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In an Antique Land

Written by Amitav Ghosh

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In an Antique Land

Amitav Ghosh

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For Debbie

Contents

Prologue	11
Laṭaîfa	21
Nashâwy	107
Mangalore	239
Going Back	289
Epilogue	343
Notes	*355*

Prologue

THE SLAVE OF MS H.6 first stepped upon the stage of modern history in 1942. His was a brief debut, in the obscurest of theatres, and he was scarcely out of the wings before he was gone again—more a prompter's whisper than a recognizable face in the cast.

The slave's first appearance occurred in a short article by the scholar E. Strauss, in the 1942 issue of a Hebrew journal, *Zion*, published in Jerusalem. The article bore the title 'New Sources for the History of Middle Eastern Jews' and it contained transcriptions of several medieval documents. Among them was a letter written by a merchant living in Aden—that port which sits, like a fly on a funnel, on the precise point where the narrow spout of the Red Sea opens into the Indian Ocean. The letter, which now bears the catalogue number MS H.6, of the National and University Library in Jerusalem, was written by a merchant called Khalaf ibn Iṣḥaq, and it was intended for a friend of his, who bore the name Abraham Ben Yijû. The address, written on the back of the letter, shows that Ben Yiju was then living in Mangalore—a port on the south-western coast of India. In Strauss's estimation, the letter was written in

the summer of 1148AD.

In the summer of its writing, Palestine was a thoroughfare for European armies. A German army had arrived in April, led by the ageing King Conrad III of Hohenstaufen, known as Almân to the Arabs. Accompanying the king was his nephew, the young and charismatic Frederick of Swabia. The Germans struck fear into the local population. 'That year the German Franks arrived,' wrote an Arab historian, 'a particularly fearsome kind of Frank.' Soon afterwards, King Louis VII of France visited Jerusalem with his army and a retinue of nobles. Travelling with him was his wife, the captivating Eleanor of Aquitaine, the greatest heiress in Europe, and destined to be successively Queen of France and England.

It was a busy season in Palestine. On 24 June a great concourse of the crowned heads of Europe gathered near Acre, in Galilee. They were received by King Baldwin and Queen Melisende of Jerusalem, with their leading barons and prelates, as well as the Grand Masters of the Orders of the Temple and the Hospital. King Conrad was accompanied by his kinsmen, Henry Jasimirgott of Austria, Otto of Freisingen, Frederick of Swabia, Duke Welf of Bavaria, and by the margraves of Verona and Montferrat. Among the nobles accompanying the King and Queen of France were Robert of Dreux, Henry of Champagne, and Thierry, Count of Flanders.

Between festivities, the leaders of the crusading armies held meetings to deliberate on their strategy for the immediate future. 'There was a divergence of views amongst them,' their enemies noted, 'but at length they came to an agreed decision to attack the city of Damascus...' For the Muslim rulers of Jordan and Syria, who had only just begun to recover from the first hundred years of the Crusades, this was a stroke of

unexpected good fortune because Damascus was at that time the only Muslim state in the region that had friendly relations with the Crusader kingdoms.

On 24 July 1148AD the greatest Crusader army ever assembled camped in the orchards around Damascus. Its leaders had some successes over the next couple of days, but the Damascenes fought back with fierce determination and soon enough the Crusaders were forced to pack up camp. But Turcoman horsemen hung upon their flanks as they withdrew, raining down arrows, and the retreat rapidly turned into a rout. After this battle 'the German Franks returned' wrote the Arab historian who had so dreaded their arrival, 'to their country which lies over yonder and God rid the faithful of this calamity.'

It was not until 1942, the very summer when Khalaf's letter slipped quietly into twentieth-century print, that the Middle East again saw so great and varied a gathering of foreigners. Nowhere were there more than in the area around Alexandria; the Afrika Corps and the Italian Sixth Army, under the command of Erwin Rommel, were encamped a bare forty miles from the city, waiting for their orders for the final push into Egypt, and in the city itself the soldiers of the British Eighth Army were still arriving—from every corner of the world: India, Australia, South Africa, Britain and America. That summer, while the fates of the two armies hung in the balance, Alexandria was witness to the last, most spectacular, burst of cosmopolitan gaiety for which the city was once famous.

WITHIN THIS TORNADO of grand designs and historical destinies, Khalaf ibn Ishaq's letter seems to open a trapdoor into a vast

network of foxholes where real life continues uninterrupted. Khalaf was probably well aware of the events taking place farther north: the city he lived in, Aden, served as one of the principal conduits in the flow of trade between the Mediterranean and the Indian Ocean, and Khalaf and his fellow merchants had a wide network of contacts all over North Africa, the Middle East and southern Europe. They made it their business to keep themselves well-informed: from season to season they followed the fluctuations of the prices of iron, pepper and cardamom in the markets of Cairo. They were always quick to relay news to their friends, wherever they happened to be, and they are sure to have kept themselves well abreast of the happenings in Syria and Palestine.

But now, in the summer of 1148, writing to Abraham Ben Yiju in Mangalore, Khalaf spends no time on the events up north. He begins by giving his friend news of his brother Mubashshir (who has set off unexpectedly for Syria), letting him know that he is well. Then he switches to business: he acknowledges certain goods he has received from Ben Yiju—a shipment of areca nuts, two locks manufactured in India and two bowls from a brass factory in which Ben Yiju has an interest. He informs Ben Yiju that he is sending him some presents with the letter—'things which have no price and no value.' The list seems to hint at a sweet tooth in Ben Yiju: 'two jars of sugar, a jar of almonds and two jars of raisins, altogether five jars.'

It is only at the very end of the letter that the slave makes his entry: Khalaf ibn Ishaq makes a point of singling him out and sending him 'plentiful greetings.'

That is all: no more than a name and a greeting. But the reference comes to us from a moment in time when the only

people for whom we can even begin to imagine properly human, individual, existences are the literate and the consequential, the wazirs and the sultans, the chroniclers and the priests—the people who had the power to inscribe themselves physically upon time. But the slave of Khalaf's letter was not of that company: in his instance it was a mere accident that those barely discernible traces that ordinary people leave upon the world happen to have been preserved. It is nothing less than a miracle that anything is known about him at all.

THIRTY-ONE YEARS were to pass before the modern world again caught a glimpse of the slave of MS H.6: the so-called Yom Kippur War was just over and the price of oil had risen 370 per cent in the course of a single year.

The Slave's second appearance, like his first, occurs in a letter by Khalaf ibn Ishaq, written in Aden—one that happened to be included in a collection entitled *Letters of Medieval Jewish Traders*, translated and edited by Professor S. D. Goitein, of Princeton University. Like the other letter, this one too is addressed to Abraham Ben Yiju, in Mangalore, but in the thirty-one years that have passed between the publication of the one and the other, the Slave has slipped backwards in time, like an awkward package on a conveyor belt. He is nine years younger—the letter in which his name now appears was written by Khalaf ibn Ishaq in 1139.

This is another eventful year in the Middle East: the atabeg of Damascus has been assassinated and the Levant is riven by wars between Muslim principalities. But as ever Khalaf, in Aden, is unconcerned by politics; now, even more than in the other

letter, business weighs heavily on his mind. A consignment of Indian pepper in which he and Ben Yiju had invested jointly has been lost in a shipwreck off the narrow straits that lead into the Red Sea. The currents there are notoriously treacherous; they have earned the Straits a dismal name, Bab al-Mandab, 'the Gateway of Lamentation'. Divers have salvaged a few pieces of iron, little else. In the meanwhile a shipment of cardamom sent by Ben Yiju has been received in Aden, and a cargo of silk dispatched in return. There are also accounts for a long list of household goods that Ben Yiju has asked for, complete with an apology for the misadventures of a frying-pan—'You asked me to buy a frying-pan of stone in a case. Later on, its case broke, whereupon I bought you an iron pan for a niṣâfî, which is, after all, better than a stone pan.'

Yet, despite all the merchandise it speaks of, the letter's spirit is anything but mercenary: it is lit with a warmth that Goitein's translation renders still alive and glowing, in cold English print. 'I was glad,' writes Khalaf ibn Ishaq 'when I looked at your letter, even before I had taken notice of its contents. Then I read it, full of happiness and, while studying it, became joyous and cheerful...You mentioned, my master, that you were longing for me. Believe me that I feel twice as strongly and even more than what you have described...'

Again the Slave's entry occurs towards the end of the main body of the text; again Khalaf sends him 'plentiful greetings' mentioning him by name. The Slave's role is no less brief upon his second appearance than it was in his first. But he has grown in stature now: he has earned himself a footnote.

The footnote is very brief. It merely explains him as Ben Yiju's Indian 'slave and business agent, a respected member of his household.'

The letter is prefaced with a few sentences about Ben Yiju. They describe him as a Jewish merchant, originally of Tunisia, who had gone to India by way of Egypt, as a trader, and had spent seventeen years there. A man of many accomplishments, a distinguished calligrapher, scholar and poet, Ben Yiju had returned to Egypt having amassed great wealth in India. The last years of his life were spent in Egypt, and his papers found their way into his synagogue in Cairo: they were eventually discovered in a chamber known as the Geniza.

I CAME UPON Professor Goitein's book of translations in a library in Oxford in the winter of 1978. I was a student, twenty-two years old, and I had recently won a scholarship awarded by a foundation established by a family of expatriate Indians. It was only a few months since I had left India and so I was perhaps a little more befuddled by my situation than students usually are. At that moment the only thing I knew about my future was that I was expected to do research leading towards a doctorate in social anthropology. I had never heard of the Cairo Geniza before that day, but within a few months I was in Tunisia, learning Arabic. At about the same time the next year, 1980, I was in Egypt, installed in a village called Laṭaîfa, a couple of hours journey to the south-east of Alexandria.

I knew nothing then about the Slave of MS H.6 except that he had given me a right to be there, a sense of entitlement.