

S. D. GOITEIN

Letters of Medieval Jewish Traders



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LETTERS OF MEDIEVAL JEWISH TRADERS

Letters of Medieval Jewish Traders

TRANSLATED FROM THE
ARABIC WITH
INTRODUCTIONS
AND NOTES BY

S. D. Goitein

PRINCETON UNIVERSITY
PRESS

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In loving memory of my eldest brother

MAX MEIR GOITEIN

Executive, gentleman, and humanist

(1895-1940)

PREFACE

SERIOUS books are not always the result of systematic endeavors and orderly procedures. The present volume is a case in point. Its writer is engaged in a comprehensive undertaking: a three-volume book entitled *A Mediterranean Society: The Jewish Communities of the Arab World as Portrayed in the Documents of the Cairo Geniza*. The second volume, with the subtitle *The Community*, comprising some 650 pages, has just been published by the University of California Press. The third and last volume is in an advanced state of preparation. A companion volume to this book, to be called *Mediterranean People: Letters and Documents from the Cairo Geniza, Translated with Notes and Introductions*, also is well under way. Simultaneously with this work on the Mediterranean world hundreds of documents on the medieval India trade have been prepared for editing and translation and are now being checked and rechecked, and new items are added.

One day in November 1971, while working at the Institute for Advanced Study, Princeton, my eyes rested on the vast lawn stretching in front of Fuld Hall, and it occurred to me that it was a felicitous idea of the landscape architect to break the monotony of the lawn by planting a small circle of low crab apple trees in its center. Suddenly it came to my mind that it would be appropriate to make a break in producing large books and turn to writing something short and handy which might be welcome to students, laymen, and scholars alike. A topic for such a book easily presented itself. Most of my scholarly research in the past had to do with rulers, warriors, scholars, poets, and saints. But of late, through the study of the Cairo Geniza, I had become aware of the worthiness of those daring, pious, and often learned representatives of Middle Eastern civilization during the High Middle Ages: the overseas traders. Their letters were available in abundance, and, since these are expressive without being prolix, they provide interesting insights into the personalities of their writers. Before my eyes turned away from the lawn with the crab apple trees, my choice was made.

The originals of only eight out of the eighty items translated in this volume have been edited thus far, six of them by myself. But all

of them have been copied and typed, so that they may be regarded as "edited," albeit they have not been published.

The Introduction describes the provenance and present whereabouts of the letters translated, the social milieu of their writers, the organization of the overseas trade, and the goods traded. An Author's Note explains certain details apt to facilitate the use of the book, a List of Abbreviations notes the books, journals, and manuscript collections most frequently used.

There remains for me to express my personal thanks and the gratitude of scholarship to the librarians and officials of the libraries whose manuscripts have been used in this book (see the List of Abbreviations). Most of the manuscripts translated had been copied during the early 1950s, but I possess photostats of all of them and no translation was made without continuous examination of the originals.

This book is part and parcel of my work on the Cairo Geniza, which was made possible during the current year by the National Endowment for the Humanities; the John Simon Guggenheim Foundation; the Lucius N. Littauer Foundation; and the Max Richter Foundation. I wish to extend my heartfelt thanks to the men guiding these institutions for their understanding and encouragement. My membership in the Institute for Advanced Study under the imaginative direction of Carl Kaysen was another fortunate factor furthering my work.

Finally, it is my pleasant duty to thank my young colleague, Professor Abraham L. Udovitch, for his unfailing friendship and, in particular, for reading the manuscript of this book and contributing invaluable suggestions for its improvement. I am grateful to Mrs. Sandra S. Lafferty of the Institute for Advanced Study for her dedicated and painstaking work in typing the manuscript. I would also like to thank the Director and staff of Princeton University Press—in particular Mrs. Polly Hanford, indefatigable editor—for their understanding and helpfulness.

S. D. GOITEIN

*Institute for Advanced Study
Princeton, New Jersey
December 1972*

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

1. With the exception of no. 3, all items in this volume are in Arabic. The translations of Hebrew words or phrases inserted in the Arabic text are italicized.
2. Abbreviations are rendered by full translations, but the English words or parts of words the equivalents of which do not appear in the originals are put in parentheses. For example, the blessing over a dead person, appearing in the original in the form *r''e*, is translated as: (*may he*) *r(est in) E(den)*.
3. Common phrases omitted in the translation are indicated by
4. References to God are capitalized solely where the word "God" does not precede, as in the opening of letters, often superscribed: "In Your Name," meaning God.
5. Arabic names and words are transcribed as in the second edition of the *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, with the exception that *dj* is replaced by *j*, and *ḳ* by *q*.
6. We spell Fatimids, Fustat, Qayrawān, for Fāṭimids, al-Fuṣṭāṭ, al-Qayrawān, respectively, and make similar allowances for frequently occurring Arabic names.
7. Biblical names, if appearing in the original in Hebrew, are spelled in the usual English way. When the original has an Arabic form, it is transcribed phonetically, such as Ya'qūb for Jacob.
8. Fractions are rendered in the form they have in the original, where they are written 1/2, 1/4, not 3/4 (see, e.g., no. 64). Fractions calculated by the author are rendered in the usual way (e.g., in no. 27, B).
9. Rhymed prose is indicated by slashes (e.g., in no. 38, A).
10. Words written above the line in the original mss are put between double slashes (e.g., in no. 15).
11. Parts of a text which are either lost or illegible and replaced by conjecture are enclosed in brackets.
12. Words deleted by the original writers are enclosed in double brackets.
13. Long *ū* in *Abū* ("father of") becomes short in combinations such as *Abu 'l* or *Abu Shāq* and is then written without a bar, the sign of length.

ABBREVIATIONS

Amari, <i>Musulmani di Sicilia</i>	Michele Amari, <i>Storia dei Musulmani di Sicilia</i> . Catania, 1933-1939. 3 vols.
Ashtor, <i>Prix</i>	<i>Histoire des prix et des salaires dans l'orient médiéval</i> . Paris, 1969.
Assaf, <i>Texts</i>	Simha Assaf, <i>Texts and Studies in Jewish History</i> . Jerusalem, 1946. Arabic and Hebrew.
b.	Son or daughter of (Hebrew and Arabic).
Baron, <i>History of the Jews</i>	S. W. Baron, <i>A Social and Religious History of the Jews</i> . New York, 1952-1965. 10 vols. and index.
BM	British Museum, London.
Bodl.	Bodleian Library, Oxford, England. The shelf mark of the manuscript is followed by its number in A. Neubauer and A. E. Cowley, <i>Catalogue of the Hebrew Manuscripts in the Bodleian Library</i> (Oxford, 1906), and by the folio of the document under discussion, e.g., Bodl. MS Heb. c 28 (Cat. 2876), f. 38.
DK	David Kaufmann Collection, Hungarian Academy of Sciences, Budapest. One series bears Arabic numerals, and another Roman numerals.
Dozy, <i>Supplément</i>	R. Dozy, <i>Supplément aux dictionnaires arabes</i> . Paris, 1927. 2 vols.
Dropsie	Geniza manuscripts preserved in the library of Dropsie University, Philadelphia.
El	<i>Encyclopaedia of Islam</i> . 1st ed.
El ²	<i>Encyclopaedia of Islam</i> . 2d ed.

- ENA Elkan N. Adler Collection, Jewish Theological Seminary of America, New York
- Eretz-Israel* *Eretz-Israel: Archaeological, Historical and Geographical Studies*. Jerusalem, 1951———. Hebrew, with English summaries; some volumes have sections in European languages.
- f., fs. folio(s); fragments(s).
- Fischel, *Jews* Walter J. Fischel, *Jews in the Economic and Political Life of Mediaeval Islam*. London. 1937. Reprint, New York, 1969.
- Goitein, *Jemenica* S. D. Goitein, *Jemenica: Sprichwörter und Redensarten aus Zentral-Jemen*. Leipzig, 1934. Reprint, Leiden, 1970.
- Goitein, *Jews and Arabs* S. D. Goitein, *Jews and Arabs: Their Contacts through the Ages*. New York, 1964.
- Goitein, *Studies* S. D. Goitein, *Studies in Islamic History and Institutions*. Leiden, 1966. See also *India Book* and *Med. Soc.*, below.
- Gottheil-Worrell *Fragments from the Cairo Genizah in the Freer Collection*, ed. R. Gottheil and W. H. Worrell. New York, 1927.
- Grohmann, *World of Arabic Papyri* Adolf Grohmann, *From the World of Arabic Papyri*. Cairo, 1952.
- Heyd, *Commerce du Levant* W. Heyd, *Histoire du commerce du Levant au moyen-âge*. Amsterdam, 1959. 2 vols.
- Hinz, *Masse* W. Hinz, *Islamische Masse und Gewichte*. Leiden, 1955.
- Idris, *Zirides* H. R. Idris, *La Berberie orientale sous les Zirides, X^e-XII^e siècles*. Paris, 1962.
- India Book* A collection of 354 Geniza documents on the India trade being prepared for publication by S. D. Goitein.

xvi ABBREVIATIONS

JAOS	<i>Journal of the American Oriental Society.</i>
JESHO	<i>Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient.</i>
JNUL	Jewish National and University Library, Jerusalem, Israel, MS 4° 577, 3. This file contains all the Geniza documents used in this book.
JQR	<i>Jewish Quarterly Review.</i>
Lane-Poole, <i>History of Egypt</i>	Stanley Lane-Poole, <i>A History of Egypt in the Middle Ages</i> . London, 1914.
M.	Heb. Mār or Ar. Sayyidī, both = Mr.
Maimonides-Meyerhof	<i>Un glossaire de matière médicale composé par Maimonide</i> , ed. Max Meyerhof. Cairo, 1940.
Maimonides, <i>Responsa</i>	Maimonides, <i>Responsa</i> , ed. Jehoshua Blau. Vols. I-III. Jerusalem, 1957-1961.
Mann, <i>The Jews in Egypt</i>	Jacob Mann, <i>The Jews in Egypt and in Palestine under the Fāṭimid Caliphs</i> . Vols. I, II. Oxford, 1920-1922. Reprint with Preface and Reader's Guide by S. D. Goitein. New York, 1970.
Mann, <i>Texts</i>	Jacob Mann, <i>Texts and Studies in Jewish History and Literature</i> . Vol. I, Cincinnati, 1931. Vol. II, Philadelphia, 1935. Reprint with Introduction by Gerson D. Cohen, New York, 1972.
Med. Soc.	S. D. Goitein, <i>A Mediterranean Society. The Jewish Communities of the Arab World as Portrayed in the Documents of the Cairo Geniza</i> . Berkeley and Los Angeles, Vol. I, 1967. Vol. II, 1971.
Mez, <i>Renaissance</i>	A. Mez, <i>Die Renaissance des Islams</i> . Heidelberg, 1922. In order to enable students using the English, French, Spanish, or Arabic translations to find the passage quoted, the number of the chapter is included.

Mosseri	A private collection of Geniza material in the name of Jack Mosseri.
Nahray	A collection of 261 Geniza documents connected with Nahray b. Nissim (see ch. iv), treated in a Ph.D. thesis by Murad Michael. The numbers following <i>Nahray</i> refer to Dr. Michael's thesis.
REJ	<i>Revue des Études Juives.</i>
Serjeant, <i>Islamic Textiles</i>	R. B. Serjeant, "Material for a History of Islamic Textiles up to the Mongol Conquest," <i>Ars Islamica</i> , 9-16 (1942-1951).
Shaked, <i>Bibliography</i>	Shaul Shaked, <i>A Tentative Bibliography of Geniza Documents</i> . Paris and The Hague, 1964.
Steingass, <i>Persian-English Dictionary</i>	F. Steingass, <i>A Comprehensive Persian-English Dictionary</i> . London, 1947.
Tarbiz	<i>Tarbiz. A Quarterly for Jewish Studies</i> . Hebrew, with summaries in English.
TS	Taylor-Schechter Collection, University Library, Cambridge, England. The collection is kept in glasses, in bound volumes, and in boxes. For example: <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. No. 251 of the series of glasses, 12 inches long is marked thus: TS 12.251 2. Folio 7 in volume 12 of the series of volumes 10 inches long: TS 10 J 12, f. 7 3. Boxes are marked either with Arabic numbers or with letters (G, J, K, and so on), or with the word "Arabic." 4. NS designates new series. It is followed by the number of the box and the folio. 5. NS J designates boxes of the new series which contain documents exclu-

TS (cont'd.)	sively and which bear no numbers. Only the folio is cited.
ULC	University Library, Cambridge, England. Collections of Geniza material in the library other than the Taylor-Schechter Collection.
Wahrmund, <i>Handwörterbuch</i>	A. Wahrmund, <i>Handwörterbuch der neuarabischen und deutschen Sprache</i> . Giessen, 1898. 2 vols.
Yāqūt	<i>Jacut's Geographisches Wörterbuch</i> , ed. F. Wüstenfeld. Vols. 1-iv. Leipzig, 1866-1870.
Zion	A Quarterly for Research in Jewish History. Hebrew, with summaries in English.

LETTERS OF MEDIEVAL JEWISH TRADERS

CHAPTER I

Introduction

I. PROVENANCE AND PRESENT WHEREABOUTS OF THE LETTERS TRANSLATED

ANYONE looking at the title of this book will be tempted to ask: Why Jewish? Why should we single out one of several communities active in the trade of the Islamic countries during the High Middle Ages? The answer is simple: From that world and that period, only the letters and other papers of Jewish overseas traders have thus far been found. Their preservation was due to very special circumstances.

All the letters translated in this volume were originally found in the so-called Cairo Geniza. Geniza (pronounced gueneeza) is a place where discarded writings on which the name of God was or might have been written were deposited in order to preserve them from desecration. This pious precaution was a general Middle Eastern custom, shared by Christians, Muslims, and Jews. But only the Jews seem to have developed the practice of burying their sacred writings no longer in use, a custom still widely observed.

Most of the papers of the Cairo Geniza were preserved in a room specifically set aside for that purpose and attached to a synagogue. Hundreds of thousands of leaves have been saved, mostly of religious, or otherwise literary, character. Unlike other genizas, however, the Cairo Geniza also comprises a huge quantity of writings of a purely secular character, such as official, business, learned, and private correspondence, court records, contracts and other legal documents, accounts, bills of lading, prescriptions, etc. Since only discarded writings were thrown into the Geniza room, it is natural that most of the material is fragmentary. Still, the number of writings extant in their entirety, or at least forming meaningful units, is considerable. I estimate that about 1,200 more or less complete

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business letters have been preserved and identified as such by me. Thus, the eighty letters presented in this volume contain about seven percent of the total. I do not claim at all that the pieces chosen here are uniquely representative. Alongside items of special interest, others of a more humdrum character have been translated. Another author might have selected another eighty pieces equally apt to illustrate the mercantile world of the medieval society of the Arabic speaking Mediterranean area.

The appellation Cairo Geniza needs some qualification. The city of Cairo was founded by a Fatimid caliph in the year 969 when Egypt was conquered by his troops. The ancient capital of Islamic Egypt (al-)Fustat, sometimes inaccurately referred to as Old Cairo, was situated about two-and-a-half miles south of the new foundation and remained the economic center of the country throughout the eleventh and the first half of the twelfth century. This is precisely the period in which most of our letters were written, as is evident from this breakdown:

	<i>Total</i>
Letters from the eleventh century (may include last decade of the tenth)	
nos. 1-5, 11-36, 63-67, 69-73, 74, 77	43
Twelfth century (may include last decade of the eleventh century)	
nos. 6, 7, 9, 37-42, 48-60, 68, 75, 79	25
Thirteenth century (includes one item from the end of the twelfth)	
nos. 8, 10, 43-47, 61, 62, 76, 78, 80	12

The synagogue with the Geniza chamber was that of the "Jerusalemmites" or "Palestinians," that is, the ancient, pre-Islamic congregation of Fustat, which adhered to the rites and customs of the Jews of Palestine. The immigrants from Iran and Iraq, referred to as "Iraqians" or "Babylonians," possessed another place of worship, originally a church, which they had purchased from the Coptic Patriarch in 882.¹ A third Jewish community of Fustat was that of

¹ Until recently it was generally assumed that the Geniza chamber had been attached to the building which originally was a church (see, e.g.,

the Karaites, a dissident sect recognizing the sole authority of the Bible and repudiating that of the "Rabbis" of the Talmud, the post-biblical writings sacred to the main body of Jews who were referred to as "Rabbanites." In the eleventh century the Karaites were very prominent in commerce and banking, as well as in the government bureaucracy and medicine, but, naturally, they had no reason to deposit their discarded writings in a Rabbanite place of worship. Still, some interesting items addressed to Karaites found their way into the Geniza, as for example, nos. 11 and 69, and there are many references to them throughout. (See index, s.v. Karaites and Tustarīs.)

At least twenty out of the eighty items included in this volume were addressed to places other than the capital of Egypt. As the title of this publication and selections 1-10 indicate, the letters originated in practically all Islamic countries extending from Spain and Morocco in the West to India in the East. Letters with a destination other than Cairo-Fustat reached the Geniza for a great variety of reasons, but mostly because the recipients had traveled there.

As a rule, business letters from the area and the period covered by this book were written in Arabic. This was not classical Arabic, nor simply a vernacular, but a semiliterary language of rather regular usage and considerable expressiveness. Jews wrote this language with Hebrew characters. Since everyone had learned Hebrew as a little boy while attending school, where Bible-reading was the main subject of study, all were familiar with Hebrew letters, while the far more difficult Arabic script had to be practiced with a private tutor. Moreover, the writers often interspersed their Arabic text with Hebrew words and phrases.² Needless to say, the better merchants were fluent in the Arabic script as well, as we see from the addresses which are often in Arabic characters, or from express references, as in no. 9. Selection no. 62, a letter to a qadi, or Muslim judge, is, of course, in Arabic characters, while no. 3 is in the

Paul E. Kahle, *The Cairo Geniza*, New York, 1960, p. 3). But, as I have shown in *Med. Soc.*, II, 148-149, it was the Iraqians who acquired the church when they were in need of a place of worship for themselves, while the "Jerusalemmites," the original Jewish inhabitants of Fustat, already possessed a synagogue there in Byzantine times.

² The translations of Hebrew words and phrases are printed in italics.

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Hebrew language, because its writer was an Italian, and not an Arabic-speaking, Jew.

The treasures of the Cairo Geniza became known to the scholarly world (and to antiquity dealers) shortly before 1890, when the time-honored synagogue of the Palestinians was pulled down and replaced by another building. Libraries and private collectors in Europe and America acquired considerable quantities of the documents found there. Finally, in 1897, Solomon Schechter, then Lecturer of Rabbinics at the University of Cambridge, England, with the assistance of Dr. Charles Taylor of St. John's College, succeeded in removing the total remaining content of the Geniza chamber to the University Library, Cambridge. The Taylor-Schechter Collection now contains perhaps three times as much as all the other Geniza collections taken together. Other important collections represented in this volume are those of the Bodleian Library, Oxford, the British Museum, the Jewish Theological Seminary of America, New York, Dropsie University, Philadelphia, the David Kaufmann Collection, Budapest, Hungary, and the private Mosseri Collection. There are a dozen other collections, almost all of which contain material suitable for this volume.³

2. THE TRADERS' WORLD

With a few exceptions, this book is confined to letters, including accounts which used to form parts of letters. Naturally, a great variety of papers others than letters dealt with commerce, such as legal documents issued at the conclusion or the dissolution of a partnership, the granting or payment of a loan, the sale of a house, a slave, or a book, or any other transaction for which written statements used to be made. Court records connected with commerce are another extremely frequent type of document found in the Geniza. In this volume, I wished to present the subjective aspect of trade, trade as seen by the people who were engaged in it, and this is most directly expressed in their letters.

Because of the general insecurity and the slowness of communications, international trade was largely dependent on personal rela-

³ The story of the documentary Geniza is told in detail in *Med. Soc.*, I, 1-28, in Goitein, *Studies in Islamic History*, pp. 279-295, and briefly in *El'*, III, 987-989.

tionships and mutual confidence. A man shipping goods overseas normally had to wait months before he could know what happened to them. He had to rely on his friends in the country of destination for the proper handling of his affairs. Mostly, although by no means exclusively, friends were chosen from one's own religious community. This was natural under medieval conditions. The clubhouse of the Middle Ages where one met one's peers daily, or, at least, regularly, was the mosque, the church, or the synagogue. A Spanish Jew traveling to India would pray in the synagogues of each of the larger cities of Sicily, Tunisia, Egypt, and Yemen, and thus become personally acquainted with everyone who counted. Thus, coreligionists became natural business friends. The religious community functioned like an extended family. The few longer Arabic business letters on papyrus from the ninth and tenth centuries (which have been edited by A. Grohmann, D. S. Margoliouth, and A. Dietrich) were also exchanged between members of the same religious community, either Christians or Muslims.⁴

Religion was conducive not only to the formation of business relationships, but also to their proper conduct. Again and again a man's piety and fear of God are invoked when he is reminded to adhere to good business practices or when he is praised for his excellent handling of his friends' affairs.⁵

The modern reader is inclined to regard the continuous references to God in these letters as a mere *façon de parler*. This is not the case. God was conceived as the creator of all that happened in nature and in human life, including man's thoughts, decisions, and actions. He was, so to say, the most active substance in the physical world. Therefore, keeping him constantly in mind and mouth was the most practical thing a good businessman could do.

Moreover, man's very limited ability to defend himself against the whims of nature, such as storms at sea, famines, epidemics, and other cases of illness, as well as his helplessness in the face of a ruthless government or the constant menaces of piracy and war

⁴ Adolf Grohmann, *From the World of Arabic Papyri*, Cairo, 1952 (where further literature on Arabic papyri); Albert Dietrich, *Arabische Briefe aus der Papyrussammlung der Hamburger Staats- und Universitäts-Bibliothek*, Hamburg, 1955; D. S. Margoliouth, *Catalogue of Arabic Papyri in the John Rylands Library, Manchester*, Manchester, 1933.

⁵ E.g., no. 1, sec. C; nos. 11, 17, 23, secs. B, D, F.

developed in him a feeling that he was not the master of his own destiny, that he was delivered into the hands of a higher power. "Fate," albeit not absent from our letters, occurs in them rarely. God, the personal God, served the purpose better; he was a friend and father, with whom one conversed in prayer at least seven times a day; he knew one's innermost thoughts and most secret deeds, and one could always find a little, or not so little, sin, for which one was punished when something went wrong. All the good came from God and "he who hopes for the good will obtain it; God does not break his promise" (no. 32). Hence the astounding equanimity apparent in many Geniza letters and the generally optimistic approach to life displayed in them despite frequently dire living conditions. Religion was undoubtedly the strongest element in a merchant's mental makeup, and religion meant membership in a specific religious community.

Trading, naturally, was interdenominational and international. Several letters of this volume make mention of non-Jewish business friends and even partners. The trade with Christian Europe was largely responsible for the flourishing state of the mercantile communities on the southern shores of the Mediterranean during the eleventh century, as shown in *Med. Soc.* 1, 44-47, where it is emphasized, however, that this trade was in the hands of Christian, not Jewish, merchants. Consequently, this exchange with Christian Europe is reflected in this collection mainly by indirect reference. Number 4, a letter from Amalfi, Italy, is the only example from the eleventh century of Arabic-speaking Jewish merchants doing business in a Christian port of Europe; there is none from the twelfth; and again only one, no. 8, this time concerning Genoa and Marseilles, from the thirteenth century. An important element of mutual understanding was the fact that the business ethics of the three monotheistic religions were essentially identical, although individual writers formulated them differently in their own original fashion.⁶

Besides the barriers of religion there existed the dividing lines of economic position and social class and sometimes it appears that the latter were stronger than the former. The reader of this volume

⁶ A good introduction to the business ethics of Islam is provided in the article "Tidjārah" in *EP*, iv. About Hindus see the introduction to ch. v, below.

will quickly acquire a feeling for the social position of a writer, namely, whether he addresses an equal or a person of a higher or lower state than his own. In practically every letter the recipient is wished that God may preserve his "honored position" (Arabic *'izz*). For "man's fate depends on his place in society."

Yet a spirit of equality pervaded that highly differentiated world. The way in which a former slave addresses a merchant prince and great communal leader (no. 13) is characteristic in this respect. The root of such brotherly attitude was again religion: one feared the same God, who was very near to all his children, high and low, and frequented the same place of worship, which was usually of limited size. Moreover, in both Judaism and Islam, scholarship conferred social prestige. A learned middle-class merchant—a rather common phenomenon—ranked as high in society as a rich and powerful supplier of the court. It seems also that the long months spent together in foreign parts on perilous voyages brought people close together, for "strangers are kinsmen to one another" (n. 78).

As is evident from the content of several of the letters translated below, some of their authors were learned persons, and some, such as Nahray (ch. iv), Abraham Yijū (nos. 38, 39, 40), and Ḥalfōn b. Nethanel (no. 59) were scholars. Besides biblical studies and, of course, the command of Hebrew (including Aramaic, the language in which a large section of the post-biblical Jewish literature is written), they were versed in Jewish law and lore, as is evident from the legal opinions which they wrote on the reverse sides of business letters received by them. This vast body of writings was studied first "for Heaven's sake," that is, because study was worship, but also for practical reasons: one studied the law because it was applied in life, and attorneys, who take care of these matters in our own time, were practically unknown in those days. In addition, Abraham Yijū was a poet, or rather, a maker of verses, and Ḥalfōn a connoisseur in several fields, such as poetry, philosophy, and some of the sciences.

Islam, as already alluded to in passing, took a similar attitude

⁷ TS 13 J 8, f. 27, l. 27. The letter concerned is personal, not commercial. (A young man asks his prospective father-in-law not to divulge that he had asked him for the hand of his daughter, for he would lose face if he were repudiated.)

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toward learning and the learned; the learned merchant has indeed been described as the bearer of medieval Islamic civilization. I wonder, however, whether this was not a more general medieval phenomenon. In the thirteenth century Norwegian *King's Mirror*, a young man who wished to become an overseas trader instead of joining the service of the king, received this advice from his father—among many other instructions: “Finally, remember this, that whenever you have an hour to spare you should give thought to your studies, especially to the law books; for it is clear that those who gain knowledge from books have keener wits than others, since those who are the most learned have the best proofs for their knowledge.”⁸

There was very little contact between the world of the traders and that of the government and the army. The top merchants who acted as suppliers to the court naturally were close to the ruling circles, such as the recipients of nos. 1 and 11 or the writer of no. 12. The government provided naval escorts as a protection against pirates and enemy attack, as in nos. 69-70, which were, however, often ineffective, as proved by nos. 9 and 73. Syria was notorious for its lawlessness, and the caravans had to be protected by special guards paid by the merchants (no. 16, sec. A). Customs dues were not particularly oppressive. Complaints appear only in the times of political decline, as at the end of Almoravid rule in Morocco (no. 7), in disorderly Yemen (no. 43), or in later Ayyubid times in Egypt (no. 8, sec. B).

The government reserved for itself the right of buying first. When a boat carrying oil, wax, silk, or any other goods regarded as essential for the court or the army, arrived in a port, the government would prohibit the unloading until it had made its own purchases (see, for instance, no. 14). Powerful officials would assert the same right for themselves (no. 11, sec. C). A foreign Muslim ship would be seized and emptied of its entire cargo when it was needed for a war—a procedure that of course upset the dispositions of the merchants affected (no. 50). A boat from a Muslim country, albeit

⁸ James Bruce Ross and Mary Martin McLaughlin, *The Portable Medieval Reader*, New York, 1956, p. 146. From *The King's Mirror*, trans. L. M. Larson, New York, 1917.

owned by a Jew, was liable to seizure when driven by a storm to Christian territory, as no. 76 shows, but local contacts were apt to save the proprietor from such a mishap. Government supervision of the mores of the travelers, as attested in no. 80, was exceptional, and not general practice.

Christian and Jewish merchants used to settle their disputes and other legal affairs before their communal courts (see *Med. Soc.*, II, ch. VII, and in this book, nos. 17, 18, 33, 34D, 36, 37A, 39B, 45B, 46, 47, 48, 51, 54, 56, etc.). Since, in those days, law was personal rather than territorial, that is, a man normally was judged in accordance with the law of the denomination to which he belonged, the Jewish merchants traveling between Spain and India were subject to the same law everywhere and often knew the prominent judges and jurisconsults from their writings or personally or both. If a merchant was learned, he himself often served as an assistant judge, or, where no local authority was available, formed a court with others. Any non-Muslim could apply to a Muslim, that is, government, court, as alluded to in no. 17, but this was strongly resented, as is evident, for instance, from the content of no. 56 and the tenor of the report contained in no. 79. All in all, the organization of law in medieval Islam markedly enhanced the cohesiveness of the non-Muslim communities and the communal attachment of the merchants.

3. THE ORGANIZATION OF THE OVERSEAS TRADE

This volume is concerned with the traders rather than the trade, that is, with the sociological rather than the economic aspects of the overseas commerce. But, naturally, the former cannot be properly appreciated without some knowledge of the latter.

The organization of the overseas trade was effected largely through partnerships, countless varieties of which appear in the Geniza papers, as is evident from the discussion of the subject in *Med. Soc.*, I, 169-186.⁹ The rich Islamic material on this vital instru-

⁹ Three partnership agreements from the Cairo Geniza were published by A. L. Udovitch in *Studia Islamica* 32 (*Joseph Schacht Memorial Volume*), 289-303. Thirty more partnership documents, all differing with regard to the socioeconomic circumstances and mostly also the legal stipulations, are translated in my forthcoming book *Mediterranean People: Letters and Documents from the Cairo Geniza, Translated with Introductions and Notes*.

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ment of economic life has been brought to the attention of the scholarly world in an important recent publication.¹⁰ To be sure, the very great merchants possessed sufficient capital for financing comprehensive overseas undertakings with their own resources (see, for example, nos. 69 and 70). They employed agents in the home ports to ship their goods and permanent representatives in the main centers of trade abroad. But even they would not disdain the conclusion of many partnerships of limited size, as manifested in nos. 1, sec. B, and 14, both referring to the merchant prince Joseph Ibn 'Awkal who lived around 1000. The economically strongest, like our own great companies, endeavored to become still stronger through partnership, as when the Muslim Bilāl, who later became the ruler of southern Yemen, and Maḍmūn, the leader of the Jewish community of Aden and superintendent of its port, united in constructing a boat for the Aden-Ceylon route or in shipping huge quantities of goods to the capital of Egypt, as we learn from no. 37, secs. B and C. Middle-class merchants who produced the bulk of writings preserved in the Geniza, usually conducted their business ventures in cooperation.

For an easier understanding of the letters translated in this volume, one characteristic of the Mediterranean partnership should be kept in mind: the relationship of partners could be maintained during a lifetime or even through generations, as in nos. 22 and 25, but it was customary to make a contract for each business venture, which could be defined by a certain time limit, such as a year, or a specific undertaking, such as "a travel to Yemen and beyond."

"Informal cooperation," based on "formal friendship," was another and widely applied method of overseas trade. I purposely placed the angry letter from Qayrawān, Tunisia, at the beginning of the book because it emphasizes again and again the true character of business "friendship," as it was called. The writer does not wish to become the official representative of the addressee; all he wants is "that you exert yourself for my goods there as I do for yours here" (no. 1, secs. A, C, F, H). The services rendered for a "friend" and expected from him were manifold and exacting, as the long list in *Med. Soc.*, I, 164-169 shows, and there is little doubt

¹⁰ Abraham L. Udovitch, *Partnership and Profit in Medieval Islam*, Princeton, 1970.

that the relationship varied from one pair of friends to another.¹¹

The bonds of friendship were strengthened by marriages concluded between families all over the Mediterranean area, including the India route (see no. 9). Blood relationship was felt to be even stronger than the ties of marriage. A family business, comprising a father and his sons, brothers, or a merchant and his nephew, was the natural form of mercantile cooperation, conspicuous especially during the eleventh century, as is proved by many examples in this volume. But cooperation never meant common property. Accounts were kept strictly separate. Fathers groomed their boys to do business on their own account, as in no. 22, sec. F, and granted them only a modest share in the family income as long as they were dependent (see no. 40, sec. E).

Bond-servants who acted as commercial agents of their masters also must be regarded as belonging to the family business. For a slave was no stranger; he was a member of the household. Bama, the Indian slave so often mentioned in the correspondence of his master, is referred to as brother, he is addressed with the title "sheikh," like any other respectable merchant, and greetings are regularly extended to him in the letters still read by us (see no. 38, n. 18). The status of a bond-servant depended, of course, on that of the master whom he served, as the story included in no. 79 so palpably demonstrates. Male slaves able to serve as confidants and to do overseas business were costly and only the greater merchants could permit themselves such a luxury, as is evident from the examples occurring in this book. It must have been customary to free such bond-servant agents at a comparatively early stage of their lives, that is, when they still were able to do business for themselves, for the cases of freedmen carrying on a business of their own, like the one in no. 13, are at least as frequent in the Geniza as those still in bondage and working for a master. I imagine that a merchant with small children took a slave as his confidant, but as soon as his sons were old enough to assist him, he freed the slave, lest he should become too powerful in the house, as happened so often in Islamic governments. The Geniza is apt to contribute

¹¹ The subject is treated in a wider context in S. D. Goitein, "Formal Friendship in the Medieval Near East," *Proceedings of the American Philological Society* 115 (1971), 484-489.

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material to the study of this interesting social phenomenon, which has parallels in various other human societies.

A ubiquitous element of medieval trade was the *dallāl*, usually translated as broker, auctioneer, or middleman, the person who fulfilled the economic function of advertisements and other modern means of publicity. He cried out the goods offered for sale in the bazaar and brought them to the knowledge of customers in other ways. The writers of our letters rarely have opportunity to mention him, but the accounts often list the commission paid to a *dallāl*, as in no. 64, secs. A and D.

In addition to partnerships, "friendships," family connections, and agents and brokers of various types, overseas trade relied on an institution which, more than any other, has been brought into the broad light of history through the Cairo Geniza documents: the office of the representative of the merchants. The *wakīl al-tujjār* originally was the legal representative of absent foreign merchants, and often himself a foreigner or a descendant of one: a Spanish Jew in the port city al-Mahdiyya, Tunisia (no. 70, n. 6); a Maghrebi in Alexandria, Egypt (no. 28, n. 24); a man from Aleppo in Ramle, Palestine (no. 5, n. 20). The prominent *wakīl* of Fustat, Abū Zikrī Judah b. Joseph Kohen, to whom letters 9 and 37 are addressed, was called Sijilmāsi, and probably had traveled to that remote city in southern Morocco, if he was not born in that place, while his father sojourned there on business.¹² The representatives of the merchants in Aden, South Arabia, Ḥasan b. Bundār and his son Maḍmūn (nos. 36, 37, 38 sec. C, etc.), probably hailed from Iran. I have come to this conclusion not only because of the Persian name of the founder of the family, Bundār, but for various other reasons, the explanation of which would take me too far afield.

Thus, the function of the representative of the merchants was

¹² See no. 41, n. 6. Judah's father might have married in Sijilmāsa and remained there until a son was born to him. Judah's grandfather and namesake was the leading Jewish scholar and religious authority in Egypt (see the introduction to no. 9). "Dynastic" marriages were as common among the families of divines as among those of the leading merchants. In 1037, the head of the Iraqi Jewish community of Fustat married the daughter of the Jewish judge of Sijilmāsa, which would have formed an exact precedent for Judah's father. About such marriage connections between families living in countries remote from one another see *Med. Soc.*, 1, 48-49.

essentially the protection of the interests of persons who were absent from a town or were foreigners there. He kept a warehouse, which served for the storage of goods, as a bourse where business was transacted, and as a mail office. He received merchandise sent to him from abroad, sold it, and distributed the proceeds to the partners who had invested in the relevant business venture (no. 40, n. 11). He took care of the goods, money, and claims of merchants who had perished at sea or otherwise died abroad, and tried to alleviate the lot of the families who had suffered this privation (no. 37). On top of all this, he of course did business for himself. Muslim representatives of merchants are usually referred to with the title qadi, or judge, which means that they also issued the legal documents needed for business transactions. Letter 62 is addressed to such a qadi, but one who was not the proprietor of a warehouse, but sat in one acting as a notary. Most of the Jewish wakīls referred to in this book were learned enough for drawing up legal documents, but it seems they were occupied with work more lucrative than the time-consuming labor of a legal clerk.

The office of the representative of the merchants has been discussed by me in *Med. Soc.*, 1, 186-192. A renewed scrutiny of the Geniza papers in comparison with the widely diffused Arabic literature on the subject may provide additional insights. There is little doubt that the Islamic wakīl al-tujjār, or shāh-bender ("the king of the port"), or whatever he was called, was the prototype for the consuls of the Italian and other merchants' colonies in the Levant, and a comparative study might be conducive to a better understanding of both institutions.

4. THE GOODS

The character of a trade, and even of a trader is considerably influenced by the nature of the merchandise with which he trades. Everyone understands that the matters to be attended to by a druggist are very different from those to be tackled by a horse-dealer. Therefore a note about the commodities handled by the writers of our letters might not be out of place.

With one or two exceptions, the 150 or so commodities mentioned in this book, as unfamiliar as some of them may appear to the modern reader, were common items in the medieval trade and also recur

in other Geniza letters. Their provenance, movements, prices, use, and economic significance can thus be conveniently studied on the basis of rich and reliable source material. It is not intended to pursue this study here. I wish, however, to give a short survey of the goods traded by the writers of our letters so that the reader may become familiar with the world in which they moved. The notes provide additional information wherever needed.

In view of the bewildering variety of goods appearing in this book one might be tempted to assume that these people traded with practically everything. Nothing is further from the truth.

The main food items, such as wheat, beans, and barley, are not included here; neither are sheep and other meat cattle, nor beasts of transport, such as donkeys, mules, and camels. No one traded in building materials, whether timber, bricks, or stones. Weapons and slaves, great items of both international and local trade, are entirely absent from the Geniza correspondence. To be sure, all these were items in general use. Therefore we read that people acquired them for themselves, their relatives and friends, or the community. There were also exceptions confirming the rule: for example, we would find a document proving that a Jew traded in commercial quantities of wheat. But such exceptions are rare.

The choice of the goods traded depended in a large measure on the community to which a trader belonged. The international commerce of the Jews was closely intertwined with the local Jewish industries and retail business. Then, as in modern times, Jews were prominent in textiles. Therefore, threads, fabrics, and clothing take a place of pride in the letters translated here. I hurry to add: had we a similar collection from the hands of Muslim or Christian traders, the picture would have been exactly the same. In the Middle Ages, textiles were the number one item of commerce in both general and luxury goods. According to a Muslim legend, Abraham was a clothier; to the best of my knowledge, no Jewish source exists for this legend.¹³ The pious and learned Muslims who mostly found their livelihood in the bazaars of the clothiers, simply could not

¹³ A Jewish legend to this effect could hardly have originated in view of the express testimony of the Book of Genesis which depicts the patriarch Abraham as a cattle breeder.

imagine that Abraham, the father of faith, could have done anything other than trade in textiles.

Dyeing, a difficult craft in view of the primitive materials then available and the high demands made of the artisan,¹⁴ was closely connected with the textile industry and also largely Jewish. Jews even had the reputation of possessing professional secrets which they refused to communicate to anyone not within the fold. But again, it would be entirely wrong to assert that the Jews enjoyed a monopoly in this field or, vice versa, that they were forced into it because it was regarded by some as a despised profession. Anyhow, the Jewish overseas trade handled great quantities of dyeing materials coming from practically all parts of the world frequented by it: the Far East, India and Yemen, Egypt, Palestine and Syria, Tunisia and Morocco. By chance, only the most common dyeing stuffs occur in our letters.

In the professions of druggist, pharmacist, and perfumer the Jews were represented out of all proportion to their number. These were the most popular occupations among them. Consequently, medical plants and preparations, spices and aromatics, as well as perfumes and incenses constituted the main items of the Jewish overseas trade. About one-third of the commodities listed in the index of this book belong to this category.¹⁵

Copper, together with its alloys, is the metal most frequently mentioned in our letters. The reason for this is, of course, that most utensils and containers, for instance in the kitchen, which are manufactured today from a great variety of materials, were then made of copper. The Arabic terms for copper, bronze, and brass often are used indiscriminately (see no. 39, n. 8). In addition, the reader should be alerted to the fact that "copper," when not expressly described as raw material, could also mean old or broken copper vessels sent to a place where they would be melted down and used for the fabrication of new ones.¹⁶ Tin, the usual alloy of copper,

¹⁴ See no. 11. About the color-intoxication of medieval people see *Med. Soc.*, I, 106-107.

¹⁵ The Geniza material about these professions is presented in *Med. Soc.*, II, 261-272, where an attempt is also made to explain why they were so popular among Jews.

¹⁶ The same use is seen in the lists of trousseaux, which are mostly divided

and lead, used in many chemical processes, also were great items of commerce.

Iron, a most prominent commodity of export from India to the Arab world and handled by Jewish merchants, was next to absent from the Geniza papers related to the Mediterranean trade. Once it is mentioned there, the Hebrew word is used, probably because the writer assumed that the iron, if discovered, would be seized by the government. (The secret police was believed to know the Hebrew characters, but not the language.) Jews were black- and coppersmiths and manufacturers of various implements made of metals and preparations from chemicals, but were not particularly conspicuous in these industries. Thus the Jewish prominence in the metal trade probably went back to some ancient tradition. When the Arabs invaded the island of Rhodes in the eastern Mediterranean in 672 or 673, they destroyed the famous colossus, one of the seven wonders of the ancient world. Its copper, weighing 880 camel loads, was bought by a Jewish merchant in Emesa, Syria, who certainly was no novice in the copper trade. An Iranian source of the twelfth century speaks of a Jew who had leased copper mines in that country from the government. When we find a Tunisian Jew operating a bronze factory in India (no. 39), we can safely assume that this newcomer to the subcontinent only followed the examples of other Jews who preceded him. The trade in metals and chemicals is well represented in our collection.

Throughout the Muslim world Jews were active as gold- and silversmiths. But the products of this industry were sold individually and were not traded wholesale. Pearls and precious stones were a great commodity of international trade, and so were the cheap mass articles serving as ornaments, such as beads, corals, cowrie shells, and lapis lazuli. Jews were very prominent as glassmakers. But this industry is referred to in documents in greater detail than it is in letters.

Olive oil, wax, and soap were imported to Egypt in large quantities, mainly from Tunisia, and so were dried fruits, mostly from southwest Asia. Sugar, on the other hand, was produced in Fustat

into these sections: jewelry (including gold and silver vessels), clothing, bedding, copper (meaning household goods).

and exported from there all over the Mediterranean. Jews were prominent in the food industry as makers of sweets, cooked foods, and lemonades, but these people seem to have been small vendors and hardly of significance for a flourishing international trade. Naturally, oil and wax were needed for lighting, for which the local linseed oil also was used. Because of the heat, the nights were reserved for entertainment and study and the consumption of lighting fuel was high. The Jewish community of Fustat was praised for its zeal "for study throughout the night until daybreak." (Their letters do not give this impression.)

By chance, two other commodities of wide use in daily life, and consequently often referred to in Geniza writings, are almost absent from our selection. Cheese was the main protein food of the poorer population, and despite Egypt's extended sheep breeding, cheese had to be imported from Sicily, Crete, and other places. Here (no. 39, n. 21), cheese, especially prepared for use in a Jewish kitchen, is sent as a present from Aden to India. Wine, in good Mediterranean fashion, was taken by Christians and Jews with their daily dinner. Every respectable household had a good supply, and wine merchants have left us their accounts. Despite Koranic prohibition wine was openly sold in the bazaars of Cairo in those days, and the shipowner with the family name "Son of the Wine-seller" in no. 73 certainly was a Muslim.¹⁷ In classical antiquity salted tuna fish was an important Mediterranean article of trade. In the Geniza, it appears solely as a present, sent from Tunisia to Egypt (as in no. 22, sec. J), probably because the Jews had no part in that wholesale trade. But Jewish fishmongers are repeatedly referred to in the Geniza, even a tuna fish-seller (or perhaps fisher, for in the document concerned his future wife promises never to leave the house except with his permission and gives him the right to lock her in, a right enjoyed by Muslim, but not by Jewish, husbands; in exchange she receives some special privileges).

One of the most exacting aspects of medieval sea transport was the proper packing and wrapping of the goods. The storms tossed those sailing ships around, the bales were torn apart and the goods contained in them damaged by seawater. "Eight bales of flax, seven

¹⁷ It could have been a nickname.

of which had been torn open," we read in no. 23, sec. C, and similar statements are contained in no. 22, sec. D; no. 25, sec. C; and elsewhere. The bales of flax damaged by seawater were a constant rubric in the account books, as in no. 63. The goods were wrapped in canvas and protected by oxhides, an item of import from Sicily. Because of the availability of hides in the West parchment remained in use there for letters far longer than in Egypt, where we find it used only in sacred or otherwise precious books and in important legal documents.

Paper was produced everywhere, but varied so much in quality that we find it shipped from one country to another in huge quantities, e.g., in nos. 15 and 16. In the India trade, small amounts of paper, Egyptian, Spanish, etc., were sent as presents from Aden to India. Many of the letters sent to India and which we now hold in our hands must have remained with their recipient for ten or fifteen years, and one wonders how they were protected against termites; those expert dealers in spices and medical plants probably knew how to overcome those voracious insects. The local Indians did not use paper in the twelfth century. Our letters permit us also a few glimpses into the book trade.

Finally, gold and silver coins and other means of payment also should be classified as "goods"; at least they were regarded as such by the writers of our letters. A variety of coins were on the market, but the general movement of specie was from the West to the East, from Spain and North Africa to Egypt and from there to India and the Orient. Promissory notes were the most common means of payment inside a country, while the *suftaja*, usually translated as "bill of exchange," but more correctly described as cashier's check (see no. 70, n. 18) was used for larger transactions, often those conducted between two countries.

In order to counteract the perils of transport and the whims of the overseas markets, merchants usually spread the risk by shipping a variety of goods and by limiting the size of the shipments. Occasionally, however, we find extravagant quantities of one commodity only and that at a time of war, as in nos. 17, 69, and 70, where unusual numbers of bales and bags with Egyptian flax went westward. Shall we assume that in wartime there was a boom for Egyptian flax during the first half of the eleventh century as there