

906: Bertha of Tuscany's Correspondence with al-Muktafī bi-llāh in the Version of Ibn al-Zubayr

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Abstract: That Bertha, the marquise of Tuscany, should have entered into written correspondence with the 'Abbāsīd caliph al-Muktafī bi-llāh in 906 has aroused scholarly curiosity for decades. The correspondence is recorded in Arabic sources since the tenth century, but found its most extensive documentation in an eleventh-century version, edited by Muḥammad Ḥamīdullāh in the early 1950s. Since then, scholars have speculated about Bertha's motives to win the caliph's friendship, generally characterizing Bertha as an ambitious woman who, in this case, went beyond her means. In the early 2000s, Ann Christys then labelled Bertha's correspondence "as a spoof" and as a manifestation of Arabic-Islamic "conceptualizations of the barbarous," thus seriously questioning the authenticity of the correspondence. This article draws together different arguments to arrive at an evaluation of what the extant documentation can tell us about the probability and nature of Tuscan–'Abbāsīd relations in the early tenth century.

Source

Al-Qāḍī al-Rašīd b. al-Zubayr, *Kitāb al-Ḍaḥā'ir wa-l-tuḥaf*, ed. Muḥammad Ḥamīdullāh, al-Kuwayt: Dā'irat al-maṭbū'āt wa-l-našr, 1959, pp. 48–54. Translation adapted from: *Book of Gifts and Rarities – Kitāb al-Ḥadāyā wa al-Tuḥaf*, trans. Ghāda al-Ḥijjāwī al-Qaddūmī, Cambridge/MA: Harvard University Press, 1996, § 69, pp. 91–98.

وقدم عليّ الخادم بالهدية من ملكة إفرنجية وبكتابها
إلى المكتفي بالله، وبرسالة منها لم يضمنها الكتاب
لغلا يقف عليها أحدٌ سوى الخليفة. (...)

قال أبو عبد الله محمد بن عبد الله الإصبهاني، كاتب
أبي ليلي الحارث بن عبد العزيز: كنتُ في العسكر
مع المكتفي بالله قد شخصتُ لشخص الوزير
العبّاس بن الحسن. فطلب السلطان من يترجم
الكتاب. وكان في خزانة الكسوة، مع يشر الخادم،
فرنجي يقرأ كتابة أهلها، فأحضره ذلك الخادم. فقرأ
الكتاب وترجمه بكتابة الرومية. وأحضر أسحاق بن
حنين فترجمه بالعربية من الرومية. فإذا فيه.

Alī the eunuch arrived with the gift and the letter of
the queen of the Frankish realm (*malikat Ifranġa*) to
al-Muktafī bi-llāh, and with a message from her not
included in the letter so that no one except the caliph
would know it. (...)

Abū 'Abd-Allāh Muḥammad b. 'Abd-Allāh al-
Iṣbahānī, secretary to Abū Laylā al-Ḥarīṭ b. 'Abd al-
'Azīz says: I was in the camp with al-Muktafī bi-
Allāh, having come in person to see Vizier al-
'Abbās b. al-Ḥasan, and the Sultān [caliph?] asked
for someone to translate the letter. There was in the
garment treasury (*ḥizānat al-kiswah*), together with
the eunuch Bišr, a Frank able to read the language
of her people. He was brought in by the eunuch Bišr
and, having read the letter, wrote out a translation in
Greek (*Rūmi*) script. Then Ishāq b. Ḥunayn was
summoned to translate the Greek into Arabic. The
letter read as follows: (...)

بسم الله الرحمن الرحيم. حفظك الله بسلطانه أيها الملك، الجيد العهد، القوي السلطان، من كل أعدائك، وثبت لك ملكك، وأدام سلامتك، في بدنك ونفسك منذ الآن إلى الأبد.

أنا برتا بنت الأوتاري، الملكة على جميع الفرنجيين، أقرأ، يا سيدي الملك، عليك السلام. إنه جرت بيني وبين ملك إفريقية صداقة لأني لم أكن أتوهم أن ملكاً يكون فوقه يملك الأرض إلى هذه الغاية. إن مراكي كانت خرجت، فأخذت مراكب ملك إفريقية. وكان رئيسها خادماً له، يقال له عليّ، فأرسته ومئة وخمسين رجلاً كانوا معه في ثلاث مراكب. وبقوا في ملكي سبع سنين، ووجدت عاقلاً فهماً. فأعلمني أنك ملك على جميع الملوك. وقد كان صار إلى ملكتي خلق كثير. فلم يصدقني منهم عنك إلا هذا الخادم الذي يحمل إليك كتابي هذا (...).

وعرفني أن بينك وبين ملك الروم المقيم بالقسطنطينية، صداقة. وأنا أوسع منه سلطاناً وأكثر جنوداً، لأن سلطاني على أربع وعشرين مملكة، كل لسانها مخالف للسان المملكة التي تليها. وفي ملكتي مدينة رومية العظمى، والحمد لله. وقال لي فيك قولاً حسناً ملاً به قلبي مما أنت عليه في أمورك، وأنا أسأل الله العون على مصادقتك والصلح بيننا ما أحببت من السنين. فإن الأمر في ذلك إليك. والصلح شيء لم يطلبه أحد من أهل بيتي ولا قراباتي ولا جنسي قط. ولم يكن أحد يخبرني عن جيوشك وكراماتك التي أنت فيها على ما أخبرني به الآن هذا الخادم الذي أرسلت به إليك. فعليك يا سيدي في محبة الله أكثر السلام. وأكتب إلى بصحتك وفي جميع حوائجك في ملكتي وبلدي مع عليّ هذا الخادم، ولا تحبسه قبلك ليحبيني عنك، فأني متوقعة لموافاته. وقد حملته سراً يقوله لك إذا رأى وجهك وسمع كلامك، ليكون هذا السر بيننا، لا أحب أن يقف

In the name of God, the Compassionate, the Merciful. May God, O King of prosperous reign and strong power, protect you with His power against all your enemies, stabilize your kingdom and preserve your well-being in body and soul, from now to eternity.

I, Bertha, daughter of Lothair (*Bartā bint al-Awtārī*), queen of all the Franks, send you, Lord King (*yā sīdī al-malik*), my greetings. There was formerly friendship between me and the king (*malik*) of Ifrīqiya because I never conceived there could be any king above him, who rules over the earth to such a degree. My ships used to sail out and they seized the ships of the king of Ifrīqiya. Their commander was one of his eunuchs called 'Alī. I captured him, along with a hundred fifty men who were with him on the three ships. They remained in my power for seven years. I found him to be intelligent and understanding. Now, he informed me that you are the king over all kings. Many had come to my kingdom, yet none had told me the truth concerning you except this eunuch, who now bears you this letter of mine. (...)

I am informed by 'Alī that there is friendship between you and the ruler of the Byzantines (*malik al-Rūm*) residing in Constantinople. I have greater power and more soldiers since I rule over twenty-four kingdoms, each of which has a different language from the kingdom adjoining it. The great city of Rome also lies in my kingdom, praise be to God. 'Alī gave me such a favourable account of your situation as has filled my heart concerning the things you are up against in your affairs. And I request the aid of God in [gaining] your friendship and [establishing] peace (*ṣulḥ*) between us for as many years as this may be agreeable to you. The decision in this matter lies with you. As for the peace settlement (*ṣulḥ*), this is something never before sought by anyone among my family (*ahl baytī*), relatives (*qarābātī*), or ethnic group (*ḡinsī*). None had told me of your armies or of the high esteem you enjoy, until it was told me by this eunuch I have sent to you. My Lord (*yā sīdī*), I wish you profound peace in God's love. Write to me, through this eunuch 'Alī, of your health and of all you require from my kingdom (*mamlakatī*) and my city (*baladī*); and do not hold him back from returning with your reply, since I await his arrival. I have entrusted him with a secret message that he

عليه أحدٌ غيرك وغيري وغير هذا الخادم. وعليك أكثر سلام الله وعلى جميع من معك. وكتب الله عدوك وجعله وطء قدمك. والسلام (...).

will convey to you when he has seen your face and has heard your words, so that the matter may remain secret among ourselves; for I do not wish that anyone but you, myself, and this eunuch should know of it. May God's profound peace be upon you and upon all those around you, and may God bring your enemies low, to be trampled beneath your foot. Farewell [Peace]. (...)

فدعاني الوزيرُ العباس بن الحسن، وقد كان ذكرني من ديوان الرسائل في أيام علة ابن فرات. فألقى إلى الكتاب عن هذه الملكة إلى المكتفي. وقال لي: بُحِبُّ عن هذا الكتاب، لأقف على مذهبك في الصناعة. فأجبتُ بجواب كان في بعض الحشونة. فأمرني بملايتها وعمَلِ كتابٍ ثانٍ. فعملته وعرضته عليه فاستحسنه. ووصل الخادم بمال. وأنفذ الكتاب معه فمات في الطريق. وهذه نسخة الجواب الثاني: (...)

Then the Vizier al-‘Abbās b. al-Ḥasan summoned me, recalling me from the time I was in the chancery of correspondence during the sickness of Ibn al-Furāt. He said to me: “Answer this letter, so that I may know your style in the art [of writing].” I wrote a somewhat harsh reply, whereupon he ordered me to prepare a second letter showing greater mildness toward her. This I did, and when I showed it to him, he deemed it good. He granted the eunuch funds and sent the letter with him, but the eunuch died during the journey. This is a copy of the second reply: (...)

وإنه أنهى إلى أمير المؤمنين أن خادماً يسمي علياً ورد باب أمير المؤمنين ووصف أنه وافدٌ عنك بكتاب تذكير فيه أن أحوالاً جرت بينك وبين الملك على إفريقية في التجاذب والتحارب صار في خلالها هذا الخادم ومئة وخمسون رجلاً، كانوا معه في ثلاثة مراكب خرجت إليك من قبله، أسرى في يدك. فبقوا في ملكك سبع سنين وأفرجت تلك الأحوال عن صداقة بينك وبينه (...).

It has been reported to the Commander of the Faithful that a eunuch named ‘Alī arrived at the gate of the Commander of the Faithful, who described how he was dispatched by you with a letter in which you mention matters that took place between you and the king over Ifrīqiya in terms of mutual affinity and conflict, in the course of which this eunuch and a hundred fifty men who were with him on three sent out against you by him, became captives in your hands. They have remained in your power for seven years, and these things led to friendship between you and him.¹ (...)

وأنه عرفك إلى ذلك أن بين أمير المؤمنين وبين عظيم الروم المقيم بقسطنطينية صداقة وأنت منيفة الخطر عليه، إذ كان سلطانك يشمل على أربع وعشرين مملكة، لكل واحدة منها لغة تخالف لغة الأخرى، وفيها مدينة رومية العظمى. وتعرضين في فحوى خطابك بصلح يوقعه أمير المؤمنين لك وبسلم يعثده بينه وبينك، وتصلين ذلك بذكر ما أوعزت إلى

And that, in addition to all this, he informed you of a friendship existing between the Commander of the Faithful and the Mighty One of the Byzantines (*‘aẓīm al-Rūm*) residing in Constantinople, and how your significance is superior to his (*munīfa l-ḥaṭar ‘alayhi*), since your power encompasses twenty-four kingdoms, each having a language different from the other, and that the great city of Rome lies there. You propose, in your letter, a peace treaty (*ṣulḥ*) to be signed for you by the Commander of the Faithful and also a peace that he concludes between him and you (*salām ya‘quduhu baynahu wa-*

¹ The English translator believes that “him” refers to “the king of Ifrīqiyah.” However, the personal pronoun could also refer to ‘Alī.

الخدام فيه بما يسره إلى أمير المؤمنين على جميع ما
تضمنه هذا الكتاب وفهمه.

baynaki), and you link this with a reference to what you intimated to the eunuch concerning what he should secretly transmit to the Commander of the Faithful, concerning all the things contained in this letter and what he has been given to understand.

Authorship & Work

[§1] If we believe in the authenticity of the correspondence cited above, then Bertha's letter was written at the order of the marquise in the chancery of the margraviate of Tuscany in Lucca. In Samarra, in Iraq, an unknown "Frank" from the caliph's wardrobe translated the "language of her people", probably Latin,² to Greek, the translator Ishāq b. Ḥunayn from Greek to Arabic. The caliph's reply, in turn, was commissioned and approved by the vizier al-ʿAbbās b. al-Ḥasan, but written by the secretary Abū ʿAbd Allāh Muḥammad b. ʿAbd Allāh al-Iṣbahānī who was in the caliph's camp on another errand.

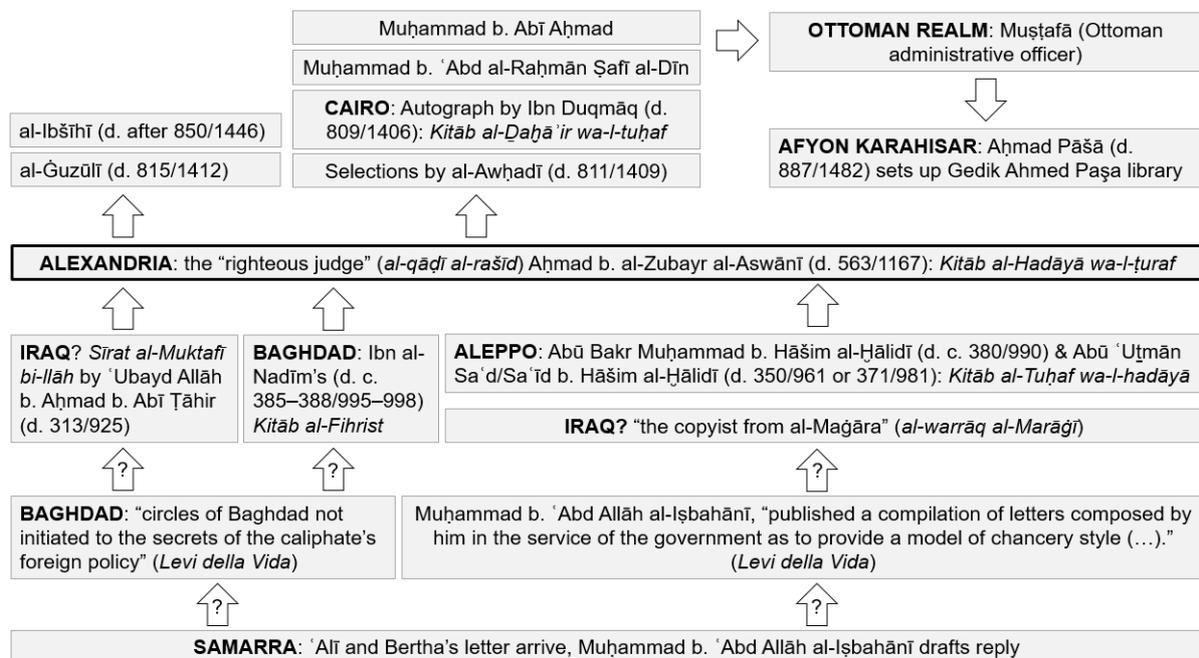


Fig. 1: Supposed transmission of Bertha's letter

[§2] The earliest records mentioning or citing of Bertha's correspondence originated in a western Asian milieu of Arabic-Islamic secretaries, poets, and bibliophiles. Theories about how the correspondence may have become part of the Arabic-Islamic literary tradition are a matter of conjecture. Giorgio Levi della Vida proposed that the secretary responsible for drafting the caliph's reply, i.e. Muḥammad b. ʿAbd Allāh al-Iṣbahānī, "published a compilation of letters composed by him in the service of the government as to provide those aspiring to the post of a secretary with a model of chancery style (...)." This compilation would have contained Bertha's letter, the reply, as well as a short introduction explaining the circumstances of its production.³

² On the identification of Latin with "Frankish" in Arabic sources, see König, *Unkempt Heritage*, pp. 428, 431–432, 437.

³ Levi della Vida, *La corrispondenza*, p. 32: "È possibile che, come altri segretari, egli abbia pubblicato una raccolta di epistole composte da lui in servizio del governo, per fornire agli aspiranti all'ufficio di segretario un modello di

Unfortunately lost, this text would have served as the primary source for the earliest extant documentation of the correspondence.

[§3] Bertha's letter, but not the caliph's reply, is first documented in the "Book of Rarities and Gifts" (*Kitāb al-Tuḥaf wa-l-hadāyā*) that was written by two brothers from al-Ḥālidiyya near Mosul known as "al-Ḥālidiyyān."⁴ Abū Bakr Muḥammad b. Hāšim al-Ḥālīdī (d. c. 380/990) and Abū 'Uṭmān Sa'd/Sa'īd b. Hāšim al-Ḥālīdī (d. 350/961 or 371/981) served as *literati* in the entourage of Sayf al-Dawla (r. 333–356/945–967), the amīr of Aleppo and northern Syria.⁵ Chapter 10 deals with "the presents of rulers from the peripheries to the sultan and their writings to him (*hadāyā mulūk al-aṭrāf li-l-sulṭān wa-makātibatihim iyāhu*) and mentions two embassies, one from India (*al-Hind*), the other from "Bertha, the daughter of Lothair" (*Bartā bint al-Awtārī*, alternatively spelled *Turna*). The letter was supposedly transmitted to the brothers by "the papermaker / stationist / copyist of manuscripts from al-Marāḡa" (*al-warrāq al-Marāḡī*), possibly a man hailing from a town in modern-day Azerbaijan. As *warrāq*, he belonged to a professional group that dealt with all kinds of texts, was present in all larger cities, and had close connections to intellectuals and *literati*.⁶ Bertha's letter as it is quoted by the Ḥālidiyyān-brothers is identical with the version cited above.⁷

[§4] The next reference to Bertha's letter is found in the *Kitāb al-Fihrist*, a biobibliographical index written by Ibn al-Nadīm (d. c. 385–388/995–998), a bookseller in Baghdad. Ibn Nadīm does not cite Bertha's letter, but refers to it in a subchapter of his book that deals with different kinds of scripts, in this context with the "script of the Franks" (*kitābat al-Faranḡa*). His reference to Bertha's letter adds three pieces of original information that are not mentioned by the Ḥālidiyyān-brothers. Ibn al-Nadīm describes (1) the letter's script and claims to have included a specimen of this script that is unfortunately lost. He defines (2) the writing material as white silk. Moreover, he claims that (3) Bertha proposed marriage to the caliph.

"Their writing is similar to, but more rectilinear than the Byzantine script (*al-ḥaṭṭ al-rūmī*). Maybe (*rubbamā*) we have seen it on Frankish swords, and a Frankish queen wrote a letter (*kitāban*) to al-Muktafī on white silk. She dispatched it with a servant who had come to her country from the direction of the Maghreb, sought the friendship of al-Muktafī, and proposed to marry him. The name of the servant was 'Alī [*Alban* (علبا), probably a scribal error from *Alīyan* (عليا)⁸] from among the servants of Ibn al-Aḡlab, and this is what their writing looks like ... [lacuna, specimen missing]."⁹

[§5] Ibn al-Nadīm possibly became acquainted with Bertha's letter through his acquaintance with the Ḥālidiyyān-brothers, since he claims to have talked to one of the brothers, Abū Bakr Muḥammad, about the latter's ability to memorize poetry.¹⁰ Given that the specimen of "Frankish writing" announced by Ibn al-Nadīm is missing, we cannot be sure whether he had really seen the supposed original letter or even authentic "Frankish script."¹¹ Since he does not

stile cancelleresco, e che di questa raccolta facesse parte la lettera a Berta, preceduta dal racconto delle circostanze in cui era stata redatta."

⁴ Al-Ḥālidiyyān, *Al-Tuḥaf wa-l-hadāyā li-l-Ḥālidiyyīn*, ed. Dahān.

⁵ Pellat, *al-Ḥālidiyyāni*.

⁶ Beg, *Warrāq*.

⁷ Al-Ḥālidiyyān, *Al-Tuḥaf wa-l-hadāyā li-l-Ḥālidiyyīn*, ed. Dahān, pp. 165–166. See pp. 39–49, on the manuscripts and alternative spellings.

⁸ Hamidullah, *Embassy*, p. 299.

⁹ Ibn al-Nadīm, *Kitāb al-Fihrist*, ed. Flügel, vol. 1, p. 20; al-Nadīm, *Kitāb al-Fihrist*, ed. Taḡaddud, p. 22; trans. Dodge, p. 38.

¹⁰ Ibn al-Nadīm, *Kitāb al-Fihrist*, ed. Flügel, vol. 1, p. 169; al-Nadīm, *Kitāb al-Fihrist*, ed. Taḡaddud, p. 195; trans. Dodge, vol. 2, pp. 373–374.

¹¹ Christys, *Queen*, pp. 156–157.

cite the letter, we cannot be sure whether he had read the *Kitāb al-Tuḥaf wa-l-hadāyā* by the two Ḥālidiyyān-brothers. As concerns his claim that Bertha proposed marriage to the caliph, Levi della Vida assumes that news about the letter and the secret oral message conveyed by the emissary ‘Alī circulated among “circles of Baghdad not initiated to the secrets of the caliphate’s foreign policy,” prompting rumours that a foreign woman writing to the caliph could have only proposed marriage.¹²

[§6] Although it is difficult to reconstruct the letter’s early transmission, we can establish the following facts: by the end of the fourth/tenth century, the story of a Frankish queen having sent an envoy with a letter and a secret message to the caliph al-Muktafi bi-llāh had become part of the Arabic-Islamic literary tradition as had an Arabic version of the queen’s letter. New information on this correspondence only appears in the version quoted at the beginning of this article. It contains an exact copy of Bertha’s letter as written out by the Ḥālidiyyān-brothers and the surplus information contained in Ibn al-Nadīm. Moreover, it quotes the caliph’s reply and elaborates upon the circumstances surrounding the arrival and translation of Bertha’s letter as well as the drafting, correction, and eventual dispatch of the caliph’s reply.

[§7] The editor, Muḥammad Ḥamīdullāh, identified the author of this text with the “righteous judge” (*al-qāḍī al-raṣīd*) Aḥmad b. al-Zubayr al-Aswānī. According to Yāqūt (d. 626/1229) and Ibn Ḥallikān (d. 681/1282), Ibn al-Zubayr lived in Alexandria/Egypt of the sixth/twelfth century. According to Yāqūt, he engaged with philology, history, medicine, logic, engineering, and astronomy, was author of a “Book of Gifts and Curiosities” (*Kitāb al-Hadāyā wa-l-ṭuraf*), and was executed in 562/1166. According to Ibn Ḥallikān, he was active as *qāḍī* and director of the *dīwān*-s in Alexandria and was killed in 563/1167 under Šāwar (d. 564/1169), vizier of the last Fāṭimid caliph al-‘Āḍid li-Dīn Allāh (r. 555–567/1160–1171).¹³

[§8] The identification of the author of the “Book of Gifts and Rarities” with Ibn al-Zubayr was questioned by its English translator, Ghāda al-Hijjāwī al-Qaddūmi. She pointed to passages in the text that describe how the Fāṭimid treasury in Cairo was pillaged in 460–461/1068–1069 from the perspective of an eye-witness.¹⁴ Having died around a century later, Ibn al-Zubayr could not have witnessed this event. On the basis of scanty autobiographical references in the text, she surmised that the text was written by an anonymous author who lived in Egypt between 444/1052–1053 and 463/1071. Because of several references to Fāṭimid officials, he must have been employed in the Fāṭimid administration under al-Mustanṣir bi-llāh (r. 427–487/1036–1094).¹⁵

[§9] Heinz Halm solved this controversy on authorship by assuming that the extant “Book of Gifts and Curiosities” actually contains two books. The pillaging of al-Mustanṣir’s treasury was described by an Anonymous in a book entitled “Book of Gifts and Rarities and What of it was Found in the Castle” (*Kitāb al-Daḥā’ir wa-l-tuḥaf wa-mā kāna bi-l-qaṣr min dālik*), which was used by later authors including the Egyptian historiographer al-Maqrīzī (d. 845/1442). Around one century after the pillaging, Ibn al-Zubayr was inspired by this text to write a more comprehensive book on the treasures of Muslim rulers from the Umayyads to his lifetime, including those taken from the treasuries of al-Mustanṣir. This book featured under the title “The Book of Wonders and Curiosities and Gifts and Curiosities” (*Kitāb al-‘Aḡā’ib wa-l-ṭuraf wa-l-hadāyā wa-l-tuḥaf*).¹⁶

¹² Levi della Vida, *La corrispondenza*, p. 34: “ambienti di Bagdad non iniziati ai segreti della politica estera del califfato (...)”

¹³ Halm, *Buch der Schätze*, p. 82.

¹⁴ Al-Raṣīd b. al-Zubayr, *Kitāb al-Hadāyā*, ed. Ḥamīdullāh, p. 25; *Book of Gifts*, trans. al-Hijjāwī al-Qaddūmi, p. 59.

¹⁵ *Book of Gifts*, trans. al-Hijjāwī al-Qaddūmi, pp. 11–13.

¹⁶ Halm, *Buch der Schätze*, pp. 79–84.

[§10] Unfortunately, Ibn al-Zubayr does not tell us how he received access to the correspondence between Bertha and the caliph, which, in his lifetime, was already more than 250 years old. He merely mentions that the “Biography of al-Muktafī bi-llāh” (*Sīrat al-Muktafī bi-llāh*) by ‘Ubayd Allāh b. Aḥmad b. Abī Ṭāhir (d. 313/925–926), a work unfortunately lost, claims that the gifts she announced had never been dispatched.¹⁷

[§11] A shortened version of Ibn Zubayr’s text, cut down to the list of Bertha’s presents and her letter, appeared later in al-Ġuzūlī’s (d. 815/1412) anthology *Maṭāli‘ al-budūr fī manāzil al-surūr*,¹⁸ whereas the work of al-Ibšīhī (d. after 850/1446) only lists the gifts.¹⁹ Ibn Zubayr’s “full” version of the correspondence and the surrounding circumstances has come down to us in the autograph of a certain Ibn Duqmāq (d. c. 809/1406), which was probably written in Cairo.²⁰ It consists of selections of Ibn Zubayr’s text made by a man called al-Awḥadī (d. 811/1408–1409), whose texts were also used by al-Maqrīzī.²¹ The manuscript contains the names of several owners, who are difficult to identify, i.e.. Muḥammad b. ‘Abd al-Raḥmān Ṣafī al-Dīn and Muḥammad b. Abī Aḥmad. At some point of time in the fifteenth century, this manuscript came into the possession of an Ottoman administrative officer named Muṣṭafā, whose son, Aḥmad Paşa (d. 887/1482), was the grand vizier of Mehmed the Conqueror (r. 848–850/1444–1446 and 855–886/1451–1481). Aḥmad Paşa founded the Gedik Ahmed Paşa library in Afyon Karahisar (modern-day Turkey) where the manuscript was eventually found.²²

Content & Context

[§12] The manuscript carries the title “The Book of Gifts and Rarities” (*Kitāb al-Daḥā’ir wa-l-tuḥaf*). It deals with the treasures collected by Umayyad, ‘Abbāsīd, Būyīd, Fāṭimid, and other Muslim rulers. Bertha’s letter and the caliph’s reply form part of the first chapter on gifts. With a few minor exceptions, this chapter proceeds chronologically, beginning with gifts given and received by pre-Islamic rulers, then by Muḥammad and his contemporaries, by the Umayyads, and, finally, by the ‘Abbāsīds and dynasties contemporary to them up to the author’s lifetime in the twelfth century. The correspondence is inserted between an entry listing the presents sent by the Aḡlabīd ruler Ziyādat Allāh III (r. 290–296/903–909) to al-Muktafī bi-llāh in 291/904, and another entry dealing with the gifts sent by Ismā‘īl b. Aḥmad of Ḥurāsān to al-Muktafī’s successor, the caliph Ġā’far al-Muqtadir bi-llāh (r. 295–320/908–932), in 298/911.

[§13] The entry on Bertha’s gifts has an intricate structure. The introduction mentions the date, the sender, the receiver, the messenger, and the gifts sent. It claims that the eunuch ‘Alī arrived with the letter and a secret message, according to which Bertha asked the caliph to marry her (*ṭalab al-tazwīġ*). It describes the letter as having been written on white silk and in the “Frankish language,” and then explains how ‘Alī had become Bertha’s messenger and how he found the caliph in his hunting camp (*fī mutaṣayyidihi*) near a place called “Whoever saw it was pleased” (*surra man rā’a*) that we can identify with Samarra (*Sāmarrā*).²³ The text then reproduces the narrative of the secretary who wrote the caliph’s reply. He explains how the letter was translated and then quotes the letter.

¹⁷ Toorawa, ‘Ubayd Allāh b. Aḥmad b. Abī Ṭāhir.

¹⁸ Al-Ġuzūlī, *Maṭāli‘ al-budūr fī manāzil al-surūr*, vol. 2, pp. 135–136. References to Ibn al-Zubayr in vol. 1, p. 128; vol. 2, pp. 40, 65, 140, 162, 189; Halm, *Buch der Schätze*, p. 82; Brockelmann, *al-Ġuzūlī*.

¹⁹ Al-Ibšīhī, *al-Mustaṭraf fī kull fann mustaṭraf*, vol. 2, pp. 67–68; Levi della Vida, *La corrispondenza*, p. 24 FN4; Vadet, *al-Ibšīhī*.

²⁰ Pedersen, *Ibn Duqmāq*.

²¹ Rosenthal, *al-Maqrīzī*, p. 194.

²² Halm, *Buch der Schätze*, pp. 79–84.

²³ Northedge, *Sāmarrā*, p. 1039.

[§14] The letter itself repeats much of the aforementioned information. It begins with the *basmala* and good wishes to “the king” (*al-malik*) alias the caliph. Identifying herself as the daughter of Lothair, Bertha mentions her former friendship with the Aġlabid “king of Ifrīqiya” and explains how she seized three of his ships, thus capturing their commander, the eunuch ‘Alī, together with 150 men, who remained in her custody for seven years. ‘Alī, said to have informed her of the existence of the ‘Abbāsid caliphate, is accredited as Bertha’s messenger who bears the gifts now listed. Bertha then refers to the friendship between the caliph and the Byzantine emperor and describes herself as more powerful given that she holds sway over twenty-four kingdoms including the city of Rome. She declares her wish to establish friendship and peace with the caliph. Ignoring the exchange between her great-great-grandfather Charlemagne with Hārūn al-Rašīd around a century earlier,²⁴ she claims that “this is something never before sought by anyone among my family, relatives, or ethnic group (*ġinsī*).”²⁵ The letter ends with a reference to the secret message sent with ‘Alī.

[§15] A short interpolation follows that can either be credited to the secretarial narrator or to Ibn al-Zubayr. He mentions that, according to the “Biography of al-Muktafi” by ‘Ubayd Allāh b. Aḥmad b. Abī Ṭāhir (d. 313/925–926), Bertha’s gifts had actually never been sent. He then quotes a hitherto unknown passage of the letter, in which Bertha explains that she had not sent the gifts fearing that the “ruler of Ifrīqiya” would seize them. She also promises to send “all Muslim prisoners we are holding captive” (*wa-ursila ilayka bi-ġamī‘ min qad ḥawānāhu min asrā al-muslimīn*) and to provide “anything your heart can conceive that you need from my country” (*wa-ġamī‘ mā yaḥtar bi-qalbak mimā taḥtāġ ilayhi min mamlakatī, fa-huwa laka*) while she “shall request whatever I need from your country (*wa mā aḥtāġ ana aydan ilayhi mima fi mamlakatika, sa ‘altuka iyāhu*).” In what seems to be a kind of proposal to conclude an economic treaty, she deplores that “it is not possible to translate this talk” (*ḥādā kalām lam tatahayya ‘ tarġamatuhu*), expressing the hope, however, that “there is a treaty between us” (*wa-yakūn baynanā ‘ ahd*).²⁶

[§16] The text then returns to the narrative of the secretary al-Iṣbahānī who explains how the vizier commissioned him to write a reply which turned out so harsh that he was ordered to write a milder variant. After mentioning that this reply never arrived because the emissary ‘Alī died on the way, this milder version is then quoted. It begins with the *basmala* and a boastful description and divine legitimization of the caliph’s power. The letter then repeats the contents of Bertha’s letter in slight variations, mentioning the arrival of ‘Alī, Bertha’s relations to Ifrīqiya, her capture of ‘Alī, her realization that the caliph was mightier than the Aġlabid amīr, her intention to send gifts of arms, slaves, and birds of prey thwarted by her fear of an Aġlabīd attack. While there is no reference to any kind of marriage offer, the letter acknowledges Bertha’s offer to use ‘Alī as a messenger who will transmit what the caliph requests from her realm as well as her request to be sent curiosities as may be found in the realm of the Commander of the Faithful in exchange for the Muslim captives held in her realm.

“And you dispatched the servant to return to you with a written reply intending that he should be a messenger between the Commander of the Faithful and you who transmits to you what the heart of the Commander of the Faithful can conceive that he needs from my country, while he conveys from you what you ask the Commander of the Faithful concerning the curiosities that are in his realms, on the

²⁴ See Kalkbrenner, 797–802; Notkers *Gesta Karoli Magni*, for the relevant literature.

²⁵ Al-Rašīd b. al-Zubayr, *Kitāb al-Hadāyā*, ed. Ḥamīdullāh, p. 52; *Book of Gifts*, trans. al-Hijjāwī al-Qaddūmi, p. 93. According to Levi della Vida, *La corrispondenza*, p. 33, Bertha is only able to present herself as queen over twenty-four kingdoms against the backdrop of the Carolingian empire.

²⁶ Al-Rašīd b. al-Zubayr, *Kitāb al-Hadāyā*, ed. Ḥamīdullāh, p. 54. My translation differs from *Book of Gifts*, trans. al-Hijjāwī al-Qaddūmi, p. 94, who connects the impossibility of translation with the possibility of concluding a treaty: “it is not possible to translate the substance of a pledge between us (...).”

resolve of the Commander of the Faithful that you will send to the Commander of the Faithful all the prisoners contained in your realm.”²⁷

[§17] Bertha’s boast of holding sway over twenty-four kingdoms is repeated and answered with comparable boasts on the part of the caliph who claims that all rulers of the world yearn to win status through his attention. Claiming that his high rank prevented him from entering into friendship with other, always lower rulers, he demonstrates his goodwill by claiming that, among all rulers to whom he shows affability, Bertha will stand out because of her eminent status. The eunuch ‘Alī is said to have been entrusted with a reply to Bertha’s secret message. Both the caliph’s letter and the entry on Bertha’s correspondence ends here.

Contextualization, Analysis & Interpretation

[§18] The following paragraphs discuss the correspondence between Bertha of Tuscany and the caliph al-Muktafī bi-llāh with regard to its disputed authenticity and its Iraqi context of reception. The commentary then turns to the North African and Tuscan political and economic environment that could have triggered Bertha’s initiative to contact the caliph. These deliberations will serve as a basis to produce a tentative evaluation of what this correspondence can tell us about potential Tuscan–‘Abbāsīd relations in the early tenth century.

[§19] Most scholars who have worked with the text, including Muḥammad Ḥamīdullāh, Giorgio Levi della Vida, Carlo Guido Mor, Helmut G. Walther, Catia Renzi Rizzo, Germana Gandino, François Bougard, and Giacomo Vignodelli have regarded this correspondence as curious but potentially plausible. Levi della Vida, in particular, has deliberated how the letter’s text eventually became part of the works written by the Ḥālidiyyān-brothers and Ibn al-Zubayr. As we have seen, he assumed that news about the letter and the secret oral message prompted rumours that a foreign woman writing to the caliph could have only proposed marriage,²⁸ whereas the letter became available to a wider public thanks to a compilation of letters written by the secretary responsible for drafting the caliph’s reply, i.e. Muḥammad b. ‘Abd Allāh al-Iṣbahānī. This compilation contained Bertha’s letter, the reply as well as a short introduction explaining the circumstances.²⁹ This would have served as the basis for the work written by the Ḥālidiyyān-brothers. At some point of time, Levi della Vida assumes, the explanatory introduction to the episode must have been enlarged, possibly by an anonymous author copied by Ibn al-Zubayr.³⁰

[§20] Ann Christys, in turn, systematically questioned the letter’s authenticity. She insinuated that the story of the Frankish queen addressing the ‘Abbāsīd caliph originally represented a kind of literary exercise in chancery practice³¹ that did not distinguish clearly between history and fiction.³² It served to highlight the grandeur of the ‘Abbāsīd caliph and Muslim rulers in general. In her view, the so-called “queen of all the Franks” (*malika ‘alā ḡamī‘ al-Faraṅḡiyyīn*) was “a

²⁷ Al-Rašīd b. al-Zubayr, *Kitāb al-Hadāyā*, ed. Ḥamīdullāh, p. 56: “wa-qaddamti al-tawḡih bi-l-ḥādīm li-ya‘ūda ilayka bi-ḡawāb al-kitāb wa-yakūn rasūlan bayna amīr al-mu‘minīn wa-baynaki yaḥmal ilayki mā yaḥṭar bi-qalb amīr al-mu‘minīn mimā yaḥtāḡ ilayhi min mamlakatiki, wa-yu‘addī ‘anki mā tas’alīna amīr al-mu‘minīn al-amr bi-ittihāfiki mimā fī mamālikihī ‘alā ‘azma yakūn min amīr al-mu‘minīn tuṣdirīna ma‘ahu ilā amīr al-mu‘minīn mā taḥwīhi mamlakatiki min asrā al-muslimīn.” *Book of Gifts*, trans. al-Hijjāwī al-Qaddūmi, p. 96.

²⁸ Levi della Vida, *La corrispondenza*, p. 34.

²⁹ Levi della Vida, *La corrispondenza*, p. 32.

³⁰ Levi della Vida, *La corrispondenza*, p. 33: “e pertanto l’introduzione non può essere opera dell’autore delle *Dhakā’ir*, il quale deve averla copiata o riassunta da un’opera anteriore all’a sua, nella quale probabilmente avrà trovato anche il resto del racconto e dei documenti, risultante dalla combinazione delle due fonti primarie.”

³¹ Christys, *Queen*, pp. 157–158, 161.

³² Christys, *Queen*, p. 160.

creation of an Arabic writer or writers.”³³ Christys pointed, in particular, to the version included in the work of the Ḥālidiyyān-brothers, where Bertha's letter seems to serve as an exoticizing literary representation of a rather fantastic Frankish West that represents the exotic counterpart to an equally fantastic Indian East.³⁴ Because of its entertaining, exoticising character, the story was repeatedly copied and interpolated in works that dealt with treasures, gifts, and rarities.³⁵ Several points prompted her to call into doubt the letter's authenticity.

[§21] The editor Ḥamīdullāh had already pointed out that the name “Berta, daughter of Lothair” (*Bartā bint al-Awtārī*) is actually never spelled this way in the extant manuscripts, but is rendered “Turtā” (ترتا), “Turnā” (ترنا), and even “Tur[a]yā” (تريا).³⁶ Her father's name, “Lothair,” in turn, is rendered *al-Awbārī* (الأوباري) in a later quotation of the text.³⁷ It should be noted, however, that these spellings are graphically very similar to the rendering of “Berta” (برتتا) and “Lothair” (الأوتاري) in Arabic letters. Since they merely confuse letters with graphically similar alternatives (“ب” with “ت”, “ت” with “ا”) and given that dirt on a manuscript can easily be mistaken for a diacritical point (*i ʿġām*), a scribal error seems highly plausible.³⁸

[§22] Rather than assuming that an Arabic-Islamic writer would create a Frankish queen carrying the name “harlot” (*turnā*),³⁹ we should consider that the use of Bertha's name, albeit in distorted spelling variants, speaks for the authenticity of this correspondence. The name “Berta” did not belong to the repertoire of known Frankish names in the Arabic-Islamic sphere in and beyond the tenth century. Arabic-Islamic sources up to the crusading period mention few Frankish anthroponyms, generally only royal names. The fact that they recorded the name of a Carolingian woman and her father rather speaks for the fact that this woman had made an effort to communicate with the ‘Abbāsīd caliph.⁴⁰

[§23] It is difficult to claim that the “letter reflects idealized correspondence practice rather than a real letter from a Christian ruler.”⁴¹ At first sight, the letter seems to brim over with Islamic formulae, e.g. the initial invocation of God (*basmala*), which must have been inserted during the letter's translation to Arabic in Samarra.⁴² The letter uses other religious formulae in Arabic, e.g. “peace upon you” (*‘alayka al-salām*), “may God, O King of prosperous reign and firm power, protect you with His might against your enemies” (*ḥafāzak Allāh bi-sultānihi ayyuhā al-malik, al-ġayyid al-‘ahd, al-qawwī al-sultān, min kulli a‘dā’ika*). However, we cannot claim that such formulae were foreign to Christian chancery practice. Given that the letter does not use the titles customarily used for a caliph in Muslim chancery practice, e.g. by addressing the caliph as “king” (*malik*),⁴³ it actually fails to adhere to the stylistic ideals and protocol of Arabic-Islamic correspondence.

[§24] Scholars including Ann Christys acknowledge that the Iraqi context described by Ibn al-Zubayr is amazingly consistent: the vizier, al-‘Abbās b. al-Ḥasan al-Ġarġarā’ī (d. 296/908),⁴⁴ his secretary, Abū ‘Abd-Allāh Muḥammad b. ‘Abd-Allāh al-Iṣbahānī, and the translator Iṣḥāq

³³ Christys, *Queen*, pp. 149–170, here: 162, 165, 168.

³⁴ Christys, *Queen*, pp. 166–168.

³⁵ Christys, *Queen*, pp. 161.

³⁶ Ḥamidullah, *Embassy of Queen Berta*, pp. 293; Christys, *Queen*, pp. 154–155.

³⁷ Christys, *Queen*, p. 155.

³⁸ Levi della Vida, *La corrispondenza*, p. 23, FN 4; Gandino, *Aspirare*, pp. 254–255.

³⁹ Ḥamidulla, *Embassy*, p. 293; *Lane's Lexicon*, vol. 1, p. 306, translates the term *turnā* as “female slave,” “fornicatress,” “adulteress,” or “prostitute.”

⁴⁰ König, *Arabic-Islamic Views*, pp. 189–239, especially p. 201; Ḥamidullah, *Embassy*, p. 294: “They could not invent the name and genealogy of an unknown princess of Tuscany.”

⁴¹ Christys, *Queen*, p. 161.

⁴² Levi della Vida, *La Corrispondenza*, p. 26, FN 7.

⁴³ Crone and Hinds, *God's Caliph*, pp. 4–23.

⁴⁴ Sourdel, *al-Djardjārā’ī*.

b. Hunayn⁴⁵ were all active at the ‘Abbāsīd court in this period.⁴⁶ We encounter only one chronological problem in connection with North Africa: according to Ibn al-Zubayr’s introduction to Bertha’s letter, the eunuch ‘Alī had been in the service of the Aġlabīd ruler Ziyādat Allāh b. al-Aġlab (r. 290–296/903–909) when he was captured by Bertha’s ships. Then, he allegedly spent seven years in Bertha’s captivity before he was sent to the ‘Abbāsīd caliph. Chronologically, this is not possible. If ‘Alī reached Samarra in 293/906, as Ibn al-Zubayr claims, he would have been taken captive in 286/899, i.e. four years before Ziyādat Allāh acceded to rule in 290/903.⁴⁷ Levi della Vida ascribed this chronological inconsistency to the anonymous author responsible for the explanatory introduction.⁴⁸ Ḥamīdullāh solved it by assuming that ‘Alī was captured in the seventh year before Bertha’s embassy during an expedition against Calabria in 288/900. According to Ibn Ḥaldūn (d. 808/1406), Ziyādat Allāh took part in this expedition organized by his grandfather Ibrāhīm.⁴⁹ The chronological problem could also be solved by acknowledging that Ziyādat Allāh already had servants and an important position that could have entailed organizing maritime expeditions before he had his father murdered and took power in 290/903.⁵⁰

[§25] Christys regarded most of the presents listed in and around Bertha’s letter as products of exoticising fantasy. However, one can make the case that these gifts were potentially available to the marquise of Tuscany and represent real products exported from the Frankish sphere.⁵¹ The caliph’s reply only lists “different kinds of arms” (*aṣnāf al-asliḥa*), “goods” (*al-amti ‘a*), “Slavic servants and maids” (*al-ḥadam wa-l-ġawārī al-Ṣaqāliba*), and “trained birds of prey” (*al-ġawāriḥ al-mu ‘allama*). Ibn al-Zubayr’s introduction and Bertha’s letter contain a fuller list. They only differ slightly by elaborating differently on the gifts’ attributes:

- **Weapons:** 50 Frankish swords (*sayf*, Pl. *suyūf*), 50 shields (*turs*, Pl. *turūs*); 50 spears (*ramaḥ*, Pl. *rimāḥ*): the export of Frankish swords to the Arabic-Islamic sphere is mentioned in several Arabic-Islamic sources from Iraq written by al-Kindī (d. c. 252/866), Ibn Ḥurdābah (d. after 300/911), and Ibn al-Nadīm, and is also documented in later sources from the Islamic West.⁵²
- **Textiles (1):** 50 garments with gold threads (*tawb mansūġ bi-l-ḍahab*): in the late tenth century, Ibn Ḥawqal (d. after 378/988) mentions the fine quality of linen produced in Naples. The technique of inserting gold threads into garments was well-known in the Latin West of the early tenth century.⁵³
- **Slaves:** 20 servants (*ḥādim*) and 20 maids (*ġāriyya*), only classified as “Slavic” (*Ṣaqlabī/Ṣaqlabiyya*) in Ibn al-Zubayr’s introduction and the caliph’s reply: the export of Slavic slaves from ninth- and tenth-century Europe to the Arabic-Islamic sphere is well documented, both in terms of the export routes and the employment of *Ṣaqāliba* in al-Andalus and Egypt.⁵⁴

⁴⁵ Strohmaier, Ishāk b. Ḥunain, p. 110; Strohmaier, Ḥunain b. Ishāk, p. 578.

⁴⁶ Christys, Queen, p. 152.

⁴⁷ Christys, Queen, pp. 152–153.

⁴⁸ Levi della Vida, La corrispondenza, p. 33.

⁴⁹ Hamidullah, Embassy, p. 298.

⁵⁰ Marçais and Schacht, Aġlabīds, p. 250.

⁵¹ Bougard, Le royaume d’Italie, pp. 136–137.

⁵² König, *Arabic-Islamic Views*, pp. 199–200; Hoyland and Gilmour, *Swords*, pp. 22–23, 42–43, 57, 77; Zeki Validi, *Schwerter der Germanen*, pp. 22–26; Renzi Rizzo, *Riflessioni*, pp. 36–39.

⁵³ Linen: König, *Arabic-Islamic Views*, p. 290; gold threads: Braun-Ronsdorf, *Gold Embroidery and Fabrics*, pp. 2–16; Járó, Toth, and Gondar, *Determination*, pp. 299–301, deals with the method of manufacture of the gold thread used to embroider a tenth-century relic purse, now in Nürnberg, Germany; Netherton and Owen Crocker (eds), *Medieval Clothing and Textiles*, vol. 8, contains several articles on the use of gold threads in different parts of early medieval Christian Europe.

⁵⁴ König, 903–906: Raffelstettener Zollordnung, with an extensive bibliography; Renzi Rizzo, *Riflessioni*, p. 36

- **Animals (1):** 10 dogs (*aklub*) that can withstand ferocious beasts: the *Gesta Karoli Magni* by Notker Balbulus (d. 912) claim that Charlemagne sent Frankish dogs to Hārūn al-Rašīd at the caliph's request, which were so ferocious that they could be used to hunt wild beasts.⁵⁵ Liutprand, in turn, relates that King Hugo sent two dogs to the Byzantine emperor in 926–927.⁵⁶
- **Animals (2):** seven gyrfalcons (*buzāh*), seven hawks (*ṣuqūr*): several Latin and Arabic sources, especially from the high Middle Ages, attest that the shared passion for hunting birds among European-Christian and Muslim elites led to the exchange of animals and information about their keeping. In the tenth century, al-Mas'ūdī (d. 345/956) already reported on the Visigothic culture of falconry.⁵⁷
- **Textiles (2):** one silk tent with accessories: silk was imported into Italy from China since Antiquity, the production of silk is said to have begun in the Mediterranean of the sixth century, with centres of production developing from the late ninth century onwards in al-Andalus and Sicily.⁵⁸ In the early medieval period, Lucca seems to have been the only place in the Latin West where silk was produced.⁵⁹
- **Textiles (3):** 20 garments made of “wool found in molluscs extracted from the depths of the sea there” (*min ṣūf yakūn fī ṣadaf yuḥraġ min qa' r al-baḥr hunāk*) that shines in all colours of the rainbow (Ibn al-Zubayr's introduction) or changes its colour every hour (Bertha's letter): known as “maritime wool” (*lana maritima*) in Latin sources, this material is attested in various Arabic sources from the western and eastern Mediterranean⁶⁰ as well as in a letter written by pope Leo IV in 851, in which he asks Leo, *iudex* of Sardinia, for “sea wool” to dye papal vestments.⁶¹
- **Animals (3):** three birds from the lands of the Franks that scream alarm when they discern poisoned food: this is the only gift that cannot really be accounted for, given that it is difficult to find a zoological explanation of, or other sources on this phenomenon,.
- **Medical utensils:** beads that extract arrow- or spearheads from wounds that have already closed. These beads may have represented strong magnets that would allow to extract metal fragments from wounds. Geophysical and archaeological research on the island of Elba, the prime supplier of iron to Lucca and Pisa since Antiquity, has pointed to sources of strongly magnetised ores on Elba.⁶²

[§26] Renzi Rizzo proposed that most of these presents were actually of Byzantine origin and procured via Venice and/or Pavia.⁶³ But although the presents assigned to Bertha's initiative may seem exotic and even fantastic at first sight, closer inspection reveals that they probably could have been available at Lucca, even if some of the descriptions suggest that their value and exotic character was exaggerated. This implies, however, that early tenth-century Tuscany had access to the primary sources and products of Italy, the adjoining islands of Sicily and Sardinia, and maybe even of al-Andalus in the west. This seems conceivable if we take a closer look at the letter's supposed Italian context of origin.

[§27] Christys largely ignored the Italian context of Bertha's activities, which has served many other scholars as the main proof for the letter's authenticity. Explaining this context entails

⁵⁵ Kalkbrenner, 797–802: Notkers *Gesta Karoli Magni*, §5.

⁵⁶ Liudprandus Cremonensis, *Antapodosis*, ed. Becker (MGH SS rer. Germ. in us. schol. 41), lib. III, cap. 23, pp. 82–83.

⁵⁷ König, *Arabic-Islamic Views*, p. 159, also see pp. 223, 272.

⁵⁸ Massa, *Seide*, cols 1702–1704; Renzi Rizzo, *Riflessioni*, p. 30.

⁵⁹ Tomei, *Power of the Gift*, p. 131.

⁶⁰ Serjeant, *Material*, pp. 60–61.

⁶¹ McCormick, *Origins*, p. 733, FN 26, p. 927; Renzi Rizzo, *Riflessioni*, p. 31–33; Bougard, *Le royaume d'Italie*, p. 137.

⁶² Bianchi, *Archeologia*, pp. 22, 32, 46, 70, 82, 159, 189; Tanelli et al., *Iron Mineral Deposits*, pp. 239–248.

⁶³ Renzi Rizzo, *Riflessioni*, p. 29.

engaging with Bertha's biography, including her character, reputation, and political role in late Carolingian Lotharingia, Provence, and northern Italy. In a second step, it involves analysing the political and economic reasons that could have prompted Bertha to initiate the correspondence with al-Muktafi bi-llāh.

[§28] Bertha's biography reveals an ambitious and politically successful female member of the Carolingian elite. The daughter of Lothair II of Lotharingia (r. 855–869), she was born around 860 or 865. Married before 880 to count Theobald of Lorraine, she shared her husband's exile in Arles, where he had sought refuge with Boso, the King of Provence (r. 879–887) after the latter's brother Hugo had attempted to conquer Lorraine.⁶⁴ She bore him four children who were to attain influential positions in a region spanning southern France and northern Italy. Hugo, possibly born around 881, later became King of Italy; Teutberga, born between 880 and 885, was married to Guarniero of Chalons; Boso, born between 885 and 887, later became margrave of Tuscany; Ermengarda, born between 885 and 895, later became marquess of Ivrea.

[§29] When Theobald died around 887, Bertha married the margrave Adalbert II of Tuscany (r. 885–915) around 890⁶⁵ or, at the latest, in 895 or 898.⁶⁶ Adalbert's family had much property in Provence, carried the epithet *dives* and led a lavish court life in Lucca. As opposed to Ḥamīdullāh, who regarded Adalbert as “always unlucky” and subject to “constant imprisonments and defeats” in the internecine feuds of Italian chieftains,⁶⁷ Theo Kölzer described Adalbert's policy as

“characterised by a skilful manoeuvring between the individual candidates for the royal and imperial crowns, which he played off against each other for the sake of his own advantage, always taking care that the autonomy of his margraviate and his quasi-royal position did not suffer any damage in the turmoil of the time.”⁶⁸

[§30] Adalbert's policy involved reacting to the ambitions of margrave Guido II of Spoleto, his son Lambert, margrave Berengar of Ivrea, duke Arnulf of Bavaria, and King Louis of Provence, all of whom aspired to the crown of Italy between the end of the ninth and the beginning of the tenth century. Adalbert II and Bertha first sided with Guido II and his son Lambert against Berengar, thus ensuring that Guido was crowned King of Italy in 889 and emperor in 891, his son Lambert becoming royal and imperial co-regent in 891 and 892 respectively. The couple's support for Guido and Lambert expressed itself in the fact that their two sons were christened Guido and Lambert between 891 and 894. Adalbert tried to impede Arnulf of Bavaria from interfering in Italian affairs in 894, but then turned against Lambert by cooperating with Berengar of Ivrea between 896 and 898. If we believe Liutprand of Cremona, it was around 898 that Adalbert tried to become king of Italy himself.⁶⁹

[§31] Around 900, Adalbert and Bertha supported the aspirations of King Louis of Provence to become emperor, possibly in the hope that Bertha's son Hugo would thus be able to become King of Provence instead. When Hugo's promotion failed to materialise, the couple turned against Louis, first by not impeding, then by actively supporting Berengar in his conflict with Louis. In this period, the couple already exerted enormous influence in Italy: the anti-pope

⁶⁴ Bougard, *En marge du divorce*, pp. 33–51.

⁶⁵ Mor, *Berta*.

⁶⁶ Kölzer, *Adalbert II.*, cols 96–97.

⁶⁷ Ḥamidullah, *Embassy*, p. 294.

⁶⁸ Kölzer, *Adalbert II.*, cols 96–97: “gekennzeichnet durch ein geschicktes Lavieren zw. den einzelnen Anwärtern auf die Königs- und Kaiserkrone, die er um des eigenen Vorteils willen gegeneinander ausspielte, stets darauf bedacht, daß die Autonomie seiner Mgft. und seine königsgleiche Stellung in den Wirren der Zeit keinen Schaden litt.” See Bougard, *Le royaume d'Italie*.

⁶⁹ Liutprandus Cremonensis, *Antapodosis*, ed. Becker (MGH SS rer. Germ. in us. schol. 41), lib. I, cap. 39–41, pp. 28–29.

Sergius III (sed. 898 and 904–911) had sought refuge with Adalbert and, according to Liutprand of Cremona, was “made pope by Adalbert” (*papa per Adalbertum constituitur*) in 904. In this year, the couple felt strong and independent enough to begin dating their documents according to their own regnal years.⁷⁰ When Louis was eventually captured and blinded by Berengar in 905, he entrusted Bertha's son Hugo—count of Vienne and Arles, duke and margrave of Provence—with the government of Provence.

[§32] In 906, the year in which Bertha is said to have sent her letter to the ‘Abbāsid caliph, Louis of Provence had retired from the competition for the imperial throne, whereas Adalbert and his wife were confronted with the imperial ambitions of Berengar of Ivrea, which they opposed by blocking the Apennine pass leading him to Rome.⁷¹ Bertha seems to have been strongly involved in containing Berengar. That she wielded power at the side of her husband is evident from her correspondence with the archbishop of Ravenna.⁷² Germana Gandino proposed that, in the contest with Berengar, Bertha was able and willing to present herself as a descendant of Charlemagne, as heiress of the Carolingian dynasty in Italy, and thus as a legitimate alternative candidate to the imperial throne. While this may seem unconceivable at first sight, we should consider that her husband Adalbert II did not have an equally prestigious pedigree and, by 906, had receded into the background politically.⁷³ Bertha's quest for power also seems to have prompted contemporaries such as Liutprand of Cremona to harshly polemicize against her in particular and against women striving for power in general.⁷⁴ Gandino believes that Berta may have even called herself “basilissa” (Βασίλισσα) in her letter to al-Muktafi bi-llāh, thus seeking imperial recognition from a foreign leader in a time, in which she—not her husband—formulated a claim to the imperial throne.⁷⁵

[§33] Bertha's activities in the period after writing the letter demonstrate that she occupied an important political position in a region spanning the Provence in the west, Ivrea in the north, and Tuscany in the south. Still confronted with the imperial ambitions of Berengar when her husband died in 915,⁷⁶ she installed her son Guido as margrave of Tuscany with herself acting as regent and married her daughter to the margrave Adalbert of Ivrea after his wife's death. When Berengar chased Adalbert from Ivrea and arrested Bertha and Guido in Mantua between 919 and 920, she still managed to prepare the ground for her son Hugo. He was to become King of Italy in 926, shortly after Berengar's assassination in 924 and Bertha's death in 925.⁷⁷

[§34] Contemporaries acknowledged Bertha's political ambitions and supraregional influence. Constantine VII Porphyrogenitus (r. 913–959) called her “the great Bertha” (τῆς μεγάλης Βέρτας) and highlighted that she reigned on her own (ἐβασίλευσεν) for several years after her husband's death.⁷⁸ Liutprand of Cremona (d. 970 or 972) describes her negatively as a highly influential and scheming political actor,⁷⁹ whereas the contemporary *Gesta Berengarii* (written 915–924) accuse “the Beast of the Tyrrhenian, lifted up as usual by poison” and “pouring wild hisses from the mouth” of having impeded Berengar's imperial coronation, among other things

⁷⁰ Liudprandus Cremonensis, *Antapodosis*, ed. Becker (MGH SS rer. Germ. in us. schol. 41), lib. I, cap. 30, p. 23; Gandino, *Aspirare*, p. 263.

⁷¹ See Bougard, *Du centre à la périphérie*, pp. 15–31.

⁷² Mor, Berta: “risalta evidente è che un potentissimo prelato come il ravennate ci teneva a restare in buona con lei ed era pronto a presentarle le soddisfazioni richieste.” on the basis of Loewenfeld, *Acht Briefe*, pp. 515–539.

⁷³ Bougard, *Le royaume d'Italie*, p. 139.

⁷⁴ Gandino, *Aspirare*, p. 260; La Rocca, *Liutprando*, p. 291; Buc, *Italian Hussies*, pp. 207–225, Bougard, *Le royaume d'Italie*, p. 139.

⁷⁵ Gandino, *Aspirare*, pp. 257, 264–266.

⁷⁶ Bougard, *Le couronnement impérial*, pp. 329–344.

⁷⁷ Mor, Berta; Kölzer, *Adalbert II.*, cols 96–97.

⁷⁸ Constantine VII, *De administrando imperio*, ed. Moravcsik, trans. Jenkins, cap. 26, p. 112.

⁷⁹ Liudprandus Cremonensis, *Antapodosis*, ed. Becker (MGH SS rer. Germ. in us. schol. 41), lib. I, cap. 39, 41, pp. 28–29; *ibid.*, lib. II, cap. 36, 39, 55, pp. 54–55, 63.

by employing “the wealth of neighbouring Charybdis.”⁸⁰ Much more positively, the epitaph on Bertha’s gravestone in the church of San Martino in Lucca underscores Bertha’s royal and imperial Carolingian pedigree as well as her transregional prestige and influence.

“This tomb protects the buried body of Countess Berta, an illustrious progeny, benign and pious, wife of Adalbert, Duke of Italy, she too was of royal lineage and was all its ornament. Born noble from the sublime lineage of the Frankish kings, she had the pious king Charles [the Great] as her ancestor. Beautiful in appearance, more beautiful for the good done, Lothair’s daughter was even more splendid for her merits. As long as she lived in this world she was happy, and no adversary could prevail over her. With wisdom of opinions she guided many rulers, and always the great grace of God was by her side. Many counts came from many regions to seek her wise and sweet conversation. She was always the dearest mother to the unhappy exiles and always helped pilgrims with subsidy. This woman shone as a wise and robust column, virtue, glory, light of the whole country. On March 8 she emigrated from this life; may she live with the Lord in eternal peace. Her death saddens many for the pain, the peoples of the East and the West are in mourning, now Europe is moaning, now all of France, Corsica, Sardinia, Greece, and Italy are mourning. All of you who read these verses, pray that the Lord gives her eternal light, amen. She died in the year 925 from the incarnation of the Lord, in the thirteenth indiction.”⁸¹

[§35] Bertha certainly did not rule over twenty-four kingdoms, each with a different language. Although she and her husband influenced the papal election in 904, she did not rule the city of Rome. Her army was not greater than that of the Byzantine emperor. Does the “rhetoric of the letter reveal it as a spoof,” as Christys claimed?⁸² Notwithstanding its exaggerated claims, local, regional, and transregional evidence proves that Bertha was regarded as a highly influential politician by friends and foes in texts written as far away as Constantinople. Although exaggerated, the letter’s rhetoric fits in perfectly well with a female ruler who was fully involved in the conflicts about the Carolingian imperial heritage in Italy and emphasised her Carolingian descent as a means to legitimize her claim to power.⁸³ A reference to this Carolingian heritage can even be found in the letter, when Bertha refers to “my family” (*ahl baytī*), “my relatives” (*qurābātī*) and “my ethnic group” (*ǧinsī*).

[§36] Bertha and her son Hugo of Provence are depicted as Charlemagne’s progeny and as imperial players in Constantine Porphyrogenetos’s *De administrando imperio* under the chapter title “The Genealogy of the Illustrious King Hugo” (Ἡ γενεαλογία τοῦ περιβλέπτου ῥηγὸς Οὐῤῥωνος). Constantine VII needed to depict Hugo and his mother as worthy of imperial attention, given that he had married his son Romanos to Hugo’s daughter. Notwithstanding this,

⁸⁰ Gesta Berengarii, ed. Winterfeld (MGH Poetae IV,1), lib. III, lin. 2–4, pp. 394–395: “iterum solito sublata veneno / Belua Tirrenis fundens fera sibila ab oris / Sollicitat Rhodani gentem (...).”; lib III., lin. 92, p. 398: “Quatinus huic prohibebat opes vicina Charibdis (...).”

⁸¹ Epitaphium Berthae, ed. Strecker (MGH Poetae IV,3), p. 1008: “Hoc tegitur tumulo comitissae corpus humatum, / Inclita progenies Berta benigna pia. / Uxor Adalberti ducis Italiae fuit ipsa, / Regalis generis quae fuit omne decus. / Nobilis ex alto Francorum germine regum, / Karolus ipse pius rex fuit eius avus. / Quae specie speciosa, bono speciosior actu, / Filia Lotharii, pulchrior ex meritis. / Permansit felix, seculo dum vixit in isto. / Non inimicus eam vincere praevaluit. / Consilio docto moderabat regmina multa, / Semper erat secum graia magna dei. / Partibus ex multis multi comites veniebant / Mellifluum cuius quaerere colloquium. / Exulibus miseris mater carissima mansit / Atque peregrinis semper opem tribuit. / Claruit haec mulier sapiens fortisque columna / Totius virtus gloria lux patriae. / Idibus octavis Martis migravit ab ista / Vita, cum domino vivat et in requie. / Mors eius multos contristat pro dolor eheu, / Eous populus plangit et ociduus. / Nunc Europa gemit, nun luget Francia total, Corsica, Sardinia, Grecia et Italia. / Qui legitis versus istos, vos dicite cuncti: ‘Perpetuam lucem donet ei dominus.’ Amen. / An dñicae incarnationis DCCCCXXV indic. XIII obiit de mundo.”

⁸² Christys, Queen, p. 162.

⁸³ Bougard, *Le royaume d’Italie*, p. 139; Vignodelli, *Per stemmata regum*.

the Byzantine emperor regarded Bertha and Hugo as important enough to forge a marriage alliance with them.⁸⁴ Even contemporary Arabic-Islamic sources acknowledge that a new power had arisen in Italy: in a slightly confused account, al-Mas'ūdī (d. 345/956) described a ruler of Rome (*ṣāhib Rūmiyya*) who made himself independent from the Byzantine emperor Constantine VII (*Qusṭanṭīn Ibn Alyūn*) by adopting a royal title (*tusammā malikan*) and imperial insignia. In the ensuing conflict, Byzantium was defeated. Eventually, the king of Rome wedded his daughter to Constantine's son Romanos (*Armānūs bin Qusṭanṭīn*). In spite of the fact that al-Mas'ūdī dates this event to 340/951–952 and we know of no military confrontation between Hugo and Byzantium, this ruler must very probably be identified with Bertha's son Hugo.⁸⁵

[§37] Against this backdrop, it becomes impossible to presume with Ḥamīdullāh that Bertha was a woman without political ambition who offered her hand in marriage to the caliph to escape her allegedly weak and unsuccessful husband, claiming “that Bertha despaired of him, and thought of going to Baghdād and satisfying her desire to be a grand lady” by marrying a caliph about twenty years younger than her.⁸⁶ Rather, it becomes conceivable that Bertha could have developed a foreign policy strategy that looked beyond Italy and Byzantium and as far as Aḡlabid North Africa. When she eventually understood that the Aḡlabids were nominally subjected to the 'Abbāsīd caliphate, she looked eastwards to 'Abbāsīd Iraq. If there was a marriage proposal at all, she may have wanted to offer one of her daughters to the caliph, as François Bougard suggested.⁸⁷ To understand whether all this is plausible, we need to take a closer look at the Mediterranean policy of the margraviate of Tuscany in the late ninth and early tenth century.

[§38] Romney David Smith suggested that the Italian maritime cities of the tenth and early eleventh century only possessed few ships of their own. He claimed that even for merchants from Amalfi, whose intensive trade with Muslim-ruled North Africa since the ninth century is widely acknowledged by scholarship,⁸⁸ “sailing on foreign ships proved easier or cheaper,” and assumed that the “situation in Pisa may have been similar.”⁸⁹ This, however, contradicts the findings of Catia Renzi Rizzo, Marco Tangheroni, and Graziella Berti, who have listed all available evidence for Pisan maritime activities in the ninth and tenth centuries, thus proving that, under Carolingian rule, Pisa advanced to become an important port in the Tyrrhenian Sea prior to the eleventh century that began importing goods from Islamic societies at the latest from the late tenth century onwards.⁹⁰

[§39] Bertha's son Hugo (r. 903–947) certainly pursued a Mediterranean strategy as soon as he became king of Italy in 926.⁹¹ His intensive relations with Byzantium are recorded by the emperor Constantine VII Porphyrogenitus,⁹² his complex relations with the “raider colony” of Fraxinetum by Liutprand of Cremona.⁹³ According to Ibn Ḥayyān (d. 468/1076), he approached the caliph 'Abd al-Raḥmān III of Córdoba in 328/939–940 with the demand of a “security guarantee for merchants of his territory that travel back and forth between there and al-

⁸⁴ Gandino, *Aspirare*, p. 258.

⁸⁵ al-Mas'ūdī, *Kitāb al-tanbīh*, ed. de Goeje, pp. 181–182. See König, *Arabic-Islamic Views*, pp. 212–215.

⁸⁶ Hamidullah, *Embassy*, p. 294.

⁸⁷ Bougard, *Le royaume d'Italie*, p. 137.

⁸⁸ Kreutz, *Before the Normans*, pp. 75–93; Citarella, *Relations*, pp. 299–312.

⁸⁹ Smith, *Calamity and Transition*, p. 41.

⁹⁰ Tangheroni, Renzi Rizzo, and Berti, *Pisa e il Mediterraneo occidentale*, pp. 109–142; Renzi Rizzo, *Pisa e il Mediterraneo nell'ultimo trentennio*, pp. 171–182.

⁹¹ See the excellent overview on Hugo in Vignodelli, *Ugo di Provenza*, pp. 400–407.

⁹² Constantine VII, *De administrando imperio*, ed. Moravcsik / trans. Jenkins, cap. 26, pp. 108–112.

⁹³ Liutprandus, *Antapodosis*, ed. Becker (MGH SS rer. Germ. in us. schol. 41), lib V, cap. 9 and 17, pp. 134–135, 139, trans. Osten-Sacken and Wattenbach, pp. 79, 84; trans. Wright, pp. 181–182, 186–187.

Andalus.”⁹⁴ It does not seem far-fetched to assume that Hugo’s mother had already begun to think in the same lines of securing the Tyrrhenian Sea for Tuscany and of expanding the region’s security and economic purview.

[§40] Bertha’s actions have to be seen as part of a geopolitical situation, in which the Tyrrhenian Sea was increasingly encroached by Muslim forces, settled in Sicily since 827 and in the raiding outposts of Garigliano and Fraxinetum since the 880s.⁹⁵ Giorgio Levi della Vida and Carlo Guido Mor proposed that Bertha addressed the Aġlabids’ formal overlord in Baghdad with the aim of curbing Saracen incursions into the Tyrrhenian Sea.⁹⁶ Ignoring the highly positive reception of Bertha and her son Hugo in Constantine’s VII *De administrando imperio*, they surmised erroneously that a prospective alliance with the ‘Abbāsīd caliph may have also served to weaken Byzantine influence in the Thyrrhenian Sea.⁹⁷

[§41] Catia Renzi Rizzo, in turn, deliberated, whether Bertha’s initiative could have served to further Tuscany’s economic interests and took great pains to prove that Bertha’s presents to the caliph could have been acquired on the basis of Pisa’s regional economic connections by land and by sea.⁹⁸ In view of Hugo’s later transregional rule, she regarded Bertha’s initiative as the beginning of a Tuscan, later Provençal effort, to integrate both regions into a burgeoning economic exchange system maintained by Muslim and Jewish agents across the Mediterranean. In this context, she described Hugo as the representative of northern and southern Italy, assuming that it was due to his influence that Amalfitan merchants arrived at the Umayyad court of Córdoba in 942.⁹⁹ In view of the clear discrepancy between the integration of southern Italian maritime cities such as Amalfi, Salerno, and Naples into transmediterranean Jewish–Muslim economic networks since the ninth century,¹⁰⁰ and the much weaker involvement of northern Italian maritime cities such as Pisa and Genoa in these networks before the eleventh or even twelfth century, one could also speculate whether Bertha’s and later Hugo’s initiatives intended to promote the economic prospects of the Tyrrhenian and Ligurian sea ports. These initiatives were not necessarily directed against the maritime cities of southern Italy, but were maybe envisioned in view of their success in cooperating with Muslim-ruled societies and, as a consequence, of being spared by Muslim raids. Bertha’s request for a peace agreement (*ṣūlh, salam*) as well as her written offer to the caliph to provide “anything your mind can conceive that you need from my country” while she “shall request whatever I need from your country” and her statement that “there is a treaty between us” (*wa-yakūn baynanā ‘ahd*) could point into this direction.¹⁰¹

[§42] Certain questions will remain unanswerable and prompt further doubts with regard to the authenticity of the letter. Why, for example, should Bertha have claimed that there was friendship between her and the Aġlabids, but then capture three Aġlabid ships? Via which route did ‘Alī travel to Samarra, and when, where, and why did he die on the way back? The letter’s contents are as peculiar and complicated as its history of transmission. Perhaps, however, this

⁹⁴ Ibn Ḥayyān, *al-Muqtabas (al-ġuz’ al-ḥāmis)*, ed. Chalmeta and Corriente, § 308, p. 454: “wa-sa’ala ta’ mīn tuġġār arđihi ‘alā l-iḥtilāf ilā l-Andalus.” *Cronica del Califā ‘Abdarrahmān III*, trans. Viguera and Corriente, § 308, pp. 341–342. See Renzi Rizzo, I rapporti diplomatici, pp. 1–24.

⁹⁵ Jehel, *L’Italie*, pp. 13–36; Metcalfe, *Muslims of Medieval Italy*, pp. 4–69; Kreutz, *Before the Normans*, pp. 18–101.

⁹⁶ Levi della Vida, Corrispondenza, pp. 34–35; Mor, Berta; Bougard, *Le royaume d’Italie*, p. 137.

⁹⁷ Levi della Vida, Corrispondenza, p. 37; Mor, Berta. This idea is still retained by Gandino, Aspirare, p. 258; and Bougard, *Le royaume d’Italie*, p. 137.

⁹⁸ Renzo Rizzo, Riflessioni sulla lettera, pp. 3–47.

⁹⁹ Renzi Rizzo, I rapporti diplomatici, pp. 1–24.

¹⁰⁰ Kreutz, *Before the Normans*, pp. 75–93; Citarella, Relations, pp. 299–312.

¹⁰¹ Al-Rašīd b. al-Zubayr, *Kitāb al-Ḥadāyā*, ed. Ḥamīdullāh, p. 54. My translation differs from *Book of Gifts*, trans. al-Hijjāwī al-Qaddūmi, p. 94, who connects the impossibility of translation with the possibility of concluding a treaty: “it is not possible to translate the substance of a pledge between us (...).”

peculiarity can be regarded as an indicator that the events and actions described in this correspondence were not invented by an Arabic-Islamic scribe in Western Asia trying to prove his worth as a chancery secretary by inventing the letter of a Frankish queen carrying a name that could be mistaken for the word “harlot.” Bertha’s motives to approach the ‘Abbāsīd caliph—to gain “imperial” prestige through high-level foreign relations in the Italian run for the imperial crown, and to seek both protection from Muslim raids and integration into Muslim-dominated Mediterranean markets—can only be deduced from our interpretation of the context and thus remain speculative. If we regard the letter as authentic, however, we can interpret it as a further piece of evidence for the intensifying economic and diplomatic relations between Christian-ruled and Muslim-ruled societies after the end of the period of Arabic-Islamic expansion. In the same vein, the letter can be read as a sign of interest among European Christians in northern Italy, who had hitherto been excluded from exchange with Muslim-ruled societies, to connect to a sphere that was threatening due to its raiding activities, but also politically interesting and economically attractive.¹⁰²

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¹⁰² I would like to give profuse thanks to Giacomo Vignodelli for having accompanied and considerably supported my research on Bertha with lots of additional material, scans, new ideas, and a critical reading of two versions of this article. Remaining mistakes are my own.

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