



The Fatimid Petition

MARINA RUSTOW

Princeton University, Princeton, NJ, USA

E-mail: mrustow@princeton.edu

Abstract The Cairo Geniza preserved hundreds of Arabic-script petitions to officials at the Fatimid palace. These petitions are more elaborate than those written during the rule of earlier Islamic dynasties. This essay asks three questions about Fatimid petitions and their development: Who were the scribes who wrote them? When (and why) did Arabic petitions assume the elaborate form and format characteristic of the Fatimid period? And why did Fatimid high officials hold the petition-and-response procedure to be so central to governance? The essay includes an edition and translation of an unedited petition to Sitt al-Mulk, the sister of the caliph al-Ḥākim (386–411/996–1021), who ruled the state for more than two years after her brother’s death. A comparison between this petition and another I edited in 2010 sheds light on all three questions.

Keywords Cairo Geniza · Fatimid caliphs · Petitions · Arabic state documents · Papyrology

Arabic letters of petition can be found among the papyri of the first three Islamic centuries. But the petition as a distinctive genre, with dedicated formula and specific, grand formatting, emerged during the period of Fatimid rule in Egypt (359–567/969–1171).

While petitions survive from the Umayyad and Abbasid periods, their layout, their opening and closing formulas, and the scripts in which they are written are like those of letters. In formal terms, the only thing that distinguishes them from the plain letter is a conditional clause beginning *in raʿā*, “if (the patron) should see fit” to grant the petitioner his or her request, with the apodosis implied or explicit. Apart from the *raʿy* clause, these petitions look like plain letters and read like them, too. Petitions addressed to officials of state in the Fatimid period, by contrast, use a chancery script, an elaborate structure, new formulas, and an instantly recognizable layout whose only analogue lay in other state documents: the decree and the internal bureaucratic report.¹

The Fatimids developed the petition as a genre because their approach to rule emphasized petitioning as a means of redressing injustice—specifically,

¹Geoffrey Khan, “The Historical Development of the Structure of Medieval Arabic Petitions,” *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 53 (1990): 8–30; Marina Rustow, *The Lost Archive: Traces of a Caliphate in a Cairo Synagogue* (Princeton, NJ, in press).

the injustices that midlevel officials inflicted on ordinary subjects. Any subject could submit a petition to the caliph, the vizier, or other high-ranking dignitaries of state, and the complaints could be personal or collective, petty or momentous. The importance of petitioning would carry through into the Mamluk and Ottoman periods, as would some of the physical and verbal characteristics of the genre. Along with the pervasiveness of petitioning under the Fatimids came a class of scribes adept at writing petitions in a specialized way.

Fatimid petitions were elaborate verbally and graphically: they contained a greater number of obligatory blessings, sections, and technical phrases than earlier Arabic petitions, and they looked like chancery decrees in miniature form. Like grand state documents from earlier periods, they used wide line spacing. Like Fatimid chancery decrees, they utilized curvilinear, proportioned script of the type that had developed in Abbasid Iraq and boat-shaped lines, a fragmented, stair-step baseline, and stacking of words at the ends of lines. All this suggests that Fatimid petitions were written by scribes familiar with official document production—but the petitions themselves are the only record we have of the existence of these scribes. Their handiwork suggests that the state invested resources in training them or in making the procedure available outside the capital.

The ideology that underpinned all this was that caliphs, viziers, and their immediate bureaucratic phalanxes should take their role as patrons and protectors of the weak seriously, out of not just liberality but pragmatism. Higher officials encouraged petitioners to bring to their attention unjust treatment by lower officials; the complaints of subjects could usefully serve as a means of bringing the bad behavior of appointees to the rulers' attention, providing the rulers with concrete grounds to dismiss their appointees or confiscate their ill-gotten gains. "In this way," as one Fatimid chancery official, Ibn al-Ṣayrafī, put it in 1130, "[the hands of officials] are stayed from injustice [*zulm*] and unlawfulness [*ta'addā*], and they will beware of their actions' evil consequences, which cause harm to subjects. Thus does one eliminate the greater part of corruption [*fasād*]; the number of petitioners suddenly diminishes; the regime's reputation improves [*yaḥsun sum'at al-dawla bi-dhālik*] and it gains great perfection."²

Ibn al-Ṣayrafī worked in the Fatimid chancery for nearly half a century, and, while his claim that petitioning could eliminate corruption was surely idealized, a striking enough number of petitions have survived to suggest that

²Ibn al-Ṣayrafī, *Al-Qānūn fī dīwān al-rasā'il wa-l-ishāra ilā man nāla al-wizāra*, ed. Ayman Fu'ād Sayyid (Cairo, 1990), 155. All translations are my own.

subjects indeed believed it worthwhile to submit them and scribes believed it worthwhile to draw them up. It was widely held that redress was obtainable.³

But, for all the seriousness with which the Fatimid state took petitioning, for most of the Fatimid period in Egypt petitions were processed not in a public forum but behind the closed doors of the palace, without the petitioners present. Contemporaneous and later descriptions emphasize the secrecy of the proceedings: petitions came before the vizier in his chamber, which could be entered only by his servant (*farrāsh*). The only witnesses the vizier wanted to appear were the ones he called.⁴

The privacy and even secrecy of the procedure under the Fatimids are striking for two reasons: the Fatimids are best known—and were remembered even in the later medieval period—for their elaborate public processions; and later regimes in Egypt and Syria, including the Zengid atabegs and the Ayyubid and Mamluk sultans, held public forums in which petitioners could present their complaints. Why did the Fatimids, who otherwise specialized in public ceremonial, not devise a public forum for petitioning? The purpose of the secrecy may have been to protect the caliph from view; it may also have been a matter of administrative convenience. But I suspect that something else was behind it: unlike later Sunni rulers, the Fatimids had no need to co-opt the Sunni *‘ulamā’*, so there was no need to require them to attend the *khidma* and similar state processions, as they would have to do under the later dynasties. Requiring the *‘ulamā’* to hear petitions lodged against state officials and to consent to the ruler’s judgment on them was one way the ruler’s decisions gained a veneer of legitimacy in terms of sharia. The Fatimid caliphs, who were held to be the final arbiters of the law among a small Isma‘ili elite, had no need to seek legal legitimacy from the *‘ulamā’*.

Precisely in the absence of a public ceremony, written petitions took an elaborate physical form, as though the ritual, ceremony, and pomp were compressed into the graphic space of the petition itself.

The Scribes

Neither Fatimid-era sources nor later descriptions of Fatimid petitioning tell us about the scribes who wrote petitions. There are impassioned and well-reasoned statements of why one should answer petitions and of the centrality

³The database compiled for DIMME, the project Documents and Institutions in the Medieval Middle East (<https://www.princeton.edu/~geniza/dimme/index.html>), contains at least 145 Fatimid petitions and perhaps more since, in the case of fragments, it is impossible to distinguish reports to higher officials from petitions because they share formulaic features.

⁴al-Maqrīzī, *Al-Mawā‘iz wa-l-i‘tibār fī dhikr al-khiṭaṭ wa-l-āthār*, 2 vols. (Būlāq, 1854), 1:403 (cf. 2:207); al-Qalqashandī, *Ṣubḥ al-a‘shā fī šinā‘at al-inshā*, 14 vols. (Cairo, 1913–19), 3:491–92.

of petitions to the cause of justice in the realm; there are descriptions of how petitions were processed in the palace. But, to the best of my knowledge, there is no narrative or prescriptive statement about the officials who wrote them, how they were trained, or where subjects could find them.

These are striking omissions from the source record. The petitions are calligraphic, specialized, and elaborate; it stands to reason, then, that the scribes who wrote them had some training. They wrote on behalf of a broad range of subjects, from impoverished women and blind people to former state officials; they must have been part of some more or less orderly and diffuse network, and people must have known where to find them. And, where lower officials have been trained and deployed, higher officials must have trained and deployed them—higher officials of the sort likely to write administrative manuals. But, while texts about fiscal administration have survived from the Fatimid period, as have fiscal treatises by officials trained under the Fatimids, there are, so far as I know, no surviving works on how to draw up petitions, what formulaic language to use, how to render a petitioner's story concisely, and how to ensure that petitions found their way to the vizier's chamber.⁵ The scribes may have been too local and otherwise insignificant or served too many other public roles to warrant specific mention; they may have learned their craft in informal networks; or I may not have looked for the descriptions in the right places.

If the narrative sources are less than forthcoming, one must fall back on the documents themselves and deduce from them information about the petition-and-response process. The documents provide evidence of two of its stages: drafting and drawing up the final version. Both suggest that drawing up petitions was a specialist job.

This is clear in the case of petitions from Jews, though, as an organized community with literate officials, they may be an exception to a more general practice. Jewish communal leaders and officials did some drafting and preformulating of petitions—specifically, of the main narrative and the request components. The surviving drafts demonstrate that their knowledge of the formulaic language petitions used was not superficial but also not quite

⁵ENA 2747.16 (a field guide to taxation); Sahl b. al-Faḍl b. Sahl al-Tustarī, *Mukhtaṣar fī šinā'at al-kitāba*, RNL Firk. Ar. 124, described in Sabine Schmidtke, "Mu'tazilī Manuscripts in the Abraham Firkovitch Collection, St. Petersburg: A Descriptive Catalogue," in *A Common Rationality: Mu'tazilism in Islam and Judaism*, ed. Camilla Adang, Sabine Schmidtke, and David Sklare (Würzburg, 2007), 377–462, 436, and currently being edited and translated by Luke Yarbrough in collaboration with a team of scholars and consultants including Lahcen Daaif, Tamer el-Leithy, Yossef Rapoport, Gregor Schwarb, Mathieu Tillier, Naïm Vanthieghem, and myself; Ibn Mammātī, *Qawānīn al-dawāwīn*, ed. A. S. Atiya (Cairo, 1943); al-Makhzūmī, *Al-Minhāj fī 'ilm kharāj Miṣr*, edited in Claude Cahen, *Makhzūmiyyāt* (Leiden, 1978).

specialized. Their handwriting likewise demonstrates that they were not, in fact, the ones who produced the elaborate final versions.

The distinction becomes clear from two sets of petitions from the Geniza. The first is a set of eight drafts of a single petition to the caliph al-Mustansir (427–487/1036–1094) that S. M. Stern identified toward the end of his brief career (the publication was in proofs when he died).⁶ The drafts come from a faction of Jews in 1040 complaining that they had been mistreated by another faction of Jews. Tellingly, some of the drafts narrate the petitioners' case as a complaint against two Jewish state officials who were supposed to have helped resolve the conflict but failed to do so. This is striking: the purpose of the petition was not to complain about officials of the state, but to force the second faction to unlock the synagogue of the first and stop harassing them. Apparently, as the scribe weighed the options, he considered phrasing the petition as a request for intervention against the injustices (*mazālim*) of state officials, presumably because he thought that a *mazālim* case was more likely to attract the vizier's attention than was a mere internecine quarrel. In the final drafts, however, he thought better of this approach and suppressed any mention of the Jewish officials.

These were all merely the drafts. The scribe who wrote the final draft (fig. 1) is not the scribe who wrote the first seven (figs. 2–4). The second of the eight drafts (fig. 3, left column, line 7) is in Arabic characters, drawn with a calamus and a ductus identical to those of the hand responsible for the Hebrew characters. So apparently the scribe writing in Judeo-Arabic aborted an attempt to write a draft in Arabic script and, from the third draft through the seventh, reverted to Hebrew characters. The hand that produced the final, Arabic-script draft (fig. 1), by contrast, was that of a specialist who knew how to write in a chancery hand.

The evidence of paleography and diplomatics speaks volubly. While the scribe who produced the first seven drafts was not a petition writer by trade or training, he had some experience with petitions as a genre. He included several technical phrases from the repertory of the Arabic petition, two of them perfectly valid and contemporary Fatimid formulas, and a third that was by then archaic, a phrase left over from the pre-Fatimid petition.⁷ As

⁶T-S Ar. 30.278 and Bodl. MS Heb. b 18.21, in Samuel M. Stern, "A Petition to the Fāṭimid Caliph al-Mustansir Concerning a Conflict within the Jewish Community," *Revue des études juives* 128 (1969): 203–22.

⁷The Fatimid petition formulas: (1) *al-'abīd yaḍra'ū ilā allāh ta'ālā wa-ilā al-ḥaḍra al-majīda fī khurūj al-amr al-'ālī* (the slaves beseech God, may he be exalted, and the glorious presence to issue an exalted decree), in drafts 4, 6, and 7; (2) *wa-li-mawlānā ṣalawāt allāh 'alayhi 'ālī al-ra'y* (and to our lord, prayers of God be upon him, belongs the exalted opinion), in drafts 3, 4, 6, and 7. The archaic formula, otherwise known only from pre-Fatimid petitions: *in ra'at al-ḥaḍra an . . .* (if the presence should see fit to . . .), in draft 4 only.

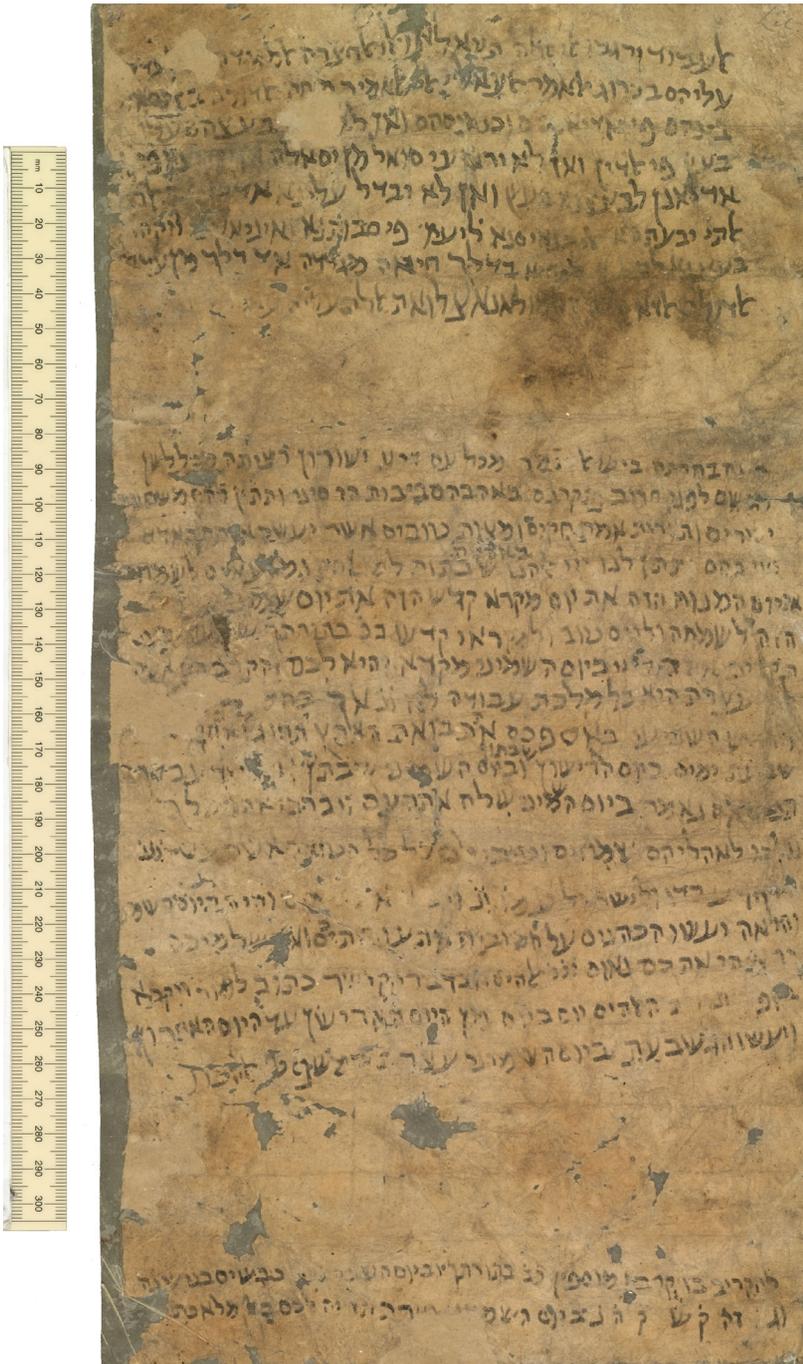


Fig. 2. The penultimate draft of the petition in Hebrew script. Bodleian Library, University of Oxford, MS Heb. b 18.21, recto.



Fig. 3. Preliminary drafts of the petition. Draft 1 (top left), draft 3 (left, line 8 on), and drafts 4 and 5 (right) are in Hebrew script; in draft 2 (left, line 7), the same scribe has abortively attempted to write out the text in Arabic script. Cambridge University Library, T-S Ar. 30.278, recto. Reproduced by kind permission of the Syndics of Cambridge University Library.

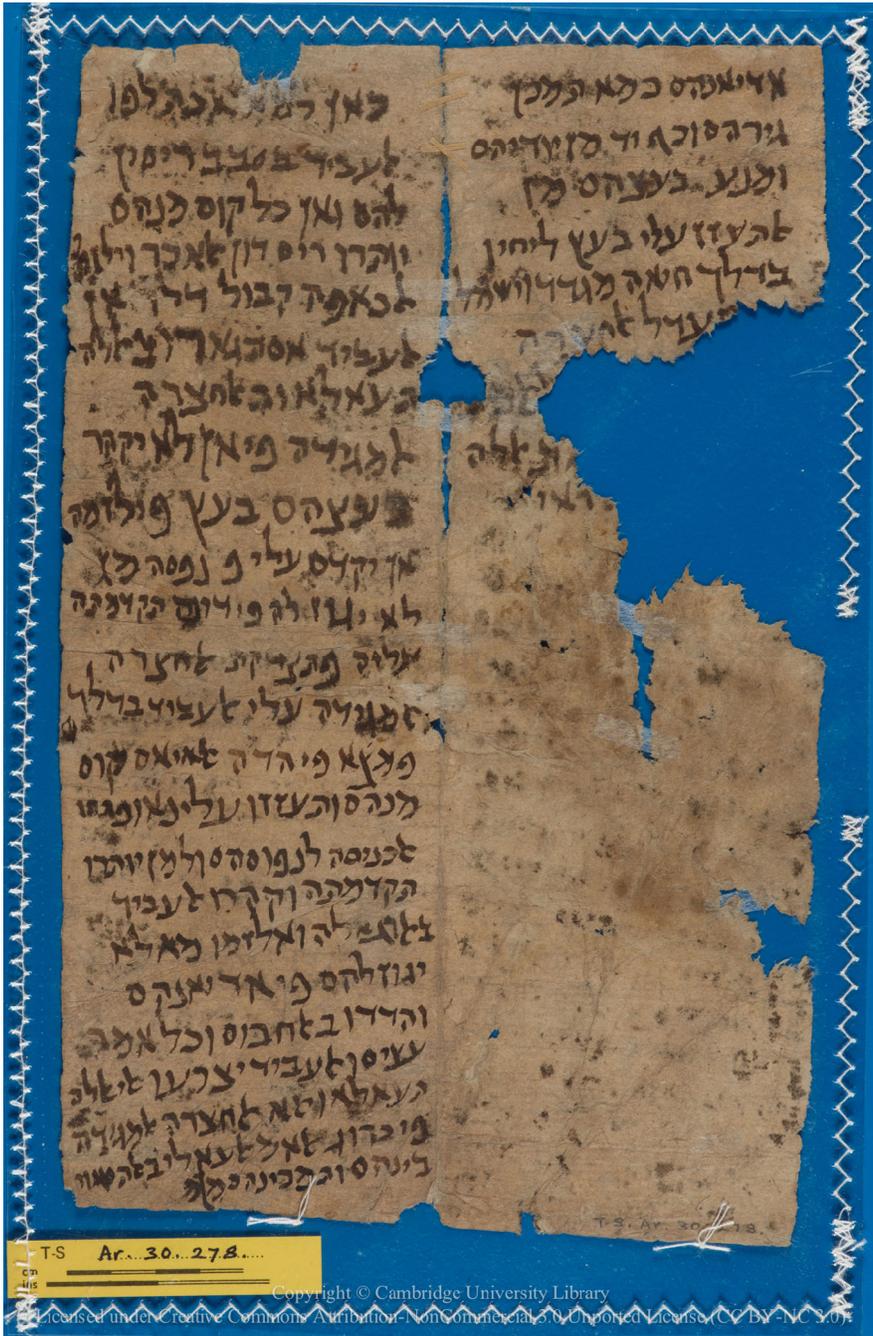


Fig. 4. Draft 6 of the same petition to al-Mustansir in Hebrew script. Cambridge University Library, T-S Ar. 30.278, verso. Reproduced by kind permission of the Syndics of Cambridge University Library.

for the state-trained scribe of the final draft, he has added all the initial benedictions—which, after the graphic features, were the most technical part of the Fatimid petition—and placed the *tarjama* identifying the senders in the upper left-hand corner of the page, as was the usual practice in state petitions.⁸

Some Jews, then, knew how to craft the narrative component of a petition. Some may also have known a few of the obligatory phrases. But, if one wanted to have a proper petition drawn up, one had to call in a professional.

The same conclusion emerges from a second multidraft petition, also in Hebrew script, but from a century later. It was addressed to Ibn al-Salār (544–548/1149–1153), a vizier of the caliph al-Zāfir (544–549/1149–1154), from the heirs of a Jewish merchant protesting the unjust confiscation of property by a government official (figs. 5–6). But, like the eight-draft petition from the faction of Jews, its scribe had a middling knowledge of Fatimid state diplomatics: both drafts omit the opening blessings and go straight to the *narratio*, whereas, on the second draft, he includes the *tarjama* in the upper left-hand corner (in the first draft, the upper left-hand corner has been torn away). Both drafts include a small amount of formula toward the end, but it is too little to demonstrate his full competence.⁹

While Jewish communal leaders and officials drafted petitions, then, for the final versions, they sought the assistance of scribes adept in the chancery-style script and formulas of the Fatimid administration. This suggests that we must not assume—as some writings on the subject have—that the Jewish community handled the writing of its own petitions. That is a highly significant fact: if an urban, well-organized, disproportionately literate group of subjects with direct connections to the palace required the help of specialists to write the final versions of their petitions, how much more so would a villager from the Fayyūm?

⁸The section of the petition containing the petitioner's name is called the *tarjama*, "heading," because it was placed above the text. Petitions are sometimes called *ruq'a mutarjama bi-ism* or *'alā (fulān)*, "a note headed with (the name of *X*, the sender)," the technical meaning of which is "petition." Examples: T-S 10J28.2, line 5: *ruq'a mutarjama 'alā ism aṣḥāb Yosef*; copy of the decree T-S 13J7.29, line 2: *ruq'a mutarjama bi-jamā'at al-yahūd al-rabbaniyyīn*; S. M. Stern, *Fātimid Decrees: Original Documents from the Fātimid Chancery* (London, 1964), doc. 3 (a decree from the Monastery of St. Catherine, Sinai), line 6: *ruq'a mutarjama bi-ism 'Abd al-Masīḥ*; *ibid.*, doc. 4, line 21: *ruq'a ... mutarjama bi-usquf al-Ṭūr al-madhkūr Anṭūn*; *ibid.*, doc. 10, line 5: *ruq'a mutarjama bi-ism Maqār usquf Dayr Ṭūr Sīnā wa-rahbānih*.

⁹T-S 13J20.5, edited in Geoffrey Khan, *Arabic Legal and Administrative Documents in the Cambridge Genizah Collections* (Cambridge, 1993), doc. 79. Draft 1, recto, lines 22–24: *wa-hum yujaddidū al-su'al bi-khurūj tawqī' karīm al-mutazawwaj bi-l-'alāma al-'ādil<iyy>a*. (They further request the issuing of a noble rescript headed by the *'alāma* of al-'Ādil; *mutazawwaj* is apparently a scribal error for *mutarjam*, an error suggesting that the scribe was copying from an unpointed Arabic model.) Draft 2, verso, margin, lines 2–3: *wa-li-l-majlis al-sāmī al-ra'y al-'ālī fī dhālik* (to the lofty chamber belongs the exalted opinion in this matter).

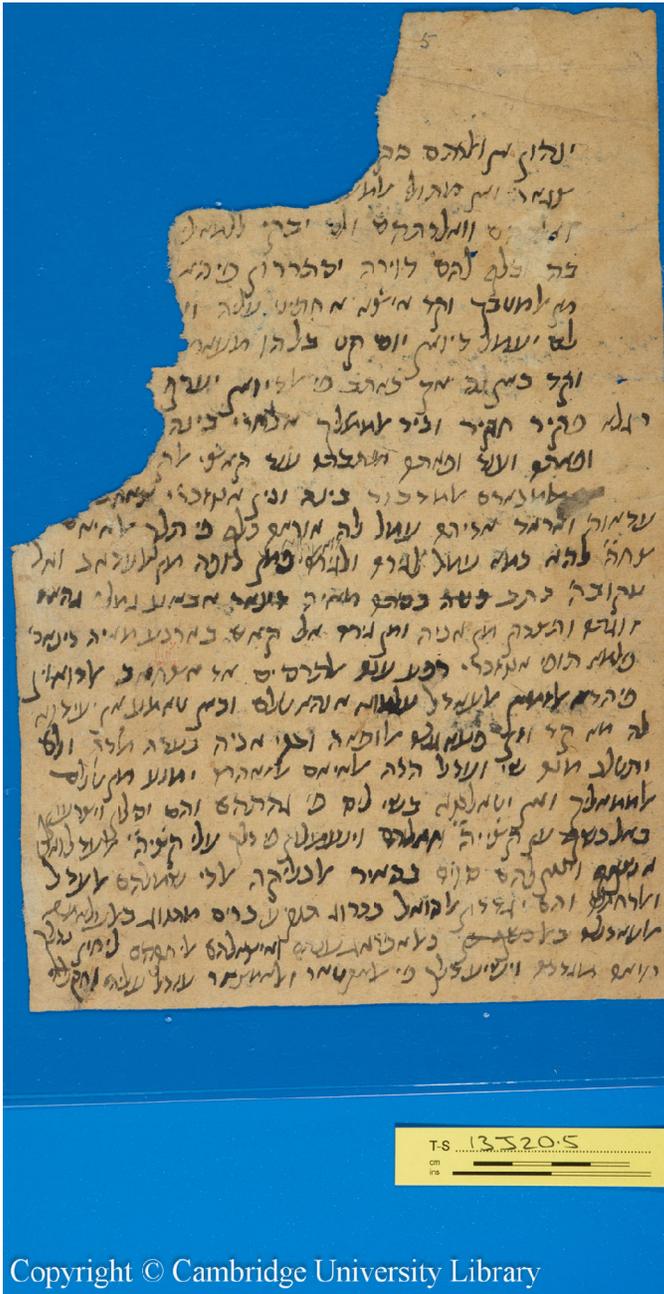


Fig. 5. Draft in Hebrew script of a petition to the Fatimid vizier Ibn al-Salār concerning the confiscation of property by a government official, 545/1151. Cambridge University Library, T-S 13J20.5, recto. Reproduced by kind permission of the Syndics of Cambridge University Library.

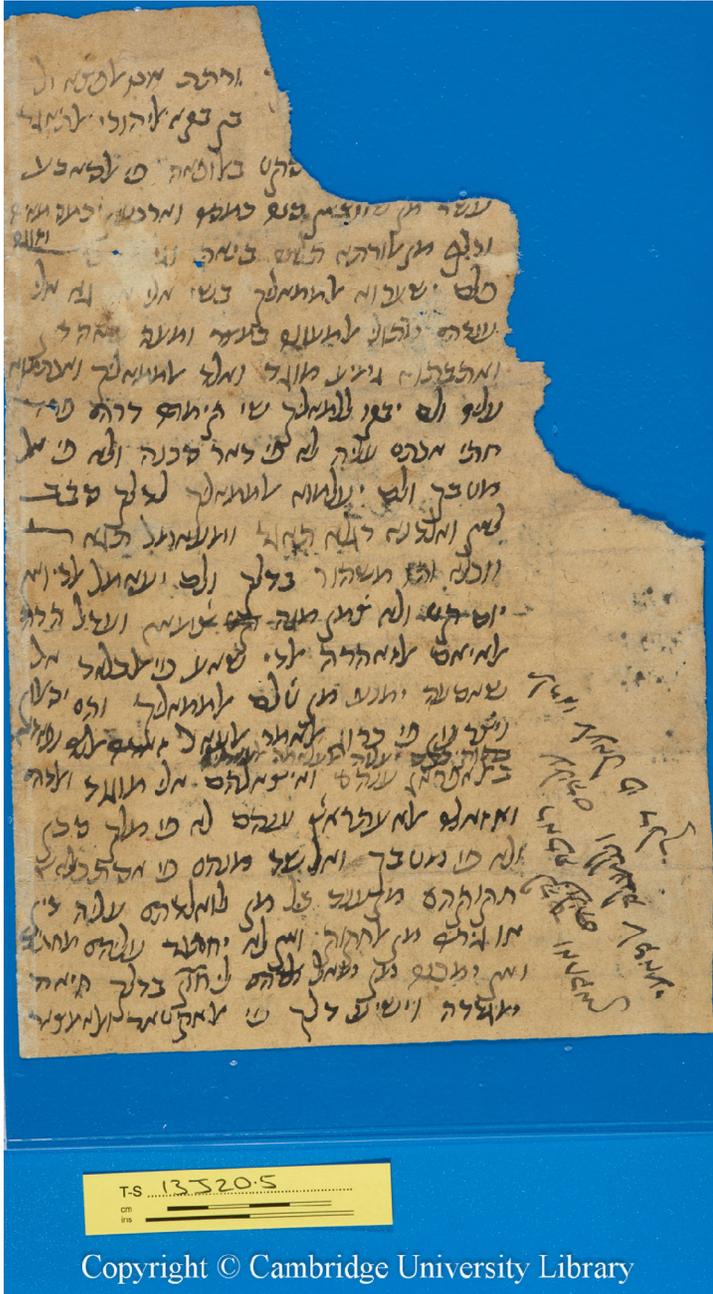


Fig. 6. A second draft in Hebrew script of a petition to the Fatimid vizier Ibn al-Salār concerning the confiscation of property by a government official, 545/1151. Cambridge University Library, T-S 13J20.5, verso. Reproduced by kind permission of the Syndics of Cambridge University Library.

But where to find a professional? Did a petitioner from the countryside have to leave his human and animal dependents and his fields and make the journey to Cairo to petition the palace in person, or could he have his petition drawn up closer to home and submitted in absentia?

That brings us to the fourth of the five petitions that I will discuss here (fig. 7). It has remained unpublished until now; I offer a transcription and translation at the end of this essay.

A Petition from the Fayyūm

In the midst of a second consecutive year of inadequate Nile floods and mounting grain prices—a date is not mentioned, though later on it will become clear—a villager sent his son to Madīnat al-Fayyūm with one hundred dinars to buy seventy sacks of wheat or barley, the first for human consumption, the second for fodder. This was a large quantity of grain. It may have been intended as a stockpile or else to feed the population of the village and its livestock.

What happened next is not entirely clear because the petitioner alludes to it with some delicacy: “The news reached me that he (the petitioner’s son) had bought with them (the hundred *dīnārs*) seventy sacks of wheat and given them over to my lord the emir Abū Muḥammad al-Ḥasan b. Thiḡat al-Dawla.” Given them over to the emir voluntarily or forcibly? Had the emir confiscated them? Had he done so on his own rogue initiative, or was he following the orders of his superiors to requisition grain from villagers and stockpile it for the state? Either way, the petitioner wanted his grain back. He asks that the district governor (*qāʿid*) issue a decree to an official to intercept the sacks of grain as soon as they reached Giza, the Nile port of Fatimid Cairo, so that they could then be given back to him.¹⁰

The official to whom the petition is addressed is, unusually, a woman: Sitt al-Mulk, the sister of al-Ḥākim (386–411/996–1021), who held power tantamount to that of a vizier for roughly two years after her brother’s death. Al-Ḥākim’s son and successor, al-Zāhir (411–427/1021–1036), was a young boy when he rose to the caliphate. Sitt al-Mulk, his aunt, ruled the Fatimid state until she herself died, probably having been poisoned. A contemporary chronicler mentions that Sitt al-Mulk received petitions in her *dīwān*. It is one thing to read this brief notice, but quite another to hold in one’s hands an

¹⁰For a full explication of the case, including how I deduced the date of the document on the basis of formulary, low Niles, and mounting grain prices, see Marina Rustow, “Famine, State Extraction and Subjects’ Rights in Fatimid Egypt: A Second Petition to the Princess Sitt al-Mulk from the Cairo Geniza” (in progress).

actual petition addressed to her.¹¹ Three petitions to Sitt al-Mulk survived in the Geniza: one currently at the Bodleian, from a member of the high Isma'ili elite who was the administrator of a congregational mosque in Cairo or Fustat that Sitt al-Mulk had endowed; another at Cambridge, which is faded and remains unpublished; and the one I present here.¹²

Sitt al-Mulk's power and wealth can be deduced from the fact that the Western Palace at Cairo was built for her. Although nothing remains of the building's structure (the site now houses a Mamluk mausoleum and madrasa), its ornate and astonishingly detailed carved wooden doors have survived in the collection of the Museum of Islamic Art in Cairo, and they offer a sense of the splendor of the palace. The same chronicler who says Sitt al-Mulk received petitions confirms that, during the two-year period of her rule, she developed *hayba*, a quality best translated as "awe" in both the objective and the subjective senses: a larger-than-life demeanor, the capacity to follow through on one's implicit threats, and, therefore, the ability to inspire awe and dread in others.¹³

The petitioner is the otherwise unknown Yaḥyā b. al-Ḥasan, district unknown. His name is written in the upper left-hand corner of the page (fig. 7). He is called a "slave" (*abd*), not because he was literally chattel, but as a way of representing his abject submission before the mercy of his addressee. Petitioners are usually styled either *abd* or *mamlūk*, also meaning "slave." The scribe has placed the *tarjama* in the upper left-hand corner, as was usual in this period. But he has inadvertently omitted the name of the petitioner's district. Perhaps he meant to return to the *tarjama* once he had reached the end of the petition but then forgot. This offers a possible clue as to how one went about having a petition written: the petitioner stood before the scribe narrating his predicament; the scribe decided whether the case was worth his time; if it was, he attempted to render the story in a concise and clear form, only then clarifying the details of the petitioner's name and district (*nāḥiya*).

The omission of the district suggests that the scribe did not know the petitioner personally. On the other hand, a district was a relatively small administrative unit, and this supports the possibility that the petitioner did not have to go far to have his petition written.

¹¹al-Musabbihī, *Al-Juz' al-arba'ūn min Akhbār Miṣr*, ed. Ayman Fu'ād Sayyid and Thierry Bianquis (Cairo, 1978), 111.

¹²Bodl. MS Heb. b 18.23, in Marina Rustow, "A Petition to a Woman at the Fatimid Court (413–414 A.H./1022–23 C.E.)," *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 73 (2010): 1–27; T-S Ar. 42.194, cited in Khan, "The Historical Development of the Structure of Medieval Arabic Petitions," 20, and *Arabic Legal and Administrative Documents in the Cambridge Genizah Collections*, 314 n. 39. T-S Ar. 42.194 is addressed to a recipient called *mawlatūnā al-sayyida* and *al-ḥaḍra al-sharīfa*.

¹³See Rustow, "A Petition to a Woman at the Fatimid Court," 10 n. 30.

Two other clues in the text support this reading. First, the petition requests a rescript (*tawqīʿ*) from the district governor (*qāʿid*), not from the caliph or his chancery. While in lodging a petition to Sitt al-Mulk the petitioner had turned to the highest echelon of the administration in the capital, the intervention he requested was at the district level. Second, the physical evidence of the petition itself speaks volubly when one compares it with the petition to Sitt al-Mulk from the Ismaʿīli mosque administrator in Cairo or Fustat (fig. 8). The petition from the capital is written in a practiced chancery-style hand. This one is written in a script that is, for its time period, archaic: it has more in common with late Arabic papyri of the fourth/tenth century than it does with paper documents of the Fatimid period, and it seems generally untouched by the proportioned script (*khatt mansūb*) of the Fatimid chancery and, before that, of the Abbasid east in the early fourth/tenth century. Note the S-shaped or double-hairpin *kāf*, the backward slant of the ascender of the *ṭā*, the toothless *ṣād*, the dull hairpin *ḥā*, the open final *nūn*, and the lack of consistent proportioning of the letters: the scribe's hand is a pre-Fatimid paleographic fossil stuck in the sedimentary layer of the Fatimid period. The most straightforward explanation for this is that he was writing far from the capital. The layout of his petition is similarly revealing: while he has placed the *tarjama* correctly at the upper left, his lines are not boat shaped, his baselines are neither fragmented nor nested in parallel, his line spacing is not as broad as it is on other state documents, and his stacking of words at the ends of lines is unconvincing. Like the dialects of remote places, the diplomatics of provincial scribes casts light on areas of empire that had not yet caught up with the new diplomatic system of the capital.

If, in turn, our scribe was working far from the capital, there may well have been other scribes far from the capital. If there were scribes far from the capital, then there was a class of petition-writing lower officials. If there was a class of petition-writing officials, then the high officials at Cairo knew that they were there and might even have put them there. And, if the high officials tolerated or encouraged those scribes to work in the peripheries, then they very much wanted their subjects to be able to petition.

As well they should. Surviving administrative manuals from the Fatimid period emphasize the importance of petitioning for good government. Al-Qāḍī al-Nuʿmān, chief judge and chief qadi of the Fatimids in Ifrīqiya and the architect of the blueprint for Fatimid sovereignty in Egypt, exhorts the caliph to allow *kharāj*-paying subjects to “complain to you about a heavy *kharāj*” or about “the cutting off of irrigation water, or the destruction of the soil by inundation, or desiccation, or some devastating plague” and to ask that he “alleviate their burden.” He further exhorts upper officials: “Enquire about the needs of the poor and destitute whose wants may not have become known to you, whom the overseers do not deign notice, and whom people

do not think important enough to bring their need before you. Establish as a guardian for them someone on whose advice you can fully rely, someone most scrupulous in accomplishing good deeds and most humble before God, one of those who do not despise the weak and do not magnify the powerful. Command him to bring their affairs to your attention, then take good care of these, for the emaciated of the flock has more need of just treatment and solicitude than do the plump ones.”¹⁴

If a motive turns a homicide into a murder, the emphasis of the administrative manuals on petitioning makes the diffuseness of Fatimid petition writers throughout the territory seem deliberate indeed. Only by making formal petition writers accessible could the palace ensure a steady supply of requests for aid and complaints about corrupt officials, and only by supplying justice could it ensure a steady supply of tax revenue. This petition to Sitt al-Mulk, then, along with its non-identical twin from Cairo, suggests that petition-writing scribes could be found in central and remote areas alike.

Form and Structure of the Arabic Petition

In his pathbreaking work on the Arabic petition, Geoffrey Khan outlined a seven- or eight-part structure of the Fatimid petition: (1) name of sender (*tarjama*); (2) divine invocation (*basmala*); (3) opening blessings on the addressee (*ṣalwala*); (4) obeisance (*taqbīl*) clause, usually some variant on the petitioner “kisses the ground,” but only in petitions from the reign of al-Āmir (495–525/1101–1130) forward; (5) presentation of the problem (*narratio*); (6) request (*qiṣṣā*); (7) *raʿy* clause; and (8) closing blessings (*ḥamdala* and *ḥasbala*).¹⁵ Components 2, 4, 7, and 8 are truly formulaic; components 1, 3, and 6 are predictable in form but not wording; and component 5 is pure free text.

Khan’s analysis of the technical details of the petition structure opened up the diplomatic study of the petition as a genre and made it possible to date undated medieval Arabic petitions to within a dynasty at the most, a decade at the least. It also revealed the complexity of the Fatimid petition compared to what had preceded it. The increased complexity of the Fatimid petition stands to reason. The petition was an administrative tool serving the sovereign’s claims on legitimacy, benevolence, and justice; its diplomatic form provided

¹⁴al-Qāḍī al-Nuʿmān b. Muḥammad b. Ḥayyūn, *Daʿāʾim al-Islām wa-dhikr al-halāl wa-l-ḥarām wa-l-qadāya wa-l-aḥkām ʿan ahl rasūl allāh ʿalayhi wa-ʿalayhim aḥdā al-salām*, ed. A. A. A. Fyze, 2 vols. (Cairo, 1951–61), 2nd ed. (Cairo, 1963), 1:363, 366–68. Also quoted in al-Qalqashandī, *Ṣubḥ al-aʿshā fī ṣinʿat al-inshā*, 10:12–15.

¹⁵Khan, “The Historical Development of the Structure of Medieval Arabic Petitions.”

a highly specialized version of this tool to a regime that depended on it, from its political-philosophical foundation to its practical everyday governance.

The maps we draw of the structure of a formulaic document are inevitably a product of the questions we ask. The explicit statements of concern with the *quid pro quo* of justice for tax revenue that I have found in Fatimid works on governance led me to reexamine Khan's corpus, S. M. Stern's, and my own with questions about structure in mind, and I have found reason to identify a ninth part of the structure of the Fatimid petition: the *arenga*. In Latin charters, an *arenga* is the section in which an institutional authority (pope, bishop, lord) explains that he or she is granting this charter out of piety, obedience to God, magnanimity, or the like. Fatimid decrees, likewise, emphasize that God has entrusted the caliph with just government and that he is therefore issuing this decree. In Fatimid decrees, the *arenga* is the penultimate item in the total structure. In Fatimid petitions, by contrast, the penultimate section is the *ra'y* clause ("to the Presence belongs the exalted opinion in this matter"). But, grammatically, it is often connected to an *arenga*-like statement. So I would map it as the eighth of the nine parts—the penultimate section, just as in Fatimid decrees.

In the case of our petition from the Fayyūm, the *arenga*-like clause reads: "since she is characterized by magnanimity and abundant benefaction and manifest kindness." The *arenga* comes just before the *ra'y* clause because, like the *ra'y* clause, it softens the request while flattering the recipient: the decision lies in your hands, but you will choose to help because you are noble, gracious, and magnanimous. In the *arengae* of decrees, the ruler notes these qualities about himself or herself. In petitions, the *arenga* is spoken in the person of the petitioner, but it echoes the decree. Or, to phrase things in their proper temporal order, just as the petitioner notes, "You are generous, and I am in need," in answer, the patron explains the reason that he or she has granted the request: "I am generous, and you are in need, and my job is to protect needy people like you." The echo of *arenga* for *arenga*, I would argue, serves as a kind of social contract. The petition was a forum in which subjects explicitly consented to a patron-client relationship with their sovereigns, and vice versa, with all the reciprocal obligations that that relationship entailed: service and loyalty for protection and benefaction.¹⁶

¹⁶Marina Rustow, "Formal and Informal Patronage among Jews in the Islamic East: Evidence from the Cairo Geniza," *Al-Qanṭara: Revista de estudios árabes* 29 (2008): 81–122, "Benefaction (*ni'ma*), Gratitude (*shukr*), and the Politics of Giving and Receiving," in *Giving in Monotheistic Religions*, ed. Miriam Frenkel and Yaacov Lev (Berlin, 2009), 343–68, and "Patronage in the Context of Solidarity and Reciprocity: Two Paradigms of Social Cohesion in the Premodern Mediterranean," in *Patronage, Production and Transmission: Books in Medieval and Early Modern Jewish Cultures*, ed. María Esperanza Alfonso and Jonathan Decter (Turnhout, 2014), 13–44.

Because the *arenga* is a historically variable component of the Arabic petition that expanded in the Fatimid period, I believe that it deserves notice as a distinct part of the petition's diplomatic structure. It serves, in a sense, as the philosophical underpinning of the entire petition-and-response process.

I will end with a metacomment. I have identified the *arenga* as a distinct part of the Fatimid petition in part because of its historical variability—because, as a diplomatic component, it seems to emerge distinctively in the Fatimid period. But I have also done so in view of the political intent and purpose of the petition. Diplomatic analyses may seem objective and structural. In fact, they are always influenced by historical context and, in turn, by the kinds of questions we ask of our documents.

Jewish Theological Seminary Library, ENA 3974.3¹⁷

ENA 3974.3 is a petition to Sitt al-Mulk from a certain Yahyā b. al-Ḥasan complaining that a local emir has confiscated his grain, 411–414/1021–1024:

1. عبدها يحيى بن الحسن من ناحية < >
2. بسم الله الرحمن الرحيم
3. اعلم مولاتنا السيدة خلد الله ملكها وثبت عزها ببقا مولانا وسيدنا
4. الامام الظاهر لاعزاز دين الله امير المؤمنين صلوات الله عليه وعلى ابائه
5. الطاهرين [vacat] اني تحت ضر وفاقه من قلة القوت و علف الحمار واني
6. احتاج في كل يوم خبز و علف للدابة بثلاثين درهما كل ليلة فلما
7. طال علي ذلك حملت ولدي على العون ودفعت له مائة دينار
8. وانفذته الى مدينة الفيوم يشتري بها قمح او شعير ناكله
9. فجائني الخبر بانه قد ابتاع بها سبعين تليس قمح ونسبها
10. لمولاي الامير ابي محمد الحسن بن ثقة الدولة ادام الله عزه وانا
11. اسل مولاتنا خلد الله ملكها وثبت عزها التوجيه للقائد
12. خصي باخذ توقيع منه باطلاقها ساعة وصولها للجيزة
13. فان تاخر ذلك عني ذهب تعب {ة} عبدها ولدي ورجعت الى

¹⁷I have used the following conventions in my transcription. Square brackets indicate a lacuna of any length; text within square brackets is my suggested completion. Angle brackets indicate that the scribe has inadvertently omitted some text and I have not attempted to restore it. Double brackets surround a *rasura*, text that the scribe has crossed out but is still visible. Curly brackets indicate superfluous letters that the scribe has added. Square brackets surrounding the word *vacat* (Latin “it is empty”) indicate a space that the scribe has inserted between structural sections of the text.

14. عيلة مولاتنا فان عندنا [[ما]] من العيال ما لو ابصرتهم
 15. لرحمتهم ولولا اظاقة البأس لما تثقلت على مولاتنا
 16. في شي وان كان لا يثقل على كرمها شي لانها موصوفة
 17. بالكرم والاحسان الجزيل والمعروف البين
 18. ولمولاتنا الكريمة عالي الراي في اجابة عبدها فيما سال
 19. [الحمد لله وحده وصلواته على سيدنا محمد وسلم تسليماً]

Translation

Name of Sender (tarjama)

1. Her slave Yahyā b. al-Ḥasan from the district of (scribe has omitted place-name):

Invocation (basmala)

2. In the name of God, the merciful, the compassionate.

Opening Blessings (ṣalwala)

3. I inform our mistress, the lady—may God make her dominion eternal and strengthen her loftiness in the permanence of our master and lord
 4. the imam al-Zāhir li-i'zāz dīn Allāh, Commander of the Faithful, the prayers of God be upon him and his pure
 5. fathers—

Presentation of Problem (matn, ba'diyya, narratio)

5. that I am in distress and need due to shortage of food and fodder for the donkey, and that
 6. each day I require bread and fodder for my riding animal in the amount of thirty *dirhāms* per night. And when
 7. I had endured this (shortage) for (too) long, I convinced my son to help. I gave him one hundred *dīnārs*
 8. and sent him to Madīnat al-Fayyūm to buy wheat or barley there for us to eat.
 9. Then the news reached me that he had bought with them (the hundred *dīnārs*) seventy sacks of wheat and given them over
 10. to my lord the emir Abū Muḥammad al-Ḥasan b. Thiḡat al-Dawla, may God prolong his power.

Request (qiṣṣa or ruq'a)

10.

11. am asking our lady—may God make her dominion eternal and strengthen her power—to send a eunuch
12. to the district governor to take a decree from him releasing them (the sacks of wheat) as soon as they reach Giza.

Arenga

13. If he holds it up from me (the permission to release the sacks of wheat), the toil of her servant my son will be in vain, and I will return to
14. the support of our lady, since our household has so many dependents that were she to see them,
15. she would have compassion toward them (and relieve their suffering). Were it not for the oppression of misery, I would not have imposed upon our lady
16. in any way, even though her magnanimity does not weigh heavily on me at all, since she is characterized
17. by magnanimity and abundant benefaction and manifest kindness.

Dispositiōlra'y Clause

18. And to our gracious mistress belongs the lofty resolution in answering her servant in what he has requested.

Closing Blessings (ḥamdala and taṣliyya)

19. [Praise be to God, the only, and his prayers and pe]a[c]e [upon our lord Muḥammad.]

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