CHAPTER FIFTEEN

THE UNITY OF THE MEDITERRANEAN WORLD IN THE “MIDDLE” MIDDLE AGES

An Arabist reading Jerome Carcopino's classic *Daily Life in Rome* is overwhelmed by the many striking parallels, often pointed out by the author himself between the life described in that book and the life we know from Mediterranean Muslim towns which have preserved their medieval character. Carcopino gives us a picture of imperial Rome, the capital of the pagan world, about 900 years before Islamic civilization reached its apogee, and still there is much in common between the two.

This continuity of the Mediterranean heritage has been brought into full relief by the recent studies of Professor Claude Cahen on the development of the Islamic and Western towns. Until then, it was generally believed that the European town was somehow a continuation of the Graeco-Roman polis, whilst in Islam a town in the sense of a self-contained, organized community never existed. On the whole, the latter assumption is correct, but in the West, too, there was little of autonomous city life in later Roman times, whilst in early Islam various organizations enjoying local autonomy, such as the *Ahddth*, "the young men", a kind of local militia, were active and recognized by the authorities. The final differentiation between East and West came about during the twelfth century, when new and specific historical forces were at work in Europe and when power was completely taken over by barbarian soldier slaves in almost all of the Muslim states.

However, during the "middle" Middle Ages, around 1050, the unity of the Mediterranean world was still a fact. This is all the more remarkable, since the European shore of the Mediterranean, including Spain, as well as the African and Asian sides, were split up into many separate political units, often at war with one another. However, despite the many frontiers and the frequent wars, people

1 Cf. Claude Cahen, "Mouvements populaires et autonomisme urbain dans l’Asie musulmane du Moyen Age", *Arabica, Revue d’Etudes Arabes*, tomes V et VI, 1958-1959. Tome VI, p. 260 quotes Geniza documents showing that around 1050, the Ahdath were a fixed institution even in a comparatively small town such as Jerusalem.
and goods, books and ideas travelled freely from one end of the Mediterranean to the other. As far as the Islamic side is concerned, we can deduce this fact from literary sources, such as the biographies of scholars, or, in particular, from some of the excellent books of travel which were written around that time. Even more impressive is the documentary evidence to be derived from the letters and deeds preserved in the Cairo Geniza. For here we have records of life as it really was, especially of the middle and lower strata of society, uncensored by literary selection and presentation.'

To be sure, the writers of the letters and deeds found in the Cairo Geniza were mostly Jews. However, at least eighty per cent of the documents preserved were written not in Hebrew, but in Arabic, the lingua franca of the time; Muslims and Christians are frequently mentioned in them, and one does not get the impression from them that the Jews at that time moved about more than the members of other communities. In any case, the enormous degree of freedom of communication enjoyed by the people mirrored in the Cairo Geniza would not have been possible had it not been favored by the legal position and the general political climate in the states concerned.

The first and most eloquent testimony of this freedom of movement is the silence about its curtailment in the thousands of preserved fragmentary or complete business and family letters. A person would refer to his travel to Palermo, Genoa, Marseilles, or any place in Spain, North Africa, Egypt, or the Syrian coast, or even to places in Byzantine Greece, such as Salonika or Thebes; or he would write a letter in Arabic from Seleucia, today Selefke, in Asia Minor to Cairo, mentioning his journey through Jaffa, Rhodes, Chios, and Constantinople, without ever alluding to any difficulties incurred because of political boundaries. Merchants would commute freely every summer between Fatimid, Shi'i, Egypt and Zirid, Sunni, Tunisia even at the time of great tension between the two countries, or would travel on the direct route between Alexandria and Seville or Almeria in Spain. To be sure, everyone had to carry a bara'a, which is not a passport, but a certificate to the effect that he had paid his taxes. Without such a bara'a, one could not travel at all, even inside Egypt. We frequently read in the Geniza papers that persons carried these certificates or forgot them at home.\(^1\) or we

\(^1\) Cf. above Ch. XIV.

\(^2\) "Please search in the pocket of my dove-colored robe", writes a merchant