

International Trade and the Medieval Egyptian Countryside

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THE STUDY OF THE MEDIEVAL Islamic countryside, and of the silent majority that inhabited it, is enveloped by a considerable obscurity with only occasional and partial clearings. Our familiarity with the medieval Egyptian (and, more generally, Middle Eastern) countryside is vague and imprecise. Fundamental issues remain unclarified and unstudied. We are bereft of some of the most basic notions and concepts to describe, understand, and analyse the agricultural and rural history of the Islamic Middle East. Abhorring this vacuum, historians of the pre-modern Middle East have slowly begun to mobilise to fill in some of the voids in our knowledge. If we exclude for the moment research and publication on fiscal and administrative issues pertaining to agriculture in the early centuries of Islam, most of this work has been produced during the past twenty-five years. In his superb bibliographic survey of Middle Eastern historical studies that appeared in 1991, Stephen Humphreys already found it possible to devote an entire chapter to 'The Voiceless Classes of Islamic Society — The Peasantry and Rural Life'. This chapter contains a fairly comprehensive survey and review of the literature on agriculture and rural life in the Middle East published through 1988, and covers the area extending from Iran through North Africa and Muslim Spain during the pre-modern period. Humphreys points to the penury of our sources, regrets the fact that 'in medieval Islamic culture, the peasant seems both voiceless and invisible' and laments the absence (with one notable exception for North Africa) of any comprehensive work on pre-modern rural society. He concludes that 'in the end, our neglect of the peasant in Islamic studies is a failure

of curiosity—and perhaps also a failure . . . to suppose that he had any history'.¹

In some ways, this paper can be seen as an illustration of Humphreys' point about the importance of curiosity in furthering historical research, especially in a situation of scarcity of relevant sources. The material on which it is based, the business letters from the Cairo Geniza, are an unlikely and unexpected source for information on Egyptian rural history. Among these documents are scores of letters written to or from villages, and many more that refer to economic exchanges with rural settlements both in the Delta and in Middle Egypt. None of these letters is newly discovered. All have been known to scholars for at least forty years now and have been liberally used as a source for studies of the grand international commerce of the Mediterranean during the eleventh and twelfth centuries. Quite a number have, in whole or in part, been translated. Yet the unique and unmediated information they contain on the economic and social realities of Egyptian rural life, scant though it may be, has been largely overlooked. It is, to paraphrase Humphreys, both curiosity and the assumption that medieval Egyptian rural society has a history—even if it is somewhat difficult to access—that have transformed documents of the grand commerce of the Mediterranean Sea into documents of the more humble rural history of little-known villages of Middle Egypt.

Textiles in Medieval Mediterranean Trade

Texts of rural provenance found their way into the Geniza primarily because Egyptian villages served as sources both of raw materials and manufactured goods being exchanged in Mediterranean commerce. Most prominent among these were items connected with cloth and textiles.

Textile production and all the processes connected with it were the leading industrial activity of the Middle Ages. It is against the background of this major economic reality of the Middle Eastern and European medieval world (a reality that may also have extended to large parts of Asia), that the renewal and expansion of commercial exchange in the Mediterranean in the eleventh and subsequent centuries should be seen.

The enormous volume of textile production in the medieval Islamic world was a major source of regional and interregional commerce. Demand for textiles emanated from virtually all segments of the society and also from sources beyond its cultural and political frontiers. Egyptian society of the eleventh century accommodated this enormous demand by a specialisation and division of labour that resulted in the concentration of entire communities and towns on the manufacture of specific textile products (as was the case, for example, with Tinnis

¹ Humphreys (1991), 284.

on the north-eastern edge of the Egyptian Delta). More directly relevant to this study, it might also involve the adjustment of other sectors of the economy, especially agriculture, so as to be able to supply adequate and appropriate raw materials for textile production.²

Egyptian Flax in the Eleventh Century

Before cotton, it was flax and linen that Egypt contributed to the international trade in textiles. From classical times through the High Middle Ages, Egyptian flax and linen products were much-sought-after commodities in regional and international commerce. By the eleventh century, the production of flax had to satisfy not only the considerable needs of Egypt's internal market, but also a growing demand from other parts of the Mediterranean—Europe, Spain and North Africa. Our evidence for this export activity and its considerable magnitude dates from the early decades of the eleventh century, and continues uninterrupted for most of the century. Thus we have a century's worth of documentation on this aspect of flax in and from Egypt.

During the eleventh century, the thriving and expanding Mediterranean commerce in textiles had two major economic consequences for Egypt: flax became the most important industrial crop of Egyptian agriculture as well as one of its leading export commodities.³

Flax of the highest quality was produced in many parts of Egypt, but it was from the regions of Middle Egypt, particularly the little-known village of Busir Quridis and its surrounding area, that most of the data furnished by the Geniza documents concerning the cultivation and commerce in flax derives. It appears that the merchants represented in the Geniza documents entertained a privileged relationship with the producers and distributors in the regions south of Cairo, most particularly those of Busir. There were certainly many other sources for flax in Egypt both in the Delta and in the area around Fayyum. However, the 'Geniza flax', if we may call it that, came primarily from Busir and its region.

As early as the year 1000, raw flax was already an important item of Egyptian export. During the first four decades of the eleventh century, the most important family in the trade between Egypt, Tunisia, and other parts of the western Mediterranean was the house of Ibn 'Awkal. Members of this family and their agents were based in Egypt and in several ports along the Tunisian coast. Their annual volume of trade ran into the tens of thousands of gold dinars. While their stock in trade was quite diversified, including dyeing materials, spices, aromatic

² The role of textile production in the medieval world is best summarised by Lombard (1978), 15.

³ Goitein (1967), 104–5.

and medicinal plants, and precious stones, the single most important commodity they exported from Egypt to Tunisia, Sicily and Spain was raw flax.⁴ Judging from the types of flax traded by the house of Ibn 'Awkal (Ashmuni, Busiri, Misari), the primary (and perhaps exclusive) sources of supply for this export commodity were the rural districts of Middle Egypt in the Nile Valley to the south of Cairo, to the exclusion of the rich flax-growing areas of the Delta. This means that from approximately the year 1000 onward, Ibn 'Awkal's representatives were present annually not only in Busir, where the bulk of their flax was acquired, but also in several other villages in the districts of Bahnasa and Ashmunayn.

Volume of Flax Trade

Although the surviving letters from the Ibn 'Awkal firm and from its contemporaries are small in number and often fragmentary, they furnish us with dispersed items of quantitative information that permit us to make an informal estimate of the volume of flax exports during the first four decades of the eleventh century.

One letter refers to over 179 bales of flax belonging to Ibn 'Awkal sent before the end of May (that is, within the first six or eight weeks of the Mediterranean sailing season) from Egypt to the Tunisian port of al-Mahdiyya. Writing from Alexandria, Ibn 'Awkal's representative there reports as follows:

I have written five letters to my lord, Abi Zikri [an important business associate of Ibn 'Awkal], may God see to his well-being, informing him of all the goods I have sent to al-Mahdiyya during the current season; this amounts to 179 bales and two *barqalu* [a package or small bale of about 200 pounds]. I informed him of the ships carrying the cargo and of the extent of the advance payment for the freight, and the like.⁵

In his study of the Ibn 'Awkal letters, Norman Stillman estimates the weight of these 179 bales as 'almost 54 tons', and their value at approximately 4,860 dinars.⁶ It is probable that all this merchandise was dispatched in a single convoy during the early part of the sailing season. Consequently, it is virtually certain that this figure represents only a fraction of the total amount of raw flax exported by Ibn 'Awkal and his associates in any single year.⁷ In addition to

⁴ The business correspondence of the Ibn 'Awkal family consists of sixty-one items which date to the years 980–1076 and has been carefully studied by Goitein (1967–69), and Stillman (1970) and (1973). According to Stillman, twelve of the Ibn 'Awkal letters—one-third of the surviving commercial correspondence—are devoted to the flax trade.

⁵ Cambridge University Library. T. S. 13 J 17 folio 3, lines 24–29; for text and Hebrew trans. cf. Goitein (1967–69), 36, 372–5.

⁶ Stillman (1973), 29.

⁷ The table of flax transactions in Stillman (1973), 31, assumes that the 179 bales and two *barqalu* refers to the total shipments for the entire year. From the context, I believe that the meaning is rather: 'for the year up to now'.

Tunisian ports, substantial amounts were simultaneously sent to other destinations in Tunisia and Sicily. In a severely damaged letter written to Ibn 'Awkal from either Qayrawan or Palermo, the writer describes in detail the arrival of a very large shipment of flax of approximately 600 *qintars* (=30 tons). Not all of this belonged to Ibn 'Awkal, but the volume of one series of shipments is nevertheless quite impressive.⁸

Since mercantile convoys continued to sail westward from Egyptian ports throughout the summer and early autumn, it is not unreasonable to estimate Ibn 'Awkal's flax exports at three or four times the 179 bales referred to above, possibly reaching 200 tons or more.

A rare glimpse into the overall volume of flax exports from Egypt to the central and western Mediterranean is provided in a letter from Alexandria addressed to Ibn 'Awkal in Fustat and written on the 16th of the Hebrew month of *Tevet* (mid-December) some time in the 1020s. Disruptions in the last scheduled westward convoy resulted in a backlog of 'more than five thousand loads' (*ahmâl*) of merchandise. These bales, destined for the ports of Tunisia, Sicily, and Spain, remained stranded in the warehouses and quays of Alexandria.⁹

While some other types of merchandise were probably included in this considerable stockpile, there can be little doubt that almost the entire content of these over 5,000 packages consisted of flax. The Arabic term used here (*himl*, plural *ahmâl*) designates the largest unit of freight; these loads often contained more than one bale and their weight is estimated at about 600 pounds. Approximately 1,500 tons of flax intended for export were, thus, left to winter in Alexandria. This figure represents the excess of one single westward convoy from Alexandria. If we assume three or four such voyages during the sailing season (that comprised the months of April through the end of September), we can estimate the volume of flax exports as between five to six thousand tons annually.

In a similarly impressionistic manner, but bolstered by a large body of circumstantial evidence, we can suppose that the volume of raw-flax exports expanded even further during the second half of the eleventh century, at least from the regions of Upper Egypt. While we cannot put a figure to this expansion, we can demonstrate a considerably intensified commercial interest in the flax-producing districts of the Fayyum, Bahnasa and adjacent areas, and a probable expansion of the land area devoted to flax cultivation. For example, the letters of Ibn 'Awkal from the 1020s and 1030s mention six types of flax, all named for geographic locations in Upper Egypt, whereas the documents from the second half of the century refer to twenty-two varieties of flax, most of these also named for the villages and districts of Egypt that produced them.¹⁰

⁸ Cambridge University Library T. S. 13 J 29 f.9. See Stillman (1970), 387ff.

⁹ Goitein (1967-69), 37, 50-2; Stillman (1973), 28-9.

¹⁰ Goitein (1967), 226-7 and 465-6, n. 61.

Busir as a Sub-Regional Centre

No medieval Arabic sources provide any hint—direct or indirect—concerning the size of Busir's population, or any information whatsoever about its 'urban' topography. Early geographical works mention Busir briefly and only in passing, giving its name and indicating its approximate location. Even the Egyptian administrative manuals and cadastral surveys compiled by government bureaucrats of the twelfth through fifteenth centuries allocate but a few lines to this town. Typical is the entry in the *Kitab al-intisar* by Ibn Duqmaq (d. 1406):

Abusir Quridis—This town is one of the ancient cities. It is located at the top of a mountain belonging to the Hajir (?) of the Bani Sulayman tribe. Its 'ibra [revenue] is thirty thousand dinars and its size is . . . It is now attached to the *diwan al-sharif al-sultani*. Marwan b. Muhammad *al-himar* [i.e., the donkey], the last of the Umayyad kings, was killed at this place.¹¹

Indeed, the assassination of the last Umayyad caliph within its precincts—an event recalled in the entries on Busir in several other works as well—was Busir's sole claim to any notoriety.

While we can make no absolute statement about its medieval population, we can say something about its relative position in the hierarchy of settled places in Middle Egypt. In his cadastral survey, Ibn Ji'an lists Busir as one of 151 towns, villages, and hamlets in the Bahnasa province (*al-a'mal al-Bahnasawiyya*). Ibn Ji'an, of course, wrote in the mid-fifteenth century, and we certainly cannot assume that the position and role of Busir that he observed was identical, or even similar to that of this village some four centuries earlier. Nevertheless, it is only Ibn Ji'an and Ibn Duqmaq that give us any quantitative indications at all about Busir. The annual revenue ('ibra) of the settlements in this province ranged in value from a low of 700 dinars for a small place called Al-Bahjur to a high of 54,000 dinars for Wahat, a rural complex that contained fifty hamlets or subdivisions.¹² Busir, with its annual revenue of some 20,000 dinars (30,000 according to Duqmaq) was one of the larger towns of the district and probably functioned as one of the several non-regional centres in the province.¹³ Thus it was much more than a hamlet, but barely a town—one of dozens of such settlements, some of them much larger, dispersed throughout the provinces of Egypt.

All the earlier references to Busir, in sources closer to the dates of the documents discussed here, are very brief. With the exception of the geographer

¹¹ Ibn Ji'an, *Tuhfa*, 159. An almost identical description is given by Ibn Duqmaq, *Kitab al-intisar*. Other medieval references to Busir, or Abu Sir Al-Malak, may be found in Maspero and Wiet (1914); Ramzi (1960); Halm (1979–83).

¹² Ibn Ji'an, *Tuhfa*, 173.

¹³ Ibn Ji'an, *Tuhfa*, 159ff.

Al-Muqaddasi writing in the early eleventh century, none of our sources associate Busir with the production and distribution of flax, nor do they contain any hint of the town's local or regional importance.¹⁴ Indeed, none of the earlier writers seem to be clear even about Busir's exact location.

Without the fortuitous, almost accidental evidence from the Geniza documents about its 'teeming' and rather complex social and economic life, Busir would have remained for us and for posterity a simple two- or three-line entry in medieval geographical dictionaries or administrative and tax manuals. Because of the new and suggestive evidence from the Geniza documents, we can now, for the first time, appreciate the significance of a place like Busir in its Egyptian context, as well as in its wider regional and Mediterranean commercial setting. One must justly wonder how many other such small but important towns have been overlooked and forgotten in the course of Egyptian history.

Monetisation of Rural Exchange

It was not only in the markets of great cities that the lines of demand and supply of eleventh-century Mediterranean commerce intersected. Points of contact were numerous and were dispersed in many places along the Mediterranean coast, reaching inland towns and, at a number of points, penetrating deep into the Egyptian countryside.

This spatial extension of eleventh-century commerce beyond the major entrepôts (such as Cairo and Alexandria) directly affected areas of rural Egypt in terms of the transmission of agricultural and other surpluses from the countryside to urban areas and beyond. It made a great difference to the nature and structure of rural society whether the surpluses—or a large portion of them—passed directly to governmental authorities in lieu of taxes, or whether some of these surpluses remained the property of inhabitants of the rural areas to be disposed of in an open market in part created by the requirements of international trade.

Until recently, the dominant hypothesis on this issue, although not held with unanimity, was that the rural surpluses belonged overwhelmingly to outside parties, and that the flow of money and goods was structurally unidirectional from the rural areas to the large political urban centres. Fief-holders did not live in, or close to their rural holdings, and the government bureaucracy was minimally represented in the countryside. Consequently only a trickle of goods and money flowed in the opposite direction.¹⁵

Evidence from the Geniza documents directly challenges this assumption for

¹⁴ Al-Muqaddasi, *Ahsan al-taqasim*, 203.

¹⁵ This is a view that I have upheld in earlier writing but now disavow; for a persuasive survey of urban-rural relations in the pre-modern Middle East, cf. Raymond (1987).

the mid-eleventh century and, combined with evidence from other sources, casts doubt on its general validity for medieval Egypt. In the Mediterranean basin, the commercial revolution of the eleventh century was gaining momentum. Egyptian flax and linen products figured very prominently in the expanding exchange between East and West in the eleventh-century Mediterranean. On this point the evidence of the Geniza documents is unequivocal. Emanating from Spain, western North Africa, Italy, and other parts of Christian Europe, the demand for these products converged on the commercial entrepôts of Tunisia and Egypt (al-Mahdiyya, Susa, Alexandria, Fustat, and even Tyre). The peak of commercial activity occurred annually during the months of April through September, the sailing season on the Mediterranean.¹⁶

To satisfy this powerful—at times insatiable—demand, Mediterranean merchants and their agents fanned out during the autumn and winter months into the flax-producing areas of the Egyptian countryside to acquire and store large quantities of high-quality flax fibres so as to be ready for the onslaught of Italian, Byzantine, and Spanish merchants who would arrive with the first commercial convoys of the spring in search of flax and other eastern goods.

At this time, Egypt was without doubt the largest producer of both flax and linen in the Mediterranean basin and in the Fertile Crescent. With rare exceptions, the demand for high-quality flax fibres far outstripped its supply, and the competition for acquiring sufficient quantities of this merchandise was keen. Only those well placed in this arena could expect to succeed. Among the basic prerequisites for such success was access to an ample reserve of cash in the form of gold coins (dinars) of recognised quality and minting that was acceptable to the local population. Providing an adequate supply of purses of gold coins to the buyers in the rural areas was the chief concern of letters sent to and from Busir, and was a frequent topic in numerous other letters that discussed the acquisition of flax.

Although most of the letters from which the following data are taken date from the middle of the eleventh century (c. 1045–55), the contacts between Mediterranean traders and the town of Busir and the consequent massive inflow of gold coins into that village can be documented from the very beginning of the eleventh century, and continued as long as the international demand for Egyptian flax persisted. We should also keep in mind what a dinar signified in terms of purchasing power in the eleventh century. According to Goitein, an average 'middle-class' family could cover its monthly expenses with an income of two dinars.

In the course of a single buying season, our Geniza merchants easily expended many thousands of dinars for flax purchases in Busir and its environs. The

¹⁶ On the commercial revolution cf. Lopez (1976); for the place of flax in the eleventh-century Mediterranean trade, cf. Goitein (1967), 104–5 and 224–8.

surviving letters represent only a small fraction of the transactions that actually took place. Some idea of the sums involved can be had from an account prepared in the 1020s for the Tunisian merchant Ibn 'Awkal detailing the sale of thirty-seven bales of flax acquired in Busir. The purchases of this single merchant involved an outlay of between 1,200 and 2,200 gold dinars, most of which was undoubtedly paid out directly in Busir. In the years 1045–50, from which most of our documentation on Busir derives, these levels appear to have been maintained and possibly exceeded.

None of the merchants from whose letters we are about to quote was as grand and powerful as Ibn 'Awkal; yet each letter speaks of hundreds of dinars of cash expended on flax and refers to numerous bales being prepared for shipment, or as having already been dispatched to Fustat. All the letters quoted below form part of the corpus of documents connected with the career of the merchant-scholar Nahray ben Nissim (c. 1025–96) who, although born in Qayrawan, Tunisia, spent his entire adult career (1045 until his death) in Fustat, the commercial capital of Egypt.¹⁷

In a letter from Fustat to a senior associate in Busir in early February some time between 1046 and 1049, Nahray b. Nissim wrote:

I am writing out of strong longing for you, may God in his grace and goodness bring close the time of our next meeting.

I cannot describe to you the anxiety I experienced about the bales of flax from Dandir [a town near Busir] until the arrival of your letters concerning the payment of 213 dinars. I was greatly relieved at their arrival [i.e. of the bales of flax]. I carried out your instructions. He paid to your paternal cousin Abu Ishaq approximately 90 dinars and I supplemented these with the 213 dinars. In addition, I paid two dirhams to the *jahbadh* [government banker]. Thus the sum of 500 dinars were recorded in our names in the register of the *jahbadh* of the Bureau of Expenditures [*diwan an-nafaqat*]. From them, Bashran the *jahbadh* took an official receipt [*wusul diwani*], and he gave me in his own writing a receipt for 200 dinars for the farmers of Dandir. I sent it to you with Abu 'Imran Musa; I now feel relieved about the matter.

In my view, you should hurry and load [ship?] all of the bales and be through with any dealings with the Treasury [*diwan*]. I met with the elder Abu al-Surur who told me: 'I am able to get you a letter for 20 bales.' I thanked him for the fact that he showed concern for us.¹⁸

Not all the financial and commercial details of this passage need to be elucidated here. The point to note is the large amounts of cash that are being sent to Busir—213 dinars were sent for the flax from Dandir; this sum was supplemented by another 90 dinars; 500 dinars for the purpose of acquiring flax were recorded with the Bureau of Expenditures. While part, or all, of this latter sum may have

¹⁷ For biographical details of Nahray ben Nissim cf. Goitein (1973), 145–74.

¹⁸ Cambridge University Library, T. S. 10 J 12 f. 26, lines 4–12.

remained in the capital, another 200 dinars was on its way for 'the farmers of Dandir,' as were other purses of coins referred to later in this same letter. While nothing definite was concluded between Nahray and Abu al-Surur concerning an additional 20 bales, their acquisition would have entailed the expenditure of approximately another 500 dinars. All in all, this letter refers to the possible expenditure of almost 1,500 dinars in cash in Busir and its immediate environs. I must emphasise again that this certainly does not represent all the purchases even of this small group of merchants.

The degree to which some sectors of the rural landscape had become monetised by the mid-eleventh century is vividly illustrated by a fascinating if somewhat problematic passage in a letter from a merchant of Busir to Nahray in the late 1040s.

I am gladdened at the prospect of your imminent arrival, since I know that you are an expert on the conditions in Busir and more experienced in them even than the elder Abu Ishaq. I have repeatedly sent him letters informing him of the situation here, of the high level of prices, of the abundant demand for flax, and of the reluctance of people to sell.

They will not accept anything but the best-quality dinars, the most desired coins. He sent me dinars which are not in the category of those accepted by the small flax dealers (*sa'alik*) or craftsmen, but are of the quality accepted by the farmers and estate-owners.¹⁹

In spite of the tantalising uncertainty of the last few lines of this passage, its general import is quite clear. The pressure of demand for flax affected the market in Busir in two ways: as one would expect, it pushed prices up; and, somewhat unexpectedly, it caused sellers to reject payment in dinars they ordinarily accepted and to insist on being paid only with the highest quality gold coins. Other details in the same letter confirm the feverish competition for the acquisition of top-quality flax. For example, some sellers accepted only gold *Mustansiriyya* dinars (named for the Fatimid Caliph al-Mustansir, r. 1036–94), and all insisted on scrupulously checking and verifying the quality of the dinars in the standard purses of coins. Clearly, the demand in Busir at this particular time was exceptionally strong. The passage cited above reveals the presence in this small village of considerable experience, familiarity, and sophistication with monetary matters, and further indicates that the 'cash nexus' had spread beyond the group of landowners and flax-brokers to include artisans, small farmers, and even day-labourers. As we shall see, other letters from Busir confirm distinctions in what one might call 'monetary consumption' along social and geographical lines. This, of course, is of great importance for the monetary history of medieval Egypt (and probably for the entire medieval Islamic world) and cer-

¹⁹ Cambridge University Library, T. S. 12 f. 793, lines 7–12. The Arabic term *sa'alik* has the very local, vernacular meaning of petty flax merchant or small producer.

tainly merits further study and interpretation. From the standpoint of medieval rural society, it points to a considerable degree of social differentiation within a small rural community, and to the fact that the framework of monetary exchange included many levels of that society.

An exchange of letters between Nahray b. Nissim in Fustat and his associate Abu al-Surur Farah b. Isma'il b. Farah in Busir in early December of c. 1045–7 illustrates other aspects of this same phenomenon. Nahray wrote to his friend:

In your letter you mentioned the purses of coins which you are sending in order to have them exchanged, and you complain that you will not be able to buy anything from the villages (*di'ah*) lest they demand an additional advance from you. . . . For this reason you should go back to making your purchases from the people of Busir.

There is no need for you to send the purses and to change the dinars, because they are already accepted currency in Busir. I had intended to change the purse of coins belonging to your paternal uncle that I have in my possession here in Fustat. But when your letter arrived stating that you will purchase flax for him in Busir, I refrained from changing them and will now send them as they are so that you can use them to purchase flax for him in Busir, according to his share and profit [Arabic: *bi-qisma wa-rizq*].

Likewise, you have in your possession the first purse of coins belonging to al-Kohen. . . . I will further send you an additional sum to bring the amount up to 120 dinars. Use the entire sum to buy flax for him [i.e., al-Kohen] in Busir, as the Lord of the worlds will make possible for you.

This is my advice to you, because if you increase the time you spend deep in the rural areas, you will exhaust yourself. Lighten your work-load so that you will be less burdened and will be able to relax a little. Staying in Busir will make for a better life for you, and will ease the amount of effort you will have to expend. In Busir you will be able to select the flax at your leisure, which is advantageous. Indeed you can begin to do this immediately.²⁰

Clarifying the enigmatic content of these lines requires a commentary that exposes the underlying monetary and commercial assumptions of the transactions being discussed. First, Farah b. Isma'il was buying flax from small producers outside Busir. These small, rural suppliers apparently demanded a certain kind of gold coin that was different from the ones being accepted in Busir, and different from the ones that Farah b. Isma'il had in his possession. He therefore wrote to his associates in Fustat expressing his intention to send them the purses of coins in his possession with a request that these be exchanged for the kind of coins that his small rural suppliers would accept. His Fustat correspondent, Nahray b. Nissim, rejected this proposal and urged Farah to confine his acquisitions to the 'city-limits' of Busir. In this way, there would be no need for Farah to return his cash supply to Fustat, and there would be no need for Nahray to

²⁰ Cambridge University Library, T. S. 8 J 22 f. 10, lines 2–12.

exchange the coins belonging to Farah's paternal uncle, funds intended to be used by Farah in Busir to acquire flax on his uncle's behalf.

This passage not only provides additional confirmation of our earlier contention that significant amounts of cash were making their way to Busir. It tells us something more. Monetary transactions reached the remotest and smallest units of the countryside around Busir, the *di'ahs*, i.e., estates and hamlets. In the letter just cited, Farah clearly considers it worthwhile to seek flax even in the remote *di'ahs*, but in another letter he disparages the flax of the *di'ah*: 'As for the flax of the estates, it is not worth very much at all. And anyone who goes out in the countryside in order to acquire it will not even realise a dirhem's profit on it.'²¹

Farah b. Isma'il, the recipient of these letters was clearly an enterprising young merchant. He was not content to sit still in Busir and simply wait for good flax-buying opportunities to present themselves. He struck out into smaller villages and estates in the environs of Busir and dealt directly with the small landowners. Presumably in this way he obtained better flax at better prices for himself and his colleagues. But this was wearing and difficult work, and it is probably for this reason that Nahray b. Nissim counselled him not to 'seek extremes' but to concentrate his efforts in the market of Busir. In the course of this exchange a remarkable and puzzling fact emerges. Those selling flax in the small villages and rural estates were apparently not willing to accept the same dinars as the ones which passed as the coin of the realm in Busir. There is no hint in our passages about whether the dinars being demanded in the villages were of higher or lower quality, or whether they were simply of a very specific type. This apparent aberration in monetary practice (a highly localised and circumscribed sphere of circulation) certainly merits further study. Whatever its explanation, it tells us that even the most modest flax-growing landowner disposed of a crop easily and that flax was quickly convertible into cash.

Monetary Realities in Busir

The monetary pluralism of the market-place, the subtleties of monetary practice even in a small town like Busir, the skill needed to navigate the pitfalls of exchange in changing market conditions are all reflected and epitomised in a passage from a letter written to Nahray in Busir by one of his senior associates in Fustat.

Please keep an eye on Qasim the broker, and impress upon him the importance of the good quality of the flax. Do not let him purchase any medium-quality flax for me. Likewise, I adjure you not to give any of the debased (*bahraja* = low quality) dinars to him, lest I arouse his distrust. . .

²¹ Jewish Theological Seminary Library, ENA 4020, f. 43, lines 16–17.

Were I there myself with a hundred of these *bahraja* dinars, I would not be concerned, since I would know how to dispose of them. Please let me know if you have done anything about exchanging them into dirhams. I used to exchange them in the stall of Ibn Yasir in the market of the silk-dealers with people who came from Fayyum.

The exchange rate here is 37 to the dinar. Please let me know what the rate of exchange is where you are.

Please write a letter on my behalf to Qasim telling him that I have sent you dinars on which the exchange has been paid [or: which are to be changed into dirhams]. If you have bought anything, then deduct them from the *bahraja*. Tell him to write to me concerning the arrival of the purses of coins and concerning the purchases he made for me.²²

When there was an insufficient supply of good coins, all types were brought in to use including *bahraja*, low-quality, slightly debased dinars, that were apparently used to acquire silver dirhams that were in turn accepted (at least, in some quarters) as payment for flax. The precise logic of the variety of coin types circulating in Busir is a subject that needs further reflection. It seems, however, that the situation varied from year to year, depending upon demand, supply, and upon what kind of specie was available. Some types of coins were clearly preferred by certain sellers and other types by other sellers. In case of an insufficient supply, there must have been some sort of hierarchy.

This passage (lines 6–7), contains a particularly tantalising item of information concerning financial practices and services in Busir. ‘Ayyash b. Sadaqa, the writer of this letter, advises Nahray regarding the exchange of *bahraja* dinars into dirhams and even suggests a good place in Busir at which this can be accomplished. The implication is clearly that there was more than one place in Busir where such exchanges could take place. Actually, it was not so much a place, as that exchanges were possible with certain people who were accessible at a certain place.

The place in this case was the stall of Ibn Yasir, located in the market of the silk-dealers in Busir. The people who did the exchanging were those ‘who came from the Fayyum’. This incidentally, points to the existence of an active and permanent market in Busir organised spatially according to crafts and occupations. Furthermore, this market attracted people from the Fayyum, which was a considerably larger town, who came undoubtedly to acquire flax and other merchandise to take back for consumers in Fayyum. It also seems that one of their ancillary activities was currency exchange, indicating that deeper in the countryside all sorts of coins could, under the right circumstances, find value and acceptance.

The amounts of cash that are recorded as flowing from Fustat to Busir in the letters exchanged directly between these two locales are impressive enough.

²² Cambridge University Library, T.S. 13 J 13 f. 11, Side II, lines 3 ff.

These, however, represent only a fraction of the total volume of specie transferred to Busir and its environs in the autumn and winter months during the eleventh century. References to shipments of purses of dinars to Busir (and to other flax-growing rural areas) abound in numerous other business letters of the Geniza and are by no means restricted to the letters to and from Busir.²³

Mediterranean Trade and Finance in the Egyptian Countryside

Instructions for sending dinars to Busir emanated not only from within Egypt, but often originated from the distant Mediterranean ports of Tunisia. In a very early letter from Qayrawan (c. 1042–43) Barhun b. Ishaq suggested that Nahray b. Nissim, his fledgling agent in Fustat, raise funds (200 dinars) from Abu Nasr Tustari before setting out for Busir to procure flax.²⁴ In late January 1048, the same Barhun b. Ishaq Taherti, Nahray's mentor and senior partner sent, via a caravan departing from al-Mahdiyya, several purses of dinars and dirhams amounting to about 400 dinars. These were intended primarily to finance flax purchases in Busir, and a portion of these funds was addressed to Barhun's long-time Muslim partner Abu al-Qasim 'Abd al-Rahman, with whom he was frequently associated in the flax business and who was probably a part-time resident of Busir.²⁵ A few years later, in a letter from two Taherti brothers (first cousins of the preceding Barhun b. Ishaq) written in Susa or al-Mahdiyya, Nahray b. Nissim was instructed to use a portion of the considerable amounts of cash being forwarded to him from Tunisia for the purchase of flax in Busir. I mention these three examples in order to highlight the very clear and direct financial and commercial connections between the comparatively little-known, small town of Busir and the main flow of international Mediterranean commerce in the mid-eleventh century.²⁶

Indeed it could not be otherwise, since flax was the main eastern counterpart to the products of North African and European provenance that were flowing towards Egypt. The relationship was a direct one: the cash needed to finance the flax purchases of Busir was to a significant degree generated by the export of North African goods to Egypt. These sums were supplemented by the funds carried by European (*Rumi*) merchants who descended annually on the markets of Susa and al-Mahdiyya (and later in Egypt as well) and whose demand for flax translated via a number of intermediate steps into the demand for flax from Busir and the consequent influx of cash into the rural areas of Middle Egypt.

²³ See for other examples Cambridge University Library, T. S. Box 25 f. 19 [N 1], verso, top; T. S. 12 F. 281, lines 4ff; T. S. 13J 13 f. 11, lines 12 ff.; T. S. 8 J 19 f.4 [N69], lines 6 ff.

²⁴ Oxford, Bodleian Library, Heb. b3 folio 20 verso, line 8.

²⁵ Letter from Barhun b. Ishaq Taherti: T. S. 20 f. 180, translated in Goitein (1973), 147–53.

²⁶ Letter from Barhun and Yusuf sons of Musa Taherti: Cambridge University Library, T.S. 16 f. 339.

These connections are wonderfully illustrated in a letter written to Nahray in Alexandria by Barhun b. Musa in Tripoli, Libya on his way to al-Mahdiyya in Tunisia. Very early on in his letter Barhun b. Musa enumerates the 'western' merchandise—woven goods, saris and silk—that were *en route* from al-Mahdiyya in Tunisia, via Tripoli in Libya, ultimately to be delivered to Nahray in Alexandria or Fustat and to be sold there. He lists goods costing 1,269 gold quarter-dinars that were dispatched to Egypt from Sicily and 'Susi textiles and silk and dinars' that were sent by Barhun's younger brother Abu Sa'id from al-Mahdiyya to Egypt. Nahray was supposed to have sold all this merchandise and to 'purchase goods for us with all the cash that has accumulated with you from the wares that were previously left with you.'

Throughout the letter, Nahray is repeatedly instructed to dispose as quickly and as profitably as possible of the goods sent to him from Sicily and Tunisia and to hasten to reinvest the proceeds of these sales in other merchandise that will have a ready market in the West. Nor are we left in any suspense as to what the desired commodities were. His instructions are explicit and clear. Nahray is to use all his uncommitted monetary resources 'to acquire either flax or pepper'.

News of the excellent quality of that year's flax harvest had already reached Barhun b. Musa while still in Tripoli. He did not hesitate to advise Nahray to make immediate plans to proceed to certain small villages in Fayyum and Bahnasa districts in order to acquire, in partnership with himself, flax of superior quality. This advice to Nahray is more than just an interesting detail regarding the trade in flax. What it tells us—and this is confirmed by many other letters—is that, as far as Egypt was concerned, the expanding Mediterranean trade of the eleventh century was not restricted to the major cities and towns but also extended into the very heart of the countryside.

The arrival of the *Rum*, that is the European (mostly Italian) merchants, in Tripoli had an immediate and radical effect on the market. Prices of flax, pepper, indigo, and sal ammoniac shot up by 20 to 40 per cent. Other commodities, sought after by Spanish merchants, were totally absent from the market and Barhun b. Musa strongly urged Nahray to acquire them as quickly as possible. Similar market conditions—strong Western, especially European, demand and inadequate supplies—are depicted in numerous other letters from the Geniza.²⁷

Other International Contacts with Busir—Tyre

It is interesting to note that the affairs of Busir were being followed not only in the West (Tunisia and Sicily), but also figured prominently in letters to the East. In Tyre, as much as in al-Mahdiyya or Susa, there was an interest in and a need for information from Busir. In a letter of November–December, 1050, to

²⁷ Udovitch (1990), 239–53.

a leading merchant in Tyre, the representative of the merchants (*wakil al-tujjar*) in Alexandria, Isma'il b. Farah, referred to his son's presence in Busir: 'He is now is Busir, may God oversee his redemption and his letters from Busir have certainly reached you by now.'²⁸ Here we have an explicit confirmation that letters were being exchanged between Busir in Middle Egypt and Tyre on the Lebanese coast. While these letters certainly passed either via Fustat or via Alexandria (probably the former), it is nevertheless significant that Farah b. Isma'il, while busy acquiring flax in the countryside, still found it important, maybe even necessary, to communicate with his associates in Tyre.

Concluding Reflections

The material presented here offers us a rare glimpse into the connection between a distant commerce and the rural realities of Egypt in the High Middle Ages. One should be cautious before drawing any broad conclusions about the meaning and significance of this relationship for the countryside. Increased demand for flax had the almost immediate effect of raising its price. Some of the documents cited above indicate that the competition for the acquisition of high-quality flax was fierce. With variations that were few and far between, these market conditions prevailed for most of the eleventh century. We do not know with certainty what changes this provoked in Egyptian agricultural production. Expanded production of flax through the allocation of more farmland to its cultivation was a probable response to growing demand. However, if that was indeed what happened, did it come at the expense of other crops, or did it involve a global expansion of area under cultivation? Although these are questions to which, for the moment, we have no clear answers, it is likely that there was a little bit of both. That is, there was probably some expansion of the area under cultivation as well as some displacement of other crops by flax cultivation.

In an important review article, Michael Brett pointed to evidence for a significant expansion of the area of land under cultivation in the Fatimid period, especially during the latter part of the eleventh and early twelfth centuries. The extension of agricultural exploitation may have begun somewhat earlier. This expansion was more or less spontaneous, having taken place without government control or permission, and with little or no tax being paid to the central authorities. Brett discussed this phenomenon in the context of the administrative and fiscal reforms of the Fatimids, and of the efforts of the Fatimid state to establish some sort of control over the agricultural lands that were either usurped from the state by 'private' landholders large and small, or that were added to

²⁸ Cambridge University Library, T. S. 8 J 20 f.2, margin; from Isma'il b. Farah in Alexandria to Abi Ya'qov Yusuf (Ha-Kohen) b. 'Ali al-Fasi in Tyre. Transcription and translation to be found in Ben Sasson (1991), 535–9.

private domains from the waste lands that were brought under cultivation. Bolstered by the evidence of the Geniza letters, there is now reason to assume that this expansion was in part, maybe even in large part, due to that stimulus from the demand of international commerce. Indeed, this would make very good sense.²⁹

There is also the suggestive, if indirect, evidence of Nabulsi's *Ta'rikh Fayyum*, composed in the mid-thirteenth century. We learn many things concerning rural life from this text. One of the most important, if somewhat unexpected, insights concerning the medieval Egyptian countryside was the fact that it was constantly changing shape and extent, sometimes in very significant and major ways. We tend to think of long-term continuities in pre-modern rural society, and in many sectors of Egyptian rural life this was indeed the case, but from Nabulsi's first-hand account we learn that many settlements disappeared or were relocated—fields, gardens, and orchards were abandoned or slid beneath the waters of the Nile or its canals. It was possible, therefore, within a relatively short period of time, for the morphology of the countryside to undergo very serious changes.³⁰

These changes could result from political causes, such as inefficient and negligent administration, or as a consequence of natural causes, floods, epidemics or similar disasters, or in response to a changed economic or commercial reality. A dramatic and instructive example relates to the cultivation (or, rather, non-cultivation) of flax. In the entire treatise of Nabulsi (written in AH 642 or 643), there is almost no mention of flax cultivation. This stands in sharp contrast to the dominant place of the flax crop a century and a half earlier. In the eleventh century, flax was one of the great cash crops of the region, a crop that was eagerly sought after as a major commodity of the burgeoning Mediterranean trade. Flax probably did not entirely disappear (since Egypt remained a flax- and linen-producing country until early modern times), but the extent of its cultivation must certainly have been considerably curtailed. What happened in the interval? The international demand for flax declined sharply, in part surely due to the fact that its cultivation spread to different parts of Europe, notably Italy, thus replacing the supply that formerly originated in the Nile Valley.

Thus the evidence from non-documentary historical sources, although by its very nature inconclusive, reinforces the hypothesis of a very direct connection of international trade and the fate of the peasants and cultivators in rural Egypt.

The different forms of the relationship of commerce to agriculture in the medieval Islamic world are yet to be investigated. We have sporadic evidence of merchants hovering around towns and villages during the tax-collecting season buying up crops from peasants desperate to raise the cash in which their taxes were required to be paid. See, for example, the Syriac description of rural

²⁹ Brett (1984), 52–4.

³⁰ Nabulsi, *Ta'rikh al-Fayyum*, 14–18.

Iraq in the ninth to tenth centuries by Bishop Dionysius of Tell Mahré which was studied by Claude Cahen. In that case, merchants from the larger cities were acting like wholesalers, acquiring agricultural products at advantageous prices to be resold in the markets of Baghdad and other cities and towns of southern Iraq.³¹ In the Egyptian case, the range of demand was far wider, going beyond the boundaries of Egypt and comprehending the cities of the Levant in the north-east, the entire North African region (Tunisia, Morocco, Algeria) in the West, and Christian countries of the western Mediterranean. The question thus becomes whether we have here an early and very particular case of agricultural production being determined and influenced by long-distance commerce.

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³¹ Cahen (1954), 136–52.

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