

AL-‘UṢŪR AL-WUṢṬĀ

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Khalīl: al-Ightiyālāt al-siyāsiyya fī Miṣr fī aṣr al-dawla al-Fāṭimiyya

*al-‘Izzāwī: al-Imām ‘Abd Allāh ibn Wahb wa-ārā’uhu al-fiqhiyya fī
l-‘ibādāt*

al-Khuḍayrī: Āthār Ibn Rushd fī falsafat al-‘uṣūr al-wuṣṭā

*Bin Ḥusayn: al-Dawla al-Umawiyya wa-muqawwimātu-hā al-
idīyūlūjīyya wa-l-ijtimā‘iyya*

Folding of a Paper Document from Quseir al-Qadim: a method of archiving?

Anne Regourd

During the most recent campaign of excavations conducted by the University of Southampton at the site of Quseir al-qadim (QAQ, Egypt) in 2003, an unusual “object” was found, consisting of a sheet of paper folded into an equilateral triangle.¹ (Fig. 1.) The folding, conducted with great care, closed the sheet irrevocably upon itself. On the visible surface could be found some writing, some of which had been erased by mechanical action; the corners of the triangle, the most exposed parts, had been soiled, probably by organic matter of human or animal origin.

This object was actually found in a trash heap of Ayyūbid remains, probably formed during the Mamlūk period (Trench 13): locations 5500 and 5520 contained some documents datable to the end of the Ayyūbid period, thanks to the identification of some individuals who figure in them, while the object with which we are concerned came to light in location 5523.

Once opened, our paper revealed two important things. First of all, a written fragment of smaller dimensions was lodged inside the larger paper. Second, the larger piece was not square in shape, but rectangular. In such a case, folding along the diagonal in order to end up with an equilateral triangle necessarily produces a remnant that, here, was re-folded “slipper-like” toward the interior of the triangle, thus producing the hermetic sealing of the paper upon itself (see Figure 2).²



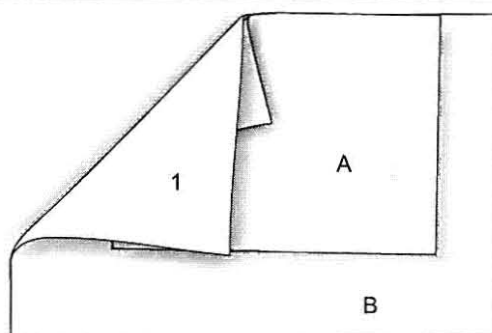
Fig. 1. The folded document from Quseir al-qadīm.

Examination of the large and small papers immediately revealed that they were both fragmentary and that the writing was done in the same hand. It was therefore easy to think of putting them together. Combined, the two pieces then form a complete document, one of the rare letters reporting commercial transactions in the Southampton collection that is complete from beginning to end, aside from the ends of several lines, which are

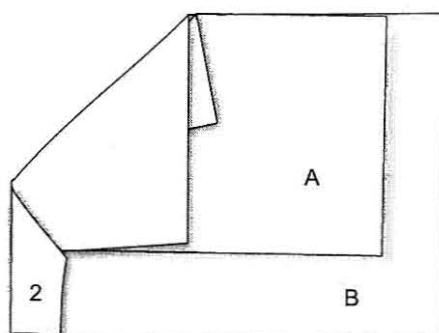
missing because of the abrasion mentioned above. This letter is, moreover, particularly long: one counts 17 lines on the recto and 15 on the verso, to which one must add the end of the closing formula, which figures on the right margin, on one line.

As is usually the case with commercial letters from QAQ, the letter touches on several subjects, six of them very exactly, including someone's sickness, the sending of some goods, the price and condition of crops, and some accounts. But in contrast with other letters, in this case the changes of subject are signaled by the use of the same formula: "*yā mawlā'ī*." The structure of the letter, which furthermore falls into major divisions (laudatory introductory formulae, main body, closing formulae), is thus very clear. One of the individuals mentioned in the letter, called "*abd al-Mukhlis*," may be associated with Aḥmad 'abd al-Najīb Mūsā ibn Mukhlis, "Aḥmad, the servant of al-Najīb Mūsā ibn Mukhlis," who appears in another letter of QAQ (see Guo 2004: 254-55, verso line 4). This association serves to confirm the dating of the text to the Ayyūbid period, specifically the end of the Ayyūbid period, since Li Guo decided to select fragments from the Chicago collection on the grounds that they formed the archive of a single company, that of Abū Mufarrij. But, surely, we cannot be absolutely certain that this identification of individuals is exact.

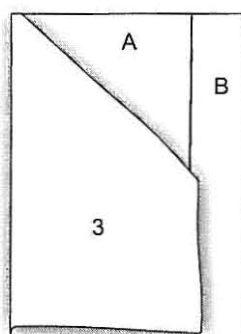
Examination of the edges of the two fragments reveals clearly that the original letter was torn up. Moreover, the document was torn in two pieces—and not into a thousand shreds—thus permitting the reconstitution of the original text in its entirety at any moment. Was it, then, a case of accidental or intentional tearing up? Even if one cannot absolutely rule out the possibility of an accidental dismemberment, a very interesting lead has been opened by documents of the sale of



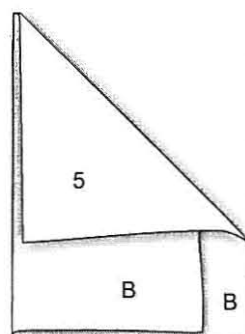
A. Fold over first corner



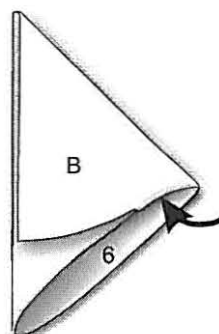
B. Fold in lower corner



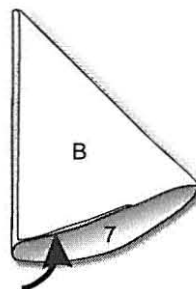
C. Fold into centre



D. Fold over top right corner



E. Fold in bottom right corner



F. Fold in bottom left corner

Fig. 2. The method of folding.

slaves, in Greek: several of these documents, according to those who study them, appear to have been intentionally damaged in order to cancel any obligation. This procedure finds a parallel in the cancellation by putting diagonal bars on crossed-out papers (Feissel, Gascou, Teixidor 1997).

Among the Quseir documents, the only other mark for the end of a transaction that I have been able to identify is this of the crossed-out papers. In this case, they are lists of commodities followed by a quantity, crossed out with diagonal bars; but we cannot know for sure whether they refer to quantities delivered or paid for, nor whether the transaction is written from the perspective of the supplier or the recipient. Several lists separated by a horizontal line are sometimes to be found in the same document (examples in Guo 2004: 284, and no. 6, 263-265, no. 68, 284-86; Regourd Forthcoming 2009). This system of marking is, yes, different from the one that concerns us and, besides, I have not been able to identify other cases of documents torn in two.

These observations on the manner in which the paper was torn, on the practices followed during commercial transactions, combined with the hermetic folding into a triangle, raises the following question: are we not dealing here with a method of archiving or storage, the nature of which is in some measure called forth by the division of the document into two parts?

It is true that finding other examples to support this phenomenon is a challenge, whether in the collections of documents from QAQ or through the publications from other collections. However, works devoted to folding are still limited in number, and mostly concern papyri rather than paper documents (see bibliography). The documents, when they reach the papyrologists, are already conserved, generally under glass or plexiglass, complicating the reconstitution of folds. And, at this stage, one must still remain prudent, for the practice of rolling documents survived into the Ayyūbid and Mamlūk periods; we must still establish some criteria by "feel" to decide whether a document had been folded or rolled.

But the real problem lies ahead of us, in the archaeological practice of flattening documents out in order to photograph them, without noting down the different stages in opening them up. Documents collected in excavations, however, are precisely those that might reveal this kind of information.

The manner of folding, as I have tried to show here, may provide evidence of methods of archiving. Following on these first inquiries, we should be sure not to lose sight of other clues. Are different ways of folding markers of types of documents? This, it seems to me, is one interesting aspect of the studies, still in their infancy, on the ways talismans are folded. To close on a point of methodology: we must insist on the importance of a systematic recording of the methods of archiving, in particular of folding.

Endnotes

¹ Two campaigns of excavation that uncovered Islamic materials were carried out at QAQ: the first, conducted by D. Whitcomb for the University of Chicago, took place in 1978, 1980, and 1982; the second, conducted by D. Peacock and L. Blue for the University of Southampton, occurred over five years, from 1999 until 2003.

80 paper documents from the Chicago collection were published by Li Guo (Guo 2004), who presents the characteristics of the assemblage in his introduction. For a general presentation of the Southampton collection, see Regourd 2003, Regourd 2004, and Regourd Forthcoming 2008. A monograph comprising publication of roughly 50 documents is in preparation (Regourd Forthcoming 2009); it could not have been realized without the financial support of the AHRC for the University of Leeds project "Reconstructing the Quseiri Arabic Documents" (RQAD). I offer warm thanks the members of the Southampton archaeological team, who willingly responded to my questions over a lengthy period. The document examined here bears the inventory number QAQ/ PA0597.

² It is worth noting that the trash heap also yielded other organic artifacts, some fabrics, and some copper objects; see Peacock, Blue, and Moser (eds.) (2003), and Peacock and Blue (Forthcoming 2008).

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Feissel D., Gascou J. & Teixidor J. 1997. « Documents d'archives romains inédits du Moyen Euphrate », *Journal des Savants* 6-7, 3-57.

Werner Diem has made a systematic study of the fold-marks in the physical description of documents from the National Library of Vienna he has published:

Diem W. 1995. *Arabische Geschäftsbriefe des 10. bis 14. Jahrhunderts aus der Österreichischen Nationalbibliothek in Wien*, Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz. (= Documenta Arabica Antiqua : 1)

Diem, W. 1996a. *Arabische Privatbriefe des 9. bis 15. Jahrhunderts aus der Österreichischen Nationalbibliothek in Wien*, Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz. (= Documenta Arabica Antiqua : 2)

Diem, W. 1996b. *Arabische amtliche Briefe des 10. bis 16. Jahrhunderts aus der Österreichischen Nationalbibliothek in Wien*, Wiesbaden, Harrassowitz, (= Documenta Arabica Antiqua : 3)

Methods of folding are also addressed systematically in:

Karabacek J. 1894. *Papyrus Erzherzog Rainer. Führer durch die Ausstellung*. Vienna:

Khan G. 1993b. *Bills, Letters and Deeds. Arabic Papyri of the 7th to 11th Centuries. The Nasser D. Khalili Collection of Islamic Art*. London: The Nour Foundation, pp. 18-19.

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