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A merchant reports: flax trade in an Arabic papyrus

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A Merchant Reports: Flax Trade in an Arabic Papyrus (*)

PL I/60

23.7 × 19.2 cm

IV A.H./X A.D.
Provenance unknown

Nice light brown papyrus with the original cutting lines in place on all but the left side. The top right corner is broken off as well as a narrow strip on the left of the papyrus resulting in a loss of 1-3 letters in each line. There is a large blank margin at the top of the papyrus and a smaller one on the bottom and right sides. The letter is complete. It is written in black ink with a medial thick pen perpendicular to the papyrus fibres. There are few diacritical dots used. *Shīn* and *sīn* occasionally have an oblique stroke over them (l. 3 *fa-sarratnī*; l. 4 *bi-iḥsān*; l. 7 *shā'a*; *salāman*), but is otherwise written as a horizontal line (e.g. l. 1 *bi-sm*; l. 5 *al-ḥisāb*; l. 5 *bi-tafṣīr*). Some unconventional ligatures are used especially in the opening and closing greetings, but also throughout the letter (e.g. l. 3 *fa-sarratnī*; l. 4 *akramaka*; l. 7 *in shā'a*; *'alayka minnī*). The back of the letter was reused to write an account using Greek letters as numerals which might be related to the letter on the *recto*. The address of the letter appears at the top of the *verso* written parallel to the fibres.

The writing generally shows the cursive tendencies characteristic of documents of the 3rd A.H./9th A.D. and 4th A.H./10th A.D. centuries. There are some indications, however, to date this letter to the 4th A.H./10th A.D. century. First, the angle between the horizontal and vertical features of the script in this letter

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I am grateful to Rosario Pintauro for bringing this text to my attention and for allowing me to publish it here.

is rather wide, comparing well with that of the writing in letters from the 4th A.H./10th A.D. century (1). The hanging baseline (the angle between the horizontally oriented main writing direction and the line formed by the obliquely placed individual letters) varies between 25° and 45° in several words, although many words also show no hanging baseline at all. The script angle also shows a variation between 105° and 110° pointing to a later date for the letter. Another indication that we are dealing here with a later document is the expression “*to all those whom you care about many greetings*” (l. 7 ‘*alā jamī‘ man taḥūṭuhu ‘ināyatuka al-salām kathīran*) which is only attested in paper letters from the 4th A.H./10th A.D. century. Finally, the way the Greek letters used as numerals are written on the text on *verso* – in a very cursive form influenced by Arabic-writing scribes and almost unrecognisable as Greek letters – also suggests a later date (2).

The sender of the letter, whose name is mentioned in the address on the *verso* as ‘Ubayd Allāh, relates several commercial transactions concerning the sale of flax involving also other individuals. The sender starts by reporting that he has taken care of the requests that the addressee, possibly called Abū al-Faḍl as mentioned on the *verso* of the papyrus, addressed in a previous letter – he has forwarded flax to a certain Abū Ishāq son of Abū al-Aṣḡagh, who informed the addressee about the account based on the price the sender received for flax sold for the addressee. The sender has also forwarded Abū Ishāq son of Abū al-Aṣḡagh part of the price received for five *qinṭārs* of flax which have been transferred to a certain Fīf, the Arabic rendition of the popular Coptic name Phib. The remainder of the price, ‘Ubayd Allāh will follow after the sender has sold an additional load of flax.

The *verso* contains the address of the letter on *recto* mentioning the name of the addressee as Abū al-Faḍl (?) followed by eulogies and the sender as ‘Ubayd Allāh. Underneath a short account appears listing household goods (candles or wax, spices, Henna and papyrus rolls?) with prices written with Greek letters as numerals. Based on the amounts involved these seem to be the object of commercial transactions. The hand-writing of the letter on *recto* and the note on *verso* is very similar (see especially final ‘*ayn* in r 8 *ma‘a* and v 3 *shama‘* and the writing of *al-thaman* in r 7 and v 3) suggesting the sender wrote

(1) E.M. GROB, *Documentary Arabic Private and Business Letters on Papyrus. Form and Function, Content and Context* (Arch. Pap., Beihefte 29), Berlin - New York 2010, pp. 166-170.

(2) I am grateful to Federico Morelli, who has reviewed the Greek letters used as numerals on the *verso* even though the writing and period fall far beyond his expertise.

both. This makes it likely that the *qinṭār* of an unnamed project worth one *dīnār* and one *qīrāt* that was dispatched with a certain Barsam (?) refers to one of the shipments of flax mentioned in the letter on *recto*. It also suggests that the specification of the expenses that the addressee has received, according to the sender (*r* 5), is the one written on the *verso*.

Both the letter on *recto* and the note on *verso* mention a number of other individuals who are involved in the trading activities discussed and it seems possible to identify their relationship in general terms. ‘Ubayd Allāh uses many blessings for Abū al-Faḍl throughout his letter to him and extends greetings to the sender’s father (see commentary to line 8) pointing both at a degree of familiarity and respectful reference. ‘Ubayd Allāh addresses Abū al-Faḍl with an imperative, albeit followed by a polite blessing. The kind of tasks ‘Ubayd Allāh is asked to take care off for Abū al-Faḍl suggests that the sender is in a relationship of dependency vis-à-vis the addressee. The two Christian Egyptians who are mentioned by name (Phib and Barsam?) in the letter and note on *verso* seem to be the ones responsible for the actual handling of the goods, keeping and transporting flax, presumably at the order of ‘Ubayd Allāh. Abū Ishāq b. Abū al-Aṣḡagh (*r* 5) who receives a shipment of flax from Abū al-Faḍl’s stock, on the other hand, seems to be Abū al-Faḍl’s trading partner.

Recto

1. بسم الله الرحمن الرحيم
2. اكرمك الله واطال بقاءك واعزك بطاعته وتقواه واتم نعمه عليك وزاد في احسانه اليك
3. وعندك برحمته كتابي اليك اكرمك الله وانا بحال عافية والحمد لله على ذلك كثيرا وصل الي كتابك وسرتلني
4. سلامتك تمم الله ذلك باحسان وفهمت ما ذكرت اكرمك الله من بيع الكتان الاول وانفاذه
5. الى ابي اسحق بن ابي الاصبع فقد اوصلت ذلك اليه وكتبت اليك بتفسير الحساب فاعلم ذلك
6. اكرمك الله وقد اوصلت اليه من ثمن الخمسة قناطير التي مع فيف عشرة الدنانير وانا ابيع الكتان والنفذ
7. اليه باقي الثمن ان شاء الله عليك مني سلاما كثيرا وعلى جميع من تحوطه عنايتك السلم كثيرا
8. وعلى ولدك اكرمك الله السلم كثيرا مع الكتاب بخبرك وحالك وحوايحك فانك تسرني بذلك
9. اكرمك الله واطال بقاءك واعزك بطاعته وتقواه واتم نعمه عليك وعندك

Diacritical dots

- (1 سم (3 كتابي ؛ عافيه (4 فهمت (5 الاصبع؛ اوصلت؛ اليه (6 اوصلت؛ فيف

Verso

address

لاي الفضل؟ اكرمه الله بطاعته من عبيد الله

1. لاني محمد سالم والبيت عشرين رطل
2. الذي خرج مع رسم α قنطر بدینر وقیراط α رقوق العد. / . . . \ وبلغ الثمن $\alpha\beta\eta$
3. وجرى الثمن $\alpha\beta$ وشمع وممن α وحوائج $\beta\eta$ وسفر وایزار وفلتي حنا
4. في نصف

Recto

- 1 *In the name of God, the Merciful, the Compassionate!*
- 2 *May God honour you, prolong your life, strengthen you through obedience towards and fear of Him, complete His blessings on you, and augment His beneficence to you*
- 3 *and with you through His mercy. I write (my letter) to you, may God honour you, while I am healthy, thank God greatly for that. Your letter reached me and I was pleased*
- 4 *that you are healthy, may God complete this for you in kindness. I understood what you, may God honour you, mentioned concerning the sale of the first flax and the dispatch [of it]*
- 5 *to Abū Ishāq son of Abū al-Asbagh. Well, I have already sent that to him and I wrote you explaining the account, so know that,*
- 6 *may God honour you. I have sent him of the price of the five qinṭārs which are with Fīf (i.e. Phib) ten dīnārs. And I will sell the flax and I will [dispatch*
- 7 *to him the remainder of the price, God willing. Many greetings from me to you, and to all those whom you care about many greetings,*
- 8 *and to your father, may God honour him, many greetings. (Send us) your letter reporting on your news, condition and your needs, for you would please me by doing so.*
- 9 *May God honour you, prolong your life, strengthen you through obedience towards and fear for Him and may he complete His blessings on you and with you.*

Verso

*To Abū al-Faḍl (?) may God honour him through obedience to Him
From 'Ubayd Allāh*

- 1 *To Abū Muḥammad Sālīm and the household twenty raṭl*
- 2 *That which went out with Barsam is 1 qinṭār for 1 dīnār and 1 qīrāt; 1 papyrus rolls of . . . \ . . . / and the price amounts to 1 ¹/₂ ¹/₈*

- 3 The price of 1 $\frac{1}{12}$ was spent; plus candles and . . . 1; plus miscellaneous $\frac{1}{2}$
 $\frac{1}{12}$; plus . . . and spices and two jars of henna
 4 in

Recto

- 2-3. *Zāda fī iḥsānihi ilayka wa- 'indaka* is attested regularly in 3rd A.H./9th A.D.-century letters, but the exact meaning remains a bit unclear. Editors have translated the expression 1) literally: «und vermehre sein Wohltun gegen Dich und bei Dir» (A. GROHMANN, *Einige bemerkenswerte Urkunden aus der Sammlung der Papyrus Erzherzog Rainer an der Nationalbibliothek zu Wien*, «Arch. Orient.» 18, 1950, pp. 80-119, no. 18, 9), 2) without acknowledgement of the presence of two prepositions «möge er (i.e. God) Dir noch mehr sein Wohlwollen erweisen!» (P.Heid.Arab. II 53, 2; P.Berl.Arab. II 61, 2) or 3) interpreting the second preposition as “those with you”: «et augmente en bonté pour toi et les tiens» (P.Marchands II 28, 2; Y. RĀĞIB, *Lettres arabes I*, «Ann. Islamol.» 14, 1978, pp. 15-35, nos. 15a, 2-3; 18b, v 3).
4. For *tammama allāh dhālīka bi-iḥsāni*, see in a 3rd A.H./9th A.D.-century letter: *tammama allāh laka al-ni'ma* (J. DAVID-WEILL, *Papyrus arabes du Louvre*, «Journ. Econ. Soc. Hist. Or.» 14, 1971, pp. 1-24, no. 19, 7, with a correction by W. Diem in P.Berl.Arab. II, p. 272). Related expressions appear in other letters: *as'aluhu* (= God) *tamām dhālīka 'alaynā wa- 'alayka bi-iḥsān*, whereby *bi-iḥsān* is translated as: «wohlwillend» (P.Berl. Arab. II 72, 7, 2nd A.H./8th A.D.); *sa'altuhu an yutimma ni'amahu 'alayka bi-iḥsān*, where *bi-iḥsān* is translated as: «par bonté» (P.Marchands II 35, 9, 3rd A.H./9th A.D., provenance Fayyūm).
- The meaning of *al-kattān al-awwāl* might refer to the first sale or harvest of the flax. Alternatively, it might have an internal meaning in the correspondence between sender and addressee referring to the first batch of flax sold for the addressee.
- The last word on this line should have a meaning of “transportation, conveyance, transfer”. *Infādhihi* seems to fit the *rasm* visible before the papyrus breaks off where we can read *alif*-tooth-*fā' qāf-lām/alif*, and the expected meaning. This word occurs frequently in papyri related to commercial transactions with the meaning transporting, sending, dispatching.
5. *Ishāq* is written with the *qāf* extending below the line, but it seems the best reading. The reading *katabtu* rather than *kataba* – despite the *rasm* showing two rather than three teeth – is based on the interpretation of the relation between the text on *recto* and *verso* as having been written by the same sender. In this sentence he refers to having produced a specification of the addressee's account, including all payments received or made for different items. If we read the verb as *kataba*, it is the recipient of the flax delivery Abū Ishāq b. Abū al-Asbagh mentioned at the beginning of this line who has sent the specified account to the addressee. The *alif* of the article in *al-ḥisāb* is written very small and slightly above the line. The word before *al-ḥisāb* is not clearly readable, with the tooth of the *yā'* written high above the line. The use of *tafsīr* to refer to an account or overview of expenses compares well with the header of an overview of amounts of wheat that have left a barn (A. GROHMANN, *From the World of Arabic Papyri*, Cairo 1952, p. 160). In other 3rd A.H./9th A.D.-century papyrus letters mention is made of clarifying bills or calculations using the verb *fassara*: “I have already explained what has accrued to you

and the total amount of that is . . .” (*qad kuntu fassartu laka mā šāra ilyka wa-jumla dhālika* . . ., P.Khalili I 25, 5-7); “him will be explained the price of this fabric from Ḥasan and Ja‘far” (*qad fassira thaman hādhā al-khaysh min Ḥasan wa-Ja‘far*, P.Marchands I 5, 10 with correction by W. DIEM, *Neues zur arabischen Papyrologie*, «Islam» 64, 1987, pp. 272-277, part. p. 274); “and inform me of its amount, and what each of us has to pay, what is obligatory on us concerning provisions, what we have to pay of land tax, so that I receive this with a clear commented on explanation, God willing” (*wa-‘arrifnī mablaghahu wa-mā yuṭayyiru li-kull wāḥid minnā wa-mā yalzamuhu min al-mūna wa-mā ta‘ayyana ‘alayhi min al-kharāj li-aqifa ‘alā dhālika mufasssaran mubayyanan mashrūhan in shā’a allāh*, W. DIEM, *Philologisches zu arabischen Dokumenten der Österreichischen Nationalbibliothek in Wien*, «Wien. Zeits. Kunde Morg.» 101, 2011, pp. 75-140, no. 5, 3-5).

6. Flax is generally measured in weight of *qinṭārs* and *raṭls*. Sometimes it is sold in bundles (*ḥuzma*). The use of the article on the numeral but not on the amount counted like here in *al-khamsa qanāṭir* is attested in other papyri: cf. *al-khamsa danānīr* (P.Vente 14, 4, 632^p-800^p; P.Marchands V/1, 1, 3rd A.H./9th A.D.); *al-khamsa darāhim* (D.S. MARGOLIOUTH, E.J. HOLMYARD, *Arabic Documents from the Monneret Collection*, «Islamica» 4, 1930, pp. 249-271, no. 1a, 16); *al-khamsa fadādīn* (P.Philad.Arab. 31 II, 15, dated 268 A.H./881/882 A.D.). Conversely, I have not found instances where the cardinal number does not have the article, but the counted amount does. *Danānīr* is written very cursorily. In an order of delivery from the 3rd-4th A.H./9th-10th A.D., a guard called Fīf receives one *dīnār* (A. GROHMANN, *From the World*, cit., p. 151); in another order of delivery dated 208 A.H./823 A.D. Fīf son of Mīnā is ordered to execute the delivery (A. GROHMANN, *ibidem*, p. 142); a 3rd A.H./9th A.D.-century account mentions a Mīna son of Fīf (P.Prag. Arab. Beilage I, v 15). The name transliterated in Arabic as Fīf corresponds to the very common Egyptian name Phib, referring to the holy monk credited with the foundation of the monastic complex of Bāwīt.

The last word on this line is again a verb referring to transportation, probably a form of the same verb *anfadhā* used in line 4: *wa-unfidhu*.

7. For *‘alayka minnī salāman kathīran*, see *ablighhumā minnī salāman kathīran* (K.M. YOUNES, *Joy and Sorrow in Early Muslim Egypt: Arabic Papyrus Letters: Text and Content*, PhD Dissertation, Leiden University 2013, no. 14, l. 13, 2nd A.H./8th A.D.). *‘alā jamī‘ man taḥūṭuhu ‘ināyatuka al-salām kathīran* is attested in paper letters from the 4th A.H./10th A.D. to 7th A.H./13th A.D., but not in papyrus letters. Cf. P.Cair.Arab. 327, 10 (with corrections in W. DIEM, *Philologisches zu arabischen Dokumenten. II. Dokumente aus der Sammlung der Egyptian Library in Kairo*, «Zeits. Arab. Ling.» 56, 2012, pp. 27-78); CPR XXXII 4, 11; P.Vind.Arab. I 11, 13, all from the 4th A.H./10th A.D.
8. *Wālidika* is written with a defective long *a*: cf. S. HOPKINS, *Studies in the Grammar of Early Arabic: Based Upon Papyri Datable to Before 300 A.H./912 A.D.*, Oxford 1984, §9.

Verso

The name of the addressee is difficult to read. It starts clearly with *li-Abī* and the name following seems to start with the article ending in *lām*; *al-Faḍl* seems a plausible reconstruction.

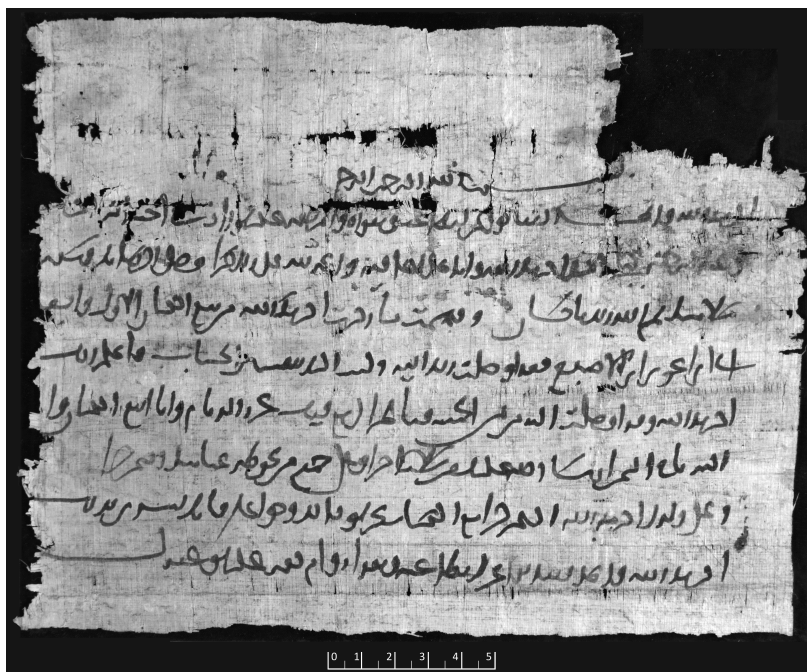
1. This first line stands apart from the remainder of the text on the *verso* in terms of script,

position on the writing surface and content. The line starts further to the left than the subsequent three lines, almost as if it functions as a heading. Abū Muḥammad and his household have received twenty *ratl* of an undefined product. Contrasting with the amounts that are mentioned in the next three lines, the number is written out in words in this line, while in the next lines Greek letters with numerical value are used.

2. Many accounts list items followed by Greek letters used as numerals but without indicating the unit of counting or monetary unit intended: cf. A. GROHMANN, *From the World*, cit., p. 135; A. GROHMANN, *Texte zur Wirtschaftsgeschichte Ägyptens in arabischer Zeit*, «Arch. Orient.» 7 (1935), pp. 437-472: pp. 437-447, nos. 19 and 23, dating to the 3rd-4th A.H./9th-10th A.D. The verb *kharaja* with a meaning of expenditures made is attested more often in accounts: cf. P.Hamb.Arab. I 12c and 13c, 9, dated after 294 A.H./906/907 A.D., provenance al-Ashmūnayn; P.Khalili I 6 v right column 7 and 11; A. GROHMANN, *Texte zur Wirtschaftsgeschichte*, cit., no. 19, 2, 2nd-3rd A.H./8th-9th A.D. I was unable to identify the name following the preposition *ma'a*. A tooth followed by *rā'zayn*, *sīn/shīn* and final *mīm* can be read. The reading *ruqūq*, rolls of papyrus or parchment, is not certain and the word following cannot be identified. The Greek numeral at the end of this line seems to have an additional sign between the *alpha* and *ēta*, perhaps the sign for $\frac{1}{2}$.
3. The verb *jarā* occurs more often in accounts and in relation to financial transactions, referring to expenditures or payments occurring, but the expression *jarā al-thamān* I have not come across. The first numeral on this line consists of an *alpha* plus a fraction. The fraction consists of two letters, seemingly the same as those appearing in the third numeral in this line. Comparing the two numerals Federico Morelli suggests reading *īḥ*, although the Greek letters are written in a very different manner compared to earlier shapes. The *wāw* in the listing of goods seems to function as a way to indicate that amounts are added to each other. The word following *shama'*, “wax or (wax) candles”, is unclear: one can read *mīm*-tooth-*mīm*-final *nūn*. *Shama'* are regularly attested in accounts especially related to household expenditures (e.g. P.Hamb.Arab. I 12c and 13c, 10, dated after 294 A.H./906/907 A.D., provenance al-Ashmūnayn; A. GROHMANN, *From the World*, cit., p. 156 l. 4, 4th A.H./11th A.D. c.). Several contemporary accounts have a heading of undefined *ḥawā'ij*: cf. A. GROHMANN, *Texte zur Wirtschaftsgeschichte*, cit., no. 19, 3, 6, 9, 11, dating to 238 A.H./852/853 A.D.; P.Hamb.Arab. I 12c + 13c, 2, after 294 A.H./906/907 A.D., provenance al-Ashmūnayn; A. GROHMANN, *From the World*, cit., p. 135, l. 21). The Greek numeral consists of the sign for $\frac{1}{2}$ plus a fraction, seemingly the same that appears at the beginning of this line, namely *īḥ* or, less likely, *κδ*. *Qullatay ḥinnā'* seems a possible reading as the combination with spices or pits (*abzār*) is not entirely unlikely. The word before *abzār* should refer to a similar product.
4. The first word on this line seems to be read as the preposition *fī* with a back-bending final *yā'*, but the second word I was not able to find a solution for.

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Recto



Verso

