

Book Review

Indian Traders of the Middle Ages: Documents from the Cairo Geniza

Reviewed by Nathan Katz

S. D. Goitein and Mordechai A. Friedman, *India Traders of the Middle Ages: Documents from the Cairo Geniza* (Leiden, Brill. 2008). 918 + xxix pages. ISBN 978-90-04-15472-8.

Readers of this journal will likely know the story of the fabled Cairo Geniza documents, our most significant source of information about medieval Jewish merchants who plied the sea lanes between western and southern Asia.

Jewish law is very concerned about not desecrating the Holy Name, so any document on which the word "G-d" (or some variant) is written may not be discarded or destroyed, but must be respectfully buried. Even the most secular document that might contain the Name is set aside and conveyed to a storeroom, known as a Geniza, until it is properly interred in a cemetery. In 1890, the synagogue at Fustat in Old Cairo was torn down. Scholars and antique dealers were astounded by the great number of documents preserved in the synagogue's Geniza, mostly from the eleventh to thirteenth centuries, including an estimated 1,200 merchants' letters.

The late Solomon D. Goitein devoted much of his life to the study and translation of these letters, which were composed in Judaeo-Arabic. In 1973 he published eighty of them in *Letters of Medieval Jewish Traders*¹ and others in *The Yemenites: History, Communal Organization, Spiritual Life* in 1983.² At the time of his death two years later, was working on his *India Book*, a study of those letters dealing with the India trade. Mordechai A. Friedman of Tel Aviv University, who had been Goitein's research assistant in 1962, was entrusted with the task of bringing his mentor's work to fruition.

The result of their half century of collaborative effort is this masterful work, a treasury of primary documents that will be mined by scholars for decades. In it are translations of 459 documents, including letters, commercial bills, shipping manifests, court records, and the like, most of them written between 1080 and 1160, some as late as 1240.

Friedman provides a context for and analyses of the documents in his 164-page introduction, made up of three chapters.

The first chapter is a history of their massive joint project and an overview of medieval commerce between the Middle East and India. We are introduced to some of the major medieval Jewish merchants who wrote the documents, and we learn something about the commerce itself. Summarizing the ships' manifests, Friedman reports that eastbound products included textiles, vessels of silver, glass and other materials, household goods such as carpets, tables and kitchen utensils, chemicals, medicines, paper, metals for the Indian copper industry, coral, foodstuffs such as cheese, sugar, raisins and olive oil, Yemenite sweets, and linseed oil for lamps. Westbound commodities included primarily spice of course, but also medicines and herbs, iron and steel, brass and bronze, silks and other textiles, pearls, beads and cowrie shells, shoes and other leather goods, Chinese porcelain, ivory, coconuts, and timber.

In the introduction's second chapters, we meet five of the leading Jewish merchants engaged in the India trade. Skillfully, Goitein and Friedman tease out compelling portraits of these men and their families, their lives in India and back at home in Tunisia or Egypt or Yemen, the colleagues, their disputes, their loneliness, their superstitions, and their faith. Among them, no doubt Abraham ben-Yiju is the most interesting to the modern reader. Ben Yiju, it will be recalled, was the subject of a highly acclaimed work of historical postmodern fiction by anthropologist Amitav Ghosh, *In An Antique Land*.³ Ben Yiju not only sailed to and from India numerous times, he lived in Mangalore for a decade, married an

Indian manumitted convert, and dispatched his slave to transact business on his behalf. A wealthy merchant, Ben Yiju was also a Torah scholar who composed rabbinic documents known as *responsa*, a significant poet, and something of a physician or herbalist.

The third chapter analyzes some of the topics and themes suggested by the documents themselves. There is, for example, a lengthy discussion of the ship owners or ship pilots or ship captains known by the Persian word, *nakhuda*, or *Nauvittaka* in Indian languages. There were Hindu, Arab, Persian, Jewish, and other ship owners/pilots/captains, and they apparently formed something of an interfaith, cross-cultural business community notable for multiethnic amity. Friedman follows Goitein in pondering why the western sea merchants of the Mediterranean included no known Jews, whereas those who plied the India trade were much more pluralistic. Goitein had suggested that the western Jews were more fastidious about Jewish law and would have avoided sailing on the Sabbath, unlike their eastern co-religionists. Friedman rejects this reasoning and suggests that Muslims and Hindus did not share the anti-Jewish attitudes found among the Mediterranean Christians.

These merchants were often knowledgeable and observant Jews, and many issues of Jewish law arose in the course of transacting their business. Loans were made, conflicts had to be settled, dietary laws followed, slaves kept and often freed, and contracts signed before Muslim, Hindu, and Jewish judges and witnesses. One is struck by the seriousness such legal and ethical issues evoked, and perhaps these documents ought to be studied with issues of Halakhah and business ethics specifically in mind.

This chapter also included a brief discussion of the dangers of medieval seafaring, reminding us that the most famous of them all, David Maimonides, died in a shipwreck off the coast of India. This topic raises the question of how these intrepid merchants responded to such stresses as pirates and typhoons, and is especially rich in folklore.

The long-awaited publication of *India Traders of the Middle Ages* is a milestone in Indo-Judaic Studies. Most of the book consists of primary documents, and as such will be sifted for years to come. The work is enriched by a fine introduction, which serves to organize the vast collection. It also selects a few themes to explore, establishing a standard and a method for future research.

Notes

¹ S. D. Goitein, *Letters of Medieval Jewish Traders* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1973).

² S. D. Goitein, *The Yemenites: History, Communal Organization, Spiritual Life*, ed. by M. Ben-Sassoon (Jerusalem: 1983). In Hebrew.

³ Amitav Ghosh, *In An Antique Land* (Delhi: Ravi Dayal, 1992), originally published by Alfred A. Knopf, New York.