SECTION ONE

INTRODUCTION
CHAPTER ONE

LETTERS AND DOCUMENTS ON THE INDIA TRADE IN MEDIEVAL TIMES—A PREVIEW*

Until a few years ago, no letters or documents illustrating the medieval trade with India had been known to exist on either the Arabian or the eastern shores of the Indian Ocean. Yet the India trade was the backbone of the international economy in the Middle Ages in general and within the Islamic world in particular. More than anything else, it stimulated inter-territorial traffic, furthered the rise of a flourishing merchant class and created close and fruitful links between the countries of Islam and the Far East on the one hand and Europe on the other. In later medieval times, it was the search for the direct sea route to India that led to the discovery of America and other hitherto unknown parts of the globe and thus inaugurated the age of the unification of all mankind.

The archives of the cities and kingdoms of Italy, France and Spain have preserved records concerning their trade with the countries of the southern and eastern shores of the Mediterranean, especially from the twelfth century onwards. This was to a large extent a transit trade, a re-export of Oriental goods, originally brought from the countries of the Indian Ocean to Egypt, Palestine, Lebanon and Syria. However, no such archives have existed, or have been saved in the countries of Islam. Yet it is difficult, if not impossible, to draw a detailed picture of such a complicated socio-economic phenomenon as an extensive international trade without the help of letters and documents illustrating how this trade was actually conducted. Fortunately, it has been possible to assemble during the last decades a collection of records, written mostly in the Arabic language, albeit nearly exclusively with Hebrew characters, which provide much of the desired information. These Judeo-Arabic documents are mostly of the eleventh and twelfth centuries. They had been originally preserved in the so-called Cairo Geniza and are presently dispersed throughout many libraries of Europe and

* [Based on Goitein, Studies, 339–60, with minimal editing of the text and with some additions.]

1 Cf. Sauvaget & Cahen, Introduction, 16.