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Cheese Production in Bashafir

(Around 1150)

referred to by
A. L. Z. 30 (1166),
p. 67

Oxford Bodl. Ms. Heb. b 11 (Catal. 2874), f. 11

(As cheese was the ^{staple} main protein food of the poorer ^{classes} sections of the population, and as its preparation required certain ritual precautions, its production, or import and transport loom large in the Geniza papers - as in the Arabic papyri (see p.). A few examples are given here.

Bashafir was the name of a ktra, or district, near Damietta^a in Lower Egypt, concerning which the Muslim geographer Yāqūt, Vol. I, p. 634, states that its sheep could not be equalled in the whole world. No wonder, then, that the capital was provided with its cheese, as we learn from here. The document was issued by a religious dignitary in Great al-Mahalla, a town in the Nile delta, where the producer of the cheese had his domicile.)

In Y (our name) O M (grateful)

Your servant Shemarya b. Yakhin, (may he rest in) E (den), in the town of Great al-Mahalla^a)

To... (two lines of honorific epithets)... the Magid Samuel... (another two lines of titles)... son of... Hananiah... informing his Highness of the following. When M. Spigson b. Japheth decided to go to Bashafir and make bag cheese^b) there, I sent with him a trustworthy elder called Meshullam ha-Kohen b. Tobiah ha-Kohen m.E., whom he appointed as supervisor,¹ after I had him instructed in the presence of others on the duties of a supervisor and of those that work with him. Furthermore, the cheese was made in the same village in which m. Mevasar, who is famous for his religiosity and honesty,

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to a 151

b 11, f. 11/Bastmār

lives. The latter wrote to me - in addition to the report of the supervisor - that the cheese was made in a completely satisfactory way and with the necessary precautions. The aforementioned Salīm^{e)} now has in his possession seven hundred pieces of cheese, which he brought to Samanīd,^{d)} where, according to his words, he left a Jās in the boat to watch them, while he and the supervisor came to see me, bringing with them the letter of the aforementioned Mavassār. He told me the whole story and said: "I ask you to write a letter for me to his Excellency, our lord..., for I want to sell the cheese in Fustat.."

What has become known to your servant Shemarya b. Yakhīn, m.E., he hereby transmits to your holy Excellency and to (the presidents of) your high courts.^{e)}

Notes

- a) This is the local dignitary, who addresses the Nagid, or Head of the Jewish community Samuel b. Hananiah (ca. 1140-1159), who had his seat in Cairo.
- b) Probably called so (ṭaba kfiṣ) because the curds of milk were put into bags which were suspended for drying, as one can still observe in the Near Eastern countryside.
- c) The Arabic equivalent of the aforementioned Hebrew name, Solomon.
- d) A large village on the right branch of the Nile River, about 22 miles east of al-Mahalla.
- e) The courts in the capital - two in Fustat and one in Cairo - served as highest legal and religious authority for the Jews of the Fatimid empire.

Comments

1. Heb. shōṭer, lit. watchman. The word, which occurs frequently in the Geniza papers, used to be translated as "constable," see NJ I, p. 270. However, its real meaning is evident in this and a number of other documents.