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Chapter II

In Islamic Lands

Jews and Muslims in the Eastern Islamic World Marina Rustow

The Islamic world housed the majority of the world's Jews for most of the medieval period, and the Jewish communities of the Islamic world were responsible for many of the institutions, texts, and practices that would define Judaism well into the modern era. Islamic rule remade the very conditions—intellectual, demographic, economic—in which Jewish communities lived, and created a civilization that enabled them to thrive. But just as much of medieval Jewish history is about Jews under Islamic rule, so, too, is much of the history of the early Islamic world about non-Muslims.

In 632 C.E., when armies under the banner of Islam began conquering territories outside the Arabian Peninsula, the first caliphs found themselves ruling over a population the overwhelming majority of which were Jews, Christians, Zoroastrians, and Buddhists. Although it is common to refer to these groups as non-Muslim “minorities,” in fact, Muslims were a numerical minority in their own empire for the early centuries of their rule. They would become an absolute majority only in the ninth or tenth century, depending on the region.¹ The early stages of the Islamic conquests brought the Jewish populations of the Near East under a single empire that maintained its political unity for three centuries – and its cultural unity for much longer.

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The expansion of Islam in the ninth century.

Jews and Muslims in the early Islamic Empire

The age of the unified caliphate saw the rule of three dynasties: the Rashidun, or “rightly guided,” caliphs of Medina (632–661), so called because they had known Muhammad personally, belonged to the tribe of Quraysh, and were his relatives by blood or marriage; the Umayyads (661–750), who built their capital at Damascus, an ancient city with a solidly Roman core; and the Abbasids (750–1258), who founded the new capital of Baghdad on the Tigris River in 762, north of the ruined Sasanian capital of Ctesiphon. It was during this period of unity that the Islamic Empire reached its greatest territorial extent.

Under the Rashidun caliphs, Muslim armies conquered the Levant, Egypt, and coastal North Africa into Libya, dealing a severe blow to the Byzantine Empire and putting an end to the Sasanian shahs of Iraq and Iran. In the east, they pressed as far as Khorasan (modern Afghanistan and Turkmenistan), taking Balkh, an ancient center of Buddhism and Zoroastrianism, and Merv, a great emporium on the trade route to China. The Umayyads pushed the boundaries of their empire as far as the Indus River in the east and the Atlantic coasts of Africa and Europe in the west. The Abbasids extended their borders into Sicily, Crete, the Horn of Africa, and deeper

into Central Asia. Each successive stage of the conquests brought the conquerors into contact with new subject peoples, and each move of the central government brought the caliphal bureaucracy into contact with the administrative and legal traditions of the previous rulers, especially those of the Byzantine and Sasanian Empires.

Conversion to the new religion was a slow, gradual, and initially restricted process. At first, the conquering Muslim armies lived in relative isolation from most of the conquered population, in garrison cities (sing. *miṣr*, pl. *amṣār*) such as Kufa, Basra, and Mosul in Iraq, Fustat in Egypt, and Qayrawan in Ifriqiya (central North Africa; today's Tunisia).² But there were also non-Muslims in the *amṣār*; conversion therefore began as it had several centuries earlier when inhabitants of the Roman Empire abandoned pagan worship for Christianity: in dense population centers. But as in any preindustrial society, the vast majority of people were peasants and nomads spread out across the countryside, or else nomadic pastoralists.

The Islamic conquests did not, then, have the character of an explosive or sudden transformation. There were palpable continuities between the former Byzantine and Sasanian Empires and the new Islamic one. In Egypt, the region for which the most evidence has survived, the Muslim rulers retained Christian experts to administer their bureaucracies; many early Islamic administrative documents from Egypt are written in both Greek and Arabic.³ The vast majority of the populace—peasants who struggled to pay the tax collector—would have felt little change as they rendered old but renamed taxes to new masters.

For some groups, to be sure, there were radical, even traumatic changes. Zoroastrians no longer benefited from the state sponsorship their religion had enjoyed under the Sasanian shahs. Chalcedonian Christians (those in communion with the Byzantine Church) who had lived under Byzantine rule now found themselves stranded in alien territory. But for other Christian groups—the Miaphysites of Egypt (Copts) and Western Asia (Jacobites and Armenians)—and for Jews, after the initial cataclysm of conquest, Islamic rule presented a relief from theologically based oppression.⁴ The conquests may have been even less traumatic for Jews than for others. Jews had lived as a tolerated minority under Christian rule since the fourth century; they continued to live as a tolerated minority under Islam. Under the Byzantines, Jewish religious practice had been legal but restricted; similar restrictions continued under Islamic law, while others were lifted. And though Sasanian Jews had found a fairly stable *modus vivendi* under the shahs, under the Abbasids they took an active part in the creation of a great imperial culture.

For these reasons and others, Islamic rule brought a new latitude to Jewish communal life. Eventually, it would also bring about a complete revolution in Jewish culture—both the high culture of the educated elite and the everyday life of the

► See article
by Mark R.
Cohen, p. 68.

“Islamic rule not only transformed Judaism but enabled its consolidation and diffusion.”

average Jewish inhabitants of cities, towns, and the countryside. By the tenth century, the rabbinic forms of Judaism that had begun to develop in Mesopotamia and Palestine in late antiquity had spread far beyond those regions and taken root in a huge swath of land, from Iberia to Khorasan. In that sense, Islamic rule not only transformed Judaism but enabled its consolidation and diffusion. The main transformations can be divided into five rubrics: politics, demography, economics, language, and technology.

Politics in a united empire

The three major Jewish communities of antiquity (in Mesopotamia, Palestine, and Egypt) had been divided between Sasanian and Byzantine rule. Now, the effects of living in a politically unified realm—one that also happened to represent, increasingly, the pinnacle of world civilization—granted them new possibilities and opportunities.

Political unity entailed, first and foremost, freedom of movement. There were fewer boundaries to cross and fewer contested zones to hinder migration and trade. During the early Islamic centuries, many Jews moved from the three historical centers to towns across the Islamic world. Because non-Muslims' legal status was now consistent across the empire, having paid one's taxes in one area entitled one to travel to another.⁵ The consolidation of large areas under Islamic rule also created new means of geographic mobility. Fresh trade routes opened; the Umayyad and Abbasid caliphs built roads and other transport infrastructure in the interests of taxation, information gathering, and communication with provincial officials.⁶ Private postal carriers came to use that infrastructure as well, facilitating communication in writing and travel across distances previously unimaginable.

Islamic rule thus created both the occasion and the means for Jews to found new communities, strengthen old ones, and develop new networks of exchange and mobility. The net effect on Judaism as a system of beliefs and practices was its relative standardization across a vaster territory than ever before. To be sure, in any preindustrial society, cultural integration tends to be limited, and, in any case, greater among the urban, literate elites than the rural masses. But Jews under Islamic rule became a disproportionately urban population. Despite the vast distances that divided them from one another, they developed a coherent cultural koine and a pattern of geographic mobility that is truly remarkable when compared with other premodern societies.

One measure of that cultural integration was the rise of the *geonim* of Iraq as the spiritual leaders of the Jewish world. The *geonim* (sing., *gaon*) were the heads of the two rabbinic academies (yeshivot) in the Mesopotamian towns of Sura (on a main subsidiary of the Euphrates called the Nahr Sura) and Pumbedita (far-

Responsa

The dispersion of the Jews throughout the world brought decision-makers (specialists in the law) to provide written answers to legal questions before them. These written analyses, equivalent to Islamic fatwas, were called *teshuvot* (*responsa* or “answers”) or *She’elot u-teshuvot* (“questions and answers”), abbreviated *Shut*. The Latin term *responsa* is often used in the literature of European languages. *Teshuvot* are valuable for the researcher, since they reflect the socio-historical details of Jewish life in history.

ther north on the Euphrates, about five kilometers upstream from al-Falluja near the Nahr ‘Isa). Although by the time the yeshivot begin to be mentioned in gaonic literature they are already assumed to be ancient, they owed their institutional development to the kinds of changes wrought by Islamic rule. The yeshivot came to serve as high courts, centers of

learning, and bodies of governance over the Jewish communities of Iraq, Iran, and beyond; in turn, they depended on those communities to supply them with disciples and monetary contributions. Only with Islamic rule were the *geonim* able to develop significant networks of followers, and they could not survive without donations and students from abroad. Thousands of surviving letters, legal *responsa*, and copies of sections of the Babylonian Talmud sent throughout the Mediterranean basin attest to the influence the yeshivot developed outside their immediate geographic orbit.⁷

But that influence also had limits. The yeshivot had little say over the quotidian affairs of far-off Jewish communities: local rabbinic leaders decided pressing legal and ritual cases without waiting weeks or months for ships or caravans to bring them directives from Iraq. Nonetheless, those leaders—and many of their followers—offered the Iraqi yeshivot obeisance and fealty by sending them formal queries (often about the meaning of passages in the Talmud) together with donations. In exchange, the yeshivot composed *responsa* (answers to queries) and granted local scholars official titles and the authority to lead their communities independently. *Responsa* came to constitute the primary literary output of the yeshivot and their most important means of contact with their followers. The circulation of *responsa* reflects the organization of Jews into networks of towns and cities more closely linked with each other than with the surrounding countryside.

Demographic changes: Urbanization

One of the most important long-term effects of the Islamic conquests was migration to cities. The cities of the Islamic Empire became centers of territorial bureaucracies, and interurban links themselves tended to encourage geographic mobility and the tighter integration of the elites. Urbanization was a change palpable on every level of society, affecting those in the countryside as well. If the Jews of the Middle

Ages were a disproportionately urban population, the roots of that urbanization are to be sought during this period. Not all Jews moved to the major cities following the Islamic conquests, but most lived in dense settlements of some sort, be they cities or towns. Muslims, too, were disproportionately urban at the beginning of the conquest period, though soon new landholders who were connected with the ruling regime began to proliferate throughout the countryside.

In the early Abbasid period, the Jews of Iraq had tended to work in commerce, crafts, and other town-based occupations. The Iraqi belletrist al-Jahiz (d. 869) described Jews as “dyers, tanners, barbers, butchers, and tinkers,” and while the

“*But by the tenth century, the Jews also had their share of courtiers and bureaucrats in Baghdad and elsewhere.*”

generalization was typical of his literary style and cannot be taken as a literal description of all Jews, it is significant that he emphasized that Jews practiced town-based professions rather than agriculture. Al-Jahiz’s point was a different one: that Jews worked in despised professions, while Christians boasted among their ranks courtiers, state officers, physicians, and money changers. But by the tenth century, the Jews also had their share of courtiers

and bureaucrats in Baghdad and elsewhere. Before the end of the ninth century, there are also traces of Iraqi Jews in long-distance commerce.⁸

As to why Jews, Christians, and Zoroastrians alike came to abandon the land, one spur may have been the Muslims’ imposition of the *kharāj* (land tax) on non-Muslim villages. The *kharāj* was a collective tax, and that meant that when individuals fled to cities, they increased the tax burden on those who remained behind. Urbanization itself thus made life for peasants more difficult, and ultimately, the burden of subsistence farming and the increasing viability of earning a livelihood through crafts and trade encouraged many to move to towns and cities. Progressive urbanization is reflected in an important legislative change that the rabbinic authorities of Iraq promulgated a generation after Baghdad was founded. According to the Babylonian Talmud, debts on the estates of deceased persons could be collected only from real property (land). Between 786 and 787, two of the three central Jewish legal authorities, the *gaon* of Sura and the *exilarch* (who ran an academy in the shadow of Sura and was responsible for representing the Jews at the caliph’s court), decreed that debts on estates of the deceased could now be collected on movable property.⁹ The new law came about because so many Jews had abandoned the land for towns and cities as to make the old ruling impracticable. And even those who remained in the countryside were now well connected with urban centers: Arab geographers report, for instance, a regular mail route between Pumbedita and Baghdad, a distance of about 62 kilometers (39 miles).

► See Nota bene, Bagdad, pp. 102-105. The rise of Baghdad as the most important city of the Islamic world bore profound implications for Jewish culture. By the late ninth or early tenth century, the two Iraqi yeshivot left their seats in Pumbedita and Sura and moved to the

capital.¹⁰ At Baghdad, both institutions came to be headed—for the first time—by cosmopolitan and outward-looking *geonim* educated beyond their own confines. Thinkers such as Saadia, Shemu'el ben Hofni (ca. 998–1013), and Hayya bar Sherira transformed the role of the *gaon* by composing works that went far beyond the boundaries of the traditional formats of the responsum and the legal compendium. They also added new fields of inquiry to the intellectual range of Jewish religious leaders, including philosophical theology (Arabic, *kalām*), hitherto a preserve of Muslim and Jewish Karaite thinkers.

The work of the tenth-century *geonim* and other cosmopolitan Jewish intellectuals reflects a culture of exchange that took place in public and semiprivate literary salons, known in Arabic as *majālis* (sing., *majlis*). These gatherings served as forums for the patronage of poets and other writers, and for philosophical and theological debates on every conceivable question. They reflect a relative lack of boundaries between thinkers and writers of different religions, a phenomenon without parallel in the medieval Christian world in this period.¹¹

Provincial Jewish life in Palestine

Palestine followed a different trajectory from Iraq. It had been more densely urbanized under Roman and Byzantine rule, and its cities were relatively well developed, even if most (except Caesarea) were relatively small; but the north, where much of the Jewish population was concentrated, had been dominated by large villages, and the Palestinian Talmud reflects this mixed urban and rural setting.¹² The Jews of Roman Palestine were in many ways provincials, embracing Roman culture in certain ways but resisting it in others.¹³ Under Islamic rule, Palestine retained its provincial character. It formed a part of the much larger administrative unit of Syria (*bilād al-Shām* in Arabic, comprising modern Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, Israel, and the Palestinian territories); unlike the Jews of Iraq, those of Palestine did not have an imperial capital at their doorstep.

That said, the fairly well-developed port system on the Syrian littoral meant that Palestine housed networks of trade and commerce, both local and long-distance. The Umayyads refortified the seaports of Tyre and Acre. Although Caesarea contracted and declined under the Muslims, the notion that the early Arab rulers kept their distance from the sea in favor of inland cities is not entirely true. While the political centers tended to be concentrated inland—Ramla was founded as the district (*jund*) capital of Palestine, and Tiberias, the main center of Palestinian Jewish life after the failure of the Jewish revolt of 132–35 C.E., became the capital of the *jund* of al-Urdunn—inhabitants of the Sham had access to the sea, to shipping, and to the system of port cities in the Mediterranean basin.

Tiberias was both a center of Abbasid government administration and the most important center of Jewish culture in Palestine through the middle of the tenth

century. The two facts were related. A teacher of Saadia Gaon, Abu Kathir Yahya ibn Zakariyya (d. ca. 932–33), was an Abbasid official (*kātib*) in Tiberias, and he typified the tendency of the learned elite to serve in government bureaus. He also reflects an important phenomenon among Jews under Islamic rule: religious specialists and communal leaders frequently served as government administrators and courtiers, many using their political prestige on behalf of their communities and mediating for them at the royal courts.

► See
Nota bene,
Saadia Gaon,
pp. 758–761.

Tiberias was also home to the Palestinian yeshiva well into the tenth century and the city where Jewish biblical scholars undertook the most extensive and, ultimately, authoritative project to stabilize the text of the Hebrew Bible and provide it with vowels and cantillation signs: the *masora*. Qur'anic scholars in the eighth century had developed some similar techniques of stabilizing their sacred text, and it is possible that the Masoretic scholars were indebted to them. But in the study of scripture and language, the influence flowed in all directions. Arabic-speaking Jews, Christians, and Muslims collaborated in gaining access to the contents of the Hebrew Bible/Old Testament; the entire project of translating the biblical text to Arabic was one shared among scholars of the three religions.

Tiberias's religious prestige ultimately ceded to that of Jerusalem. Islamic rule had allowed the Jews to settle permanently in Jerusalem for the first time since the failed revolt of 132–35 C.E., when the Roman emperor Hadrian had exiled them. While in 638, the Arab conqueror of the city, 'Umar ibn al-Khattab, had excluded the Jews from the city, drawing up a treaty that

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preserved the status quo ante in the interests of the Christian majority; eventually, after further negotiation, Jews resettled there.¹⁴ Initially, they came to Jerusalem from elsewhere in Palestine, especially Tiberias; later, Jews from all over the Islamic and even the Christian world migrated there. They came in especially great numbers from the Islamic

East: in the eleventh century and perhaps earlier, Jerusalem housed an entire Persian-speaking neighborhood. Around the middle of the tenth century, the yeshiva left Tiberias for Jerusalem, in circumstances poorly understood, and enjoyed a period of particular strength and stability just when the Iraqi yeshivot were being forced into temporary closure ca. 1040.

Jerusalem remained a major center for Jews and Christians, but it was also the theater of Islamic triumphalist monument-building. The Umayyad caliph 'Abd al-Malik (685–705) began building the Dome of the Rock (Qubbat al-Sakhra) on the site of the Temple Mount, and its location and physical form constituted direct challenges to Judaism, the site of whose former sanctuary it now filled, and to Christianity, whose Church of the Holy Sepulchre was now no longer the

highest point in the city. The structure was a grand announcement that Islam had superseded both previous religions.

But the special status of Jerusalem also translated into certain advantages, first for Christians, and then for Jews, on whom the Muslim rulers imposed a taxation structure that allowed them to pay the *jizya*, the tax on condition of which they were allowed to remain non-Muslim and granted the patronage of the state, not as individuals but in one lump sum. This meant that the rich could pay for the poor. Eleventh- and twelfth-century records from Egypt attest that in practice this happened even when the tax was levied individually, but the allowance in Jerusalem was significant, since it probably attracted poor Jews to the city. It probably also facilitated the flow of Jewish pilgrims, who could avoid paying the tax levied on non-Muslim visitors. All this had a salutary effect on Jerusalem's economy, as trade records suggest for the eleventh century—a period during which Jerusalem was otherwise considered, as one merchant put it, “a weak city” for trade, except during pilgrimage seasons.¹⁵

Palestine eventually followed the wider Islamic-period pattern of producing an interregional network of well-connected urban population centers. Jerusalem maintained close and frequent links with the Fatimid capital of Fustat (Cairo), with the centers of provincial government in Damascus and Ramla, with the seaport of Tyre, and with Aleppo and Baghdad. Those links are attested in letters that survive from the eleventh and twelfth centuries. They are likely to have dated to the Abbasid and even the Umayyad periods.

► See Note bene, Jerusalem, pp. 108-110.

Economics

In preindustrial societies, the broad prevalence of subsistence farming meant there was little need for precious metal coins. Peasants traded in kind or in copper; even the early Abbasids recognized that peasants were more likely to pay their taxes if they could offer produce rather than money. Together with urbanization and geographic mobility in the early Islamic heartlands came the spread of gold and silver coins and their exchange—particularly for items that brought a high profit margin, such as slaves, furs, spices, and other luxury goods.

This situation is reflected in Arabic and gaonic literature alike. A brief passage in a geographic work called *Kitab al-Masalik wa-l-Mamalik* by the Abbasid postmaster and spymaster Ibn Khurradadhbih, composed between 846 and 885, tells of a group of Iraqi Jewish merchants called *rādhāniyya*, or Radhanites, who covered staggering distances over half the vast expanse of the globe.¹⁶ The Radhanites spoke an impressive number of languages (Arabic, Persian, Greek, French, other Romance dialects, and Slavonic—Ibn Khurradadhbih's omission of Aramaic from the list may indicate that it was assumed of Jewish traders) and traveled by land



This map, by the geographer Al-Istakhri, is taken from *Livre des routes et des royaumes* (Book of Roads and Kingdoms) and shows the mouth of the Tigris River, the city of Baghdad, Kufa, and the Persian Gulf. Iraq, tenth century. Cairo, National Library.

and sea from Western Europe to India and China, including, in between, the Mediterranean Sea, the Red Sea, Constantinople, the land of the Slavs, and the Caspian Sea. Their cargoes included slaves (both female and male, including eunuchs), furs, textiles, weapons, and spices. Long-distance traders had to deal in expensive items to make the costs and risks of travel pay off. Although a dearth of corroborating accounts independent of Ibn Khurradadhbih's has made it difficult for scholars to say much more about the Radhanites, gaonic responsa offer parallel information on the traffic in slaves, textiles, and spices. In addition, the trade routes of the Radha-

nites were standard ones in their time—with the notable exception of the overland route to China via the Khazar kingdom; and Ibn Khurradadhbih's role in the Abbasid postal and information system would have made him privy to reliable information.¹⁷

► See
Nota bene,
The Cairo
Geniza,
pp. 99-101.

The Radhanites attest to Jewish activity in long-distance trade as much as one century before the documents of the Cairo Geniza document it in more detail and farther west.

They also demonstrate Iraq's importance as an entrepôt and staging point for great mercantile networks during the Abbasid heyday. The Abbasid court at Baghdad would have been the best conceivable market for luxury goods, since only the rulers and their immediate retainers possessed enough liquid funds to purchase such expensive items. The presence of the court was, indeed, essential in the unprecedented economic growth of early Islamic Iraq.¹⁸ Only when the Fatimids conquered Egypt did the luxury market shift westward.

The breakup of the caliphate

The epoch of Islamic political unity did not last: a mere three centuries after the founding of the caliphate, it had split into three. The province of al-Andalus was the first to break away: when the Abbasid dynasty came to power in 750, Islamic Iberia remained under the control of the Umayyad dynasty of governors, and it remained under Umayyad control until the early eleventh century. But the biggest series of challenges to Abbasid hegemony arrived in the tenth century, along with a concatenation of military and fiscal crises at home and abroad. No sooner had the population and wealth of Baghdad grown exponentially in the late ninth century than political chaos and economic decline stunted its ascendancy.

The first crisis arrived in 909, in the form of the Fatimid dynasty, which conquered Ifriqiya and Sicily and then set its sights on the East. The Fatimids adhered to the Isma'ili branch of Shi'ism, a different legal and theological school from that of the Sunni Abbasids. The first Fatimid ruler, who took the messianic regnal name al-Mahdi, also had the temerity to proclaim himself caliph—a title reserved for the succession of rulers after Muhammad. The theology of the caliphate held that there could be only one political and religious leader (*imām*) of the Muslims at a time. Yet now there were two. The Fatimids constituted a direct affront to Baghdad both religiously and politically; and in 969, they set out eastward from Ifriqiya to conquer Egypt. They quickly subdued it, founding their palatine city of Cairo (al-Qahira, “the [city] victorious”) just north of Fustat. Eventually they also conquered al-Sham. Then they set their sights on Iraq. Though they never conquered Baghdad, they retained control of Egypt for two hundred years, and of Syria until the Crusader conquests, shifting the center of the Islamic world westward.

In the late tenth and eleventh centuries, the Fatimids were the most powerful state in the Mediterranean. Rulers—Christian and Muslim alike—imitated the Fatimid style of royal propaganda, decorative arts, and administrative procedure. One imitator was the Umayyad governor of Cordoba, ‘Abd al-Rahman III, who in 929 proclaimed himself caliph and commenced the building of an enormous palatine complex at Madinat al-Zahra’ outside Cordoba, modeled after the Fatimid capitals of Ifriqiya.

► See article
by Mercedes
García-Arenal,
p. 111.

The number of caliphs in the Islamic realm was now three.

That same year, Baghdad was the scene of a dramatic power struggle between the army and the court of the profligate caliph al-Muqtadir (908–932), who was deposed and killed. In 945, a shaken Abbasid court called upon mercenaries from Daylam, south of the Caspian Sea, to rule what remained of their realm; as the Buwayhid dynasty, they governed the Abbasid territories until 1055. The Buwayhids were Shi'a like the Fatimids, but unlike the Fatimids, they ruled in the name of the Abbasid caliphs. Nonetheless, the vast territory formerly ruled by the Abbasids would never be truly reunited: while most subsequent Islamic dynasties, up to and including the Ottomans, called their sovereigns sultans rather than caliphs and

claimed to rule in the name of the Abbasid house, the caliphate would never enjoy the same authority as in its early years.

Yet the political fragmentation to which the Abbasid realm was subjected did not reverse the cultural unification of previous centuries. Paradoxically, it furthered it, for one main reason: the crisis in the Iraqi heartland sent waves of migrants westward, and those migrants brought Iraqi customs and culture with them. For the Jews, this fact was transformative. Just as the Islamic conquests of the eighth century had sent migrants westward to the Mediterranean basin and beyond, so did the collapse of the Iraqi economy in the late ninth and early tenth centuries. The presence of so many easterners in the west furthered the sense of a cultural koine. It created an intellectual ferment in the Eastern Mediterranean, and helped integrate the customs and traditions of Palestine, Egypt, and elsewhere with those of the East. This was especially true among Rabbanite and Karaite Jews. And so the center of the civilized world shifted from Baghdad to the hubs of the Indian Ocean and Mediterranean trades, Fustat and its royal city, Cairo.

Hundreds of business letters written during the Fatimid period by Jewish long-distance traders and merchants survived in the Cairo Geniza. They demonstrate an intensity of shipping centered on two main networks: in the eleventh century, a triangular trade among Egypt, Ifriqiya, and Sicily; and, in the twelfth, as Italian merchants began to dominate the Mediterranean trade, the maritime route to India via Upper Egypt, the Red Sea, and Yemen. The centrality of Egypt to both those networks offered the Fatimids a seemingly endless source of revenue, from customs and other taxes. It also made it a desirable destination for anyone in search of good markets, cultural riches, and positions in the state bureaucracy. By the eleventh century, Egypt would grow from a province to a metropole.

It also grew from a minor place of Jewish settlement to the very center of the eastern Jewish world, on a par with the Iberian Peninsula in the west. That it should do so was not obvious. Of all the places so far discussed, early Islamic Egypt had been the least important Jewish settlement when the Muslims conquered it. It had never been a center of rabbinic activity, like Mesopotamia and Palestine, but by 1127, the gaon of Palestine himself would move to Fustat, and a generation later, ca. 1165, so would the great Andalusian philosopher and jurist Moses Maimonides (1138–1204) of Cordoba.

Egypt is also justly a major player in any study of the medieval maritime world, particularly maritime commerce. Like al-Sham, Egypt had outlets onto both the Mediterranean and the Red Seas; like al-Sham, it had a network of inland waterways to move goods up and down the interior of the country, a less expensive means of shipping than over land (animals had to be fed and watered, while boats did not). But al-Sham never became as wealthy as Egypt. The explanation for this must be sought in the presence of the Fatimid court: like the Abbasids before them, the Fatimids managed and exploited the region's natural resources, especially the Nile

floods, keeping it prosperous, extracting wealth from the population, and concentrating it in and around the capital. True, Syria boasted its share of wealthy centers: the port of Tyre housed a coterie of successful long-distance traders in close communication with Fustat and Alexandria; but the truly great traders were based in Fustat and Cairo.

Language

The logistical challenges involved in trade operations were not limited to transportation. Goods had to be procured at a reasonable price and their quality assured, most often by proxy. If one wished to trade over long distances—and to earn the large margins of profit long-distance trade permitted—then one needed a network of

allies and business associates with local connections abroad. Sometimes traders relied on their cousins or sons and other relatives; or they apprenticed the sons of trading partners; or they trained free servants or slaves in reading, arithmetic, and business. In all cases, one needed to issue commands and reports in writing. What was needed for this was not only a means of conveying documents but a common language.

Under Islamic rule, spoken and much of written communication took place in a language entirely new to the populations outside the Arabian Peninsula and the semiarid lands of the southern Sham: Arabic. Arabic ultimately replaced the other languages that had been spoken and written for centuries throughout the newly conquered Islamic territories, including Greek, Aramaic (though pockets of it survived and still survive today), and Persian (which experienced a renaissance in the ninth century). For the Jews, Arabic took the form of Judeo-Arabic, a range of Arabic registers and dialects written in Hebrew characters that served as a koine, enabling Jews across vast distances to communicate with each other.¹⁹ Arabic would remain



A village bazaar, with a mosque in the background, in *Maqamat (The Assemblies)* of Al-Hariri. Illuminated manuscript of Al-Wasiti. Iraq, thirteenth century. Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale de France, ms. or. Arabic 5847, fol. 138.

the language spoken by the vast majority of the world's Jews until the later medieval and early modern periods, when the Romance languages (including Ladino) and, finally, Yiddish eclipsed it; and it is the language in which many of the most impor-

“*Arabic would remain the language spoken by the vast majority of the world's Jews until the later medieval and early modern periods.*”

► See
Chapter II
of Part IV,
pp. 653–681.

tant Jewish works of the Middle Ages were composed. For Jews, Arabic also—perhaps paradoxically—proved to be an important language for the renewal of written Hebrew. Like other classicizing languages based on scriptural texts considered immutable, classical written Arabic carries a set of ideologies attached to its use. First and foremost is the belief in the perfection of the language as spoken by God directly to Muhammad (*i'jāz al-Qur'ān*). Arabic speakers

attempted to adhere to the classical purity of the Arabic of the Qur'an, and developed the sciences of grammar, morphology, syntax, and lexicography in order to understand it better. Jews adapted all those sciences to the study of Hebrew and of biblical texts, in the tenth and eleventh centuries, literally inventing the field of Hebrew linguistics—a field in which Karaite Jews in particular were pioneers.

Technology: Paper manufacture and written communication

One of the most important changes in this period was a vast proliferation of written culture, especially in the ninth and tenth centuries. Written transmission as a mode of passing on knowledge constituted a veritable revolution for Jews, since the previous millennium had given rise to taboos around making official written copies of rabbinic texts. (Copies for personal use were permitted.) By the tenth century, the oral monopoly on textual transmission applied only to one Jewish text, the Babylonian Talmud, and only the Iraqi *geonim* continued to insist that it be learned orally.

The diffusion of three technological innovations made the production and circulation of written texts possible: paper, an empire-wide postal system, and the codex (the bound book as we know it today). All three helped people to exchange ideas, information, and goods over long distances, especially among the urban and literate elite; ultimately, they were Islamic-era developments that entirely transformed Jewish culture. The latter two had Roman precedents, but spread under Islam to an unprecedented extent.

Paper totally transformed written culture all over the Islamic world. Papermaking techniques had been developed in China by the first millennium C.E.; by the early eighth century at the latest, writing paper was being produced in Central Asia.²⁰ But the Abbasids manufactured paper on a scale hitherto without precedent because they needed large quantities of writing material to run their bureaucracy; in the second half of the eighth century, they founded the first Arab paper mills at Baghdad.

Prior to the eighth century, books in the Near East had been written on papyrus and parchment, and documents on both those materials and on clay shards (ostraca),

wood, cloth, and tanned leather. Paper held distinct advantages over these media: it was lightweight, durable, and relatively simple to manufacture; it was less expensive than parchment; and, unlike papyrus, on which Egypt held a virtual monopoly, it could be made anywhere, since its main ingredients were cotton and linen rags.²¹ The Abbasid administration in Baghdad understood that a local source of writing material was a good investment, and the bureaucrats appreciated one important quality of the new medium: while parchment and papyrus can be washed or scraped (palimpsested) and thus erased without significant damage to the writing surface, paper documents cannot be altered without leaving evident traces of tampering. Paper is thus an effective weapon against forgery.

From Baghdad, paper spread westward. By the mid-tenth century it had become the preferred medium for both everyday and scholarly writing in the Islamic world. Even in the latter country, which had manufactured papyrus for millennia, papyrus was reduced to wrapping paper and then, by the thirteenth century, stopped being made altogether.

► See
Nota bene,
The Cairo
Geniza,
pp. 99-101.

The tenth century is the period not only of the first documents on paper that survive from the Islamic world but of the first Jewish documents preserved in numbers great enough to enable us to reconstruct an entire society on their basis. Roughly 330,000 folio pages survived in the Cairo Geniza, especially during the period from ca. 950 until 1250. A sizable minority of these—more than 15,000—are letters, contracts, depositions, official lists, accounts, receipts, and other documentary sources. Most of the documents are on paper; some, such as Jewish marriage, betrothal, and divorce documents, and Islamic legal contracts, are on parchment. The Geniza texts demonstrate the role writing played in everyday life, not only for transmitting and teaching literary works, but also for transacting business. One subset of documents—letters—demonstrates the uses of the well-organized and empire-wide postal infrastructure. Jews had certainly communicated via letter under Roman rule, as had pagans and Christians (as the Epistles of the New Testament attest). But the postal system established by the Umayyads, and developed to an unprecedented extent by the Abbasids, created a network of roads, staging points, caravanserais, and ports that made it possible to convey people, objects, and written communiqués from one place to another with relative efficiency. While the Umayyads had created the system for government purposes and restricted its use to military intelligence and administration, in the late ninth century the Abbasids centralized the system and founded a government bureau to administer it, and private postal carriers multiplied. Mailing letters seems to have been inexpensive, and it is striking how many letters were sent not only for business purposes but simply to update relatives and friends living far away.²² Letters, too, must have contributed to the sense that the vast expanse of space ruled by Islam was relatively unified.

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Paper also contributed to the spread of the codex: papyrus is not an ideal material for binding, since the fibers tend to fray at the edges, and a single parchment codex could require the hides of as many as three hundred sheep. Although the Roman republic saw the first codices of papyrus used for classical literature, eventually the medium became inextricably associated with Christian books. Jews, therefore, resisted it and, until the advent of Islam, they transmitted their religious and literary works either orally or on papyrus and parchment rolls. But Muslims' adoption of the codex from the earliest period, for the Qur'an and other texts, broke the medium's exclusive association with Christian books, and so by the ninth century Jews had begun using it too.

All the transformations set in motion by the Islamic conquests—the migration of populations, their concentration in cities, their greater mobility and communication across long distances—meant that medieval Jews lived differently from their predecessors who had produced the classical texts on which many of their religious practices depended. The literate elites who produced and consumed the new Jewish culture were also responsible for interpreting and promulgating the old texts within Jewish communities. It is to those communities and their organization that this chapter now turns.

Jewish communal life and religious leadership

The caliphs and sultans governed somewhat loosely, due not to benevolence but to a shortcoming shared with all premodern empires: lack of manpower. That left people at liberty to organize themselves into solidarity groups based on ideology or kinship, or into other reciprocity-based networks that helped them with everything from meeting basic material needs to marrying off daughters, finding apprenticeships for sons, or forging contacts in new places. As with other solidarity-based self-help groups under Islamic rule, the Jews organized themselves along religious lines. It is in that sense that the medieval sources speak of a "Jewish community." Jews also maintained networks based on professional bonds or obligations of patronage and clientele, and those often crossed religious borders, but the default sense of belonging was to the Jewish community, even if its members did not all share exactly the same religious beliefs, practices, or loyalties.

The Jewish communities distributed charity, ransomed captives, collected taxes and fees, adjudicated disputes through a system of courts and legal specialists, and elected and appointed leaders. They also held property in trust and collected contributions from their members for expenditures, such as stipends for scholars. In towns and small cities, they appointed leaders who, by the late eleventh century, had come to bear the Arabic title *muqaddam*, although the office existed before the title used in this sense; the central Jewish authorities, the *geonim* of Palestine and Iraq,

often chose communal leaders from outside the place they served, presumably to keep them independent of local factions.²³ This was one way of ensuring justice and a sense of solidarity, and of offsetting the potential for private patronage outside the communal system.

There were three types of Jewish congregations: the Babylonian Rabbanites, who followed rabbinic law and tradition as promulgated by the *geonim* of Iraq; the Shami or Palestinian Rabbanites, who followed the *geonim* of Palestine; and the Karaites, who developed a school of law based on their own interpretations of biblical and postbiblical law. Throughout Egypt and al-Sham, cities of significant size, such as Fustat, housed all three types of congregation, as the Geniza documents attest; in Iraq, the same was probably true as well, at least to judge by literary sources that refer to Karaites and Palestinian-rite Jews in Iraq.²⁴

The three Jewish congregations functioned as schools of thought, each with its own legal tradition—much like the *madhāhib* in Islamic law. Among Muslim scholars in this period, the label *madhhab* applied not only to the four Sunni schools but also to the Shi'a, regardless of instances of mutual recrimination in polemics. The label *madhhab* made sense to medieval Jews as well: in documents and literary sources in Judeo-Arabic, writers from all three groups refer to themselves and other groups as *madhāhib*, with the implication that each was equally legitimate. True, Rabbanite and Karaite polemicists—and Iraqi- and Palestinian-rite polemicists, for that matter—accused each other of straying from correct belief and practice, but those kinds of disagreements were usually restricted to a handful of zealots. Most of the community, the leaders included, cooperated.²⁵

Although the three Jewish *madhāhib* were each headed by a separate leader, they formed one larger community for administrative purposes. Jews everywhere had—and exercised—the option of joining any of the three groups, since membership was a matter of personal loyalty rather than territorial jurisdiction; a person from Baghdad could follow the Palestinian rite. (Indeed, the gaon of Palestine in the 1050s was a Baghdadi.) Loyalty to one group or another often hinged, in practice, on political and social alliances rather than ideological considerations. The head of the Shāmī-rite congregation in Fustat ca. 1030 received a warning from a colleague in Palestine about growing opposition to his leadership: “Haven’t we here in Palestine received numerous letters, the longest of which contains [the signatures of] thirty-odd witnesses, complaining that you are alienating the congregation with your haughtiness and domineering manner? Because of you and your son-in-law, many people have switched over to the other [Iraqi-rite] synagogue and to the Karaite congregations.”²⁶ The three groups also competed over wealthy members, particularly the long-distance merchants engaged in the Mediterranean and Indian Ocean trades.

Wealthy members of the communal elite—long-distance traders, bankers, or physicians—often served as intermediaries between the Jewish community and the courts

► See The article by Phillip Ackerman-Lieberman, pp. 683-693.

of the caliphs and sultans. In Iraq, this role was usually played by the *exilarch*, who occupied his position by virtue of his claims to Davidic ancestry, or by Jewish courtiers such as the Banu Natira, a dynasty of Abbasid bankers in the tenth century. In Fatimid Egypt and Syria before the Crusader conquests, numerous courtiers played the role, Karaites and Rabbanites alike. In the last decades of the eleventh century, the position was formalized and its incumbent titled *raʾīs al-yahūd*, “head of the Jews.”²⁷

Having an intermediary at the ruler’s court was an absolutely essential asset to any community, in part because of a special feature of Islamic statecraft: the petition-and-response procedure. In principle, any subject could petition the sovereign and other members of the caliph’s or sultan’s court with requests in matters personal or collective. The Geniza has preserved hundreds of such petitions to caliphs, sultans, viziers, and other high-ranking courtiers and bureaucrats in Egypt and Syria. They were composed by Jews, Christians, and Muslims; the fact that non-Jewish petitions survived in a Jewish Geniza attests to cooperation among members of the three religions in lodging petitions, writing them, and handling them.²⁸

The petitions fall into four general types: complaints against officials who had committed injustices (*mazālīm*), requests for investiture by communal leaders, bids for governmental arbitration in communal disputes, and individual requests for material and other types of help. They demonstrate that the central government relied on its subjects to bring to its attention problems in governance, particularly when midlevel officials abused their power. They also demonstrate that ordinary subjects enjoyed the latitude to protest and make demands. In practice, however, the government chanceries were not consistent in answering petitions. That is where the courtly intermediaries proved useful: having a petition answered could depend on the intercession of leaders with contacts in the palaces. Those leaders themselves—some *muqaddamun*, the *raʾīs al-yahūd*, the *geonim* of Jerusalem, Muslim qadis, and Christian patriarchs and bishops—also petitioned the rulers to request investiture in their positions. Sometimes they were forced to lean on intercessors (in the eleventh century, Rabbanite leaders cultivated the patronage of Karaite courtiers). The regime, in turn, benefited from these requests because they functioned as royal propaganda, helping the ruler to secure an image as just and as the personal patron of his subjects, Muslim and *dhimmi*s alike.

Political styles and communal administration

The administrative procedures of the Jewish community were partly modeled on those of the Islamic state. Members of both religions engaged in similar styles of politics and of forging individual alliances through patronage and reciprocity. Letters exchanged among Jews use idioms of loyalty and friendship that are strikingly similar to those used among Muslim functionaries of the Fatimid and

Abbasid courts and bureaucracies. A Jew in late eleventh- or early twelfth-century Alexandria who addresses a petition for charity to a Jewish benefactor follows the standard form of petitions to Fatimid caliphs and viziers, and even the physical format of the document is similar to that of Fatimid petitions, with the name of the writer (*tarjama*) appearing at the top left of the page.²⁹ The same Arabic terms that express the social concepts of patronage, clientele, and loyalty in Islamic sources also pervade Jewish ones in Judeo-Arabic.³⁰

None of this is surprising: the system of Islamic politics was a relatively open one, admitting participation by non-Muslims, initially as specialized bureaucrats and later as literate elites from a wide range of professions. The fact that Jews engaged in the styles of patronage and reciprocity attested among Muslim elites had repercussions for the way they administered and organized their communities. First, the fluidity of membership in the Jewish *madhāhib* led to intense competition among leaders over their followers. Despite the vigorous battles the yeshivot conducted over hegemony and followers, there is little evidence that the Diaspora communities felt obliged to commit their loyalties to one *madhhab* exclusively, like Muslims who submitted legal queries to different *madhāhib* simultaneously. In Qayrawan, Fustat, and Palermo, some rabbinic leaders, wealthy traders, and other community members who solicited responsa from Baghdad and sent donations in return also gave funds to the Jerusalem yeshiva and sought official titles from both centers. Karaites felt free to have their legal documents drawn up in rabbinical legal courts, and some rabbinic scribes obliged them by writing documents according to Karaite specifications. Karaites also donated money to the Palestinian yeshiva and assisted both Sura and Pumbedita with raising funds and having them transferred to Iraq. Such multiple allegiances are nearly impossible to explain using monolithic models of the Rabbanites as the orthodox group and the Karaites as a heretical sect (as was habitual in older scholarship on Karaism), or with a centralistic model postulating the hegemony of one *madhhab* over the others. The reality was more complex.

“The fact that Jews engaged in the styles of patronage and reciprocity attested among Muslim elites had repercussions for the way they organized their communities.”

But the progressive centering of the Jewish world on Egypt also altered this model of multiple allegiances. In both Egypt and the Sham, the three *madhāhib* came to form a single Jewish community over the course of the eleventh century. Nearly year by year, the gaonic office in Jerusalem amassed prerogatives and developed a more consistent relationship to the Fatimid court and bureaucracy in Cairo. The Jewish intercessors at court began to take on increasingly formalized roles, and this finally culminated in the creation of a new office of leadership over Jewish communities under Fatimid rule centered on Egypt: the *raʾīs al-yahūd* (head of the Jews). The position was the project of a coterie of Egyptian notables of the 1060s and

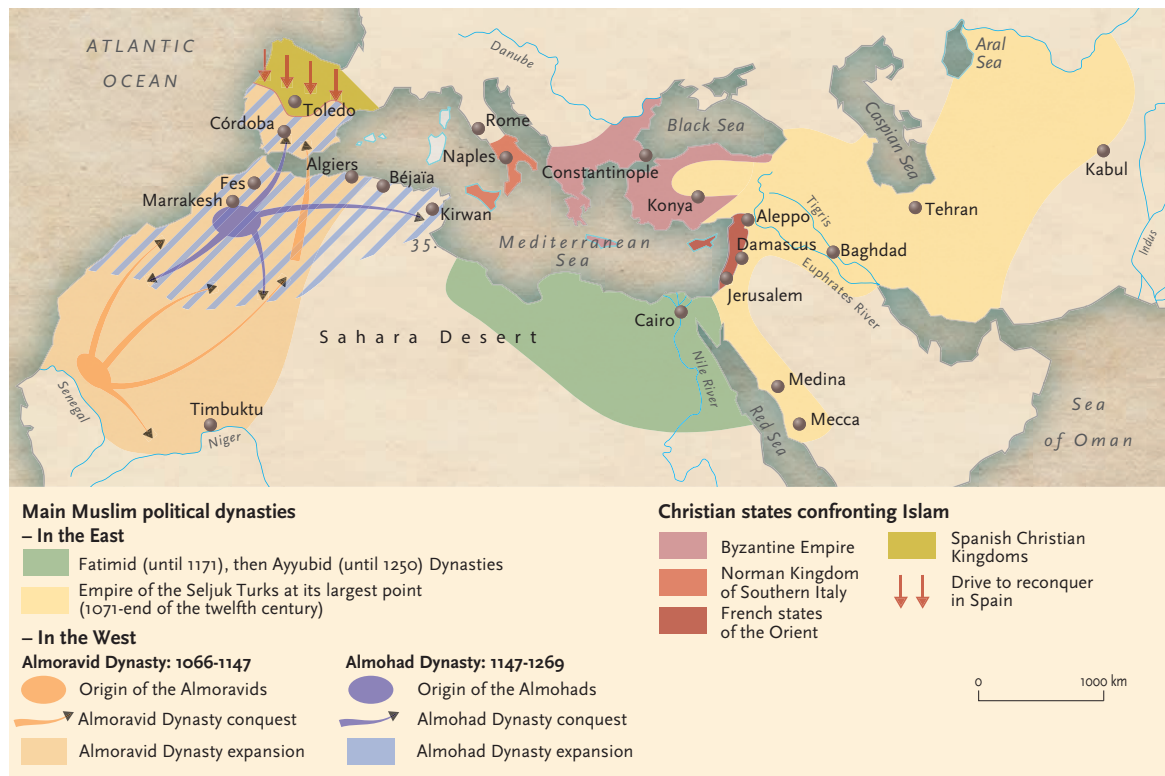
1070s, including Rabbanite physicians at the Fatimid court; ultimately, it brought the entire tripartite Jewish community (Palestinian Rabbanites, Iraqi Rabbanites, and Karaites) under the aegis of a single office that would persist until the Ottomans abolished it in the sixteenth century. For the first time since antiquity, the Jewish world was no longer linked to the central leadership in Iraq and Palestine. This turn away from the centers toward what used to be the peripheries echoed the breakup of the Abbasid realm more than a century earlier.

The strength of this centralized Egyptian Jewish community was particularly evident in its institutions of communal governance, such as care for the indigent. Although Fustat and Cairo are overrepresented in Geniza material, the community does seem to have loomed large among Mediterranean Jews seeking relief from poverty: poor people migrated to Fustat to benefit from a well-organized set of communal services. Charity lists also include numerous converts to Judaism, some of whom may have converted to benefit from the extensive Jewish system of relief for the poor, including peasants hoping to better their lot in the city.

Funds from private donors were joined with community funds—fines, taxes, foundations, bequests, and other exceptional collections. These resources were used for distributing food and clothing, scholarships, and extraordinary expenses, such as paying the ransom of captives; after the First Crusade, ransom was paid not only for persons but also for sacred books.³¹ The old ecumenical method of governance centered on the yeshivot in Iraq and Palestine now gave way to a local administration centered on Egypt and transcending the interests of each congregation. The Fatimid conquests had made this possible; the rise of Egypt as an economic and political center had made it desirable; and the Crusades had made it necessary, by forcing many of the Jewish communities of al-Sham into exile, including the Palestinian yeshiva itself.

State intervention in the later Middle Ages

The Ayyubid sultans (1171–1250) recaptured large parts of al-Sham from Crusader rule, including Jerusalem in 1187. But even after the Islamic conquest of Syria and its reattachment to the Ayyubid administration in Cairo, Syria continued to exercise some measure of political independence. If from the beginnings of the Fatimid period in Egypt Jews had found it imperative to hone their expertise in negotiating with the state for privileges and offices, by the Ayyubid period, doing so had become nearly routine. Though it is common to say that the Jews formed an independent community that functioned free from the interference of the state, in fact, their leaders sought state interference and support when it served them. But it was also rare that the Islamic state intervened in Jewish matters without an invitation. Under the Mamluk sultans (1250–1517), it became less rare. But even here, despite the image depicted in both Jewish and Muslim sources of a rapacious Mamluk state determined



The Muslim world in the twelfth century.

to usurp Jews' and Christians' privileges and property, it was Jews themselves who had established the precedent of turning to the state with requests for interference and mediation between Jewish factions. Official Mamluk chroniclers represent the state as intervening in internal *dhimmi* communal conflicts so as to paint the regime as administratively effective and religiously zealous, but where documentary sources can offer a bit more background and detail, it is clear that *dhimmis* took the initiative.³² In Iraq, it may be that such interventionist policies had begun slightly earlier, but we lack the copious documentation of Egypt to understand whether there, too, Jews had initiated it. Under the Abbasid caliph al-Muqtadi (1055–94), the Saljuq Turks wrested Baghdad and the Abbasid state from the Buwayhids; during this period there was an increase in state incursions into the Jewish community's affairs, probably a side effect of rivalry between the *atābeg* (commander in chief) Nizam al-Mulk and the assistant vizier, Abu Shuja' al-Isfahani. It may be that Jews followed the rivalry closely and used it to their advantage, as they did in Egypt on more than one occasion, but there is little firsthand evidence apart from the single eyewitness account of Johannes of Oppido, a Norman priest who converted to Judaism in the waning years of the eleventh century and took the Hebrew name 'Ovadya. This

‘Ovadya visited Baghdad ca. 1105 and reported that Abu Shuja’ had attempted to force Jews to wear distinguishing signs on their clothing. The decrees were alternately repealed and renewed well into the 1140s.

“*Anti-Jewish legislation in Iraq eased once Saladin, restored Egypt and Syria to the Abbasid realm by pledging fealty to Baghdad.*”

Tensions and anti-Jewish legislation in Iraq eased once Saladin (1171–92), the first Ayyubid sultan, restored Egypt and Syria to the Abbasid realm by pledging fealty to Baghdad. But the reunification of Iraq and Egypt did not lead to a corresponding reunification of Iraqi and Egyptian Jews. The gaonate of Baghdad had been revived: the Jewish

traveler Petahiah of Regensburg, who visited Baghdad in 1176, reports that the gaon Shemu’el b. ‘Ali ibn al-Dastur (1164 – ca. 1194–97) possessed the power to appoint judges in Iraq, Iran, and Syria, including Damascus. But Benjamin of Tudela, who visited Baghdad ca. 1168, gives a contradictory report according to which the appointment of judges and *geonim* alike was a prerogative of the *exilarch*; the contradiction may have reflected a jurisdictional conflict between the two leaders. The same gaon, Ibn al-Dastur, was an object of repeated opprobrium for the great Jewish religious authority of Egypt, Moses Maimonides, who mocked him as an ignoramus motivated only by the pursuit of fancy titles and other perquisites of office. To read Maimonides, one might think that Iraq had been entirely eclipsed in the Jewish scholarly imagination, and that the future of Jewish learning lay in Egypt, Provence, and perhaps Yemen. The reality was probably more complex. The Iraqi *geonim* were still communicating with the West, and they received the attention and backing of the Abbasid state during the long reign of the Abbasid caliph al-Nasir (1180–1223). But the independence of the Mediterranean communities from Iraq for so many centuries could not simply be erased.

Beyond polemics

The patterns Jews followed in their trade networks, congregational organization, literary production, and personal loyalties owed much to the Islamic world. Whether Jews as a group bore a similarly palpable effect on Islamic collective life is unlikely. Jews constituted a tiny minority in a vast civilization, perhaps no more than 10 percent of the population of major cities such as Baghdad and Fustat (perhaps more in Jerusalem). But there is one sense in which Jews in medieval eastern Islamic lands are far more important than their sheer numbers suggest: the vast quantity of their written materials that have survived. These allow historians to reconstruct the texture of daily life in Islamic lands and make it clear that power relationships were often more fluid and open to negotiation than one might imagine. True, Muslim rulers and jurists in theory defined non-Muslims as subalterns and set the terms of the relationship. But a closer look at the communities through their documen-

tary sources suggests that attempts at religious self-definition, including some of the statements one finds in polemics and other learned works, do not tell the entire story.

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5. S. D. Goitein, *A Mediterranean Society: The Jewish Communities of the Arab World as Portrayed in the Documents of the Cairo Geniza*, 6 vols. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1967), esp. 1:62.
6. Adam Silverstein, *Postal Systems in the Pre-Modern Islamic World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007); Goitein, *Mediterranean Society*, op. cit., vol. 1, p. 281-295.
7. Robert Brody, *The Geonim of Babylonia and the Shaping of Medieval Jewish Culture* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1998); David Goodblatt, "The History of the Babylonian Academies," in Steven T. Katz, ed., *The Cambridge History of Judaism*, vol. 4, *The Late Roman-Rabbinic Period* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 821–39, esp. 837; Sacha Stern, "Rabbinic Academies in Late Antiquity: State of Current Research," in Henri Hugonnard-Roche, ed., *L'Enseignement supérieur dans les mondes antiques et médiévaux: Aspects institutionnels, juridiques et pédagogiques*, Colloque international de l'Institut des traditions textuelles (Fédération de recherche 33 du C.N.R.S.) (Paris: J. Vrin, 2008), 221–38.
8. Al-Jahiz, *Kitab al-radd 'ala l-Nasara*, translated in Charles Pellat, *The Life and Works of Jahiz* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1969), 87–88; Morony, *Iraq after the Muslim Conquest*, 312.
9. Brody, *Geonim of Babylonia*, 63.
10. Ibid., 36–37.
11. Hava Lazarus-Yafeh et al., eds., *The Majlis: Interreligious Encounters in Medieval Islam* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1999).
12. Hayim Lapin, *Economy, Geography, and Provincial History in Later Roman Palestine* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2001).
13. Hayim Lapin, *Rabbis as Romans: The Rabbinic Movement in Palestine, 100–400 C.E.* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012); Seth Schwartz, *Were the Jews a Mediterranean Society? Reciprocity and Solidarity in Ancient Judaism* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2009); and Martin Goodman, *Rome and Jerusalem: The Clash of Ancient Civilisations* (London: Allen Lane, 2007).
14. Levy-Rubin, *Non-Muslims in the Early Islamic Empire*, 53.
15. Letter of Yisra'el b. Natan to Nahray b. Nissim, ca. 1060 (Jewish Theological Seminary of America, ENA NS 48.15, line 4), published in Moshe Gil, *Palestine during the First Muslim Period (634–1099)* (in Hebrew), 3 vols. (Tel Aviv: Tel Aviv University Press, 1983), vol. 3, doc. 477 (cited there as JTS Geniza Misc. 15), line 4; Jessica Goldberg, *Trade and Institutions in the Medieval Mediterranean: Geniza Merchants and Their Business World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 223.
16. The name of the group indicates that they originated in Radhan, the province around Baghdad that housed the Sasanian-era city of Mahoze and other Jewish population centers. Barbier de Meynard put forward this hypothesis about the name of the Radhanites as early as 1865, and Gil has more recently argued in favor of it; Moshe Gil, *In the Kingdom of Ishmael* (Hebrew), 4 vols. (Tel Aviv: Tel Aviv University, 1997), sec. 344.
17. Gil, *In the Kingdom of Ishmael*, secs. 344–46; Peregrine Horden and Nicholas Purcell, *The Corrupting Sea: A Study of Mediterranean History* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000), 162–63; Adam Silverstein, "From Markets to Marvels: Jews on the Maritime Route to China ca. 850 – ca. 950 C.E.," *Journal of Jewish Studies* 58 (2007): 91–104.
18. Hugh Kennedy, "Feeding the Five Hundred Thousand: Cities and Agriculture in Early Islamic Mesopotamia," *Iraq* 73 (2011): 177–99.

19. David J. Wasserstein, "Why Did Arabic Succeed Where Greek Failed? Language Change in the Near East after Muhammad," *Scripta Classica Israelica* 22 (2003): 257–72.
20. Medieval Arabic chronicles claim that the Abbasids discovered paper when they defeated Tang armies at the battle of Talas in Transoxiana in 751 and captured a Chinese prisoner of war who kindly taught his captors paper-making techniques, but this is probably a later legend that circulated to explain the excellence of the paper made in Samarqand. Actual samples of Central Asian paper have survived from the early eighth century, so the Abbasids would not have needed a Chinese teacher. Jonathan Bloom, *Paper before Print: The History and Impact of Paper in the Islamic World* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2001), 42–43.
21. Adam Bülow-Jacobson, "Writing Materials in the Ancient World," in Roger S. Bagnall, ed., *The Oxford Handbook of Papyrology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 4–5. Though Pliny mentions the existence of the papyrus plant in Syria and Mesopotamia, it requires stagnant pools of water to grow, and special manufacturing techniques perfected in Egypt. In the Middle Ages, it also grew in Sicily, but was not used for papermaking (*ibid.*, 25n8).
22. Silverstein, *Postal Systems*; Goitein, *Mediterranean Society*, 1:281–95.
23. Goitein, *Mediterranean Society*, 2:69–70.
24. For Karaites in Iraq, see al-Qirḡisani, for example, who mentions them at Baghdad, Basra, and Tustar (*Kitāb al-anwar wa-l-maraqib*, ed. L. Nemoy [New York: Publications of the Alexander Kohut Memorial Foundation, 1939]), chap. 19. For Palestinian Rabbanites in Iraq, see, for example, Levi b. Yefet, *Sefer ha-misvot* (Leiden, MS Or. 4760, MS Warner 22, 19r–19v; cf. St. Petersburg, Russian National Library, MS Yevr.-Arab. I 3920).
25. Marina Rustow, *Heresy and the Politics of Community: The Jews of the Fatimid Caliphate* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2008).
26. Letter of Shelomo b. Semah to Efrayim b. Shemarya, Cambridge University Library, T-S 10 J 29.13.
27. Mark R. Cohen, *Jewish Self-Government in Medieval Egypt: The Origins of the Office of Head of the Jews, ca. 1065–1126* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1980); see further Rustow, *Heresy and the Politics of Community*, 328–40, and for the historiography, 100–107.
28. Marina Rustow, "A Petition to a Woman at the Fatimid Court (413–414 A.H./1022–23 C.E.)," *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 73 (2010): 1–27.
29. Cambridge University Library, T-S 13 J 18.14; see Cohen, *Poverty and Charity*, 177–85, and *Voice of the Poor*, doc. 1; cf. Khan, "The Historical Development of the Structure of Medieval Arabic Petitions," *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 53 (1990): 8–30.
30. Marina Rustow, "Formal and Informal Patronage in the Islamic East: Geniza Evidence," *al-Qantara: Revista de Estudios Árabes* 29 (2008): 341–82.
31. Cohen, *Poverty and Charity*, Cambridge University Library, T-S 10 J 5.6 + T-S 20.113; Rustow, *Heresy and the Politics of Community*, 341n43 and 340–44.
32. Marina Rustow, "At the Limits of Communal Autonomy: Jewish Bids for Government Interference," *Mamluk Studies Review* 13 (2009): 133–59.

The Cairo Geniza

What is now known as the Cairo Geniza came to the attention of scholars between the 1860s and 1890s. A hoard of about 330,000 separate pages of books and documents had accumulated in a storage room of a medieval synagogue in Fustat and began to find their way to dealers, private collectors, and libraries.¹

The last decades of the nineteenth century were the great era of Egyptology and of discoveries in Pharaonic tombs. Amid Europe's fascination with the ancient world, a few intrepid scholars went to Egypt in search of post-Pharaonic material. In 1896–97, two Oxford scholars, Bernard Grenfell and Arthur Hunt, excavated a rubbish heap outside the Hellenistic city of Oxyrhynchus in the Fayyum (modern al-Bahnasa) and found it contained a half-million Greek papyri – including three pages from a lost Christian Gospel.² That year and in the same spirit, Solomon Schechter, reader in rabbinics at Cambridge University, tracked down the source of the Geniza documents and brought the remaining manuscripts back to Cambridge.³

A *beit geniza* is a storage chamber where texts in Hebrew script are deposited when they are too worn out to remain in circulation, or, in the case of documents, when the business they have transacted has been concluded. Most of what the Geniza contained were fragments of literary texts: the Hebrew Bible, biblical commentaries and translations, rabbinic literature (including some of the earliest known fragments of the two Talmuds), philosophy, science, poetry, and belles lettres. Some of these works had been transmitted well into the modern age, and the copies now found contained interesting textual variants. Other works had been entirely unknown before the Geniza's discovery, or known only from quotations in other medieval works.

One of these was a legal code by 'Anan ben David, an eighth-century Iraqi Jew who devised his own school of Jewish law, one different from the rabbinic tradition that had preceded him. The Geniza also yielded more than eight hundred works by the shadowy Palestinian liturgical poet Yannai, who probably lived in the seventh century, all of whose works had been lost except one.⁴ Many of the poems of Yannai that survived in the Geniza had been copied on top of erased (palimpsested) Greek texts that themselves held clues to Egypt's pre-Islamic, Hellenistic past and that of its Jewish communities.

The Geniza also totally transformed parts of Jewish history thought to be known and understood. Moses Maimonides, who lived in Egypt from the 1160s until his death in 1204, was a member of the synagogue where the Geniza was housed. Among the finds are draft pages of some of his works in his own hand, including the philosophical masterpiece *The Guide for the Perplexed*. (One page from the *Guide* was pieced together from three fragments in two separate libraries as recently as 2004.) There are also letters from Maimonides's brother, David, an India trader whose business ventures supported the great sage's scholarship until he died in a shipwreck, forcing Maimonides to seek work at the Ayyubid court as a physician.

A sizable and significant minority of the Geniza's pages – probably more than fifteen thousand – are documents (letters, contracts, lists, accounts, children's exercise books) written by known and unknown figures. These have cast light onto entirely new realms of the Jewish and Islamic pasts, such as trade, agriculture, the roles of women, education, the history of childhood, sex, food, and the function, symbolism, and prices of textiles and clothing.⁵

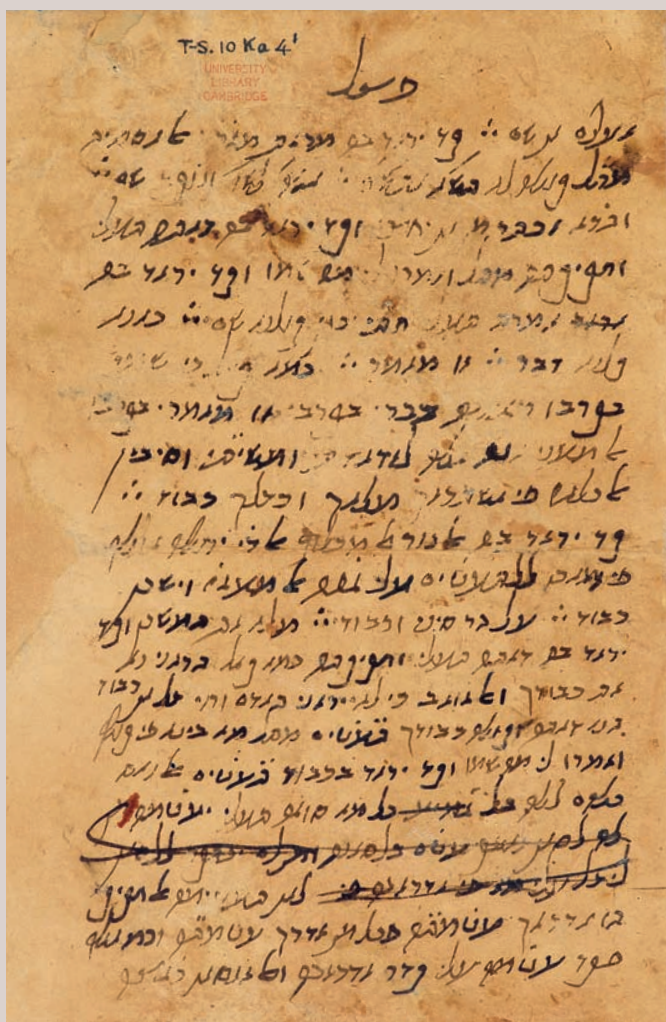
Because there are no medieval testimonies on the practice of *geniza*, we will never be sure what motivated the Shami congregation of Fustat to store its papers. Based on modern practices of *geniza*, however, scholars have made some educated guesses. One reconstruction speculates that medieval Jews believed that just as the body is a container for the soul and deserves a proper burial, so too should manuscripts be buried after they've become too worn to transmit knowledge.

Indeed, some modern Jewish communities store texts in a *geniza* until they can be buried. In Ottoman Jerusalem in the nineteenth century, Jews emptied their *beit geniza* and brought it to the cemetery once every seven years in a festive ceremony, or else during droughts in an effort to bring rainfall. For unknown reasons, the members of the Shami congregation in Fustat did not bury their papers systematically, and in the eleventh century, when they rebuilt their synagogue, they provisioned it with

a *beit geniza* so large that they could fill it up indefinitely.⁶

The community deposited its papers in their *geniza* chamber continuously for nearly nine centuries, but the best-documented period is 1000–1250. This is fortunate for two reasons. First, until the Geniza's discovery, this had been one of the least-known periods in Jewish history, populated only by the religious, philosophical, and literary works that happened to have been continuously transmitted rather than lost, destroyed, or confiscated and censored by the church in medieval Europe. Second, during this period Egypt happened to be the center of the Islamic world and the hub of the Mediterranean and Indian Ocean trades. Geniza documents were therefore able to illuminate not only medieval Jewish communities but the entire burgeoning society of which they were a part.

There have been other sensational finds since the Cairo Geniza. In 1945, a number of ancient Christian books came to light at Nag' Hammadi in Upper Egypt. One of them was the apocryphal Gospel of Thomas, almost in its entirety, in Coptic translation; it turned out to be the same Christian text in the



A draft of Maimonides's *Guide for the Perplexed*. Egypt, late twelfth century, Judeo-Arabic fragment discovered in the Cairo Geniza. Cambridge University Library, coll. Taylor-Schechter. By kind permission of the Syndics of Cambridge University Library.

original Greek that Grenfell and Hunt had excavated at Oxyrhynchus half a century earlier. In 1947, a Palestinian shepherd at Khirbet Qumran near the Dead Sea discovered a clay jar containing ancient Hebrew books. Excavations of the site over the next decade revealed an ancient Jewish library—now known as the Dead Sea Scrolls—containing the earliest copies of biblical and apocryphal Hebrew texts ever found. Both these finds were small compared to the riches of Oxyrhynchus and the Geniza. But while Oxyrhynchus yielded mainly documentary texts related to a provincial town, the Geniza has offered generations of scholars the opportunity to reevaluate medieval Jewish culture in the context of the cosmopolitan, urban culture that produced and consumed it. ●

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The Jews of the Fatimid Caliphate (Cornell University Press, 2008) and coeditor with Robert Chazan of the fifth and sixth volumes of *The Cambridge History of Judaism* (Cambridge University Press, forthcoming).

1. The Geniza's contents are now housed in fifty libraries and several private collections. Most are being made available online as digital images through the Friedberg Genizah Project (www.genizah.org).
2. On the excavation of Oxyrhynchus and its contents, see Peter Parsons, *City of the Sharp-Nosed Fish: Greek Lives in Roman Egypt* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 2007).
3. For a wonderful, readable account of the scholarly discovery of the Geniza, see Adina Hoffman and Peter Cole, *Sacred Trash: The Lost and Found World of the Cairo Geniza* (New York: Schocken, 2011).
4. Hoffman and Cole, *Sacred Trash*, 103, 119.
5. The classic work is S. D. Goitein, *A Mediterranean Society: The Jewish Communities of the Arab World as Portrayed in the Documents of the Cairo Geniza*, 6 vols. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1967–88). There are now also scores of newer works by Goitein's students and their students.
6. Goitein, *Mediterranean Society*, 1:17.

Baghdad

The city of Baghdad was built in the middle of the eighth century as the capital of a new dynasty, that of the Abbasid caliphs, who took power in 750. Within a few decades, Baghdad had become the economic and cultural center of the Middle East, attracting scholars and merchants from all over the empire. Jews, Muslims, Christians, and Zoroastrians, people from Bukhara and Khorasan, from Yemen, Syria, and Egypt, flocked to the City of Peace (*Madinat al-Salam*, as its founders called it), contributing to one of the most diverse and dynamic cultural contexts the world has known.

The sources documenting Baghdad in the Abbasid era are ample. They attest to many of the great men of the age (though to fewer women), particularly their political activities, courtly intrigues, and cultural output. The Jewish sources take a special position among these, since they offer glimpses of life beyond political circles and the literary elite.

Baghdad housed as many as 500,000 inhabitants at its height in the late ninth and early tenth centuries.¹

What did it take for a city to sustain a population of this magnitude? Most important, a steady food and water supply. Baghdad was well situated at the northern side of the vast alluvial plain between the Tigris and the Euphrates—an area of such rich, fertile silt that the Arabs named it *al-Sawad*, “the black land.” The Abbasids took advantage of this setting by expanding the pre-Islamic system of irrigation canals. They also ensured the food supply to Baghdad by taxing peasants in the hinterland in kind rather than coin; the peasants thus avoided borrowing tax money at ruinous rates of interest. When the Abbasids moved the capital from Damascus to Baghdad, they enabled themselves to collect more taxes and thus to harness the riches of Iraq: the *Sawad* yielded more than five times as much in taxation as the provinces of Syria and Palestine.²

The geographer al-Maqdisi (d. ca. 990) reports that in his day, Jews were the third largest population group in Iraq and Iran, after Muslims and Zoroastrians; he included rural areas in which Jews were clearly a majority, such as the *Jibal* in Iran and the area around *Sura*, which still housed mainly Jews well into the tenth century, if not later. But estimating the Jewish population of Iraq and Baghdad presents difficulties because of a severe paucity of information. The only figure that has been transmitted to us comes from the Iberian Jewish traveler Benjamin of Tudela, who visited Baghdad in 1170 and estimated 40,000 Jewish inhabitants, 28 synagogues, and 10 institutions of higher learning. These figures are plausible. At Baghdad’s height in the tenth century, between 50,000 and 75,000 Jews would not be an unreasonable guess, between 10 and 15 percent of the total population.

As the Iraqi population urbanized and the Abbasids came to rule one of the largest empires in world history, Baghdad grew into the most important city in the Near East.

The burden of subsistence farming and the economic attractions of the city spurred ever greater numbers of peasants to abandon agriculture. With urban growth came vastly expanded geographic mobility and commerce; long-distance traders brought goods, information, and people (including slaves) from as far away as al-Andalus, India, Constantinople, and the land of the Slavs, and the Abbasid court served as a prime market for them. Selling luxury goods to rulers could mean gaining a permanent place at the Abbasid court or else accumulating so much capital in trade as to make a move into banking possible.

Indeed, the Abbasid court served as an economic magnet, bringing commerce to the city and the

possibility of work in the bureaucracy and the army. Over the course of the ninth century the court grew into an extensive machinery, staffing thousands of employees. The caliphs retreated behind the walls of their palaces and became less accessible to the outside world. They were protected by endless numbers of guards and attendants, among whom the vizier (*wazīr*) and the main chamberlain (*hājib*) were the most powerful.

The bureaucracy in Baghdad was an immense apparatus with tens of specialized departments dealing, for example, with land taxes, state landholdings, military affairs, official correspondence, and the minting of coins. These bureaus were staffed by salaried professionals. Most of the high-ranking scribes – we lack information on the anonymous subordinate scribes – came from families of large landowners and merchants in the Sawad. Scribes with non-Muslim and non-Arab backgrounds were well

represented in the bureaucracy. Many Christians reached high-ranking positions, becoming directors or subdirectors of administrative departments. The same was true for the Shiite minorities; one of the most famous viziers of the early tenth century, Ibn al-Furat, was of Shi'ite origin. Jews are rarely mentioned in the administrative departments, except for the position of court banker and *jahbadh*, who supplied funds for the often deficient state treasury and measured the weights and values of gold (*dīnār*) and silver (*dirham*) coins in the Abbasid Empire's bimetallic economy.

One of the most noticeable features of the Abbasid administration was its extensive use of written documents – especially when compared to the administrations of early medieval Europe. The number and types of specialized letters, surveys, registers, reports, financial accounts, and internal



A tenth-century specimen of Baghdad paper: a letter from Nehemiah, *gaon* of the Pumbedita academy in Baghdad (960–68), to an Iraqi leader in Fustat (Old Cairo) complaining that the Egyptians have ignored his appeals for donations. Cambridge University Library, T-S 12.851. By kind permission of the Syndics of Cambridge University Library.

memoranda are overwhelming. So are the references to archives. The introduction of paper manufacture from Central Asia also played a major role in the dissemination of written documents within the Abbasid administration. Unfortunately, the original documents from Iraq have been lost, though a few have been copied into narrative sources, and Abbasid documents on papyrus and leather have survived from the provincial administrations of Egypt and Khorasan.

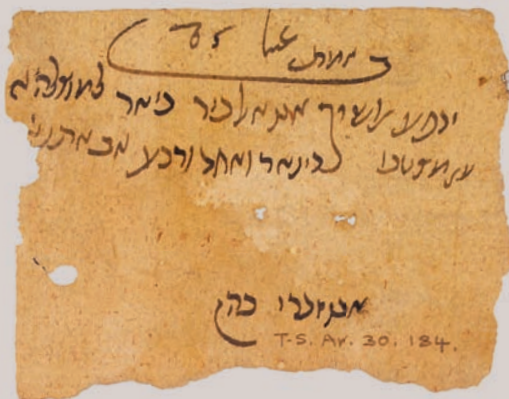
The Abbasid bureaucracy must have required vast quantities of paper. Soon after the first paper mills in the Islamic world were founded in Iraq, Baghdad became so closely associated with the manufacture of excellent paper that Byzantine writings referred to it as *bagdatikhon*.

The availability of paper also affected the book trade. By the early ninth century, there were no fewer than one hundred bookshops in Baghdad's paper-sellers' market (*sūq al-warrāqīn*) vending and copying books. If they served a population on the order of half a million people, this is a remarkably high ratio of booksellers to inhabitants even by modern standards. The demands of literary consumers

should not, however, be overstated: literacy rates in premodern societies were low.

Baghdad soon became the home of the most important scholars of the era. Literary salons multiplied, and a wave of translations from Greek, Persian, and Syriac to Arabic introduced ancient scientific and philosophical works to a new public. Cultural life was far from exclusively Islamic. Although Baghdad attracted the most important Islamic jurists and theologians from the empire, Christians played a vital role in the translation of the classical Greek heritage, and Jews are attested among the earliest exponents of *kalām*, or speculative reasoning, in the ninth century. In the ninth and tenth centuries, scholars of all three faiths evidence new interest in Arabic translations of the Jewish and Christian scriptures. Until then, Muslims had cited biblical stories only in their Islamized form, as *qis.as*, *al-anbiyā'* or *isrā'īliyyāt* (legends about pre-Islamic prophets and biblical Israelites). But in late ninth-century Iraq, they began to gain access to Arabic translations of the biblical text itself. The Iraqi polymaths Ibn Qutayba (828–89) and al-Jahiz (781–869), and the great Abbasid historian and Qur'an commentator al-Tabari (839–923), all quoted the Bible on the basis of Christian Arabic translations made from the Syriac translation of the Septuagint. That translation would also shape the Judeo-Arabic Bible translations of Sa'adya ben Yosef al-Fayyumi, *gaon* of Sura in Baghdad (928–42), who set a new standard for translation of the Hebrew Bible into Arabic; his translation would, in turn, influence Christian Arabic translations for centuries. None of this is obvious, since the Hebrew Bible and the Greek Septuagint from which the Christian Syriac translations were made are not identical; it attests to the mobility across religious boundaries of the biblical text – and of the Baghdadi scholars who studied it.³

Abbasid Baghdad witnessed the spread of a culture that valued literacy highly. Scribes in the bureaucracy



A suftaja written by a merchants' representative (*wakīl tujjār*) in Fustat, Abu Zikri Yehudah ben Yosef ha-Kohen (fl. 1131–ca. 1149). More than eighty of his *safātij* have been preserved. Like modern checks, this *suftaja* specifies the amount to be paid to the recipient written in numerals and words. Cambridge University Library, T-S Ar. 30.184d. By kind permission of the Syndics of Cambridge University Library.

expressed their corporate identity through their expertise in writing, producing specialized treatises; legal specialists edited and standardized model documents to make them more effective and watertight; and religious experts discussed the advantages and disadvantages of writing down traditions, prophetic traditions in the case of Muslims and rabbinic ones in the case of Jews. One of the most striking outcomes of the dissemination of literacy was the growing trust in writing and written documents.

Such a development is clearly visible in written documents supporting financial transactions, especially the *suftaja* (pl., *safātij*), a written bill of credit used in both the tax administration of the remote provinces and long-distance trade. The *suftaja* spread all over the empire. The tenth-century historian al-Miskawayh attests to the provincial administration's reliance on it during the reign of al-Muqtadir (908–32), when the vizier 'Ali ibn 'Isa and his successor Abu 'Ali ibn Muqla were sent the contents of the treasury of Ahwaz in *safātij* of 300,000 and 600,000 dirhams, respectively.⁴ Trade, too, benefited from the use of the *suftaja*. The Babylonian *geonim* endorsed its use by Jewish merchants, despite a Talmudic prohibition against employing a similar antique device called a *diyogqni*.⁵

The early tenth century saw the political breakdown of the Abbasid caliphate. The state was afflicted by major financial deficits caused by wars, mismanagement, and devastation of the fragile agricultural land of Iraq. The need for immediate cash forced viziers and caliphs to introduce fiscal privileges for large landowners and to enter into unfavorable contracts with tax farmers; the caliphs borrowed money from wealthy merchants and bankers at high rates of interest. Meanwhile, faraway provinces of the empire, including Ifriqiya (central North Africa), rebelled, requiring military expeditions and thus higher expenses. The army claimed an ever-increasing role in the political arena, and the caliph came to depend on its goodwill. In 936, the military governor of Wasit, Ibn Ra'iq, came to

Baghdad to take over the administration, effectively marking the end of the political and military power of the Abbasid caliphs. ●

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1. Premodern population estimates are necessarily speculative. There were no census registers, the sources offer varying (usually very high) estimates, and numbers can be miscopied in manuscripts. Hilal al-Sabi' (969–1056) offered what he called a conservative estimate of 96 million (!) based on the number of public baths (see his *Rusum dar al-khilafa*, ed. M. 'Awwad [Baghdad: Matba'at al-'ani, 1964, 18–19]). Al-Sabi' also criticizes his predecessors who have "greatly exaggerated their descriptions of Baghdad without giving us proof and without increasing our knowledge" or offering "reasonable or dependable arguments." Still others provided estimates based on the quantity of soap used in bathhouses or the number of male and female singers.

2. On the regional economic system that sustained Baghdad and benefited from its riches, see Hugh Kennedy, "Feeding the Five Hundred Thousand: Cities and Agriculture in Early Islamic Mesopotamia," *Iraq* 73 (2011): 177–99.

3. Ronny Vollandt, "Christian-Arabic Translations of the Pentateuch from the 9th to the 13th Centuries: A Comparative Study of Manuscripts and Translation Techniques" (PhD dissertation, Cambridge University, 2011), 22, 63–75, 182–204 passim.

4. Ahmad b. Muhammad al-Miskawayh, *Tajarib al-umam* (The Experiences of Nations), ed. Amedroz and Margoliouth (London: Blackwell, 1920–21), 1:187.

5. The most recent discussion of the ruling and of the Greek etymology of the word *diyogq-ni* appears in Mark R. Cohen's book manuscript in progress, tentatively titled *Law and Society in Maimonides' "Mishneh Torah": Codification on the Post-Talmudic Islamic Economy*, introduction. Thanks to Professor Cohen for making parts of this work available to us.

Persecutions under the Reign of al-Hakim

In the last quarter of the ninth century, the Islamic world was the birthplace of the Ismaili movement, a Shi'ite current whose objective was to establish an alternative to Sunni Muslim society. Propagandists spread the Ismaili doctrine, and underground groups organized throughout the Islamic world. A specific Ismaili current came into being in North Africa in 893; its followers took the name "Fatimids" (a reference to their direct ancestor Fatima, daughter of the Prophet, and to her husband, 'Ali, Muhammad's cousin). They managed to assemble an army from the local Berber tribes and formed a Fatimid kingdom in the Maghreb, centered around Kairouan and Mahdia, the port they built nearby. But the aim of the Fatimids was to conquer Baghdad, capital of the Abbasids; they wanted to impose their doctrine on the entire Islamic world. In 969 the Fatimid caliph al-Mu'izz succeeded in conquering Egypt, after an operation meticulously planned by Ya'aqub ibn Killis, a Jewish vizier who had converted to Islam. Within a year, the Fatimids added most of Palestine as well as southern Syria to their conquests and founded a new capital in Egypt: Cairo, near the former capital of Fustat. Al-'Aziz, al-Mu'izz's son, pursued the task of establishing the new kingdom. He turned away from the Maghreb to concentrate on Egypt, Palestine, and Syria. He devoted himself particularly to the kingdom's commercial development. Upon his death in 996, his eleventh son, al-Hakim Bi-Amr Allah, ascended to the throne. He had been born to a Christian mother, and his court included a large number of Christians.¹

Traditionally, the Jews supported the power in place, which usually ensured them protection and security. In the early years of his reign, al-Hakim seems to have followed that practice. This is indicated by a Jewish text discovered in the Geniza, commonly called the "Egyptian Scroll." It mentions an event dating to the beginning of the year 1012. During formal Jewish funeral

ceremonies, the populace had attacked the Jews in the cortege. The police arrested and incarcerated twenty-three Jews. Having learned of these events, al-Hakim took the trouble to make inquiries, and, after his investigations, concluded that the Jews were innocent and sent them home. The Egyptian Scroll celebrates him for that action in the following terms: "The king, may he live eternally, king of justice, who hates the wicked and whose throne offers the hope of clemency."²

The Islamic sources, most of them written by Sunnis, were quite naturally hostile to the Ismaili Fatimids in general, and to al-Hakim in particular. This is why the information they provide focuses especially on the repression by al-Hakim and on the decrees he promulgated during that period. The primary targets of these decrees were the Christians, beginning in about 1007, then the Jews, apparently from 1012 on; but the Sunni Muslim population was also targeted. That repression reached its peak in 1009, when al-Hakim gave the order to destroy the Church of the Holy Sepulchre and to confiscate all its property. He also ordered the destruction of all the churches and synagogues in his kingdom. He compelled the Jews and Christians to wear humiliating signs intended to set them apart from the Muslims. According to certain sources, he even made the Jews and Christians choose between converting to Islam or being expelled, an attitude in total contradiction with Muslim belief ever since its origins in the Qur'an, which proscribes constraint in religion (Qur'an 2:256). Only one allusive reference to these events appears in the documents of the Geniza, in a letter whose ending is missing, written in about 1013 by Elhanan ben Shemaria, son of Shemaria ben Elhanan, leader of the community of Fustat. It is addressed to the Jewish community of Jerusalem. Here is the end of the text as it has come down to us: "The evil things grew and the good went away. . . . Synagogues were destroyed,

omens came: the scrolls of the Torah were torn up and their shreds cast to the four winds, the holy books were scattered in the streets . . . the churches were destroyed and turned into rubbish heaps, we dressed in black and our faces are dark, our houses are filled with moaning, wood is hung around our necks, we are grief-stricken and have no peace. . . . Many have abandoned their faith and turned away from religion.” That is a somber evocation of the repressive measures: synagogues destroyed and profaned, Torah scrolls burned, the humiliation of wearing distinctive signs (for example, a piece of wood around the neck), forced conversion to Islam.³

The sources provide no clear explanation of al-Hakim's motives. A few contemporary researchers refer to mental imbalance, while others attempt to interpret his acts in the light of his fanatical desire to be the incarnation of the Mahdi (Messiah), who occupies a fundamental place in Fatimid thought. The coming of a descendant of ‘Ali is expected, one who will guide the world on the right path. Regarded objectively, al-Hakim's acts can be seen as a way of imposing the Pact of ‘Umar in particularly extreme ways. But in the last years of his life, al-Hakim allowed the exiles to return, and the places of worship that had been destroyed were gradually rebuilt throughout his kingdom. He even allowed the Jews and Christians who had been forcibly converted to Islam to return to their original religion (despite the fact that apostasy was punishable by death, according to most Muslim jurisconsults). The life of the Jewish community more or less resumed its normal course in 1016, some five years before al-Hakim was assassinated.

The relations between al-Hakim and the Jews and Christians were an anomaly in the Fatimid kingdom and, more generally, in the view of the world elaborated by Islam, and gave rise to strong opposition among the Sunni Muslims. Yet we have found no evidence other than the letter of Elhanan ben Shemaria, and it is impossible to know for certain what sort of relations the Jews maintained with al-Hakim. We must, however, take into account the Jews' traditional allegiance to the power in place and the praise they bestowed on the

caliph before the repressive decrees. It is true that al-Hakim's reign developed under unstable conditions. There were local revolts in Egypt and an uprising by the bedouin in Palestine. The inadequate flooding of the Nile for several years in a row plunged Egypt into famine and destitution, stirring up discontent. It is plausible that the Jews, like the rest of the population, suffered from his manner of exercising power and even more from his enforcement of the Pact of ‘Umar, but we have found no written statements expressing hatred toward him. Conversely, several positive elements of al-Hakim's reign are identifiable: the construction of lavish mosques in Cairo; the founding of al-Azhar, a richly endowed study institute intended to spread the Ismaili doctrine; the establishment of political contacts and the conclusion of several treaties with Byzantium; and the maintenance of an acceptable level of order in the kingdom, despite the many revolts. Al-Hakim was nonetheless assassinated in 1021. Because his body was never found, mystic groups such as the Druze concluded that he truly was the Mahdi and that he would reappear when the time came. His son, az-Zahir, succeeded him on the throne.⁴ ●

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1. S. Lane-Poole, *A History of Egypt in the Middle Ages* (London: Nabu Press, 1968), 92–136.

2. Quoted in Jacob Mann, *The Jews in Egypt and in Palestine under the Fatimid Caliphs* (New York: Cornell University Library, 1970).

3. M. Gil, *Eretz Israel ba-tekufa ha-muslemit ha-rishona* [Palestine during the Early Islamic Period, 634–1099], part 2: *Documents of the Cairo Geniza* (Tel Aviv, Tel Aviv University, 1983), B, 43.

4. Yacov Lev, *State and Society in Fatimid Egypt* (Leiden: Brill, 1991), 25–37.

Jerusalem

The entrance of the first Muslim armies into Jerusalem is shrouded in mystery, yet we can nevertheless distinguish two stages: the first siege was carried out in the winter of 634 and the second occurred after the disastrous defeat of the Byzantines in the Battle of Yarmuk in the summer of 636. Following negotiations between the Muslims (Saracens) and the patriarch Sophronius (d. 638), who served as the head of the church of Jerusalem, the city capitulated. The account of the negotiations between the caliph 'Umar and the patriarch is merely a historical legend, while the stories on the participation of the Jews in the first phase of Islamic rule reflect an apocalyptic interpretation of the events. It seems that immediately after the withdrawal of the Byzantine army from inland Syria, the old proscription that

banned the Jews from inhabiting Jerusalem, which was confirmed in the abovementioned treaty, was lifted by the new regime.

Muslim sources tell about the participation of Jews in the excavation of the Temple Mount and the (building of the) foundation of a new sacred space (*harām*), that is, the al-Aqsa Mosque and the Dome of the Rock, which late Jewish sources confirm. Mention of the al-Aqsa Mosque recalls the sacred place of Jerusalem in Muslim belief. There, according to the exegeses of the Qur'an (Sura 17:1) and the hadith, one night the angel Gabriel miraculously transported the Prophet Muhammed, via a mythical steed, to "the Farthest Mosque" (*al-Masjid al-Aqsa*) in Jerusalem. On his arrival the Prophet met and prayed with some of the prophets, including Moses and Jesus, and also ascended to heaven and spoke with God.

Muslims and Jews shared the vision of Jerusalem as a sacred city, the place where King David and King Solomon (prophets in Islamic tradition) ruled and erected the Temple (*masjid*, or mosque, in Islamic tradition). Yet while the Jews envisioned the holy city as the navel (umbilicus) of the universe, the Muslims considered Jerusalem as a secondary sacred location, next to Mecca. In their prayers they turn to this sacred city, where the Caaba, the shrine of Abraham, is situated. Nevertheless, through the period covered in this article, a rich literary output of tractates that praised the merits of Jerusalem (*al-Quds*: "the Holy" in Arabic) was recorded.

A Jewish population flourished in Jerusalem under the aegis of the caliphs. The specific location of their neighborhood in the city is disputed. The yeshiva of Jerusalem gained wide fame and recognition. Some of the families immigrated from northern Palestine;



Fighting at the gates of Jerusalem, Ottoman painting, 1583. Istanbul, Museum of Turkish and Islamic Arts.

others migrated from all over the Islamic world. With the renewal of maritime communication between Southern Europe and the Eastern Mediterranean (in the tenth century) connections between the Jews of Europe and the Jews of Palestine were reestablished. In addition to Rabbanites, the city also housed a vibrant Karaite community.

The significance of the city in Jewish religious life under the caliphs can be deduced from the ceremony of the declaration of the new moon (month) on the Mount of Olives. On the day of Hoshana Rabbah (the seventh day of Sukkoth/Tabernacles), the chiefs of the yeshiva of Jerusalem would ascend to the Mount of Olives and make the proclamation of the calendar, that is, they gave the dates of the upcoming Jewish festivals and indicated whether the year would be a leap year. Jewish pilgrims from the East as well as the West came to Jerusalem. A ritual of circumambulating the Haram al-Sharif's walls and praying at its gates took place yearly on Hoshana Rabbah, just as in Temple times. From the southern wall, the so-called Gate of the Priest, the procession would climb to the "chair" (a long sacred stone). In addition to the proclamation of the calendar, the heads of the yeshiva would announce the nominations of new scholars and leaders. This was followed by the collection of donations from the audience and a festive meal. At that time, the early custom of contributing money to light candles at the Dome of the Rock vanished, and was seemingly replaced with the Jews contributing to communal charity institutions in the city and to the Jerusalem yeshiva.

The rich documentation found in the Cairo Geniza sheds light on Jewish life in Jerusalem during those centuries, and on communication between the local communities and other Jewish congregations and with the Diaspora. From these documents we learn that during the Fatimid period, the head of the Jerusalem yeshiva (*gaon*) served as the head (*ra'ṣ al-yahūd*) of the Jews of the Fatimid state.

Toward the closing decades of the eleventh century, the number of Jews in Jerusalem shrank and their

economic condition went from bad to worse. The yeshiva, the heart of the intellectual and judicial community, emigrated from Jerusalem to Tyre. The Franks renewed the old Byzantine rule that banned Jews from dwelling in Jerusalem, but the Muslim sultan Saladin abolished this decree in October 1187. Following his victory in Hattin in northern Palestine, Saladin led his armies to attack the fortified cities and towns of the Latin Kingdom of Jerusalem. The sultan synchronized the recapture of Jerusalem with the Islamic calendar, and his army entered the city "in striking coincidence" with the anniversary of the Prophet Muhammad's ascension to heaven (*al-'Isrā' wal-Mi'rā'*), which is traditionally celebrated on the night of Rajab 27. During the negotiations that led to the surrendering of the city, the Franks of Jerusalem secured a treaty with Saladin. The parties agreed that the Latins would ransom themselves and go free. Following his entry, the sultan ordered the purification of Jerusalem. The Dome of the Rock and the al-Aqsa Mosque were re-Islamized. Some assume that at that event the famed volume containing all the books of the Hebrew Bible, which was revised by Rabbi Aaron Ben Asher and was considered as the most authoritative, was removed to Egypt, where Maimonides (A.D. 1138–1204) saw it. The claim that Saladin issued a call to the Jews to come settle in Jerusalem as a new Cyrus (see Ezra 1:1–3) is probably a myth.

Yet, this was a very short period of relief. The armies of the Third Crusade threatened to capture Jerusalem. Considering the advance of Richard the First (the Lionheart) as a grave menace to the city, Saladin ordered that Jerusalem should be refortified and repopulated with loyal inhabitants, among whom were probably Jews. A popular historical legend narrates that during his advance toward Jerusalem, King Richard fell ill and Maimonides turned down an invitation to travel to Palestine to treat the sick king. Yet, as Bernard Lewis has already demonstrated, this is a nice anecdote but absolutely without historical foundation.

In the wake of the truce with King Richard, Saladin returned to Damascus, where he passed away, leaving the sultanate to his Ayyubid heirs. They governed the Holy City for several decades. During these years they contributed modestly to attiring Jerusalem with an Islamic robe. Some Jews reinhabited the city.

The Hebrew poet Judah Alharizi, in his *maqāma* (Tahkemoni 16:39), mentions that he saw three Jewish communities in Jerusalem (A.D. 1216): al-Ifranji (literally “Franks,” from Latin Europe), Maghribians (from North Africa/Spain), and al-Shamiyun (from Syria-Palestine). It might be that this last congregation settled in the city during the years between the victory at Hattin and the advance of King Richard. The realm of the Ayyubids stretched

from southern Turkey (Ashur/Assyria) to Yemen, and presumably Jews from these lands moved to Jerusalem, too. Several letters from the Geniza tell stories of these worshippers.

The economic destitution, the arrangements concluded between the Ayyubids and the Franks, and the advance of the Mongols reduced the size of the Jewish population of Jerusalem in the last decades of the Ayyubids almost to nothing. ●

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