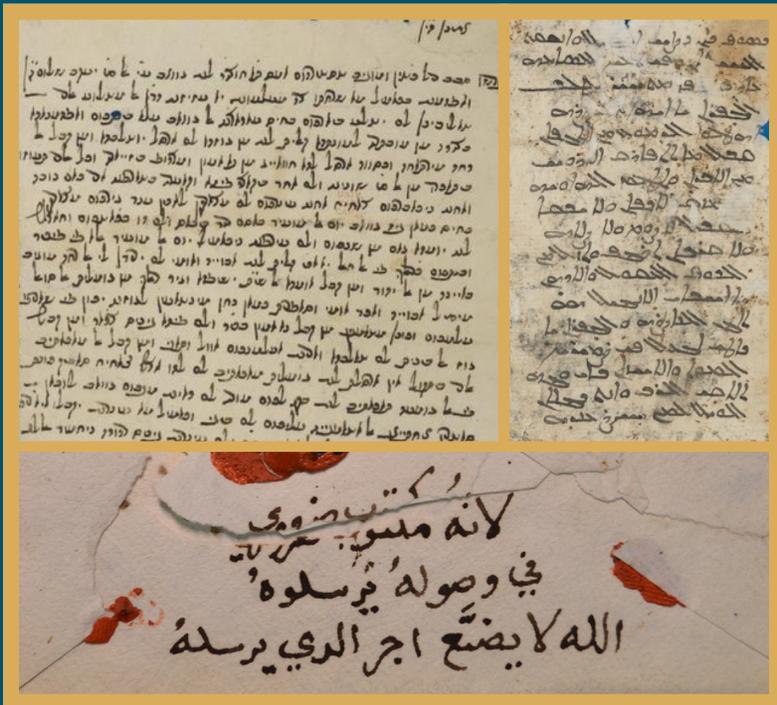


# A Handbook and Reader of Ottoman Arabic

EDITED BY ESTHER-MIRIAM WAGNER





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## 21. ARAB MERCHANT LETTERS FROM THE GOTHA COLLECTION OF ARABIC MANUSCRIPTS

*Boris Liebreuz*

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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 Qaṣiṣa 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; د; ذ > ض; س > ص) (ز > ظ; ت > >), but also occasionally the reverse (e.g., دراهم regularly becomes ضراهم); case endings lost or wrong (بكل خيراً); 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' marbūta* becomes *tā'* and vice versa; *plene* writing of long vowels that are regularly omitted (ذالك); the *'alif* of the article is dropped when the initial *hamza* is silent (بلسلامه); individual words can be joined into one when contracted in speech (قلله = *qul lahū* > *qillu*). The letters of Abū Qaṣiṣa'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

Fransīs Bernard Dumyān to his cousin Giovanni Rūk / Rocco and his maternal uncle Yūsuf Anṭūn Tarjumān Talāmās / Giuseppe Talamas in Damietta. The writer's unnamed sister<sup>1</sup> is also mentioned in the internal address.

The details of the matter reported in this latter are not always clear to me.<sup>2</sup> Yet the contours of dramatic events revolving around two fierce legal cases taking place in Rosetta are evolving. They first pitted Fransīs 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. بمنه تعالى
2. يصل الى ثغر دمياط ويسلم ليد جناب حضرة ابن عمنا الخواجه
3. جواني روك وخالنا الخواجه يوسف انطون ترجمان تلاماس

<sup>1</sup> Theresia, according to other letters.

<sup>2</sup> 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.

4. المحترمين امانه مرسله بالخير

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

## Recto

1. حفظهم الباري تعالى
2. امين
3. جناب حضرة شقيقتنا المصيونة وابن عمنا سنيور جواني وخالنا سنيور يوسف  
المحترمين
4. غب عروض الشوق اليكم مع تزايد الاشتياق لجنابكم المعروض لبين اياديكم
5. هو انه قبله تقدم لكم مكتوب عن سكت راشيد تحت يد الخواجه بطروشي وهي  
عرفناكم
6. بوصولنا لاجل الاطمان انشا الله تعالى يكون وصلكم وانتم بخير الان
7. نخير جنابكم بخصوص القنصل حين لقا كافت القناصل شادين على يدنا بلحق
8. والطريقا لسبب لم يمشو مثله على طمع الفلوس فلمذكور رد جواب للجميع
9. انني صحيح رسلت وراه انه يحضر ولاكن الان لم لي عنده ولا له عندي
10. فطلبناه للشرع عند [..] قنصل الذي هو يريدو بحضور كافت القناصل
11. لم كان يقبل ورجل البابين انه عارف حاله لم هو باقي لسبب ذلك
12. معلط وقصده ياكل العرايون .. ٣ (نصف) ٥٥٣ خلاف المصاريف ولاكن انشا الله  
تعالى
13. ووجود المحبين منبظر عينه بوسط كرفوه لان كافت القناصل ختمو لنا الاوراق
14. ايضا الرويسة افرنج وروم ووجهناهم بسلامت الله تعالى الي كرفوه للسنانو اول (...)
15. ولجل البخت توجه ايضا والد الاب المحترم ابونا ديونيسيوس وكيل الروم فجنايه
16. سلمهم لوالده وايضاً بمكتوب منه للبرينشيه حكم ما ردنا نحن فنساله تعالى
17. دعاكم فرنسيس
18. ممد
19. برنا دميان

١٢١٩ .20

.21 سنة

## Righthand Margin

- .22 ان يطول بعمر المحبين فلرجا دائماً تكونو مطمئين  
 .23 علينا ولم يكون لكم علينا فكرة بوجه من الوجوه  
 .24 وعمالين كل يوم بعزومه ايام عند القناصل ايام عند  
 .25 التجار والمحبين نساله تعالى ان يقضدنا [كذا] علي مكافت  
 .26 الجميع ورد شملنا وياكم بجبران خاطر عن قريب  
 .27 بجاه والدت السياه وابنها الحبيب وكافت  
 .28 القديسين امين  
 .29 الان رسلنا الكنباري الي راشيد لاجل  
 .30 يحصل محضر المركب من بيترو اتر امارني  
 .31 عن يد الخواجه روشيتي انما ارجوكم  
 .32 ترسلو لنا الورقة الذي حضرت من  
 .33 اسلانبول بختم كنشليريت [السمع]  
 .34 جوزر<sup>3</sup> ومكتوب فيها حساب  
 .35 محضر المركب وبتجادوها بين  
 .36 الاوراق الفرنجية لان الكنباري  
 .37 ينساها الرجا ارسالها حالاً  
 .38 مع قوطم الجوخ الزروق بتوع  
 .39 الايتو الذي عليه السبايطا  
 .40 ووجه دوشك من الصوفر ع ١ واربع  
 .41 وجوه امخداث بلونو ام خمسة

<sup>3</sup> 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.

42. ذلك ما ارجوه منكم مع الدعاء

## Top Margin

43. دائماً وسلاماً للجميع كل حي  
 44. باسمنا وايضاً الاخ يعقوب غطاس  
 45. ومنا بتقبل (... ) كافة الامهات جميعاً جناب  
 46. ابونا باصلي وجناب ابونا يوسف والبيتريو واكل  
 47. الكبير ووكيل القدس والسنايتي والاب عيسا جارنا  
 48. ودائماً نسالهم الدعاء خط عجله وعمركم يطول  
 49. ومزيد سلامنا لجناب الخواجه باصيلي فخر والخواجه  
 50. عيروت المحترمين

## Verso

1. يستولي  
 2. قبله واحد اجر دلي قوس ترجمان اسويسيا  
 3. ونابولي بلقرايينا ويساعة قتل اخدوه دفنوه  
 4. ورسلو كافت القناصل للحاكم وطلبو منه الرجل حتا  
 5. شنقو بحارت الافرنج فلحاكم فتش عليه لم وجد فقال  
 6. لهم بسلمكم واحد اجر دلي غيره وقتلوه بيقا واحد  
 7. قدام واحد فلم قبلو ولحد تاريخه يفتشو علي الذي  
 8. قتل وبادين يعمر بوابات ويعملو حارت الافرنج  
 9. لوحدها فقامت اهل البلد لم رادو فلزم انهم يحررو  
 10. لسعادت الباشه ومستنزين الجواب وعملين بينو  
 11. بلسد وكل يوم سو خره على اولاد البلد فربنا  
 12. يجعل النهاية خير لان الحال واقف على الجميع وكل  
 13. شي غالي يكون معلومكم الرجا من ابن عمنا سنيور جواني  
 14. ايذا راد ولقا مناسب يسرف بضاعتو بطرفكم انسب  
 15. من هنا ومن راشيد وانما مصر لم بنعرف الاسعار  
 16. وانما الحرب دائماً حد ذلك كفاية دمتم

## 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 Rāšīd 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 [*mişriyya*] 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 pa-  
 pers for us, (14) also the heads of the monasteries of the Europe-  
 ans (Ifrañj) and the Orthodox (Rūm). We delivered them to Corfu  
 for the Senate first [...]. (15) And for good luck, the father of the  
 esteemed Father Diyūnisiyūs, guardian of the Orthodox, His Ex-  
 cellency (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 be-  
 loved son, and all (28) the saints. Amen.

(29) Now: we sent al-Kunbārī to Rāšid so that (30) he  
 would get the ship's manifest from Pitrū Atrāmārnī (31) by way  
 of the master Rūšītī. 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 Ya‘qūb Ġaṭṭās. (45) And from us (...) all the mothers kiss (the hands of) His Excellency (46) Our Father Bāṣilī and His Excellency Our Father Yūsuf and al-Bītrīyū, the great (47) guardian, and the guardian of Jerusalem, and al-Sanāyitū, and Father ‘Īsā, 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 Bāṣilī Faḥr and the master (50) ‘Ayrūt, the esteemed.

### Verso

(1)–(2) Previously, one (اجر 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 (اجر 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 Rāšīd—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

العرايون. 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

بتوع. Like the more prevalent form بتاع, this term signifies a connection or belonging between two nouns, equivalent to the terms تابع and ذو/ذات.

## Line 39

الاييتو. 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 *بد* (*badd*) as an invariable noun to which a personal pronoun is attached to express gender and number, e.g., *بدهم*. But in this rare case, as in a few other places throughout the letters, it is formed like a verb, e.g., *بدني*.

**MS Gotha orient. A 2837, doc. 148**

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

**Transcription****Recto**

1. يصل ان شا الله تعالى الى محروسة مصر يسلم ليد المحترم المكرم الاخ العزيز الحاج صالح ابو قصيصة بوكالت النشارين ٨٦٤٢

**Verso**

1. الجناب المحترم المكرم الاخ العزيز الحاج صالح ابو اقصيصة اعزه الله تعالى
2. بعد مزيد السلام عليه وكثرة الأشواق اليه لا يخفاكم نعرفكم سابق تاريخه
3. ارسلنا لكم مکتوب وفيه قايمة بعلم المشحون ان شا الله تعالى يكون
4. وصلكم واتطلعوا عليه وانتم بخير ويوم تاريخه قدمنا لكم
5. في داو العيدروس خرز ١٥ وداو السعيدي خرز ١٥ على با هارون خرز ٢٢ هذا غلاق
6. الخرز ونعرفكم من قبل اصحاب الثلاثة داوات المذكورة فهم عندكم
7. في مصر اياك تنولوا في كل داو خمسة احمال لاجل شحنت الشامية
8. الذي لكم لان بلغنا انهم بينولوا في مصر وخايفين يحضروا
9. ويكونوا غلفوا الشحنة في مصر يكون في علمكم واستلموا لنا
10. على الاخ الحاج محمد ابن قيموا وكل من يسال عنا والسلام
11. السيد مكّي
12. روي
13. (علامة)
14. ١٢١٠
15. سنة
16. في ٥ رجب

**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 Ṣāliḥ Abū Qaṣīṣa at the Wikālat al-Naššārīn 8642

**Verso**

(1) His Excellency, the esteemed and noble one, the beloved brother al-ḥājj Ṣāliḥ 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-‘Aydarūs, 15 beads, and on the dhow of al-Sa‘idī 15, and on (that of) Bā Hārūn 22. And that is the rightful passage of possession (*gilāq*) (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 (*ṣaḥnat 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

ⲁⲓⲉⲗⲧ ‘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

غلاق. 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 غلق and its infinitive nouns غَلَقٌ and غُلُوقٌ as “The pledge was, or became, a rightful possession [i.e. a forfeit] to the receiver of it,” although this remains an unsatisfactory explanation.