

JEWISH TRADING IN FES ON THE EVE OF THE ALMOHAD CONQUEST*

Comercio judío en Fez en la etapa previa a la conquista almohade

AMIRA K. BENNISON – MARÍA ÁNGELES GALLEGO
University of Cambridge – ILC, CSIC

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Resumen: En este artículo se presenta una carta de la Genizah relativa comercio judío en la ciudad de Fez, en el período en el que los Almohades habían comenzado la conquista del Sur de Marruecos. Las autoras proponen una nueva lectura del texto, como parte de un proyecto de revisión de fuentes primarias relativas a las relaciones interreligiosas bajo poder almohade.

Abstract: This article presents a Genizah letter dealing with Jewish trade in Fes shortly after the Almohads had started their conquest of southern Morocco. The authors propose a new reading of the text, as part of a project of revision of primary sources related to interfaith relations under Almohad rule.

Palabras clave: Almohades, judaísmo, judeo-árabe, Genizah.

Key words: Almohads, Judaism, Judeo-Arabic, Genizah.

1. INTRODUCTION

The status of Jewish communities under Almohad rule has been the subject of scholarly interest for different reasons notably in the framework of the disruption of *convivencia* in al-Andalus among the people of the three abrahamic faiths.¹ In addition to being known for their harsh policies against the Almoravids, the Almohads have been traditionally portrayed as extremely hostile to *dhimmis*² even though the evidence for this is drawn from a limited number of sources, whose information has been

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1. For a summary of the situation of Jews and Christians in al-Andalus under Almohad rule, see Fierro, 1997: 523-540.

2. The first historiographical analysis of this kind can be found in the work by Munk, 1842.

repeatedly cited by a chain of scholars and on occasion elaborated upon.³ While violent and intolerant attitudes towards *dhimmi*s seem to be confirmed for specific periods of Almohad rule, the assumption that Almohad persecution of non-Muslim religious minorities was a *systematic* or *official* policy throughout their rule is more problematic. New readings of the existing primary sources and incorporation of new material can shed fresh light on this episode of Jewish-Islamic history. The letter under review here is the first step in a project to reconsider not only the source material related to this era from both the Jewish and the Islamic sides but also the way particular historiographical trends have evolved over time and their impact upon our current perceptions of this important but, in fact, poorly understood era.

2. THE ALMOHAD MOVEMENT: HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

From a chronological point of view, the Almohad era was short, enduring for around a century, but its impact on history and historiography has been both important and controversial. According to the Arabic sources, the Almohad movement was started by a Masmūda Berber tribesman of the Hargha clan called Abū ‘Abd Allāh Muḥammad b. Tūmart. He grew up in a village called Igilliz in the Sus valley south of the High Atlas mountains studying late into the night in the community mosque. Around 1106 he left Morocco to study the religious sciences in the great cities of the Islamic world. Although his itinerary is not altogether clear, the majority of scholars accept that he went to Cordoba before travelling east to Alexandria en route for the *ḥajj* and an extended study period in the Mashriq which included sojourns in Baghdad, Jerusalem and Cairo.⁴

During these years, he acquired a good knowledge of most of the intellectual trends of the early twelfth century which included Shi‘ism in its Ismā‘īlī and Imāmī forms, Mu‘tazilism, Ash‘arism, Sufism and

3. For a thorough analysis of these sources which points out the inconsistency of some of them, see the seminal work by Corcos, 1976.

4. No detailed account of Ibn Tūmart’s educational itinerary exists, therefore it is impossible to accurately reconstruct his journey. His autobiography, written by al-Baydhaq, only starts with his return to the Maghrib in its extant form, al-Baydhaq, 1975. There is some doubt as to whether he ever left North Africa but he certainly came into contact with a sizeable corpus of Mashriqi learning, García Arenal, 2006: 163.

contemporary *fiqh* methods. The most famous, albeit quite likely mythical episode, during his education was his encounter with the iconic Sunnī jurist and mystic, al-Ghazālī, who gave him a mission to overthrow the Almoravids when he learnt that they had ordered the burning of his most famous work, the *Ihyā' 'ulūm al-dīn*.⁵ Whether prompted by al-Ghazālī or not, Ibn Tūmart eventually left the Mashriq and settled for a time in a small village outside Bijaya, now in eastern Algeria, before travelling on to Marrakesh.

Al-Baydhaq's eye-witness account of this part of Ibn Tūmart's life suggests that he began this journey as a reformist preacher and only gradually developed his religio-political mission to overthrow the Almoravids. He also used his time in Algeria to create a small cohort of followers who then accompanied him west, the most important of whom was 'Abd al-Mu'min, a Kumiya Berber tribesman from the Tlemsen area, who ultimately succeeded Ibn Tūmart as head of the Almohad movement and constructed the Almohad empire. During the journey to Marrakesh, Ibn Tūmart gained stature as a gifted preacher with an uncompromising message that God's uniqueness was the central tenet of the faith and that true adherence to Him required total submission to the way of life detailed in the Qur'ān and the Sunna.

He was highly critical of customary practices not rooted in these sources, of jurists' lack of knowledge of them, and the emulative rather than rational-critical tendency predominant among Maghribi scholars. He had a puritanical strand and reacted strongly, sometimes violently, to men and women mixing in public, to wine-drinking, and to music and dancing but, aside from this, his extant works show that he was also an erudite scholar able to use philosophical and logical arguments to press his point home and impress and silence the Maghribi jurists and students with whom he debated.⁶

5. Although this episode is cited in numerous Arabic sources, it was dismissed by I. Goldziher, 1903 and most subsequent scholars have concurred with his view. The exception is Madeleine Fletcher who suggests that Ibn Tūmart may have met al-Ghazālī in Alexandria at the time when the latter was exploring the possibility of Almoravid patronage, Fletcher, 1997.

6. Good summary accounts of his journey across North Africa are given by Cornell, 1987: 73-89 and García Arenal, 2006: 162-174.

Once he reached Marrakesh, the capital of the Sanhaja Berber Almoravid empire, around 1121 he quickly demonstrated his intention to challenge the existing political and religious establishment which was dominated by a combination of Sanhaja Berber *amīrs* and Maliki jurists from Morocco and above all, al-Andalus. Under threat of imprisonment or death he fled Marrakesh and retreated to his natal village of Igilliz in the Sus where his followers soon recognised him as the *mahdī*, a redeemer sent to renew and purify Islam by establishing a new community or *umma* to which it was hoped that all Muslims would ultimately subscribe. In fact, the logic of Almohadism was such that it not only aspired to remake the Muslim *umma* but also to incorporate those who subscribed to early versions of the monotheistic message, Christians and Jews. It was this desire to replay the foundational story of Islam itself and succeed where it had partially failed that gave Almohadism its distinctive approach to the matter of religious minorities.

The attitude of Ibn Tūmart and his immediate circle towards non-Almohads became clear during their establishment of their community in the High Atlas mountain town of Tinmall or Tinmalal around 1124. After the Almohads occupied the town, the inhabitants enjoyed a grace period of about four years after which those who refused to accept Ibn Tūmart and his message were brutally driven out and massacred. At the same time, Ibn Tūmart and his disciples showed an unusually high commitment to public education. His message was conveyed in Berber as well as Arabic at daily study sessions and ‘educated’ Almohads were sent out to their tribes to spread the message further.⁷ Later on, ‘Abd al-Mu’min and succeeding Almohad caliphs showed a similar interest in educating their subjects about basic Almohad beliefs which they understood to be nothing more nor less than correct Islam.

There is much debate about the content of the Almohad message but it was in essence a stark recognition of the transcendence of God and the importance of having a clear understanding of His injunctions and following them. The *mahdī* led his people as the chief interpreter of God’s injunctions, a role later assumed by his ‘caliphs’ assisted by a coterie of Almohad shaykhs from Morocco and al-Andalus. The most controversial aspect of Almohadism was undoubtedly its recognition of Ibn Tūmart as

7. Fawrati, 1911: 80; Fletcher, 1991: 112.

the *mahdī* which many in the Maghrib found hard to swallow, in other respects, however, it was a reformist Islam which eschewed popular practices while also encouraging rational, reflective and even philosophical approaches to religion.

Ibn Tūmart died around 1130 shortly after the disastrous Battle of the Buhayra near Marrakesh at which the Almoravids routed the Almohads. The movement could easily have collapsed at this moment but survived as a result of the judicious actions of his closest disciples, the Council of Ten, who decided to accept ‘Abd al-Mu’min as Ibn Tūmart’s successor but did not inform the Almohad rank and file of either Ibn Tūmart’s death or ‘Abd al-Mu’min’s succession until an appropriate moment a couple of years later. During the 1130s and 1140s, ‘Abd al-Mu’min proved himself an able military and political tactician and the Almohads steadily gained control of the High Atlas and Middle Atlas Mountains. They then attacked the Almoravid cities of the plains. Tlemsen (1145), Fes (1146) and then finally Marrakesh (1147) fell and an empire came into being.

The letter presented here apparently dates to the period between Ibn Tūmart’s establishment of the Almohad community in the Sus and High Atlas mountains in the early 1120s and the fall of the key northern cities of Tlemsen and Fes in the late 1140s. This was a time of political upheaval throughout Almoravid domains. In al-Andalus, local lords restive under Almoravid rule took the opportunity of the rise of the Almohads in Morocco to launch rebellions either in favour of the Almohads or in the hope of securing their own independence. It is unlikely that the specificities of the Almohad message were fully understood at this time although from very early on, the Almohads seem to have stressed their role as fighters for the faith (*mujāhidīn*) and required their soldiers to participate in communal daily prayers while on campaign. Belief in the *mahdī*, a figure whose role was religio-political by definition, obliged the Almohads to wage a *jihād* to restore Islam in its own lands and defend the Islamic frontier from outside threats.

3. JEWISH VIEWS OF ALMOHAD RULE

Jewish sources containing information on the Almohad conquest and rule agree on presenting this historical episode as a deep catastrophe for the Jewish communities of al-Andalus and the Maghrib. In fact, the source

material for this view is scarce even though brief references have had a significant impact and been disseminated repeatedly in the writings of later authors.

It is worth noting in the first place two Hebrew chronicle narrations: *Sefer ha-Qabbala* by Abraham ben Daud⁸ (ca. 1110-1180) and the *Shebet Yehuda* by Shelomoh ben Verga⁹ (d. 1559), the latter partly relying on the account of the former. Abraham ben Daud eloquently described the Almohad period as:

After the demise of R. Joseph there were years of war, evil decrees and persecutions that overtook the Jews, who were compelled to wander from their homes, “such as were for death, to death; and such as were for the sword, to the sword; and such as were for the famine, to the famine; and such as were for captivity, to captivity.” To Jermeiah’s prophecy, there was now added “such as were [destined] to leave the faith.” This happened in the wake of the sword of Ibn Tumart, which came into the world in [4]873, when he decreed apostasy on the Jews, saying: “Come, and let us cut them off from being a nation: that the name of Israel may be no more in remembrance.” Thus, he wiped out every last “name and remnant” of them from all of his empire, from the city of Silves at the end of the world until the city of al-Mahdiya.¹⁰

Along those lines, but in the domain of *belles-lettres* literature, is set the famous elegy or *Lament* (*Aha yarad*) by Abraham ibn Ezra (1089-1164) which reports in a poetic form the account of the destruction of Jewish communities in al-Andalus and the Maghrib which he had not witnessed himself but heard of during his European sojourn. There exist several versions of the poem, an older Genizah copy discovered by Schirmann preserving a different order of events to that followed in the most familiar version of the *Lament*.¹¹ Further, the Genizah fragment includes the story of a disputation held in Dar‘a, in southern Morocco, between the Jews and the Muslim conquerors also mentioned in another Genizah letter (see below).

8. Cohen, 1967: 65-66 (Hebrew text), 87-88 (English translation).

9. Text edited by Shohet – Baer, 1946. Spanish translation by Cano, 1991.

10. Cohen, 1967: 65-66/87-88.

11. Schirmann, 1965: 219-221.

Another relevant element for the study of the situation of the Jews during the Almohad period is the *Letter on apostasy*¹² written by Maimonides in Fes around 1164/65, in which the great Jewish scholar rebukes the opinions of a rigorous rabbi who had recommended martyrdom rather than false conversion even in cases of extreme need. Maimonides, in his *Letter*, deemed it licit to pretend conversion to Islam as a means to prevent many Jews from being killed or actually abandoning their Jewish faith. The best option, in any case, was migration to other territories, according to the Andalusī rabbi. Some modern scholars have seen in this letter implicit data pointing to a temporary false conversion to Islam of the great rabbi, hence his understanding attitude. The *Letter on apostasy* might then reflect his own experience before leaving Morocco and the settling of his family in Fustat. The enormous significance of Maimonides in Jewish tradition has led to the focussing of many discussions about the status of Jews under Almohad rule on the particular issue of Maimonides' possible conversion, on the basis of his own statements in this letter along with other pieces of evidence. Ibn al-Qiftī (1172-1248) an Egyptian biographer of scientists describes 'Abd al-Mu'min's injunction to Jews and Christians to convert or leave and says:

When this command was issued, those with little to lose (*al-mukhiffūn*) left but those with burdens, covetous of their families and wealth outwardly professed Islam and concealed their unbelief. Mūsā b. Maymūn was one of those who did this in his country and stayed there. When he publicly performed the rites of Islam he adhered to their details in recitation and prayer and he did that until the opportunity for travel presented itself...He departed from al-Andalus to Egypt with his family and settled at the city of Fustat among its Jews and made manifest his religion.¹³

12. Edited by Kafih, 1987: 105-120. Spanish translation by Cano – Ferre, 1988.

13. Ibn al- Qiftī, 1903: 317-318, *Ta'riḫ al-ḥukamā'* (*History of scientists*) edited by Lippert, 1903. According to Ibn al- Qiftī, towards the end of his life an Andalusī jurist called Abī'l-'Arab b. Ma'īsha arrived in Egypt and insisted upon his conversion to Islam in al-Andalus and publicly reviled him but the judge, 'Abd al-Raḥīm b. 'Alī al-Fāḍil, ordered him to desist saying 'the Islam of a man who has been forced is not legally binding'. Ibn al- Qiftī, 1903: 319.

Paradoxically, even though forced conversion, exile and death are commonly mentioned in all Jewish sources in regard to this period, the conversion to Islam of Maimonides is consistently denied.

Finally, several letters from the Cairo Genizah dated to this period have proved to be especially rich material for the reconstruction of this chapter of Jewish history, for they usually convey first hand information, without any goal beyond private communication between individuals, in contradistinction to chronicles or literary works. The most extensive account of the Jewish plight under the Almohads has been recorded in Shelomo ha-Kohen al-Siljimasī's missive from Fustat to his father coming back from India in 1148. Shelomo ha-Kohen reports to his father the news from the Maghrib that he has learnt from a group of Muslim and Jewish travellers who have arrived in Egypt from the Maghrib, where they witnessed the course of events.

According to their account, when Sijilmasa surrendered to the Almohads, the new rulers tried to convert the Jews to Islam by debate and persuasion for over seven months (an episode mentioned as well in a Genizah copy of Abraham ibn Ezra's *Lament*). From a doctrinal perspective, this correlated with the Almohad mission to convert all Abrahamic monotheists to the true faith. It also matches with Ibn al-Qiftī's reference to the grace period offered to non-Muslims by 'Abd al-Mu'min. The letter adds that after this period a new governor arrived in the city and killed a hundred and fifty Jews, whereas the others apostasised, including the *dayyan* (judge) of Sijilmasa. The letter continues by giving a record of the cities conquered in the West and the fate of the Jews, concluding that they have all been killed or converted to Islam.¹⁴

Other Genizah letters of a commercial nature are informative of this period, including the letter by a merchant in Fes to his father in Almeria, dated around 1140, mostly dealing with business matters but also advising his father against travelling to this region and warning on the increasing hatred of Jews in that country.¹⁵

14. Edited for the first time by Toledano, 1927, and edited a second time (with an introduction and Hebrew translation) by Hirschberg, 1960.

15. TS 12.435. Edited and translated by Goitein, 1974. These and other materials have been included in the work on trade in Muslim Spain by Constable, 1994.

The Genizah letter presented below also contains an early reference to the drastic changes that had started to take place in the Maghrib,¹⁶ although the goal of the merchant who wrote it was far from providing any historical account of political developments. The dynamism of trade between North Africa and the Iberian Peninsula and the role that Jews had in it emerges clearly from the entire text and can help us to assess later social and political developments.

The date of this trade letter from the Cairo Geniza (TS 13 J 21 12) can be safely established as 1140, since in its text the death of the Spanish rabbi Joseph ibn Migash is explicitly mentioned. It is written by a merchant who was carrying out several trade operations in Fes, in connection with his partner in Almeria, to whom he writes this missive. The sender is almost exclusively concerned about business matters. He shows a deep worry about one of his assistants, Barūkh, who is presented here as an unreliable collaborator, though necessary in the current state of affairs (he is already in charge of some of his partner's goods).

The entire letter breathes dynamism and hectic commercial dealings on the part of the sender and in the city of Fes more generally. The expressions 'Do not delay this matter a second' and 'quickly' are used several times, along with specific requests for sale and payments. This practical and business-like mentality of the Jewish trader is, however, interspersed with expressions related to his own mood, especially with regard to the death of the known Spanish rabbi, Joseph ibn Migash, which causes him profound sorrow, and he regrets not having had a personal acquaintance with him in the past. The impact of the Almohad conquest of the Sus is reflected in the trader's difficulties selling the lac after its price has dropped. As for the rest of the text, trade operations seem to be going on in regular ways.¹⁷

16. Goitein, in the introduction to his translation of this particular letter claims that 'here we see that the merchants were fully aware of the imminent danger' (Goitein, 1973: 264), contrary to the opinion of the authors of the present study.

17. In Goitein's reading of the letter the interpretation is the opposite, 'business had come to a standstill in the capital, although the Sūs, the region referred to here, is in the utmost southwest of Morocco, while Fez is situated in its northernmost part', Goitein, 1973: 264.

4. THE LANGUAGE OF THE LETTER

This letter shows the typical traits of medieval Judeo-Arabic texts¹⁸, including the obvious ones of being written in the Hebrew script and inserting Hebrew vocabulary.

In regard to the orthography, the scarce use of diacritical points must be noted. The representation of Arabic phonemes is therefore reduced to a limited number of Hebrew characters:

א = א, ב = ב, ט/ת = ת, ג/ג = ג, ח = ח, כ/כ = כ,
 ד/ד = ד, ר = ר, ז = ז, ס = ס, ש = ש, צ/צ = צ,
 פ/פ = פ, ע = ע, פ = פ, ק = ק, ל = ל, מ = מ, נ = נ,
 ו = ו, ו = ו, י = י

As is common in Judeo-Arabic texts, *hamza* is not represented graphically, only its support letter is given: ex. l[in]e] 21r *ḥā'ir* (support letter *yā'*) and it can disappear completely as in the verb *shā'a*, ex. l. 35r, and in *shay'*, ex. l. 4v.

Other phenomena common in medieval Judeo-Arabic texts are the indistinct use of *alif mamdūda*, *alif maqṣūra* and *tā' marbūṭa*: ex. l.34r *al-khibra* (written with final *aleph* rather than *he'*), l. 18r *yabqā* (written with *aleph* rather than *yod*); l. 33r *al-'aḏīma* (written with final *aleph* rather than *he'*).

Also in the orthographic domain, a few cases of *scriptio plena* are to be noted contrary to the use of Standard Arabic, as in the *lam al-ta'kīd* in l.36r, written plena and as a separate word, similarly to the negative particle: *lā khalattuhu wa-lā 'arraftu-hu*.

One common orthographic feature of Judeo-Arabic texts is, however, hardly used in this letter: the use of the ligature for representing *alif lam* which in this text is written with the two letters with just a few exceptions as in l. 4v: *bi-l-sūq*, and l.5v *bi-l-ṣagīr*.

The syntax of this text corresponds to that of a middle Arabic text. The author writes standard Arabic in a simplified grammatical style, keeping in general within the norms of the classical language. There are certain

18. A comprehensive study of the linguistic phenomena of medieval Judeo-Arabic can be found in several works by Blau, 1961.

marks of the influence of the colloquial language as in the abundant appearance of prepositions or in the use of *shay*' to reinforce negation, as in l.22r *lam yaqdir yabi' min-hu shay'*. And half-way between standard and colloquial Arabic is the invariable use of the relative pronoun *al-kāfi*, as in l.12-13r: *al-mithqālayn al-kāfi*

In the field of lexicon, the author of this text has employed forms that must have existed in the spoken language but which are not registered in Standard Arabic, as in the plural for *sanaḡa*: *sunūḡ* (instead of *sanaḡāt*), in l. 29r. Finally, the influence of the maghrebi dialect can be observed in the use of the particle *matā'* for marking possession, as in l. 10r.

5. EDITION

- 1 ול עאני פ[...]
 2 ויבע ש [אלגמיע] [...]
 3 שב [] [רבעין]
 4 אלניל פענד וצול]
 5 אללה ואלקנטאר א]
 6 כ' מתקאל אליך ותתפצל עלי אד
 א אבעתה אלדי יפצל ען אלעשרין
 7 מתקאל תשתרי תוב מחרר מן אלשיך אלדי עמל אלעתאבי מתאך
 8 אלשיך אבו זכרי יכון תפציל בג' מתאקיל ונצף ותנאליהא ואן לם
 9 תגדה מעמול פתכלפה עמלה סרעה ותצבגבה אכצ'ר פסתק
 10 ותכמדה כמד עאלי ותרסלה סרעה מע אלחצר מתאע אברהם
 11 לאן אלתוב איצ'א לה והו מחתאג' אליה לערסה ולא ילחקך פי דלך
 12 תואני ותתפצל איצ'א תערף ר' יצחק בן ברוך ש'צ' אן אלמתקאלין
 13 אלדי בקית להרון בן אלברגלוני ענדה וקת אן אראד יסאפר לסגלמאסה
 14 דפעתהא לה ענה מן ענדי פתקבצהא מנה בגיר תאכיר ואערפך
 15 אן פי קלבי אלנאר אן קד גמעת דהב ומא צכת מע מן ארסלה
 16 ותלגיני אלצורה אן ארסל מנה שי מע דאוד ובללה ליס יטיב
 17 קלבי עלי דלך ולכן ב'ט'ח' בי וארסל לך מעה איצ'א מא תיסר
 18 מן נחאס ואערפך אן אללך לם יבקא עלי אלסוק אלאל אללא מדה
 19 יסידה ומן יום נזול אלכארג'י עלי אלסוס צ'רב ברוחה אלארץ'
 20 וקד בקי ענדי מנה ה' אעדאל ואמא אלדי' אעטית לברוך מאד
 21 לם יקדר יביע מנה שי ואנא חאיר פי אמרה אכתר מן גמיע
 22 אלאמור ואללך גמיעה חצל ענדי פי אלחג'רה ובאללה לו לא כופי
 23 מן אלדי לך ענדה גיר אללך מא כנת אמכנה מנה מן וקיה
 24 לכן אכשא ממא קיל לי אן לך ענדה פאללה תעאלי יחסן

- 25 אלעאקבה ולא תט'ן אן בקי לי פי פאס עוק אלא ארא מא
 26 יכון מנה לאן אברהים אכתו מא סאק דרב וסאלתני ען
 27 אלבקס והו יסוא רטל ונסף במתקאל וכת קד כתבת אליך
 28 כתאב ודכרת אן תם צראף יהודי והו מא יקצר מעי פי
 29 אלקבץ' ואלדפע וטלב זוג מיאזין ודסת סנוג ודפעלי תמן
 30 אלגמיע וכתבת אליך כתאב פי קצתהא וכתבנא כתאב
 31 אלי אלמיאזיני פלא ילחקך פיהא תואני ואמא אלורקה
 32 פקד ערפתך בוצולהא דפעאת עדה ומא אחסן אצף לך בעץ'
 33 ציק צדרי פי פאס וזאדתי אלמציבה אלעט'מא ואלטאמה
 34 אלכברא ופאה רבינו יוסף הרב הגדול ר'ית' נצאבני עליה
 35 מא לא אחסן אצף לך בעצה' פלו שא אללה וכת בקית עלי
 36 אלואל לא כאלטתה ולא ערפתה פאן לס ידכל קלבי קט תצרה
 37 אמר מן תצרתה

verso

- 1 ואערפך אן אלשב אלדי ארסלת לך פיה אעדאל ז' גיאד בזאיד
 2 רבע מתקאל פי אלקנטאר ובקיתה מכתלף אלסער וכאן שרא
 3 רכיץ וקבל כרוגה זאד כל קנטאר רבע מתקאל פאן ראית
 4 אן תכלטה או תביע כל שי במפרדה אנת אכבר באלסוק
 4 אלדי תרא ואלט'רוף גמיעהא ביעהא לאן כל ט'רף מנהא
 5 בדרהם וגמלה וזן אלשב אלדי לכאצך מ'ה' קנטאר ונסף באלצגיר
 6 אללה תעאלי יסהל ולו גסרת כנת ארסלת לך מנה ק' קנטאר
 7 ולכן מא קוי קלבי וכאן אלטאלב עליה כתיר ערפתך גמיע
 8 דלך אנת פי אמאן אללה וחפט'ה מכצוץ באתם סלאם ותחיה
 9 וסלאם וגמיע מן תחותה ענא יתך אלסלאם וכתבת
 10 עלי חפז אלכארג ושלמך יגדל אלעשר אלאכיר מן
 11 טבת ואלכתב לא תגטל ענהא ומוצל כתאבי
 12 אליך הו אלשדאד והו כאן חאט'ר על שד אלשב ויקול לך
 13 אלטיב מן גירה וקד אעדתה כרגי אלצגיר פענד וצולה
 14 תאכדה מנה ומע דאוד אכתב אליך כתב בגמיע מא
 15 תחתאג ושלום

6. TRANSLATION¹⁹

Collect 20 mithqals²⁰ from the price for yourself and take what remains from the sale to buy a silk outfit from the master who made the silk outfit for the elder Abū Zikrī, the cut of which cost 3 and a half mithqals, and get it tailored. If you do not find it already made, ask to have it made quickly, dye it pistachio green, have it pressed to the highest standard and send it off quickly with the mats of Abraham, since the outfit is also for him and he needs it for his wedding. Do not delay this matter a second.

And, please, do also inform Yishāq ben Barūkh –May the Rock protect him–, that with regard to the two mithqals that remained [owed to] Hārūn ibn al-Barjalūnī, I paid them to him at the time that Hārūn intended to travel to Siljimasa, on his [Yishāq’s] behalf, from my own money. So collect the money from him without delay.

Know that my heart is burning since I have gathered gold and I have not found anybody to send it with, so I feel obliged by necessity to send part of it with Daud and, by God, that does not make me happy, but ‘Trust in God and do good’ (Psalms 37:3). I will also send you the copper that is available with him.

I inform you that the lac remained at its previous market [price] for only a short period, since from the day that the rebel occupied the Sus, the price has dropped.²¹ I still have five bales of it. As for that which I gave to this Barūkh, he has not been able to sell any of it. I am confounded about this more than about anything else. All the lac has remained with me in the room and, by God, had it not been for my concern about what he has of yours (with the exception of the lac), I would not have left him in charge [of anything]. And I [still] fear that it is said that [my] lac is with him. May God, the exalted, bring everything to a good end. Do not think that any impediment makes me stay in Fes other than checking what

19. This letter was first translated by Goitein, 1973: 264-268, though it has never been edited before. The present translation relies on some of Goitein’s readings whereas in certain sections our interpretation of the text is considerably different. Most of the lexicon that pertains specifically to Judeo-Arabic texts was consulted in Joshua Blau’s dictionary: Blau, 2006.

20. Unit of mass equal to 4.25 grams.

21. Goitein, 1973: 265, translates: ‘From the day when the usurper occupied the Sus, a general depression set in’.

happens with him [Barūkh] since Ibrahim shifted most of the things that he conveyed.

You asked me about brazilwood: one pound and a half costs one mithqal.

I already wrote a letter to you in which I mentioned that a Jewish money changer who [never] falls short [in helping me] in the collection and payment of debts, asked for a pair of scales and a set of weights whose price he already paid to me in its entirety. I wrote a letter to you about this matter and I also wrote to the scales maker. Do not delay this matter a second.

In regard to the note, I already acknowledged its arrival to you many times.

I do not feel I can describe to you my sadness in Fes. My lamentation was increased by the great disaster, the catastrophe, the news of the death of our rabbi Yosef, the great rabbi –May the spirit of God set him at peace–. I do not feel I can describe it to you. If God had willed that I had stayed in the previous [state], I would have certainly conversed with him and made his acquaintance. I have never experienced more bitter adversity than this.

[Verso]

Take notice that in the alum that I sent to you there are seven bales of excellent quality which have an additional cost of one quarter of a mithqal per qintar²². The price of the rest varies but it was a cheap purchase. Before it went out each qintar increased its value a quarter of a mithqal. Whether you consider that it is preferable to mix it or to sell it individually, you know the market better. As for the containers, sell all of them because each container costs one dirham. The total weight of the alum that belongs to you is forty five qintars and a half, small measure. May God, the exalted, facilitate things.

If I had had the courage I would have sent to you one hundred qintars, but I did not dare since there was a lot of demand for it, as I informed you of all of this.

Be under God's protection and guard. Best regards and greetings and all His protection.

22. Qintal.

I gave you my regards and wrote it on the point of leaving. *May your well-being increase.* On the last ten days of Tevet.

Do not fail writing [letters] to me.

The bearer of my letter to you is the packer, who was present when the alum was packed and can tell you which is the good quality one. I lent him my small saddle. When he arrives take it from him. I will send to you letters with Daud, with all that you need. Shalom.

7. CONCLUSION

Although Goitein read into this letter a sense of impending doom created by the rise of the Almohads in southern Morocco, we must be careful not to read it with the benefit of hindsight. As the translation presented here indicates, the Jewish author was far more concerned about commercial matters and the death of an eminent Jewish scholar in Fes than the Almohads. Although irritated by the fact that the lac market was slow, his only concrete reference to the Almohads is a line describing them as having taken over the Sus. While it is possible to read this line as conveying a negative image of the Almohads, it is equally possible to translate it in a rather more neutral way. The term *khārijī* was a negative term in Arabic but could mean little more than rebel rather than the more loaded term, ‘usurper’ suggested by Goitein. There is little indication that the merchant was aware of the negative effect on the Jewish communities of the region which the rise of the Almohads might have. Although distressed to be stuck in Fes, this could be as much a product of his commercial troubles as of an anti-Jewish atmosphere. In sum this letter provides a starting point from which to reconsider the relationship between the Almohads and the religious minorities in their domains. Its re-reading shows the importance of contextualising and not pre-judging the scattered documents mentioning persecution and the enduring importance of more mundane aspects of life despite the revolutionary religious and political circumstances of this era.

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