

MEDITERRANEAN TRADE AND HIERAPET DI MARTIN'S LETTERS (PRELIMINARY REMARKS)*⁴⁸

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The essay aims to shed light on how the Mediterranean trade was reflected in Armenian private business correspondence in the early modern period, relying on the unstudied collections of commercial letters sent to and written by Hierapet di Martin residing in Venice at the turn of the eighteenth century. This merchant worked as an agent for the little-studied Julfan Armenian family firm of the Guerak-Mirmans, a Catholic-Armenian family from Isfahan. Based on Hierapet's commercial correspondence predominantly preserved in the Venetian State Archives and British Library, the paper allows us to take a close look at this wealthy family's global network with factors at many important markets. The study ends with the conclusion that this valuable documentation helps us to gain a clear understanding of "secrets of trade" and commercial life of the Mediterranean zone perceived and interpreted by Armenian merchants.

Keywords: *Hierapet di Martin, Venice, New Julfa, Mediterranean Sea, Armenian merchants, Guerak-Mirmans, commercial correspondence.*

Introduction

In the second volume of his *Civilisation and Capitalism, 15th-18th Centuries*, Fernand Braudel, one of the most outstanding scholars in the field of Mediterranean studies, offers a sketchy overview of Armenians' role in the early modern long-distance trade and defines it as a "fabulous success"⁴⁹. Not much has been done to look into the key to Armenians' commercial success and their global trade network even several decades after Braudel's stimulating definition. Moreover, much of the scholarship on Armenian participation in international trade has relied on accounts written by European travellers, merchants, and diplomats, failing to consult rich troves of Armenian commercial documentation.

The systematic and extensive use of Armenian mercantile documents goes back to the publication of Sebouh Aslanian's groundbreaking book, *From the Indian Ocean to the Mediterranean*⁵⁰. Published in 2011, this study brought to light and popularised the global network of Armenian merchants, drawing on a large number of documents written by merchants themselves in their abstruse dialect. The book provides a comprehensive picture of such

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⁴⁸ The essay was presented as a paper at the "*Cultural Entanglement, Transfer and Contention in Mediterranean Communities from Antiquity to the Present*" conference at Central European University in Budapest on June 1, 2019.

⁴⁹ **Braudel F.**, *Civilization and Capitalism, 15th-18th Century*, vol. 2: The Wheels of Commerce, New York: Harper & Row, 1983, p. 158.

⁵⁰ **Aslanian S.**, *From the Indian Ocean to the Mediterranean: The Global Trade Networks of Armenian Merchants from New Julfa*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011.

documents scattered in over 30 archives across continents, paving the way for future explorations and inspiring a generation of young scholars to engage in this field⁵¹.

While working on Armenian commercial documentation in Archivio di Stato in Venice, a number of “letter books” or ledgers collected in the same archival unit grabbed our entire attention. The further research showed that those ledgers had belonged to Hierapet di Martin or Hayrapet, son of Martiros, an Armenian merchant who lived in Venice throughout almost all his life in the second half of the seventeenth century and the first half of the eighteenth century. A short reference in Aslanian’s above-mentioned book helped me get an idea of where to find other pieces of Hierapet’s correspondence. After digging out all of the information on Hierapet’s epistolary heritage and consulting all the necessary archival fonds in Venice and London, we have found approximately 2000 letters both written by and sent to Hierapet di Martin between the 1680s and 1710s.

The main goal of this presentation is to offer a comprehensive overview of Hierapet di Martin’s unstudied voluminous correspondence in the context of the Mediterranean trade in the early modern period. To do so, the first part of the essay provides a clear portrayal of Hierapet’s life and correspondence in relation to New Julfan Armenians’ global commercial world. Then, we try to consider this invaluable source in the larger framework of the waning influence of the Mediterranean trade. Relying on our own reading of nearly a quarter of letters exchanged between Hierapet in Venice and his correspondents residing from Madrid to Istanbul, we put an emphasis on the importance of this correspondence in understanding and rethinking “the secrets of the trade”⁵² in the Mediterranean zone at the turn of the eighteenth century. In addition, the documentation in question is equally helpful in allowing us to trace the little-studied history of Venice’s Armenian mercantile community and taking a close look at how trade was organized between Armenians and non-Armenians, all of them minorities of the city of dodges.

Hierapet di Martin and His Business Correspondence

“Io Erapiet Figlio di Martiros presi fondo dal Sign. Zaccaria Figlio di Girach Tumani duecento e dieci d’Abbassi, che fà la mettà Tumani cento, e cinque, quell’utile, che concederà il Signore, siano due porzioni del Sig. Zaccaria & una di me Erapiet Figlio di Martiros. Questo seguì in Ispahan l’anno 1122. Mese di 2. Niran questo scritto à Carrattere di mi Erapiet Figlio di Martiros Io affermo L. S.”⁵³

Translation: “I Erapiet son of Martiros took a capital of 200 tumans and 10 abbassis from Mr. Zaccaria son of Girach, half of which is 100 tuman and 5 [abbassi]. Of what Lord will give, two parts belong to Mr. Zaccaria and one part belongs to me, Erapiet son of Martiros. This was signed in Isfahan in the year 1122 [+551=1673] in the month of Niran 2 [February 15]. This is my handwriting, Erapiet son of Martiros. I confirm.”

This commenda contract is taken from a stampa book on the Guerak Mirman Armeno-Italian mercantile family which was preserved in the series of Procuratori di San Marco, Archivio di Stato in Venice. According to the contract signed in 1673, a merchant named Hierapet received some money of more than two hundred Persian tumans from Zaccaria to work for him as a commenda agent or factor. Hierapet was one of hundreds, if not thousands of Armenian commenda agents who were working for their well-to-do compatriots, by travelling as far east as Manila and as far west as London and Amsterdam and putting their capital in motion with the dream of striking it rich one day. Hierapet seems to have belonged to the Veligianian family whose members were among those deported by Safavid Shah Abbas I from their small mercantile

⁵¹ Ibid., 307-313.

⁵² **Markovits C.**, *The Global World of Indian Merchants, 1750–1947: Traders of Sind from Bukhara to Panama*, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000, p. 25.

⁵³ Archivio di Stato di Venezia (hereafter, ASV), Procuratori di San Marco, b. 180-D, stampa book, p. 172.

township of Old Julfa and resettled in New Julfa on the outskirts of Isfahan, Safavid capital. Martin/Martiros Veliganian, who was arguably Hierapet's father, moved from Armenian suburb of Isfahan to Venice in the mid-17th century. Then he spent his entire life in Venice and was buried in an Italian church *Chiesa di San Moisè* in the neighbourhood of the famous Piazza San Marco in 1686. His tombstone is still visible and legible in the church on which the bilingual inscription reads as follows:

“Martinus Veleianus Mercator origine Persa Vita Venetus caelicola die XIII Maii MDCLXXXVI In hoc Sepulchro quitem mercatur Aetatis SUAE LXXXII.”

“Այս է տապան ջուղայեցի Վելիջանի որդի Մարտիրոսի, որ փոխեցաւ ի Զրիստոս ի թվին ՌՃԼԵ [1686] մայիսի ԺԴ [14].”

Translation: “This is the tomb of Martiros [Martin] the son of Velijan of Julfa who passed on to Christ in the year 1135 [1686] on 14th of May.”

The Veliganian family lineage continued through Martin's two sons, Hierapet and Giacomo, both born and raised in Venice and engaged in commercial practices throughout their lives. The available evidence concerning the Veliganians paints a picture of an Armeno-Italian mercantile family which epitomized the cosmopolitan worldview of early modern Armenian merchants. The history of the Veliganian family that has yet to be examined is bound to make a significant contribution to the study of cross-cultural interactions in the Eastern Mediterranean.

The second person appeared in the above-mentioned commenda contract was Zaccaria, a member of the affluent, Catholic Armenian family of Guerak-Mirmans with agents at all important markets of that period. By the mid-17th century one branch of the family had migrated from New Julfa to Venice and Livorno, while another branch had settled in India. The founding father of the family's Italian line was Gregorio di Guerak-Mirman, who paid for the building and renovation of Venice's Santa Croce degli Armeni church in 1688 where he was buried. One of the family papers contains a list of twenty-two agents working for the benefit of the Guerak Mirmans.⁵⁴ This list, in which, by the way, Hierapet's name is also included, is an extremely invaluable source that helps reconstruct the global trading network of the Guerak Mirmans. Their representatives were involved in commercial operations in European, Asian and even African port cities and settlements.

The next important aspect of the commenda contract is that it has not been preserved in its original Julfan Armenian version. Like a large number of other financial and legal documents relating to the far-flung network of the Guerak-Mirmans, this contract was translated from the Julfan Armenian dialect into Italian in the eighteenth century because the family members were assimilated enough into Italian identity and lifestyle not to be able to read documents written by their own ancestors hundred or so years ago.

The contract concluded between Zaccaria and Hierapet marked the beginning of the commercial career of the latter in the Mediterranean settlements, extending from 1673 to the 1710s. The information on Hierapet's long-standing commercial operations would have been limited to this single fact, if he had not been involved in various lawsuits and had not been forced to present his business correspondence as evidence in court. Although the court proceedings of his lawsuits have not been discovered yet, the presence of the bulk of his letters in Avogaria di Comun-Civile archival series leaves no room for doubt about what preceded the final stop of the odyssey of his correspondence.

Hierapet's business letters are stored predominantly in two series of Archivio di Stato in Venice, Documenti Armeni and Avogaria di Comun⁵⁵. Another small collection of seventeen letters exchanged between Hierapet in Venice and Amirbek di Vardan in Napoli has been preserved at the British Library⁵⁶. This voluminous correspondence, which amounts to 1000 pieces

⁵⁴ ASV, Procuratori di San Marco, b. 180-D, stampa book, pp. 21-22.

⁵⁵ ASV, Documenti Armeni, bb. 2-3, Avogaria di Comun, bb. 17, 210.

⁵⁶ For this piece of Hierapet's correspondence, see British Library, MS OR 15794.

of letters and has never been studied before, contains all types of economic information that were transmitted via private correspondence in the milieu of early modern European merchants: market-oriented information, political news, and information about agents themselves. The main part of Hierapet's epistolary heritage are draft business letters that he copied in his letter books before sending the originals to their addressees. This was a common practice among merchants engaged in early modern long-distance trade to keep copies of letters they sent. In his most famous and widely imitated commercial manual of early modern Europe, Jacques Savary urged merchants to make copies of their letters, so that they could submit them as evidence in court and could review what they had previously written to their correspondents⁵⁷. Hierapet seems to have been extremely diligent in making copies of his letters in the chronological order which resulted in the emergence of twelve letter books, each containing letters dating back to the period between 1694 and 1715. Apart from these draft commercial letters, the documentation in question includes more than 200 letters that Hierapet received from Amirbek di Vardan and Martiros di Sargis in the years between 1680s and 1710s. Letters he could have certainly received from his other correspondents appear not to have been preserved.

Hierapet's correspondents were agents of the Guerak Mirmans residing in a number of Mediterranean port cities and settlements as representatives of family's trading network in the Mediterranean zone. The language in which Hierapet and his correspondents communicated was the New Julfan dialect of the Armenian language. What is the most important and noteworthy aspect of this dialect is that it was a mixture of Armenian, Persian, Arabic, Turkish, Hindi, French, Italian words, phrases and terms making the process of reading and deciphering them a very strenuous and time-consuming task. The Julfan commercial dialect is so intricate and tremendously different from the standard Armenian language that an Armenian who speaks and understands both eastern and western versions of his native language is sure not to be able to make out Julfan papers. Apart from Julfan Armenian correspondence, almost one hundred pieces of letters Hierapet exchanged in Italian. This was the case with letters sent to agents in Spain named Baldassar di Giaocino and Zuane di Salazaro, who most probably had lost touch with Julfan roots and could no longer understand the language of their compatriots.

Mediterranean Trade in Hierapet's Correspondence

On August 23, 1701 Hierapet di Martin wrote a letter to Davit, an Armenian merchant residing in Livorno, "This city [Venice] is in bondage, may God open the door of charity to make the trade come to life because the city's trade is in a shutdown. May God open the door of charity for the benefit of merchants to make all of them feel happy"⁵⁸. Complaining about the decline in the number of commercial operations, Hierapet could not have been aware of the downturn of Venetian economy, which was at its peak in the late Middle Ages, long before the period he scribbled his letter. Only in the mid-20th century did the scholarship on Venetian economic life conclude that by 1600 Venetian commercial leadership in the Mediterranean area had come to a definitive end⁵⁹. Unconscious of the waning influence of the Eastern Mediterranean trade in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, Hierapet and thousands of merchants in Venice and other Mediterranean port cities were sparing no effort to make lucrative transactions with the dream of hitting the jackpot one day. Hierapet appears to have been involved in the gem trade, in particular turquoise, diamonds, and rubies were his stock in trade. He was also engaged in the commerce of

⁵⁷ **Savary J.**, *Le parfait négociant ou Instruction générale pour ce qui regarde le commerce des marchandises de France et des pays étrangers*, Paris: Chez Louis Billaine, 1675, b. 2, ch. 43.

⁵⁸ «Այ արն, քաղաքըս հենց կապ է ընկել որ տր ածըն մին դուռն բանայ ողորմութեն որ առք և ծախս լինի թե չե քաղաքս ալիշվերիշն կապվել այ տր ածըն բանայ դուռն ողորմութեն բազմկանին որ իխչ ուրախանան» (ASV, Documenti Armeni, b. 3):

⁵⁹ **Jan de Vries**, *The Economy of Europe in an Age of Crisis*, New York: Cambridge University Press, 1976, p. 26.

Venetian glass, sending countless crates of glass to his business colleagues to sell them in various European settlements. In exchange, Hierapet received a wide portfolio of commodities from his fellow merchants to put their capital into motion in Venice. All of these commercial transactions were reflected in his letters, allowing us to take a look at what commodities were circulated and how trade was organised in the closing decades of the seventeenth century and at the start of the eighteenth century. What is more significant about this aspect of his correspondence is that it may shed some new light on the fading influence of Venice and nearby cities and illustrate some important features of the downturn of their economies. My reading of some part of Hierapet's copious letters makes me convinced that the study of this documentation is sure to make a considerable contribution to the reassessment of the Eastern Mediterranean trade at the turn of the eighteenth century.

The epistolary heritage in question abounds in information on the prices of a wide of commodities. For instance, in a letter dating back to December 19, 1704 and addressed to Mkrtum in Rome, Hierapet provided the following explanation, "You have written that [rhubarb] is sold for 8 ducats in Venice. Who said that rhubarb [is sold for] 8 ducats in Venice or Livorno? This is inaccurate information. Today it is sold for 12 ducats here, my brother"⁶⁰. So, the abundant economic information exchanged between Hierapet and his correspondents may even be of great interest for the field of price history.

Second, future explorations of Hierapet's letters should concentrate on the rare opportunity to study them in terms of relations between Mediterranean commercial communities. In particular, the correspondence includes a huge amount of information on Armenian merchants' relations with their Jewish competitors. As Francesca Trivellato points out in his famous *The Familiarity of Strangers*, "little is known about business relations between Armenians and non-Armenians." Relying on the extremely rich documentation of the Ergas and Silvera firm, she shows that the representatives of this Jewish family dealt in commodities with Armenians in Livorno and traded on their behalf overseas on a few occasions"⁶¹. The study of Hierapet's correspondence with his fellow merchants is very likely to provide sufficient information on the neglected area of relations between Armenians and Jews in the Mediterranean zone. In his letter addressed to Davut, Hierapet wrote, "I have long looked for this lining, [now] I am about to go to the quarter of Jews, and I will buy if I find it"⁶². This letter, which dates back to 1701, unquestionably alludes to where Venice's Jewish community lived from the sixteenth century onward, which seems to have been frequently visited by Hierapet and his compatriots with the aim of looking for hard-to-find commodities. That Jewish merchants were exceedingly and famously involved in the gem trade was reflected in Hierapet's letters as a reason why Armenians were eager to get inch touch with them. For instance, he wrote these lines to his colleague Mkrtum in 1701, "In a letter dating back to November 12 you asked me to by one box of diamond from Mr Sarhad and one box from Jews. As I understood, I will not purchase more than you ordered"⁶³. Other interesting evidence can be found in another letter exchanged between the same merchants, "Again, my brother, you have written about diamond, really and truly there is no one I have not asked, there is no go-between I have not demanded... I encountered somewhere a Jew having [diamonds] worth of 600 ducats. I wanted to

⁶⁰ «Գրել աս, թէ 8 տուկատ է ծախվում Վենետիկումն, ետ ով է առել 8 տուկատ ըռեվանդ Վենետիկումն կամ Լիվորնայ, 6 մառչիլ է, ետ ռիչ սուտ խօսկ է, էսօր տեղս ժք (12) տուկատ է ծախվում, ախբեր» (ASV, Documenti Armeni, b. 3):

⁶¹ **Trivellato F.**, *The Familiarity of Strangers: The Sephardic Diaspora, Livorno, and Cross-Cultural Trade in the Early Modern Period*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009, p. 151.

⁶² «Եւ աստառն շատ ամ ման եկել, մին էլ գնամ ջոհուտի մաիլէն տեսնում ընկանի կառում» (ASV, Documenti Armeni, b. 3):

⁶³ «Նմբրի 12 գրումն գրել իր, թէ մին մացայ մարգարիթ պարոն Սարհադիցս յինք առում և մին մացայ ջոհուղէն ավելի չառնեմ, բարի է, դոր գրել աս, Էսպես կառեմ» (ASV, Documenti Armeni, b. 3):

buy all of them, [because] there was every type of diamonds. Since that big purchase would require a tax of 100 ducats and diamonds are not sold fast in Napoli where you are, I decided against purchasing them”⁶⁴.

Finally, this collection of Armenian mercantile sources is worth a more detailed examination in terms of delving into the sociological aspect of merchants' life in the early modern Mediterranean area. In other words, Hierapet's correspondence is likely to contribute to the study of what is called “the psychology of merchants”, that is their sociological traits as a social group. As Robert Lopez and Irving Raymond claim in their study on Medieval Mediterranean trade, “there is no better key to the psychology of merchants” than business correspondence.⁶⁵ The study of some of Hierapet's letters shows that he appears to have been markedly informal in the correspondence, making it a very promising tool to dig out information on the psychology of the Eastern Mediterranean merchant. In the letter to Mr Sahak, Hierapet wrote, “What is the truth of the world is that if you are willing to get to know somebody, have dinner with them or trade with them”⁶⁶.

Conclusion

In her study of merchants' letters across geographical and social boundaries, Trivellato maintained that “private correspondence continued to play a fundamental role in the eighteenth century, that is, long after the appearance and diffusion of printed periodicals containing economic information”⁶⁷. The huge importance of business correspondence for reconstructing the features of early modern economic and historical life is also displayed in her book which draws upon 13,600 letters of Ergas and Silvera, a Jewish commercial firm.⁶⁸ What is of greater interest for this study is that she emphasised that “the function of correspondence can be better tested through commercial diasporas - such as the Sephardic Jews, Huguenots, Quakers, Armenians, and later the Greeks”⁶⁹. In spite of their importance from the perspective of world economic history, most Armenian commercial documents have escaped the scholarly attention and even remained not seen for the last hundreds of years. In this respect, Hierapet's correspondence is a good example to demonstrate how important this neglected area of early modern documentation can be. This Venice-based merchant's letters contain an immense amount of economic information on long-distance trade in the Mediterranean zone at the turn of the eighteenth century. A question arises as to whether Venice-based merchants' other collections of commercial letters have been preserved from the same period. Regardless of whether it is unique or not, this Armenian documentation needs a thoroughgoing examination popularizing its importance and paving the way for its digital edition.

⁶⁴ «Դարձեալ մարգարթի համար ես գրել, ախպեր, աստուած վկայ լինի, որ մարդ չէ մնացել, որ խարցուցել չեմ, դալալ չէ մնացել, որ ասել չեմ ... մին տեղ կեր ջուհուդի 600 տուկատի, ասի, թէ դիչն առնեմ, զամեն բաբաթ կեր, ամայ շատ ապարնք էր, 100 տուկատի ավելի վարց կու գնէր, հե՛նի կու ծախվէր եչնափ ապրանքն, տեղըտ դժար են առնում ի Նապոլի, էլ այտպես վախեցայ չառի» (ASV, Documenti Armeni, b. 3):

⁶⁵ Lopez R. and Raymond I., *Medieval Trade in the Mediterranean World*, New York: Cambridge University Press, 1955, p. 378.

⁶⁶ «Հախ է, որ աշխարհի խօսկն այս է, որ կասեն, թէ ուզես, որ մարդ ճանանչես, խըտուրն հաց կեր, և կամ ալիշվերիշ արայ» (ASV, Documenti Armeni, b. 3):

⁶⁷ Trivellato F., *Merchants' Letters across Geographical and Social Boundaries*, ed. by F. Bethencourt and F. Egmond, “Cultural Exchange in Early Modern Europe”, vol. III, Correspondence and Cultural Exchange in Europe, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007, p. 81.

⁶⁸ Trivellato F., *The Familiarity of Strangers*.

⁶⁹ Trivellato F., *Merchants' Letters across Geographical and Social Boundaries*, p. 93.

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հայոց պատմության ամբիոնի ասպիրանտ,
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Հոդվածը նպատակ ունի լույս սփռելու այն հարցի վրա, թե միջերկրածովյան առևտուրն ինչպես է արտացոլվել հայկական մասնավոր առևտրական նամակագրության մեջ արդի դարաշրջանում՝ հիմնվելով 17-րդ դարավերջին և 18-րդ դարասկզբին Վենետիկում բնակվող հայ վաճառական Հայրապետ դի Մարտինի առևտրական նամակների չուսումնասիրված հավաքածուների վրա: Այս վաճառականն աշխատում էր որպես Նոր Զուղայից/Սպահանից սերող Գերաք Միրմանների՝ քիչ ուսումնասիրված հայ կաթոլիկ ընտանիքի առևտրական ընկերության գործակալ: Հիմնելով գերազանցապես վենետիկյան պետական արխիվներում ու Բրիտանական գրադարանում պահպանված Հայրապետի՝ այլ գործակալների հետ ունեցած նամակագրության վրա՝ հնարավորություն ենք ունեցել հետազոտելու այդ հարուստ ընտանիքի համաշխարհային ցանցը, որը գործակալներ ունեւ բազմաթիվ կարևոր շուկաներում: Ըստ ուսումնասիրության եզրակացության՝ այդ արժեքավոր փաստաթղթերը թույլ են տալիս հասկանալու, թե միջերկրածովյան տարածաշրջանի «առևտրի գաղտնիքները» կամ առևտրական կյանքն ինչպես է ընկալվել ու մեկնաբանվել հայ վաճառականների կողմից:

Հիմնաբառեր՝ *Հայրապետ դի Մարտին, Վենետիկ, Նոր Զուղա, Միջերկրածովյան տարածաշրջան, հայ վաճառականներ, Գերաք Միրմաններ, առևտրական նամակագրություն:*

ТОРГОВЛЯ СРЕДИЗЕМНОМОРЬЯ И ПИСЬМА АЙРАПЕТА ДИ МАРТИНА (ПРЕДВАРИТЕЛЬНЫЕ ЗАМЕЧАНИЯ)

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Цель статьи – основываясь на ранее неизученных собраниях коммерческих писем жившего в Венеции на рубеже 17-18 веков армянского купца Айрапета ди Мартина прояснить вопрос о том, как средиземноморская торговля отразилась в частной армянской коммерческой переписке в ранний период Нового времени. Этот торговец служил агентом в армянской фирме Герак-Мирманов, армянской католической семьи из Новой Джульфы (Исфахана), о которой на сегодняшний день мало что известно. Основываясь преимущественно на хранящейся в Венецианском государственном архиве и Британской библиотеке деловой переписке Айрапета, материалы статьи дают возможность изучить обширные связи этой состоятельной семьи, которая имела своих агентов на многих важных рынках. Исследование заканчивается выводом о том, что эта ценная документация помогает получить четкое представление как армянские купцы понимали и оценивали «коммерческую тайну» и коммерческую жизнь Средиземноморского региона.

Ключевые слова: *Айрапет ди Мартин, Венеция, Новая Джульфа, Средиземноморская зона, армянские купцы, Герак-Мирмани, деловая переписка.*