

**Jessica Goldberg.** *Trade and Institutions in the Medieval Mediterranean: The Geniza Merchants and Their Business World.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012. xxi + 426 pp. \$119.99, cloth, ISBN 978-1-107-00547-1.



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**Commissioned by** Jason Kalman (Hebrew Union College - Jewish Institute of Religion)

I apologize to the author and the publisher for the lateness of this review. In *Trade and Institutions in the Medieval Mediterranean*, Jessica Goldberg bridges some of the great Genizah scholarship of the twentieth century. If S. D. Goitein connected the dots amongst the vast points of data, and if Moshe Gil dove deeply into the editing of individual data points, that is, documents, then Goldberg weaves a story about the Genizah's commercial society, based on people, experiences, and statistical data.[1] Not as narrowly economic as Avner Greif's thesis, nor as broad as Eliyahu Ash-tor's picture of the Near East, *Trade and Institutions* succeeds in painting a coherent and compelling picture of a trading community, while still maintaining technical precision.[2] The result is that one learns, and even enters, a world of foreign categories and remarkable social-economic mechanisms.

Organized in two parts, "Institutions" and "Geography," *Trade and Institutions* essentially maps out the ways in which traders pursued their business in relation to one another and to the

world in which they lived, respectively. The two sections artificially break down phenomena that in fact overlap, as when the forces of geography and technology require cabotage, which in turn shapes the economics of repositories and middlemen. But the artifice is a useful one, because it achieves its goal of illustrating the choices faced by the merchants of the world of the Genizah, sometimes called the "Genizah merchants." Goldberg poses her arguments by beginning each chapter with a vignette intended to capture an ambiguity or complexity that requires analysis if we are to fully understand those choices. For example, chapter 7, "The Geography of Information," begins with a Genizah letter describing four copies of the letter, each sent separately. The different channels for information, often independent from one another and from the goods to which they referred, revealed the multiple systems that the merchants had at their disposal to navigate risk. Goldberg herself has to walk a fine line of choices in describing this complex, multi-layered universe that is still emerging from the

Genizah. On the one hand, she relies heavily on the world of the Genizah laid out by her forebears, the great Genizah scholars of the twentieth century, and she does not hesitate to recognize her reliance. On the other hand, she feels obligated to sharpen her pencil and add highly technical nuance to terms and references in the texts that comprise her dataset. Herein lies much of her innovative contribution. She spends some time, for example, on a corrective definition of *ṣubḥa* (ch. 5), a term difficult to translate, but variously understood as informal cooperation or reciprocal partnership. In fact, Goldberg thoroughly and convincingly describes it as a kind of highly modular agency based on the assignation—often unilateral—of specific tasks to another party without remuneration. The relationship presumes a kind of reciprocity, but it nevertheless forces a reconsideration of Avner Greif’s thesis of a coalition (p. 148), an informal, market-based honesty. Goldberg points out that *ṣubḥa* did in fact rely on formal legal infrastructure to function, though its flexibility allowed quick reactions to changing conditions.

Fundamentally, Goldberg cleaves to rigorous methods of textual and even statistical analysis. When she counts off the number of letters that contain personal information vs. those that do not, or graphs (pp. 78-81) the topics and orientation contained in what she aptly calls the “commercial corpus,” she marshals powerful tools of argumentation. Also methodologically, she embraces the more dynamic and challenging questions that govern the geographical scope of her query, refreshingly leading her to call into question the presupposition of Jews’ domination of long-distance trade or their displacement at the hands of the Italians of the European commercial revolution. *Trade and Institutions* attempts to describe a coherent landscape—coherent in markets, geography, and merchants. But a landscape is, by definition, wide and varied. To her tremendous credit, Goldberg does the landscape justice, tackling details and establishing new connections.

The very ambition, however, lends itself to a set of conclusions which, though useful, does not tell a particular story. It is, as Goldberg herself says in the conclusion “a wide window” (p. 337), with many stories going on. For example, the vertical aspect of trade, from agricultural production to long-distance sale, promoted metropolitan urbanism in the Muslim world, but it also promoted second-tier cities. Still, this variety and complexity is the stuff of life and, from an historical point of view, this is the outstanding value of the Genizah as a window into a far-distant world.

#### Notes

[1]. Shelomo Dov Goitein, *A Mediterranean Society*, 6 vols. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1967-93); Moshe Gil, *A History of Palestine: 634-1099*, trans. E. Broido (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992).

[2]. Avner Greif, “Reputation and Coalitions in Medieval Trade: Evidence on the Maghribi Traders,” *Journal of Economic History* 49, no. 4 (1989): 857-82; Eliyahu Ashtor, *A Social and Economic History of the Near East in the Middle Ages* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976), though Ashtor also focused on the economy; see *The Jews and the Mediterranean Economy: 10th-15th Centuries* (London: Variorum Reprints, 1983).

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