In a letter to his father in Italy, written in 1488, R. Obadiah of Bertinoro from Jerusalem described the Egyptian Jews he encountered during his journey to Jerusalem, writing:

> Among the Jews in Cairo there are moneychangers and merchants, for the country is large, and some branch of industry is open to everyone. For commercial dealing there is no better place in the world than Cairo; it is easy to grow rich; hence one meets there with innumerable foreigners of all nations and languages. You could go out by night as well as by day, for all the streets are well lit with torches. The people even sleep on the ground in front of shops.1

Through the inspection of archives scattered among the commercial centres of the Mediterranean basin, particularly in Europe, the study of Mediterranean trade in the late medieval period has received new impetus. Eliyahu Ashtor, a great scholar, researched this topic for many years and laid the foundations for the study of various aspects of the trade.2

From the early fifteenth century until the discovery of the direct route to India at that century's end, European commercial powers such as Venice, Genoa, Sicily, Florence and others dominated oriental trade. With the mid-fifteenth-century collapse of local Middle Eastern industry, these powers took advantage of the opportunity to step up their commercial activities. During the first half of the fifteenth century, due to factors operative both in the Orient and in Europe, it

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2 For an excellent publication on the general Mediterranean trade in that period, see E. Ashtor, *Levant Trade in the Later Middle Ages* (Princeton, 1983). For more items on this topic see also notes 3 and 4.
was the Venetian Republic that dominated Mediterranean trade. This republic maintained its dominance in two-way occidental-oriental trade until the late sixteenth century. During this period, Venetian and other European consuls could be found residing in Alexandria, Egypt’s major port. In addition, the island of Crete (known also as Candia) was under the Venetian Republic’s sphere of influence and served as an important center of mercantile trade with Egypt.

The major role of Egyptian Jews in medieval trade, as reflected in the Cairo Genizah documents, particularly from the Fatimid period onwards, has received much scholarly attention. It is impossible to proceed without acknowledging Solomon Dov Goitein’s unique contribution to this field, especially his monumental five-volume work, A Mediterranean Society, of which the first volume is devoted exclusively to economic matters.

In contrast, the study of Egyptian Jewry’s role in fifteenth-century trade is still in its infancy. It seems, however, that Jews engaged more actively in trade than in other branches of the Egyptian economy. This preference can be attributed primarily to the fact that, for Jews, commercial activity provided a more secure economic base. It was not subject to strict regulation by the authorities, and was potentially more profitable as well. Due to recurring economic crises in Egypt, we find

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