

Book Reviews

LI GUO, *Commerce, Culture, and Community in a Red Sea Port in the Thirteenth Century: The Arabic Documents from Quseir* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2004). Pp. xx + 334.

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Our knowledge of the Red Sea trade, and consequently of the Indian Ocean trade, in the pre-modern period is hardly satisfactory. The main reason does not lie so much in the paucity of the data, provided either by historical sources or primary documents, as in the neglect of these sources. Until very recently, the documents of the Cairo Genizah had barely been studied from the point of view of maritime trade, though some scholars realized the importance of this source for this purpose.¹ The situation has changed since the appearance of Roxani Eleni Margariti's revised doctoral dissertation submitted at Princeton in 2002 (*Aden and the Indian Ocean Trade: 150 Years in the Life of a Medieval Port* [University of North Carolina Press, 2007]). As for historical sources, there is no doubt that the forthcoming publication of É. Vallet's doctoral dissertation on power, commerce, and merchants in Yemen during the Rasulid period (thirteenth–fifteenth centuries) will improve our understanding of trade in the region, too.²

The book under review expands our knowledge of this history, as it unveils a significant, though anecdotal, part of the history of Red Sea trade in the early thirteenth century on the basis of previously unpublished documents. These documents, mostly scraps of paper, were brought to light by the excavations carried out by the University of Chicago in 1982 in the Islamic residential complex of the site of Quseir (Quşayr al-qadīm), a port later abandoned when ʿAydhāb

¹ Apart from Goitein's masterpiece, one can cite his articles entitled "From the Mediterranean to India: Documents on the Trade to India, South Arabia, and East Africa from the Eleventh and Twelfth Centuries," *Saeculum* 29 (1954): 181–97; "Arabic Documents on the Trade Between India and the Mediterranean Countries (11th and 12th centuries)," in *Proceedings of the Twenty-sixth International Congress of Orientalists* (New Delhi, 1970), 251–56; "From Aden to India: Specimens of the Correspondence of India Traders of the Twelfth Century," *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 23 (1980): 43–66. Also worth a mention is the following study: H. M. Rabie, "Al-Baḥr al-Aḥmar fī al-ʿAṣr al-Ayyūbī," in *Al-Baḥr al-Aḥmar fī al-Tārikh wa-al-Siyāsah al-Duwalīyah al-Muʿāṣirah* (Cairo, 1979), 105–23.

² A major source for the study of trade in this period started to appear in 2003: *Nūr al-Maʿārif fī Nuẓum wa-Qawānīn wa-Aʿrāf al-Yaman fī al-ʿAhd al-Muẓaffarī al-Wārif*, crit. ed. Muḥammad ʿAbd al-Raḥīm Jāzīm (Sanaa, 2003–5), 2 vols.

superseded it. The documents were discovered in what appeared to be a merchant's house, whose name, Abū Mufarrij, is found in several of them. The dates provided by a small number of documents confirm that his business was active during the first half of the thirteenth century (earliest document dated 612/1215, latest dated 633/1235), a fact substantiated by the numismatic findings. The excavated house proved to be a warehouse (*shūnah*) which also served as a residence for the family. Should we recognize in this discovery a genizah, as Mark Cohen recently suggested?³ In his view, the archive, together with other material not necessarily connected with the family (official documents, religious texts, charms), was probably saved from oblivion for the same reason that led to the preservation of tens of thousands of fragments in the Cairo Genizah and other genizah-like findings in the Islamic tradition (the documents of the Haram in Jerusalem, the fragments of Quranic manuscripts in the Great Mosque in Sanaa, the documents of the Great Mosque in Damascus): to preserve honorably fragments of the Quran, in the first place, and secondarily documents. These would have been placed in the attic of the shaykh's house and were scattered everywhere in the room when the building collapsed. Though this is a tempting explanation, it fails to address other problems. Guo does not consider the possibility that this cache was a genizah, as he speaks of clearly discarded trash which had not been deliberately kept and was in a state of disorder, and he even notices that a letter seemed to have been "kneaded into a ball and then tossed in [a] trash bin" (p. 158). In another case, an account was found torn into several pieces (p. 41). The main characteristic of the Cairo Genizah is that manuscripts and documents, sometimes even personal archives, were placed in a specific room over quite a long period. If the shaykh's house was used in this way, how can we explain that other documents were found thanks to later excavations in another place not connected with this building and identified as a *sibākh* (organic refuse)?⁴ As the archeologists put it, "no significant difference in date or character of the deposits was noted between the material from within and outside the structure, or between different levels within the deposit. This suggests that the *sebakh* is not representative of *in situ* activity but rather accumulated through the deliberate dumping or redepositing of refuse from other parts of the Islamic town."⁵ If genizah-like practices were current in Quṣayr al-qadīm, there is no reason that they would not have been applied to

³ Mark Cohen, "Geniza for Islamicists, Islamic Geniza, and the 'New Cairo Geniza,'" *Harvard Middle Eastern and Islamic Review* 7 (2006): 129–45, 138.

⁴ The University of Southampton carried out excavations from 1999 to 2003 (see <http://www.arch.soton.ac.uk/Projects/default.asp?ProjectID=20>). Anne Regourd is in charge of the study of the Arabic documents that surfaced during this new campaign of digging (see <http://www.rqad.leeds.ac.uk/>).

⁵ See the interim report for 2003, trench 13 at the website indicated above.

other documents such as those uncovered in trench 13, for instance. At other sites in Egypt, too, documents have been found in layers that looked like refuse. On the other hand, it is known that the recycling of paper documents was a common occurrence.⁶

The book is divided in two sections. The first one is devoted to the study of the material deciphered in the second section. Guo succeeds in making the most of scraps of paper hardly decipherable not so much because of the nature of the handwriting, but rather because of the poor state of preservation. The author manages to reconstruct the social milieu revolving around the shaykh, Abū Mufarrij (chapter I), including his family (as it seems that Abū Mufarrij's business later became a family business, with one of his sons deeply involved), the company and its employees as well as its associates, and all the other categories of persons dealing with the house (clients, suppliers, buyers, but also officials, given that documents issued by this category surfaced together with the collection of business papers). Guo asks why official documents are found among the private business documents: he suggests that Abū Mufarrij's warehouse probably served as a postal address for the official documents or that he acted as a government agent. If so, why were these official documents unearthed in his house if he was supposed to transmit them to the authorities or other recipients? Guo does not answer this question. It might be that some of these official papers were intended for reuse of the blank verso, but in the end they were not.⁷

Chapter II is devoted to the economic problems raised by the business letters, accounts, and the like. The documents provide important data about the metrology in use in this remote part of the Muslim world which barely attracted the attention of medieval historians. As such, it is an incomparable source for the study of weights and measures in the Red Sea: similar data available for the holy cities provide an interesting comparison.⁸ Importantly, the author also succeeds in demonstrating that the Quseir economy was first and foremost a credit one based on paper. This is not a surprise, rather it confirms a situation prevailing in the Near East at this time.

⁶ Either reused for the blank parts or recycled to produce new paper. See on this Jonathan M. Bloom, *Paper before Print* (New Haven, 2001), 76.

⁷ For the reuse of some of the documents, see p. 110. Anne Regourd found, among the papers excavated at Quseir by the University of Southampton, a death certificate which was reused on the back to write a letter. See her article to appear in the proceedings of the Third Conference of the International Society for Arabic Papyrology held in Alexandria in 2006. This practice is also confirmed in other cases (documents of the Cairo Genizah or those excavated in Fustat).

⁸ Since Guo's study was published, a book devoted to economic life in the Hejaz during the Mamluk period has appeared: Muḥammad Maḥmūd Anāqirah, *Al-Ḥayāh al-Iqtisādīyah fī al-Ḥijāz fī 'Aṣr Dawlat al-Mamālīk, 648–923 h., 1250–1517 m.* (Riyadh, 2006).

Among the documents excavated, some were obviously not connected to business: sermons, prayers, block-printed amulets, magical texts, and astrological dials (chapter III). These improve our knowledge of popular culture in such a remote place. A major question is: are these documents related to the business ones and, consequently, with Abū Mufarrij? If we consider that they were unearthed in the shaykh's house and that the business section belonged to Abū Mufarrij, we should, as the author did, regard them as part of the family business. As Guo noticed (p. 84), Abū Mufarrij's son, Ibrāhīm, is described as a *khatīb* in a document, and it is probable that the sermons and the like are to be seen as connected to this activity. The block-printed amulets constitute another group (12 fragments) of highly attractive materials. Considered as a link between Chinese and European printing activities, the block-printed texts raise more questions than they answer. A thorough study of all the specimens preserved in various collections around the world could provide a good starting point. Those found in American and European institutions have recently been published.⁹ Thanks to those studied by Guo in his book, there only remain those held in Middle Eastern collections (mainly Egypt) to be analyzed. The Quseir items corroborate that block-printed texts were spread throughout the Near East.

The second part of the book contains the decipherment and philological commentary on the documents. In this part, a selection of business letters, accounts, shipping notes, funeral texts, and amulets are published. These 84 fragments were selected from among several thousand (the exact number is not provided, see p. 104) for their interest and their state of preservation. This does not mean, however, that Guo neglects to analyze in the first part of the book those documents he decided not to publish in this second part. This part is introduced by chapter IV, which deals with the material analysis. Guo provides detailed remarks on the handwriting, including a paleographical study, a survey of the abbreviations and logograms (a particular case remains unsolved, see pp. 111–12), and of the numerals. As for language, most of the items published were written in a type of language that is now referred to as Middle Arabic (in this case, Muslim Middle Arabic), though this designation is not universally accepted.¹⁰ Truly, most of these texts feature several traits generally noticed in modern dialects and found in many documents dated to the medieval period. Guo gives an exhaustive list of the linguistic characteristics of the documents studied and usually compares them to similar features noted in the scientific literature.

The edited texts (chapter V) are organized according to the typology established by the author (pp. 101–5). Guo was not content with only studying photographs

⁹ See Karl R. Schaefer, *Enigmatic Charms: Medieval Arabic Block Printed Amulets in American and European Libraries and Museums* (Leiden and Boston, 2006).

¹⁰ See, for instance, P. Larcher, "Moyen arabe et arabe moyen," *Arabica* 48 (2001): 578–609.

of the documents: he paid a visit to the Islamic Museum, where they are now kept. Scrutiny of the actual documents made it possible for him to describe precisely the writing material (color of the paper, dimensions, actual state, and color of the ink). Each document is introduced by a summary of its contents, then the text and the translation are provided together with a commentary on the words that require clarification or those with dubious meaning. Given the state of these fragments and the cursive script with which they were written, the author is to be praised for the result he managed to achieve. The reader must realize that a fragmentary text is in itself difficult to decipher because some parts, decisive for its understanding, may be missing. In this particular case, the difficulty is magnified by the nature of the texts, the language used, and the type of script. If a criticism has to be made, it should regard the fact that the documents edited are not reproduced. Of course, this may well be due to a decision by the publisher rather than the editor. Although four plates display some examples, the reproduced documents are so small that one can hardly compare the edited text with these photographs. Under these circumstances, the reader will have to take the edited text for granted. Fortunately, in the meantime, the documents have been introduced in the Arabic Papyrology Database, and some readings have been improved because the editors had access to scans of the documents. Consequently, the edition must now be read in conjunction with the website.¹¹

To conclude, answers to the many questions these documents pose obviously remain conjectural due to the fragmentary state of this “archive,” but the result is a convincing reconstruction of the activities of a family business at the dawn of the thirteenth century. Given the challenge presented by the Quseir fragments, Guo must be commended for the tremendous work he has accomplished on these scraps of paper. His book is indispensable for all those interested in economic and social history, Red Sea and Indian Ocean trade, numismatics, diplomatics, and documents.

¹¹ <http://orientw.uzh.ch/apd/project.jsp>. Select “papyri” and on the page that appears, scroll down (“choose an edition”) to “P.QuseirArab.”