NEW LIGHT ON THE BEGINNINGS OF THE KĀRIM MERCHANTS

BY

S. D. GOITEIN

As is well known, a first comprehensive study of the subject was made as early as 1937 by W. J. Fischel1). It is, however, a telling testimony to the newly aroused vivid interest in the economic development of the mediaeval Near East, that no less than three extensive studies have been devoted to it of late, by Dr. Sobhy Labib, Professor Gaston Wiet and Dr. E. Ashtor respectively2).

In surveying the results of the studies made so far, Professor Cl. Cahen arrives at the conclusion that the earliest reliable evidence of the existence of the Kārim in Egypt is Maqrīzī’s statement about it relating to the reign of Saladin3).

It is the purpose of the following lines to show that we are now in a position to push further back into the history of the Kārim, as it appears already in documents dating undoubtedly from the Fatimid period. These documents — all in Hebrew characters, but mostly in Arabic language — come from the so-called Cairo Geniza, whose treasures are

3) Arabica III, 3, p. 339, identical with p. 97 of the Revue Bibliographique. Maqrīzī relates in his Sulūk I, 72-3, that the Kārimis came to Egypt in 1181, where they had to pay duties for several years.
now dispersed all over the world\textsuperscript{1}). That repository of discarded writings contained a great many letters and deeds dealing with trade and travel between the Mediterranean and the Indian ocean during the eleventh and twelfth centuries\textsuperscript{2}). It is most revealing to learn what they have to tell us about the Kārim, both explicitly and by their silence.

The first two items concern a merchant and shipowner (Nākhodā) of Aden, Mahruz b. Jacob, who is referred to in twelve documents. One of these is dated February-March 1134; however, even without that detail, his time could be fixed, as many other wellknown personalities are mentioned in the letters concerned.

Mahruz' center of activities was Aden and, as his mother lived there and as he is styled al-'Adani, he most probably also was born in that town. Sometimes he is found travelling in his own ship, which followed the course Mangalore-Aden\textsuperscript{3}), but more often he used others, e.g. one of the ships belonging to Maḍmūn, the "Representative of the (Jewish) Merchants" of Aden, who was also the Head of the Jewish community of Yemen. Mahruz' sister was married to Judah b. Joseph Cohen, the

\textsuperscript{1) Cf. S. D. Goitein, "The Cairo Geniza as a source for the History of Muslim Civilisation", Studia Islamica II, 1955.}

\textsuperscript{2) A report about these papers and their proposed edition is contained in my article "From the Mediterranean to India: Documents on the Trade to India, South Arabia and East Africa from the Eleventh and Twelfth century", Speculum, Cambridge, Mass. XXIX, 2, April 1954. However, meanwhile the number of documents collected on the subject has raised from 130 (cf. ib. p. 184) to 233, of which about 190 have direct bearing on it, while the rest contains details about the activities of India traders in Spain or North Africa etc.

I am also glad to announce that the documents belonging to the Kaufmann Collection of the Hungarian Academy, which, at the writing of that article, were believed to be lost (ib., p. 185, note), meanwhile have been found and put at my disposal by the courtesy of the Academy authorities.

\textsuperscript{3) A most characteristic aspect of mediaeval sea traffic, emanating from the Geniza papers, is the rule that ships had their fixed route connecting two, or at most three, ports. Thus a ship, coming from Aden, would not call, after having crossed the ocean, at the different ports on the west coast of India — the documents mention 16 —, but only at one or two. In the paper mentioned in the previous annotation, p. 193, note 22, a technical reason was adduced for this usage. Another factor no doubt was the endeavour to avoid the exorbitant port duties. In addition, I wonder whether in mediaeval, like in our own times, ships had not to get special permits for loading or unloading goods in a harbour.