

Letter of Jew to ...  
~~From Spain to Uchi'a~~  
no 74  
L. P. H.

TS 13 J 26, f. 10.

Palermo.  
INVITATION TO SICILY  
Letter sent from Palermo to Fustat, Egypt  
(ca. 1140)

The fragment of an earlier letter by the same writer, TS 8 J 23, f. 13, establishes his full name and provides more of his personal history. That letter, like the one translated here, was addressed to his elder brother Abu 'l-Barakāt ("Blessings"). He himself was called Abū Sa<sup>c</sup>īd ("Blissful") b. Abu 'l-Ḥasan al-Abzārī ("Dealer in seeds," the family name), and, as his beautiful hand and good style indicate, was a well-educated man. TS 8 J 23, f 13 tells us that Abū Sa<sup>c</sup>īd had traveled from Egypt on a Christian ship, which met the warship (or fleet, uṣṭūl) that had conquered Jerba. This, no doubt, refers to the conquest of that Tunisian island by the admiral of the Norman king Roger II in 1135, an event echoed in several Geniza papers.<sup>1</sup> Abū Sa<sup>c</sup>īd and his non-Christian fellow-travelers were horrified, but no harm befell them. He arrived safely in Bijāya (Bougie), Algeria, where he did profitable business. He intended to return to Egypt that same year, but "the Rūm rammed and toppled the ship of the Laqantī," that is, one belonging to a man from Alicante in Muslim Spain, "and a war was on," wa-waqa<sup>c</sup>at as-sayf. Whether, as a result of that obstacle, Abū Sa<sup>c</sup>īd remained in the West, married there and had two children, as evident from our letter, or whether he had commuted between Egypt and the West some years between the two letters discussed here, cannot be said.

Our letter reflects the situation around 1140, when the Normans

cut Ifrīqiya, that is, approximately, Tunisia of today, from its life line, the trade route to Egypt. For a merchant like Abū Sa'īd, who specialized in the export of Oriental spices to the West, this meant that he had nothing to do any more in the countries of North Africa. On the other hand, at his arrival in Sicily he was favorably impressed by the commercial prospects there and, instead of traveling to Egypt, he suggested to his brother to join him on the island.

The distance between the town of Tunis and the shores of Sicily is very small, but bad storms could have a devastating effect: instead of one day or so our traveller needed thirty-five <sup>days</sup> to reach his goal and most of those who had set sail simultaneously <sup>+</sup> with him perished.

The letter vividly illustrates travel conditions in the mid-Mediterranean and the role Sicily had acquired or retained after the Norman conquest.

TS 13 J 26, f. 10.

"And say to him: All your life - peace <sup>to</sup> upon you, peace <sup>to</sup> upon your house, etc." <sup>2</sup>

"The Lord will guard you from all evil, he will guard your soul,

The Lord will guard your going out and coming in, from this time forth and for ever." <sup>3</sup>

To the presence of my brother, the delight of my eyes, my lord and leader, most esteemed by me, the crown of my head,

and the one on whom I rely. May God prolong his life in happiness, guard and keep him and never deprive him of his good guidance.

Dear brother, may God <sup>protect</sup> ~~perfect~~ and never forsake you, may he be your help and sustainer, your support and trust from this time forth and for ever.

A. Reasons for the Journey to Sicily.

I entered Sicily with my family coming from Tunis because of the privations suffered there and the horrors witnessed in Ifrīqiya and also because of my longing for you. I intended to travel to Egypt via Sicily, for it is not any more possible to travel to Egypt directly from Ifrīqiya. I planned to arrive in Egypt this very year, but God had willed otherwise. The obstacle to my travel and coming to you was illness in the family, which lasted four months. By Israel's religion, my misfortune<sup>4</sup> forced me to spend 50 Murābiṭī dinars<sup>5</sup>, for the wife fell ill and also the two little ones, and God willed that one of them died, the baby, he was one and a half years old - may your life be prolonged!

B. Horrors on the Way.

Then on the voyage to Sicily I was overcome by a disaster<sup>4</sup> the like of which I have never witnessed. A great storm seized us on the sea and we were forced to land on an island called Ghumūr.<sup>6</sup> We stayed there for twenty days with no food other than nettles.<sup>7</sup> When we set out from there we did not have any more the look of human beings. The seas tormented<sup>8</sup> us for thirty-five days and we were regarde<sup>d</sup> as lost.<sup>9</sup> For we set sail in four barges

We were regarded as lost,

(qārīb), but only ours ~~but only ours~~ survived. After arrival in Sicily we were so exhausted from our sufferings at sea that we were unable to eat bread or to understand what was said to us for a full month.

### C. Invitation to Sicily.

This is the reason which prevented me from coming to Egypt this year. After all we have endured this year we are not prone to travel. You must see us with your own eyes; no description can do justice to our state.<sup>10</sup>

Furthermore, it is now three years that I have not seen a letter or an answer from you. I am very much upset, and this, too, makes me reluctant to come. Dear brother, by God, do not withhold your letters from me, for I am waiting for them. I am staying here in Sicily, by God, do not withhold from me your letters<sup>11</sup>...., for I am yearning after you and my mind is very much perturbed since the time your letters ceased to come. Write also about the poll tax.<sup>12</sup>

If you intend to move, the best thing is to come to Sicily,<sup>(or, Palermo)</sup> for the spices of the Orient sell here well. Thus, it will be for both pleasure and business. We shall help one another in enhancing the prestige of the family<sup>13</sup> and shall be happy with one another.

### D. Conclusion.

(Greetings to four persons and to "my paternal aunts", which suggests that the family had been settled in Egypt for at least

two generations).

This letter was written on the New Moon day of the month of Sivan.<sup>1</sup> By God, I need not entreat you again to answer quickly, if God wills. Peace upon you and God's mercy and his blessings. And your welfare may wax for ever and never decrease, Amen.

My son Abū 'l-Ḥasan<sup>15</sup> sends greetings to you all, and so does the dweller of my house<sup>16</sup> - to everyone, young and old.

#### N O T E S

<sup>1</sup>"Today [October 14, 1136] there arrived the prisoners of Jerba", namely in Egypt) to be ransomed, TS K6, f. 47. "The captive cantor, of the Jerba captives," TS 10 J 15, f. 26. See below, no. <sup>I</sup>35.

<sup>2</sup>I Samuel 25:6. My translation is in accordance with the commentaries contemporaneous with the writer of the letter.

<sup>3</sup>Psalms 121:7-8. These verses may allude to the writer's own successfully concluded adventures.

<sup>4</sup>The word ḥaraka, literally, movement, is used here and below in the sense of événement grave, as in the Arabian Nights, see Dozy, Supplement, I, p. 276a.

<sup>5</sup>The "dollars" of that period, see Mediterranean Society, I, Index.

<sup>6</sup>Presumably one of the little islands between Tunisia and Sicily. <sup>¶ 7</sup> Nettles: ḥurrayq. The tender stalks of the nettles are edible during spring time. As the date of our letter shows, this voyage was undertaken approximately in April in order to catch the boats going from Sicily to Egypt in May. Another case of nettles eaten in spring (Passover, cut in a ruin in al-Mahdiyya): TS 10 J 14, f. 20v, l. 4.\*

<sup>8</sup>Literally, "the seas wanted to get at <sup>us</sup>ua," tamannatna 'l-biḥār.

<sup>9</sup>These words are repeated in the text, albeit in different order.

<sup>10</sup>Text: lays 'l-khabar kāl-'iyān, a proverbial expression.

<sup>11</sup>Such repetitions are frequently found in similar contexts.

One word is illegible here.

<sup>12</sup>Although the writer had been away from Egypt for at least four years, he was afraid that he was still registered as resident, and, at arrival there, would have to pay the poll tax for the years of his absence, although he had certainly paid the tax ~~for the intervening years~~ at his domicile in the Muslim West.

<sup>13</sup>Text: wa-nata 'āwanū fī rufū' 'l-ahl. I am not entirely sure about the correctness of the translation; rafa'<sup>a</sup> means move someone up in the row of seats of honor.

<sup>14</sup>Falling in the month of May.

<sup>15</sup>So called after his grandfather.

<sup>16</sup>His wife.

The Address on the reverse side is largely effaced, but the main elements are recognizable:

To my brother...Abū <sup>l</sup>Barakāt, son of...al-Abzārī... Fustat.

From his brother Abū Sa'īd.