



Document of the Month 2/26: A Letter of Safe Passage

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Travelling in Troubled Times: A Latin Letter of Safe Passage for a Muslim Merchant Issued during the Frankish-Fatimid Wars

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Introduction¹

A single photograph of a letter of safe passage is all that remains of the documentary trail of a Muslim merchant travelling through the northern reaches of the Latin Kingdom of Jerusalem decades after the city's violent takeover by the first crusaders in 493/1099. The document can be classed as a letter close, or royal writ granting permission for an action, intended to be opened and used only once. It is the only known example of a letter close issued by a sovereign of Latin Jerusalem in its original format.² The majority of the chancery's original documents were likely lost during the conquest of the reduced Kingdom of Jerusalem by the sultan of Cairo, al-Ashraf Khalīl (reigned 689–693/1290–1293), in 690/1291.³

The letter somehow made its way to the Great Mosque of Damascus. It became part of its eclectic archive and was stored in the mosque's Qubbat al-Khazna (Dome of the Treasury) until the summer of 1901, when it was taken on loan, along with other non-Arabic fragments, to Berlin. This set of documents was photographed in Berlin between 1901 and 1909, when, at the behest of the Ottoman authorities, the documents were finally sent back to Damascus. Unfortunately, the original safe passage document was lost at some point during its return journey, leaving the aforementioned photograph, now stored at the Staatsbibliothek zu Berlin under the classmark Mss simulata orientalia 6 (fol. 53r), as the only evidence for its existence (Figure 1).⁴ The document thus shares its fate with other lost fragments discussed separately by Robert Hoyland and Nadia Vidro in their articles in the *Document of the Month* series ([December 2024](#) and [April 2025](#)).

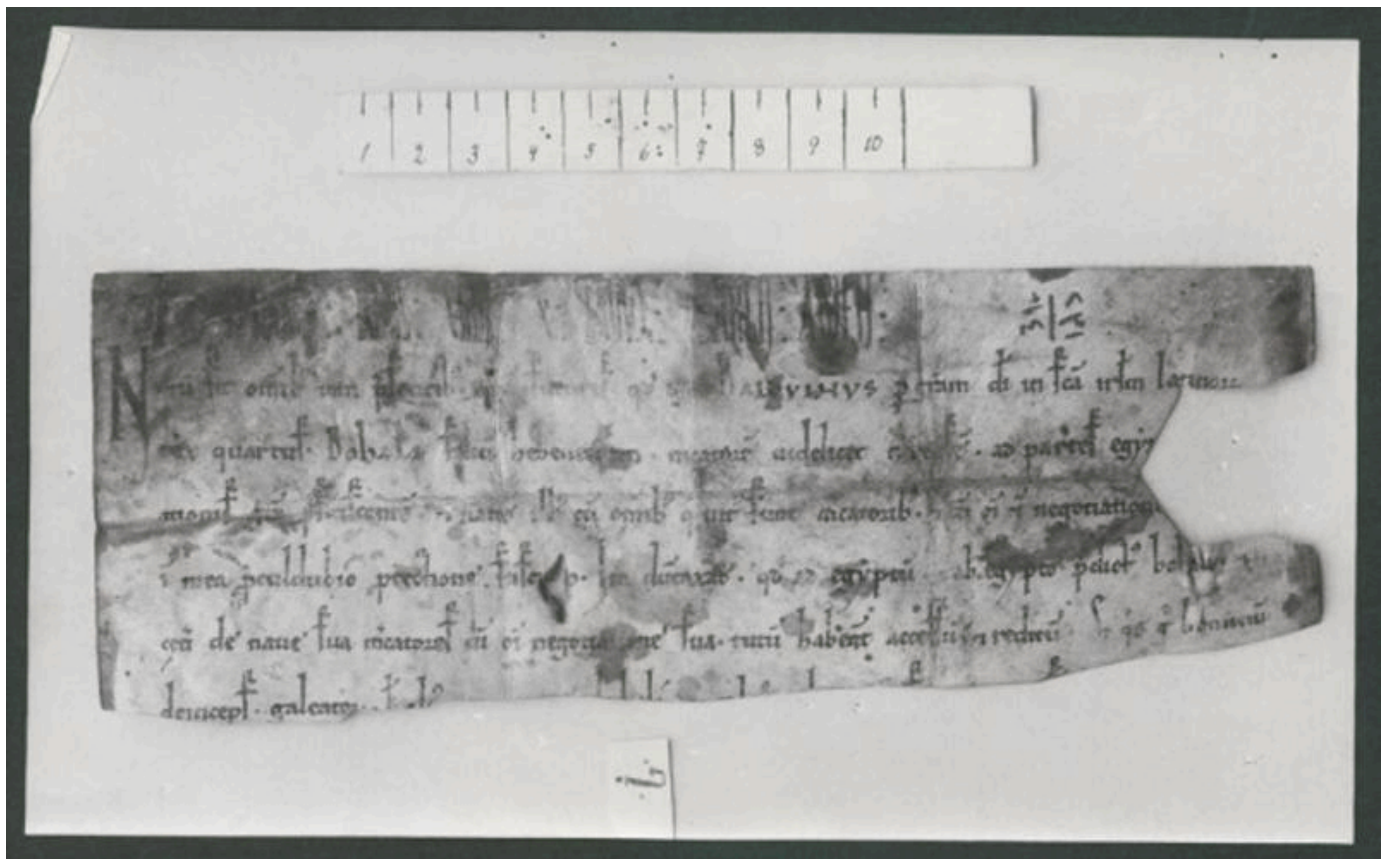


Fig. 1: *Mss simulata orientalia 6, fol. 53r*. Photograph downloaded from the *Stabi Digitalisierte Sammlungen* of the *Staatsbibliothek zu Berlin*. Public Domain Mark 1.0.

Description of the document

To my knowledge, the most detailed studies of the document to date can be found in two articles published by Hans Eberhard Mayer in 1992 and 2000. Mayer suggests that the original document would have measured 21cm by 11.7cm on the basis of its folds. The photographed fragment measures 21cm in width, 7.9cm in height at its left margin, and 6.3cm in height at its right margin. The support is parchment. The text begins with an *invocatio* (divine invocation), penned in elongated majuscule letters (line 1), followed by the *promulgatio* (circumstance of the issue of the decision, line 2), the *intitulatio* (issuer's name and regnal title, lines 2–3), and the *dispositio* or decision (lines 3–7), all written in Caroline minuscule with the exception of the issuer's name, Balduinus, which is rendered in capitals. This use of elongated and regular minuscule was standard practice for the composition of charters issued by the chancery of Jerusalem and by Western chanceries in general during this period. It is difficult to determine what form the now-missing closing section or *eschatocol* would have taken, since the document is unique and the text is shorter than what ordinary charters issued by the chancery would have contained. A seal might have sufficed for authentication, though we can imagine the addition of a *corroboratio* (a formula referring to the mark of authentication).⁵

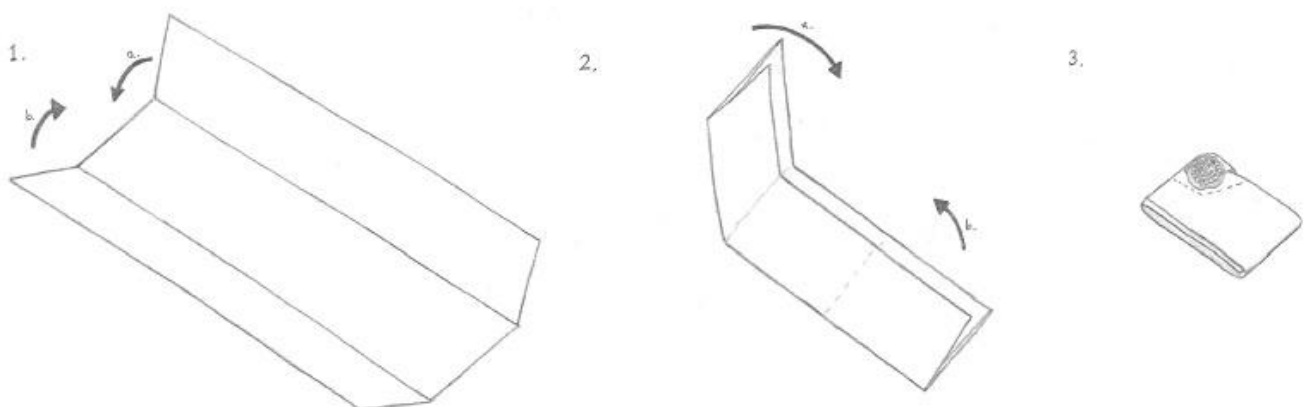


Fig. 2: A hypothetical reconstruction of the folds of the safe-passage document. Drawings by the author.

The letter was certainly folded twice lengthwise to create a long, folded sheet and then folded again twice widthwise to create a parcel (Figure 2). Mayer suggests that holes might have been punched into what would have been the top-left corner, once folded into a packet, to feed a cord through and affix a seal. The cord would then have been wrapped around the parcel.⁶ However, the problem with this hypothesis is that punch marks with corresponding holes equidistant from the fold-line are not clearly visible along the left margin of the document. Another possibility is that the seal was attached at the top-left corner using a slip of paper that would have extended from the now-missing bottom edge of the document, in a manner that resembled the way in which a fourteenth-century letter close issued by John II of France (reigned 1319–1364) had once been sealed (Figure 3).⁷ The missing bottom section might have been cut off deliberately for record-keeping, allowing a customs official to keep one section of the original and the recipient of the safe passage to retain the remainder of the document.

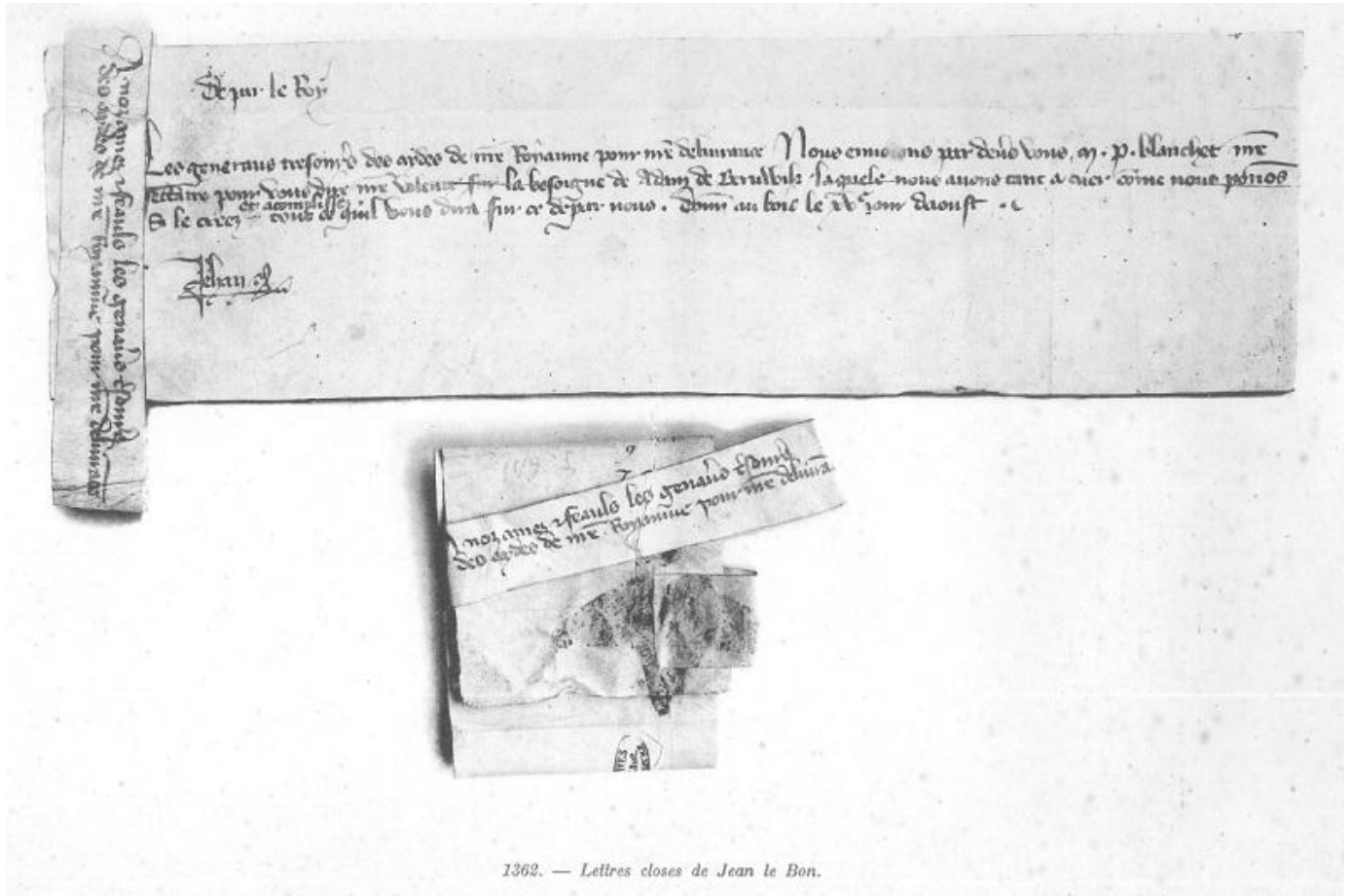


Fig. 3: A fourteenth-century letter close issued by John II of France (1319–1364). Paris, Archives nationales, Série J 641-13-6. Reproduced from De Bouärd, *Manuel de diplomatique, Album, Plate II*. Believed to be in the public domain.

The context: transregional travel amidst Fatimid-Frankish and Burid-Zengid clashes

Determining the context for this grant of safe passage continues to present a challenge. Having been sealed for one-time use, the document is in essence a personalized safe passage for a single return journey, or an “einfaches Privileg” (simple privilege), as Mayer calls it.⁸ This makes the document all the rarer, since safe passage for travelling merchants was often accorded to all merchants crossing the territories of treaty partners within the framework of peace agreements.⁹ In this case, the safe passage was issued specifically to a group of merchants whose representative’s name is rendered in Latin as Bohali filium Hebenecstin or Hebenecsutin (Abū ‘Alī son of Ibn ‘Izz al-Dīn, line 3) and identified as a merchant of Tyre (*mercatorum... Tyrensem*, line 3).

The issuer of the safe passage was King Baldwin III (reigned 1143–1163). The king would have assigned the task of drawing up the agreement, which involved a two-stage process, to his chancery staff. A draft version was composed first, followed by an official copy on parchment. The latter is the version we see in the photograph. Mayer has identified the two scribes at work (“Chancery Scribe II” and “Radulf B” = Stephen of Lyon) based on a comparison of chancery formulae and chancery hands found in other documents issued by the Jerusalemite court around the same time.¹⁰ The first known act

of Chancery Scribe II is dated 7 June 1156, which Mayer has taken as the *terminus post quem* for the letter close, but it actually serves only as a rough chronological marker. His analysis thus leaves us with a time range for the issue of this safe passage of ca. 1156–1163, the latter being the year of Baldwin’s death. Nothing is known about the recipient of the privilege, Abū ‘Alī ibn ‘Izz al-Dīn. Mayer suggests that the merchant, or his father, might have been a wealthy person once connected to the Burid court of Damascus prior to its conquest by Nūr al-Dīn ibn Zengi (reigned 541–569/1146–1174), hence the deposition of the document there.¹¹ However, the attribution of *Tyrensem* could also mean that he was a Muslim living in Latin Tyre, which had a sizeable Muslim population well into the late twelfth century.¹²

According to the document, the king extends his protection to Abū ‘Alī, his ship, the other merchants in it, and its merchandise during its passage to and from Egypt. Mayer is certainly correct in stating that the letter was meant to protect the merchants from harm caused by Christian seafarers, in this case Genoese, Pisan, or Venetian crews operating in the Eastern Mediterranean. The seventh line, largely missing, likely spelled out the consequences for any trouble caused either by them, or possibly even by Abū ‘Alī’s travel companions. We can infer this from the opening of the sentence, which begins with “If anyone” (*Si quis...*). Latin translations of Ayyubid commercial privileges issued in 569/1173 and in 616/1220 contain stipulations that begin in a similar manner:

A commercial privilege issued in 569/1173¹³

A commercial privilege issued

...et si quis prevaricasset aliquid, persona et res eorum ad mercedem curie fuisset.

*Et si aliquis de superbis et infir-
subiectione et locorum prenor
alicuius uel molestum alicui hc
terram, huius rei causa debet s
debent res ablate, que inuente*

...and if anyone wrongs another, that person and his belongings shall belong to the court for judgement.

And if anyone among the prou-
folly, of the aforesaid territory
to the things or any trouble to
at sea and on land, his cause s
governor, and his things—what
returned.

In the case of Baldwin's letter, the target of and consequences for any harm caused remain unclear. We can surmise that the king would have retaliated against the perpetrator's co-religionists if any disturbance occurred.

A legal formula used in the letter also finds a faint echo in agreements issued by Islamic chanceries. I refer to the formula *tutum habeant accessum et reditum* ("they shall have a safe arrival and return," line 6). Commercial privileges issued by the Ayyubid chancery, which likely adapted Fatimid formulae and protocols, tend to specify that merchants were to be protected both when arriving in and departing from the sultan's territories.¹⁵ To provide a contrasting example, a near-contemporaneous Latin treaty between Henry II of England and Philip Augustus of France contains the stipulation, repeated for both sides, that the merchants "are to be secure and have peace in all my (i.e. the king's) lands".¹⁶ In this case, the kings extended a form of general protection to merchants within their realms, whereas Baldwin's privilege was intended to provide protection for a return trip between two pre-determined points, spanning what we would nowadays call "international waters". In principle, the safe passage, then, protected the merchants from attacks by third parties answerable to the king, such as the aforementioned Genoese, Pisan, or Venetian seafarers. The document would have been inspected upon their return to the Kingdom of Jerusalem, or at any other time that the king or his representatives wished to open the document, which would have involved breaking the seal and thereby annulling it.

Concluding reflections on the context of Abū 'Alī's journey

The document was designed to ensure the safe movement of a Muslim merchant residing in Tyre, along with his companions and their wares, between the Kingdom of Jerusalem and Fatimid Egypt. It is difficult to date the document precisely, since the relations between Jerusalem and Cairo were vexed by military confrontations throughout the 1150s. A Fatimid fleet raided the port cities of Acre, Beirut, Tripoli, Jaffa, and Sidon in 546/1151, at a time when Baldwin was already pre-occupied with deflecting a Zengid attack on Damascus, while it was still controlled by the kingdom's erstwhile allies, the Burids.¹⁷ In the following year in the Islamic calendar (= 1153), Baldwin III directed a campaign against Fatimid Ascalon that resulted in the capitulation of the city after a siege lasting several months. According to the chronicle of William of Tyre (died 1186), the king provided an escort to the city's inhabitants for their journey to Egypt following the negotiation of a surrender agreement, thereby leaving open a future avenue for diplomacy.¹⁸ Following this, the Fatimids raided Ascalon in 549/1155 and 551/1156 and both Ascalon and Gaza in 553/1158.¹⁹ The later chronicle of Ibn Muyassar (died 1278) preserves a record of another Fatimid raid on Tyre in 550/1156.²⁰ Shortly after this latter incursion, the Order of the Knights Templar surrendered the son of the short-lived Fatimid vizier, 'Abbās ibn Abī al-Futūḥ ibn Tamīm ibn Mu'izz ibn Bādīs al-Ṣinhājī (served 548–549/1153–1154), to the caliphal court, suggesting a brief spell of collaboration.²¹ Baldwin III also conducted a campaign near Egypt around 552/1158.²²

These episodes point to near-continuous conflict between 546/1151 and 552/1158, which would have complicated the movement of people between the two sides. There are several solutions for situating the present document, though none are entirely satisfactory. One is that the merchant Abū 'Alī received special dispensation to travel to Egypt for the very reason of the risk presented by ongoing conflict with the Fatimids. Another possibility is that Abū 'Alī obtained the document of safe passage during a period of respite, such as in 549/1155, when a truce was concluded by Baldwin III, the new Fatimid vizier Ṭalā'ī ibn Ruzzīk (served 549–556/1154–1161), and Nūr al-Dīn ibn Zengi, the ruler of Mosul, Aleppo, and, from 549/1154, Damascus.²³ This scenario seems all the more probable if we consider that the poet and amir Usāma ibn Munqidh (died 584/1188) also received a safe passage from Baldwin to transport his family and library from Egypt to Syria around this time.²⁴

The voyage of Abū 'Alī, and certainly other itineraries of a similar nature, might have been made possible in part by factionalism between pretenders to the vizierate at the Fatimid court. Some factions at the Egyptian court turned to the Zengids of Syria for military support, whereas others favoured collaboration with the Franks and might have pursued commercial cooperation at the same time. Despite the constantly changing tides, it appears that Abū 'Alī returned safely to Tyre and had his letter inspected by a local authority, which might explain the missing seal and/or the cut-off bottom part.²⁵ Perhaps he proceeded to Damascus from there, depositing his portion of the expired letter close, as pilgrims would later deposit their pilgrimage certificates, for time to uncover centuries later.²⁶

Notes

1 I am very grateful to Prof. Arezou Azad for her invitation to contribute an article to this series and to Dr. Nadia Vidro for her corrections and suggestions, which helped me reflect further on several aspects of the document's history. Any errors that remain are mine.

2 Mayer, "Abū 'Alīs Spuren," 113; Mayer, "Lettre de sauf-conduit," 27. As pointed out by Mayer, Usāma ibn Munqidh (died 584/1188) also received a letter of safe passage from Baldwin III to convey his family and library from Egypt to Syria. This document has not survived but is referenced in his autobiographical *Kitāb al-i' tibār* ("The Book of Learning by Example"), trans. Cobb, *Book of Contemplation*, 43-4; Cobb, *Usama*, 43.

3 Riley-Smith, "Government and the Indigenous," 126.

4 I thank Konrad Hirschler (Asien-Afrika-Institut, University of Hamburg) for first pointing me toward Hans Eberhard Mayer's article on this unique document. Most of the Arabic materials from Qubbat al-Khazna were moved to Istanbul in 1917 and are now housed in the Türk ve İslam Eserleri Müzesi (Museum of Turkish and Islamic Arts). D'Ottone Rambach, Hirschler, and Vollandt, "Introduction," in *The Damascus Fragments*, 12; Bauden, "State of the Art," 53-4; Rustow, *Lost Archive*, 47-8; Nünlist, "Devotion and Protection," 477. For a detailed reassessment and state of the literature of the archive's history and dispersal, see D'Ottone Rambach, Hirschler, and Vollandt (eds.), *The Damascus Fragments*.

5 Mayer, "Abū 'Alīs Spuren," 115-6, see also 121; Wansbrough, *Lingua Franca*, 96-123 on components of official documents.

6 Mayer, "Abū 'Alīs Spuren," 123-9.

7 De Bouärd, *Manuel de diplomatique*, Album, Plate II.

8 Mayer, "Abū 'Alīs Spuren," 120.

9 Ibn al-Qalānisī, *Ta' rīkh Dimashq*, 238; trans. Gibb, *Damascus Chronicle*, 68; Sibṭ ibn al-Jawzī, *Mir' āt al-zamān*, 8; trans. McGuckin de Slane, *Extraits*, 528.

10 NB: Whereas Chancery Scribe II ("Kanzleischreiber II") remains unidentified, Mayer identifies Radulf B (not to be confused with the royal chancellor known as Radulf of Bethlehem) with the chancery secretary Stephen of Lyon. Cf. Mayer, "Abū 'Alīs Spuren," 117; idem, *Die Kanzlei*, I: 129-30, 817, 823, 829, 873, II: 836-7; and idem, "Lettre de sauf-conduit," 29; see also idem, *Die Kanzlei*, II: 834-2 for the drafting process and I: 872-4 for the production of the present document; and Grévin, "Entre inšā' et dictamen," esp. 121-2, 132-3, for the process of official composition in comparative perspective.

11 Mayer, "Abū 'Alīs Spuren," 116; Kedar, "Subjected Muslims," 172, n. 99.

12 Hillenbrand, *The Crusades*, 379; Zouache, *Armées et combats*, 780.

13 Amari, *Diplomi Arabi*, serie seconda, no. 7 (pp. 257-61, 458-9). My translation.

14 Tafel and Thomas, *Urkunden*, no. 258 (II: 221-5). My translation.

15 Amari, *Diplomi Arabi*, serie seconda, no. 11 (pp. 265-6, 461-2).

16 Roger of Hoveden, *Chronica*, ed. Stubbs, II: 146; Benham, "Law or Treaty?," 492; see also Benham, *International Law*, 96.

17 Ibn al-Qalānisī, *Ta' rīkh Dimashq*, 307-8; Ibn Muyassar, *Akhbār Miṣr*, III: 470.

18 William of Tyre, *Chronicon*, II: 232-3, 234; Abū Shāma, *Rawḍatayn*, ed. al-Zaybaq I: 289; trans. Barbier de Maynard, IV: 77-8.

19 Ibn al-Qalānīsī, *Ta' rīkh Dimashq*, 346; Ibn Muyassar, *Akhbār Miṣr*, III: 470–1; Abū Shāma, *Rawḍatayn*, ed. al-Zaybaq I: 309, 362–3; trans. Barbier de Maynard, IV: 78–9, 97.

20 Ibn Muyassar, *Akhbār Miṣr*, 470.

21 William of Tyre, *Chronicon*, II: 253.

22 Ibn Muyassar, *Akhbār Miṣr*, 471–2; Ibn al-Qalānīsī, *Ta' rīkh Dimashq*, 348; Fulton, *Contest for Egypt*, 28, 30.

23 Fulton, *Contest for Egypt*, 26; Köhler, *Alliances and Treaties*, 170.

24 Mayer, “Lettre de sauf-conduit,” 33; Cobb, *Usama*, 43.

25 On checkpoints in medieval Europe, see Benham, *International Law*, 70.

26 On the Ayyubid-period pilgrim certificates, see Sourdél and Sourdél, *Certificats de pèlerinage*; cited in Nünlist, “Devotion and Protection,” 477.

+ Expand All

Edition

Staatsbibliothek zu Berlin, Mss simulata orientalia 6, fol. 53r

Edition by Bogdan Smarandache. My edition does not exhibit any significant divergence from Mayer’s (Mayer, “Abū ‘Alī’s Spuren,” 133; idem, “Lettre de sauf-conduit,” 34). I have used angle brackets to indicate text that is missing or illegible in the photograph, ellipsis to represent missing letters that cannot be reconstructed, and underlining to mark abbreviations.

1. IN NOMINE PATRIS ET FILII ET SPIRITUS SANCTI. AMEN.
2. Notum sit omnibus tam presentibus quam futuris, quod ego BALDUINUS per gratiam Dei in Sancta Ierusalem Latinorum
3. rex quartus Bohali filium Hebenescutin mercatorem videlicet Tyrensem. ad partes egypti merc
4. ationis gratia proficiscentem et navem illius cum omnibus, qui intus sunt mercatoribus. et cum omni etiam negotiatione <sua>
5. in mea proculdubio protectione. suscipio. Ita dumtaxat. quod ad egyptum <et> ab egypto predictus bohali et
6. ceteri de nave sua mercatores cum omni negotiatione sua. tutum habeant accessum et reditum. Si quis ergo hominum
7. deinceps. galeator vel <alius..... bohali.....>

Translation

Staatsbibliothek zu Berlin, Mss simulata orientalia 6, fol. 53r

Translation by Bogdan Smarandache. Ellipsis represents missing letters in the original that cannot be reconstructed.

1. In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, Amen.
2. Let it be known to all present and those to come, that I, Baldwin,
3. fourth king of the Latins at Holy Jerusalem by the grace of God, take Abū ‘Alī, son of Ibn ‘Izz al-Dīn, the Tyrene merchant,
4. for the purpose of departing to the regions of Egypt, his ship, with all the merchants in it and with all its goods,
5. under my absolute protection, such that the aforementioned Abū ‘Alī and
6. the other merchants of his ship with all its goods shall have a safe arrival in Egypt and a safe return from Egypt. If anyone, now, among his men,

7. from this point onwards, galley-rower or anyone else... Abū 'Alī...

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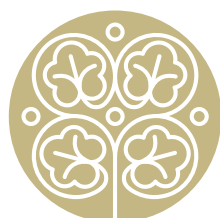
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