



Map 2. The Route to India

benedictions, was said by Jews over bread baked of wheat, barley, or other Near Eastern grains, but not over the foreign rice, the staple fare of India (no. 38, n. 14). But saying grace was no less a necessity of life than taking food.

Three members of the leading Jewish family of Aden were ship-owners, two of whom actually operated as such (no. 37, sec. B; no. 9); for the third see no. 38, n. 3. In the Mediterranean we have only one story about a Jewish shipowner, no. 76. For "the shipowner" and his son, mentioned in various lists of contributors to charitable collections in Fustat in the early decades of the thirteenth century (*Med. Soc.*, II, 508), are described with the Persian word *nāḳhudā*, which was used in Indian waters, not in the Mediterranean. Thus it seems that in the multinational countries bordering on the Indian Ocean it was easier for a minority group to gain prominence in maritime undertakings than in the Mediterranean area, where Muslims and Christians were poised one against another as powerful hostile camps. Maḏmūn (no. 37) was superintendent of the port of Aden, and a Muslim source reports that a Jew with the family name Khalaf, perhaps a relative of the writer of no. 38, drew up the customs tariff of that port.

With the exception of nos. 9, 10, and 79, the India papers are presented here as a group, and not dispersed chronologically between other material. This was done in order to convey to the reader an impression of the world of the India traders despite the comparatively limited space allotted to them.

### 36 THE VICISSITUDES OF THE TRADE

*An India Trader, involved in lawsuits after his return to Fustat, writes to the Trustee of the Merchants in Aden, South Arabia*

1097

The adventures and tribulations of Joseph Lebdi, the writer of this letter, are described in detail in my article "From the Mediterranean to India," *Speculum* 29 (1954), 191-195. His family name is

derived from the town of Lebda on the Tripolitanian coast, the ancient Leptis Magna, whose magnificent ruins are among the most impressive remnants of the Roman presence in North Africa. He was a native of Tripoli, Libya, but later settled in Fustat.

Before setting out eastward to India, Joseph traveled westward to al-Mahdiyya, Tunisia, and collected goods from other merchants in order to trade with them on his way. He did the same, to a far larger extent, in Fustat. His trip to India, however, on which he was accompanied by the brothers of the trustee of the merchants of Aden, was marred by shipwreck and other misfortunes involving great losses. As is natural, he faced lawsuits after his return. Eighteen documents have been preserved on this affair, which provide us with much interesting information about the India trade at the end of the eleventh century.

The plaintiff against Joseph, who was a "trustee of merchants" in Fustat, had the same first name, but is always referred to here as Abū Ya'qūb al-Ḥakīm ("the father of Jacob, the Doctor").<sup>1</sup> Al-Ḥakīm entrusted Lebdi with textiles of various types, copper, silver vessels, drugs, chemicals, and corals, and instructed him to deliver one half to the trustee of the merchants in Aden for buying pepper on the Malabar coast of southern India and to take with him the other half to a place in the Gujarat province (in western India, farther to the north), where he should exchange it for lac. But Lebdi sold part of the goods on his way to Aden, and, with the best of intentions, deviated in other ways from al-Ḥakīm's provisions. Thus he became, at least in part, responsible for the losses.

Our letter was written at an early stage of the lawsuit, for which we have dated documents from November 9, 1097, through August 18, 1098. It is a draft written by the court clerk Hillel b. Eli in the record book of the court, because it was to serve as a piece of evidence in the lawsuit. It was addressed to the trustee of the merchants in Aden, Abū 'Alī Ḥasan (Hebraized as Japheth) b. Bundār, who had indeed bought fifty sacks of pepper, at a price of 5 dinars per

<sup>1</sup> In the Bible and in the Koran, too, Joseph was the son of Jacob. Since the first-born boy used to be called after his grandfather, a Joseph was given the honorific byname "father of Jacob" even while still in the cradle. "The Doctor" was the family name derived from the profession exercised by an ancestor. A grandson of this trustee of the merchants again became a physician.

sack, as instructed. Ḥasan-Japheth had noted all the transactions made in Aden in his account book, as is expressly stated in another letter by Lebdi, wherefore their knowledge is presupposed here. Fortunately, we know them because reference was made to them during the proceedings of the lawsuit.

Despite his bad luck on this trip, Lebdi was a prosperous merchant, as we know from other Geniza documents. He perished while traveling abroad, which did not deter his son from following in the footsteps of his father. We are able to trace the destinies of Lebdi's descendants until the middle of the thirteenth century, which is the more impressive as the known beginnings of the family go back to the tenth.

Bodleian Library, Oxford, MS Heb. d 66 (Cat. 2878),  
f. 66v, *India Book* 13.

*In Your name, o Merci(ful).*

My lord, the illustrious elder Abū 'Alī, (*our*) *m(aster and t(each)er) Japheth*, . . . *the Prince of the Congregations*,<sup>2</sup> . . . my preceding letter to you relieves me from repeating here all its details.<sup>3</sup>

I am unable to describe to you—may God protect your honored position—the bickerings and quarrels I had to endure from the elder Abū Ya'qūb, the Doctor, with regard to the goods which I carried for him, part of which I left with my lord, namely:

Small silver vessels, seven in number; their weight is given in the aforementioned letter

A load of alcali, according to the Doctor weighing 400 mann (about 800 pounds)

Copper, weighing 110 pounds, according to him

Thyme, 10 mann, according to him

A small container with scammony

Things have happened between me and him which your excellency is too illustrious to hear from me. But those who will travel to your place will tell you. I had made him a prepayment of 100

<sup>2</sup> This title implies that the trustee of the merchants served also as head of the Jewish community in southern Yemen.

<sup>3</sup> A much corrected, and therefore not dispatched, version of this letter is contained in *India Book* 14 (69 lines preserved). Most interesting, but too much mutilated for consecutive translation here.

dinars on these goods until their proceeds would arrive. But after these settlements had been reached, we both began to argue and wrangle until the matter reached the courts. Finally, upright elders intervened, and today a settlement was reached to the effect that I should write you as follows:

Kindly list all the proceeds from the goods belonging to the elder Abū Ya'qūb, the Doctor, and also of the fifty sacks (of pepper), as far as they have been saved, on the payment of which my lord had given me respite,<sup>4</sup> for I had made up my mind that he should have fifteen sacks of them. Of the total received deduct the 100 dinars I have prepaid him here, plus 11 1/2 dinars I had paid for the goods,<sup>5</sup> and hand over the balance to your representative in accordance with your kindness to me at all times. I know well that all this causes you much trouble and I feel very badly about this, but it is not on my initiative that I write this letter. I am forced to do so. The account given to your representative should be an official document, signed by the elders.<sup>6</sup>

I wish to inform you also that it was established here in court that the total due me from my lord is:

100 dinars

11 1/2 dinars for the balance of the copper<sup>7</sup>

3 dinars for the additional expenses<sup>8</sup>

Fifteen sacks of pepper, 5 dinars per sack.

All that is above the total of this sum belongs to him and all that is less, to me, and he has no share in it and no responsibility; even if all has perished he is not obliged to return the prepayment of 100 dinars. This is stated expressly in *the record of the court*.

Now, my lord, exercise your usual circumspection—may I never

<sup>4</sup> Since Ḥasan-Japheth had goods of both Lebdi and the Doctor in his warehouse, he ordered pepper for them in India without demanding cash in advance, as was usual. While writing the letter referred to in the previous note, Lebdi did not yet know that most of the pepper, too, had been lost. This additional misfortune naturally exacerbated the situation.

<sup>5</sup> See n. 7, below.

<sup>6</sup> And not merely a report of the trustee of the merchants.

<sup>7</sup> The Doctor had sent hammered copper (*naḥās darb*). In Aden it was found out that only cast copper (*ṣabb*) could be exported to India. Lebdi paid the difference, 11 1/2 dinars.

<sup>8</sup> The Doctor had given 20 dinars to Lebdi for expenses (freight, customs, etc.). But the total at reaching Aden was 23 dinars.

be deprived of you and never miss your favors—and examine with the light of God, the exalted, the case of those fifty sacks of pepper. Divide what has been salvaged in proper proportion between him and me. Originally, thirty-five sacks had been mine and fifteen his. So, divide the remains accordingly and explain everything clearly. The proceeds from the cast copper<sup>9</sup> belong to the elder Abū Ya'qūb, not to me. Please copy from your account book all that is due him after deduction of customs and commission and give a certified copy to your representative. Buy whatever you deem fit for my 100 dinars and send it with whomever you prefer. If possible, send pepper or lac. At the time of the sending of the shipment, please inform some of our coreligionists traveling here, at least two of them. *And peace.*

### 37 THE LEADERS OF THE INDIA TRADE

*The Trustee of the Merchants in Aden writes to his counterpart in the capital of Egypt*

Ca. 1130

This important and large fragment (69 lines preserved) lacks both the beginning and the end and consequently the address is also missing. But it is in the unmistakable, characteristic hand of Maḍmūn I b. Japheth, the son and successor (in his capacity of trustee of merchants) of the recipient of the preceding selection, no. 36. The graphological evidence is confirmed by many details, which also indicate that the letter was addressed to Maḍmūn's counterpart in Fustat, Abū Zikrī Judah Kohen b. Joseph, who also happened to be his brother-in-law (see no. 9, above).

This letter presents an excellent illustration of the activities of a Jewish trustee of merchants in a port city. He takes care of the estate of foreign traders who perished in shipwreck (sec. A) and collaborates closely with the most prominent Muslim merchant in town (secs. B, C). This man, Bilāl b. Jarīr, later became a general and ruler of Aden, a transition natural in medieval mercantile nations, such as the Arabs and Italians. Maḍmūn constructed a ship, presum-

<sup>9</sup> Called here *butrūh*, the term common in the India trade.