A Handbook and Reader of Ottoman Arabic

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Arabic letters concerning personal and business matters abound in the pre-Ottoman period, but become extremely scarce afterwards. Since the early 19th century, the Forschungsbibliothek Schloss Friedenstein, Gotha (Germany) has held seven volumes of merchant letters dating from the middle of the 18th century until 1806. Numbering more than 1,600 letters, this repository seems to be the largest one preserved from the period.

The writers and addressees are both Christian and Muslim and examples of both will be given here. There are some overlaps, but in general the Christian letters cover a network of merchants of Syrian origin that operated between Cairo, Alexandria, Damietta, Jaffa, Jerusalem, and Damascus, with mentions of further extensions to Istanbul, Cyprus, and Rhodes. The letters by Muslims (with few Christian examples) belong to several networks of Muslim merchants centred in Cairo. In the case presented here, the network revolves around two brothers Abū Qaṣīṣa and letters are exchanged primarily between Jedda, Suez, and Cairo.
The language of the Christian network is marked by unequivocal embracing of the colloquial. Its features include: loss of gender distinction, plural, or dual; replacement of emphatic consonants with their unemphatic counterparts (ط > ض; ص > ض; ض > ط; ز > ظ; يبكل خير → ضراهم), but also occasionally the reverse (e.g., دراهم → ضراهم); case endings lost or wrong (بكل خيرا → ضراهم); negation of all tempi with lam followed by a verb in perfect tense (lam kān) or even negation with lam with no verb at all (lam huwa bāqī); imperfect verb forms are often prefixed with a ب. The lexicon includes not only several words of Italian and French origin (بوليصه), but also several particles of colloquial usage (šū, layš, minšān). The orthography changes with the individual scribes, but some features are prevalent: tā’ marbūṭa becomes tāʾ and vice versa; plene writing of long vowels that are regularly omitted (ذالك); the ʾalif of the article is dropped when the initial hamza is silent (بسلامة); individual words can be joined into one when contracted in speech (قيلله = qul lahū > qillu). The letters of Abū Qaṣīṣa’s network are generally more in line with the grammatical and orthographic rules of written Arabic although any of the aforementioned phenomena may occur.

The address differs between the two networks in layout and sometimes wording. Those from the Red Sea and Egypt are written in one line at the top of the verso side. The Syrians write several lines at the centre of what was the outer side of the folded letter. The same can be observed from other contemporary letters from the Ottoman Empire north of Egypt. This formal feature appears to mark a general division between letters written in
Greater Syria and north of it (of which the Syrian merchant diaspora is an Egyptian extension to the south) on the one side, and those coming from Egypt, the Arabian Peninsula, and further south, on the other.

Transcription

**MS Gotha orient. A 2837, doc. 1**

Fransîs Bernard Dumyān to his cousin Giovanni Rūk / Rocco and his maternal uncle Yūsuf Anṭūn Tarjumān Talāmās / Giuseppe Talamas in Damietta. The writer’s unnamed sister¹ is also mentioned in the internal address.

The details of the matter reported in this latter are not always clear to me.² Yet the contours of dramatic events revolving around two fierce legal cases taking place in Rosetta are evolving. They first pitted Fransîs against a powerful consul, while he believes he has the whole community of consuls on his side, securing documents from as far as Istanbul. The second case is that of a murder that had taken place in the Frankish quarter and sees the consuls united against the city’s governor, who is unable to present the murderer.

¹ Theresia, according to other letters.
² The matter is taken up again in Forschungsbibliothek Gotha, Ms. orient. A 2837, no. 27 (dated Ṣafar 30, 1219), which this one must precede, since the murder is mentioned as an immediate case here unlike in no. 27.
محترمي امانه مرسله بالخير

MSig. Guiseppe Talamas Inca-
ricato dell’Agenzia d Spagna opera
altiss. Giovanni Rocco in
Damietta

Recto

1. حفظهم البازي تعالى
2. امين
3. جناب حضرة شقيقةنا المصونة وابن عمنا سنيور جوانى وخالنا سنيور يوسف
4. غب عروض الشوق اليكم مع تزايد الاشتياق لجنابكم المعروض لبين اباديكم
5. هو انه قبله تقدم لكم مكتوب عن سكت راشيد تحت يد الخواجه بطروشي وهي
6. عرفتكم
7. بوصولنا لاجل الاطممان انشا الله تعالى يكون وصلكم وانتم باخير الان
8. نخبر جنابكم بخصوص القنصل حين لقا كافت القنصل شادين على يدنا بلحق
9. والطريقة لسبب لم يمشو مثله على طمع الفلوس فلمذكرو رذ جواب للجميع
10. اني صحيح رسلت وراه انه يحضر ولاكن الان لم لي عندنا ولا له عند
11. فطلبنا للشرع عند [ ] ففصل الذي هو يريدو بحضور كانت القنصل
12. لم كان بقبل ورجل البابان انشا عرف حاله لمو يافي لسبب ذلك معلط وقصده ياك العرابون ..ه 3 (نصف) خلاف المصاريف ولاكن انشا الله
13. تعالى
14. ووجود المحبين منبطر عليه بوصط كروفه كان كافت القنصل ختمو لنا الاوراق
15. أيضا الروية افنج ورم ووجهناهم بسلامت الله تعالى الى كروفه للمستنود اول ( )
16. ولجل الابخ توجه أيضا والد الاب المحترم ايوبنا دانونيسيوس وكيل الروم فجنابه
17. سلمهم لوالده وايضاً بمكتوب منه للبرينشبه حكم ما ردنا نحن فنساله تعالى
18. دعاكم فرنسس
19. ممد
20. برا دميان
Righthand Margin

ان يطول بعمر المحبين فرحا دااما تكون مطمئنين
علينا ولم يكن لكم علينا فكرة بوجه من الوجه
ومعذرة كله بعزمك ايمام عند القناع والمحبين نسأله تعالى ان يقضدنا [كذا] علي مكافحت
الجميع ورد شملنا وياكم بجيران خاطر عن قريب
بجاه والدت السيده وابنها الحبيب وكافته
الفديسين امين

الآن رسلنا الكباري الى راشيد لأجل
يحصل محضر المركب من بترو اتراماني
عن بيد الخواجة روشيني انا ارجوكم
ترسلو لنا الورقة الذي حضرت من
اسلامبول بختم كنثليت [السبع]
جوزر ومكتوب فيها حساب
محضر المركب وتجدادوها بين
الأوراق الفرنجة لان الكباري
يسهاجه الزوج ارسلها حالا
مع قوطكم الجرح الزروع بنوع
الابن الى عليه السبابطا

وجه دوشك من الصوفر عم 1 واربع
وجهه امخدات بلونو ام خمسة

3 This short-lived Republic of the Seven Islands or Septinsular Republic comprised several islands off the coast of modern Greece in the Ionian Sea, among them Corfu, mentioned in the letter. It was established by a joint Ottoman-Russian military intervention that took the territories from the French and it existed between 1800 and 1807, after which they were first annexed by Napoleon and then transformed into a British protectorate from 1815 to 1864.
ذالك ما ارجو منكم مع الدعا

Top Margin

دايماً وسلامنا للجميع كل حي

ومنا بقبل (...) كافة الأمهات جميعاً جناب

ال كبير ووكيل القدس والسنايبي والاب عيسا جارنا

ودايم نسالهم الدعا خط عجله وعمراكم بطول

ورمز سلامنا للجناح الخواجه باصلي فخر والخواجه

 وغيرت المحترمين

Verso

1. يستولي
2. قبلاً واحد اجر دلي قوس ترجمان اسويسيا
3. ونابولي بلبرانيا ومساعدة قتل اخرده دفنه
4. ورسولاً كافت الفنال للحاكم وطلبو منه الرجل حنا
5. شنقوا بحارت الأفرنج للحاكم فقتله عليه ولم يجد فقال
6. لهم بسلهمم واحد اجدلي غيرو وقتلوا ببقا واحد
7. قدم واحد قلم قبل ولوحد تاريخه يفتشو علي الذي
8. قتل وبادين يعمر بوابات ويعملون حارت الأفرنج
9. لوحدها فقامت اهل البلد لم رادوا فازم انهم يحررو
10. لسعادات الباشة ومستزرين الحجاب وعمالين يبنو
11. بلبس وكل يوم سو خرو على أولاد البلد فربنا
12. يجعل النهاية خير لان الحال واقف على الجمع وكل
13. شيء غالي يكون معلومهم الرجا من ابن عم أبو سندر جواني
14. إذا راد ولقا مناسب بصرف يعفر بطفلكم انسب
15. من هنا ومن راشيد وانما مصر لم يعرف الاسعار
16. وانما الحرب دايمًا حد ذات كفاية دعم
Translation

With His blessing
May it arrive at the harbour Damietta and be expedited to the hand of his excellency our cousin the master
Juwānī Rūk and our maternal uncle the master Yūsuf Anṭūn Tar-jumān Talāmās,
the esteemed, safe and sound.

Recto

(1) May the Exalted protect them!
(2) Amen.
(3) [To] his Excellency our sister, our cousin Signor Juwānī, and our maternal uncle Signor Yūsuf, the esteemed.
(4) After expressing the longing for you with exceeding yearning for your Excellency, what we have to put before you (5) is this: you previously received a letter regarding the mint of Rāshīd by hand of the master Baṭrūshī, in which we informed you (6) about our arrival to put you at ease. God willing, it reached you and you are fine. Now (7) we want to report to your Excellency on the issue of the consul when he found all the consuls in support of us (8) because, unlike him, they were not driven by greed for money. Said consul answered to the crowd: (9) “It is true that I sent after him so that he would appear. But right now I have no claim against him, as he has none against me. (10) We had cited him to court at [...] a consul who wanted him in the presence of all the consuls, (11) which he refused.” It is clear that this is a man who knows his ways and won’t stay blemished because of that. (12) His intention is to pocket the down payment—533 ½
[piasters and] 3 [miṣriyya] plus expenses—but—God willing—(13) with the presence of loving friends, he will be thwarted, with the mediation of Corfu. Because all the consuls have sealed papers for us, (14) also the heads of the monasteries of the Europeans (Ifranj) and the Orthodox (Rūm). We delivered them to Corfu for the Senate first [...]. (15) And for good luck, the father of the esteemed Father Diyūnīsiyūs, guardian of the Orthodox, His Excellency (16) directed them to his father, too. And also a letter from him to the Principe according to our answer. We ask God (17) Praying for you Fransīs (18) ...
(19) Barnā Dumyān (20)–(21) in the year 1219.

Righthand Margin

(22) to prolong the lives of our friends. Please, always be at ease (23) about us, and don’t spare a thought on us. (24) We spend our days being invited, sometimes with the consuls, sometimes with (25) the traders. About the friends we ask God to enable us to satisfy (26) them all and that he would unite us in good spirit soon, (27) through the power of the Mother of the Lord, her beloved son, and all (28) the saints. Amen.

(29) Now: we sent al-Kunbārī to Rāšīd so that (30) he would get the ship’s manifest from Pitrū Atrāmārnī (31) by way of the master Rūşītī. I ask you only (32) to send the paper that arrived from (33) Islāmbūl with the seal of the consul’s office of the Seven (34) Islands, as well as a letter with the account (35) of the ship’s manifest. You will find it between (36) the franjī
(Italian or in Latin characters?) papers. (This is) because al-Kunbārī (37) (might?) forget it. Please send it immediately (38) together with: a (قوطم?) of blue broadcloth belonging to (39) the dress on which are the shoes; (40) and 1 kind of (دوشك?) from (الصوفر?); and four (41) or five coloured pillows.

(42) This is what I ask from you, with my constant prayers,

**Top Margin**

(43) and greetings to everyone, each (44) by their names! Also to the brother Yaʿqūb Ǧaṭṭās. (45) And from us (…) all the mothers kiss (the hands of) His Excellency (46) Our Father Bāṣīlī and His Excellency Our Father Yūsuf and al-Bītrīyū, the great (47) guardian, and the guardian of Jerusalem, and al-Sānāḥītū, and Father ʿĪsā, our neighbour. (48) We always ask for their intercession. This is written hastily! May your life be prolonged! (49) Extensive greetings to His Excellency the master Bāṣīlī Ǧaḥr and the master (50) ʿAyrūt, the esteemed.

**Verso**

(1)–(2) Previously, one (أجر دلي) overpowered the dragoman of Switzerland (3) and Napoli with a carabine and (the dragoman) was immediately killed. They took him and buried him (4) and all the consuls sent for the governor to demand the perpetrator. They wanted to (5) strangle him in the Frankish quarter. The governor searched for him but did not find him. So he said (6) to them: “I will hand over another (أجر دلي) for you to kill. Thus it’s still one (7) for one.” But they did not accept. And up to date they are still looking for the (8) killer. They want to fortify the gates
and make the Frankish quarter (9) isolated. The local people rose up and will certainly write (10) to His Excellency the pasha. And they are waiting for his answer. They set out to build (11) on the wall. The worst curse on the local people every day! May our Lord (12) give a good outcome because all business stops at this state of affairs and (13) everything is expensive. This is to let you know.

We ask of our cousin, Senior Giovanni, (14) if he so pleases, to find a better opportunity to turn his merchandise into cash (15) than here or in Rāṣīd—for Cairo we don’t know the prices. (16) The war is always an obstacle for this. Enough now! May you live long!

Commentary

The address is in Italian and the lexicon of the writer, too, seems to show familiarity with Italian terms (l’abito, principe).

Recto

Line 12

I interpret this to be a form of ‘arabūn, which, according to de Biberstein-Kazimirski (1860, 209) means arrhes, i.e., ‘deposit, down payment’.

Line 38

Like the more prevalent form بنّاع, this term signifies a connection or belonging between two nouns, equivalent to the terms ذو/ذات and تابع.
Line 39
الابيتو. This word appears to be of a non-Arabic form and I interpret it as a rendering of the Italian l’abito ‘the dress’.

Line 48
خط عجله. A standard excuse for a letter written in haste.

Verso

Line 2
اسويسيا. This seems to reflect the Italian version of Switzerland, Svizzera.

Line 8
بادين. This is the dialectal expression of intention and desire which is usually formed today and in the letters with بَدَ (badd) as an invariable noun to which a personal pronoun is attached to express gender and number, e.g., بِهِم. بَدَنِ. But in this rare case, as in a few other places throughout the letters, it is formed like a verb, e.g., بَدَنِ.

MS Gotha orient. A 2837, doc. 148

Makkī Rawāy to Şāliḥ Abū Qaṣīṣa at the Wikālat al-Naṣṣārīn in Cairo. The letter was presumably sent from Suez, where Makkī was posted.

Transcription

Recto

1. يصل إن شا الله تعالى إلى محروسة مصر ليد المحترم الكرم الاله العزيز الحاج صالح أبو قصصية بوكالات النشارين ٨٤٥٤٢
الجناب المحترم المكرم الآخ العزيز الحاج صالح أبو أقسيمة اعزه الله تعالى

1. بعد مزيد السلام عليه وكثره الأشواق إليه لا يخفكم نعرفكم سابق تاريخه ارسلنا لكم مكتوب وفيه قامعة بعلم المشحون أن شاء الله تعالى يكون وصلكم وانطلقوا عليه واتم بخير وبسنتاريخه قدمنا لكم

2. في داو العيدروس خرز ۱۵ وداو السعدي خرز ۱۵ على يا هارون خرز ۲۲ هذا غلاف الخرز ونعرفكم من قبل أصحاب الثلاثة داوات المزكورة فهم عندكم في مصر اياك تولوا في كل داو خمسة احمال لاجل شحت السامية الذي لكم لا بلغنا أنهم يبنزوا في مصر ويخافين يحضروا ويكونوا غلفوا الشحنة في مصر يكون في علمكم واستلموا لنا على الاح الحاج محمد ابن قيموا وكل من يسأل عن وسلم

3. السيد مكي

4. روای (علامة)

5. سنة ۱۲۱۰

6. سنة ۱۶

Translation

Recto

(1) May it arrive, God willing, to the well-protected Cairo and be delivered to the hand of the esteemed and noble one, the beloved brother al-ḥājj Śāliḥ Abū Qaṣīṣa at the Wikālat al-Naššārin 8642

Verso

(1) His Excellency, the esteemed and noble one, the beloved brother al-ḥājj Śāliḥ Abū Qaṣīṣa, may God strengthen him!

(2) After copious greetings for him and much longing for him, it shall not be concealed from you that we inform you that
previously (3) we sent you a letter which included a cargo manifest, God willing it has (4) reached you and you looked at it and are in good health. As of today, we have forwarded to you, (5) on the dhow of al-ʿAydarūs, 15 beads, and on the dhow of al-Saʿīdī 15, and on (that of) Bā Hārūn 22. And that is the rightful passage of possession (ḡilāq) (6) of the beads. We also inform you on behalf of the three captains of the aforementioned dhows, that when they are with you (7) in Cairo you can load five loads (aḥmāl) on each dhow because of the Syrian cargo (šaḥnat al-Šāmiyya) (8) that is with you. Because it has reached us that they load in Cairo and are afraid to come, (9) they will wrap the cargo in Cairo. So that you know.

Greet on my behalf (10) the brother al-Ḥājj Muḥammad Ibn Qīmū and everyone who asks after us. Peace!

(11) al-sayyid Makki
(12) Rawāy
(13) [signature]
(14)–(16) on 5 Rajab in the year 1210 (=15.1.1796)

**Commentary**

**Recto**

Line 1

\(8642\)’. This number has an apotropaic function. The letters of the southern network of mostly Muslim writers who corresponded between Cairo, the Red Sea, and the Hejaz, rarely exclude it. But it is sometimes also found in correspondence of the northern, mostly Christian network.
Verso

Line 5
غلاقة. I am not certain about the meaning of this word. My translation is based on Lane’s (1863–1893, VI: 2284) translation of the verb غَلَق and its infinitive nouns غَلَقْ and غَلْقُ as "The pledge was, or became, a rightful possession [i.e. a forfeit] to the receiver of it," although this remains an unsatisfactory explanation.