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Arabic Documents from Medieval Nubia

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4. OTHER CORRESPONDENCE AND ACCOUNTS

4.1. Correspondents

Letters **28–40** are not sent to the eparch or his office, but rather constitute miscellaneous pieces of correspondence. Most of these are within the Muslim community. Letter **36** appears to be addressed to some kind of Nubian official. Document **41** is a poetic description by the writer of his journey on a boat, presumably on the route between Aswan and Nubia. Documents **42** and **43** are business accounts. We learn from letter **9** that such accounts were enclosed with letters:

A record of the goods and their purchase is enclosed in this letter of mine. It has been inserted with a note of all expenditure. (9r:22–23)

Letters **28–34** are addressed by merchants to high-ranking dignitaries. The addressee of **28** and **29** is identified as an *'amīr* 'commander'. Letter **28** was addressed to the *'amīr* Ḥiṣn al-Dawla. This is likely to be Ḥiṣn al-Dawla ibn al-ʿAsqalānī, who was the writer of letter **13** and the man called Ibn al-ʿAsqalānī who is reported in letter **9** to be at the court of the Nubian king. Letter **29** is addressed to *al-ʿamīr ʿIbrīm*, which presumably means 'the commander at Ibrīm'. The address of this letter is *الى ابريم ان شا الله* 'to Ibrīm, God willing'.

The addressees of letters **30–34** are not explicitly identified as *'amīrs*, but are shown to be dignitaries of some kind by the lofty terms of address in the opening or by their contents, e.g.,

حضرة مولاي حضرة مولاي الشيخ الاجل اطال الله بقاه وادام عزه وعلاءه
وضعف سناه وتمكينه وكبت بالذل حسدته واعداه

‘My honourable lord, the most illustrious elder, may God prolong his life and cause his strength and his ascendancy to endure, and double his splendour and his power, and crush in humility his enviers and his enemies.’ (30r:2–3)

حضرة مولاي الشيخ الاجل اطال الله بقاها وادام تاييدها وعلاها ورفعته
وسناها وسموها وارقتها وكبت بالذل المهين حسدتها واعداه

‘My honourable master, the most illustrious elder, may God prolong his life and cause his strength, his exaltedness, his ascendancy, his splendour, his loftiness and his elevation to endure, and crush in vile humility his enviers and enemies.’ (31r:2–4)

حضرة مولاي وولي واخي على اطال الله بقاها وادام سموها وسناها وتمكينها
وكبت حسدتها وعداها

‘My honourable master, my friend and brother, ‘Alī, may God prolong his life and cause his exaltedness, his splendour and his power to endure, and crush his enviers and enemies.’ (34r:3–4)

In the address of 30, it is stated that the sender was “Maṣṣūr ibn Lāmi‘ ibn Ḥasan, by the order of Kalīfa ibn Ḥasan.” This was, presumably, the son of Lāmi‘ ibn Ḥasan al-Kanzī, who was the sender of several of the letters to eparchs (3, 4, 5, 6, 9, 12). The address also contains the phrase ليصل ابريم ‘May it reach Ibrīm’.

Letters 35–40, as far as can be seen from their surviving addresses and opening formulas, were addressed to people of lower rank or no clear official rank. The recipient of letter 36

appears to have been some kind of Nubian official. The sender of this letter was Lāmi^c ibn Ḥasan al-Kanzī, who, as remarked, was the sender of several of the letters to eparchs. The other letters of this group appear to be correspondence between friends or family members.

As can be seen, therefore, some of the senders of the letters of the group **28–40** were members of the Banū al-Kanz. The Kanz al-Dawla and Kanzī officials are mentioned in the body of a number of the letters of this group, e.g.,

I inform you, my son, that I had sent you the advance consignment immediately after asking the commander, Kanz al-Dawla, may He cause his power to endure, (to dispatch it). (29r:4–5)

So, talk to him and inform him that the author of the letter brought by Ṭāʿī is an elder sent by the judge. He is the deputising son of the Kanzī judge. (30r, margin, 15–17)

If the ruler, may God strengthen his victory, has validly received their poll-tax, through the services of the Pride of the Arabs, Kanz al-Dawla, may God cause his elevation to endure, he knows what the ruler, may God strengthen his victory, has undertaken to support the livelihood of the two from the one who sold them and the ruler's son, the exalted, glorious, noble, rightly-guided and powerful presence, who safeguarded their return, gathered (funds) for supporting their families that could be lived off. (32:2–4)

I, God willing, shall go to ʿUbayd, Kanz al-Dawla, the Greatest of the Progeny, the Noble One. May God, the Mighty and Glorious, preserve the brotherhood that is between us. (33:4)

The correspondents of letters **28–40** are summarised in the table below:

Table 5: Correspondents of letters **28–40**

Sender	Recipient
28 —	—
29 ‘Abd al-Karīm ibn al-Ḥasan	’Abū al-Qāsim Hibat Allāh ibn Muḥammad ibn al-’A‘mā
30 Maṣṣūr ibn Lāmi‘ ibn Ḥasan	’Abū Muḥammad ‘Īsā ibn Muḥammad ibn Ḥasan
31 —	—
32 —	—
33 —	—
34 Muḥammad ibn ‘Ubayd Allāh ibn al-Ḥasan ibn ‘Alī	’Abū al-Ḥasan ‘Alī ibn ’Abū al-Ṭāhir ‘Ubayd Allāh ibn ’Abī Tur‘a
35 ‘Alī ibn Muṣ‘ab	’Abū Finjān ibn Fakka
36 Lāmi‘ ibn Ḥasan al-Kanzī	al-Qarṭamaq Maṣāl al-Farīk
37 Jāmi‘	Ḳalīl, ‘Umar and ‘Uṭmān
38 Muḥammad ibn ’Abū Ḥayy	Danī ibn Kannān
39 —	Bū Ḥasan
40 —	—

4.2. Overview of Subject Matter

The letters belonging to the group of correspondence **28–40** relate to various topics. As expected, the dominant focus in many of the letters is trade, typically with copious references to specific commodities and monetary payments. Some letters allude to relations with the eparch and the Nubian king. Letter **38** describes problems with agricultural cultivation in an *‘iqṭā’* situated on an island and requests the help of the addressee to find more cultivators. The writer says

They... moved the plough from the island and took it to the town of Edfu. (38:8–9)

On the other side of the letter, there is a document of lease (44) that records the lease of a share of the property of Danī ibn Kannān on “the island known as ‘Abū Fāris to the west of the border of Nubia.” This suggests that the island mentioned in 38 was in Egypt close to the border of Nubia.

Several letters are of a personal nature and include expressions of emotion to the writer’s family and friends. The writer of letter 30 describes how he has been in pursuit of two runaway servants, who fled to Nubia.

4.3. Relations with the Nubian King

There are references to relations with the Nubian king in letters 33 and 39. Various passages in letter 33 indicate that the addressee, whose identity is not clear, acted as an intermediary between the writer and the Nubian king, e.g.,

This is so that you be aware of it so that I can have an audience with the king. Please bring us to my lord the king, God willing.... for you are the conveyor of my letter to my father and to my honourable lord the king. (33:5–6)

The addressee is evidently a high-ranking Muslim dignitary, presumably an *ʿamīr*, and not the eparch, who would normally be expected to convey letters to the king. This is shown by passages such as the following in the letter, which indicates that the addressee’s father was an *ʿamīr*:

my father commanded me that when I needed any instructions, we should write to your father, the commander (*ʿamīr*) on the desert river. (33:2–3)

The letter refers to the renewal of the governorship of his father by the Nubian king. Presumably what is intended is the authority for his father to command the operations of the Muslims within Nubia:

I inform you, may God give you life, that the king, may God give him life, has renewed the governorship (*al-wilāya*) of my father. The king said (this) to him when he admitted the man arriving with him. (33, margin, 1)

If this interpretation of 33 is correct, then it suggests that high-ranking Muslim dignitaries had privileged access to the king.

Letter 39 was written by a Muslim merchant who had travelled to Soba to deliver merchandise to the Nubian king and his army, but at the time of writing the king had not yet made an appearance:

If the king had come to us in Soba, we would not have stayed in the country more than a month or two months, but... (We are) with the merchandise that we have for the king and his army, but we have found that there is only little (business) in the land. (39r:8–10)

The precise content of the merchandise for the king's army is not specified. Some letters of the corpus refer to the delivery to the eparch of military equipment including "the helmet (*al-kūda*),... the three scabbards (*qurub*) and the spear (*al-rumḥ*)" (31v:1). Gabriel Gerhards (personal communication) has suggested that the goods that the merchant supplied to the king may have included mail armour. Fragments of this, greatly corroded, have been discovered in excavations in Soba (Daniels and Welsby 1991, figures 65, 109).

The writer of **39** says he misses his family, but does not seem to be the only Muslim visitor to the region, as suggested by the following passage:

Please make an effort to send us your news with whomsoever may happen to travel to the land of Nubia. We would be happy about that and be able to be informed about what he knows about your situation. We are only meeting one another by chance. (39r:7–8)

According to al-ʿAswānī, who visited Nubia in the second half of the tenth century, there was a Muslim quarter in Soba (Kheir 1989, 53). Already al-Yaʿqūbī (d. 292 AH/897–8 AD) states that Muslims visited Soba (*Kitāb al-Buldān*, 174).

Letter **39** is unusual in that it provides the exact date on which it was written:

We arrived in Soba in the last ten days of the month of Ramaḍān in the year four-hundred and eighty-five (1092 AD). I am writing this letter on the tenth day of Shawwāl (18th November 1092 AD). (39r:11–12)

Letter **30** describes how he pursued two runaway servants (*kādimayn*) but turned back at the Nubian border, indicating that Muslims, in principle, required permission to enter Nubia:

When I was notified that they had arrived in his (the eparch's) land, I turned back (from my pursuit of) them. (30r:8)

4.4. Grain for Nubians

Letter **36**, which appears to be addressed to some kind of Nubian official, refers to shipment of grain to Nubia:

The lack of produce this year has not been concealed from you and the condition of the people. No ship would have been sent this year, had I not opened the store and sold to the people of your land. (36r:6–8)

This appears to be referring to a shortage of grain in Nubia. The delivery of grain to Nubia by the Muslims was one of the terms of the *baqt* treaty (cf. al-Maqrīzī, *Kitāb*, I:370). There are several extant Nubian documents containing disbursement orders of grain issued by the eparch (e.g., P. QI II 23, P. QI III 49, P. QI IV 94). These disbursements, which show that the eparch was responsible for the supply of grain, were apparently from public stores or the eparch's personal store (Adams 1996, 226–27).

It is significant that the passage in letter 36 indicates that the grain was sold to the Nubians. As was discussed above (§2.5.4), in the period in which the letters were written, the mutual obligations of Muslims and the Nubians were contracted between individuals, as suggested by a passage in letter 9:

Does not the Master of the Horses think that what has brought me and you together close in the presence of the bishop is that I provide him with provisions and I remain in the service of the king and the protection of your companions? (9r, margin, 11–v:1)

4.5. Trade

The letters of this group of correspondence refer to numerous commodities of trade. These include herbs and spices, clothes and textiles, jewellery, furniture, fuel and military equipment (see §8 for a full list), which, it seems, were intended for shipment to

Nubia. This range of commodities also appears in the accounts 42 and 43.

There are also references in the letters to slaves and slave girls, which would have been received from Nubia. Letter 37 refers to the lack of slaves in Aswan:

As for slaves (*al-raḡiq*), there is nothing in Aswan, or only a few. By God, bring your slave girl with you. (37v:4–6)

Letter 31v:4 mentions the acquisition of a ‘freedman’ (*mawlā*).

Letter 30 refers to what appears to be a business partnership (*šarika*), which includes the writer’s slave boy (*ḡulām*):

Inform the Master of the Horses about the person who is with you and tell him that he (the person with you) is the son of the sister of the judge, Nūr al-Dīn, and he is a member of the partnership (*al-šarika*) of which Nūr al-Dīn is a member. (30r:15–16)

I have brought into partnership (*ʿašraktu*) with him my wife and my slave boy, Ramaḡān and Rāšid, the mariner (*al-baḡḡār*), who is with him and those of the Nubians [] (30r, margin, 6–9)

This letter also mentions a ‘partner’ (*šarīk*), presumably a ‘business partner’:

Moreover, I would not have desisted from travelling to Ibrīm in the current situation, but I did not know whether I had a friend or acquaintance in it (Ibrīm) after you departed from it upriver and Ṭāʿī was absent. So I desisted from coming to the partner (*al-šarīk*), because I did not dare, and, moreover, he could not have helped me (anyhow). (30r:10–11)

Letter **29** refers to the advance consignment of goods (*al-ʿīna*). This appears to have been a delivery of goods that the recipient of the letter had paid for in advance:

I inform you, my son, that I had sent you the advance consignment immediately after asking the commander, Kanz al-Dawla, may He cause his power to endure (to dispatch it), and he sent it with a reliable person indicating that he would meet ʿAbd al-Bāqī and deliver it to him. He went on part of the way, but then returned, and it (the advance consignment) has remained with us until this day. I have (now) sent it to you with ʿAbd al-Bāqī. It contains nine *raṭls*.... I paid to ʿAbd al-Bāqī a sixth of a dīnār apart from the fee for the credit (*ʿujrat al-ʿīna*) that would remain with you of an eighth of a dīnār. (29r:4–9, 17–18)

The letters and accounts use the units of measure *raṭl* (blue wool **34r:8**; herbs and spices, bitumen **43**) and *wayba* (cartham seed **43v:1**).

In the Fatimid period, several *raṭls* were used. The one used for weighing bread and meat was 144 dirhams, i.e., 444.9 g. The one used for spices (called *raṭl fulfulī*, pepper *raṭl*) and also for cotton was 150 dirhams, i.e., 463 g. The one used for flax, which was called *raṭl layṭī*, was 200 dirhams, i.e., 617.96 g. The one used for honey, sugar, cheese and metals, which was called *raṭl jarwī*, was 312 dirhams; i.e., 964 g (Ashtor and Burton-Page 2012). A *wayba* was 15 litres (1/6 of an *ʿirdabb*) or 11.6 kg of wheat (Hinz 1955, 52).

As in the letters to eparchs, in the correspondence **28–40** there is frequent mention of the buying and selling of commodities by monetary transactions.

There are references to the sending of cash payments, which are typically referred to by the term *ḥaqq ‘ayn*, i.e., cash to pay what is due, e.g.,

What I have sent is a cash payment (*ḥaqq ‘ayn*). This is because, when ‘Ubayd Allāh decided to travel to you, I sent this enclosed with it for you quickly in haste. (33:16–17)

In some cases, a commodity is substituted for cash payment, as seen in the following passage. The writer feels obliged to apologise, which indicates that cash was the preferred means of payment:

I have sent with the bearer of the letter a dyed garment (*musaqqa’*) in place of the payment in cash (*ḥaqq ‘ayn*). Please forgive me. (36v:2–3)

Letter 30 refers to the wages (*naḥaqa*) that are due to the writer from the addressee, indicating that there was an employment relationship:

I have been informed that I shall not have my wages from him (the addressee) (*naḥaqtuhu*) until when he returns. (30r:8)

The standard means of transportation of goods by the merchants that is mentioned in this group of letters is the river boat, referred generically as *markab* (pl. *marākib*).

The merchants were typically passengers and the boats were navigated by a crew. This is clear from the poetic description of a voyage on a boat in 41. In letter 30, there is a reference to “Rāšid, the mariner (*al-baḥḥār*)” (30r, margin, 7). Merchants had to pay for transport by boat, as seen in 31:

I asked (them to allow me) to come with them and all that has prevented me is the cost of the transport. It is not appropriate for me to go up (the river) and leave the cost of the transport behind me (i.e., without paying it). (31r:6–8)

The legal document **45** records the lease by two Muslim merchants of a light boat known as a *zallāj* ‘gliding boat’, which appears to have been navigated by them alone.

Passages in letters **31** and **37** indicate that merchants sometimes travelled on land by horse (*ḥiṣān*). Various overland routes were available, the main one from Ibrīm to Aswan being via the oasis of Kurkur in the western desert (Paprocki 2019; Ducène 2007; Davies and Welsby 2020). The journey, however, was evidently very gruelling:

As for other matters, I journeyed beyond al-Marīs and arrived at Aswan. My horse (*ḥiṣānī*) was covered in dust (and exhausted). (31r:4–5)

For God’s sake, encourage one of your group to come to me, for my horse is weak and I cannot come to you. (31v:2–3)

What I wish to inform you of is that I have arrived in Aswan and both I and the horse (*al-ḥiṣān*) are exhausted. (37r:4–5)

Horses were sometimes transported by boat, as seen in the following passage from **37**:

Come only in a boat (*markab*). Do not bring a horse (*faras*). When you come down (the river), take my horse and go back up (the river). (37v:7–9)

The writer of letter **30** indicates that he hired the services of a muleteer:

I hired a muleteer (*mukārī*) and travelled to the person who is his (the commander's?) lieutenant (*kalifatuhu*). (30v:6)

For rapid travel, camels were used, as seen in letter **30**, in which the writer describes his hot pursuit of runaway servants:

After the flight of the servant, I rode a Nubian camel throughout the day and night and I did not rely on any of the servants to undertake the search for them. (30v:2–3)

The Muslim merchants preferred to avoid travelling during the fast of Ramaḍān:

The only reason I did not come to you after you arrived was that I wanted to spend the fast of Ramaḍān with my family. (30v:1)

Letter **34** refers to a caravanserai (*kān*), which appears to have been used by visiting merchants on their travels:

On another matter, I have sent to you by the conveyer of this letter (*mūṣil hādā al-kitāb*) a *raṭl* of blue wool (*ṣūf 'az-raq*) to the caravanserai (*kān*) of Faṭḥ the dyer (*al-ṣabbāḡ*), (34r:7–8)

4.6. The Structure of the Letters

4.6.1. Opening

Letter **35** opens with the abbreviation *بسملة* *basmla* rather than the full formula.

Letter **31**, which is addressed to a dignitary, opens with the present tense verb *اعلم* 'I inform', which is a feature of the letters to eparchs:

اعلم حضرة مولاي الشيخ الاجل

'I inform my honourable master, the most illustrious elder...' (31r:2)

Most letters of this group, however, open with the formula كتابي '(This is) my letter', e.g.,

كتابي الى حضرة مولاي وولي واخي على

'(This is) my letter to my honourable master, my friend and brother, 'Alī.' (34r:3)

كتابي الى اخي وسيدي واعز الخلق على وعندى

'(This is) my letter to my brother and my lord, the dearest person to me.' (35r:2)

كتابي الى الأخ خليل وللاخ عثمان وعمر

'(This is) my letter to my brother Kālīl and my brother 'Uṭmān and 'Umar.' (37r:2–3)

كتابي اليك يا والدي والعزير على وعندى

'(This is) my letter to you, my father, who is dear to me.' (38r:2)

كتابي اليك يا والدي والعزير على

'(This is) my letter to you, my father, who is dear to me.' (39r:2)

Letter 29 opens with the formula كتبت اليك 'I have written to you', which has a similar sense to كتابي اليك:

كتبت اليك يا ولدي العزيز على الامير ابريم

'I have written to you, my son, who is dear to me, the commander (at) Ibrim.' (29r:2)

Letter 36 opens with the report of the arrival of a letter:

كان كتاب الخليفة مثل انكرة سلمه الله وصلنى على يد عبیده

‘The letter of the lieutenant Mašal Ankara, may God keep him safe, has reached me by the hand of his servants.’
(36r:2–3)

Letter 40 opens with a request for news:

اسال عن اخباركم فيسرني سماعي لما اختار منها

‘I (write to) ask about your news, for it would make me happy to hear something of this that I would treasure.’
(40:2)

The addressee is addressed by various titles expressing respect and affection, as seen in the examples above. The titles of the addressees of letters 31 and 34, who are dignitaries, include the term *ḥaḍra* ‘presence’. The kinship terms *والدى* ‘my father’ and *الاخ/اخي* ‘my brother/brother’ are likely metaphorical expressions of endearment. The term *ولدى* ‘my son’ in the opening formula of 29 may be a genuine kinship relationship. Alternatively, it could be a term of endearment to a person who is younger than the sender. The phrase *ولدى* occurs twice in a list of greetings at the end of 34 (v:1, 2), where it seems indeed to be a kinship relationship. It is relevant to note, however, that in 17, which is a letter from the eparch Uruwī, the eparch addresses the Muslim merchant in the opening formula as *ولدى*. Here it is difficult to interpret the word as a genuine kinship relation. There is always the possibility, however, that the orthography is defective and *والدى* ‘my father’ was intended.

The blessings after the addressee’s title are similar to those in the letters of the correspondence with the eparch. The first

formula is ‘may God prolong his/your/their life’ (اطال الله بقاه, اطال الله بقاها, اطال الله بقاهم, اطال الله بقاك, الله بقاها). This is followed by an assortment of further blessings, which vary according to the status of the addressee. Letters to dignitaries typically have blessings expressing wishes for the preservation of the addressee’s high office, e.g.,

اطال الله بقاها وادام سموها وسناها وتمكينها وكبت حسدتها وعداها

‘May God prolong his life and cause his exaltedness, his splendour and his power to endure, and crush his enviers and enemies.’ (34r:3–4)

اطال الله بقاه وادام تاييده وعلاه ورفعته سناه

‘May God prolong his life and cause to endure his strength, his elevation, his ascendance and his splendour.’ (35r:2–3)

4.6.2. Closure

The letters of this group close with the three formulaic elements that are found in the correspondence with the eparch, namely (i) the *ḥamdala*, (ii) blessings on the prophet Muḥammad and (iii) the *ḥasbala*. In 29, only the *ḥasbala* occurs. In 30, the blessings on the prophet are omitted.