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The Caliph's Favorite

New Light from Manuscript Sources on Hasdai ibn Shaprut of Cordova

The mid-10th Century was a remarkable time in the history of Europe — not least because of the burgeoning presence in Spain of a Muslim power whose military forces had pushed out from North Africa more than two centuries earlier and gradually transformed almost four-fifths of the country into the Arabic-speaking Caliphate of Andalus (=Andalusia). Roughly speaking, the first two centuries of the Arab conquest were given over to military victories and the consolidation of power, but by the time Abd-al-Rahman the Third had ascended the throne of the Caliphate in the year 929, he was able to devote at least a small part of his time to more mundane and sometimes even peaceful affairs of state.

By approximately 930, the Jewish family of Hasdai son of Joseph ibn Shaprut had moved from their hometown of Jaen to the Muslim capital of Cordova, and before many years had passed the relatively young Hasdai began attracting the attention of the courtiers in the royal palace for his unusual intellectual and sentient qualities. By approximately 935 he was himself serving as a royal courtier, and Abd-al-Rahman himself soon began to recognize Hasdai's highly unusual gifts; he eventually appointed him major-domo over virtually all affairs of state.

Several Muslim writers of the Middle Ages have known about Hasdai and as a rule praised him in their Arabic writings — but Hebrew texts of that period offer more detailed descriptions of his remarkable activities while serving Abd-al-Rahman. There is, of course the very lengthy and detailed letter by Hasdai himself to King Joseph of the Khazars, in which Hasdai offers fascinating descriptions of his official duties and of the economy and material culture of Andalus under his caliph's rule; also extant is a full-fledged response of the Khazar king to Hasdai, which set the stage for Hasdai's supreme personal venture.

That venture was his voyage to the land of the Khazars by sea and the Don-Volga river-system, about which we learn from fragments of the Cairo Genizah preserving copies of Hasdai's correspondence. Here we have, in this letter of Hasdai to Queen Helena of Byzantium, the words "land of the Khazars," and on its following page Hasdai's request of Helena for "ships from among the ships of the king" --- the king being, of course, Constantine Porphyrogenetos — followed by the type of vessel needed, namely "the rafts." Hasdai was quite clearly asking for flat-bottomed boats of the type used on the Don-Volga river system, for it was by such means that he might travel to and eventually reach the land of the Khazars. The Arab geographer Ibn Hauqal in his famous work *Surat al-ard* (Shape of the Earth), written no more than a generation or two after

The Diplomatic Travels of Hasdai ibn Shaprut of Cordoba to
Leon and Catalonia on behalf of 'Abd-al-Rahman III,
940/941 A.D.



Hasdai's death, specifically described Hasdai's visit to Khazaria, quoting him on his description of its mountainous regions and adding that Hasdai "had been there and met many of its great personages and royal figures."

However, even before setting out on his epic voyage, Hasdai had become internationally renowned for his diplomatic skills and medical knowledge. When the Byzantine emperor's diplomatic mission to Cordova bestowed on Abd-al-Rahman a precious manuscript of Dioscorides' renowned *Materia Medica*, it was Hasdai who organized and took a leading role in its translation into Arabic. It was Hasdai alone who was able to cure Sancho, of the royal house of Leon, of his dangerous obesity. It was Hasdai whom the head of another diplomatic mission to Cordova — originating in the court of Carolingian emperor Otto I — praised by saying he had never, in all his years, met a man of such prudence and industry. And it was Hasdai who, with the blessings of Abd-al-Rahman, sent emissaries to Italy, Byzantium and beyond in his lifelong effort to protect far-flung communities of his coreligionists from those who meant to suppress or cause them harm.

All this, and much more, became known about the Caliph's favorite by virtue of manuscript texts and fragments brought to light during the past hundred and fifty years. And yet we are learning still more about Hasdai even today, thanks particularly to study of the Arabic writings of an 11th-century historical chronicler of Cordova known as Ibn Hayyan, who is generally acknowledged to be the most eminent of the medieval historians of Islamic Spain. Ibn Hayyan lived in Cordoba itself during the 11th century, and had access to the daily chancery records accumulated voluminously during the reign of Abd -al-Rahman III, which are still mostly extant in the Arabic original. The Spanish scholars Chalmeta, Corriente and Subh have published a portion of those records, dealing with the years 939-942 — and sure enough, Hasdai figures in it significantly, in connection with events that transpired approximately ten years before the other known circumstances of his career that I've described in part above. I base myself here on the original Arabic text, but describe the events in reverse chronological order.

In the year 939 a series of border-wars had broken out between Abd al-Rahman's military forces and those of Ramiro, the Christian ruler of Leonese Galicia. One of the Muslim prisoners taken by Ramiro's troops in the battle of Simancas was Muhammad ibn Hashim al-Tujibi, a dear and personal friend of the caliph. His continuous imprisonment in Leon gravely upset Abd-al-Rahman, whose fealty moved him to plan arrangements for personal contact with Ramiro regarding cessation of hostilities between them and the signing of a peace treaty — for the one and only reason that this might serve as a ladder by which to gain the freedom of his friend al-Tujibi.

For this reason, writes Ibn Hayyan, the Caliph in the course of time dispatched to Ramiro (I quote) "Hasdai ibn Shaprut, that unique man of his generation the likes of whom could not be found amongst the servants of any other emperor in the world, because of his high culture, the depth of his cunning, his sharp discernment, and his exceptional cleverness."

After arriving at Ramiro's palace in Leon, Hasdai began entreating conversations with him and encouraged his humane sentiments, until, little by little, Ramiro actually started to befriend him and to pay attention to his observations. Hasdai so enchanted him, writes Ibn Hayyan, that Ramiro began looking forward to their meetings, and eventually Hasdai's stay extended to over seven months. Ramiro became totally enchanted by this master of the humane arts, and in the end Hasdai, having learned how to penetrate to the depths of Ramiro's thought, succeeded in arriving at the very brink of al-Tujibi's freedom.

That freedom, however, was not to happen until the formalities of the peace treaty could finally be drawn up — this indeed was the ostensible reason given for Hasdai's embassy to Leon. For that purpose, Ramiro in the summer of 941 sent a delegation to Cordova that came to a full agreement with the caliph and was ratified by him in a formal meeting of his council. What Ramiro at the same time did, for his part, was to demand that a delegation of Christian bishops officiating in Muslim Andalusia travel to Leon for the purpose of attesting to Ramiro's consent to the treaty. Hasdai ibn Shaprut, as the chief diplomat responsible for the overall successful conclusion of the treaty, was still there in Leon, and saw to it that all of its details were worked out in full. That, writes Ibn Hayyan, "was how the warfare between the two nations was brought to an end, including all of the territories from the city of Santarem until Huesca, Ramiro himself including within the treaty Garcia son of Sancho ... Lord of Pamplona, Fernand Gonzales Lord of Castille, his sons Gomez and Ensor, and other counts of Galicia, all of their names being listed in the treaty of peace."

It was only afterwards, at the end of October 942, that Hasdai returned to Cordova with a free Muhammad al-Tujibi as well as the Andalusian bishops.

Let us turn back now to some earlier pages of Ibn Hayyan's chronicle, describing what I believe to be a yet more intriguing mission of Hasdai on behalf of Abd-al-Rahman, and some of its unintended consequences. The effort of the caliph to extend the boundaries of Andalus northward to lands of the Carolingian Empire itself meant, for him, a forceful continuation of the unremitting pressure of earlier caliphs not only on the Christian regions of Galicia but, even more so, on the principalities of Catalonia — and particularly on Barcelona and its surrounding region; for it was that region, bordering the Mediterranean seacoast, which presented the most feasible gateway into the Frankish lands. The threat to Barcelona became more palpable when, in May of 940 A.D., instructions were given to the Muslim admiral Abd-al-Rahman al-Bajani to proceed with a fleet of warships from Almeria to Barcelona itself. The fleet reached the march of Barcelona after a voyage of sixty-nine days, but remained at sea.

In the meanwhile, however, pressed by military difficulties elsewhere, Abd-al-Rahman had made the decision to offer a two-year truce to Count Sunyer, the lord of Barcelona, and his Christian allies, and had sent no other than Hasdai ibn Shaprut to Barcelona to negotiate that treaty. Hasdai was already there, engaged in negotiations, and had already secured the tentative agreement of Sunyer to the proposed truce, when the Muslim fleet arrived, but Hasdai immediately gave orders to the admiral to withdraw.

Hasdai then turned his attention to securing some final agreements in principle to the idea of the treaty. As Ibn Hayyan writes, Hasdai entreated “the magnates of Barcelona” (clearly meaning those of the surrounding region as well) to agree to the peace-treaty offered by the caliph, and he met with the full agreement of a number of them. One of these magnates, having the enigmatic name “Unjou” or “Anjou,” forthwith sent a delegation to the caliph in Cordova, which secured from him a treaty authorizing the merchants of his region to freely engage in maritime commerce with the merchants of Andalusia. Copies of the treaty were then sent to all of Andalusia’s main ports of entry. The Frankish princess Riquilda (about whom little is otherwise known) followed in the footsteps of Anjou, sending, through her emissary Barnat the Israelite, precious gifts to Abd-al-Rahman who thereupon acknowledged her generosity and reciprocated with yet more precious gifts of his own.

On the 6th of September, 940 A.D. Hasdai finally returned from his Barcelona mission, accompanied by Gotmar, the bishop of Girona and special emissary of Count Sunyer. Gotmar’s purpose was to attest in person to the agreements reached with Hasdai on behalf of the caliph, and even the casual reader of Ibn Hayyan’s description of the caliph’s demands will find it hard not to gasp at their severity. Among them were the following: (a) that Sunyer would refrain from befriending or coming to the aid of all or any Christian parties who had not included themselves in the peace treaty; (b) that Sunyer would undertake to honor and show respect toward Abd-al-Rahman; and (c) that insofar as Sunyer had given his daughter in marriage to Garcia son of King Sancho of Pamplona (a sworn enemy of the caliph), Sunyer would immediately sever his familial relationship with said king— meaning of course that Sunyer would have the marriage annulled, as indeed transpired subsequently.

Abd al-Rahman was satisfied with the positive response to his demands by Sunyer’s emissary. So he sent copies of the agreements to the commander of the Andalusian seacoasts and to the admirals of his war-fleet, ordering them to withdraw from Sunyer’s cities and territories and to remain in peace with their inhabitants. He did the same with respect to the rulers of the county of Cerdagne — in the Pyrenees mountain-range itself — insofar as they also had agreed to the two-year truce. As Ibn Hayyan is careful to add, the agreement was formally certified by Abd-al-Rahman himself at a meeting of his royal council precisely on the 18th of September 940 A.D.

Now by the time I had finished reading through this very accurate medieval Arabic account of Hasdai’s early role as diplomatic emissary of Abd-al-Rahman, several geographic names in the text concerning Catalonia kept bothering me. There was, for example, Cerdagne, in the Pyrenees, which was often used as an alternative route from the Spanish territories to the Frankish domains later known collectively as Provence, in the event that the coastline route via Barcelona itself was blocked. In addition, there was Pamplona, which however remained hostile to the Andalusian Muslims and would soon form an alliance with Ramiro of Leon against them. Then there was of course Barcelona, the main focus of activity, and where we know from Ibn Hayyan that Hasdai himself was ensconced at least through most of the summer of 940 A.D. Finally, there

was Gerona, no more than fifty miles north of Barcelona and the seat of bishop Gotmar who would accompany Hasdai on the return voyage to Cordova. I mulled this over for quite a while before recalling that a document of the Cairo Genizah mentions the presence of emissaries of Hasdai himself in a region not too far north of Gerona and only a modest distance further from Barcelona itself.

Here is an image of the manuscript in question, as preserved in the magnificent collection of Cairo Genizah texts at Cambridge University Library. (I've edited all of the fragments of Hasdai's correspondence found in the Genizah, but am still in the process of translating the texts into English prior to publishing, as I hope, the corpus as a whole.) The letter in question is actually one of the better-preserved texts. Like many other medieval letters, it begins with numerous expressions of praise directed to the addressee, taking up its first five lines. Then, in line 6, we have the identification of the senders: "From us, the *kehillot* (i.e., the Jewish communities) of Frantza, thy servants" followed by further words of obsequious praise.

For most of the 10th century, as for a few centuries beforehand, there was no actual country known precisely as Frantza, or France. Instead, most of western and central Europe including the various principalities of what otherwise was known as the Provence, was still all together part of the Frankish or Carolingian Empire and known collectively as Frantzia or Frankia, i.e., the Land of the Franks. (This image indicates how the 11th century scribe of the Hebrew manuscript slightly erred by omitting a single diminutive consonant from the original text.) The Jewish community structure of the Carolingian Empire evidently had three main seats of power — for Austrasia it was Mogentium, i.e. Mainz; for Neustria, Rotomagus, later known as Rouen; and for the Provincia Narbonensis (or Provence), Narbonne. The expression *Kehillot Frantzia*, "Communities of Frankia," necessarily implies that the letter in question was a formal document addressed to its recipient by the Jewish community leadership in one of those three cities. Ensuing portions of the letter, beginning with the eleventh line, indicate quite clearly who that person was, and I translate them piecemeal as follows (note that the addressee is always addressed in the third person):

(A) "Be it known to our honored lord that we remain at peace ... because of the good tidings brought to us by our esteemed Master Saul, Rav Joseph and Master Judah upon their arrival here from the presence of our lord....."

Comentary: The letter speaks of the arrival of three individuals who have brought greetings from a distinguished personage. The names of all three of the travellers are known from other correspondence of **Hasdai ibn Shaprut** as individuals who helped Hasdai in determining the geographical position of Khazaria and the best itinerary for Hasdai's eventual voyage there.

- (B) “The (charitable hospitality) ... of our lord is also known from the good tidings that Mar Samuel (himself), our lord’s trusted emissary, has conveyed on our lord’s behalf...”**

Commentary: Mar Samuel is known from another letter addressed to **Hasdai** preserved in the Cairo Genizah, one which was written by Italian Jewish dignitaries who likewise praised Mar Samuel for his great fidelity to his master Hasdai.

- (C) “(Mar Samuel) urged us to recommend a worthy deed for our divinely chosen lord (Hasdai) to perform (for our benefit). We investigated and determined that in the metropolis of Toulouse the Jews must pay a fine of thirty litres of spice for (the cathedral’s) idolatrous worship each year during Easter; at that time the (church officials receiving this offering) strike a blow on the neck of the person who delivers it.”**

Commentary: The Colaphus judaeorum, or “smiting of the Jews” of Toulouse, is also known from Latin sources of the Middle Ages, thus confirming the historicity of the description in the Genizah document.

- (D) “Now when Mar Samuel, the trusted emissary of our lord (Hasdai), heard this from us, he said as follows: ‘This matter will be easy for our lord to abrogate.’ And so we said to one another, ‘Perhaps the subtle ways of our lord (Hasdai) will indeed result in cancellation of the decree!’ Thus we rejoiced greatly, in heart and soul, and gave thanks to God the Rock of our strength...who raised up for us such a faithful, holy, pious and trustworthy shepherd such as he!.....”**

Commentary: The writers of the letter, which is addressed to Hasdai himself, here give thanks to him for any effort he might make towards putting an end to the annual degradation at Easter visited upon the Jewish community of Toulouse.

By way of summarizing the letter of the “Communities of Francia” to Hasdai, we see that it was preceded by the visit to their headquarters of four individuals who were in the actual service of Hasdai, and one of whom — Mar Samuel — was empowered to speak on Hasdai’s behalf. It is evident that Hasdai, for his part, was intent on making

contact with the leadership of those communities and of inquiring as to their welfare. The only complaint contained in their subsequent letter to Hasdai was that concerning the situation in Toulouse.

As for the location of the writers of the letter, it could only have come from one of the main headquarters of the “Communities of Frantzia/Frankia” — and insofar as both Mainz, in Austrasia, and Rouen, in Neustria, were very far distant from the abode of Hasdai’s Cordovan emissaries, and also far from Toulouse, we must look elsewhere, closer to Hasdai’s own area of activity, for the place of origin of the letter. Logically, that place would of course be Narbonne, the chief seat of power of the rulers of the province of that name, i.e. the *Provincia Narbonensis*, and also the city where the Rex Judaeorum, or chief official of the Jews of the province, had had his seat and exercised his power from the inception of the Carolingian Empire in the 8th century.

When writing a book on the Khazars which I published jointly with the late Prof. Pritsak of Harvard back in 1982, I had to follow Hasdai’s career rather closely, and the Cairo Genizah fragments of his correspondence were of great help to me in tracing his diplomatic activities. But the letter of the “Communities of Frantza,” while enlightening in a number of ways, proved in the end to be an enigma: for I could not understand how, given the prevailing state of war between the Andalusian Muslims and the Christian principalities of Galicia, Pamplona and Catalonia — how Hasdai, in Cordova, could be willing to send his faithful emissaries into harm’s way by ordering them to travel north, through enemy lines as it seemed to me, in order to reach the closest seat of the “Communities of Frantzia” so as to inquire of the welfare of the Jews in the southwestern Carolingian provinces. So in the book on the Khazars, I felt obliged, for lack of evidence, to shy away from considering possible solutions to that enigma. But now, on the basis of Ibn Hayyan’s description of Hasdai’s early diplomatic activities, the solution to that problem would appear to be within our grasp. In the summer of 940 A.D., Hasdai ibn Shaprut was not *in* Cordova; he had been sent as the caliph’s diplomatic representative up north to Barcelona in order to negotiate the final details of the two year peace treaty with the Catalonians; and we may be sure that he did not travel there alone, but only with an extensive entourage, both for his own personal safety and to emphasize the seriousness of his mission.

It is a reasonable inference that those accompanying Hasdai on the 440-mile journey to Barcelona would have included his own faithful representative Mar Samuel and the three other personages mentioned in the Genizah letter from the Communities. Once settled in Barcelona, Hasdai — from what we know of other such efforts on his part, would have been quick to utilize at least some of his time to plan out a mission of friendship and inquiry by Mar Samuel and his colleagues to the Jewish communal leadership north of the Pyrenees — where the Muslim Andalusians *earlier* on, before the truce went into effect, and also *later* on, after that same truce had expired, could not safely travel because of the constant warfare. The obvious route of travel during the period of the truce was from Barcelona to Gerona and thence to Narbonne. Toulouse, the object of the Communities’ concern, lay but 95 miles to the northwest.

In conclusion, allow me to suggest that the description of the Muslim chronicler Ibn Hayyan *and* the evidence contained in the Cairo Genizah document I've just described, together open a new chapter in the remarkable career of Hasdai ibn Shaprut, one of the great men of the Middle Ages, whose luster continues to grow as formerly unread pages of manuscripts from that age are turned and turned again.
