

MERCATOR, MEDIATOR

Jewish Traders in Times of Christian-Islamic Strife

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This paper analyzes the role Jewish traders played in the economy across medieval Europe and the near East. Using primary sources such as discarded documents from the Cairo Geniza, the itineraries of a Jewish traveler, and decrees from governing bodies and religious institutions alongside secondary scholarship, it determines that Jewish traders acted as mediators in periods of warfare between Christians and Muslims, as well as the state of Jewish trade in major hubs of economic activity, which frequently fluctuated due to restrictions placed on Jewish people in both Christian and Islamic states. It addresses the roots of the connection between merchant activity and the Jewish people and how they came to fill an important niche in medieval economic affairs. The paper concludes by addressing how Jewish trade affected and was affected by the expulsion of Jews from Catholic Spain in 1492.

By the beginning of the medieval period, the words *Judaeus* and *mercator*, ‘Jewish’ and ‘merchant’, were becoming nearly synonymous. The convergence suggests to modern scholars the significance of Jewish participation in the economic world in a time of great contention in Europe and the Near East. Trade created complex tensions amongst nations while Christians and Muslims engaged in bitter, bloody religious wars. During such periods, they often forbade each other entry into their respective lands and refused to cooperate. As bad blood simmered, the wound festered and endangered trade. This served as a possible entry point for the third and oldest of the Abrahamic religious groups—the Jewish people. Jewish traders were in the unique position to travel between Christian and Muslim societies during the medieval age. Because of this, they could do as Christians could not and were able to follow trade routes through the Caliphate and into the East. While Muslims generally refused to enter Christian lands and Christians were loath to allow them entry, their exports were still sought after, and Jewish traders were the opportune means of transport.

However, this unique position did not necessarily equate to long-term prosperity. As a subjugated class in both empires, Jewish traders frequently faced hardship and oppression, whether it was as *dhimmis*, a protected but subjugated class in Islamic lands, or as a similarly restricted citizen of Christian Europe. Jews received protections under the law when Christian and Islamic empires recognized Jews as necessary to the economy; when these rulers viewed them as threats, they faced suspicion, violence, and, inevitably, expulsion. Nevertheless, Jewish trade as an entity persisted throughout most of the medieval period, and it served as a much-needed mediator between the two major players that shaped the fate of Europe and the Near East.

This essay looks to connect the commercial interactions between Jewish traders and the Christian and Muslim authorities who presided over them to better understand the Jewish trader’s position as a mediating figure during the crusading era.

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It furthermore relates the treatment of Jewish people to their participation in the commerce of the region. Jewish trade acted as a bridge between the Christian and Muslim worlds of the East and West, preventing blockades that would have disrupted major commercial activity during the medieval period. That is not to say that Christians and Muslims did not trade together at all. This work is not an attempt to disregard any of the Christian-Muslim acts of commercial cooperation during the era of the Crusades but rather analyzes how Jewish participation in trade connected the East and West despite Christians and Muslims refusing to collaborate in trade due to the warfare they engaged in.

One must understand the role of Jewish traders in these practices to fully understand relations between Christians, Muslims, and Jews in the medieval period. Neglecting to analyze their involvement in these matters oversimplifies both the presence of Jewish people in the kingdoms that harbored them and the reasons behind the conditions they faced under Christian and Muslim law. Their subjugators understood that Jewish people were important to the trade industry—enough so that they associated the craft with them. It is a disservice to medieval society and its many complexities to ignore this cornerstone of medieval peoples' reality.

Modern scholars such as Olivia Constable and Mark Cohen recognize the importance of trade in crusading history. Their research widens the understanding of medieval Jewish traders and further develops a picture of how these traders fit in the grand scheme of crusading and warfare between Christians and Muslims at the time.

Primary sources also give the readers insight into these traders' lives and their practices, including those from traveling rabbi Benjamin of Tudela and those pertaining to the Radhanites, a group whose itineraries exemplify Jewish involvement in trade as a bridge between the religious empires of Europe. The Radhanites emphasize the role of the Jewish trader as an economic mediator, especially during the wars and crusades of the Christian and Muslim empires.

The Cairo Geniza

In terms of primary sources, much of modern historians' understanding of medieval Jewish merchants can be credited to a single source: the Cairo Geniza.¹ A *geniza* is a storage facility intended to temporarily hold writings that feature the name of God. Because Talmudic law—the religious law of the Jewish people—forbids the destruction of these kinds of documents, they are collected and stored in genizas to prevent desecration until they can receive a proper burial.² This practice, executed out of religious precaution, preserved countless discarded fragments providing insight into Jewish life across the span of centuries. The Cairo Geniza is perhaps one of the most valuable strongholds of Jewish history ever discovered. In 1896, academic scholar and rabbi Solomon Schechter became aware of a page from the lost Hebrew version of the *Sirach* (better known as the Book of Ecclesiasticus) and chased the document's trail back to its origin—a storeroom in Cairo, Egypt's Ben Ezra Synagogue.³ For nearly a thousand years, the Jewish community of Fustat, or Old Cairo, surrendered any handwritten text containing God's name to this storeroom. By the time Schechter arrived at the synagogue to transfer its contents to the libraries of

¹ S.D. Gotein, *Letters of Medieval Jewish Traders* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1973), 3.

² *Ibid.*

³ Eve Krakowski, "Elhanan, Son of Shemariah': The Old Series and the Cairo Geniza," *The Jewish Quarterly Review* 110 (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press), (Fall, 2020): 593-98.

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Cambridge, there were countless fragments stored within its walls.

While *genizas* primarily deal in religious writings, the Cairo Geniza was an exception. Thousands of documents, such as official and unofficial correspondence, court records, ledgers, and even prescriptions, found their way into the Ben Ezra Synagogue's storeroom.⁴ This repository accounts for numerous primary sources used to discern the relationship between Jewish merchants and the communities they traded with. Because of the Cairo Geniza, analysis of the operations of these traders is not limited to Christian European documents and scant personal records from smaller repositories. Its value to modern understanding of Judeo-Islamic trade relations cannot be overstated.

Jewish Traders in Al-Andalus

One letter found in the Cairo Geniza was written by a Jewish trader of Iberian origin after his arrival in Alexandria. The letter references Western exports, along with several business partners, one of whom is a Muslim. Near the beginning of the letter, the author assures the recipient: "I have arrived safely."⁵ He then immediately proceeds to turn to matters of business, calling for further exchanges between himself and the letter's recipient. The correspondence is very casual. It is one of many letters showing such travels to the East were commonly conducted by this Jewish trader.

In the medieval age, Iberia was a heavily contested area. It was, at some point, occupied by Muslims, Christians, Franks, Phoenicians, Byzantines, Visigoths, and others. The present-day region containing Spain and Portugal was once called al-Andalus, an area intermittently occupied and ruled by Muslims from 711 to 1492. Upon Muslim conquest of the region, many Muslims and Jews began to move westward, settling along the newly Muslim-controlled Mediterranean.⁶ Andalusian society presented a rare opportunity for Jewish people in Europe. Here, they flourished to an unparalleled extent. Modern scholarship commonly refers to this as the golden age of Jewish history.⁷ Art, poetry, and philosophy thrived—and so did commerce.

From the early Middle Ages to the middle of the twelfth century, Jewish traders controlled the Andalusian economy.⁸ The western and eastern regions of Muslim rule allowed Jewish traders to exercise their skills in long distance trade with the many different goods found in the two distinct areas of the Caliphate. These areas were separated by Christian kingdoms which Jewish merchants traded with. Jewish commercial activity brought prosperity to Jewish families, allowing the formation of trading dynasties and unique commercial networks between Jewish and Muslim traders.⁹

Despite the cultural golden age in al-Andalus, there was still a marked difference between Muslims and Jews in Andalusian society. Jewish people were considered *dhimmis*, or "protected people," under Islamic law. This status is based on the principle that Jewish people, like Muslims, were perceived as "people of the book". The term itself is misleading. Though Jewish people generally fared far better

⁴ Gotein, *Letters of Medieval Jewish Traders*, 3.

⁵ Gotein, *Letters of Medieval Jewish Traders*, 85-8.

⁶ Mark R. Cohen, *Under Crescent and Cross: the Jews In the Middle Ages* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008), 91.

⁷ "Judaism," Sephardim.

⁸ Olivia Remie Constable, *Trade and Traders in Muslim Spain* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 61.

⁹ Constable, *Trade and Traders*, 61.

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in the Muslim world than the Christian one, this did not make them equal to Muslims. Muslims were still considered to be of a ruling class; they did not need protection. Jewish people were forbidden from holding political and military offices, which prevented them from having power over Muslims.¹⁰ The title served as a reminder that Jewish people were a distinct class in Andalusi society that was viewed as lesser than their Muslim counterparts.

By the late twelfth century, Jewish traders disappeared from al-Andalus; they ceased to appear in the Cairo Geniza's records after this point. Scholar Olivia Constable theorizes that this can be attributed to two events: the rise of Christian trade and the persecution of Andalusi Jews under the Almohad regime.¹¹ The Almohad rulers imposed many restrictions on Jewish traders pertaining to their residencies in certain regions of al-Andalus and their ability to move through Islamic territories. In an unprecedented move, they allowed Christians, who were gaining more footing in the commercial world, to again legally access their ports. This removed the need for Jewish traders to act as mediators between the Christians and Muslims of the region. The persecution Jews faced in al-Andalus under the Almohad rule led many of them to move into the Christian regions of Europe and North Africa, where they hoped to face less violence and subjugation.

Jewish Traders in Frankish Europe

Those who migrated to Europe did not find the peace they were looking for. European Jewish life was contingent on the opinions of Christian monarchs. In Christian domains, these opinions could change frequently under ever-shifting leadership—at great costs to the Jewish people of the territory. Jews were scattered across the continent, but seeing as this essay will focus primarily on Jewish traders, attention here turns specifically to a place which functioned as a popular location of European Jewish trade during the early medieval period—Gaul.¹²

The centers of Jewish commercial activity in this region include present-day Narbonne, Clermont-Ferrand, Orleans, Tours, Bourges, Arles, and Lyons of France.¹³ Though Romans had ruled this region for nearly five centuries, it came under Frankish control at the beginning of the medieval period. Despite this conquest, the Frankish rulers of the Merovingian empire maintained many laws put in place by previous Roman rule. These laws forbade Christian and Jewish intermarriage, Jewish ownership of Christian slaves, Jewish occupation of public spaces during Christian holidays, and even shared dinners between Jewish and Christian individuals. It is interesting to put these early and extremely harsh Frankish perceptions of the Jewish people into context with Jewish trade at the time. Though Jewish traders were certainly still active, the economic decline of the fifth and sixth centuries limited them significantly. They could not provide as much for the Frankish kingdom until this depression gave way to heavy commercial activity, which coincided with the fall of the Merovingian empire and the ascension of the Carolingians.

The harsh and dehumanizing laws under Frankish rule changed with the instatement of Carolingian rule. Though Charlemagne, an empire of the Carolingian empire, was highly suspicious of Jews and maintained many of their social

¹⁰ John Tolan, *Religious Minorities in Christian, Jewish and Muslim Law (5-15th Centuries)* (Turnhout: Brepols Publishers, 2014), 20.

¹¹ Constable, *Trade and Traders*, 108-9.

¹² Leonard B. Glick, *Abraham's Heirs: Jews and Christians in Medieval Europe* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1999), 30-1.

¹³ Louis Rabinowitz, *Jewish Merchant Adventures: A Study of the Radanites* (London: St. Ann's Press, 1948), 14.

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restrictions, Carolingian succession began an era of relative acceptance for Jewish people in Frankish lands. Charlemagne's authority encouraged Jewish settlement in urban areas and free participation in commerce. Furthermore, Louis the Pious, Charlemagne's son, was sympathetic to the Jewish people in his empire and granted them numerous privileges and protections. This is reflected in a charter that pertained to Jewish traders such as Domatus and his nephew Samuel.¹⁴ Upon their request, he not only granted them protection from Christians with antisemitic views but also the right to hire Christian labor for the transport of their goods. This is a degree of power that few Jews in Europe had. The protection of Jewish traders reflects their understood importance in Frankish society. They were the link to the East that Christian Franks could not be because of contentious relations with the Caliphate. There were relatively few Christians beyond Europe, with even fewer Christian traders. Jewish people were not accepted by the Carolingians because of good will alone. They served a purpose for the Frankish empire. Their access to other regions for trade was likely a significant factor regarding the protections they were given. Their positive relations with Muslims and their access to other Jews across the span of the two continents made them indispensable.

Jewish Traders in Catholic Spain

While Jewish people found some acceptance in the Frankish world under Carolingian rule, the rest of Christian Europe was far different. Jewish people established communities all throughout western and northern Europe. Jewish people in countries north of the Pyrenees faced heavy persecution beginning with the First Crusade in the late eleventh century.¹⁵ To escape the violence and vitriol of crusaders and the invigorated antisemitism in the townships they once considered to be their homes, Jewish people fled to the Iberian Peninsula in droves.¹⁶ The kingdom of al-Andalus was now facing Christian invasions. This new Iberia under the Spanish Crown was the home of many Jewish communities. Spanish rulers passed laws to properly address the undeniable Jewish presence in their kingdom.¹⁷ These laws gave Jewish people access to the Spanish commercial world and recognized their importance to the economy.

Tolerance of Jewish trading activity was tenuous and short-lived. Spanish Catholics had several qualms with Jewish traders. They perceived them as "aliens," strangers that did not conform to the typical expectation for Christian economic interests. Early medieval Christendom believed in economic practices which resulted in landowning and the ability to remain sedentary were of higher status.¹⁸ Sociologist and scholar Georg Simmel believes the Jewish trader to be the perfect example of the merchant as stranger, writing that "the stranger is by nature no 'owner of soil.'"¹⁹ The Latin Christian tradition was deeply suspicious of what it described as the mortal sin of avarice, also known as greed. Trade was therefore valued far less than more stable trades.

Furthermore, Jewish people were victim to a Biblical rumor of the nature of the trader: that of the "wandering Jew". The legend claimed that a Jew mocked Jesus on

¹⁴ Jonathan Ray, "The Jew in the Text: What Christian Charters Tell Us About Medieval Jewish Society," *Medieval Encounters* 16, no. 2 (May 2020): 246-47.

¹⁵ Elena Romero Castello and Uriel Macias Kapon, *The Jews and Europe: 2,000 Years of History* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, Inc., 1994), 40.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Cohen, *Under Crescent and Cross*, 78-9.

¹⁹ Ibid.

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the way to his crucifixion and was thereafter cursed to wander for the rest of his life.²⁰ Jewish people faced suspicion because of this defamation. Despite Christian distrust, Jewish people continued to survive under the intense scrutiny and violence that frequently erupted from it until the marriage of Ferdinand II of Aragon to Isabella I of Castile.

The coupling of the two royals led to an era of peace that would end in unanticipated tragedy. Upon the ascension of Ferdinand II and Isabella I, the Spanish Crown began to institute protections that prevented the commercial activity of Jewish traders from coming under threat.²¹ Several factors caused this protection to fail. The Catholic Church sponsored the Crusades, many of which targeted Jewish people. They did not trust them to engage with Christians in the Catholic kingdom of Spain and wanted them removed from the region entirely. The Spanish Crown knew that trade was an important aspect of the Spanish economy. With Jews being immensely connected to European trade at this time, there was hesitance to give into the Church's demands and remove all Jewish people from the kingdom. Spain, like much of Christian Europe, knew that the only way they could comply with the Church's demands was if religious restrictions on trade relaxed significantly.²² The Church eventually complied, opening the door to Christian trade. With their concern for negative economic effects alleviated, Catholic rulers succumbed to the pressure of the clergy. Thus began the infamous Spanish Inquisition.

On March 31, 1492, King Ferdinand II and Queen Isabella I published the Alhambra Decree, which effectively banished any remaining Jews from their kingdom. They granted four months for the liquidation of all assets and emigration, with the fifth clause laying out the specifications of what Jews were allowed to do with their possessions and the particulars of the prohibitions laid upon them: And so that the said Jews and Jewesses during the stated period of time until the end of the said month of July may be better able to dispose of themselves, and their possession, and their estates, for the present we take and receive them under our Security, protection, and royal safeguard, and we secure to them and to their possessions that for the duration of the said time until the said last day of the said month of July they may travel and be safe, they may enter, sell, trade, and alienate all their movable and rooted possessions and dispose of them freely and at their will, and that during the said time, no one shall harm them, nor injure them, no wrong shall be done to them against justice, in their persons or in their possessions, under the penalty which falls on and is incurred by those who violate the royal safeguard. And we likewise give license and faculty to those said Jews and Jewesses that they be able to export their goods and estates out of these our said kingdoms and lordships by sea or land as long as they do not export gold or silver or coined money or other things prohibited by the laws of our kingdoms, excepting merchandise and things that are not prohibited.²³

The choice to forbid emigration while possessing gold and silver forced Jews to liquidate as many of their assets as possible. As the demand for these items decreased due to the sudden saturation of similar goods on the market, many of their possessions were unliquidated and therefore confiscated before they could leave Spain. The cessation of Jewish participation in the Spanish economy was met by a

²⁰ Castello and Kapon, *The Jews and Europe*, 36-7.

²¹ Castello and Kapon, *The Jews and Europe*, 46.

²² Cohen, *Under Crescent and Cross*, 82.

²³ Ferdinand II, King of Aragon and Isabella I, Queen of Castile, "Alhambra Decree," trans. Peter Edward, Foundation for the Advancement of Sephardic Studies and Culture.

papal decree in favor of Christian participation in Spanish trade and usury. All possible debts by Spanish Christians to the emigrating Jews were dissolved upon this decree. The remaining assets were seized, and they contributed to the kingdom's stability despite its significantly altered state of economic affairs.²⁴ Once influential Jewish communities were eliminated by the Inquisition, and Jewish trade essentially vanished from the then Christian-ruled Iberian Peninsula.

The Effects of Christian-Islamic Tensions on Trade

The dynamics between Jews and Muslims, as well as Jews and Christians, reveal the significance of Jewish trade for large periods of time across Europe. Meanwhile, tensions remained high between Christians and Muslims throughout the medieval era. The two groups engaged in nearly eight hundred years of battle due to the Christian-fronted *Reconquista*, the campaigned removal of Muslims from Iberia. The two groups developed distinct empires, and they waged many skirmishes and wars for control of land. Al-Andalus is one example of this. Muslims conquered the Iberian Peninsula near the dawn of the Middle Ages and later were steadily conquered by Catholic armies until their total removal of authority with the loss of Grenada in 1492. The groups were disparate in not only their political interests but also their religious ones. Everything from their perception of God to their legal writ and dietary and hygienic choices contrasted significantly. Anger emerged from a perceived heresy on both sides. These bloody wars devastated both Christians and Muslims, fueling a traceable tension into the modern era. They ignited religious fervor and increased intolerance for one another's beliefs.

While Christians and Muslims traded in times of peace, their connection during the crusading era was far more tenuous. The Catholic Church implemented embargoes on trade with Muslims. Beginning with the Third Lateran Council in 1179, trading material essential to warfare with Muslims was prohibited, and the ban was renewed repeatedly as crusading and warfare continued over the years.²⁵ The papal embargo declared, "cruel avarice has so seized the hearts of some that though they glory in the name of Christians they provide the Muslims with arms and wood for helmets, and become their equals or even their superiors in wickedness and supply them with arms and necessaries to attack Christians."²⁶ In times of religious warfare, it was heretical to trade with Muslims. They could be excommunicated from the Church and shunned from parishes. Items necessary for warfare included timber, weaponry, animals, and foodstuffs, eliminating major commercial avenues pursued by Christian merchants at the time.

The decrees of the Fourth Lateran Council of 1215 further clarified how severe the punishment could be if Christians were to trade with Muslims:

²⁴ Miranda Bannister, "A 1492 Letter Regarding Jewish Property in Spain," Museum of Jewish Heritage, March 29, 2022.

²⁵ Arnold Esch, "New Sources on Trade and Dealings between Christians and Muslims in the Mediterranean Region (ca. 1440-1500)," *Mediterranean Historical Review* 33, no. 2 (December 2018): 136.

²⁶ Thomas Burman, Brian Catlos, and Mark Meyerson, *Texts From the Middle: Documents From the Mediterranean World, 650-1650* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2022), 77.

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Since corsairs and pirates greatly impede the work by taking and robbing those who are going to, or returning from, the Holy Land, we excommunicate all who aid and protect them. Under the threat of anathema we forbid anyone knowingly to have anything to do with them in buying or selling, and we command all rulers of cities and other places to prevent them from practicing this iniquity ... Besides, we excommunicate and anathematize those false and impious Christians, who, against Christ and the Christian people, furnish the Saracens with arms, irons, and timbers for their galleys. If any who sell galleys or ships to the Saracens ... we decree that they shall be punished with the loss of all their goods, and they shall be slaves of those who capture them.²⁷

Moreover, there were quite a few other reasons that Muslims and Christians did not trade with each other during times of warfare. For one, Muslims typically did not stray far from Islamic markets, and Christians were not traveling to trade with Muslims and vice versa after the Lateran Council's decree. Islamic laws discouraging Muslim merchants from trading in Christian lands were not always enforced, but Al-Andalus was more likely to hold to these policies than the Muslim East because of Christian Spain's proximity. Christian kingdoms and townships also did not accommodate Muslim religious restrictions, such as bathing and eating. Therefore, it is likely that many adherents to Islam shunned these trading ports.²⁸ Before the medieval European expulsion, Jewish people did not suffer the same hindrances as Christians and Muslims entering each other's lands.

One such example of this is found in the itineraries of traveling rabbi Benjamin of Tudela. These documents provide a unique insight into what it was like to be a Jew traveling through Europe during the era of the Crusades. It also reveals the social and commercial relations between Jews, Muslims, and Christians in these areas. There are few Jewish perspectives from this period, and none of them are as comprehensive as Benjamin's. His itinerary spans the length of Europe, traveling from his homeland of Spain, throughout Europe and into China. He also traveled into Africa, through Egypt and Alexandria. In each location that Benjamin visited, he noted the presence, or lack thereof, of Jews, recording the extent of Jewish communities within the three continents.²⁹ Benjamin stayed with these Jewish communities in his travels, only rooming amongst Christians or Muslims when there were no Jews to house him. In visiting these communities, he was able to preserve their histories and record their connections with other religions.

Benjamin recorded a story from a Jewish community in the mountains of Naisabur, detailing an encounter with a Persian king eager to battle with a group of Mongols called the Kofar-al-Turak. Benjamin wrote the following excerpt from their perspective:

“I am not come to fight you, but the Kofar-al-Turak, my enemy, and if you fight against me I will be avenged on you by killing all the Jews in my Empire; I know that you are stronger than I am in this place and my army has come out of this great wilderness starving and athirst. Deal kindly with me and do not fight against me, but leave me to engage with the Kofar-al-Turak, my enemy, and sell me also the provisions which I require for myself and my

²⁷ “Decrees of the Fourth Lateran Council,” in *The Crusades: A Reader*, ed. S.J. Allen and Emilie Amt (Toronto: Toronto University Press, 2014), 247.

²⁸ Constable, *Trade and Traders*, 56-9.

²⁹ Benjamin of Tudela and Marcus Nathan Adler, *The Itinerary of Benjamin of Tudela: Critical Text, Translation and Commentary* (New York: Phillip Feldheim, Inc., 1907).

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army.” The Jews then took counsel together, and resolved to propitiate the king on account of the Jews who were in exile in his Empire. Then the king entered their land with his army, and stayed there fifteen days. And they showed him much honour, and also sent a dispatch to the Kofar-al-Turak their allies, reporting the matter to them.³⁰

One early scholar of medieval Jewish history, Adolf Neubauer, connected the Kofar-al-Turak of Benjamin’s itineraries with the legend of Prester John, a fabled Christian king of the east. Neubauer suggests that “the Kofar al Turak mentioned by Arabic historians and by Benjamin of Tudela, are identical with the subjects of the fabulous Prester John”.³¹ This conclusion gives weight to the idea that the Kofar-al-Turak were Orthodox Christian, as Prester John was believed to be, though the existence of the supposed king has long since been disputed by scholars. This is a prime example of Jewish people across the continent acting as mediators between Christians and Muslims, particularly through their role as traders. The Jewish people worked with both the Persians and the Kofar-al-Turak. They provided resources during times of warfare, and their presence was necessary for the two groups to sustain themselves, seeing as the Persian king.

Benjamin’s itinerary also reveals that, unlike Muslims, Jewish traders could rely on the presence of settlements in Christian and Muslim-controlled areas to accommodate their religious dietary and hygienic needs. Because of this, trade areas across Europe were far more accessible to them. Jewish traders knew that in many places they went, there would be other Jewish people that would welcome them. On the other hand, Christians rarely entered Islamic markets due to the warfare between Christians and Muslims throughout the era of the Crusades. Commerce became an increasingly dangerous game as acts of conquest intensified. If a Christian were to enter an Islamic territory, such as al-Andalus, they faced hostility and were at risk of being taken hostage.³² The dangers of crusading primarily affected invading Muslims and Christians. A traveling Jewish trader, while still at considerable risk, was not seen as a direct threat to the institution, as there was no invading Jewish empire or army to account for.

Because of the laws preventing their access to locations within the Christian Empire and their tendency not to stray far from Islamic lands, Muslims typically traded amongst themselves and with Jews. Muslim-Christian trade partnerships were extremely rare even outside of times of crusading warfare. Their geographic separation was one reason for this. However, religious differences caused them to be uncooperative even in locations where Christians and Muslims lived amongst each other. Legal restrictions also frequently prohibited them. Laws were created to prevent Christians and Muslims from being able to engage in trade partnerships. Most merchants in Europe only engaged in official partnerships with those from their own religious group. Jewish and Christian partnerships occasionally appear in documents, with Judeo-Islamic partnerships showing up at a higher frequency. Talmudic law made it very easy to form trade partnerships with one’s co-religionists.³³ It laid out the

³⁰ Benjamin and Adler, *The Itinerary of Benjamin of Tudela*, 86-7.

³¹ Adolf Neubauer, “Where Are the Ten Tribes? III. Early Translators of the Bible and Commentators: Abraham Bar Hiyya, Benjamin of Tudela, Prester John, Obadiah of Bertinoro, Abraham Levi and His Contemporaries,” *The Jewish Quarterly Review* 1, no. 3 (April 1889): 188.

³² Constable, *Trade and Traders*, 64-5.

³³ Mark R. Cohen, *Maimonides and the Merchants: Jewish Law and Society in the Medieval Islamic World* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2017), 55.

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rules for a standard partnership that complied with the standards of Judaism. However, the law did not account for the later events of persecution and diaspora, both of which significantly changed the face of Jewish trade. It made it challenging to practice long-distance trade as it assumed Jewish commerce would continue to have a limited scope.

Partnerships with members outside of Judaism were also more complicated. Mark Cohen, a scholar on crusading history and medieval trade, suggests that Jewish traders addressed this by adopting the Islamic policy of *qirād*, which set out rules for engaging in partnerships with Muslims and each other.³⁴ The concept of the *qirād* was built into Islamic commerce and therefore was easily adaptable for Jewish-Muslim commercial collaboration. In this system, one partner provided the goods and money to the other, who brought these goods to the market for trade.³⁵ Muslims occasionally would not trade in Christian ports, but when a Muslim provided the goods and funding in a *qirād*, a Jewish trader could take these goods to markets, and they would split the profits. Considering the widespread evidence that Jewish people frequently traveled long distances to trade, it is very likely that this is how the majority of Jewish-Islamic partnerships operated. Christians did not have a Latin iteration of the *qirād* until the ninth century, which further served to cut them out of the practice of inter-religious partnering that Jewish and Muslim merchants participated in as early as the fifth century.³⁶

The precocious development of standards for Jewish-Muslim collaboration cemented them as the standard practice of the medieval period, leaving Christians vastly underdeveloped in the art of trade. While warfare was certainly a factor keeping Christians from collaborating with Muslims, Christian and Islamic societies faced incompatibility on legal and societal grounds, preventing long-term commercial relationships like those Muslims and Jews formed.

The al-Radhaniyya, a group of Jewish traders also known as the Radhanites, illustrate the vital role of Jews as intermediaries in medieval trade more than any other. Historians have reconstructed the activity of the Radhanites through merchants' itineraries. Early scholars such as Louis Rabinowitz presumed the Radhanites to have originated in Southern France or al-Andalus, but later experts such as Moshe Gil determined that they likely came from an Iraqi region known as "the land of Radhan."³⁷ The Radhanites transported goods from Western Europe and carried them as far as China and India through four distinct trade routes, two by land and two by sea.³⁸ These highly intelligent traders are recorded in several documents. One such account comes from Abu al-Qasim ibn Khurradadhbah's *The Book of the Routes and the Kingdoms*:

These merchants speak Arabic, Persian, Roman, Frankish, Spanish, and Slavonic. They travel from the East to the West and from the West to the East by land as well as by sea. They bring from the West eunuchs, slave girls, boys, brocade, beaver skins, marten furs and other varieties of fur, and swords ... On their return from China, they load musk, aloe wood, camphor, cinnamon, and other products of the eastern countries ... Some of them sail for Constantinople in order to sell their merchandise to the Romans. Others

³⁴ Cohen, *Maimonides and the Merchants*, 56.

³⁵ Cohen, *Maimonides and the Merchants*, 56.

³⁶ Cohen, *Maimonides and the Merchants*, 56.

³⁷ Cohen, *Under Crescent and Cross*, 791.

³⁸ Caroline Rebouh, *The Jews of China: History of a Community and its Perspectives* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2018), 38.

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proceed to the residence of the king of the Franks to dispose of their articles.³⁹

This document tells us quite a lot about the Radhanites. Their multilingualism granted them the ability to communicate with groups across both continents. The Eastern goods they returned with included silk and spices, both of which were highly prized by the royal courts of Christian Europe. In a time of great contention, Radhanites could travel with relative impunity between Christian and Muslim empires. They had access to Muslim lands that Christians did not, such as Baghdad and the Levant, and could therefore reach the Eastern Sea. Baghdad was a part of the typical route taken by traders at the time, being a large city heavy with merchant activity. Since Christians could not easily bring Western products into these Muslim-controlled locations during periods of warfare and tension, Jewish traders such as the Radhanites imported goods to these places. This trading group would disappear from records by the 1000s, but their impact was significant in that they were likely responsible for developing Jewish communities along their routes.⁴⁰ These communities became points of connection between Western and Eastern Jewish people, some of which became later hosts of Benjamin of Tudela on the journeys recorded in his itineraries.

The Radhanites allow for a much broader understanding of early Jewish trade. They are perhaps one of the most famously cited examples of Jewish traders with long-distance trading practices. The group's multilingualism demonstrates that they likely came from across Europe and the Near East, but they came together to establish a strong Jewish foothold in international trade. They act as a model for the routes and goods Jewish traders were likely to have engaged with during later long-distance trading ventures because of the earlier development of Jewish communities along the way. They also reveal why Jewish traders were so apt at behaving as mediators between warring empires for several centuries.

Conclusion

Denying the importance of Jewish trade during the medieval era would be ignoring a significant contribution made by those on the outskirts of Christian and Muslim societies alike. Though Jewish merchants did not have a total monopoly on trade and eventually lost their position as a convenient connection between warring empires, documents ranging from the fragments found in the Cairo Geniza and Christian charters penned by kings in Europe prove that Jewish trade was necessary at the time of their creation. In truth, *Judaeus* and *mercator* are not synonymous. The scope of medieval Jewish life was not that narrow—they were also farmers, moneylenders, artisans, philosophers, poets, and more. Still, there is no denying that they participated in European commerce, which granted them widespread protections they otherwise would not have. It had a hand in delaying the Inquisition, kept them in Louis the Pious' good graces, and offered them the ability to travel through Christian and Muslim lands knowing that, unlike their neighbors in Abrahamic religion, there would be Jewish people willing to connect with them and Christians and Muslims willing to trade with them. The Radhanites established a precedent for what would later be seen as the typical medieval Jewish trader. They reveal how Jewish traders were capable of

³⁹ Abu al-Qasim ibn Khurradadhbah, "Routes of the Jewish Merchants called Al-Radhaniyya," in *Medieval Trade in the Mediterranean World, Illustrative Documents Translated with Introductions and Notes*, ed. Robert S. Lopez and Irving W. Raymond (New York: Columbia University Press, 1955), 31-32.

⁴⁰ Brian M. Gottesman, "Radanites," *Encyclopedia of World Trade: From Ancient Times to the Present* (New York: Routledge), 764.

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mediating between warring Christians and Muslims for centuries. This made them indispensable for many centuries in Europe. Prior to expulsion, Jewish traders created a link between religious empires that otherwise would have been wrought with commercial difficulties during periods of warfare.

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