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Introduction

IN DECEMBER OF 1144, a group of Jewish merchants and travelers gathered in the Red Sea port of ‘Aydhāb (maps 1 and 2) to record and sign a deposition about a heated conflict between two of their associates (figure 0.1).¹ One of them, another Jewish merchant called Ibn Jamāhir, had gone to the local chief of police (*wālī*), a Muslim official, and beseeched him to punish Šāfi (Pure), a *ghulām* (enslaved man), for slander. Šāfi was known to the Jewish community in ‘Aydhāb because he served as a factotum for the head of a rabbinic academy in Fustat (Old Cairo).² While the chief of police summoned Šāfi, Ibn Jamāhir recruited some of his Muslim colleagues to serve as witnesses on his behalf. They testified that Šāfi had slandered and demeaned Ibn Jamāhir with unspeakable profanity. Šāfi responded indignantly: “You had a *jāriya* (a slave girl) and got her pregnant. When she bore you a son, you banished her along with [your] s[on] to Berbera,” on the Somali coast.³ Ibn Jamāhir was unrelenting in his demand that Šāfi be punished. The chief of police ordered that Šāfi be flogged in front of the Jewish merchants in the town before he was thrown into jail.

Of all the stories I have encountered in researching and writing this history of slavery and the slave trade, it is the case of Ibn Jamāhir’s “banished” *jāriya*, her son, and the *ghulām* Šāfi to which I have returned the most often. Like the majority of enslaved people whose histories are told in this book, she and her child appear and disappear from the written record in a flash. Two handwritten lines contain the twenty-odd words (thirteen in the Judeo-Arabic) that attest to the life of this mother and child.⁴ Still, their history foregrounds many of the themes that animate this book, themes that cut across the scales of historical inquiry from the global to the local and from the history of urban society to the microhistories of individual lives.

Slavery was ubiquitous in the medieval Middle East, yet we know surprisingly little about its practice in everyday life. The narrative and prescriptive sources,

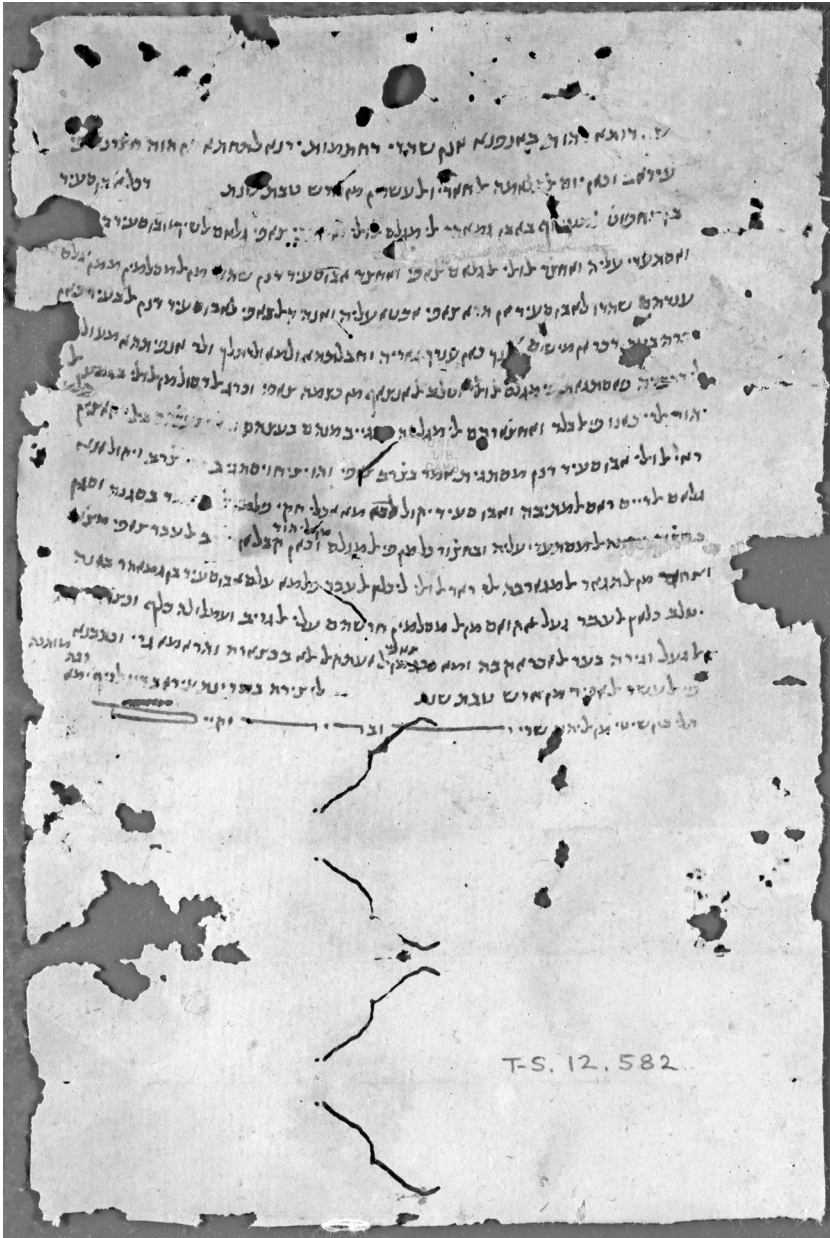


FIGURE 0.1. A court deposition from the Red Sea port of 'Aydhāb, ca. 1144. T-S 12.582. Paper. 16.5 × 25 cm. Reproduced by kind permission of the Syndics of Cambridge University Library.

like chronicles, belles lettres, and legal writings, that have long been the bedrock of medieval Middle Eastern studies tend to privilege elite settings. These types of sources thus tend to highlight the lives of refined courtesans and the concubine-mothers of the caliphs rather than the more common experiences of the enslaved people bound to urban households and to traveling merchants like Ibn Jamāhir. Alongside traditional narrative and legal sources, this book brings evidence to bear from a large corpus of everyday documentary records such as letters, bills of sale, marriage documents, and court testimonies. Jews produced and preserved most of the documents studied in this book, not because they were the largest or most important group of slave owners. Rather, it was because the custodians of one Egyptian synagogue had enough storage for disused papers that they were never compelled to dispose of nearly a millennium's worth of worn-out books and documents.⁵

While these records were preserved by Cairo's Jewish community, they tell us a great deal about Egyptian society more broadly. This was a world in which Jews transacted with Christian associates and appeared before Muslim courts to defend their rights as slave owners. Merchant and family letters demonstrate the workings of the transregional slave trade that trafficked men, women, and children across the Mediterranean, northeast Africa, and the Indian Ocean. Once in Egypt, enslaved people were thrown into a churning local slave trade through which they could be sold and resold many times over the course of their lives. Finally, it is through the everyday writings of the slave-owning classes that this book learns about the personhood of the enslaved individuals who did not produce their own written records.

This book centers Jewish men and women as slave owners for a few reasons. First, despite being a minority, Egyptian Jews preserved the largest cache of surviving documentary evidence for the topics of slavery and the slave trade in the world between the late tenth and mid-thirteenth centuries. Second, the history of slavery opens up a revealing window into the formation of medieval Jewish culture and its place in the larger Islamic Middle East. The very presence of enslaved people in Jewish households engendered this culture and sparked debates about the boundaries of the community and the nature of Jewish power in an Islamic society where Jews were simultaneously privileged and subordinated. Lastly, many enslaved people gained their freedom, became Jews, and remained in the Jewish community as the mothers and fathers of Jewish children.

Other enslaved people, for various reasons, were consigned to historical oblivion.⁶ The banished *jāriya* and her son fall into the latter category. Though we cannot trace their history beyond the court deposition in 'Aydhāb, this book tells

the history of people like them and how their lives in slavery were conditioned by factors ranging from geopolitics and famine to the contingencies of everyday life and individual choices. This book is my argument for how global medieval scholarship can integrate subaltern subjects to historicize more fully the medieval societies to which they belonged.

A Brief History of Slavery in the Medieval Middle East

Slavery and slave trading were present in pre-Islamic Arabia and across the vast territories that Muslim forces would conquer during the seventh and eighth centuries.⁷ These conquests meant both the periodic intensification of enslavement through capture and the gradual incorporation of slavery laws and customs from the conquered societies across what scholar Bernard Freamon calls the “Afro-Irano-Semitic” complex.⁸ During this expansion, the demographic centers of Jewish life were also encompassed by an Islamic imperium that stretched from Iberia across North Africa to Iraq and Iran. Jewish travelers and traders took part in economic and social networks that stretched to Yemen, India, and as far as Java and China.⁹ Slavery, along with other forms of coerced labor and unfreedom, was part of life in these places.¹⁰ Enslaved people were one of many commodities whose forcible trafficking loosely knit together a near-hemispheric constellation of medieval societies. It is a fair generalization to state that most peoples in the Middle Ages belonged to groups that were at one time or another both vulnerable to enslavement *and* owners of slaves.¹¹

Urban households were a primary site of slavery across the late antique and medieval Middle East. Not only did enslaved people perform the work necessary for the daily and seasonal routines of family life,¹² they were also pressed into other kinds of labor based on their household’s demographics and economic activities, labor such as wet-nursing and child-rearing, running errands, working in an artisan’s shop or apothecary, tending to animals and plants, and so on.¹³ As you will read below, Egyptian Jews had a term for this kind of slavery, and I assume that they shared this sense with their Muslim and Christian counterparts. They called it slavery *lil-khidma*, which translates to “slavery for personal service.”¹⁴ Sex and childbearing were other kinds of labor that enslaved women were forced to perform routinely. Slave-owning men also used enslaved men and boys for sex, though direct evidence of this exploitation is scant.¹⁵

In comparison to plantation slavery in the early modern Atlantic, gang labor in agriculture appears to have been much less common in the medieval Middle East. There are two notable exceptions to this pattern in Egypt and Iraq.¹⁶ In the

Eastern Desert between the Nile River and Red Sea coast, Arab entrepreneurs from Egypt used enslaved labor to extract precious metals and minerals from the mines there. In eighth- and ninth-century Iraq, enslaved laborers from northeast and east Africa, often referred to as the *Zanj*, worked to convert territory in the country's south into arable land. The *Zanj* are generally well known in Islamic history and the world history of slavery because they participated in a series of revolts against the 'Abbasid caliphate, whose seat was in Baghdad. Scholars surmise that the caliphate abandoned the intensive use of enslaved gang labor after the last of these revolts to prevent a recurrence of these events.¹⁷

While enslaved gang labor was not the norm in medieval Muslim societies, the caliphates did rely substantially on other forms of slavery for their political survival. The first of these developments was what the historians Majied Robinson and Elizabeth Urban call the "the rise of the concubine-born caliph."¹⁸ As these scholars show, in the late Umayyad and early 'Abbasid era, rulers increasingly used enslaved women as childbearing concubines as a strategy for solidifying dynastic loyalties and power. In Islamic law, the children born to free Muslim men and enslaved women were free Muslims. Thus, their offspring could rise to become caliphs (and caliph-imams in Twelver and Isma'īlī Shī'ism).¹⁹

The second development was military slavery. In the ninth century, 'Abbasid caliphs began to purchase enslaved Turks and Central Asians to use as soldiers for protection amid intradynastic political strife. The caliphate's preference for Turks and Central Asian soldiers has been attributed to their skill in horsemanship and archery.²⁰ For centuries to come, many Near Eastern armies enlisted enslaved and freed soldiers. By the eleventh century, armies from Iberia and North Africa to Afghanistan and northern India had also adopted the practice.²¹

Eunuchs were also commonly found in service of the palace and army of Muslim societies as they were in the Sassanian and Byzantine realms.²² Islamic law prohibited the mutilation required to "manufacture" eunuchs, but it was legal to import castrated boys from outside the *dār al-Islām* (territories under Islamic political control). Within the palace, eunuchs were gatekeepers and attendants. Since they could not produce children by the caliph's wives and concubines, eunuchs served and guarded the harem. In the Fatimid and later 'Abbasid era, eunuchs were entrusted with sacred knowledge and duties as the keepers of the Fatimid Imāms' religious texts and as guardians of the tomb of the Prophet Muḥammad in Medina.²³

Another specialized kind of slavery was the elite female courtesan (*qayna*, pl. *qiyān*).²⁴ At least from the Umayyad era forward, a class of highly trained enslaved women appears in courtly settings as singers, musicians, dancers, and objects of

male desire.²⁵ In ‘Abbasid Baghdad there was a competitive market for the purchase of the most sought-after women, some of whom eventually attained their freedom and even came to buy and command their own retinues of enslaved maids and attendants. Medieval authors composed biographies of many courtesans, and their images were painted on valuable ceramics of the era and in illustrated manuscripts; they even adorn the ceiling of the Cappella Palatina in Palermo, Sicily, where they were possibly painted by craftsmen from Fatimid Egypt.²⁶

While slavery *lil-khidma* was common across the medieval Middle East and North Africa, scholarly attention has long focused on the histories of the soldiers, eunuchs, courtesans, and concubine-mothers who were central to the political and cultural life of the caliphates. As a general rule, though not an absolute one, authors of the narrative and literary sources that tell these histories were not concerned with the experiences of enslaved people bound to more common households.²⁷ In contrast, this book draws on the abundant evidence for slavery *lil-khidma* found in documentary sources, since these records were created and kept by the classes of people who frequently purchased enslaved people for personal service.

The Cairo *Geniza* and the History of Slavery

The brief mention of Ibn Jamāhir’s banished *jāriya* and her child survived the centuries because someone eventually discarded a written deposition in the *geniza* of the Ben Ezra synagogue in the bustling city of Fustat, today one of greater Cairo’s many layers. The Ben Ezra *geniza*, today called “the Cairo Geniza,” is one of many *genizot*, but it is distinguished by its size, density, and age, with its approximately four hundred thousand manuscript pages and fragments, a great proportion of which date back to between the eleventh and thirteenth centuries.²⁸

Today, the Cairo *geniza* is divided among university and other collections worldwide. Approximately 10 to 15 percent of the *geniza* are documentary sources, such as marriage records, letters, wills, and various court records, not to mention bills of sale for enslaved people and their deeds of manumission.²⁹ These *geniza* documents are written primarily in Judeo-Arabic, a variety of the Arabic language written in the Hebrew script and used by Jews for centuries as a language of communication and cultural production from Iberia to India. Writers, mainly scribes and educated men, also used Hebrew and Aramaic. They tended to switch between these languages for any number of reasons, whether

rhetorical or technical.³⁰ Jews also acquired, reused, and eventually discarded Arabic-script materials in the *geniza*.³¹

These *geniza* documents are distinct from other kinds of historical evidence for a few reasons. First, because of its density and coherence, the Cairo *geniza* attests to a large but interconnected cast of characters in any given generation, such that one can trace many connections among individuals—including slave owners and the enslaved.³² Second, the *geniza*'s proximity to imperial Cairo (founded in 969 CE), the capital of the Fatimid caliphate (969–1171) and the Ayyubid sultanate (1171–1250), makes it an unusually rich source for the study of the interregional slave trade. The state, along with the city's merchant and professional classes, purchased slaves, whom they imported from regions including Nubia, India, and Byzantium. Significantly, the bureaucracies, courts, and mercantile networks that orchestrated this trade created a substantial paper trail. Finally, the religious diversity of Fustat meant that the *geniza*, although it was housed in a Jewish religious institution, preserved documents drawn up not just by and for Jews, but also by and for Muslims and Christians—an opportunity that allows historians to tell the story of the larger Egyptian society.

There are major challenges involved in rendering *geniza* documents legible as historical sources, for the *geniza* chamber was not an organized archive. Rather, it held heaps of haphazardly discarded materials that are often fragmentary because of physical deterioration and human handling. For example, records that had reached the end of their initial and ephemeral usefulness were frequently reused and torn apart and used for scrap paper. When antiquities collectors began to empty the *geniza* in the nineteenth century, parts of a once whole document were sometimes separated inadvertently into different crates. Some fragments have since been reunited by enterprising researchers, and more recently with the help of image recognition software.³³ Even whole and relatively legible documents may lack information like names, dates, and so on. Writers also took much for granted that outsiders, and modern readers, want to know. When merchants wrote to each other, for example, they tended to refer to previous correspondence to which researchers are often not privy.

The responses to these challenges involve generations of scholarship and, increasingly, collaborative efforts made more common by digital tools, like the Friedberg Genizah Project (FGP) and the Princeton Geniza Project (PGP). Similar developments are present among scholars who study the thousands of Arabic-script documents that were preserved in Egypt and beyond, namely in the Arabic Papyrological Database (APD). Fortunately for this book, *geniza* scholars have thus far identified the largest and contextually densest corpus of

slavery-related documents for the Middle East between the eleventh and thirteenth centuries.³⁴ My study of *geniza* documents alongside contemporaneous writings by Muslim and Christian authors convinces me that these materials together yield rare and groundbreaking insights into the history of slavery and the slave trade in Jewish communities and Islamic societies for this period.

Geniza sources and their subjects tell a fuller story when they are read in tandem with other contemporaneous writings in Hebrew and Arabic, as well as with published translations of materials in other languages such as Persian and Sanskrit. For example, family and merchant letters from the *geniza* suggest how individuals organized the trafficking of individuals across distances great and small. As the historian Jessica Goldberg argues, *geniza* merchant letters were ephemeral tools meant to convey useful information for immediate concerns and not to be enduring, public texts.³⁵ This ephemeral nature means that authors provide useful and up-to-date information about the shipping news, or they express a sudden need to purchase an enslaved person with disarming frankness and without a concern for posterity. Merchants' activities also required them to interact with a variety of ancillary characters, including ship captains, slave brokers, tax collectors, market inspectors, and others who did the quotidian work of the slave trade. Of these actors the documents provide rare snapshots, but often without further context about who these people were or what their exact roles were. For this background, other kinds of writings, such as slave-buying guides and market-inspector (*hisba*) manuals illuminate the larger world that lurks, as it were, in the epistolary shadows. Travel writing is also complementary, as these authors sought to produce writings that would interest curious readers and be preserved for posterity. They are apt, then, to focus on aspects of the slave trade that merchant letter-writers were not apt to include (as you will see in the works of Nāṣir-i Khusraw and Benjamin b. Jonah of Tudela).

This book draws on Jewish rabbinic works that were written in the same times and places as the *geniza* documents studied in this book. Among them, the responsa of Moses Maimonides (d. 1204) and his son Abraham Maimonides (d. 1237), himself a jurist and philosopher, provide us with some of the most detailed and coherent narratives about disputes over slavery in the Jewish community. Responsa (Heb. *teshuva*, pl. *teshuvot*; Ar. *fatwā*, pl. *fatāwā*) are sets of questions sent to legal authorities and those authorities' replies. Some of the responsa I study are preserved in the *geniza* and are directly addressed to Abraham Maimonides or signed in his own hand.³⁶ As I discuss in chapter 5, scholars debate the value of responsa for social history. Readers will notice, especially in parts two and three of the book, that there is a striking verisimilitude between some

responsa queries and specific cases described in documentary *geniza* sources. Both kinds of sources, for instance, report how women appeared before Muslim judges, who interrogated their personal histories to determine whether they were lawfully enslaved.³⁷ The interplay between responsa and documentary records permits the greater contextualization of both as historical sources.

Another work essential to this history is Moses Maimonides's legal code, the *Mishneh Torah*, which he completed in Egypt around 1178. The *Mishneh Torah* is one of the greatest and most enduring products of medieval rabbinic culture.³⁸ In fourteen books, Maimonides sought to compile all the Oral Law in one text so that a person would need no other source besides it and the Written Law (i.e., the Torah). Though it was not his intention, the *Mishneh Torah* also serves as a kind of archive for the social history of medieval slavery.³⁹ I juxtapose the laws of slavery found in the *Mishneh Torah* with his own responsa and evidence from *geniza* documents to illuminate how Egyptian Jews tried, and sometimes failed, to regulate slavery in the Jewish community. In some cases, Maimonides's condemnation of Jewish men's sexual use of enslaved women echoes in the criticism that Jewish communal officials leveled against men who purchased them for sex. In other cases I mine incidental, everyday details that he uses to explain and clarify his rulings. These details sometimes point to histories that are otherwise invisible to us.⁴⁰

Geniza Scholarship on the Slave Trade

This book builds upon generations of trailblazing scholarship.⁴¹ S. D. Goitein remains the chief architect of historical *geniza* studies, and it was he who first brought the case of Ibn Jamāhir, Šāfi, and the banished mother and son to light. In his six-volume magnum opus, *A Mediterranean Society*, he presents a panoramic view of the Jewish community and Egyptian society between the late tenth and mid-thirteenth centuries. One chapter in volume 1, "Slaves and Slave Girls," remains a standard reference in writings on slavery in the medieval Middle East.⁴² In his copious endnotes and personal research archive, Goitein identified hundreds of *geniza* documents that pertained to slavery, only some of which he discusses in his published works.⁴³

Goitein viewed his work on slavery, as he did *Mediterranean Society* as a whole, to be a provisional sketch upon which future scholars would expand.⁴⁴ And indeed, from the early 1970s to the present, *geniza* scholars have continued to study slavery in the Jewish households and communities of medieval Egypt as part and parcel of their inquiries into larger topics of marriage, gender, law, and

the mercantile economy. Mordechai Friedman and Amir Ashur have shown how Jewish men's use of enslaved women shaped written marriage agreements, as free brides and their families sought to protect their own status against the real and perceived threat of men's use of sexual slavery.⁴⁵ Miriam Frenkel, Eve Krakowski, and Oded Zinger have generated new approaches that use gender as a lens through which to view and analyze the dynamics of household and communal politics in which enslaved people figured.⁴⁶ The histories of enslaved people themselves have received less attention—with some notable exceptions.

My motivation to research and write this book was further stoked when I read Amitav Ghosh's genre-crossing book *In an Antique Land* alongside his academic research and the foundational works of Goitein and Friedman.⁴⁷ Ghosh's work is pioneering in how he sought to narrate the life of an enslaved person who is documented, albeit tersely, in *geniza* sources. More recently, Moshe Yagur has analyzed the lives of enslaved and freed individuals in his broader studies of religious conversion.⁴⁸ Mark R. Cohen's study of poverty and the poor also illuminates the margins of the Egyptian Jewish community where some enslaved and freed people found themselves among the many people accepting donations of bread flour and clothing.⁴⁹ Histories by Roxani Margariti, Jessica Goldberg, and Phillip Lieberman (see also Ackerman-Lieberman) provide a crucial framework for how I study the world of *geniza* merchants and their letters, personal networks, and business dealings.⁵⁰ Marina Rustow's analysis of politics and power struggles in the Jewish community, and their connection to Islamic rule, inform how I portray Jewish debates about slave ownership and the interface between Jews and Islamic rule in this book.⁵¹

In their landmark publications, Goitein, Moshe Gil, Friedman, and Frenkel stress that there is no *geniza* evidence that Jews participated in the "wholesale" slave trade, meaning that Jews did not traffic in large numbers of human beings for profit.⁵² Indeed, my research confirms that there is no evidence that Jews trafficked enslaved people in large numbers for profit to, or within, Egypt between the eleventh and thirteenth centuries.⁵³ This does not mean that Jews did not ever trade in slaves for profit during the Middle Ages. Evidence suggests they may have had some role in wholesale slave trading in ninth-century Iraq and the thirteenth-century Crown of Aragon, for example.⁵⁴

Before I explain how an outsized focus on the question of wholesale slave trading has distracted scholars from a larger and more complex history, I want to note why this preoccupation exists. In the Middle Ages, the topos of the Jewish slave trader (and manufacturer of eunuchs), along with fear of Jewish domination of non-Jews, was a durable and potent element of religious polemics, narrative

writings, and legal statutes.⁵⁵ As Michael Toch argues, modern historians misinterpret some of this evidence, and ignore other data, such that their writings overstate the extent of Jewish slave-trading and economic “monopoly” in medieval Europe.⁵⁶ Polemics that draw on myths of Jewish domination of the slave trade persist, and they are one ingredient that fuels contemporary antisemitism.⁵⁷ Contemporary antisemitism, in the words of Eric Ward, is “the theoretical core” of White Nationalist ideologies that have animated deadly violence against Jews, Blacks, Asians, immigrants, and others in recent years.⁵⁸ For all those reasons, it has been and remains necessary to critique ahistorical myths that stoke racism and violence.⁵⁹ The myth that Jews *dominated* the slave trade is one such example.

Perhaps this fraught history and state of affairs help explain why *geniza* scholarship on the slave trade never moved beyond the question of how centrally Jews were involved in it as wholesalers between roughly 1000 and 1250. Yet, for this period, the *geniza* holds one of the world’s densest corpora of documentary materials that illustrates how the slave trade operated within one of the era’s preeminent political, economic, and cultural centers—Cairo. Without careful consideration of this evidence, largely produced and preserved by Jews, I argue below that historians have sometimes misinterpreted key evidence, overlooked certain modes of slave trading, and thus failed to apprehend how a historically dynamic and multimodal slave trade operated.⁶⁰ My arguments rely both on comprehensive use of the available evidence and on an interrogation of the assumptions that scholars have made in their search for the wholesale slave trade.⁶¹

Scholarly preoccupation with the elusive quarry of the wholesale trade is analogous to another bias in medieval scholarship that favors long-distance trade in luxury goods over the more voluminous regional trade in staple commodities.⁶² Collectively, using a corpus of more than four hundred *geniza* documents, I argue that the most active and voluminous slave trade was within local and regional Egyptian markets. Moreover, wholesale trading in large numbers of enslaved people by nonstate actors was not common in the period between roughly 1000 and 1250 CE; there is no evidence that a wholesale slave trade was a regular or reliable way that enslaved people were trafficked to and within Egypt.

To integrate Jewish slave owners into this history, I ask you, reader, to hold two opposing ideas in your mind and consider that they are both accurate, if incomplete, assessments of Jewish history. Medieval Jews were nearly everywhere a subordinated group, frequently as a recognized communal body and sometimes as individual subjects of medieval polities. Medieval Jews also had privileges by virtue of their very subordinated position, as the “servants of the court (*servi*

camerae)” and as protected subjects (*dhimmīs*) within the caliphates.⁶³ Moreover, these privileges permitted Jews access to power through their vertical alliances with sovereign rulers in both Christian and Muslim contexts.⁶⁴ You will read examples of this in the chapters that follow for Islamic Egypt.

Jewish slave-owning was a very particular kind of power.⁶⁵ It was extremely rare, for instance, for a Jewish man to possess the military powers reserved for Muslim men in the state apparatus, like Ismāʿīl b. al-Naghṛīla (d. 1056, more popularly known as Samuel ha-Nagid) in eleventh-century Granada.⁶⁶ Yet it was not uncommon for Jewish men and women to possess and legally dominate other human beings as slave owners. As a form of domination, slavery was both intimate and violent. Sex, eating, child-rearing, childbirth, physical violence, illness, and deathbed declarations—these are the domains in which owners and enslaved people are asymmetrically entangled. This intimacy evoked visceral reactions from everyone involved, including from Muslims who sometimes observed Jewish slave-owning with resentment and scorn, just as they condemned and suspected the Muslims who handled the nasty business of the slave trade.⁶⁷

Slavery illustrates how Jewish subordination and Jewish power were two sides of the same structural coin. The very letter of Jewish subordination empowered Jews as slave owners, even as it constrained their slave owning in specific ways. For example, Jews in Islamic societies could not own Muslims. Slave purchases by Jews and Christians could become a sign of social disorder for rulers like the volatile and enigmatic Fatimid caliph al-Ḥākim, who forbade slave traders from selling enslaved people to Jews and Christians at the beginning of the eleventh century.⁶⁸

Scholarship on Slavery in the Islamic Middle East and Beyond

Once we recognize that “wholesale” trading was only one mode of this trade, and that Jewish sources and subjects shed light on other common modes of slave trading, this book’s contribution to scholarship on the history of slavery becomes more clear. Part 1 complements recent scholarship on the slave trade to medieval Egypt by Hannah Barker and Jelle Bruning, whose studies focus respectively on the chronological periods after and before this book’s focus.⁶⁹ My approach emphasizes that the local resale market was, in fact, the most voluminous one, even though most of the enslaved people who were continually resold within Egypt had been imported from outside of Islamic territory. Chapter 2, on the import trade, argues that it comprised different strands—diplomatic, state-sponsored,

and mercantile—that operated variously and should thus be interpreted differently when historians extrapolate from the evidence. Barker’s findings show that there was indeed wholesale slave trade to Egypt during the Mamluk sultanate (1250–1517), though Bruning’s study of documentary evidence from ‘Abbasid-era Egypt has more in common with what we find in the *geniza* documents during the Fatimid and Ayyubid periods (969–1250).

The focus on different modes of slave trading brings into clearer relief how both the demand and supply for enslaved people were driven by various strategic interests and not only by power imbalances between polities and people.⁷⁰ The Egyptian state sought enslaved people for its army, and it purchased many others for use in the palace and state apparatus, not to mention as sex slaves and child-bearers. Egyptian merchants, artisans, and others purchased enslaved people for household labor, sex, and to aid their own professional work. Moreover, regional powers from Christian Nubia and the Ḥadāriba Beja in northeast Africa, to dynasties in Yemen and Goa, nurtured political economies that relied on the control and taxation of luxury goods, travel, and trade, including of enslaved people.⁷¹ These political economies sometimes complemented the rule of empires, but they could also oppose them, as it sometimes behooved rulers to refuse to send enslaved people to Islamic rulers when their relations broke down.⁷²

The argument that slavery and slave trading were strategies used to various ends shows up across the history of the medieval Middle East. As mentioned previously, the late Umayyad and ‘Abbasid caliphates’ use of enslaved concubines as reproductive “vessels” for dynastic rule was born out of political exigencies.⁷³ Parts 2 and 3 of the book illustrate how, in society more broadly, slave owners and enslaved people both acted strategically, and in relation to one another, to exercise what scholars have come to call “interagency.”⁷⁴ Interagency emphasizes that historical subjects do not act as autonomous agents independent of others, but always interdependently and in relation to other actors. Or, as Vinciane Despret states, “There is no agency that is not interagency.”⁷⁵ The laws and culture of slavery conditioned how the interagency of slave owners and enslaved people was entangled, but these factors alone did not determine their “scopes of action.”⁷⁶ Individuals in both groups had identities grounded in their relations with people outside of the “master-slave” dyad, though the chances for enslaved people to form these ties were relatively attenuated.

Though I do not often use the term “interagency” in this book’s core chapters, it is a framework that underlies their key arguments. Part 2 of the book analyzes how the agency of male and female slave-owners relied on, and was conditioned by, enslaved labor. Free women used enslaved women and girls not only to

alleviate their own labor, but also to protect and project feminine honor and prestige, as Krakowski has illustrated.⁷⁷ Male owners also used slavery, and competed with each other over its control, in ways that engendered masculinity, a process that I came to understand better through my engagement with the work of medieval Europeanists including Ruth Karras, Debra Blumenthal, and Michelle Armstrong-Partida.⁷⁸

As a way of thinking, interagency also nurtures an interpretive stance that acknowledges that the slave owner's attempt to exercise power provokes a response from those she seeks to control.⁷⁹ Though enslaved people did not leave behind their own first-person writings, this book is rife with examples of how their actions were the impetuses for the creation of written works that describe their lives despite the intention of the slave-owning classes who primarily wielded such written instruments as tools of control. The logic of source creation and survival also cuts in the other direction, as an impediment to knowledge about enslaved individuals. Specifically, the everyday violence of slavery is largely absent from documentary sources because it was only written about when the violence against an enslaved person had consequences for a slave owner. Most violence that was suffered and absorbed by enslaved people, from beatings to rape, never generated a record.

The turn to the concept of interagency also reckons with what historian Walter Johnson has called "the master trope" of "agency," which critiques the tendency of social historians to conflate too strictly "agency" with "resistance" to slavery.⁸⁰ Such an approach flattens the humanity of enslaved and freed people, who made their way in the world sometimes by using the terms of slavery to their advantage and by choosing, strategically, from among the mostly horrible choices that were allowed them. Chapters 7 and 8 illustrate how so.

In pushing against the limits of what is possible to know about the lives of enslaved individuals, I wrote parts of chapters 4 and 7 in engagement with archaeologists of slavery who confront the "invisibility" of slavery in the material record of the medieval Islamic world and Europe, where the material culture of slavery and the slave trade largely resembles the material culture of society and trade as a whole.⁸¹ As the archaeologist Paul J. Lane puts it, we can learn a lot about slavery from not only "confirming the presence of enslaved people" in material culture, but also by "understanding the wider implications of the fact of their presence."⁸² The book's focus on the implications of enslaved people's presence is part of my larger argument for the value and potential of social history, and histories of everyday life, in global medieval studies.

Connected, global histories often center elite actors, luxury commodities, and intellectual currents, in part because these are the contents that the surviving narrative and literary sources tend to privilege. Alongside these histories, we ought to also recognize that proto-global connections also involved the violence of enslavement, human trafficking, and forced servitude.⁸³ Moreover, as the book's conclusion will argue, memories of these individuals and the history they represent linger in contemporary Middle Eastern societies.

How to Read this Book

At its heart, this book is a work of detection and integration. Like many historians, I frequently confront the reality of writing about people who did not create their own records, and I encounter the limits, ambiguities, and silence of the historical archives that, as the product of the slave-owning classes, were never meant to be the basis of a social and cultural history of slavery, let alone enslaved lives. Where possible, I overcome these obstacles using different methods. In other instances, I dwell in the ambiguity of the sources and ruminate about interpretive possibilities without resolving what must remain unknown.⁸⁴ In both cases, I try to be deliberate, transparent, and cautious in prodding at the limits of what the written texts themselves can tell us and when I suggest what the plausible outcomes of a given, ambiguous scenario were based on what we know from larger assemblages of evidence. I want to show readers, and not just tell them, how it is possible to write the social history of medieval subalterns. This mode of storytelling explains why some parts of the book are almost forensic in their approach to specific pieces of often fragmentary evidence: the method is an invitation to readers to participate actively in the construction of this history.

This book is also the product of two additional abiding scholarly commitments, both related to different kinds of integration. The first is the integration of Jewish and world histories, or Jewish sources and subjects, into narratives of premodern global history, especially in medieval Islamic contexts. Overall, I argue that Jewish slave-owning mainly reflects the practices of slavery in the larger Islamic society, of which Christians were also a major slave-owning group. At other points, specific aspects of Jewish slave-owning, and the lives of the enslaved people bound to Jewish households, are strongly inflected by Jewish law and culture. The book's narrative thus shifts its focus among Jews, Muslims, and sometimes Christians. It also foregrounds the interplay among these slaving cultures and highlights points of convergence and divergence.

The second form of integration is between the parts and whole. In this case, the parts are the three different scales across which this book proceeds, from the macro level of the interregional slave trade to Egypt, to a focus on slavery *lil-khidma* in the Egyptian Jewish community, and, finally, on to the biographies of the women, children, and men whose enslavement, trafficking, and presences (and absences) animate the whole book. Because the book tells the history of slavery from these different vantage points, parts one and two may raise questions for readers that are not immediately answered. You will read, for instance, in part 1 of the book about the slavery laws and the slave trade but not immediately about the experiences of the enslaved people who were the victims of human trafficking. It is in part 3, and chapter 7 specifically, that you read about how a six-year-old Indian girl would have experienced the multimonth passage from western India to Cairo. In this chapter, one also sees how sales were crucial moments when enslaved people could assert themselves to scuttle a planned transaction or to force their owners to make an unwanted one.

The parts of the book successively build up the historical world in which the lives of enslaved people and enslavers were entangled, and what readers learn in parts 1 and 2 of the book provides context for part 3 and the book's conclusion. Part 1 begins with a chapter that provides an overview of the Islamic and Jewish laws of slavery. The interplay between these two systems is also crucial. Chapter 1 argues that medieval Jews in Egypt lacked an effective framework for sexual slavery in contrast to Islamic law. This failure to regulate sex slavery led to a host of unintended consequences that are further explored in parts 2 and 3 of the book. Enslaved people also understood the interplay between Islamic and Jewish law, and they sometimes used the subordinated position of their Jewish owners within Islamic law to protect themselves.

Chapter 2 studies the hemispheric slave trade to Egypt, and the intercity trade within it. The chapter demonstrates that the slave trade to Egypt was multimodal and argues that these modes must be parsed to historicize the overall trade. Each of these different modes, the diplomatic, state, and mercantile trades, operated for different purposes and reflect distinct patterns. The mercantile mode was, in this era, decentralized, and scholars searching for the wholesale trade largely overlooked it or dismissed it as relatively insignificant. I argue that it was likely a primary way that enslaved people were trafficked over time outside of temporary "pulses" in the supply of slaves caused by epochal warfare and famine.⁸⁵

By thus separating the various strands of the slave trade, chapter 2 argues for a new approach to the study of the medieval slave trade in the Middle East and beyond. I use these findings to argue that scholars have misinterpreted certain

evidence for the medieval slave trade. A prime example of such a misapprehension is that of the *baqt*, which refers to a diplomatic agreement between Islamic Egypt and the Christian Nubian kingdom of Makouria and Nobatia in the seventh century.⁸⁶ By the eleventh century, the *baqt* did not exist except as a historical precedent, though diplomatic gifts (*hadiyyas*) that resembled the earlier *baqt* were an important part of geopolitical relations between Egypt, Nubia, and other polities, for which the *geniza* also furnishes new evidence. Finally, this chapter analyzes the forces and historical contingencies that coerced free people into slavery in the African lands just beyond the Egyptian frontier.

Chapter 3 argues that the center of gravity of the Egyptian slave trade was local, not transregional. Many enslaved people experienced upheaval throughout their forced servitude as they were sold and resold several times. Formal sales were only one method by which Jews transferred enslaved property. Wedding dowries, gifts, and bequests were primary methods that owners used to transfer enslaved people as both laborers and intergenerational wealth. Such documents of dowries and gifts, along with a large corpus of bills of sale for enslaved people, illustrate how Egyptian Jews fashioned a usable Jewish slavery law that allowed them to transact and protect their property rights in the larger Islamic legal environment.

This chapter also demonstrates the contingencies and ambiguities of medieval racialization. All non-Muslim people outside of Islamic territories could legally be enslaved. But Jewish sources reveal how Egyptian Jews coded black-skinned people as “slaves” in their informal writings, even though “Black”⁸⁷ was not yet used as one of the many long-standing ethnic categories that scribes were instructed to note in bills of sale, such as Nubian, Indian, and Abyssinian.

As the introduction to part 2, chapter 4 begins the book’s focus on the physical, economic, and social locations of slavery in medieval Egypt, particularly in Fustat and Cairo. We have precious little direct evidence about what slavery *lil-khidma* entailed in the medieval Middle East, not to mention how enslaved people experienced it. Chapter 4 addresses this challenge by illustrating how enslaved laborers would have moved through the domestic and urban spaces about which we do know. It reads, for example, archaeological and textual evidence of water retrieval and food preparation alongside medieval cookbooks in which enslaved women are credited with recipes to visualize how enslaved people fit into medieval urban society.

Chapter 4 also analyzes the professions of the slave-owning classes documented in the *geniza*. It classifies the main professional groups as medical workers (apothecaries and doctors), artisans, communal leaders, and merchants. These

professional clusters highlight, respectively, the different socioeconomic roles that enslaved people were forced to play as specialized laborers, as symbols of piety and prestige, and as sex slaves. Merchants are by far the largest single slave-owning group, a fact I attribute largely to these men's desire for sex with enslaved women. Many *geniza* merchants were mobile, and their stints in locations from North Africa to India could last for several years. Within a larger sexual economy that included polygyny, prostitution, and other extramarital sex, Jewish men had the least risk and the most control as slave owners.

Chapter 5 continues the study of sexual slavery by examining how Jewish men practiced sexual slavery even though it was not sanctioned by Jewish law. This chapter studies the rhetoric and behavior both of the jurists and leaders who discouraged sexual slavery and the men who defied their efforts. There were a host of unintended consequences. Some slave-owning men abandoned their free wives and children when they took an enslaved woman for sex. The enslaved women themselves lacked the protections that Islamic law gave to the childbearing enslaved women who belonged to Muslim men.

Another consequence was masculine competition over the regulation of slavery within the Jewish community. Some men performed a masculinity of dominance and asserted their prerogative as enslavers in the face of Jewish leaders who largely lacked the coercive tools to enforce their rulings. Other men cultivated a masculinity of piety that they performed by freeing enslaved women and then supporting their integration into the local community as freed, marriageable Jews. *Geniza* evidence also shows that some enslavers performed according to both masculine ideals. Enslaved and freed men also asserted their masculinity, as this chapter and part 3 of the book will illustrate.

Chapter 6 shines a spotlight on the free women who owned enslaved people and who made up one-quarter of the slave-owning classes. Beyond relief from household labor, free women also purchased and inherited enslaved girls because slave ownership was a feminine status marker and a form of social capital. Still, free women had to defend their rights as slave owners against the encroachments of their husbands and other male relatives, a fact that illustrates how Jewish women were doubly subordinated as *dhimmīs* and due to their gender in a patriarchal society. When Jewish courts were unable or unwilling to do so, women could sue Jewish men in Muslim courts. In this way, women's slave-owning provides further insight into how masculinity was shaped by Jewish men's subordination to Muslim men, the latter of whom had more privilege and power in Islamic society.

Part 3 of the book contains the individual histories and collective biography of the more than two hundred enslaved and freed people documented in the

geniza corpus. Chapter 7 focuses on the lives of enslaved people, and it begins by showing that it is possible to trace the life trajectories of some enslaved individuals despite the ambiguity created by naming practices in which enslaved people are not identified beyond their personal names. The chapter follows the life course of enslaved people from their births and childhoods, when slave owners seem to have viewed children as young as five or six as minimally competent for active servitude. The vast majority of the enslaved person's life course was an undifferentiated (by slave owners at least) passage from the age of "sexual maturity" (*bulūgh*) through either their manumission, their death with slave status, or their exit from the written archive.

Chapter 7 also focuses on the strategies that enslaved people used to exert what little power they could, along a continuum of resistance and accommodation, to protect themselves and to build their lives. In some cases, enslaved people practiced a kind of urban marronage in the "underworld" of medieval Cairo. Others used the terms of slavery and *dhimmī* law for their own purposes by converting to Islam and thus forcing their Jewish owners to sell them. Other people used their knowledge of the law to avoid an unwanted sale or to press their owners to provide the daily maintenance that slavery law required. In rare cases, enslaved people created their own families through marriage to each other.

Chapter 8 studies the freed men and women who chose to remain a part of the Jewish community. Some of them married Jews and had children. Others continue to appear in *geniza* documents because they continued the work they had done for their owners and within the same social and economic networks. The ways that freed people charted their life-paths largely resemble how freeborn Jews did so. The dowries of some freedwomen contained the kind of clothing and furnishings that free women received in their dowries. Freed men and women owned property, and others invested capital in business ventures and traded in imported goods.

The history of manumission, in Jewish law, is also a history of religious conversion as former slaves moved from the liminal category of slavery to become "full" Jews with their emancipation. Chapter 8 further analyzes how the Jewish laws of slavery, manumission, and conversion worked to erase the personal histories of freed people. By the second and third generations, the descendants of freed people were not identified as such. And the onetime presence of their forebearers, whether Nubian, Indian, and so on, was effectively muted. The multi-ethnic diasporas that formed through the violence of the slave trade, as seen in part 1 of the book, were partly absorbed into Arab-Islamic society and its Jewish communities and their histories as enslaved people eventually erased.⁸⁸

The book's conclusion focuses on how the three parts of the book work together to tell the two stories at the heart of the book. The first is the integration of Jewish and medieval world history through the lens of slavery. As in its Muslim and Christian counterparts, slavery was a constituent part of medieval Jewish culture in one of its most storied settings. Roughly one of every four enslaved people in the Egyptian Jewish community became a freed Jew and remained a part of the community in different capacities. Though Jewish history has a vocabulary for Sephardic Jews from Iberia, Ashkenazi Jews from central Europe, and Maghribi Jews from North Africa, the structures of law and religion conspire such that the passage of formerly enslaved Nubian, Indian, and other Jews has yet to be fully accounted for. The largest of these coerced diasporas was Nubian, and the conclusion ends by considering how a Jewish history of slavery figures into the stories that Nubians in modern Egypt tell themselves about the painful memories of slavery and how its legacy resonates in the present.

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