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978-1-107-00547-1 - Trade and Institutions in the Medieval Mediterranean: The Geniza Merchants and their Business World

Jessica L. Goldberg

Excerpt

[More information](#)

1 Introduction: two tales

1.1 A medieval story: the bale on the beach

Around the year 1050 a bale sat on the shore at the port of Mazara in western Sicily. It was wrapped in canvas and tied with rope, and on the outside was written the name “Maṣliāḥ b. Eliah,” the *dayyan* (judge) of Palermo. It contained indigo, and a bale of it represented a great deal of money: around 175 dinars if it was the Syrian variety, triple that if it was good Kirmānī.¹ But the bale was wet, a fact that would both reduce the value of the indigo and mean a lot of work for someone. So it sat on the shore for several days.

Ḥayyim b. ‘Ammār, the Palermo “representative of the merchants” (*wakīl al-tujjār*),² was also down on the Mazara shore, sorting, spreading, airing, and re-packing the indigo in a second wet bale dropped off by the same unweatherly ship. Aḥmad b. Dā’ūd, a clerk whom all the people of Palermo had agreed to leave in charge of their goods, asked him about the orphaned bale. Ḥayyim suggested moving it to the *funduq*³ until they heard from Maṣliāḥ. But Maṣliāḥ, writing from Palermo, said the bale did not belong to him at all, and he refused to receive it. On the other hand, could Ḥayyim get the two sections of indigo belonging to his brother out of the bale and send them to him? Ḥayyim presented this plan to Aḥmad b. Dā’ūd, who was equally quick to reject responsibility: “If you are willing to accept the bale in its entirety, fine. If you don’t want to, I’m not going to open it for you to take what you like and leave the rest with me.”⁴ Ḥayyim wrote to the judge again, who repeated his request that Ḥayyim handle matters and fetch him the requested

¹ See Stillman, 1970: 89–91, 135–136 for a description and price quotes in the early part of the eleventh century.

² See 4.3 at n. 68 below, for the role of the *wakīl*.

³ This was a merchant inn that served as lodging and storage space for foreigners without access to local warehouses; see Constable, 2003: 68–106, *passim*.

⁴ TS 20.122 r 26–27. See TS 20.122 r *passim*, v 1–12 for all the remaining details and quotations.

Cambridge University Press

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Jessica L. Goldberg

Excerpt

[More information](#)

2 Introduction: two tales

sections. So Ḥayyim, whose professional duty as *wakīl* meant he “sought to arrange everything for the best” for everyone, went to Aḥmad and said he would pay for everything and take it to his own warehouse, provided Aḥmad would open it and record all the details of each bundle – its weight and label.⁵ Aḥmad stood on the balcony of the *funduq* while the bale was opened and took down everything in his ledger. There were seven sections of indigo: three were labeled as belonging to Mūsā b. Abī 'l-Ḥayy and were to be delivered to Maṣliḥ b. Eliah; two were labeled for delivery to Maṣliḥ's brother; and two were labeled for delivery to Isma'īl b. Hārūn. One of the last sections contained some pumpkin seeds and rice along with the indigo. One of the merchants on hand to witness the unpacking, Maymūn, said that the section with the pumpkin seeds belonged to Abū Ishāq, who had had it packed in Cairo itself.

As everyone had suspected this bale caused no end of trouble for Ḥayyim. After it was opened he got a letter from Abū Ishāq telling him of a change of intent: he was to deliver the sections labeled to Isma'īl b. Hārūn to Nissīm b. Shemariah instead. In the dispute that followed when both arrived from Palermo and Ḥayyim refused to give Isma'īl the package, Isma'īl and his brother denounced Ḥayyim to the “inspectors,”⁶ saying that he was undermining Muslim institutions by evading customs duties. Insults and accusations were traded among the merchants when they were hauled in front of the Muslim authorities (*al-sultān*).⁷ Worst of all, and shameful, Ḥayyim's brothers-in-law were among those who witnessed the abuse hurled at him; in return, in a moment of anger he insulted one of the other men on the quality of both his wife and *his* in-laws. The case, and the payments involved, were apparently not settled to Ḥayyim's satisfaction, for he detailed the entire episode in a letter to an associate in Fustat (whence the bale had originated), asking that he take the letter and read it to *his* (the associate's) brother-in-law.⁸ No doubt the arguments would continue in Fustat and Alexandria, where most of the owners made their homes.

Many parts of the geographic story of eleventh-century Mediterranean commerce are encapsulated in the history of this single bale lying unclaimed on the shore, particularly the separate and intersecting movements of goods, information, and people upon which such trade

⁵ The payment would be for customs duties that might be imposed.

⁶ Ḥayyim used the Hebrew פקחים to obscure his meaning from other inspectors who sometimes read commercial letters. See Goitein, 1967–1993: I, 271 and 5.5 below.

⁷ The word referred to “the state” or “authority” in general, rather than a specific officer. It could also be the title Sultan, which became common after this period, but it was given only to the Sultan of Ifrīqiyya during the eleventh century. See the discussion in 5.5.

⁸ TS 20.122 r *passim*, v 1–12. The name of the recipient of the letter is lost.

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-00547-1 - Trade and Institutions in the Medieval Mediterranean: The Geniza Merchants and their Business World

Jessica L. Goldberg

Excerpt

[More information](#)

depended. Indigo and other goods belonging to several merchants were bundled together in Fustat, whence they were sent west to Palermo and unexpectedly landed in Mazara. A series of letters passed from Fustat to Palermo, from Fustat to Mazara, from Palermo to Mazara, and from Palermo to Fustat transmitting information and instructions regarding these goods, assigning responsibility, praise, and blame. Merchants made multiple trips between Palermo and Mazara to manage and argue over arrangements.

The story of this bale also reveals that relationships between merchants and institutional authority were complex. Officials appeared and goods had to be negotiated through a bureaucracy that included registration and customs, but the trading community had a great deal to say in this negotiation. It was the trading community, after all, that agreed to put Aḥmad in charge of their goods; when “inspectors” were called in it was as a strategic move by business players. This move, however, led to the horrors of appearing before “the authorities,” which was, as Ḥayyim put it, “an affair that I was unable to handle.” Finally, merchants appear in relation to authority as both individuals and a group: “all the people” put Aḥmad in charge of their goods and a group witnessed the opening of the bale and the argument in front of the authorities, but Ḥayyim and Maṣṣliḥ argued over individual responsibility for the bale, just as Nissīm and Isma‘īl fought over the sections.

At the same time, the story as we have it is puzzling in terms of economic organization. Why were accepting and opening the bale objects of such dispute? Why was there such an effort by two men first to avoid responsibility for the bale, and then by two others to take responsibility for sections they did not own; indeed, for goods from which none of them would profit? Why were both ownership and agency in the bale so dispersed and ambiguous? How is it that Ḥayyim, whose name appeared on no label, ended up taking charge of the bale; why was he, rather than Maṣṣliḥ, the person who received instructions in a letter from Fustat? What made Ḥayyim anxious to report on these incidents to yet another merchant in Fustat who did not own these goods, yet not ask for any particular assistance or intervention? If these questions were not enough, the infrastructure and economic geography too are mysterious. Why were these particular goods moving, and how did they come to be brought together in Fustat? If indeed the indigo was Syrian, why had it taken such a circuitous route to Sicily? What led to the diversion of destination and the orphaning of the bale? Why were so many men traveling the 110 km from the great market of Palermo to the lesser one of Mazara?

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-00547-1 - Trade and Institutions in the Medieval Mediterranean: The Geniza Merchants and their Business World

Jessica L. Goldberg

Excerpt

[More information](#)

4 Introduction: two tales

Finally, the story reveals the sort of evidence about medieval trade at our command. All the details come from a single letter, and thus we know the history of the bale only so far as it concerns Ḥayyim as momentary and unexpected custodian. The circumstances of purchase and sale, like the previous and further movements of this indigo, are lost, for the particular bale and sections cannot be located again in the few accounts and shipping notes we have. No other letter from any of the other merchants involved, giving information about resolution or repercussions, can be connected with certainty to this dispute. Moreover, the letter itself is damaged just when the dispute between the agents is recorded: seven lines are mostly illegible. And yet, it is from these narratives – from letters whole and fragmentary, from preliminary accounts, stray contracts, pages torn from the records of law-courts – that I sketch this medieval economy. By tracing these movements of information, goods, and people, and by figuring out which movements were necessary, possible, and impossible, I re-construct the institutions and geographies of trade.

This book begins from a simple premise. If we collect the commercial papers of the eleventh century and analyze the hundreds of stories such as Ḥayyim's as a group, we will discover the concerns that drove this business – the kind of work these men did, how they navigated external institutions and created internal ones. If we then trace the records of movements of things that were important to merchants it will reveal something about the economic geography of their world. That is, we will learn things not only about the overall connectivity and integration of the Mediterranean or Islamic economy, but about the relationship of local, regional, and inter-regional economies, and the nature of the production and exchange that drove commerce.

In this work I delve as deeply as possible into the activities of a group of people: I look at where they went and what they did in their travels; at the nature, origins, production, and movements of the commodities they deal with; and at the ways in which they shared information. From the nature of the sources that survive we often know a great deal about these men as individuals, making it possible to consider not only overall patterns, but sometimes how an individual's circumstances shaped the choices he made. Through both kinds of analysis I recover the geography of practice and test how that geography matches those imposed by historical studies of different areas, by medieval geographers, by what we know of the nature and boundaries of political authority. The approach might be thought of as in conversation with, but inverting, the classic *Annales* method: rather than gathering together all possible sources for a region defined in advance and exploring that region

Cambridge University Press

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Jessica L. Goldberg

Excerpt

[More information](#)

through many lenses, I look at a single set of sources in a variety of ways to see how the economy is connected, letting regions and the importance of regions emerge from the connections made by people, objects, and information.⁹

But my ability to tell the stories of the men gathered around the bale in Mazara and their disappointed colleagues in Egypt depends on a second, more modern, story. This second story presents the difficulties of the sources and scholarship. There are limits in type, number, and origin of the stories that have survived, meaning that we must think deeply about how much of the economic story of their time they can tell, even though these are also documents of unique quality and complexity. Even more, the story of how these sources came to be “discovered,” dispersed, and used by scholars over the past century defines the histories that have been written from this material in particular ways. Indeed, the scholarship is much like the documents themselves: dense and rich in some areas, but also filled with unexpected disputes, with lacunae small and large.

1.2 A modern story: three scholars and a piece of paper

I think we may congratulate ourselves . . . Please do not speak yet abroad of the matter. I will come to you tomorrow about 11pm [*sic*] and talk over the matter with you how to make the matter known. (Solomon Schechter to Mrs. Lewis, May 13, 1896, Cambridge, England)¹⁰

“In haste and great excitement,” Solomon Schechter wrote this news, which would complete the establishment of the “Cairo Geniza” as a source of unique and irreplaceable biblical and other literary and non-literary materials, and provoke the final and full transfer of the contents of the Ben Ezra synagogue’s storage room to libraries in Europe and the United States. Schechter was able to confirm what the Scottish twin sisters Mrs. Margaret Gibson and Mrs. Agnes Lewis had suspected. The fragments they had purchased from an antiquities dealer in Cairo were indeed important: for here was a piece of the Hebrew original of the Book of Ecclesiasticus, previously known to scholars only through the Greek and Syriac translations.

These three scholars were not the first to discover the textual riches of the Geniza.¹¹ Since his arrival at the University Library in 1890

⁹ See McCormick, 2001 for similar methodology. Duby, 1953 is perhaps the most foundational of regional studies in the *Annales* method.

¹⁰ ULC, uncatalogued. See Reif, 2000: 75 for a reproduction.

¹¹ Throughout the book “the Geniza” refers to the Cairo Geniza described below.

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-00547-1 - Trade and Institutions in the Medieval Mediterranean: The Geniza Merchants and their Business World

Jessica L. Goldberg

Excerpt

[More information](#)

6 Introduction: two tales

Schechter himself had already been consulted about acquiring various Hebrew texts that were emerging, in ever greater numbers, in the hands of travelers and dealers coming from Cairo. He had largely rejected their purchase, doubting either their importance or authenticity, since the burgeoning market for ancient texts in semi-colonial Egypt had naturally created its share of forgers. But several circumstances in Egypt were pushing materials into the market, and would soon drag Schechter there too.

For centuries occasional visitors to the Ben Ezra synagogue in Old Cairo had seen its notoriously large *geniza*. Of course, synagogues everywhere, including elsewhere in Cairo, had *genizot*: texts containing the name of God become sacred, and when such texts cannot or should not be used, they require a sacred resting-place, a *geniza*.¹² Many Jewish communities bury the contents of a synagogue's *geniza* box in the cemetery periodically, when it becomes full: the word *geniza* comes from the root "to hide" or "to bury." But the Ben Ezra synagogue, the earliest surviving synagogue of the Jewish community of Fustat (perhaps established in the Byzantine period), and differing from newer synagogues in that it still followed Palestinian (rather than Babylonian) customs, was unusual. For whatever reason, when the community was allowed to rebuild the ancient synagogue after the Fatimid caliph al-Ḥākim's prescribed destruction of all synagogues and churches in 1012, a large storeroom in the building was set aside for the *geniza*. The community in this and succeeding generations considered the room not as a temporary shelter for documents awaiting burial, but as their permanent resting-place.¹³ Even after much of the Jewish community moved from Fustat to Cairo proper, the building and its *geniza* remained important to the local community and visiting Jews. Through the centuries many visitors came to see the building, and many documents, some of strange and remote origin, were deposited in this *geniza*. By the mid nineteenth century over 350,000 pieces of paper and parchment, hand-written and printed in many languages, dating from the sixth through the nineteenth centuries, some originally written as far away as Spain, Russia, and Indonesia, rested together.¹⁴ The overwhelming majority were religious texts, but here and there were letters, marriage contracts, a customer's account with his shopkeeper, a scholar's response to a legal question, a synagogue schoolmaster's practice book, a magic amulet, a list of donors to or

¹² For a brief overview see *EJ²*, "Genizah."

¹³ We have documents attesting to the granting of permission to rebuild, the project of rebuilding itself, and the completion of work around 1040. See Reif, 2000.

¹⁴ See Jefferson, forthcoming.

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-00547-1 - Trade and Institutions in the Medieval Mediterranean: The Geniza Merchants and their Business World

Jessica L. Goldberg

Excerpt

[More information](#)

Three scholars and a piece of paper

7

recipients of community charity – the Geniza contains 12,000–18,000 such “historical” documents. Most were written in the Arabic spoken by the Arab Jewish community of Fustat, but using the Hebrew characters they learned in school, a form now called Judeo-Arabic.¹⁵ And most were also written in the period 1000–1250, when the new synagogue building bustled with members who lived nearby, when Fustat was the commercial heart of Egypt, and when many in the community had felt the burden of sacredness implicit in the word God, or the Hebrew script itself, most strongly.

The situation of both the synagogue and the Geniza began to change in the late nineteenth century. The city began to see the arrival of a new kind of tourist: moneyed people with a scholarly interest in ancient texts. These now included men and women with a special interest in the history of the Bible, and European and American Jews interested in the history of Judaism and the Jewish people. The Jewish community of Cairo itself was growing in numbers and economic standing as the city came under the domination of the British, and in 1889 the by-now dilapidated Ben Ezra was demolished. By 1892 the rebuilding was complete, and included a *geniza* room full of Geniza materials. But it was not exactly the same Geniza: in the years of rebuilding various documents had found their way to collectors and dealers. Even as the new building was completed, interest in the documents now circulating bubbled up in scholarly circles around Europe, and more documents were removed from the new Geniza room.¹⁶

By December 1896 Solomon Schechter too set off for Cairo, armed with money provided by Charles Taylor, the master of St. John’s College, and the backing of Cambridge University. After some delicate negotiations with the chief rabbi of Cairo the Jewish community of Cairo permitted Schechter to take away what remained in their Geniza and give it to the Cambridge University Library, and Schechter himself was given free access to the Geniza room to box up what he wished. Already less than half the Geniza was intact, and even as Schechter worked, and even as the Scottish twins joined him in Cairo to help, documents escaped. Schechter tracked down some items with dealers and purchased them, but many were overlooked, and Schechter himself decided to leave some of the printed materials. The efforts of Schechter, Lewis, Gibson, and their English colleagues and supporters means that the

¹⁵ Judeo-Arabic, like medieval Arabic, has many forms. By the ninth century a normative transliteration and orthography had emerged. See Blau, 1999.

¹⁶ See Jefferson, 2010, *passim* for more details of the processes of fragment removal and loss.

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-00547-1 - Trade and Institutions in the Medieval Mediterranean: The Geniza Merchants and their Business World

Jessica L. Goldberg

Excerpt

[More information](#)

8 Introduction: two tales

lion's share of Geniza documents, around 140,000 shelf-marked manuscript fragments, totaling about 225,000 individual folios, can now be found in the Cambridge University Library, most of them part of the Taylor–Schechter collection.¹⁷ The circumstances of the late nineteenth century, and changing practice in the twentieth, also explain why over thirty libraries in Europe and the United States claim Geniza collections, why only a scant handful are in Israel and none in Egypt, why few remain in private hands, and why it is impossible to make any definitive statement about how many Geniza documents there are.

1.3 The problem of the sources

The history of the Cairo Geniza explains the odd and arbitrary nature of its contents, and demands that we think carefully about the kinds of questions we can and cannot pose of different groups of material. A *geniza* is not an archive, the artifact of an attempt to organize and preserve texts; it is a repository of purposefully discarded texts – an *anti-archive*, as Goitein, the most important scholar of the historical Geniza, described it. Goitein's neat term, however, obscures an even more difficult problem: we do not know when, how, or sometimes even why certain materials entered the Cairo Geniza. Some papers ended up in the Geniza soon after they were written;¹⁸ other groups of papers are clearly parts of earlier archives that at some unknown date were regarded as no longer worth preserving. The Geniza thus contains a jumble of what was once worth keeping and what was never worth keeping. Geniza documents in Western libraries include writings from many segments of society alongside the churning pens of the Fatimid chancery. But in whatever area we look, we never have *everything*. Thus the different rate of materials for individuals in similar positions reveals that “*geniza practice*” varied widely even in the period 1000–1250, and not everyone was similarly assiduous in making sure papers were deposited.¹⁹ Nor did

¹⁷ The Taylor–Schechter collection is named both for Solomon Schechter and Charles Taylor, the fellow and master of St. Johns College. Additional collections in Cambridge include Lewis and Gibson's own collection, additional purchases by the library, and the loan of the last substantial private collection, that of the Mosseri family.

¹⁸ Thus two letters written to Ḥayyim b. 'Ammār, which he received on business trips to Alexandria and Fustat, ended up in the Geniza: TS 13 J 25.12 and TS 10 J 19.9. We have none of the letters he received in Sicily, suggesting that he had left the letters to be deposited in the Geniza when he traveled home.

¹⁹ Nahray b. Nissim's correspondence makes up more than a third of commercial letters from 1040 to 1080, while the Geniza contains only fourteen letters written to his contemporary Yahūda b. Mūsā Ibn Sighmār, an equally important merchant also based in Fustat and a member of the Ben Ezra synagogue.

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-00547-1 - Trade and Institutions in the Medieval Mediterranean: The Geniza Merchants and their Business World

Jessica L. Goldberg

Excerpt

[More information](#)

communal officers always put the records they generated there. The modern dispersion of the Geniza no doubt resulted in some losses of material,²⁰ but perhaps more surprising was the discovery that Jews of the synagogue had been taking material out of the Geniza long before this heap became a saleable commodity – recovering paper for re-use or for samples of good penmanship for the synagogue school.²¹ In the case of commercial letters, of most concern in this book, cross-referencing of missives mentioning the sending, arrival, and copying of other letters makes it obvious that we have only a fraction of any merchant’s correspondence, even for the two merchants who left us the largest files: Nahray b. Nissīm and Yūsuf Ibn ‘Awkal.²²

The nature of the synagogue, the notoriety of its *geniza*, the changing characteristics of Cairo and Fustat and their Jewish communities over the centuries – each plays a role in making the Geniza defy expectations of its contents. As we will be reminded time and again, what remains are mostly windows that give us fragmentary views from and towards Fustat. But the very centrality of Fustat and this synagogue led to travel and migration that brought documents as well as people, and there are unexpected vistas too – notes between Sūsa and Palermo, records from Aleppo, complaints about communal machinations in Southern Italy, poetry written between a married couple in al-Andalus. The complex nature of texts, the varied use and re-use of paper, and the dispersion of the Geniza all raise complicated questions about the pictures the Geniza provides, its representation and completeness.²³

Fortunately the “commercial papers” of the Geniza have received some of the greatest scholarly attention. Several generations of scholars, principally Goitein and his students, worked to identify all the papers associated with traders of the eleventh and twelfth centuries. These efforts came to fruition for eleventh-century materials in the work of Gil, who carried out research in the 1980s and 1990s to identify and edit, or re-edit, all the materials associated with these men, regardless of whether the materials were commercial letters, legal documents, account fragments, family or communal correspondence.²⁴ More

²⁰ The recent rediscovery of a box of Geniza materials in the basement of the Geneva Library that had lain unopened since 1897 suggests we may never fully reassemble what was dispersed.

²¹ Goitein, 1967–1993: I, 9. ²² Discussed in 2.1 below.

²³ There is no overall study of the contents of the Cairo Geniza. See Hoffman and Cole, 2011; Reif, 2000; Reif and Ben-Sasson, 1997; Reif and Reif, 2002 for descriptions. See Cohen and Stillman, 1985 on medieval *geniza* practice.

²⁴ Principally Gil, 1983a: III, docs. 458–529; Gil, 1997: II–IV, docs. 102–846. I omit some of the items in the latter volume and include some other documents in the former in my “commercial corpus.” See the discussion below.

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-00547-1 - Trade and Institutions in the Medieval Mediterranean: The Geniza Merchants and their Business World

Jessica L. Goldberg

Excerpt

[More information](#)

10 Introduction: two tales

recently, two ongoing efforts – the Princeton Geniza Project to create online editions of Geniza documents and the Friedberg Genizah Project to create a union catalog of all Geniza documents – have added more documents to the eleventh-century corpus.²⁵ Although research continues in certain collections to catalog fragments, and boxes of Geniza materials continue to appear in unexpected places, these materials are so recognizable that there is a scholarly consensus that at least 90 percent of them have been identified in known collections.²⁶ The possibility of doing the synthetic work of this book thus rests squarely on the dedicated efforts of collection and editing of many scholars; Geniza history suggests, however, that this work too may need revision as such efforts continue.

For writing the history of commercial trade the Geniza is limited in several obvious ways. There is the question of rate of survival of documents discussed above. Geniza materials are also skewed toward people associated with this synagogue (one of at least four in eleventh-century Fustat–Cairo), who did not include all Jewish merchants even in Fustat. But we also have documents both from and for Jews in Fustat who belonged to other synagogues, as well as letters addressed to merchants resident in other cities – Alexandria especially, but also odd items from the Levant and central Mediterranean.²⁷ Jewish merchants wrote letters in Arabic as well as Hebrew characters, but we have only a handful of their Arabic letters, again skewing our view of commercial activity. Finally, merchants wrote other sets of documents – particularly legal and accounting documents, both of which had continuing value as legal records – some of them rarely or never deposited in the Geniza.

The nature of the Geniza and its commercial papers as a fragmentary, selective, and random collection thus raises issues of representation, identification, and typology, discussed in chapter 3. I ask the reader to take one leap of faith with me, albeit an educated one. I have assumed that the commercial letters recovered from the Geniza are representative of the Judeo-Arabic letters that merchants resident in Fustat, or traveling there, received. That is, even if we do not have all the letters of Nahray b. Nissīm, there is nothing systematic that distinguishes the letters we have from the letters we do not have. Although arguing from absence is dangerous, extant letters can be helpfully suggestive of the nature of

²⁵ See *Manuscript sources* in the bibliography for the “commercial corpus.”

²⁶ This is the lowest estimate among scholars (A. L. Udovitch, personal communication, 2004; P. Ackerman-Lieberman, personal communication, 2005–2008; B. Outhwaite, personal communication, 2008; Mark Cohen, personal communication, 2004–2005; Roxani Margariti, personal communication, 2009–2010).

²⁷ The distribution of materials is discussed in 7.5 below.