CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

LETTERS AND DOCUMENTS ON THE INDIA TRADE IN MEDIEVAL TIMES

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 international economy in the Middle Ages in general and inside the Islamic world in particular. More than anything else it stimulated interterritorial 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 which 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 a great international trade without the help of letters and documents illustrating how this trade actually worked. Fortunately, it has been possible to assemble during the last ten years or so a collection of records, written mostly in the Arabic language, albeit nearly exclusively with Hebrew characters, which provide much of the desired information. These Judaeo-Arabic documents are mostly of the eleventh and twelfth centuries. They had been originally preserved in the so-called Cairo Geniza and are dispersed at present in many libraries of Europe and

the United States. A first report about the Geniza papers as related to the India trade was provided in Speculum, the Journal of the American Mediaeval Academy, in April 1954. Meanwhile, many new finds have been made and the whole material was subjected to a systematic re-examination. In the following pages, a preliminary report about the main results of this scrutiny will be provided.

In order to forestall misunderstandings, I should like to remark at the outset that the share of the Jewish merchants in the India trade seems to have been comparatively modest. Their papers are treated here for the simple reason that thus far they are the only ones which have survived.

The present writer's occupation with this valuable material came about quite fortuitously. Being interested in the interplay of Muslim and Jewish law, as it was evident in many records of the rabbinical courts found in the Geniza, I began collecting such records. One day, while browsing through an ancient stock of Geniza papers preserved in the University Library, Cambridge, England, I came upon the minutes of a court session dealing with a business trip to India, made by a merchant from Tripoli, Libya, called Joseph Lebdi. Examining other Geniza collections preserved in the same library, and while commuting between Oxford and Cambridge, I was able to piece together the whole dossier of this case, comprising the records of eleven sessions held between November 9, 1097 and August 18, 1098. Four other documents connected with this lawsuit were also found. This was a startling discovery. For up to that time, only very few and disconnected Geniza fragments dealing with the India trade had been published (including one treated by the present writer). If such precious material about as fascinating a subject as the India trade during the eleventh century had escaped the attention of the scholars up to that time, one was entitled to assume that the Geniza contained much more information about it not yet registered. Subsequent visits to the libraries concerned proved that this assumption was more than justified. Slowly, the disjointed fragments became meaningful and the personalities of the more important merchants and communal leaders took shape. In the article of 1954, referred to above, 

1 Cf. above Chapter XIV.

1 “From the Mediterranean to India: Documents on the Trade to India, South Arabia and East Africa from the Eleventh and Twelfth Centuries”, Speculum 29 (1954), pp. 181-197.