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FRAGMENT OF THE MONTH ARCHIVE

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What's On

A Maldivian boat and cowrie shells in a letter from Nahray b. 'Allan to his son

Search and Find

Nazim Sattar

Shelfmark: BL OR 5566D.6

Document Date: 1452-03-08 Seleucid (16 May, 1141 CE), https://geniza.princeton.edu/en/documents/6292/

Ever since I read Amitav Ghosh's, In An Antique Land, I have been fascinated by the Cairo Geniza, not least because, as a Maldivian, and a South Asian, the novel had a close resonance to my experience in Yemen in 1995 when I studied Arabic in San'a (Please don't ask me anything about San'ani Arabic, I was only 19 and utterly bored and had no idea what I was doing in a country that had recently accomplished its last civil war and was getting ready for a future assortment of wars). I was completing my "year abroad" having enrolled in an Arabic bachelor's degree in the University of Durham, UK. I completed my degree in 1998 and returned back to the Maldives and became a practicing lawyer (in typical South Asian fashion).

Since my discovery of the Cairo Geniza story, I have been reading anything I can get hold of, about the documents, even though I could not read or write Hebrew. I attempted several times to teach myself Hebrew but was not getting anywhere beyond alef. I now know why, it was because I was trying to teach myself Hebrew from a text book written in English.

That hindrance disappeared somewhat, in the course of reading the Kindle edition of Marina Rustow's, The Lost Archive: Traces of a Caliphate in a Cairo Synagogue. The opening technical note of the book said, "Editions, translations, and descriptions of many of the texts are available online through the Princeton Geniza Project (https://geniza.princeton.edu/pgp/pgpsearch/), abbreviated PGP in the documentation".1

So, I started searching the PGP and soon found myself led to Marina Rustow's, How to read Judaeo-Arabic manuscripts in five easy steps, if you already know Arabic. So, armed with these brilliant instructive steps, I started my attempts to read Hebrew script.

Of course, as a Maldivian, my first try was to find whether Maldives was mentioned in the PGP but the search did not produce any results.

I know the Maldives is mentioned in Goitein and Friedman's India Traders of the Middle Ages: Documents from the Cairo Geniza (also known as "India Book"), but as I am located in the middle of the Indian Ocean, I could not get hold of the book and it is too expensive to purchase it from Amazon and have it shipped here (that is, if it is ever in stock). I have attempted to download the book online but haven't been successful (some of the pages can be downloaded from PGP website).³

Maldives and Cowries

Having found no "Maldives" tag in the PGP, I typed "cowries" and the search provided a single letter from Nahray b. 'Allān in 'Aydhāb to his son 'Allān b. Nahray in Alexandria concerning shipments.4

Now, you may ask why cowries are synonymous with the Maldives. Maldivian historian, Naseema Mohamed, writes that Maldives had a monopoly on cowries:

moneta), have been found in many different parts of the world, some dating back many centuries. Cowries have been found in the ruins of Lothal, a port used during the Indus Valley Civilization (Heyerdhal 1986). Cowries have been found placed on the eyes of the skull of a woman excavated in Jericho, estimated to be at least 7000 years old. Cowries have been found in China in a tomb of the Yin Dynasty of 1401–1122 B.C. (Vilgon 1991–99). Cowries had also found their way to four A.D. seventh century graves in Northern Norway, north of the Arctic Circle (Mikkelsen 2000). In the ancient world, Maldives had the monopoly on cowries, leading us to question whether these cowries could have come from Maldives.⁵

The exact period when Maldives started exporting cowries is not known. But the Maldivian cowries, i.e. the money cowrie (cypraea

The Letter

The PGP's introductory description of the letter states the letter was from Nahray b. 'Allān in 'Aydhāb to his son 'Allān b. Nahray in Alexandria concerning shipments. Nahray writes that he is traveling with both Muslims and Jews "on the boat of al-Dībājī ("the brocade") dealer")". In 'Aydhāb, the merchants sold part of their goods and otherwise traded them for products from eastern markets. He describes that they were nearing the time when they needed to set sail.⁶

Nahray b. 'Allān's letter mentions cowries twice.' Nahray informs his son that he was sending him "two bales of cowrie shells measuring"

1 mudd" (וצרתין ודיע כילהם מד (פסע זייט פגאַ אוּא אב (recto line 22, verso line 1); and "as to the cowrie shells, if you think it best to send them to transliteration by Goitein; Arabic transliteration is mine). The fact the cowries are called ודיע/ודע wadī'/wada' conforms with how cowries are mentioned by al-Idrisi and by Ibn Battuta as opposed to

eighteenth century Arabic texts in Maldives which name cowries as الكوري al-kūrī. (It would be interesting if the Geniza came up with other names for cowries or other names for its packaging in future searches). Now leaving that aside, what interested me was that in the beginning of the letter Nahray says he was travelling (to India? To Maldives?)

"in the boat of al-Dībjī" ואנא מסאפר פי מרכבּ אלדיבגי (*wa anā musāfir fī markab al-dībjī*) (recto lines 6 and 7) which is rendered as the boat of "the brocade dealer" in the PGP introduction to the letter. But it can also mean "I am travelling in the boat of the Maldivian". It is established that the letter is dated 1141 CE, during which time, Arabs called cowries wadī'/wada'. It is also established that during the 12th century the Arabs called the Maldives الدبيحات (al-dbiḥāt/al-dbījāt) . In al-Idrisi's (1099-1186 CE) Kitāb nuzhat al-mushtāg fī

وفي هذا الجزء من الجزائر المرسومة في أمكنتها جزائر الدبيحات (الدبيجات) المتصلة بعضها ببعض وهي لا تحصي وأكثرها خالية وأكبرها جزيرة انبونه وهي عامرة

ويحكى أن هذا الودع الذي يدخره ملكهم يأتيهم على وجه الماء وفيه روح فيأخذون عيدان شجر النارجيل فيطرحونها على الماء فيتعلق هذا الودع بها

another and innumerable. Most of the islands are uninhabited. The largest is Anbūna which is inhabited. I am reading al-Idrisi's work from the 2002 printed version published by Cairo's Maktaba al-Thaqafa al-Dīniyya, and sure enough, the

To this section belong the islands indicated in their place, amongst others, those called al-Dbihāt [al-Dbijāt] which are linked to one

footnote of page 69 mentions that one of the manuscripts says al-Dbījāt instead of al-dbiḥāt. 10

al-Idrisi then continues: وهذه الجزائر المعروفة بجزائر الدبيحات عامرة بالناس ويزرع فيها النارجيل وقصب السكر وتجاراتهم بالودع وبين الجزيرة والأخرى مسير ستة أميال وأكثر وأقل وملكهم يدخر الودع في خزائنه وهو أكثر عده ...

The islands known by the name of al-Dbiḥāt [al-Dbījāt] are peopled. They cultivate there, the coconut and sugarcane. Commerce is carried out by means of shells (al-wada'). The distance between islands is six miles, more or less. Their king preserves these shells (al-wada') in his treasury and he possesses the greater portion of them... It is said that these shells (al-wada') that their king accumulates, are brought to the surface of the water as they have a soul [as they are living things]. They take branches of the coconut tree and throw them into the sea and these shells attach themselves thereto.

The Maldivian Dhoni Based on these descriptions, I am convinced that our friend Nahray b. 'Allān was about to set sail in the Maldivian's boat. It appears that

ikhtirāq al-āfāq he mentioned the following about the Maldives.

the Maldivian's boat arrived in 'Aydhāb with cowries and other Maldivian and Indian commodities which were unloaded there and Nahray b. 'Allan now must hastily depart on his journey to the waters of the Indian Ocean. Because it was the month of May (1141 CE) when the wind starts pushing from the south west (instead of the north east), it was time for the eastward leg of the journey. From another Geniza letter we know what kind of a boat it was. T-S 12.392, a letter from a novice India Trader in Dahlak to his brother-in-

law back home in Tripoli, Libya, 1103, mentions that they were setting sail "in a ship that contained not a single nail of iron, but rather was tied together with ropes" תם אנה כרגנא מקלעין [פי מרכב] מא פיהא מסמאר חדיד אלא מרבוטא באלחבאל (tumma inna kharajnā muqla'īn [fī markab] תם אנה כרגנא מקלעין ma fihā mismār hadīd, illā marbūṭa bi al-ḥibāl). 11 This is what we call a Dhoni in the Maldives and this is how we built our boats until the 16th century. The cowries, al-Dbījāt, the type of boat, all these facts lead me to believe that Nahray set sail to the Maldives in May 1141.

PS: Please keep an eye out for anything Maldives-related in the Geniza manuscripts and inform me.



Footnotes 1 Rustow, Marina. The Lost Archive: Traces of a Caliphate in a Cairo Synagogue, Princeton University Press. Kindle Edition.

article.

2 How to read Judaeo-Arabic manuscripts 5.1_Dec2021 3 I would like to thank Ben Outhwaite, Head of Genizah Research Unit, for providing me with a soft copy of the book after I wrote this

4 Shelfmark: BL OR 5566D.6; Document Date: 1452-03-08 Seleucid (16 May, 1141 CE)

5 Naseema Mohamed, Maldivian Seafaring in the Pre-Portuguese Period, National Centre for Linguistic and Historical Research, Male', Republic of Maldives

7 See Goitein's notes here (Princeton Genizah Project) 8 S.D. Goitein, unpublished editions

6 Letter description

9 Ḥasan Tāj al-Dīn (1984): Ḥasan Tāj al-Dīn's The Islamic History of the Maldive Islands with Supplementary Chapters by Muḥammad Muḥibb al-Dīn and Ibrāhīm Sirāj al-Dīn. Edited by Hikoichi Yajima. Vol. 2, Annotations and Indices. Tokyo: Institute for the Study of Languages and Cultures of Asia and Africa (p.23)

11 Letter from a novice India Trader in Dahlak to his brother-in-law back home in Tripoli, Libya, 1103, complaining in rhyme about the perils of the road. Unpublished. In Judaeo-Arabic. Ed. and trans. Alan Elbaum and Marina Rustow, 2021. Classmark: Cambridge University

10 Al-Idrisi, *Kitāb nuzhat al-mushtāq fī ikhtirāq al-āfāq*, Maktaba al-Thaqafa al-Dīniyya, Cairo 2002. p.69

Library, T-S 12.392; VI,1 in Goitein and Friedman's India Book numbering.

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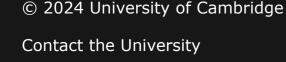
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