

1.4 Medieval and modern stories: a scholarly conversation

This book is written in two parts: the first is about institutions and the second geographies. Perhaps more accurately, the first part outlines the various structures that defined the possibilities of action for merchants, and the second examines their actions. Possibilities were defined by institutions and infrastructures: the nature and ownership of transportation, the reliability of mail, the workings of the legal system, or notions of social prestige that helped determine business aspirations. [Chapter 2](#) is a brief sketch of the position Geniza merchants occupied in their communities and in Islamic society. [Chapter 3](#) is an examination of the nature of commercial letters. I both explore the methodological problems of working with such materials and analyze letter content to demonstrate which problems of distance merchants had to solve, and which they could solve through use of letters. [Chapters 4](#) and [5](#) examine the nature of trade, infrastructures, and institutions to see why the problems disclosed in [chapter 3](#), those of market information, commodity movement, and personnel management, loomed larger in the correspondence than other possible issues such as military and naval operations, accounting, management of bureaucracy, or political maneuvers.

The second part, geographies, looks at how the choices merchants made in the eleventh century were shaped by the economic geographies of the Islamic Mediterranean, but in turn helped create and sustain the organization of markets. In [chapters 7, 8, and 9](#) I thus look at patterns of mercantile activity to draw different maps of the economy in the eleventh century. I consider connection and integration in the merchants' world. I also examine the role of merchants in sustaining regional economic systems that integrated the Mediterranean in some ways, but profited from segregation in others. Merchants' strategies in using information, in organizing

different kinds of regional and long-distance commodity movements, and in managing their own careers reveal a business model that took advantage of a highly regionalized commercial economy.

But the geographic patterns described in these chapters also changed substantially between the two main generations of Geniza merchants considered here: the geography and practice of 1000–1040 was not the same as that of 1040–1080. In [chapter 10](#) I show how merchants responded to changing geopolitical conditions by changing both the geography of their trade and the balance between different kinds of economic activity. I find that other groups of merchants reacted in different ways, allowing us to glimpse larger patterns of interaction in the Mediterranean as a whole. In the conclusion I look at how the choices of these and other merchants affected geo-political conditions, accelerating certain kinds of change in the later eleventh century.

The stories of institutions and geographies were inextricably intertwined for Geniza merchants, but also address three fields of modern scholarship: institutional economics; medieval economic history; and Mediterranean history. I discuss some of the ways the study of Geniza merchants contributes to these fields, but also how the study is complicated in two ways by the twentieth-century story of the Cairo Geniza. First, study of these men as economic actors has largely been framed by Europeans asking questions emanating from scholarship on medieval European economic history, and using the Islamic economy largely to make comparisons. Second, stories about the Geniza merchants have raised the fraught question of whether these are stories of Jews or Arabs, and what they represent.

Commercial documents from the Geniza are most famous in the social sciences, especially in institutional economics and the game theory literature on contract enforcement. Principally through the ideas put forward by Greif, the “Maghribīs” (as Geniza merchants are known in his work) have been viewed as the first documented

