THE RĀDḤĀNĪTE MERCHANTS AND THE LAND OF RĀDḤĀN

BY

MOSHE GIL

Tel-Aviv University

The Rādḥānītes: From east to west. It is now more than 100 years since Ibn Khurdadhbe's book was first edited, by the French orientalist Barbier de Meynard. Seventeen years before this first edition, the fragment dealing with the "Jewish merchants called Rādḥānītes" had been translated by another French orientalist, J. T. Reinaud, and thus brought to the attention of western scholarship. That fragment has since been the subject of a continuous discussion among scholars.

According to Ibn Khurdadhbe, who wrote around the middle of the ninth century, these Rādḥānīte merchants operated along several routes, stretching from the lands of Firanja and Andalus, i.e. Western Europe, to China in the Far East. The ramifications of these routes reached to the center of the ʿAbbāsid Caliphate as well as its periphery, the Arabian Peninsula, North Africa, Egypt, Palestine, Syria, the northern parts of India (Sind and Hind), and Khurāsān. They even reached Constantinople, Antioch, and the Slavonic lands, beyond Byzantium (al-Rūm), the lands of the Khazars, the region of the Caspian Sea, and Transoxiana 1). Six languages were spoken by these merchants: Arabic, Persian, Greek

1) See the fragment in Reinaud, Géographie, I, 38 ff.; ed. Barbier de Meynard, JA, VI-5 (1865), 115 ff.; ed. De Goeje, BGA VI, 153 ff. There are many English translations of this fragment: Jacobs, Jewish Contrib., 194 ff.; Adler, Jew. Trav., 2; Lopez-Raymond, Med. Tr., 31 f.; Katz, The Jews, 134; Rabinowitz, JQR NS, 35 (1944-45), 252 f.; Goitein, Jews and Arabs, 106; Serjeant, Ars Islamica, 15-16 (1968), 85; see French translations (besides Reinaud, Barbier de Meynard, and De Goeje) in Blachère's Extraits, 27 ff.; Hadj-Sadok, Description, 21 f. There is a Hebrew translation in Dinur's Isr. in the Diasp., I-1, 366 f., and a German one, in Aronius, Regesten, no. 113. On Ibn Khurdadhbe see inter alia Hadj-Sadok's article in Enc. of Isl., III, 839 f.; Ashtor, RSI, 81 (1969), 455 ff. See praise of Ibn Khurdadhbe's work by the 15th century bibliographer, Sakhāwī (Iṣlām, 155 f.), who says that his successors copied from him and followed his path.
(rūmiya), ifranjiya, andalusiya, and Slavonic. Ibn Khurdadhbe also gives an account of the goods carried by them, from west to east: Slaves—male, female and juvenile; brocade, furs, and swords. From China they carried musk, aromatic wood (‘ūd, probably aloe), camphor, and cinnamon.

Though there are differences of scholarly opinion concerning various aspects of the fragment, there is relative unanimity as regards the land of origin of these merchants, namely Western Europe. Only Barbier de Meynard, the first publisher of the Arabic original, connected the Rādhānīte merchants with what he called “the three cantons of Radān” (sic), which he locates in the eastern part of the sazvad, as described by Ibn Khurdadhbe himself elsewhere in his work 2). In fact, in his table of the districts, their revenue and taxes due, Ibn Khurdadhbe mentions only one district of Rādhān, on the eastern shore of the Tigris. Barbier de Meynard’s knowledge about three districts named Rādhān must have come from one of the sources discussed below in this article.

The first scholar to suggest western origin of these merchants was Heyd, in 1879, in the German, first version of his Histoire du commerce du Levant 3). It is true, he says, that to carry out such expeditions at that time one had to possess geographical knowledge of a kind which was then available only in the Arabic world, primarily in its very center, Baghdad. What made it possible for (western) Jewish merchants to operate in this way was the existence of a chain of Jewish communities, stretching from Spain to China. Carolingian conditions were very favorable for such travel.

A short time before Heyd wrote down these considerations, also in 1879, De Goeje published his Glossarium to the first three volumes of Arabic geographers edited by him. Relying upon the version of Ibn al-Faqih (see below) and the spelling found there, rāhdāniya, De Goeje showed that this word also has the meaning of “cloth merchants” (bazzāz) and is probably borrowed from Persian, deriving from rāb + dān, as noted by Dozy in his Supplément. Dozy was not the first to explain