

Fragment of the Month: June 2015

A petition against an anti-social child: T-S Ar.40.3

By Melonie Schmierer-Lee

The Cairo Genizah is not only the most important source for medieval Jewish history but also preserves a wealth of texts to and from the Islamic chancery, with numerous petitions addressed to influential Fatimid and Ayyubid dignitaries. High ranking – judges, military leaders, and even the great Saladin himself – held public audiences in which aggrieved individuals could petition for the support, assistance, or intervention of the great and powerful. Petitions were delivered to the dignitary in writing or set down by court secretaries after the petitioner had voiced his request in person. They have a highly formulaic structure, wishing blessings on the dignitary (e.g. ‘may God cause his days to endure and make eternal his rule’) and use obsequious terminology (e.g. ‘the slave [i.e. the petitioner] kisses the ground’).

T-S Ar.40.3 is one such petition. The petitioner, Muḳliṣ of Minyat Ġamr, has been struggling to deal with some extraordinary behaviour from the young son of his new neighbours. The child has ‘brazenly set upon’ Muḳliṣ and bitten his wife. The child’s father hasn’t been responsive to any of Muḳliṣ’s complaints, has put about different versions of the facts, and allows his terrorising son free reign to attack and harass his neighbour. Muḳliṣ – ‘a man of property ... a devout and learned man’ – has had to abandon his home and cast himself on the mercy of the Ayyubid military leader Šams al-Dīn ‘the sword of the warriors’. He asks for a thorough investigation into how his rights have been infringed by the antisocial behaviour of the child. In return for justice, Muḳliṣ will offer regular prayers for Šams al-Dīn.

Was Muḳliṣ’s appeal ultimately successful? Did Šams al-Dīn investigate and issue the medieval equivalent of an Anti-Social Behaviour Order against this delinquent child and his obnoxious family? This petition is a draft – it omits the typical

opening formulae and has no endorsement or instructions from Šams al-Dīn – so the outcome of this case remains unknown.

This, and 158 other Arabic legal and administrative documents from 11th-13th century Egypt are now available to view on Cambridge University Digital Library. From court records and extraordinarily descriptive witness testimonies to petitions to caliphs, sultans and viziers, these documents are a fascinating gateway into the administrative machinery of Fatimid and Ayyubid Egypt.

Recto:

1. The slave
2. [...] Muḳliṣ, an inhabitant of Minyat Ġamr.
3. In the name of God, the merciful and compassionate.
4. (The slave) reports to the seat of the master Šams al-Dīn, the sword of the warriors,
5. the support of kings and sultans, may God cause his days to endure and make eternal
6. his rule and the rule of his sultan and show mercy to his parents and his relatives,
7. (reports) that I am a man who has been dwelling in a hostel for a number of years. No harm has been done to the slave
8. from the day he began living there until the present. But now
9. a man has moved into the slave's neighbourhood with his children. The slave has suffered
10. great harm from his young son. Every time the slave complains
11. about the affair to his father he adorns the appearance of the slave's story
12. before the people and his son is allowed to go out
13. and brazenly set upon the slave

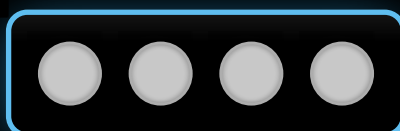
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with impudence. The slave is a certified witness in Minyat Ġamr.

Verso:

1. He has had the audacity to injure the slave's wife with his teeth in front of people without any cause.
2. The slave is a man of property and is a devout and learned man,
3. yet he (has been obliged to) leave all the property that he possesses and (has suffered) other
4. wrongs and mistreatment. He places his trust in the protection of the presence of the master and his justice.
5. The slave requests the examination of his case (and) the issuing of a command to investigate
6. The affair of the slave to establish how the youth is encroaching upon the rights
7. of the slave. When he has had proof of the harm and the impudence of the youth,
8. which he has unjustly inflicted on the slave, let the master requite him with the justice he deserves,
9. and the master will be graciously offered a pious personal prayer by the slave at
10. the end of each statutory prayer. Peace.

[Translation by G. Khan, *Arabic Legal and Administrative Documents in the Cambridge Genizah Collections*, Cambridge, 1993, pp. 406–409.]





Cambridge University Library, T-S Ar.40.3

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