Trade and Institutions in the Medieval Mediterranean

The Geniza merchants of the eleventh-century Mediterranean – sometimes called the “Maghribi traders” – are central to controversies about the origins of long-term economic growth and the institutional bases of trade. In this book, Jessica Goldberg reconstructs the business world of the Geniza merchants, maps the shifting geographic relationships of the medieval Islamic economy, and sheds new light on debates about the institutional framework for later European dominance. Commercial letters, business accounts, and courtroom testimony bring to life how these medieval traders used personal gossip and legal mechanisms to manage far-flung agents, switched business strategies to manage political risks, and asserted different parts of their fluid identities to gain advantage in the multicultural medieval trading world. This book paints a vivid picture of the everyday life of Jewish merchants in Islamic societies and adds new depth to debates about medieval trading institutions with unique quantitative analyses and innovative approaches.

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Trade and Institutions in the Medieval Mediterranean

The Geniza Merchants and their Business World

Jessica L. Goldberg
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Technical notes

Personal names

Members of the merchant community mostly followed the conventions of the contemporary Islamic world in their naming practice. Most individuals had a personal name (*ism*), patronymic (*nasab*), a *kunya* (“father of ______”), and a personal or familial *nisba* (specifier), indicating either place of origin, profession, or descent. Some individuals had more than one *nisba*, and some individuals or families also bore a *laqab*, or nickname. Writers often chose to vary the combination of names used to identify an individual even within a single letter. They refer to close associates and intimates with minimal forms (bare *ism*, *kunya*, or *kunya ism*), while using long forms with strangers.

For clarity, I refer to most merchants in “*ism b. nasab*” form, but vary this usage where another form more easily identifies the individual. Before *nasabs ‘b.* indicates *ibn* in Arabic, *ben* in Hebrew, or *bar* in Aramaic, all of them frequently used. I often include *nisbas* or *laqabs* for members of important family clans, particularly if fellow merchants often used the *nisba*. Where a patronymic form, such as *Ibn ‘Awkal*, is a family *laqab*, I use “*ibn*” rather than “*b.*” to distinguish between the two. Thus, “Yūsuf b. Yaʿqūb *Ibn ‘Awkal*” denotes Yūsuf whose father was Yaʿqūb, and whose family *nisba* was *Ibn ‘Awkal*. He is commonly referred to as Yūsuf *Ibn ‘Awkal*.

Most Jews in the medieval Near East were known interchangeably by Hebrew and Arabic names, and merchants were no exception. Since they usually used the Arabic forms of their fellows’ names in letters, I have followed the conventions of historians of Islam and used transliterated Arabic names even where there is a common English equivalent.

---

1 Special features of naming practice among Geniza people include *nasabs* generally of one generation (at most, and, rather infrequently, two), infrequent use of *laqabs*, and *nisbas* that are both familial and personal (often meaning that an individual bore two of them). For further detail on naming in Geniza documents see Goitein, 1967–1993: I, 357–358; for more general discussion see Beeston, 1971.

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Thus Yusuf rather than Joseph, Ya'qub rather than Jacob. For those merchants who are universally referred to by the Hebrew form of their name, as is the case with Masliha b. Elijah, the Jewish judge (dayyan) of Palermo, I use Hebrew transliteration for consistency. Merchants used al-Kohen and ha-Kohen almost interchangeably; I use al-Kohen throughout.

Place names and regional names

For those cities most familiar to English readers I have used English versions of place-names (e.g. Palermo, Tyre, Alexandria). Less familiar places are given in transliteration, using the definite article where this is most common among medieval users. Thus I refer to al-Lādhiqiyya (ancient Laodicea in northern present-day Syria) but to Qayrawān (not al-Qayrawān). An exception is made for Fustat, which I keep as a familiar place name. In this period Fustat and Cairo were sister cities located about two miles from each other. Cairo was a royal enclosure growing into a city, but Fustat was the great city and commercial hub of Egypt. Merchants generally refer to Fustat as Miṣr, also the word for Egypt, but when writing addresses on letters, they write al-Fustāt. Merchants frequented both Tripolis: modern-day Tripoli, Lebanon; and Tripoli, Libya. Following their use I refer to the former as Tripoli al-Shām (Syrian Tripoli), and the latter simply as Tripoli.

Since this book is concerned with the economic nature of regions, naming regions can presuppose a unity that did not actually exist. Merchants themselves used certain regional names quite commonly: al-Andalus (sometimes given with the article and sometimes without, although I use al-Andalus throughout), Sīqilliyya (Sicily), and al-Shām (greater Syria). But they used Ifrīqiyya (roughly the areas of Roman Africa: Tunisia and eastern Algeria) or Miṣr (Egypt) quite rarely. For convenience I use the names used by the geographers or their common English equivalents. Part II discusses the geographic meaning of these areas.

“Egypt” refers to the entire Nile Valley, the Delta, the Mediterranean ports of the Nile, and the area of the Fayūm. “Sicily” refers to the island and “al-Andalus” to Islamic Spain, although commercial activity did not encompass the entirety of either region. “Ifrīqiyya” refers to modern Tunisia, northeast Algeria, and northwestern Libya. “Maghrib” means the westerly part of the North African coast, comprising most of modern Algeria and Morocco. “The West” is used for the area of the central Mediterranean encompassing both Ifrīqiyya and Sicily, following the rather loose but consistent usage of Geniza merchants and their view of the world from Fustat. The “far west” refers to the Maghrib and
Map 1.2: Egypt and al-Shām
al-Andalus together. Finally, “al-Shām” was used by geographers and Geniza people universally to refer to the area roughly analogous to modern Syria, Lebanon, Israel, and the Palestinian territories.

Money, prices, and weights

This book is not particularly concerned with monetary history. When it mentions prices, it does so chiefly to provide scale and comparison. Hence all prices are converted into round figures in dinars. Direct quotes from letters contain the units and currencies used by Geniza merchants; the footnotes or text include a conversion to decimal dinars. As a rough standard of comparison, Goitein estimated that a family of middling artisans could get by on 2 dinars a month. This estimate is accepted by Geniza scholars, and provides the reader with a measure against which to judge units, tens, hundreds, and thousands of dinars.

In the case of the weights in which goods were priced and traded, rather than exact values the reader should note the close equivalence of many of these terms to avoirdupois standards. Given approximate weights, 

\[
\text{wuqiyya} \text{ can be read as ounces, } \text{ratl}s \text{ as pounds, and } \text{mann}s \text{ as two pounds (or one kilogram).}
\]

A \text{qintār} is a hundred \text{ratl}s, or a hundredweight (50 kilograms), an \text{’idl} or bale weighed roughly 500 \text{ratl} (although since these were also the physical objects of shipping, their weight varied from around 160 to over 350 kilograms).

Language: transliteration, transcription, and translation

I have tried to make sparing use of transliteration. Specific terms transliterated in the text are indicated by italics; a glossary is provided in the end-matter. Arabic transliteration follows the rules of the International Journal of Middle East Studies. Hebrew transcription follows those of the Association for Jewish Studies Review with the following changes: 

\[\text{צ} \text{is transliterated as } \text{s}, \text{ט} \text{as } \text{t}, \text{final } \text{ה} \text{without mappiq is omitted.}
\]

Exceptions

2 Geniza merchants quote prices in moneys of account. Chiefly these are dinars: halves, thirds, quarters, sixths, eighths, \text{qı¯ra¯t}s (twenty-fourths) and \text{habba}s (seventy-seconds).

3 Goitein, 1967–1993: I, 368–392. See the brief discussion and bibliography in 4.2 at n. 12.

4 More exactly, a \text{wuqiyya} was made up of 12 dirhems weighing 3.125 grams each, and a \text{ratl} was 12 \text{wuqiyya}. Goitein, 1967–1993: I, 360–361.

5 Dinars, dirhems, and \text{qı¯ra¯t}s were measures of weight as well as types of money; moneys of account are in standard weight dinars and weighed bags of money were labeled by dinar weight. On these particular weights see \text{EI2}, “Wazn.”
are made for terms found in English dictionaries, such as qadi, caliph, sultan, or yeshiva. These are treated as part of Standard English. Given that the irregularity of Arabic plurals can cause confusion, I append an ‘s’ to most transliterated terms rather than provide the morphologically appropriate plural. When published works in Hebrew or Arabic include an English title page I have given that title and indicated the original language. Where they do not I provide a transliteration.

Where questions of original language are important in my quotation of manuscript sources I have used the original Judeo-Arabic of the letters in the footnotes rather than a transliteration. An editor’s attempt to transliterate Judeo-Arabic often involves choosing to correct usage to normative Arabic, or deciding about voweling in a case where our knowledge of the Middle Arabic used is still tentative. 6

In both translations and transcriptions of manuscript sources the following conventions are used: roman type indicates original in Judeo-Arabic, underline is Hebrew; ellipses indicate editorial omission, while ellipses enclosed by brackets indicate lacunae in the text; words enclosed in brackets indicate editorial filling of a textual lacuna; words enclosed in parentheses indicate an editorial comment or clarification, or editorial completion of the writer’s abbreviation. Emphases, given in italics, are my own. Except in the model letter of chapter 3 I have not indicated corrections made by the writer: words or letters added above or below the line are included without comment; words that the writer later crossed out are omitted. Where non-Geniza sources are quoted I have relied upon previous editors and not made my own editorial comments.

Scholars have prepared English translations of many of these documents, and I have consulted many of these translations in writing this work. The table of manuscript sources in the bibliography lists both available editions and English translations. I have either re-translated or edited prepared translations in order to illuminate the consistent vocabulary of letter writers. Unless I specifically cite a translation in the footnotes all translations, and all errors that they contain, are my own.

I mostly use a literal translation style, but occasionally choose a looser, more idiomatic translation to give the flavor of the exchange. I sometimes use the second person in place of the author’s third person where comprehension is at stake. The reader will therefore find a mix of numerals and numbers, contractions, slang, and informal expressions; these are my attempts to accurately reflect registers and styles.

Abbreviations

Add. Additional
AIU Alliance Israélite Universelle (Paris)
Antonin Antonin Collection (St. Petersburg)
Ar. Arabic
AS Additional Series
BL British Library
Bodl Bodleian Library (Oxford)
Chapira Chapira Collection
DK David Kauffman Collection (Budapest)
ENA Elkan Nathan Adler Collection (New York)
Gottheil-Worrell Freer Gallery of Art (Washington)
Halper Halper Collection, University of Pennsylvania (Philadelphia)
Heb Hebrew
INA Institute of Oriental Studies (St. Petersburg)
JNUL Jewish National and University Library (Jerusalem)
JTS Jewish Theological Seminary
Meunier Meunier Collection
Misc. Miscellaneous
Mosseri Jacques Mosseri Collection (Cambridge)
MS Manuscript
NS New Series
Or Oriental
P. Heid. Papyrus Collection of the University of Heidelberg
PER Erzherzog Rainer Papyrus Collection (Vienna)
TS Taylor–Schechter Collection (Cambridge)