I. Introductory Remarks

The nākhudā was one of the central figures in the Indian Ocean trade during the Middle Ages. Nākhudās appear regularly in the Geniza documents in connection with shipping in the Indian Ocean, and they unquestionably played an important role in this commerce. Until the last few years, the nākhudā received minimal attention in the scholarly literature. Here we shall attempt to define the meaning or meanings associated with the term, the functions performed by the nākhudā in maritime commerce and his standing in society, especially as represented in the Geniza documents. Two recent studies, by Ranabir Chakravarti and Roxani Margariti, have made significant contributions to this research. We briefly review the research and survey the source material, adducing in the process yet unexamined documentation.

The word nākhudā is Persian and means ‘captain’ or ‘shipowner’ (from nāw, nāwa, ‘ship’; khudā, ‘master, owner’). As in Persian and Arabic sources, nākhudā appears with slight variations of spelling in the Geniza texts. Each of the following is qualified by the number of occurrences in the documents of this collection: n’kd’ (35), n’kwdh (23), n’kdh (13), n’kdh (2), n’kud’ (1) and the dual form n’kdtyn (1). As in Arabic texts, the Geniza writers did not distinguish between the different spellings, and sometimes one appears together with another, even in the same line. In some texts, diacritic marks are written over the letter k (to indicate kh), but apparently none has diacritic marks over d (to indicate dh, as found in some texts in Persian and Arabic literature). Because of the vagaries in
use of diacritic marks, this does not prove that the writers of these Geniza letters did not pronounce nākhudā.

Arabic dictionaries define nākhudā as ‘capitaine de navire’ (captain) or ‘patron de la barque’ (shipowner) or ‘Reeder’ (pilot). ² G. R. Tibbetts’ brief remarks in his 1971 study, Arab Navigation in the Indian Ocean before the coming of the Portuguese, seem to have been the most extensive comment on the nākhudā at that time. He noted that the word is never defined in the Arab texts.³ Tibbetts’ observations on nākhudā and the short notes by previous scholars have dealt primarily with sources from the fifteenth or sixteenth century and later. The sixteenth century writer Abu ’l-Fadl ʿAllāmī mentioned two nākhudās in his list of twelve kinds of crewmen on a ship, the first (also first in the list): The nākhudā “or owner of the ship. He fixes the course of the ship”; and the second (fourth in the list): nākhudā-khashab (khashab = ‘wood’): “He supplies the passengers with firewood and straw and assists in shipping and unloading the cargo.”³

II. Buzurg’s “The Wonders of India”

The tenth century Arabic book Kitāb ʿAjāʾib al-Hind (“The Wonders of India”), written by Buzurg b. Shahriyar, a Persian, is a veritable treasure trove of material concerning Indian Ocean travel and contains much information on its trade. Relatively little attention seems to have been paid to this book in modern studies dealing with the medieval Indian Ocean trade in general and the nākhudā in particular. A detailed analysis of his text for socio-economic history remains a definite desideratum. Primary among the men of the sea mentioned in the book are the nākhudās, many of

² E.g., Dozy, Supplément, 2:648b, captain; Kazimirski, Dictionnaire, 1220, adds shipowner; Löögren, “Glossary,” 58–59, adds pilot, and remarks that captain is a late usage, designated in earlier sources by raʾis or rubbān. Cf. Marqārī, “Aden,” 220, n. 11. According to Piamenta, Dictionary, 476, also: sailor. Note that in Greek classical sources the commanding officer of a ship in the navy was called kybernetes, literally ‘steerer.’ In emergencies, he might handle the tiller himself; otherwise he used quartermasters. In the Roman Imperial navy the gubernator, the Latin equivalent of kybernetes, was the executive officer and navigating officer. See Casson, Ships, 300, 302, 307, 310. Sperber, Nautica, 148, defines the Hebrew-Aramaic form (פורה) of Greek kybernetes: “(1) steersman, pilot, skipper (2) steering-oar.” Amir Ashur has called to my attention the ambiguity of some of the words with which nākhudā has been translated; some of these might not have always been used in their current technical sense.

³ Tibbetts, Arab Navigation, 60.

⁴ Tibbetts, Arab Navigation, 58. The first nākhudā appears to function as captain, and I do not know if the words “owner of the ship” are merely offered in the translation as a rendition of the term in question or are explicitly expressed in the original Persian.

⁵ See Fück, “Buzurg.”