

India Traders of the Middle Ages: Documents from the Cairo Geniza. “India Book”

Shelomo Dov Goitein and Mordechai A. Friedman
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Throughout Antiquity, the Middle Ages, and our current era, the Indian Ocean has been the economic backbone of an interconnected global community. This inter-territorial commerce, which feeds a vast network of merchants from the western Mediterranean to the South China Sea, probably constitutes the single most important cultural milieu in human history. While many existing studies highlight these networks' significance and even a subdiscipline in academia focuses on the “Indian Ocean,” some significant components of the interlinking system are missing. A particularly difficult problem is the shortage of primary material from the system's earlier periods, especially prior to the arrival of the Portuguese and the Dutch. The present volume, which is comprised of annotated and translated letters of various eleventh- and twelfth-century Arab Jewish traders who interacted within this larger Indian Ocean complex, provides perhaps the most foundational source to understand the economic activities, communal organization, family life, and material civilization of the medieval world's Arabic-speaking Jews. Indeed, with patience and a creative imagination, *India Traders of the Middle Ages* could lay the foundation for taking this subdiscipline in new directions.

Based on the correspondence, as well as the company and individual records of what is known today as the Cairo Geniza, this expensive (but well worth the investment) collection offers readers invaluable insight into the medieval world thriving on the Indian Ocean. This collection is derived from S. D. Goitein's (1900-85) work on the Cairo Geniza, which includes the sem-

inal six-volume *A Mediterranean Society*. As with the six-volume “portrait of a Mediterranean world,” the documents deciphered here portray another side of this interconnected world. The wide range of correspondence among merchants, family members, business partners, and rivals highlights several characteristics of the Indian Ocean/Red Sea and provides fascinating information on commerce among the Far East, Yemen, and the Mediterranean. Perhaps the most useful insight one draws from this material is the integration between the Red Sea/Indian Ocean and the western Mediterranean, which, it seems, was predicated largely on the logistical limits of mercantile enterprises. In the end, Cairo seems to have served as the terminus for both the Mediterranean and the Indian Ocean, for there is little evidence of individuals actually traversing the entire network. What seems to have developed instead was a vibrant transitional economy that serviced the larger supplier/consumer operations extending beyond the Red Sea.

Goitein’s material certainly reflects the medieval world’s material, social, and spiritual proclivities; however, it is especially important because it highlights the extent to which a fused civilization was shared by Jews, Muslims, and Christians alike. This *India* volume offers a rich, panoramic view of how people lived, travelled, worshiped, and conducted their economic and social affairs. Literally thousands of individual merchants are named, and their diverse fares are tabulated with great precision. Indeed, the range of goods traded highlights the vibrancy and dynamism of this period’s economies, which connected the Mediterranean with the Indian Ocean. More than simply overwhelming the reader with the dizzying amount of detailed information, however, the volume’s organization actually allows readers to map out a scheme for the economic foundations of the societies that interacted in this geographically dispersed context. In this regard, much of the material sheds light on the institutions and socio-political structures characterizing many of the communities located along the major trade routes. This is especially the case for operations in Aden and Dahlak (Yemen), Tripoli (Libya), and Gujarat.

Amid the repetitive detail of a storehouse’s contents are details of seafaring, such as the kind of ships and the materials used to build them. Perhaps even more fascinating are the descriptions of the people operating these vessels. If one cannot stomach the tedious detail of spices, dyes, timber, and brass objects, certainly the discussions about family life, stories of Yemeni brides, and the proclivities of Gujarati sailors offers a good substitute. Of course, there is a problem with such an amalgamation of detail: this rich material cannot be read in any useful way if consumed from beginning

to end. These documents must, therefore, be read as individual fragments that offer insight into the way people lived, especially around the family and the day-to-day concerns of merchants as they organized expeditions beyond Yemen.

This impression is rather likely due to how the authors have organized the Geniza records. Starting from page 167, the documents are presented in three chapters clustered around three different family patriarchs: Joseph B. David Lebdi, Madmun B. Hasan-Japheth (Prince of Yemenite Jewry), and Abraham Ben Yiju. It is perhaps only because of the circles within which these prominent families operated that one is left with the impression that the trade conducted between the Indian Ocean and the Mediterranean was done through local intermediaries.

This impression is only one of many drawn from exploring this vast volume of detailed correspondence from beginning to end. That alone would justify the serious scholar's purchase of this book; however, it should also prove helpful to the student due to the extensive background information provided in the first 160 pages. *India Traders of the Middle Ages* is essential reading for anyone studying Arabic-speaking Jews in the classical period and the interlinking elements of the Indian Ocean system.

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