



Universiteit
Leiden
The Netherlands

A Confirmed Bachelor Wishes to Marry

Bruning, J.

Citation

Bruning, J. (2020). A Confirmed Bachelor Wishes to Marry. *Papyrus Stories: Everyday Stories From The Ancient Past*. Retrieved from <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/138233>

Version: Not Applicable (or Unknown)

License: [Leiden University Non-exclusive license](#)

Downloaded from: <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/138233>

Note: To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).

Posted on
<https://papyrus-stories.com/2020/09/25/a-confirmed-bachelor-wishes-to-marry/>
September 25, 2020

A CONFIRMED BACHELOR WISHES TO MARRY

Jelle Bruening (Leiden University)

“My first words to you are those of a tradition on the authority the Prophet—God bless him and grant him peace—, which relates that ...”

With these quite unusual words begins *P.Khalili* I 18, an Arabic letter written on papyrus in the late ninth century CE. Arabic letters of this time usually start with religious formulae asking God to bless the addressee, but here the author of this letter has good reasons to deviate from standard practice and impress the addressee with his erudition and piety. By way of this letter, he asks for the hand of the recipient’s daughter, a young woman who, a marriage broker had informed him, “seeks flawlessness”. A draft of this letter, written on the back of an account the author no longer needed, has been preserved. Despite its crossed-out passages and transposed words, the draft’s careful organisation shows that the author has almost finalised the letter. Uniquely, it consists of a short but fascinating autobiography, carefully adapted to the author’s aim: convincing the addressee that he, a middle-aged man, makes a very good son-in-law.

After narrating the partially preserved prophetic tradition and briefly indicating his interest in marrying the addressee’s daughter, the author begins his autobiography, about “who I am, my conduct, and what I am up to”. Not less than eight long lines into the letter the author introduces himself:

“I am Ali, known as Takhshi’s secretary—may God honour you.”

His association with this Takhshi is noteworthy. He refers here to Takhshi ibn Bilaburd, a man originally from Ferghana in Central Asia who had made his career in the army and the administration of Ahmad ibn Tulun. Between 868 and 884, Ibn Tulun ruled Egypt and Syro-Palestine almost independently of the Abbasid caliphs in Baghdad. In Egypt, Takhshi served Ibn Tulun as Chief of Police. Later, Takhshi commanded Tulunid armies in the border region that separated the Abbasid caliphate from the Byzantine empire around Tarsus, where he died ca. 878.

Takhshi’s fame and esteem may explain why Ali chooses to identify himself by his nickname, “Takhshi’s secretary”, rather than by giving his genealogy. For similar reasons, the twelfth-century historian al-Sam‘ani thought it important to indicate that someone had been “Takhshi’s nephew”. But Ali may also mention his famous employer in order to quickly pass over his lack of a genealogy. The nickname may conceal that he had entered Muslim society as a convert, as had his employer’s family. Perhaps he uses his nickname to show his affiliation to the person at whose hands he had converted without explicitly referring to his non-Muslim origins. Alternatively, the nickname may conceal that he is a freed slave. As a sign of their dependent status, slaves usually had no patronymic. In order to secure a place for themselves in Muslim society, manumitted slaves often did not use a patronymic after gaining their freedom but

referred to their patron instead (usually in the form of “the freedman of so-and-so”). Converts and (ex-)slaves did not enjoy the same social standing as freeborn Arab Muslims. Explicit reference to a second-rate membership of Muslim society is surely something Ali wishes to avoid in his letter. Seemingly unable to boast about a prestigious lineage, Ali instead emphasizes his association with Takhshi ibn Bilaburd:

“I do not believe that any of the city’s (i.e., Fustat’s) notable merchants and important inhabitants fail to know me and my conduct. I was Takhshi’s secretary for fourteen years or more until he died in Tarsus—may God have mercy upon him.”

Having indicated that his former employer is no longer alive, Ali feels that he has to mention his current sources of income. After all, the addressee needs to know that he can provide for his daughter. Ali writes that his employer’s death did not sever his ties with the deceased’s family. He manages the estates of Takhshi’s heirs for which he receives remunerations. The account he had written at an earlier occasion on the other side of the papyrus may well have been an obsolete record concerning these estates. Ali further writes that after Takhshi’s death he became a merchant and stopped working as a secretary, “seeking spiritual and material health”. His business surely was lucrative. He amassed enough wealth to buy property in various locations in Fustat, including buildings near the addressee’s house. He now lives off the rents of this property, supplemented by the money he receives from Takhshi’s family.

At this point, the letter touches upon more sensitive subjects:

“I never married. Never has a child been born to me, nor was one born still. I do not have relatives, neither a father, nor a mother, nor a sister.”

Those who did not know him will have raised their eyebrows. Why did a well-off and respected man like him not marry? He explains that he spent his life in the happy company of his parents and siblings and that the situation has now changed.

“But after (my) father, mother, sister and brother had died—may God have mercy upon them—I remained, alone; (a situation) I never experienced before.”

He is aware that this explanation does not suffice. Despite the presence of loved ones around him, his long unwedded life may give the impression that he did not want to engage in a more intimate relationship with a woman because he wished to hide his homosexuality or impotence. After all, a man’s unwillingness or inability to reproduce is a possible source of disgrace: it is one of the few grounds on which an Abbasid-era woman can divorce her husband. Our author therefore quickly indicates that, while his parents and siblings were still alive, he “bought one slave-girl after the other, without marriage ever being on my mind”. Whatever other tasks he assigned to these girls, here he implies that they served him as concubines who satisfied his heterosexual desires.

The addressee will have understood the legal implications of these words, especially Ali’s statement “never was a child born to me, nor was one born still”. Concubinage could lead to a slave-girl’s pregnancy. A female slave became a so-called *umm walad*, “mother of a child”, when her master impregnated her, even when a miscarriage followed or when the child was stillborn. This new legal status gave a female slave many more rights than the average slave enjoyed and fully integrated her into her master’s household. For example, he could no longer sell her or remove her from him in any other way. Like the division of attention in polygamous

households, a married man's intimate relationship with an enslaved woman could cause tensions between him and his wife. Tellingly, Abbasid-era marriage contracts often stipulate that the husband cannot take a concubine or that the wife has the right to sell any of the concubines her husband buys. His addressee, Ali seems to imply, needs not to worry about the relationship between him and the woman he wants to marry. There is nothing serious that ties him to his slave-girls. With these words Ali also indicates that his children with the addressee's daughter will enjoy the first right to his inheritance. After all, he produced no offspring with his slaves, who would have been entitled to a share in his inheritance, and has no other direct relatives.

To make sure his suitable candidacy for becoming the addressee's son-in-law comes across, he ends his autobiographical account with the following emphatic passage:

“If I had agreed to marry into a family of those merchants in the city who [...] on the condition that the bride-price be paid (for me) and my wishes be fulfilled, I could have given my word many times. They desired that because of their knowledge of our (i.e., my) beautiful way of living and good conduct.”

This passage also serves as a bridge to the letter's last lines, in which Ali expresses his esteem for the addressee. That he declined earlier proposals and wishes to marry the addressee's daughter shows that he regards the addressee highly. In fact, he claims it is the latter's reputation, his “quest for manliness and valour and what has been described to me of (his) beautiful conduct”, that led him to asking for his daughter's hand—not the woman herself or the marriage broker's description of her! After some pious phrases he rounds this unique letter off with a polite request:

“I wait for your answer. So, inform me—may God honour you—about your opinion so that I may become familiar with it, God willing.”

Technical details

Provenance: Egypt, probably Fustat

Date: After early 276 AH/889 CE (based on the dates on the account on the recto).

Language: Arabic

Collection: Nasser D. Khalili Collection of Islamic Art, London, UK

Designation: *P.Khalili I 18*, *P.Khalili II 54* verso (see [The Checklist of Arabic Documents](#))

Bibliography: Werner Diem (1993), “Philologisches zu den Khalili-Papyri”, *Wiener Zeitschrift für die Kunde des Morgenlandes* 83, pp. 47-48; Werner Diem (1994), “Philologisches zu den Khalili-Papyri II”, *Wiener Zeitschrift für die Kunde des Morgenlandes* 84, pp. 59-82; Geoffrey Khan (1993), *Bills, Letters and Deeds: Arabic Papyri of the 7th to 11th Centuries* (Oxford: Oxford University Press), pp. 107-9 (no. 54 verso); ‘Abd al-Karim ibn Muhammad al-Sam‘ani (1988), *al-Ansab*, ed. ‘Abdallah ‘U. al-Barudi (5 vols., Beirut: Dar al-Jinan), vol. 1, p. 435.