Asia Minor he may have had learned to read Greek as well.

From section C one might conclude that the writer had accompanied the Fatimid navy, which was defeated by the Venetians off the Palestinian coast

near Jaffa in 1124. A similar case of a Jewish physician serving in the navy⁶ is reported in a Geniza letter of the year 1129, while here letters are mentioned which were sent by the writer from the "army camp" at Jaffa, and then from Rhodes and from the island of Chios, both of which were occupied by the Venetians during that expedition.⁷

Subsequently, he came to Constantinople. It is perhaps natural that the foreign physician did not find work in the capital, but had to take up his residence in a provincial town.⁸ There, however, he was successful in his profession and became a prosperous and esteemed citizen. Since his wife bore a Greek name, she obviously was a local woman whom he had married after his arrival in the new country.

It is highly significant that mention is made in this letter of eleven other Jews from Egypt who had settled in Byzantine towns. They ranged in rank from a person characterized as "the little beggar" to a spiritual and communal leader of an urban community. Moreover, the writer repeatedly encourages his in-laws to follow his example and to emigrate from Fatimid Egypt to Byzantium. This reflects the state of relative security and prosperity enjoyed by the Byzantine empire at that time, over sixty years after the Seljuk invasion.

Another noteworthy point is the writer's remark about the dowry of his daughter. Hundreds of marriage contracts containing details about the trousseau have been preserved in the Cairo Geniza, but cash as part of the dowry given to the bride never appears in them. Thus the very considerable sums of gold and silver mentioned in our letter as the first item of the dowry must reflect a Byzantine custom. On the other hand, it should be noted that in a Hebrew marriage contract

written in Mastaura on the Meandros river in the year 1022, no cash is included in the dowry.⁹

It is a little strange that this Arabic speaking Egyptian Jew should call the Byzantine officers "our commanders" (ru'asānā, literally: our heads, a term not used in Egypt in this sense at that time), section E, end. However, he was prosperous and happy in the new country, had married a local woman, and since he wished to bring all the family over to Seleucia, he obviously intended to stay there for good. Similarly the Maghrebi pilgrim writing from Fustat, p. , above, calls the Egyptian viceroy al-Afdal "our Sultan".

#/ TS 13 J 21, f. 17.¹⁰

#/ The first line, which is only partly preserved, alludes to a detail of Talmudic medical lore describing the conditions at the act of conception which determine the sex of the child. The recipient obviously had complained that his wife, the writer's sister, after having borne him two girls, had ceased to bear children. The letter then continues:

A. What the Art of Medicine Can Do.

In a Hebrew poem, composed by me, which I sent to you - I hope it will arrive - I said: "Let my limbs be joined to my aged husband, and fruit will appear: a son of his old age".¹¹ Perhaps God will fulfill your wish, when you come here - and then there will be three girls!¹² - but God will nourish them. I can imagine how grieved you were when my sister¹³ did not become pregnant despite the many medicines. If you were here, I would fix her pregnancy, by my life, even after she had ceased to bear children. However, nothing avails against the judgment of Fate.

Thus, my wife never became pregnant without taking medicines. On the other hand, at the request of the Seventh,¹⁴ I made a recipe for Abraham, the little beggar from Acre,¹⁵ but it did not help; he died and his boy was left an orphan - God ordains.

B. The Dowry of the Writer's Daughter.

Dowries in this country are very expensive. I gave my son-in-law, R. Samuel, son of R. Moses, son of R. Samuel, the Longobardian (Italian)¹⁶ merchant, the following: 324 pieces of gold; a pound of silver; a brocade robe; two silk robes; two woolen garments;¹⁷ two Greek pounds of ornaments;¹⁸ ...a silken handbag; 4 tunics; two cotton robes; 10 long and short turbans; a bed with a canopy; a round cupboard, decorated with paintings; a copper ewer, washbasin, and dipper; rings of gold and silver; blankets; servants;¹⁹ carpets; worth altogether two hundred dinars.²⁰ It is God who caused this. When I left you, I had no money - "I shall not die, but live and recount the works of the Lord."²¹

C. Letters and Presents Sent and Letters Expected.

Please take notice - may God prolong your life - that every letter accompanied with a gift never arrives. I used to send "mulberries," ribes, barberries, Gentiana leaves and essence,²² absinthe and other medicinal plants, which have a very high price in your country, and this is the reason my letters do not arrive...

I am astonished that it is not easy for the elder Abū Zikrī and the elder Abū Naṣr b. Ishāq to favor us here in the Land of the Romans

with a Hebrew letter.²³ God knows, not one year has passed, nor will pass, without letters coming from me to you.²⁴ As against your one letter, there are five²⁵ addressed to you personally by me, namely:

1. This one, which I am about to deliver to its bearer; 2. From the royal city; 3. From Chios;²⁶ 4. From the army camp, from Jaffa; 5. From Rhodes.²⁷ I thought that at least one of the four would arrive.

D. Messianic Hopes.²⁸

Perhaps God will let you see the fulfillment of Daniel's prophecy about the removal of the daily sacrifice²⁹ and bring about, in my life and in yours, what your late father has expressed in a song of his for ushering out the Sabbath - I sent it to you with your sister's son -: My living God will gather in my chicks, etc....

E. The Writer's Prosperous State.

As for me, I am in the best of health, as Caleb said to Joshua ("I am as strong this day as I was on the day that Moses sent me.")³⁰ If you come here, as you intend to, you will not long regretfully for anything you left there; as Joseph said to our father Jacob ("Come down to me; tarry not... and I shall nourish you.")³¹ God has favored me and replaced my losses. I have built a house worth 200 dinars, and I possess 400 barrels of wine, each measuring 10 ṭimāya³² - I have written about all this to Yaḥya and his brother, my brother-in-law, and to all our friends, in both Hebrew and Arabic. I am well liked here, successful in my profession, and honored by the leaders of ...

Thanks and praise to God.

Should you really come, please bring my books, which I left behind with you. As a matter of fact, I have asked our commanders to take along any medical books for me, from Aleppo or from Damascus, which might fall into their hands. According to what we have heard, they have already taken Antioch.

F. About Relatives and Friends.

You ask about Abu 'l-Ḥasan, the son of the daughter of my paternal uncle. I have already written in ten letters that he died in Constantinople, in the house of Abū 'Alī, the son-in-law of the Ḥāver al-Bagḡadī,³³ the pancake maker. It is reported that he left money, textiles, and promissory notes.³⁴ I was sorry to learn about the misfortune of the daughter of my paternal uncle. God knows, had it not been for the insecurity of communications, I would have sent help not only to her, but to the whole family. I have sent a letter of condolence to the elder Abu Zikrī on the death of his mother, his aunt, and her son Abu 'l-Faḍl Ḥamawī³⁵, and his son wrote you a letter of thanks and friendship together with this my letter to you. In future, do not address him as teacher; he is a rabbi, and his son has studied with R. Hillel and he himself was a student of my grandfather and of... He is now in Pa (l) ia,³⁶ which is as distant from Seleucia as Cairo is from the Fayyūm.³⁷ He married off his son there. This is a place which has everything in the world just like the Fayyūm. He serves them as rabbi, preacher, judge, and as head of the community. They are about fifty families. May God bless them. Ḥamawī and his son visit us frequently. Fahd, the son of al-Ṣahrajti,³⁸ and his son have died.

Only his wife, the daughter of Ben Shumaylē,³⁹ is still alive. Please inform his brother, my lord R. Solomon.

G. Greetings and Request for Seeds of Medical Plants.

I kiss your hands and your eyes, and so do Korasi⁴⁰ and her little ones, my son-in-law, Hamawī, his son and his wife. I kiss the eyes of my sister, and (greetings to) the son of my maternal uncle, my maternal aunt and his sisters, and to anyone who asks about me; also to the cousin of my mother in Alexandria.

I have written to him and to you to send me a quarter of a dirhem⁴¹ of seeds of mallow, mandrake, and althaea,⁴² for we do not have any of these. So far, I have not received a thing.

Written on the first day of the month of Av. in the year 1448
(of the era of the) doc(uments).⁴³

Notes

1. See about these events S. Runciman, A History of the Crusades, II (1952), pp. 212-3. Kenneth M. Setton - Marshall W. Baldwin, A History of the Crusades, 1969, I, p. 439.
2. TS 12.179, ed. S. D. Goitein Yerushalayim 2/5 (Jerusalem, 1955), pp. 69-71. The letter is addressed to a house "in the proximity of the synagogue of Seleucia", and deals with personal matters. At that time I erroneously assumed that Seleucia in northern Syria was intended.
3. At least, no such reference seems to be found in Joshua Starr, The Jews in the Byzantine Empire 614-1204, Athens 1939, and idem, Romania, The Jews of the Levant after the Fourth Crusade, Paris 1949.
4. Arabic does not have the sound p. Therefore p in foreign words is, as a rule, rendered as b by Arabic speaking Jews, although the Hebrew script possesses a p.
5. Cf. W. M. Ramsay, The Historical Geography of Asia Minor, London 1890, p. 163.
6. Or rather "on the battleship." ULC ^{Br} 1080 J 138, see p. (B IV, 8), below. The source uses the word uṣṭul, which is, of course, Greek stolos, but designated in the Arabic language of that period mostly a large man-of-war.
7. Cf., e.g., W. C. Haxlitt, The Venetian Republic, London, 1900, I, pp. 162-3, 172-3; R. Cessi, Storia della Repubblica di Venezia, Milano-Messina, 1944, I, pp. 140-1.
8. It should be noted that Manuel Comnenus (1143-1180), John's son, employed a Jewish court physician from Egypt, Benjamin of Tudela^{el}, ed. Adler, p. 14.

Tudela

9. Cf. T. Reinach, "Un contrat de mariage du temps de Basila^e", Melanges Schlumberger, Paris 1924, I, pp. 118-132, J. Starr, The Jews in the Byzantine Empire, pp. 187-190.
10. Ed. S. D. Goitein, Tarbiz 27 (1958), 528-535. Transl., same, Speculum 39 (1964), 298-303. Some adjustments have been made here.
11. Sarah, the wife of Abraham, speaks (^{cf.} Genesis, chapter 21).
12. A joke: instead of the long expected son, a third girl will be born.
The following phrase means that one should not care too much about the costs of the upbringing of children.
13. Text: karimatī, which in the Geniza papers means "sister" and not "daughter", as in modern usage. When I published this document in Tarbiz 27, I was not yet aware of this fact.
14. A scholar being the lowest in rank of a board of seven, heading the Jewish High Council of Jerusalem, which then had its seat in Cairo.
15. Acre is a town in Palestine. It is evident, however, that this beggar, as well as the scholar mentioned before, were known to the addressee personally and had, therefore, come from Egypt.
16. The word is vowelled in the original: 'l'ingubardī. The Arabs spelled the word 'y'nkbrd, because they had no sign for g, but no doubt pronounced it with g. The term 'y'nkbrd (Lombardia) included at that time also Southern Italy, see M. Amari, Biblioteca Arabo Sicula, (Lipsia, 1857), p. 730.
17. Ar. bushtain, see Dozy, Supplément, I, p. 88a. The word is followed by another: qytyn, which renders perhaps the Greek kiton, or shirt.

18. The word translated as "Greek pound" is liṭriya, obviously the predecessor of the Ottoman lodra, which weighed 564,4 grams, about 127 g. more than the Egyptian pound, referred to here before (see Hinz, Masse, p. 15.) The term zakhārif, "ornaments," is not known to the present writer from other marriage contracts found in the Geniza.
19. Normally only one female servant was included in the dowry.
20. Of course - with the exclusion of the cash in gold and silver, mentioned at the beginning.
21. Psalm 118:17.
22. Certainly not simple mulberries, but some medicine is intended. Ribes: Ar. rībās (see Maimonides-Meyerhof, p. 175). It is interesting to learn from our letter that this plant was imported from Asia Minor.
Barberries: Ar. barbārīs and ghāfit (see Maimonides-Meyerhof, pp. 12 and 203 respectively). These plants are still sold in the bazaar of drugs in Cairo.
23. Most probably a letter in Hebrew script is intended. Writing in Arabic letters required some effort, as one had to take heed of the many pitfalls of classical Arabic grammar. While using Hebrew script, one was at ease and wrote Arabic more or less as one spoke it.
24. In the plural. The writer refers to his friends and relatives in Egypt as a whole.
25. Originally, 4 was written here (see Note 27).
26. Spelled Shīon.
27. This was added above the line. The writer enumerates the letters sent by himself in the opposite sequence in which they were sent. Therefore, Rhodes had to be mentioned before Jaffa; however, it was added above the line as an afterthought.

28. The connection with the preceding section is the following: in Messianic times, when all the friends and relatives will be assembled in the Holy City, there will be no need for writing letters.
29. Daniel 12:11 - a verse interpreted as referring to the coming and temporary disappearance of the Messiah. Pesikta, ed. S. Buber, p. 49b. This interpretation was known even to the Muslim scholar al-Birūnī (d. ca. 1050), cf. his al-Āthār, ed. E. Sachan (Leipzig, 1878), pp. 15-16.
30. Joshua 14:11. This and the following ^bBiblical references are only alluded to in the original, but are not quoted.
31. Genesis 45: 9-11. This means that the writer is prepared to maintain his relatives if they come to Seleucia.
32. Even a very heavy drinker would not need such a supply of alcohol. However, as we know from other Geniza documents, viniculture and the production of wine were pursued as a sideline by respectable people - perhaps because wine was also used for religious purposes.
33. A family name, derived from Baghdad, the capital of Iraq; "member", namely of the Academy of Jerusalem.
34. Ar. nusakh. Lists of estates have been found in the Geniza consisting mainly of such promissory notes, called also khatt, "signed document," or ruq'a, "note". The word nusakh could also mean "books". Since the writer uses however the word kutub in this sense, the translation given in the text is to be preferred.
35. A family name, derived from Hama in northern Syria.
36. Cf. above p. 2.

37. A particularly fertile district whose capital of the same name is about 75 miles south-south-west of Cairo.
38. A family name, derived from Sahrajt, a large village on the right bank of the eastern arm of the Nile, about 45 miles north of Cairo.
39. Shumayla (ē designates the change of pronunciation known as Imāla) "a handful of grain" (see Dozy, Supplément, s.v.) - a family name derived from a nickname given to one of the ancestors.
40. The writer's wife. This is a medieval Greek name, meaning "the little girl", cf. Demetrakos, Mega Lexikon, V, pp. 4045 and 4050.
41. As the dirhem (the weight, not the coin) comprised 3,125 grams, the quantity of seeds asked for was less than 1 gram.
42. Ar. mulukhiya, yabrūh, khiṭmiyya, see Maimonides-Meyerhof, pp. 112, 88, and 195.
43. Corresponds to July 21, 1137.