

## A Handful of Swahili Coast Letters, 1500–1520\*

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### Introduction

The important role played by the ports and city-states of the Swahili coast of East Africa in the commerce of the western Indian Ocean in the medieval and early modern periods is now generally recognized in the literature. This history has been reconstructed using a variety of sources, ranging from archaeology and the study of material culture, to the documents and narratives of European visitors to the region.<sup>1</sup> The central purpose of this essay is to present and translate four letters in Arabic, written in these urban centers in the early decades of the sixteenth century. They are, at least to the best of our knowledge, the earliest extant Arabic documents from the region, and they are currently housed in the Portuguese national archives (Arquivo Nacional da Torre do Tombo) in Lisbon, in a collection usually termed *Cartas Orientais*.<sup>2</sup> Some of these letters—which largely date from the early part of the sixteenth century—have been known to scholars from at least the latter half of the eighteenth century, when the Lisbon archives were reorganized after having been thrown into chaos by the celebrated earthquake of November 1755. A number of such documents in Arabic from North Africa and the Indian Ocean region were collected and published after a fashion by a Portuguese Franciscan friar of Syrian origin, João de Sousa, in his book *Documentos arábicos para a história portuguesa* (1790).<sup>3</sup> When later historians of North Africa returned to Sousa's publication in the twentieth century, they noted however that it was frequently careless, if not worse: as they

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<sup>1</sup> Mark Horton, "Port Cities and Their Merchants on the East African Coast," in Adrian Green and Roger Leech, eds., *Cities in the World, 1500–2000* (London: Maney, 2006), 15–29.

<sup>2</sup> For comparative purposes, we refer the reader to S.M. Stern, ed., *Documents from Islamic Chanceries* (Oxford: Bruno Cassirer, 1965); and for a broad literature survey in an African context, John Hunwick, "Arabic Sources for African History," in John Edward Philips, ed., *Writing African History* (Rochester, NY: University of Rochester Press, 2005), 216–53.

<sup>3</sup> Frei João de Sousa, *Documentos arábicos para a história portuguesa copiados dos originaes da Torre do Tombo com permissão de S. Magestade e vertidos em portuguez por ordem da Academia Real das Sciencias de Lisboa* (Lisbon: Academia Real das Sciencias, 1790). For an attempt at a comprehensive survey of "oriental" documents in sixteenth-century Portuguese archives, see Georg Schurhammer, S.J., "Orientalische Briefe aus der Zeit des Hl. Franz Xaver (1500–1552)," *Euntes docete* 21 (1968), 255–301.

wrote, “the transcriptions and the translations of Fr. João de Sousa are so incorrect that they cannot by any means be used by historians.”<sup>4</sup>

The letters in the Portuguese archival collection having to do with the Indian Ocean were then surveyed once more by the eminent French orientalist scholar Jean Aubin in the early 1950s, and he eventually published several of them in a careful edition (accompanied by a translation) in the 1970s.<sup>5</sup> In the decades since Aubin’s seminal publication, several other scholars have published and commented on other materials from the same collection. These include some of the correspondence of the rulers of Hurmuz in the Persian Gulf, a Persian letter from a merchant based in Melaka in the late 1510s, and an Arabic letter from the ruler of Pasai in Sumatra from the same period.<sup>6</sup> We have ourselves drawn on the collection for two publications: a first with the Persian letters from Sultan Bahadur (r. 1526–1537) of the Gujarat Sultanate; and a second more recent one, dealing with the Arabic correspondence emanating from the port of Kannur (or Cananor) in northern Kerala.<sup>7</sup> We should also mention for the sake of completeness the early Malay letters from the Torre do Tombo in the sixteenth century, which have been published on several occasions, even if they do not belong to this particular collection.<sup>8</sup>

The Swahili coast letters that form the subject of this essay testify to the wide spread of Arabic across the Indian Ocean by the beginning of the sixteenth century. It has been argued that like Sanskrit before it, Persian alongside it, and eventually Portuguese after it, Arabic was a cosmopolitan language that sustained not only a

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<sup>4</sup> Pierre de Cenival, David Lopes, and Robert Ricard, eds., *Les sources inédites de l’Histoire du Maroc: Première série, Dynastie sa’adienne, Archives et bibliothèques de Portugal*, Vol. 2 (Paris: Paul Geuthner, 1939), 17.

<sup>5</sup> Jean Aubin, “Les documents arabes, persans et turcs de la Torre do Tombo,” in Jean Aubin, *Le Latin et l’Astrolabe: Recherches sur le Portugal de la Renaissance, son expansion en Asie et les relations internationales*, Vol. 2 (Paris: Centre Culturel Calouste Gulbenkian, 2000), 418. The essay was first published in *Mare Luso-Indicum* 2 (1973), 183–237.

<sup>6</sup> See Dejanirah Couto, “Trois documents sur une demande de secours ormouzi à la Porte ottomane,” *Anais de História de Além-Mar* 3 (2002), 469–93; Jorge M. dos Santos Alves and Nader Nasiri-Moghaddam, “Une lettre en persan de 1519 sur la situation à Malacca,” *Archipel* 75 (2008), 145–66; and for the Arabic letter from Pasai (in Sumatra) dating 1516, see A.C.S. Peacock, “Three Arabic Letters from North Sumatra of the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries,” *Indonesia and the Malay World* 44, 129 (2016), 188–210.

<sup>7</sup> Muzaffar Alam and Sanjay Subrahmanyam, “Letters from a Sinking Sultan,” in Muzaffar Alam and Sanjay Subrahmanyam, *Writing the Mughal World: Studies on Culture and Politics* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012), 33–87; Muzaffar Alam and Sanjay Subrahmanyam, “Letters from Kannur, 1500–1550: A Little Explored Aspect of Kerala History,” in Manu Devadevan, ed., *Clio and Her Descendants: Essays for Kesavan Veluthat* (Delhi: Primus Books, 2018), 99–131.

<sup>8</sup> Luís Filipe Thomaz, “As cartas malaias de Abu Hayat, sultão de Ternate, a El-Rei de Portugal e os primórdios da presença portuguesa em Maluco,” *Anais de História de Além-Mar* 4 (2003), 381–446; also the earlier work by C.O. Blagden, “Two Malay Letters from Ternate in the Moluccas, Written in 1521 and 1522,” *Bulletin of the School of Oriental Studies* 6, 1 (1930), 87–101.

religious culture—it was, of course, the language in which the Qur’an, hadith, and much religious commentary were communicated—but a broader cultural complex which also had “secular” dimensions, in sum what Ronit Ricci has in a significant work termed the “Arabic cosmopolis.”<sup>9</sup> Ricci’s work is fundamentally centered on South and Southeast Asia, but it is clear that some of its arguments could equally be extended to East Africa, where Arabic found a place alongside other vernacular languages that were frequently in the process of taking literary form, often using the Arabic script as a vehicle for the purpose.<sup>10</sup> A simple measure of the spread and use of medieval Arabic is often taken by looking at the celebrated *Rihla*, or travel-account, of the Moroccan voyager and savant (*‘ālim*) Ibn Battuta (1304–1377). Departing from Aden in Yemen in the early 1330s, Ibn Battuta made his way first to Zeila, then to Muqdisho (Mogadishu), from there to Mombasa, and eventually to Kilwa, the southernmost point of his East Africa journey. The entire voyage seems to have taken two or three months, and in its course, he encountered a good number of savants (*‘ulamā*), as well as other figures, some of whom came from the Hijaz and the Red Sea, as well as other parts of the central Arab lands. The ruler in Kilwa at the time of his visit was Abu’l Muzaffar Hasan al-Mahdali, claiming descent from a family of Yemeni Sayyids, and apparently renowned for his generosity.<sup>11</sup>

Drawing on scattered and diverse linguistic, textual and inscriptional evidence, and above all on the growing density of the archaeological record, it is now possible to offer a longer and more complex chronology of the emergence of Islamic city-states on the coast than what was current a generation ago, at the time of the pioneering work of Neville Chittick on Kilwa and its environs.<sup>12</sup> This is summed up as follows by Thomas Spear:

The ‘Shungwaya’ period, extending from 800 to 1100, saw the cultural genesis of Swahili in the north, the beginnings of trade with the Persian Gulf, and the emergence of the first pre-Muslim towns along the coast. As trade and wealth grew between 1100 and 1300 and trading contacts shifted to the Red Sea a number of new towns were founded, foremost among them Mogadishu; coastal dwellers began to convert to Islam in increasing numbers; and Yemeni *sharīfs* became prominent in Mogadishu and Kilwa in a period characterized by increasing ‘Islamization’ of Swahili societies. Trade and wealth reached a

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<sup>9</sup> Ronit Ricci, *Islam Translated: Literature, Conversion, and the Arabic Cosmopolis of South and Southeast Asia* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011).

<sup>10</sup> Mauro Nobili, “Introduction: African History and Islamic Manuscript Cultures,” in Andrea Brigaglia and Mauro Nobili, eds., *The Arts and Crafts of Literacy: Islamic Manuscript Cultures in Sub-Saharan Africa* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2017), 1–24.

<sup>11</sup> For the text, see H.A.R. Gibb, C.F. Beckingham, and A.D.H. Bivar, eds., *The Travels of Ibn Battuta, AD 1325–54*, 5 Vols. (Cambridge and London: The Hakluyt Society, 1958–2000) (the East African sections appear in Vol. 2, 374–81). Also see the discussion in H. Neville Chittick, “Ibn Battūta and East Africa,” *Journal de la Société des Africanistes* 38, 2 (1968), 239–41.

<sup>12</sup> See H. Neville Chittick, *Kilwa: An Islamic Trading City on the East African Coast*, 2 Vols. (Nairobi: British Institute in Eastern Africa, 1974).

climax between 1300 and 1600, the 'Shirazi' period, causing prominent families along the coast to claim prestigious Shirazi origins to distinguish themselves from both immigrant Arabs and mainland Africans, adopt exclusive paraphernalia and dress, build elaborately decorated stone houses and pillar tombs, and endow new mosques.<sup>13</sup>

Early scholarly contributions to the study of Swahili urbanism in the pre-1500 period were mainly based on excavations of architectural features and surface collections, especially of imported ceramics. However, in a second phase, extensive area excavations were given more prominence, helping to give a more precise definition of the southern and eastern boundaries of the Swahili world. At the same time, as Stephanie Wynne-Jones has recently remarked, "the archaeological record upon which we rely for the centuries before 1500 CE does not easily yield evidence for definable social groups."<sup>14</sup> Nevertheless, some useful attempts have been made to creatively combine archaeology and ethnography, to provide plausible reconstructions of the evolving social structure of the urban centers of the coast. In particular, the work of Mark Horton on Shanga (in Pate island), and other areas, suggests the emergence from about the eighth century of Muslim settlements organized in a clear town plan around a central open space, with public buildings and a mosque. Such towns (Swahili: *mji*) would have held a mix of pastoralists, fisherfolk, merchants and craftspeople, some of whom were drawn from the interior and others from the wider world of the Indian Ocean.<sup>15</sup> In these emergent urban centers, one sees both religious buildings and burial sites, though elaborate individual tombs remained a rarity on the coast in the centuries before 1800 CE. Further, it is generally acknowledged that Swahili Islamic architecture as it emerged had an indigenous character both in terms of its style and the materials used, rather than simply being a copy of received models from the central Islamic lands.

By the eleventh century, an early mosque structure can be found in Kilwa, and these and other buildings were then extended and enlarged in the course of the thirteenth century in the context of an expanding commercial horizon. In the fourteenth century, as noted above, Kilwa had emerged as the largest urban settlement of the coast, though it would eventually face competition from other centers both to the south (notably Sofala), and especially to the north (such as Malindi and Mombasa).<sup>16</sup> Drawing on a broad swathe of evidence, Abdul Sheriff has suggested that by 1500, all these centers "were occupied by a stratified society,

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<sup>13</sup> See Thomas Spear, "Early Swahili History Reconsidered," *International Journal of African Historical Studies* 33, 2 (2000), 281. Also see the more recent reflections in Stephanie Wynne-Jones and Adria LaViolette, eds., *The Swahili World* (London: Routledge, 2018), especially 135–146, 253–59.

<sup>14</sup> Stephanie Wynne-Jones, "The Social Composition of Swahili Society," in Wynne-Jones and LaViolette, eds., *The Swahili World*, 302.

<sup>15</sup> Mark C. Horton, *Shanga: The Archaeology of a Muslim Trading Community on the Coast of East Africa* (Nairobi: British Institute in Eastern Africa, 1996).

<sup>16</sup> Mark Horton, "Islamic Architecture of the Swahili Coast," in Wynne-Jones and LaViolette, eds., *The Swahili World*, 487–99.

including the ruling and commercial elites who lived in multistory stone houses, with carved doors and external stone benches to facilitate social interaction in a mercantile society, and a larger class of commoners who serviced the mercantile economy and lived in huts made of sticks, stones and clay. People from the immediate hinterland also settled in the Swahili towns to become new townsmen, but there has also been a continuous seepage of immigrants from across the ocean who came primarily as traders or sailors; they perennially interacted and intermarried with the local population and eventually became Swahili.”<sup>17</sup>

When the Portuguese, rounding the Cape of Good Hope, arrived in the region from the south at the close of the fifteenth century, they thus found the discernible traces of a complex history of Islamization already in place. The anonymous shipboard account (sometimes attributed to a certain Álvaro Velho) of Vasco da Gama’s voyage along the Swahili coast in 1498 gives us a first sense of this. On crossing the Cape of Good Hope, Gama’s fleet had first anchored at São Brás (Mossel Bay) in late November 1497, where they encountered only a pastoralist population. But some weeks later, when they sailed north to Inharrime River, they found a more complex settlement with thatched houses, whose inhabitants proved willing to trade copper for cloth. Then a little further up the coast, they encountered small boats, and the first indications of a more complex trading system, where one of their local interlocutors even informed them “that he had seen ships as large as those that we [the Portuguese] had brought.”<sup>18</sup> Early in March 1498, Gama’s small fleet put in at Mozambique Island, where the Portuguese found (to their apparent dismay) that the inhabitants were not only quite numerous, but “of the sect of Muhammad and speak like Moors,” besides being dressed in “rich and embroidered” clothes. There were also signs of the presence of “white Moors” from further north up the coast, bringing cloth and spices in exchange for ivory and gold. Mozambique Island thus marked for them the southern limit of the spread of Islam along the coast at the time.

It was thus no coincidence that it was precisely here that Gama engaged in his first armed conflicts with local populations. He also managed to get hold of two Muslim pilots, who reluctantly took his fleet as far north as Mombasa, where they arrived in early April. Once in Mombasa, these pilots fled as quickly as they could, and Gama was therefore obliged to find another pilot—apparently a Gujarati—in Malindi, who as we know then conducted him across the western Indian Ocean to his final destination of Calicut. It was in Malindi, moreover, that the Portuguese for the first time encountered Indian ships and merchants, though it is unclear from which region of the subcontinent they originated. On this first voyage, the Portuguese did not make

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<sup>17</sup> Abdul Sheriff, “The Swahili in the African and Indian Ocean Worlds to c. 1500,” in *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of African History*. doi: 10.1093/acrefore/9780190277734.013.152. Also see the older survey by A.I. Salim, “East Africa: The Coast,” in B.A. Ogot, ed., *UNESCO General History of Africa, V: Africa from the Sixteenth to the Eighteenth Century* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992), 750–75.

<sup>18</sup> See the discussion in Sanjay Subrahmanyam, *The Career and Legend of Vasco da Gama* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 86–94, 112–21.

direct contact either with the Sofala region or with Kilwa further north, which—as we have seen—had been the prestigious political and commercial center at the time of Ibn Battuta.

The succeeding voyages of the years up to 1505—those led by Pedro Álvares Cabral, João da Nova, Gama (for a second time), the Albuquerque cousins, and Lopo Soares—obviously consolidated the trading knowledge of the Portuguese concerning the Swahili coast. They also led the Portuguese to make an initial bid to attempt to control the gold trade of the region, making use of the textiles purchased in India for this purpose. In order to do this, they decided to build a fortress in Kilwa, a port with which they had in fact established contact in 1500, through the fleet of Cabral. However, this fort, constructed and named Santiago in 1505 by the first viceroy Dom Francisco de Almeida, was abandoned after a short existence in 1512, though we have documents from the archives regarding the day-to-day functioning of its captains such as Pedro Ferreira Fogaça and Francisco Pereira Pestana, as well as the resident commercial agent (*feitor*) Fernão Cotrim. After 1512, the Portuguese then concentrated their activities elsewhere, in sites such as Sofala and Mozambique Island. As Malyn Newitt has noted, the gold trade “had fallen off sharply in the second decade of the century as the gold traders moved their operations to Angoche and as the wars among the Karanga chiefs in the interior interrupted the supply of gold to the fairs.”<sup>19</sup> The Portuguese response to this commercial failure was to attack rival trading networks, such as those based in the Querimba Islands (1523) and in Mombasa (1529). But these attacks produced little by way of trading success, so that their focus began to shift to the more dispersed trade in ivory by the 1530s. This enterprise was however quickly transformed into the private business of the captains of Mozambique, and individual Portuguese entrepreneurs, while (as Newitt notes), “the poverty-stricken royal factory at Sofala carried on virtually no trade at all.” The Portuguese official strategy in the region cannot therefore be counted as a great success in the first decades of the century, eventually obliging them—as Edward Alpers has shown—to commence “the gradual occupation of the area which was to become known as the Rivers of Sena” (that is the Zambesi valley), thereby also forcing a reorientation of other rival networks.<sup>20</sup>

Nevertheless, these early years of Portuguese dealings seem to have produced some interesting materials from the viewpoint of the historian of the Swahili coast. We have already noted the documents of the Kilwa fortress and factory, which are however rather narrowly focused on internal transactions regarding wages, supplies, and the like. A very different type of document eventually came into the possession of the official Portuguese chronicler João de Barros (1496–1570), who was also the superintendent of the *Casa da Índia* (or India House) in Lisbon, and who therefore oversaw trade on the Cape Route. From at least the 1530s, Barros had regularly

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<sup>19</sup> Malyn Newitt, *A History of Portuguese Overseas Expansion, 1400–1668* (London: Routledge, 2005), 111.

<sup>20</sup> Edward A. Alpers, *Ivory and Slaves: Changing Pattern of International Trade in East Central Africa to the Later Nineteenth Century* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1975), 43–44.

instructed a number of Portuguese who were on their way to the Indian Ocean to find materials that could help him fill in local historical details in his planned chronicle. One such source is what he referred to in his *Décadas* as “a chronicle of the Kings of Kilwa (*huma chronica dos Reys de Quilwa*),” without clearly stating what language it was in.<sup>21</sup> Most scholars believe that the text would most have been in Arabic, or that it may already have been put into Portuguese for Barros’s benefit, since he was himself not able to read Arabic directly. In his published version, there are many signs of the careless rendering of personal names and other details in the relevant parts of the *Décadas* where he uses and cites this “chronicle.” Further, following the discovery in the late nineteenth century of the manuscript of an Arabic text, often entitled *Kitāb as-Sulwa fī Akhbār Kilwa*, there has been much discussion among specialists of the region’s history regarding the relationship between this latter text and what Barros had at hand.<sup>22</sup> The *Kitāb* was apparently composed around 1550, if not earlier, though this dating is possibly open to question.<sup>23</sup> Some have argued that Barros’s materials must have come from the brief period 1505–1512, when the Portuguese controlled Kilwa, but this is not entirely plausible for it would suppose that they were collected much before Barros was even considered for the position of chronicler. Despite several notable divergences between Barros’s account and that of the *Kitāb*, they do share some important commonalities. One of these is the insistent reference to the so-called “Shirazi” settlement of the area, and its alleged influence on the history of the city-state of Kilwa and its environs. Historians’ attitudes towards the idea that traders and other settlers from the interior Iranian city of Shiraz (and the nearby port-city of Siraf) arrived in the area several centuries before the Portuguese and played a crucial role there, have varied from outright acceptance, to cautious scepticism, to open rejection (as being purely symbolic).<sup>24</sup> But it is nevertheless of some interest that such a construct was current in some elite circles in Kilwa already in the early sixteenth century, and was thus communicated to Barros.

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<sup>21</sup> João de Barros, *Da Ásia, Décadas I–IV* (Lisbon: Régia Officina Typografica, 1777), *Década Primeira*, Parte 2: 211, 224–31, 388–90.

<sup>22</sup> S. Arthur Strong, “The History of Kilwa,” *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland* 54 (1895), 385–430. For a more modern edition, see Sa’id bin ‘Ali al-Mughiri, *Juhaynat al-akhbār fī tārikh Zanjibār*, ed. ‘Abd al-Mun‘im ‘Amir (Masqat: Wizarat al-Turath al-Qawmi, 1979), 37–58.

<sup>23</sup> For discussions, see Gabriel Ferrand, “Les Sultans de Kilwa,” in *Mémorial Henri Basset: Nouvelles études nord-africaines et orientales* (Paris: Paul Geuthner, 1928), 239–60; Elias Saad, “Kilwa Dynastic Historiography: A Critical Study,” *History in Africa* 6 (1979), 177–207; also G.S.P. Freeman-Grenville, *The East African Coast: Select Documents from the First to the Earlier Nineteenth Century* (London: Rex Collings, 1975). We need not linger over the confused essay by Adrien Delmas, “Writing in Africa: The Kilwa Chronicle and Other Sixteenth-Century Portuguese Testimonies,” in Brigaglia and Nobili, eds., *The Arts and Crafts of Literacy*, 181–206.

<sup>24</sup> Neville Chittick, “The ‘Shirazi’ Colonization of East Africa,” *Journal of African History* 6, 3 (1965), 289–90; and Randall L. Pouwels, “A Reply to Spear on Early Swahili History,” *International Journal of African Historical Studies* 34, 3 (2001), 639–46.

Of the remaining centers on the Swahili coast of commercial interest, the Portuguese had dealings in this early period above all with two: Mombasa and Malindi. Alpers has shown that even if Mombasa was a known port in the fourteenth century, its real rise to prominence only occurred late in the fifteenth century, largely on account of what he terms “their early and successful cultivation of the trade with their own hinterland.” Besides, Mombasa merchants were active in the Zambesi valley trade via Angoche, and also had some significant relations with western India. It has thus been argued that “by the time the Portuguese came along, it [Mombasa] was the most powerful city-state on the coast,” and that it had a particularly resilient trading structure. An anonymous Portuguese description from the late 1510s tells us that it is a “very large city ... with many fair houses, very tall, of stone and mortar, with well-built streets.” Known to be a place of extensive trade (*muy grão trato de mercadorias*), it was famed both for its excellent harbour and its location in a “very fertile land (*terra muy farta*).” However, the Sultan of Mombasa was from the very outset, in 1498, reluctant to deal with the Portuguese and their violent ways, and as a result paradoxically had to suffer repeated attacks from them. The same anonymous account recounts how, in 1505, viceroy Almeida’s fleet forced the Sultan from his city, “and they killed many of his people, and took into captivity many of the men and women, and it [Mombasa] was plundered and destroyed and burned.”<sup>25</sup> But this was hardly the end of matters; as Alpers notes, “Mombasa weathered a succession of catastrophic Portuguese attacks in the sixteenth century (1505, 1528–1529, 1589) without ever losing its enormous economic and political vitality.”<sup>26</sup> In contrast, the Sultans of Malindi chose to play the Portuguese card, and openly declared their friendship for the Portuguese from early on; as the same anonymous description of the late 1510s clearly states, “This king and these Moors were always good friends and servants of the King, our lord, and we have always found in the place much welcome and a very tranquil peace.”<sup>27</sup> It was a peace that came, as we shall see below, at a certain price, especially when the Portuguese captains of Sofala sent out fleets to patrol the coast and opportunistically take prizes. In the early 1510s, on abandoning Kilwa, the Portuguese considered opening a regular trading establishment at Malindi, but this does not seem to have lasted long, eventually being replaced by the practice of the coastal fleet.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> “Descrição da situação, costumes e produtos de alguns lugares de África [c. 1518],” in *Documentos sobre os Portugueses em Moçambique e na África Central, 1497–1840* (henceforth abbreviated as DPMAC), 9 Volumes (Lisbon: Centro de Estudos Históricos Ultramarinos, 1962–89), 5: 367–69.

<sup>26</sup> Alpers, *Ivory and Slaves*, 45.

<sup>27</sup> “Descrição da situação, costumes e produtos,” in DPMAC, 5: 370–71.

<sup>28</sup> Arquivo Nacional da Torre do Tombo, Lisbon (henceforth ANTT), Núcleo Antigo 872, “Sumário de uma carta de Duarte Teixeira, feitor de Melinde (n.d.),” in DPMAC, 2: 572–73.



## The Letters

The four Arabic letters that are presented below come from the first two decades of the sixteenth century, but they are all undated. The first (Letter 18) comes from a certain Sharif Muhammad al-‘Alawi, resident at Mozambique (“Musbih” in the text) and is directed (like all the others) to the Portuguese king Dom Manuel. It is relatively plain and unadorned, with a small ersatz seal drawn in ink on the reverse describing the sender. After formal praise of the Portuguese monarch, it requests him for a document that will perform two functions: guarantee protection to Indian traders in the region of Sofala (presumably from the Portuguese resident on the coast); and allow the sender to travel around himself on a ship without interference from the Portuguese. We encounter a summary of another letter from the same Sharif (or as he is called here, “xeque”) elsewhere in the Portuguese archives, albeit without the Arabic original.<sup>29</sup> Here he recounts his own services, also in regard to Portuguese ambitions in Angoche, and requests that he be allowed to bring a quantity of ivory (ten *bahārs*) to Mozambique from Sofala. However, the addressee of the letter, the secretary of state António Carneiro had also received a letter from the Portuguese factor in Mozambique, Diogo Vaz, in which the latter had spoken “very ill of the *xarife* and [said that] he merited severe punishment.”<sup>30</sup> In fact it appears that Mozambique was in rather a state of turmoil at the time, in which a certain Ya‘qub, son-in-law of the Sharif had been killed in a fracas with the Portuguese. The result was that it was practically impossible for the Portuguese to obtain supplies in both Mozambique and Angoche. Frei João de Sousa’s version of the letter, which we have equally translated, contains some errors and inaccuracies, and also carries an invented date that does not appear in the original.

The second letter (Letter 19) is one of two that originates in Kilwa and is written on behalf of its ruler Sultan Ibrahim. It is again unadorned in its physical appearance but quite well written, possibly by a professional scribe. The writer was the effective ruler of Kilwa at the time of the first contacts with the Portuguese fleets of Cabral and Nova in 1500 and 1501. As we are aware from Portuguese sources, he showed little interest in welcoming or dealing with the Portuguese, possibly because he was preoccupied by other threats, both within his city-state and from other rivals along the coast.<sup>31</sup> The Portuguese reacted rather violently to his attitude, as we see in 1502, during the second voyage to the Indian Ocean of Vasco da Gama, when Gama

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<sup>29</sup> ANTT, Núcleo Antigo 872, “Sumário de uma carta do Xequê de Moçambique para el-Rei, feito por António Carneiro, secretário do Estado [1510],” in DPMAC, 2: 578.

<sup>30</sup> ANTT, Núcleo Antigo 872, “Sumário de uma carta de Diogo Vaz, feitor de Moçambique,” in DPMAC, 2: 574–77.

<sup>31</sup> For a broad contextual analysis, see Jeff Fleisher, “Behind the Sultan of Kilwa’s ‘Rebellious Conduct’: Local Perspectives on an International East African Town,” in Andrew M. Reid and Paul J. Lane, eds., *African Historical Archaeologies* (New York: Kluwer, 2004), 91–123.

threatened to bombard the town, forced a meeting with Ibrahim and extracted a tribute from him in gold.<sup>32</sup>

For a better grasp of the complex political situation in Kilwa in the early sixteenth century, we can draw on the careful modern analysis of Elias Saad, attempting to reconcile Arabic and Portuguese materials. Saad argues that by the middle of the fifteenth century, there was “a polarization in the power structure of Kilwa between the throne (*al-mulk*) on the one hand, and another powerful post identified as the emirate (*al-amr* or *al-imāra*).”<sup>33</sup> At the same time, there emerged in the latter part of the fifteenth century a larger controlling oligarchy in the city-state, termed “the people of the major decisions (*ahl al-hall wa'l-'aqd*),” and made up both of those claiming royal descent (from the Mahdali dynasty) and others, such as prominent merchants. In the late fifteenth century, one of the Mahdalis, a certain Kiwab bin Muhammad, had made a determined but unsuccessful attempt to centralize power in his person, by seizing the emirate and placing a weak ruler on the throne as Sultan. Kiwab was succeeded as *amīr* by his nephew Ibrahim bin Sulaiman, the central personage of our story; but it is clear that Ibrahim was resented by many others, both within the broader Mahdali lineage, and among the richer merchants. Amongst these was a certain Muhammad Rukn al-Daybuli, described by Saad as a “wealthy non-royal notable” (possibly with some oversight on the treasury), who was thus not a part of the extended group of families descended from the Mahdalis. Rukn had made clandestine contact with the Portuguese, from perhaps as early as Cabral’s visit of 1500, and from him the Portuguese had received a slanted understanding of the politics of the Kilwa state.<sup>34</sup> They were thus made aware that besides the kings, there were also others who held the post of “governor (*governador*),” and that Amir Ibrahim, “though he was the absolute master of Quiloa, was not called king by the people.” Muhammad Rukn was able to maintain his contacts with the Portuguese, until 1505, when Dom Francisco de Almeida arrived in Kilwa with his force, and summarily captured the town, obliging Amir Ibrahim to flee to the mainland. Here is how Barros describes the situation thereafter.

D. Francisco de Almeida, though he was not that well informed regarding the succession among these kings, as we have now recounted, knew however from Mahamed Anconij [Muhammad Rukn] that the people were not very satisfied with Habraemo [Ibrahim], and how all of them wanted to raise up a king who would be closer to the real lineage [of kings], as well as the reason for which they tolerated him. And therefore, he came to know about the notable persons

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<sup>32</sup> Subrahmanyam, *Career and Legend of Vasco da Gama*, 201–03, which includes a translation of Gama’s letter written at Kilwa in July 1502.

<sup>33</sup> Saad, “Kilwa Dynastic Historiography,” 184.

<sup>34</sup> It is claimed by the chronicler Castanheda that Muhammad Rukn was sent by Ibrahim as a hostage on board Gama’s fleet in 1502, because he “wished him ill secretly, since he feared that he would take the kingdom from him”; Fernão Lopes de Castanheda, *História do Descobrimento e Conquista da Índia pelos Portugueses*, ed. M. Lopes de Almeida, 2 Vols. (Oporto: Lello & Irmão, 1979), 1: 98–99.

who were there in the land, and other things about which he wished to inform himself, in order to know about the manner by which to ensure the security and government of the city.<sup>35</sup>

Having had the measure of matters, the Portuguese viceroy and his council then took the rather extraordinary decision to set aside the Mahdali lineage altogether, and decided instead that Muhammad Rukn “should receive the lordship (*senhorio*) of that city, because he had merited it, and gone through our friendship, [and] because besides this he had the stature, was aged about sixty years, and had the prudence to govern even though he was not of the royal lineage, because for the setting in order of that land nothing else would do.” This decision seems to have come as rather a shock to Muhammad Rukn himself, who according to Barros was “innocent of the honor to which he had been called.” He was then taken on horseback in a ceremonial procession through the city, and the decision was announced before “all the principal Moors of the city.”<sup>36</sup>

From the outset, Muhammad Rukn appears to have been aware that he might suffer from a serious deficit of legitimacy. We are told that he therefore asked for those whom the Portuguese had taken prisoner in their assault of the city to be set free quickly, and that as a consequence of this gesture “all those who had gone off into the palm-groves of the island as fugitives returned to the city to live in their houses.” But this set of conciliatory actions proved insufficient to guarantee him a stable basis for his power. We present here a rapid summary of Barros’s rather detailed narrative of an intricate sequence of events after Muhammad Rukn’s rise to power in 1505.<sup>37</sup> The new ruler appears to have had tense relations with the Portuguese captain of the fortress, Pedro Ferreira Fogaça, who described him in a letter of August 1506 as “unnecessary (*pouco necessario*),” and an impediment to Portuguese ambitions to expand into the islands of the coast.<sup>38</sup> Ferreira was rather keen to send ships out to take prizes in the vicinity, claiming an extensive Portuguese monopoly of various trade goods. In one of these expeditions, the Portuguese captured the son of a close relative of Amir Ibrahim, who is described as the ruler of a nearby place called “Tirendincunde.” Muhammad Rukn determined to use the occasion to offer an olive branch to the exiled Ibrahim, set the young man and his family free after paying a sizeable gold ransom to the Portuguese, and himself decided (against Ferreira’s advice) to accept an invitation to visit the father on a peace mission. Instead, Barros tells us, Rukn was ambushed and assassinated by the other’s men as he “lay sleeping in the *zambuco* in which he went.” By June 1506, therefore, things were once more in turmoil in Kilwa: the Portuguese factor (*feitor*), some other officials, and several Muslim notables supported the candidature as ruler of Haj Hasan (“Agi Hocem”), the

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<sup>35</sup> Barros, *Ásia, Década Primeira*, Parte 2: 230–31.

<sup>36</sup> For another account of Muhammad Rukn’s elevation, see Castanheda, *História do Descobrimento e Conquista*, 1: 215–16.

<sup>37</sup> Barros, *Ásia, Década Primeira*, Parte 2: 432–47.

<sup>38</sup> ANTT, Gavetas, XX-4-15, summary of a letter from Pedro Ferreira to the King, dated 31 August 1506, in DPMAC, 1: 616–17.

son of Muhammad Rukn, while Pedro Ferreira and others around him wished to support the return of the family of Amir Ibrahim in some shape or form. Eventually, an emissary of the Portuguese viceroy, a certain Nuno Vaz Pereira, was obliged to choose between various options, and he decided in favor of Haj Hasan. The optimistic expectation was that he would stabilize matters and re-establish the commercial strength of Kilwa.

Instead, on taking power, Hasan was determined to make retributive war on those who had killed his father, and with some allies from the hinterland (such as a certain “Munha Monge,” perhaps a distortion of the title Mwenyi Mwanja), launched a series of bloody raids on Ibrahim’s clansmen. A series of complaints were therefore sent out by various parties to India, reaching the ears of the viceroy Almeida. It was then hastily decided to reverse the earlier decision; Haj Hasan would be displaced, and Ibrahim would be invited back, and in the event that he did not wish to return, power would be handed over to his cousin, a certain Muhammad Mikat (suspected by some of being the real assassin of Muhammad Rukn). Ferreira was only too happy to implement this decision. In turn, Mikat seems to have ruled for somewhat over two years, initially with the help of the Portuguese garrison and officials in Kilwa. But the departure of his chief patron the captain Pedro Ferreira, and his replacement by the strong-willed Francisco Pereira Pestana, boded ill for him. Pestana launched a series of insistent complaints against Mikat, accusing him of creating instability in the town and hinterland, and even of making war on his own departed cousin Ibrahim. Eventually, he managed to persuade the new governor Afonso de Albuquerque to remove Mikat from power, and to bring the exiled Ibrahim back to Kilwa. Thus, writes Barros, Ibrahim “remained in a peaceful state, reforming the country into a better situation than he had before it was taken from him by us, because the travails he had passed had taught him how to govern.” The chronicler seems to relish the irony of all this, calling it “a notable comedy of the cycles of the world.”

It appears most likely to us that the letter from Ibrahim (Letter 19) was written after his final return to power, and the removal of Mikat, although there is a small possibility that it was written during his first stint in power, just before the Portuguese capture of Kilwa in 1505. In favor of the former hypothesis are both the contents of the letter itself, and the title he now uses, namely “Sultan” (whereas he seems to have titled himself “Amir” earlier on). It is written very much in the humble tone of a supplicant, requesting the Portuguese king that “you may order your deputy (*nā’ib*) that he should deal kindly and generously with us.” Furthermore, it states that “we are a weak group (*qaum*), and we are not in a position to quarrel and combat against you.” Everything should be done to avoid discord, and to ensure that the people in Kilwa do not “scatter in panic.”

The other letter (Letter 46) is far more complex, richer, but also harder to interpret at times. Written in rather poor Arabic, with a highly uncertain grasp of the niceties of syntax (moving unsteadily between the first and third person), it may well have been an autograph of the writer, Haj Hasan ibn Muhammad Rukn. Written after his displacement from power, and at a time when Sultan Mikat still ruled Kilwa, it is a long series of complaints and accusations. To begin with, Hasan notes that his father

was in fact killed by Muhammad Mikat because of his loyalty to the Portuguese. Like his father, Hasan has for his part remained loyal, but has received no recompense for his loyalty. The chief villain in the matter is apparently the captain of Kilwa, Pedro Ferreira. Ferreira has ensured that Hasan's access to other high-ranking Portuguese such as the fleet-commander Tristão da Cunha has been partially impeded.<sup>39</sup> It is also implied that he has turned the viceroy Almeida against him, and that Almeida himself is not really an honorable individual. Besides, Ferreira is accused of constantly resorting to extortion. This includes an episode when Haj Hasan was carried off to Malindi on Ferreira's instructions, imprisoned and tortured, until he handed over a quantity of gold. Having been further robbed by Mikat's followers (enigmatically termed the *ahl al-mal*), the writer declares his helplessness and his poor condition: "I now have nothing to eat, nor do I have clothes." Through the letter and a small accompanying present, he hopes to attract the attention and benevolence of Dom Manuel. Several Portuguese officials and others are cited as his character witnesses, including the celebrated go-between and interpreter Gaspar da Gama, who had visited Kilwa more than once in these years.<sup>40</sup> This letter thus forces us to reconsider in part the eminently unsympathetic portrait of Haj Hasan that is left to us by Barros. Barros sums up the end of his career thus: "Hocem, seeing that all the wealth that he had inherited from his father had been spent in the vengeance for his death, and that if he remained in Quiloa, he ran the risk of being killed by his enemies, asked Pero Ferreira to have him carried to Mombaça, as was done, where shortly thereafter he ended his days more miserably than any commoner."<sup>41</sup> In this official version, Hasan and his own lack of judgment are seen as responsible for his fate; on the other hand, the reader of his letter is left to wonder whether he (like his rival Ibrahim) was not caught up in a complex web that was not fully of his making, in which actors like viceroy Almeida and captain Ferreira also bore some crucial responsibility.

The fourth letter (Letter 20) comes from Malindi, further to the north, and is addressed to Dom Manuel by Sultan 'Ali bin 'Ali, though it is once more undated. It is the most elaborate and best assembled of the four documents, at the opposite end of the spectrum from Haj Hasan's rather informal composition. Unfortunately, parts of the document have been damaged, making it impossible to read a few passages. The Malindi chancery, unlike those who produced the other three letters, seems to have been fully aware of the pretentious titles that Dom Manuel himself had begun to use: "King of Portugal and the Algarves on this side of the seas and beyond them in Africa,

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<sup>39</sup> On Tristão da Cunha, and his voyage to India, see António Alberto Banha de Andrade, *História de um fidalgo quinhentista português: Tristão da Cunha* (Lisbon: Instituto Histórico Infante D. Henrique, 1974).

<sup>40</sup> Gaspar was already present when D. Francisco de Almeida took Kilwa in 1505 and had extensive dealings with Muhammad Rukn on that occasion. See his letter in ANTT, *Cartas dos Vice-Reis e Governadores da Índia*, No. 76, undated [1505], published in Raymundo António de Bulhão Pato, ed., *Cartas de Affonso de Albuquerque seguidas de documentos que as elucidam*, Vol. 3 (Lisbon: Academia Real das Sciencias, 1903), 200–204.

<sup>41</sup> Barros, *Ásia, Década Primeira*, Parte 2: 443.

Lord of Guinea and of Conquest, Navigation, and Commerce of Ethiopia, Arabia, Persia, and India etc (*Rei de Portugal e dos Algarves, de aquém e de além-mar em África, senhor de Guiné e da conquista, navegação e comércio da Etiópia, Arábia, Pérsia e Índia et cetera*),” and they in turn use a version thereof in addressing him. After the elaborate addresses, we come to the business end of the letter, which is unfortunately the damaged section. This section has to do with the activities of the Portuguese captain Manuel Fernandes in the region, particularly in relation to a ship from the port of Diu in Gujarat. Was this ship seized by Fernandes, and was the Sultan asking for its release? We are unable to say. Unfortunately, as usual, Frei João de Sousa’s translation (with its typical invented dating) is of little aid, even if we assume that the document was less damaged when he examined it. He reads the document as stating that Fernandes had “very favourably received all the people who came from Adiba (*sic*) and has already given me what I had requested from you,” which would seem improbable.

A few other documents from the period are somewhat helpful in providing context on the other hand. We learn that Manuel Fernandes had been the royal agent (*feitor*) in Sofala in 1505, and then the captain there in 1506–1507; he had handed over charge to Nuno Vaz Pereira in February 1507, and was immediately investigated by his successor on the charge of stealing gold from the factory.<sup>42</sup> Other documents mention the Portuguese capture of a Gujarati ship near Malindi in March 1510, and the disputes that resulted therefrom, as well as the Portuguese hostility and suspicion towards a certain Sidi Bu Bakr, a great merchant of Malindi, who together with his brother regularly traded with Angoche.<sup>43</sup> In 1513, the Portuguese *feitor* at Sofala wrote to the king of the increasing menace that the Angoche network represented to Portuguese interests, stressing that it was place “where are resident many Moors from Quiloa and Melinde,” who were so resourceful that they could “thus fill the land with cloth and cause a great decrease in the trade of this factory.” His conclusion was that the Portuguese monarch “should order the said Moors to be thrown out of there or destroyed in such a way that they will not be able to live or trade there.”<sup>44</sup> In the face of such an attitude, even the possession of Portuguese documents (*seguros* or *cartazes*) was sometimes not enough to protect such merchants, trading in Indian cloth or trade beads, or African ivory, from seizure; as the Portuguese historian Manuel Lobato notes, “The alliance between the king of Malindi and the Portuguese did not however prevent the Gujaratis from suffering severe losses in the first

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<sup>42</sup> ANTT, Corpo Cronológico, II-12-98, inquiry dated 25 February 1507, in DPMAC, 2: 170–77.

<sup>43</sup> ANTT, Corpo Cronológico, II-2-45 and III-4-13, 20 March 1510, documents regarding the “presas de uma nau de Cambaia que se tomou em Melinde,” in DPMAC, 2: 422–27. On Sidi Bu Bakr, or Abu Bakr, see ANTT, Gavetas, XV-19-22, document dated 25 January 1509, in DPMAC, 2: 326–29; and ANTT, Corpo Cronológico, I-8-40, letter from Diogo Vaz, *feitor* at Mozambique, dated 4 September 1509, in DPMAC, 2: 374–75.

<sup>44</sup> ANTT, Corpo Cronológico, I-18-27, letter from the *feitor* of Sofala, Pero Vaz Soares, to the King, dated 30 June 1513, in DPMAC, 3: 464–65. Also see M.D.D. Newitt, “The Early History of the Sultanate of Angoche,” *Journal of African History* 13, 3 (1972), 397–406.

decades of the sixteenth century, on account of the vessels that the Portuguese captured from them in that African port.”<sup>45</sup> An example of this may be found in 1518, when a Portuguese ship sailing in the vicinity of the island of Soqotra captured “a *nao* of the Guzerates which they said was coming from Melynde to Canbaya, and its cargo was a great quantity of ivory, copper, coir and other goods that might well be worth 12,000 or 15,000 *pardaos*, and 79 *meticaes* of gold and 150 of silver, and also many valuable Moors and captive slaves.”<sup>46</sup> Rather than carry the prize to Goa, the Portuguese captain Fernando Dias is said to have secretly sold the goods in Chaul and the ship in Diu. Further examples appear in two later letters from the same Sultan ‘Ali to Dom Manuel that survive in the archives, one in a Portuguese version and the other in a summary (but without the Arabic originals). Both date from around 1520–1521: the first complains of the behavior of the Portuguese in Malindi, with their “hard words and deeds towards us” which includes robbing some 9,500 *xerafins* worth of goods; the second points a finger concretely at two Portuguese ships (including the *Taforeia*), whose captains Rui Lourenço and João Fernandes “came to this port of Melindi and corrupted and destroyed it and seized goods in it, saying openly that Your Highness is aware of this and considers it good if the port of Melindi is damaged.”<sup>47</sup>

These examples suggest that the options open to rulers of the city-states of the Swahili coast in the face of the initial Portuguese challenge were all unpleasant in some degree. A further complication was that individual Portuguese captains and officials often had ideas and projects of their own, which were at variance with royal orders as well as the official policies of the *Estado da Índia Oriental*. Open resistance, as was tried by the Sultans of Mombasa, could leave one open to costly periodic attacks from Portuguese fleets. Cooperation, attempted by the Sultans of Malindi, was not a guarantee of safety either, especially if one wanted to balance Portuguese demands even minimally against the interests of other commercial groups, and ensure that one’s port had a viable fiscal existence rather than a near-asphyxiated trading system.<sup>48</sup> Finally, the case of a Kilwa is an interesting one, where all the strategies—whether of resistance, foot-dragging or conciliation—were attempted turn by turn between 1500 and 1530. Over the course of the sixteenth century, as has been remarked by Alpers, Kilwa thus managed to survive by ceding ground and adjusting “its commercial orientation from one which had previously been exclusively seaward, to one which now looked to its own hinterland.”<sup>49</sup> The handful of Swahili

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<sup>45</sup> Manuel Lobato, “Relações comerciais entre a Índia e a costa africana nos séculos XVI e XVII: O papel do Guzerate no comércio de Moçambique,” *Mare Liberum* 9 (1995), 160.

<sup>46</sup> ANTT, Cartas dos Vice-Reis e Governadores da Índia, No. 12, letter from Diogo Lopes de Sequeira at Cochim to the King, 23 December 1518, in DPMAC, 5: 596–97.

<sup>47</sup> ANTT, Cartas dos Vice-Reis e Governadores da Índia, no. 112, “Traslado da carta de Ali, Rei de Melinde, para D. Manuel,” in DPMAC, 6: 44–47.

<sup>48</sup> See ANTT, Gavetas, XX-10-26, report by Jordão de Freitas, Goa, 17 September 1530, in DPMAC, 6: 424–33, for a proposal to heavily constrain and restrict all aspects of Malindi’s trade.

<sup>49</sup> Alpers, *Ivory and Slaves*, 46.

coast letters that we have translated here thus shed some light on a fraught moment in the history of the region, and give us an opportunity to hear the voices of some neglected actors.

### The Documents

ANTT, Núcleo Antigo 891, Maço 1, “Documentos em caracteres árabes provenientes do Oriente.”

#### 1A. Cartas Orientais, Letter 18.

p. 1: [In Portuguese] “From the King of Malindi (*Del-rey de Melyndy [sic]*).” [In the form of a seal] From Sharif Muhammad al-‘Alawi, resident of Mozambique (*Musbīh*).

This document is being sent to the mighty lord, the impregnable refuge [lit. cave], the master of our age and time, whose benefaction is matchless, whose *éclat* and might are limitless, it has been heard that he gives gifts without being asked. I have made a request to him and am waiting silently (?). Let it be known that he is the lord, Sultan Dom Manuel, may God elevate his position.

p. 2: In the Name of God, the Merciful, the Compassionate (*Bismillāh al-Rahmān al-Rahīm*), this letter is from Sharif Muhammad al-‘Alawi resident in Musbīh [Mozambique], to my lord, support, authority and refuge, benefactor of the people of the world, in all the East and West, who has made flourish the people of the land of Portugal, combining in his person excellent comportment and wealth, the master of our time; whoever has praised him was rewarded, and he who incurred his hostility would be doomed; his fame circulates in all the cities and he is a pillar for his friends, and a destroyer of his enemies. He who is obedient to him should be thankful, and he who opposed him should repent. Be aware, he is the king Dom Manuel, may God elevate him, and the signs of his power! May God protect him and keep him in his care!

The purpose of this request is for his benefaction, that we cannot forget. He may send me a document which affords protection from Sofala to the people of the land of al-Hind, and for travel in our ship in all his lands so that no one can harm or confront me. This will be one of his [Dom Manuel’s] gifts, which will elevate my position among all Muslims. [As a result], we will remain thanking him at all hours of day and night. Prayers and peace be upon the Prophet and his family.

[Margin]

He who writes this letter is a small slave of yours. He seeks help from God, his Prophet, and thereafter from the reader of this letter. He requests thereby to have the king’s benefaction for his people. I had nothing, and what I had was lost [drowned], and I remained perplexed. Greetings from me to you and those of your land. May prayers and peace be upon the Prophet.



1B: João de Sousa, *Documentos arábicos*, 85–86.

In the Name of God, the Merciful, the Compassionate, this letter is from Sharif Muhammad al-‘Alawi resident in Mozambique, to my lord, my support, my refuge, and my security, King of Portugal, goodness of the world, lord of the universe from East to West, settler of the kingdom of Portugal, and gatherer of peoples and riches. Sovereign of our time, he who is close to him will gain profit, and he who is distant will face losses. His benefactions attain all parts, he is the support of his friends, and the destroyer of his enemies. Those obedient to him thank and praise him, and those who are disobedient become infuriated and suffer loss; may God fill him with glory.

My Lord, what I ask of your benefaction is this, that you do not forget to send me the letter that I had already requested from you, by which you protect me from the attacks and hostility of your people in the state of India, and so that I can freely navigate in my own ship with all safety, with no one being able to attack me or do me damage. This is the grace that I ask, and through it I will be raised up among the Muslims and will remain grateful to you for all the days and nights of my life.

Written on 25 Rabi 923 (corresponding to 27 May 1517).

To the king Dom Manuel.

From Sharif Muhammad son of Sharif al-‘Alawi of Mozambique.

**2. Cartas Orientais, Letter 19**, p. 1: To the great king, the Sultan who is generous and kind, possessed of overwhelming strength, august and victorious, Dom Manuel, Sultan of Portugal.

Sultan Ibrahim of Kilwa sends a great salutation to you. You should know that by God’s grace he appreciates your great excellence and munificence, and the esteem for you which is recognized everywhere. He remains ever loyal to the agreements with you, clinging to your old and recent orders. He is supportive of your objectives under all circumstances. Our purpose in this letter is that you may order your deputy (*nā’ib*) that he should deal kindly and generously with us. He should not impose anything on us that we cannot carry out, in order that no difference and discord may arise between us. We are a weak group (*qaum*), and we are not in a position to quarrel and combat against you. When they [your men] interfere in any of our matters, it should be with kindness and generosity, so that they may remain undisturbed and safe. We have experienced your generosity and your affection and ask therefore that you continue to be steadfast in it, otherwise people will scatter in panic and differences will arise out of fear, which would be inadmissible for a king like you. In sum, [Qur’anic phrases] and God is the one whose help is sought [12:18], and God is sufficient for us and the worthiest is He of trust [3:173]; He alone has power over all things [2:109].

p. 2: To the Sultan who is munificent, the king who is great, Dom Manuel, Sultan of Portugal, who is like a lion, and who is supported by God and is victorious. May God prolong his power and give him a long life. May all Muslims benefit from his power both morning and evening.

**3A. Cartas Orientais, Letter 20**, p. 1: This letter is sent to the lord Sultan, Dom Manuel, Sultan of Portugal, master of Guinea (*ghanawa*), and the people of the West, possessor of countries on land and sea, master of the islands of 'Arab and 'Ajam, with power to dispose of the Indians and Persians, conqueror of all countries and cities, master of the auspicious, fortunate, protected, and guarded land (*balda*, i.e., Portugal), resident of a shining enclosed palace that dominates the world. That king who is famed for his noble attributes, and whose firm and established qualities and inclusive generosity are widely-known, and who is proud to grasp the rope of ultimate affection and love, who had made efforts for strengthening the faith of the Christians, in such a way that he shines, gathering together the mantles of honour and glory. When he called out, the rope [of God] responded faithfully and obeyed, and on account of his generosity everything followed him, and became contented; he is such a king that anyone who approaches him and is close to him is satisfied; he is the great Sultan without defects, save that he [as a human] grew out of a drop of seed when it was lodged [in its place]; the Sultan from whose mouth excellent answers emerge, and in whose speech is found all correctness; the Sultan from whom every supplicant receives everything they wanted; the Sultan from whom he who is separated will fall on bad times. May God render his prestige everlasting and elevate his position.

You should know that your ally 'Ali ibn Sultan 'Ali, Sultan of Malindi, sends you his many greetings. He has kissed your glowing face and expressed full faith in you. He hopes for all goodness and generosity from you day and night. May it be known that Dom Manuel Fernandes [came from] Malindi and [...] the ship, and [...] some [interline, in red: 17] men from the people of Dib. I requested him for [...] and he conceded my request because of your grace. May God be greatly thanked, and all the people of Malindi live in your grace and mention you with great respect morning and evening, and they have faith in you day and night. God alone can measure your goodness and generosity to us.

May Allah keep you forever in your power. The writer of this letter sends you many greetings, and also for the Sayyid [...] ibn Qasim al-Ra'ini.

p. 2: Addressed to the great Sultan, ruler of Portugal, master of the priests, master of Guinea and the people of the West, the conqueror of countries and cities, a person of great grace, excellence, virtue and generosity, with a numberless army [...]. In his hands are generosity, excellence and munificence [...]. May Allah keep him forever, amen.

In red: From the King of Malindi (*Do rey de Melyndy*).

3B, João de Sousa, *Documentos arábicos*, 123–25.

In the Name of God, the Merciful, the Compassionate. To the powerful Dom Manuel, king of Portugal, and of the Algarves, lord of Guinea, and of the two Minas, possessor of islands in the Sea of Arabia, Persia and the climes of India, conqueror of kingdoms, provinces and cities, master of a blessed court that is secure and protected, a sovereign known for his high dignity, famed for his constancy, and exalted for his

clemency, an attentive supporter of Christianity, obeyed by those who are far and near. A monarch without fault (?), his face is more brilliant than the full moon, from his mouth emerges a balanced response, and his word gives rightful satisfaction, whosoever asks him [for anything] receives it, and those who seek their distance from him suffer loss. May God perpetuate his glory, Amen.

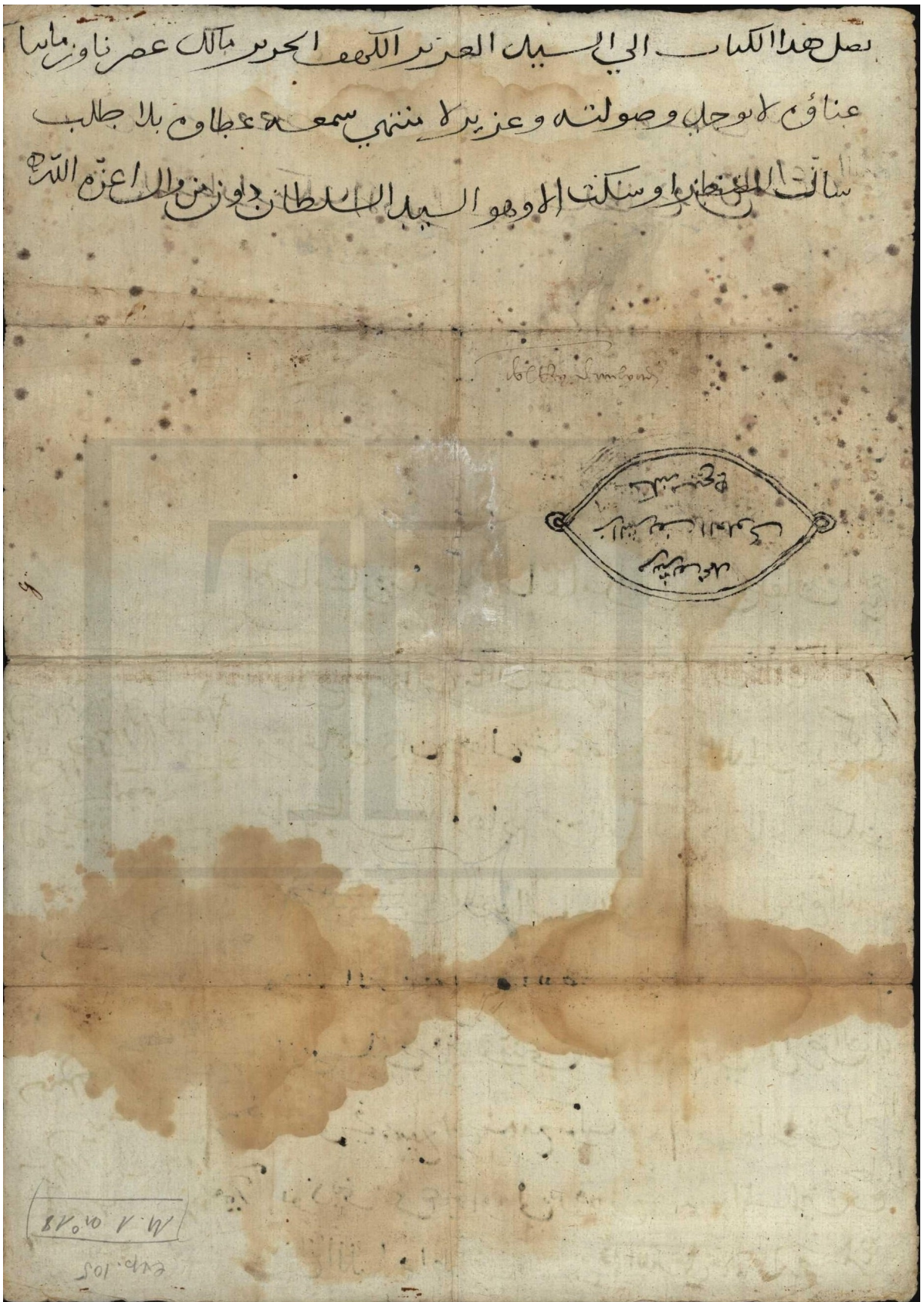
My lord will be aware that I am your friend ‘Ali, king of Malindi, son of ‘Ali who was king of the same land. I send you great greetings, and I kiss your fortunate countenance, desiring your happiness, and hoping confidently for your favours. At the same time, I want to let you know that Manuel Fernandes, Captain-Major of Malindi, very favourably received all the people who came from Adiba, and has already given me what I had requested from you, and even more than I had asked for, for which I give thanks to God, and also to you. All the people of Malindi esteem you above all creatures, because your benefactions have been abundant both to then and to me. Therefore, may God maintain you eternally. Amen.

Written on 5 Rajab 926 [7 May 1520, this date is not in the original letter].

**4. Cartas Orientais, Letter 46, p. 1:** This is a short and quick note for Rei Dom Manuel, king of Portugal. My master may please bear in mind that my father Muhammad Rukn was your servant and follower in all matters from the beginning. Muhammad Rukn was [then] killed by the Sultan Matak [Mikat] al-Mal because he was obedient to you. I am his son Haj Hasan. I never thought of anything except the good of the Christians of Kilwa and other places. This is how it was reported by the interpreter (?) Gaspar (*kalām-āqasī Kazb*) and attested to by the *feitor, alcaide-mór* (*qā'id-mūr*) and others of Kilwa. But the *capitão* Pero Ferreira (*Kabtav Bail Fariyal*) said to me: ‘Give me 1000 *mithqāls* of gold and I will reconcile you with the Sultan.’ I did not give it to him and this became a reason for dispute. When *capitão* Tristão da Cunha (*Kabtav Tastad Kuya*) came here, he [Ferreira] told him: ‘Do not meet Haj Hasan bin Muhammad Rukn, as he is my enemy.’ And he did not come to see me, but I went [to see him]. I did not know what was in his heart when he went off to India and returned. Dom Francisco de Almeida then sent a document to Kilwa [saying] he and I should betray the Sultan [Muhammad] Mikat. I remained loyal [to him]. But I do not know why there was this duplicity of Dom Francisco de Almeida or *capitão* Tristão da Cunha. There was a meeting with the Sultan Mikat, and the *feitor, alcaide-mór, capitão* Pero Ferreira, and Haj Hasan bin Muhammad Rukn, all the Christians, and all the people of Kilwa, in order to live in peace. A month later, the *capitão* and other Christians, including the *feitor, alcaide-mór, escrivão* and others caught Haj Hasan and took him to Malindi. There they tortured me a lot for three days, night and day. They sent my servant Kurribi to me every night, and he told me to keep standing half the night for the *capitão*. Until I gave 1000 *mithqāls* of gold, I would have to suffer this or be killed. I was alone and isolated behind doors until I sent my slave to my wife, saying: ‘Give me money, even if it is a half of the 1000 *mithqāls*, so that I may be saved from him’. She sent 442 *mithqāls* of gold. Then I managed to go back home, [after] being terrified in Malindi. This is what happened.

Now I ask you for peace and protection. Indeed, I have sent you a small present of gold, ambergris, and silk cloth, with *capitão* [Lionel] Coutinho (*Kadanuf?*). He took it to Mozambique and met Tristão da Cunha, who took it from him and gave it to *capitão* António de Saldanha (*'Atan Da Saljay*). I would like to find out whether you have received it or not. I appeal to you, since I now have nothing to eat, nor do I have clothes. The people of Mal (*ahl al-mal*) came to your city Kilwa at night and robbed me of everything I had, because I am your obedient follower. The *alcaide-mór* of Kilwa and all Christians are witnesses to this.

p. 2: To the lord who is a virtuous and auspicious guide and counsellor, a dependable pillar, a paragon of admirable behaviour, of high lineage, refuge of the [rich and?] poor, protector of strangers and inhabitants, the mighty and exalted master (...) the great and unique person who possesses affection, who has a sincere heart and a broad mind, whose tongue speaks an incisive language, who has populated the world far and wide with goodness. Be it known that he is that bountiful and generous lord, who deserves reverence and greatness, who is full of goodness, forgiver of mistakes and errors, the lord Sultan Dom Manuel [of Portugal].



Letter 18, p. 1.

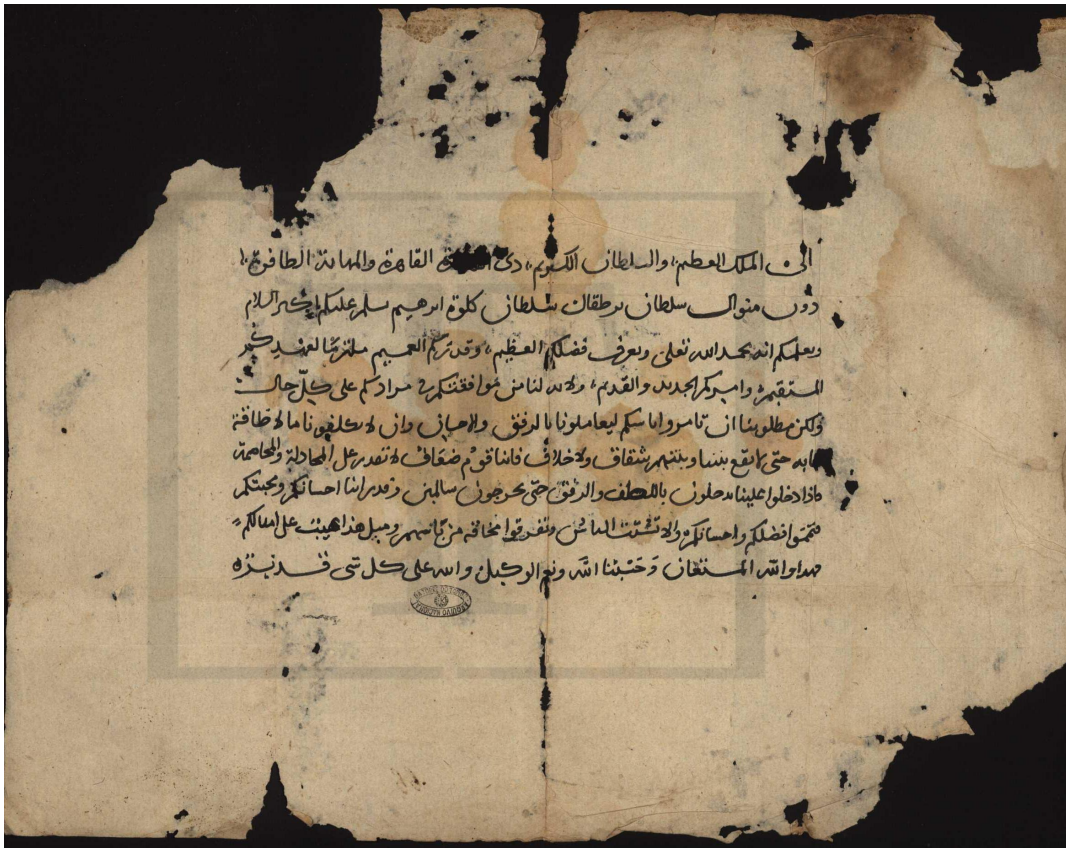


بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ

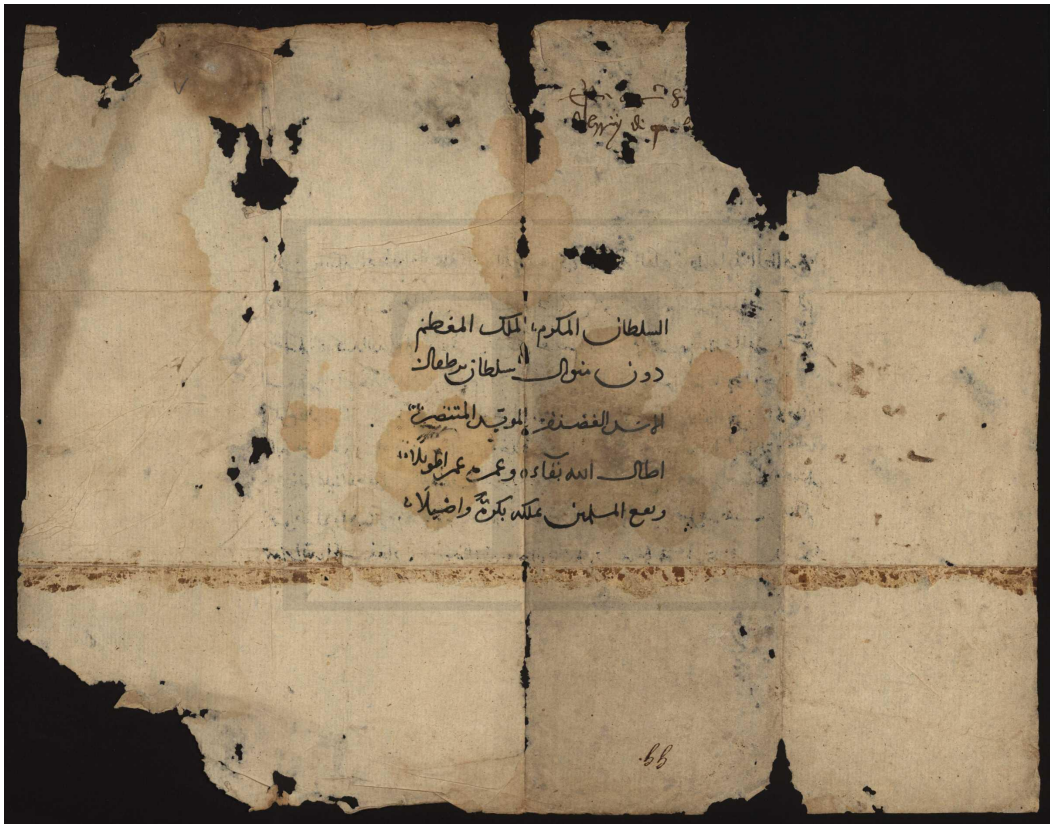
هذه الرقعة صادرة من شريف محمد العلوي مسكنه مسيح  
 الي سيدي سندكي ملجاي معتدكي خير اهل الارض  
 كلها مشارفها ومغاربها عامر اهل ارض بر طقال وجامع  
 الحلق والاموال مالك عمرنا وزماننا كل ذكره نال  
 ومزغان ذاب وحال شاعه في جميع البلدان وهو ركن  
 من اركان حبيبه وهادم من حالف اليه من اطاعه شكر  
 ومن خالفه ندم الو هو السلطان دون من وال اعنه الله  
 ومعلمه حفظه الله وتوكله ان المطلوب منه صدقة لانني  
 از بر سلفي وقتي يؤمنني من السفالة الي اهل ارض الهند  
 نمشي في جميع ارضه مع مركب لي لا احابا بنا عنى ولا احابك  
 يوزيني همي عطاون لي بر فوعي في جميع المسلمين نبهي حامدا  
 في ان الليل و اطراف النهار وطى الله على محمد وآله وسلم

*(Marginal notes in Urdu script, partially illegible)*





Letter 19, p. 1.



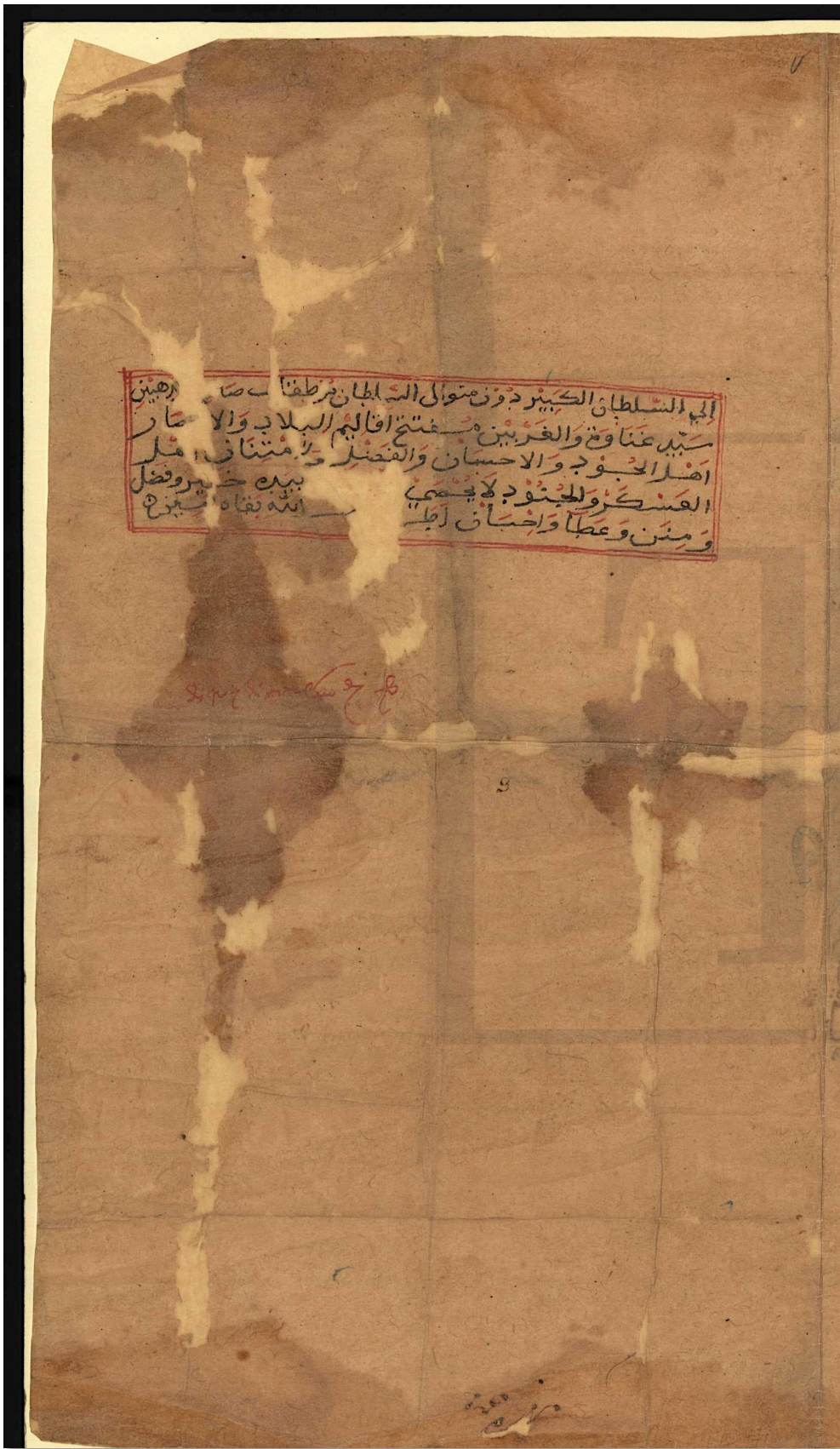
Letter 19, p. 2.



الحى السيد السلطان دوز متوال السلطان برطقال صاحب عنان والغريين  
 صسيد الدهيين مالكا اقاليم البر والبحر ومالك جزر البحر من العربية والعجمية  
 واقاله الهند والفرسية مستغنى البلاد جميع الامصار صاحب بلدة مباركة ميمونة  
 محفوظة حروسة مأمونة ويقعة زاوية ميمونة السلطان الذي اشتهر بالنعوت  
 الشامخة تمشق الوصوف الراسخة وارتفع بالجمود الفاسخة وافخر  
 بتمسك صدر لوداد النابضة الذي اجتهد بعمود السلام النصارى  
 فسطلع ونشر بشمال الخرافة جمع ونادى حبل السناد قلباه  
 واستمع فاطاعه كل شئ بيد له وقتعة السلطان العزيز الذي  
 اقنع كل من اقرب وادنى السلط الكبير الذي لا يقينه شئ  
 الاخر وجه من نطفة اذا تم من السلطان الذي يخرج من  
 فيه حسن الجواب ويدر من غلامه كل الصواب السلطان الذي  
 من طلب منه مقاصد قال عن كل المطالب ومن اجتنب  
 عنه ائتمك بالمصائب اذام ان عجز وفعلا الكه ان صاحبكم  
 السلطان ملته على من السلطان على سلم عليكم سلاما كثيرا  
 ويقبل بشاغر وجهكم تقبيل خيرا ويعتمدكم اعتمادا  
 كبيرا او يطمع خيركم واحسانكم ليلا ونهارا ويعلمكم  
 ان ذور منوبل فرنا بس د ح ملته وحى مره حباله  
 من اهل البيت فضله منة واعطاني بترككم  
 اكمل الله كثير اوجج - - - - -  
 وهم بعز وذكه اكثر الاع  
 ليلا ونهارا او خيركم واح  
 عدون الا انه اطاب الله بقاء  
 اكثر السلام ويسلم على

Letter 20, p. 1.





إلى السلطان الكبير ذو المنوال الله الجان فرطنا صا  
سيد عنا وقع والغريين مفتحة اقاليم البلاد والاسار  
اهل الجود والاحسان والفضل الامتنان مثل  
العسكرو الجيود لا يسمي  
ومن وعطا واحسان لطلب  
بيده خير وفضل  
الله بقاءه شيرع

بسم الله الرحمن الرحيم

9

Letter 20, p. 2.



فهذه الهبة المعجلة الي السلطان ربي دو من ربه السلطان دبر طفل اعلم  
 يا سيدي ان ابي محمد ركن خادمتكم وهو التابع المقر اليكم في جميع الخدمة اولاً  
 حتى ماتت السلطان المملوك قتل محمد ركن لاجل طاعتكم وانا ولد محمد ركن حاج  
 ما فعلنا الا خير للنصارى في كلوة وغيره اذا سمع كلام ابي محمد ركن وتهدد ذلك  
 قيديمور وقيطور وغيره لكن قال لي كتبوا بيدهم انا اعطيتني الف مائة ذهب  
 توليك السلطان انا اعطاه سبب خصوصي اذا جاء كتبوا تشدد كوي قال  
 لا تذهب علي حاج حسن محمد ركن خاصي وهو ما جاء مني للزيارة لكن انا  
 ذهبت عليه وانا ما ادرت في قلبه لسا فر الجيد مني لاجل جمع واصل كلوة ورقة  
 دو فر سيشك ذيل ميذ افعوا السلطان مكا الجبان مني وانا الي الطاعة  
 لكن دو فر سيشك ذيل ميذ ما ادرت هذه الجبان وكذلك كتبوا تشدد كوي ما  
 ادرت كذلك بعد هذه جلس السلطان معات وكتبوا بيدهم ركن حاج حسن  
 بر محمد ركن وقيديمور وقيطور وجماعة النصارى وجميع اهل كلوة في الخبز وغانية  
 بعد شهر كتبوا اخذوه النصارى قيديمور وقيطور وشيخ قور وبقية  
 ودوة الي الملبدة لسا سافر الي الملبدة غد يوي هذا با تشديد الملبدة ايام بلا وها  
 ونهار كل ليل اسلمني خادمة كرتي وانا قال لي اني كتبوا نص الليل اقام  
 عليه قال لي ما نعيم حتى اعطيتني منقذ ذهب انا قتل وانا منقذ منقذ وقيديمور  
 الباب حتى اسلم عدي الي زوجتي اعطيتي لركان نصف الف ذهب اسلم منه ورسول  
 لي اربع مائة واثني واربعون متقاي من الذهب لسا جمع الي البيت شرد  
 الي ملبدة هذه الذي جري وانا نطلب اليكم بالخير وانا قد اعمل اليكم شئ حقيرة  
 قليل غير وقليل شئ من الذهب وقليل نقعة ثوب دياح عي كتبوا كرتي  
 سافر ورجع الي مشبيج كتبوا تشدد كوي اخذ منه واعطيت علي كتبوا عطني دسليمي  
 وانا تشدد اليكم حتى نعلم اقبطتم امر وانا نطلب منكم انا ما عندي شئ  
 للاكل ولا ثوب للبايس اهل الملبدة في بلادك كلوة كذا الليل نهبوني جميع  
 مالي لاجل طاعتكم وقيديمور كلوة شاهد وجميع النصارى





Letter 46, p. 2.