THREE PETITIONS OF THE FĀṭIMID PERIOD

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Many years have passed since, dipping into the vast stores of Geniza papers in Cambridge and Oxford, I came across a number of documents connected with the working of Fāṭimid administration. I have announced the discovery, and published one of the documents, on a previous occasion; but it is only now that I can offer a substantial study of this material by publishing three representative specimens (discovered as long ago as 1949) and examining them in detail. The documents in question are petitions addressed either to the caliph or (in the case of the third) to the vizier and concern private grievances of the petitioner. After commenting each of the documents in turn, I add an exhaustive study of the diplomatic of the petition in the Fāṭimid period, a study which will, I think, contribute something to the knowledge of Fāṭimid administration and may even be considered as instructive in regard to Islamic bureaucratic practice and administration of justice in general.

Other documents, complete or fragmentary, are held over for subsequent publications (two fragments are discussed in the course of the commentary which forms the second part of this study). I should like to take this opportunity to appeal to fellow-workers in the investigation of the immense collection of the Cairo Geniza for help in tracing the Fāṭimid documents. Apart from some isolated specimens from the Bodleian Library in Oxford, the documents discovered by me come from the Taylor-Schechter Collection of Geniza papers in the Cambridge University Library. My acquaintance with Geniza material is more or

1 I.e. material recovered from the lumber-chamber of a synagogue in Old Cairo.
2 An original document from the Fāṭimid chancery concerning Italian merchants, in: Studi orientalisticì in onore di G. Levi Della Vida, Rome 1956, ii, 529-38. Here, and in other studies on Islamic diplomatic, I shall use “chancery” to render diwān al-inšā‘, and regret now that in that previous article I have used the word in a loose way: the document published in it, a report about the arrival of Italian merchants, was addressed to some government office, but not to the Chancery, the diwān al-inšā‘.
less limited to the collections of the Cambridge University Library, the Bodleian Library and the British Museum, and whereas I have made a systematic search through the fifty-one "Arabic Boxes" in Cambridge and believe that I know all the Fāṭimid documents found there, all those familiar with the Geniza papers (consisting to a large extent of thousands and thousands of loose sheets of the most varied content and only superficially classified) will find it natural if I say that I am far from assuming that I have traced all the documents which may exist even in the libraries known to me, not to speak of those with which I am not personally acquainted. In addition it remains to be seen whether collections of other provenance, such as papers preserved in Vienna and elsewhere, do not also contain similar documents. I do not speak in this connection of the important documents of the monastery of St. Catherine's in Sinai, or the similar documents preserved in the Coptic Museum and the archive of the Karaite community in Cairo, since these decrees issued by the Fāṭimid Chancery and preserved by the bodies to which they have been granted so many centuries ago, form a group which will hardly increase (at least considerably) by further discoveries. (This lot of documents, nine in number 1, will be published and discussed by me in a forthcoming volume entitled Fāṭimid Decrees.) It is quite different with collections derived from "archeological" sources, such as the Geniza and, possibly, excavations, and the writer would be grateful if scholars who have found in such collections documents of the type published in the following pages, would either publish them themselves or communicate their discoveries to him.

We can now proceed in medias res and consider, first, the documents themselves. The second part of our study will be devoted, as was said before, to a general investigation into the form of the petition in the Fāṭimid period and its function in the administration of that empire.

1 I have given a preliminary account of the seven extant Fāṭimid decrees granted to the Sinai monastery, and published the first of them, in my article A Fāṭimid decree of the year 524/1130, BSOAS, 1960, pp. 439 ff. The document belonging to the Coptic Museum has been published by A. Grohmann and P. Labib, Ein Fātimidenerlass vom Jahre 415 A.H. (1024 A.D.) im Koptischen Museum in All-Kairo, RSO, 1957, pp. 641 ff., that belonging to the Karaite community by Richard [J. H.] Gottheil, A Decree in Favour of the Karaïtes of Cairo dated 1024, Festschrift zu Ehren des Dr. A. Harkavy, ed. D. von Günzburg and I. Markon, St. Petersburg 1908, pp. 115-25. All these decrees will be published, or re-published, in the volume mentioned above.