



## The Unity of the Mediterranean World in the "Middle" Middle Ages

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# THE UNITY OF THE MEDITERRANEAN WORLD IN THE "MIDDLE" MIDDLE AGES \*

## I

An Arabist reading Jérôme Carcopino's classic *Daily Life in Rome* is overwhelmed by the many striking parallels, often pointed out by the author himself, between the life described in that book and that familiar from Mediterranean Muslim towns, which have preserved their mediaeval character. Carcopino gives us a picture of imperial Rome, the capital of the pagan world, about 900 years before Islamic civilization reached its apogee, and still there is much in common between the two.

This continuity of the Mediterranean heritage has been brought into full relief by the recent studies of Professor Claude Cahen on the development of the Islamic and Western towns. Until then, it was generally believed that the European town was somehow a continuation of the Graeco-Roman polis, whilst in Islam a town in the sense of a self-contained, organized community never existed. On the whole, the latter assumption is correct, but in the West, too, there was little of autonomous city life in later Roman times, whilst in early Islam various organizations enjoying local autonomy, such as the *Aḥdāth*, "the young men," a kind of local militia, were active and recognized by the authorities<sup>(1)</sup>. The final differentiation

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\* Papers read at the meetings of the American Oriental Society at Ann Arbor, April 1959, and New Haven, April 1960.

(1) Cf. Claude Cahen, « Mouvements populaires et autonomisme urbain dans l'Asie musulmane du Moyen Age », *Arabica, Revue d'Études Arabes*, tomes V et VI, 1958-1959. Tome VI, p. 260 quotes Geniza documents showing that around 1050, the *Aḥdāth* were a fixed institution even in a little town such as Jerusalem.

between East and West came about during the twelfth century, when new and specific historical forces were at work in Europe and when power was completely taken over by barbarian soldier slaves in almost all of the Muslim states.

However, during the "middle" Middle Ages, say around 1050, the date just mentioned, the unity of the Mediterranean world was still a fact. This is all the more remarkable, since the European shore of the Mediterranean, including Spain, as well as the African and Asian sides, were split up into many separate political units, often at war with one another. However, despite the many frontiers and the frequent wars, people and goods, books and ideas travelled freely from one end of the Mediterranean to the other. As far as the Islamic side is concerned, we can deduce this fact from literary sources, such as the biographies of scholars, or, in particular, from some of the excellent books of travel which were written around that time. Even more impressive is the documentary evidence to be derived from the letters and deeds preserved in the so-called Cairo Geniza. For here we have records of life as it really was, especially of the middle and lower strata of society, uncensored by literary selection and presentation <sup>(1)</sup>.

To be sure, the writers of the letters and deeds found in the Cairo Geniza were mostly Jews. However, at least eighty per cent of the documents preserved were written not in Hebrew, but in Arabic, the lingua franca of the time; Muslims and Christians are frequently mentioned in them, and one does not get the impression from them that the Jews at that time moved about more than the members of other communities. In any case, the enormous degree of freedom of communication, enjoyed by the people mirrored in the Cairo Geniza, would not have been possible had it not been favored by the legal position and the general political climate in the states concerned.

The first and most eloquent testimony of this freedom of

(1) Cf. the present writer's "The Cairo Geniza as a Source for the History of Muslim Civilisation", *Studia Islamica*, 1955, 75-91, where further bibliographical details are given. An article called "The Documents of the Cairo Geniza as a Source for Mediterranean Social History" is scheduled to appear in the *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, vol. 79.

movement is the silence about its absence in the thousands of fragmentary or complete business and family letters preserved. A person would refer to his travel to Palermo, Genova, Marseille, or any place in Spain, North Africa, Egypt, or the Syrian coast, or even to places in Byzantine Greece, such as Salonika or Thebes; or he would write a letter in Arabic from Seleucia, today Selefke, in Asia Minor to Cairo, mentioning his journey through Jaffa, Rhodes, Chios, and Constantinople, without ever alluding to any difficulties incurred because of political boundaries. Merchants would commute freely every summer between Fatimid, Shi'ite, Egypt and Zirid, orthodox, Tunisia even at the time of great tension between the two countries, or would travel on the direct route between Alexandria and Seville or Almeria in Spain. To be sure, everyone had to carry a *barā'a*, which is not a passport, but a certificate to the effect that he had paid his taxes. Without such a *barā'a*, one could not travel at all, even inside Egypt. We frequently read in the Geniza papers that persons carried these certificates or forgot them at home <sup>(1)</sup>, or we read about persons taken off a Nile barge, while travelling from one village to another without carrying a *wuṣūl al-jāliya*, or receipt for the poll tax paid. When the Spanish Hebrew poet, Judah ha-Levi, on his pilgrimage to the Holy Land made a rather prolonged stop at Cairo, his friend and agent in Alexandria had to make arrangements with the authorities for his poll tax certificate. This we know from a highly interesting letter addressed to him from Alexandria, where, at that time, his poems were collected and published.

However, these measures of precaution taken by the fiscal authorities cannot be called an infringement on the freedom of movement. Only in later times, under Saladin's rule, e.g. in a letter sent from Alexandria to Aden, a man expresses his apprehension that the *nāzir*, or superintendent, of the port would not let him travel because he regarded him as suspicious

(1) "Please search in the pocket of my dove-colored robe", writes a merchant after his arrival in Cairo from Alexandria, "you will find my *barā'a* there; please send it immediately, for I have already deposited bail bond for it".

for the mere reason that he had arrived on a Frankish boat. However, as is well-known, the famous Spanish Muslim geographer, Ibn Jubair, travelled as late as 1183 from Acre to Sicily, and from there to Spain on Christian ships; and in the Geniza it is absolutely commonplace for Jews from Muslim countries to travel on boats belonging to citizens of non-Muslim states, such as Normans, Byzantines, Genoese, or Pisans. A man could write from Spain to his wife in Cairo: "I intend to come on the Gaetani, i. e. the ship belonging to the merchant from Gaeta" (in Italy), just as we would say today: "This summer, I shall be travelling on a Dutch boat."

In practice, freedom of movement was very much disturbed by piracy and warfare, and there are many references to both in the Geniza papers. The more astonishing are the casual remarks of these people about travel to distant countries and long journeys. Just a few examples: First, a hasty note, sent by a merchant from Alexandria to Cairo; he wrote it on Friday afternoon, i.e. on the Eve of Sabbath, remarking, "I have already taken my bath" — meaning, of course, that no business was normally done at such a time. What do we read in this note? "I have just arrived from Almeria, Spain. Your business friend in Fez, Morocco, sent me a bar of gold — certainly from the Sudan — to buy with it Spanish silk for you. I, however, thought this was not a good idea, and am forwarding you the gold, as it is. On the other hand, a friend of your business friend there delivered such and such a quantity of ambergris <sup>(1)</sup> to me, which I forward herewith, and asks you to send back five flasks of musk for what you get for it; please sell the ambergris on the arrival of this letter and buy the musk, for I have to send it off immediately."

Or we read in a letter of recommendation by Solomon b. Judah, the Gaon, or Head of the Jewish Academy in Jerusalem until his death in 1051: "The bearer of this letter is a Jew from Khorasan, highly recommended to me by my friends in Seville; he is now proceeding to Cairo; please look after him." We

(1) Ambergris is a perfume made from a waxy substance, secreted by whales, and therefore comes here from the West.

do not know how this Jew from Northeastern Iran came to Spain. It is likely that he came back to Jerusalem on the Northern route, via Sicily and Tyre or Acre. The Gaon, who was the spiritual head of Western Jewry, had, owing to the institution of the pilgrimage to Jerusalem, close, personal connections with peoples from all over the Mediterranean world. Still, the short, business-like way, in which the widely travelled Khorasani is introduced here shows how small the world had already become at that time.

Another impressive illustration of the unity of the Mediterranean world in the "middle" Middle Ages is the frequency of intermarriage between persons from different countries. We have a great deal of material about this question in the Geniza. Not only did the families leading in business, scholarship, and communal life (say, in Spain, Tunisia, and Egypt) intermarry, but the same was true for the lower ranks of society. Even slaves, doing business for their masters in different countries, contracted such unions. There seems to have been some system in the matter. In a document from Tyre on the Lebanese coast, a girl gives power-of-attorney to a gentleman to select a husband for her in Cairo and to arrange a marriage contract with him in her name. Nor was this confined to Muslim countries. We have a letter, written in beautiful Hebrew, by a lady from Egypt whose brothers still lived there. She had been married in Europe and her daughter already bore a Greek name, spelled Zoi.

However, the most significant aspect of the age by far was the fact that political boundaries did not interfere with the unity and autonomy of religious or ethnic groups. Regular contributions were made by the Jewish communities all over the Fatimid empire for the benefit of the two great Jewish academies in Abbasid Bagdad; likewise, yearly collections were held in the communities of the Sunni West for the academy in Jerusalem which was under the rule of a Shi'ite dynasty; similarly, donations were sent to Bagdad and Jerusalem from Christian countries, e.g. from Lucca in Northern Italy, from Narbonne or Montpellier in France and even Mayence in Germany. All these communities submitted their questions

to those seats of learning, and over a thousand replies <sup>(1)</sup> have been preserved. Compared with the many barriers to free communication disgracing our century, these facts are really impressive.

There was even more to it. Unbelievable as it may appear, documentary evidence shows that the official head of the Jewish community in Fatimid Egypt, who was confirmed in his office by the Fatimid caliph, was installed by the Jewish exilarch who had his seat in Bagdad. Likewise, Jewish judges and other dignitaries, whether in Egypt, or somewhere in Tunisia or Morocco, were approved by the heads of the academies in Jerusalem or Bagdad. Similar relationships must have existed between the other Christian communities and that of Zirid Tunisia, which was of considerable size.

How is all this to be explained? Of course, the machinery of the state was still relatively loose in those days, i. e. the technique of making life unbearable was not yet as perfected as it is in our own time. In addition to this, however, there were three positive factors, all interconnected, one legal, one socio-economic, and one historical, which worked in favour of the freedom of movement and the unity of the Mediterranean world: (a) the conception that law was personal and not territorial, i.e. an individual was judged according to the law of his community, or even his sect, rather than that of the territory in which he happened to be; (b) the consequences of the bourgeois revolution of the eighth and ninth centuries, which still dominated the "middle" Middle Ages. A mercantile civilization was alive around the Mediterranean with merchants as its most conspicuous bearers; and business makes for free movement <sup>(2)</sup>; (c) finally — and here we come back to the beginning of this paper — all these countries had a great and long-standing tradition in common. The fact that most of them had once been united within the confines of the Roman empire is perhaps of secondary importance. It is the cultural

(1) These Jewish *Responsa* correspond to the *Fatwas* of the Muslim scholars.

(2) Cf. S. D. GOITEIN, "The Rise of Near Eastern Bourgeoisie in Early Islamic Times", *Journal of World History*, III, 1957.

tradition, which begins with Sumer and Akkad, and even with Iran — for these countries belong to the Mediterranean world — which counts. The unity of the Mediterranean world was disrupted only when the Islamic countries were taken over by barbarians from outside, mostly from Central Asia and the Caucasus, who had no share in that tradition.

## II

The unity of the Mediterranean world during the “middle” Middle Ages was achieved through the great extent of seafaring carried on in that “tideless midland sea”. The records of the Cairo Geniza contain abundant material about the subject. So far, sixteen types of ships and details for over one hundred and ten individual boats, as well as thirty-six kinds of containers for the transport of goods and about one hundred and fifty classes of commodities carried by ships have been noted. The ownership and management of ships, the seasons of sailing, numbers of passengers, routes taken, duration of passages, reports about the movements of ships, jettisoning, shipwrecking, piracy and ransoming, and many other related subjects are illustrated by the Geniza records. To be sure, the numbers given above refer solely to the Mediterranean basin. The equally rich Geniza material about the Indian ocean will be treated separately.

In the following pages, a number of special problems connected with Mediterranean sea and river traffic are presented in the hope that some of the readers of this journal might be able to contribute to their solution.

1. Whenever feasible, people travelled by water and not on land. To quote an extreme case: Around 1140, an Italian Jew, on business in Tripoli, Libya, wanted to travel to Gabes in nearby Tunisia. He was advised by his friends to board a large ship, which was sailing to Seville, Spain and which, with a good wind, would make the passage in eight days, without touching land. Then he was to transfer to another large boat to al-Mahdiyya, the main seaport of Tunisia, and to try to



reach his destination from there. This is, of course, quite an exceptional route, but conditions at that time cannot have been too insecure, for in the end the man actually travelled by land. In general, I estimate the ratio between references to overland travel and references to seafaring in the Geniza, wherever such an alternative existed, as being 1:50.

This statement has to be qualified by two considerations:

a) A disproportionally large number of Geniza papers come from the second half of the eleventh century, when overland communications might have been disrupted, owing to the invasion of North Africa by the bedouin hordes of the Banu Hilal and Sulaim. In fact, Geniza references to caravan traffic are more frequent in the first half of that century than in any subsequent period. Still, even at that time, I should estimate the ratio between seafaring and travel on land as 20:1.

b) Most of the Geniza letters were written by Jews, and Jews did not travel on Saturdays and holidays. A Jew travelling in a caravan, which was en route for more than six days, either stayed behind or hurried ahead of the caravan for celebrating his Sabbath—both cases are mentioned in our records. This, of course, required a special escort and was both expensive and dangerous. If the traveller was rich and particularly influential, he could induce the whole caravan to make a stop on the Sabbath, which is also attested in a Geniza paper. It may be mentioned in passing that these conditions remained unchanged down to the nineteenth century. The renowned Orientalist, Professor A. S. Yahuda (who died in New Haven, Connecticut, only a few years ago) recounts in his collected essays that his grandfather, when emigrating from Bagdad to Jerusalem in 1852, stipulated that the caravan with which he was travelling, should rest each Saturday, which cost him a huge sum of money. It was due to these circumstances that consignments were confided by Jews to Muslim business friends or pilgrims bound to Mecca, or that we find remarks like the following in letters: "If there be a caravan and if trustworthy Muslims travel in it, kindly send the goods with them." However, such remarks are not very common.

As a rule, people travelled by sea, wherever such an alternative existed, even for such a short distance, as Acre-Ramle (via Jaffa), Palestine, or Tyre—Tripoli, Lebanon.

Although conditions varied widely, sometimes even during one and the same year, it seems—although this is by no means sure—that discomfort, expenses, and lack of security were greater in travel by land than on sea. Still, there might have been other reasons for this discrepancy between the two methods of transport, and the present writer will be grateful for elucidations.

2. Caravan traffic and seafaring were closely coordinated. In winter, when the sea was closed, up to three caravans passed from Sijilmāsa, the great desert port of Morocco—which meanwhile has disappeared entirely—through Qairawān, Tripoli and Barqa to Egypt. In summer, too, caravan traffic had to fill a gap in seafaring. The ships normally sailed in convoys leaving in the spring and setting sail for the return journey at the Feast of the Cross, the *'Id aṣ-Ṣalīb*, which is celebrated on September 26 or 27. Another convoy departed in the Coptic month of Baoune, which begins on June 7. In between, at the end of May, the summer caravans set out, which needed about three months for the distance between Egypt and Tunisia, since business was done at the intermediary stations. In one letter, referring to Qairawān, it is stated that the fair connected with the arrival of the caravan lasted twenty days. These large distance caravans were called *mausim*, the same word, which, in the Indian Ocean, designated the seasonal winds, and which, in the form *monsoon*, has entered the English language in the latter meaning. The present writer will be grateful for any information about these caravan *mausims* and their relationship to seafaring provided from literary sources.

3. He has a similar request for another most important complement to seafaring: the overland mail. Passengers and goods went by sea, mail was largely sent by land. In literary sources we hear much about the *barīd*, the mail service maintained by the Muslim governments, just as was the case in mediaeval China and in the Byzantine empire. However, this

service was reserved for the exclusive use of the government and its officials and functioned largely as a means of supervision of the local administration. In the Geniza papers, however, we hear much about another, commercially run, private postal service, which was of utmost importance for the population at large. It was operated by couriers, called *faij* ("runner")—a Persian word—all over North Africa, and *kutubī* ("bearer of letters") in Western Asia. In one characteristic aspect, this private service followed the practice of the government post. Whilst this last institution maintained numerous relay stations, where the riding animals were changed, one and the same messenger carried the dispatches confided to him from the starting point to the final destination. The same was done by the private couriers. One and the same man would transmit the mail from Qairawān all the way to Cairo, or even from Almeria, Spain, through the whole of North Africa, to Alexandria. This service was comparatively inexpensive. A letter sent from Almeria to Alexandria cost only one and a half silver dirhams, four letters having been dispatched to the same address, while an urgent, special-delivery letter from Jerusalem to Ramle cost half a dirham. Almost invariably, in letters sent to another country by overland mail, reference is made to goods and business friends going at the same time by boat.

4. In the Middle Ages, owing to the comparatively small size of vessels, no strict distinction was made between seagoing craft and rivercraft. It is therefore not surprising that we occasionally find in the Geniza boats coming from the sea and continuing their way on inland waters or vice versa. Thus we read, e.g., about the ships of a rich Muslim judge from Tyre, Lebanon, which went, via Damietta and the eastern arm of the Nile, to Old Cairo and from there, via the western arm of the Nile and Alexandria, to Tunisia. However, the overwhelming testimony of the Geniza records proves that, as a rule, passengers and consignments left the seagoing vessels in the Mediterranean ports and continued their way inland by other means of transport, but mainly on the Nile. The reason for this might have been that owing to the continual changes which took place in

the configuration of the bottom of the Nile, navigation on it was dangerous—we read indeed about many shipwrecks on the Nile—and therefore special skill was required, which the ordinary Mediterranean sailor did not possess. A number of special types of craft were used on the Nile: the '*ushāri*, the river boat; the *jarm*, the barge; the *sumairiyya*, a type imported from Iraq (A. Mez, *Die Renaissance des Islams*, Heidelberg 1922, p. 457, calls it « Sumererschiff »); and a longish, swift boat, called *khīṭī*, for which, under the form *khīṭiyya*, I have found several references for Iraq in earlier Islamic times, but none for Egypt and for the time under discussion, the eleventh and twelfth centuries.

5. As for navigation on the high sea, ships usually sailed in convoys, which in times of danger were accompanied by warships. We read indeed that often the merchantmen were ready for sailing and waited only for the men-of-war to join them. Normally, a larger ship was accompanied by a smaller vessel, belonging to the same proprietor or to one of his relatives or friends. Obviously, under certain conditions of a rough sea, a smaller craft had more chances of survival than a larger one, especially when the latter had lost its sails and rudder, which is reported to have happened. In one case, we read in a Hebrew letter that the « maidservant » boat—as it was called—picked up the survivors from the main ship. So far no reference has been found in the Geniza records to lifeboats carried on board, and I am inclined to believe that they were not in use at that time.

6. Of the special types of seagoing craft mentioned in the Geniza records, the most common was a large sailing ship called *qunbār*, which word, so far, I have not found either in an Arabic dictionary or in Muslim literature. However, the Byzantine Emperor, Leon the Wise (886-912), says in his book on the art of war that the Greek equivalent of *qunbār*, *kombarion*, was borrowed from the Saracens, and his son, the Emperor Constantine VII, describes it as a particularly large ship. The Venetians, too, used this type of vessel in the tenth century, calling it *gombaria*. However, while the Greeks and Italians

refer to the *qunbār* as a man-of-war, the Geniza—to be sure, a century later—knows it only as a ship used for the transport of heavy cargo and passengers.

7. In addition to sailing ships, light galleys, *ghurāb*, propelled solely, or mainly, by oars, were used for travel and transport. The galley had both tactical and nautical advantages over the sailing ship: as it could be turned with ease, it had better prospects of escape from attacks by the ubiquitous pirates, and it was, of course, less exposed to the caprice of the wind. Still, the galley as merchantman is comparatively rare in our records. Seafaring, even along the coasts, appears to have been entirely dependent on the winds. To give just one example: A letter from Alexandria complains that during thirty-three days, with the exception of one large Spanish boat, no ship had arrived, for the winds were neither east nor west winds. In addition, only twenty-three days were left until the *'Id al-Ṣalīb*, the term for the return journey, so that practically no time was left for business. I wonder whether the economic ascendancy of the Italians over the Arabs was not due partly to the fact that the former built large-sized, oar-propelled galleys for mercantile shipping.

8. Another common type of Mediterranean bottom was the *khinzīra* (not *khinzīr*, which means pig and was used in Syria also as the name of a fish). The word designated in the language of the period a hub or nave of a wheel, which is a rather strange name for a type of vessel. With this, however, the nickname of a ship, *duwwāma* («whipping-top»), might perhaps be compared. The *khinzīra* is attested for Sicily, Tunisia, Tripoli, and Egypt, and a Tunisian *khinzīra* is once mentioned as sailing on the Nile.

The word *shakhtūr* or *shakhtūra* is used until the present day for a coastal craft and is also rather common in the Geniza records. Once, around 1130, we read that such a skiff made the journey from Alexandria to Almeria, Spain, in sixty-five days, but still went faster than two Spanish sailing boats, which were about to set sail when it left the harbor of Alexandria. *Shakhtūrs* are mentioned in particular on the route between Tunisia, Tripoli, and Egypt.

*Hajm*, normally designating a large drinking bowl, was the name of a type of ship en route between Sicily and Egypt—a name appropriate for a ship with a round hull. Another type, used on the same route, was called *qarrāba*, meaning box, chest. Perhaps it was similar to the East Roman *dromon*, which « was a blunt ship with angular, rather than smoothly flowing lines » (cf. Lionel Casson, *The Ancient Mariners*, New York 1959, p. 243, and the photograph of the model made by R. H. Dolley of the British Museum, *ib.*, opposite p. 219).

For one type of ships, spelled *sh'-k-h*, the present writer is unable to provide even the correct pronunciation. It could be *shāka* or *shākha* (and, of course, also *shākka*, etc.), for the Hebrew letter *k* stands for both Arabic *k* and *kh*.

As Spanish Hebrew poets of that period, when describing sea voyages, refer to both sails and oars—although their ships were dependent mainly on the winds, it might be assumed that some of the unidentified types of boats appearing in our records were, like the Italian *tarida*, a cross between sailing ship and galley.

9. On various occasions, the Geniza records speak of warships and naval war. Here, too, I would like to single out a detail, for which I should appreciate a parallel from literary sources, namely, the tactical combination of one heavy warship, called *uṣṭūl*, which operated together with light galleys, called *qaḷā'ī*, literally « pieces ». The words *uṣṭūl*, which is, of course, the Greek *stolos* (« fleet »), but designates in the Arabic of that period one heavy warship, as well as *qaḷā'ī* in the sense just described, are known from other sources. However, I have not read about their maneuvering together, outside of the Geniza, which mentions this more than once. The term *qaḷā'ī*, or rather *aqḷā'*, was used also for boats employed on the arduous trip from Cairo upstream to Qūṣ in Upper Egypt, from where they returned after a stay of only two days. Likewise, the word *ghurāb*, which we have met already as designating the galley used as a merchantman, was applied also to men-of-war. On the other hand, *shīnī*, which, according to Ibn Mammāti, *Qawānīn al-Dawānīn*, p. 240, is a synonym of *ghurāb*,

is reserved in the Geniza exclusively for warships, and *aṣḥāb al-shawānī* is a general term for pirates.

10. Finally, the greatest puzzle of Mediterranean shipping, as reflected in the Geniza papers, is its organization. While most of the international trade was based on a widely ramified system of partnerships, destined to minimize the risk of oversea undertakings, a ship was normally owned by one single proprietor. There is nothing in the Geniza comparable to the provisions for joint ownership in boats so prominent in mediaeval European sea-contracts, nor to the *loca* or shares in a boat, which dominated Genoese shipping at the end of the twelfth and the beginning of the thirteenth centuries. The situation was rather similar to that prevailing in Genoa at the end of the thirteenth century, when the accumulation of great wealth and power in the hand of the leading families made it possible to dispense with the system of shares. Still, that contrast between the methods generally in use in overseas trade and that regarding the ownership of ships calls for comment.

There is an additional problem in connection with the proprietorship of seagoing vessels—the almost complete absence of local Christians. No reference is made here, of course, to the ships of European Christians, those of Marseilles, Genoa, Pisa, Gaeta, and Norman Sicily, which appear in the Geniza papers of the twelfth century. Of local Christians who bear Arabic names, so far, only two have been found who are explicitly mentioned as ship-owners, and one or two other names of ship-owners, such as al-Iskandar, might have been borne by Christians. It seems that 400 years of naval warfare between Islam and Byzantium had an adverse influence on local Christian shipping.

The present writer is preparing a book on *Mediterranean Society in Mediaeval Times, Based on Records from the Cairo Geniza*, which will contain a chapter on travel and transport. Information elucidating any of the points raised in this paper or the subject in general will be highly welcome.

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