

17. A PHYSICIAN AND POET URGES HIS RELATIVES IN FATIMID EGYPT
TO JOIN HIM IN BYZANTINE ASIA MINOR.

A Letter from Seleucia (Cilicia)

Dated July 21, 1137

An exciting episode in Byzantine history is reflected in this letter. The Emperor John II Comnenus was on his way to Antioch - held at that time by Raymond of Poitiers - and a part of his powerful army passed through the town in which this letter was written. The Byzantines arrived before the gates of Antioch on August 29.¹ Our letter, however, reports a rumor that the city had already fallen forty days earlier. The writer, a physician, even expresses the expectation that the Emperor might take Aleppo and Damascus as well and already placed an order for medical books which would be looted there from the homes of his colleagues. In addition to this touch of living history, the letter also contains a number of other details of import for Byzantine studies.

As usual with correspondence of Arabic-speaking Jews of that period, the letter is written in Hebrew characters, but in the Arabic language. There are many quotations in Hebrew and allusions to verses from the Bible or to post-Biblical Hebrew literature. The beginning of the letter, as well as the address are lost. A combination of the facts provided in sections E and F shows that it was written in Seleucia, then the capital of Isauria in south-east Asia Minor (called today Silifke). It is evident from the content that it was sent to Egypt, most probably to Fustat, where it was found. A letter addressed to Seleucia has also been preserved in the Geniza. It is written in Hebrew, which proves that the recipient was a local, Byzantine Jew and