

# **Jewish involvement in ostrich feathers trade between Egypt and Venice in the 16th century as reflected in documents from the Cairo Genizah**

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# Jewish Involvement in Ostrich Feathers Trade between Egypt and Venice in the 16<sup>th</sup> century as reflected in Documents from the Cairo Genizah

by *Abraham David*\*

Since ancient times, the ostrich – *struthio camelus* in Latin – is well known in the Near East and North Africa and mentioned in the Bible more than once.<sup>1</sup> In those times, this largest fast-running, but flightless bird lived in the deserts of Syria, the Land of Israel and other regions of the Near East, but especially in central and southern Africa.<sup>2</sup>

Likewise well-known is the international trade between the Levant and southern Europe that started in antiquity and gained momentum in the Middle Ages<sup>3</sup> and Later Middle Ages / Early Modern times as well.<sup>4</sup> As we

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- 1 See the article by JOSEPH LEIBOVITZ and ELKANA BILIK, in: אנציקלופדיה מקראית, vol. II (Jerusalem, 1954), pp. 376-378.
- 2 On this bird in Jewish tradition since biblical times see, ZOHAR AMAR, מסורה קובץ מאמרים – העוף (Neve Zuf, 2004), pp. 190 ff.
- 3 See: ROBERT S. LOPEZ and IRVING W. RAYMUND, *Medieval Trade in the Mediterranean World* (London, 1955); SHLOMO DOV GOITEIN, *A Mediterranean Society. The Jewish communities of the Arab world as portrayed in the documents of the Cairo Geniza*, 6 vols. (Berkeley / Los Angeles / London, 1967-1999, <sup>2</sup>1999), vol. I: *Economic Foundations* (1967), pp. 29-70, 211-214; PAULA A. SANDERS, “The Fatimid state, 969-1171,” in: CARL F. PETRY (ed.), *The Cambridge History of Egypt*, 2 vols. (Cambridge, UK, 1998; <sup>2</sup>2006-2008), vol. I: *Islamic Egypt, 640-1517*, pp. 151-174, esp. pp. 161-165; LINDA S. NORTHRUP, “The Bahri Mamluk sultanate, 1250-1390,” in: PETRY (ed.), *Cambridge History of Egypt* (above mentioned), vol. I, pp. 242-289, esp. pp. 273-286.
- 4 To mention but the most important studies: ELIYAHU ASHTOR, *Studies on the Levantine Trade in the Middle Ages* (London, 1978); ELIYAHU ASHTOR, *East and West in the Medieval Mediterranean*, ed. by BENJAMIN Z. KEDAR (London, 1986); ELIYAHU ASHTOR, *Levant Trade in the Later Middle Ages* (Princeton, 1983); ELIYAHU ASHTOR, *Levant Trade in the Middle Ages* (Princeton, 2014; <sup>3</sup>2016); DAVID ABULAFIA, “The Levant Trade of the Minor Cities in the Thirteenth and Fourteenth Centuries: Strengths and Weaknesses,” in: BENJAMIN Z. KEDAR and ABRAHAM L. UDOVITCH (eds.), *The Medieval Levant: Studies in Memory of*

also know, a particular role in the development of this international trade of that period (and to a lesser degree during Early Modern times) played Near Eastern Jewish merchants actively involved in all kinds of trade, especially in Egypt. Since the second half of the last century, down to our time, this subject was, and still is, intensively studied and discussed by various great orientalists, such as Shlomo Dov Goitein, Moshe Gil, Eliyahu Ashtor, Mordechai Akiva Friedman, and many others.<sup>5</sup> The most important source for their respective studies was, and continues to be, the documents found in the famous Cairo Genizah.

Cairo Genizah means more than two hundred fifty thousand documents, mostly fragments. Though fragments, they nonetheless reveal many aspects of Jewish history and culture, life and lore and – all sorts of economic activities. Thus, to these documents belong fragments of Biblical texts and Talmudic literature, Hebrew poetry and liturgy, Biblical exegesis, commercial documents etc. written in Hebrew, Aramaic, and Judeo-Arabic, i.e., in the languages spoken and written by Jews in the Near East in the Middle Ages and later on.

This extraordinarily large and rich collection of documents has preserved in the old Ben Ezra synagogue in al-Fustat (Old Cairo) and was discovered there in the beginning of the last decade of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Although destined to be buried, for reasons not known to us, Egypt's Jews discarded these no longer needed rubbish writings and – since the 10<sup>th</sup> century – stored them in the synagogue's attic and, thus, preserved them there, where they remained until their discovery more than hundred twenty five

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*Eliyahu Ashtor (1914–1984)*, special issue of: *Asian and African Studies: Journal of the Israel Oriental Society* 22 (1988), pp. 183-202 = in: DAVID ABULAFIA, *Commerce and conquest in the Mediterranean, 1100-1500* (Variorum Collected Studies Series, vol. 410; Aldershot [etc.], 1933), pp. 183-202; BENJAMIN ARBEL, “Venetian Trade in Fifteenth-Century Acre. The Letters of Francesco Bevilacqua (1471-1472),” in: KEDAR and UDOVITCH (eds.), *The Medieval Levant* (mentioned above), pp. 227-288.

- 5 Selected studies on the commercial activities of oriental Jews in the high Middle Ages are: GOITEIN, *A Mediterranean Society* (note 3), vol. I and VI (index, pp. 20, 117: *s. v.* “Business” and “Trade”); SHLOMO DOV GOITEIN and MORDECHAI AKIVA FRIEDMAN, ספר הודו *India Book*, vols. I-IV (Jerusalem, 2009-2013); SHLOMO DOV GOITEIN and MORDECHAI AKIVA FRIEDMAN, *India Traders of the Middle Ages. Documents from the Cairo Geniza 'India Book'* (Études sur le judaïsme médiéval, vol. 51; Leiden / Boston, 2007); MOSHE GIL, *A History of Palestine 634-1099* (Cambridge, 2010), pp. 236-278; ELIYAHU ASHTOR, *The Jews and Mediterranean Economy 10<sup>th</sup> -15<sup>th</sup> Centuries* (London, 1983), esp. chapter I.

years ago.<sup>6</sup> The main part of the huge collection dates back to the classical medieval period, particularly the 10<sup>th</sup> to 13<sup>th</sup> centuries. A smaller part of the documents originates from the 14<sup>th</sup> century and later times. Since their discovery, research has focused more on documents from the classical period. Consequently, documents that go back, and are related, to the 14<sup>th</sup> century and later times are much less known and researched.<sup>7</sup> In any case, as we mentioned above, thousands of these Genizah documents point out that in those times Jews played a significant role. In my own research, special attention is directed on Genizah documents from the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries and focusses on Jewish life in the near East, especially, in the Land of Israel and Egypt with emphasis on: society and economy.<sup>8</sup> With regard to the second aspect, I was able to outline a little bit the role played by Egyptian Jews in domestic and international trade with Europe in the 16<sup>th</sup> century in general,<sup>9</sup> and with and in Venice in particular.<sup>10</sup>

When it comes to the trade mentioned in the title of this article, it seems that ostrich feather trade with the Levant and Southern Europe was

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6 Cf. the comprehensive descriptions of the Cairo Genizah discovery by STEFAN C. REIF, *A Jewish Archive from Old Cairo, The History of Cambridge University's Genizah Collection* (Richmond, 2000); ADINA HOFFMAN and PETER COLE, *Sacred Trash. The lost and Found World of the Cairo Geniza* (New York, 2011).

7 As to the Late Medieval period, few scholars only studied this topic, e.g., ASHTOR, *Jews and Mediterranean Economy* (note 5), chapters VII, VIII; ELIYAHU ASHTOR, "The Jews in the Mediterranean Trade in the Later Middle Ages," in: *Hebrew Union College Annual* 55 (1984), pp. 159-178; ELIEZER BASHAN, "חיי 18-ה-16 במאות ה-ה-1517," in: (1914-1517) תולדות יהודי מצרים בתקופה העות'מאנית (*The Jews in Ottoman Egypt (1517-1914)*), ed. by JACOB M. LANDAU (Jerusalem, 1988), pp. 63-112; BENJAMIN ARBEL, *Trading Nations. Jews and Venetians in the Early Modern Eastern Mediterranean* (Brill's Series in Jewish Studies, vol. 14; Leiden / New York, 1995).

8 ABRAHAM DAVID, חברה יהודית ים-תיכונית בשלהי ימי הביניים לאור גניזת קהיר (*A Jewish Mediterranean Society in the Late Middle Ages in the light of the Cairo Genizah*) (Jerusalem, 2016).

9 This aspect was shortly discussed by ABRAHAM DAVID, "The Role of Egyptian Jews in Sixteenth Century International Trade with Europe: A Chapter in Social-Economic Integration in the Middle East," in: BEN OUTHWAITE and SIAM BHAYRO (eds.), "From a Sacred Source." *Genizah Studies in Honour of Professor Stefan C. Reif* (Études sur le judaïsme medieval, vol. 42 = Cambridge Genizah Studies Series, vol. 1; Leiden and Boston, 2010), pp. 99-126.

10 On this topic, especially on the commercial ties with Venetian traders, see: DAVID, חברה יהודית ים-תיכונית (note 8), pp. 343-371; DAVID, "The Role of Egyptian Jews" (note 9), pp. 103-118.

flourishing in the Middle Ages<sup>11</sup> no less than in the later Middle Ages and in the Early Modern Period, i.e., 15<sup>th</sup>/16<sup>th</sup> centuries,<sup>12</sup> and again in Modern times, until the end of the First World War.<sup>13</sup>

The use of the feathers as decoration of women's costumes was quite popular throughout the generations. As we know for certain from the Cairo Genizah documents, it was Jewish merchants in the Near Eastern lands who played a significant role in this trade, especially between Egypt and Europe, via Alexandria and Venice, as we will see below.

Evidence for that is provided by sources that we have found among the documents of the Cairo Genizah collection. With reference to these documents, we can say that business of merchandising ostrich feathers from Egypt to Venice flourished when the Venetian republic was the leading power in the Mediterranean basin, holding supremacy of it, and controlled the international trade and trade routes in that part of the world. However, we don't know for sure, whence the ostrich feather came to Egypt. Probably, from central or southern Africa shipped by boat on the Nile to Cairo and from there via Nile Delta to Alexandria, at that time the greatest commercial centre in the Near East, and from Alexandria the ostrich feathers eventually found their way to Venice.

The first source that we have found attesting to the ostrich feathers trade is part of a Halakhic decree on commercial matters, which was written by R. Shim'on b. Zemaḥ Duran (1361–1444),<sup>14</sup> a famous Spanish rabbinical

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11 FEDERICO PIGOZZO, "Appunti sul commercio veneziano di piume di struzzo fra medioevo e prima età moderna," in: *Archivio Veneto*, ser. VI, 15 (2018), forthcoming.

12 See: INGRID HOUSSAYE MICHIEZI, "Le commerce des plumes d'autruche de l'Afrique subsaharienne aux marchés européens (fin XIV<sup>e</sup>- début XV<sup>e</sup> siècle)," in: ALAIN BONNET (ed.), *Le commerce du luxe. Production exposition et circulation des objets précieux du moyen age a nos jours* (Paris, 2015), pp. 19-26. See also our discussion below.

13 See: SARAH ABREVAYA STEIN, *Plumes: Ostrich Feathers, Jews, and a Lost World of Global Commerce* (New Haven / London, 2008; 2010); SARAH ABREVAYA STEIN, "Falling into Feathers: Jews and the Trans-Atlantic Ostrich Feather Trade," in: *The Journal of Modern History* 79/4 (2007), pp. 772-812.

14 On him, see: SAMUEL MORELL, "Duran, Simon ben Ṣemaḥ," in: NORMAN A. STILLMAN (ed.), *Encyclopedia of Jews in Islamic World*, 5 vols. (Leiden / Boston, 2010), vol. II, pp. 101-102. For further information about the author, see: JOEL KATAN, תשובות רבנו שמעון בר צמח דוראן, in: JOEL KATAN (ed.), מברא לשו"ת התשב"ץ (Responsa), vol. I (Jerusalem, 1998), pp. 19-59 (introduction).

authority from Algiers, who sent this decree to someone in the city of Tunis,<sup>15</sup> in the first half of the 15<sup>th</sup> century:

ובענין נוצת הנעמית<sup>16</sup> ששלחת על ידו ושלחם לויניציאה, וטוען שלא נמכרו ביותר מהחילוף שנתן לך עליהם שהם מאתים ושישים זהובים, אין עליו אלא חיוב שבועה.

Concerning the ostrich feathers that you dispatched through his agency, which he sent to Venice, and he claims that they were sold for not more than the equivalent of what he gave you, namely two hundred sixty gold pieces, he is obligated only to swear to.

As we learn from the above-cited Halakhic decree, the anonymous Jewish trader merchandising *inter alia* ostrich feathers, sold them to Venice, though not from Egypt, but from Tunis instead, thus, confirming, that the seaport of Tunis too was a great centre for transshipping commodities from Africa to Venice and others European seaports in that period.<sup>17</sup>

The other sources, to be referred to here, are six commercial documents preserved in the Cairo Genizah, in which, when speaking about ostrich feathers, the Hebrew word נוצה (*noṣab*) is used always in its singular form. But this singular certainly should be understood as a “collective singular” meaning “ostrich plume”.

(1) The first document is a letter (lacking, however, a few lines at the end) that was sent by an anonymous merchant to R. David Ibn Zamiro (*alias* Zimra).<sup>18</sup> It seems that the writer was the *fattore* (commercial agent)<sup>19</sup> of the addressee R. David Ibn Abi Zimra (1480–1573), who resided in Cairo

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15 SHIM'ON DURAN, תשובות (*Responsa*) (note 14), vol. III (Jerusalem, 2007), no. 166. The geographical name תננס in the title refers most likely to the city of Tunis and not Tenes, the Algerian seaport. On the confusion regarding the identity of the two localities, both being written as תננס, see: HAYYIM ZEEV W. HIRSCHBERG, *A History of the Jews in North Africa*, 2 vols. (Leiden, 1974-1981), vol. I: *From antiquity to the sixteenth century*, pp. 472-480.

16 Hebrew נעמית (*na'amit*) for “ostrich” was quite popular in the Talmudic literature, see: JACOB LEVY, *Wörterbuch über die Talmudim und Midraschim*, 4 vols. (Berlin / Wien, 1924; reprint Darmstadt, 1963), vol. III, p. 413.

17 On the significance of this city as an international commercial centre throughout the generations, see: P. SEBAG, “Tūnis,” in: *The Encyclopaedia of Islam*, vol. X (Leiden / Boston, 2000), pp. 629-639.

18 The document is preserved in The Jewish Theological Seminary of America, New York, ENA NS I 56 (L 92), and published by DAVID, *חברה יהודית ים-תיכונית* (note 8), pp. 319-321.

19 On the *fattore* in the Near East at that time, see: DAVID, “The Role of Egyptian Jews” (note 9), p. 103.

for more than forty years, before he moved to Jerusalem in 1553. He is considered to have been the greatest rabbinical authority among the Spanish Jews expelled from Spain in 1492.<sup>20</sup> In his letter, the writer describes the difficulties, which he had in marketing the feathers:

על ענין הנוצה, ואע"פ שכבר הודעתי [ל]מעל[תך] עם ר' שמואל כיחלאדו, כי לפניו פתחתי אותה הראיתי אותה לכמה סוחרים, ולא מצאנו שום מכירה [...] הראיתי הנוצה לסוחרים על מאמר מתיו, ולא רצו לעשות שום דבר.

Concerning the feathers, although I already informed you know through R. Samuel Kichlado that I opened [the parcel] in his presence, I showed them [i.e. the feathers] to some merchants. As we did not find [an opportunity] for selling [them], [...] I showed the feathers to the merchants following the advice of Matteo (Matthew), but they were not inclined to do anything.<sup>21</sup>

The Italian merchants, with whom he negotiated without success, apparently were not interested in buying the feathers. And of Matteo, the one mentioned by name here, we know that at that time he was in jail in Egypt.

(2) Three more commercial letters that deserve attention here, were sent from the *fattore* Abraham Colon to his employer, Abraham Ardea living in Egypt (Cairo) as well.<sup>22</sup> But it is not clear where Abraham Colon resided in Egypt. Most likely, he settled in one of the commercial centres in the Nile Delta, probably in Alexandria, at that time the greatest port (city) in the Eastern Mediterranean basin. This Mediterranean commercial centre was the major place of transshipment for most of commodities that took their way from the Near East to Europe and *vice versa* from Europe to the Near East. The name of the writer occurs also in two other Genizah commercial documents.<sup>23</sup> The Colon family was well-known in Italy. One member of

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20 A lot has been written on him and his rabbinical writings, see, e.g., HIRSCH JACOB ZIMMELS, *Rabbi David ibn abi Simra (RDbS), Leben und Lebenswerk* (Bericht des Jüdisch-Theologischen Seminars (Fraenckelsche Stiftung für das Jahr 1932; Breslau, 1933); ISRAEL M. GOLDMAN, *The Life and Times of Rabbi David Ibn Abi Zimra* (New York, 1970); ABRAHAM DAVID, *To come to the Land, Immigration and Settlement in Sixteenth-Century Eretz Israel* (Tuscaloosa / London 1999), pp. 142-144, 227-228; SAMUEL MORELL, *Studies in the Judicial Methodology of Rabbi David Ibn Abi Zimra* (Dallas, Tex., 2004).

21 Lines 2-4.

22 The letters have been published in Hebrew in DAVID, *חברה יהודית ים-תיכונית* (note 8), pp. 301-317.

23 Those two documents are stored in the Cambridge University Library (CUL) – Taylor-Schechter Genizah Research Unit, T-S NS 338, 70; T-S AS 214, 40. The first one has been published in DAVID, *חברה יהודית ים-תיכונית* (note 8), p.

the family, R. Joseph Colon of Mantua (he died at the beginning of the eighties of the 15<sup>th</sup> century), was one of the greatest rabbinical authorities in Northern Italy in the second half of the 15<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>24</sup> Two of his descendants resided in Jerusalem in the beginning of the 16<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>25</sup> It is not unlikely that Abraham Colon is a relative of this great Rabbi.

All three of his letters are dated to the years 1557/8. The writer reports to his employer on his successful and unsuccessful marketing various kinds of commodities, such as textile, metal, spices, perfumes, corals, indigo etc. In his report, he also tells about his negotiations with Jewish, Muslim, and Italian traders. Alexandria at that time, as we know, was home to a number of Italian commercial representatives and consuls, who were in charge of the Mediterranean trade and shipments to Europe, especially to Venice. Of interest in our context is that in each letter the writer explicitly mentions that he is dealing in ostrich feathers, too.

In the first letter, written on [ש"ח] י"ז חשוון (October 11<sup>th</sup>, 1557),<sup>26</sup> the writer informs of the difficulties that he faced when marketing the feathers which he was supposed to tranship probably to Venice:

מעניין הנוצה עדיין לא מכרתי אותה, כי לא ראיתי דבר שיכשר בעיניי עד עתה, כי עם ניקוליטה לא יכולתי לעשות דבר.<sup>27</sup>

Regarding the feathers, I did not sell them yet. So far, I have not seen anything that will be fitting myself. Since with Nicolita,<sup>28</sup> I could not do anything.

However, one trader wanted to buy the feathers by way of an exchange deal with garments:

כי הדולפין רוצה לקנות הנוצה, אלא שרוצה לתת בגדים מששים אינגראנה.<sup>29</sup>

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315. The second document, I have discussed several times; cf. the discussion below, note 48.

24 There is quite a lot of studies on him and his halakhic *responsa*. For a summary, see: JEFFREY R. WOOLF, "New Light on the Life and Times of Rabbi Joseph Colon Trabotto (Maharik)," in: *Italia* 13-15 (2001), pp. 151-180.

25 His son, R. Peretz Colon, and his grandson, R. Joseph Colon, were active members of the leadership of the Jewish community in Jerusalem, see: DAVID, *To come to the Land* (note 20), pp. 158, 167-168, 240, 249.

26 The letter is preserved in The Jewish Theological Seminary of America Library, New York, ENA 2727, 45, and published in DAVID, *חברה יהודית ים-תיכונית* (note 8), pp. 311-312.

27 Lines 8-11.

28 The name of the Italian trader.

29 Lines 12-14.



The Dolphin<sup>30</sup> wants to buy the feathers, but he wants to give clothes in sixty *in grana*<sup>31</sup> instead.

In the second letter, written on [יום ה' י"ב כסליו [שי"ה]] (November 4<sup>th</sup>, 1557),<sup>32</sup> the writer informs that he sold the feathers as it was an option to do so likewise by way of an exchange deal with garments:

ואל יהוש כ"ת שמכרנו הנוצה קודם שבאו הדוגיאות, כי בע"ה לא נפסיד בבגדים כי אם דבר מועט.<sup>33</sup>  
And let his honour not be disturbed that we sold the feathers before the galleys arrived. For with God's help we will sustain but a small loss for the cloth.

In the third letter, written on [יום ב' ה' אדר [שי"ה]] (January 24<sup>th</sup>, 1558),<sup>34</sup> the writer reports that he tried unsuccessfully to sell the feathers:

ועדיין לא מצאתי למכור הנוצה, וגם ר' יוסף לא עשה דבר, כי אין קונה.<sup>35</sup>

Thus far, I did not find [an opportunity] to sell the feathers. Even R. Joseph did not do anything, because there is no one buyer.

In addition to that, the letters provide some more interesting details concerning the maritime export of ostrich feathers. From references in the first and second letters, we assume that this marketing should be done only short time before the ship will raise the anchor, as the writer notifies:

אם יראה לכ"ת לשלוח גם כן הנוצה שקנה עתה, תעשה כמו שיראה לכ"ת, כי יכול להיות שימכר,  
כי הספינה עריסה הולכת לויניציאה מהרה ובודאי ימכר.<sup>36</sup>

If his honour wants<sup>37</sup> to send also the feathers [to those], who bought [them] now, do what his honour likes, for it may be that they be sold, because the ship Aressa is going to Venice soon, and [the feathers] certainly will be sold.

To the question why the feathers could not be stored long time before the ship will lift the anchors in Alexandria, thus far, I do not have any answer or explanation.

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30 As can be deduced from the context, this word is rather a nick name of the trader.

31 This is an Italian word for Purple clothes.

32 This fragment is part of the Jack Mosseri Collection IV, 93 (L 100), which nowadays is temporarily deposited in the Cambridge University Library. It was published in DAVID, חברה יהודית ים-תיכונית (note 8), p. 313. Its English translation can be found in DAVID, "The Role of Egyptian Jews" (note 9), pp. 115-116.

33 Second letter, lines 13-14.

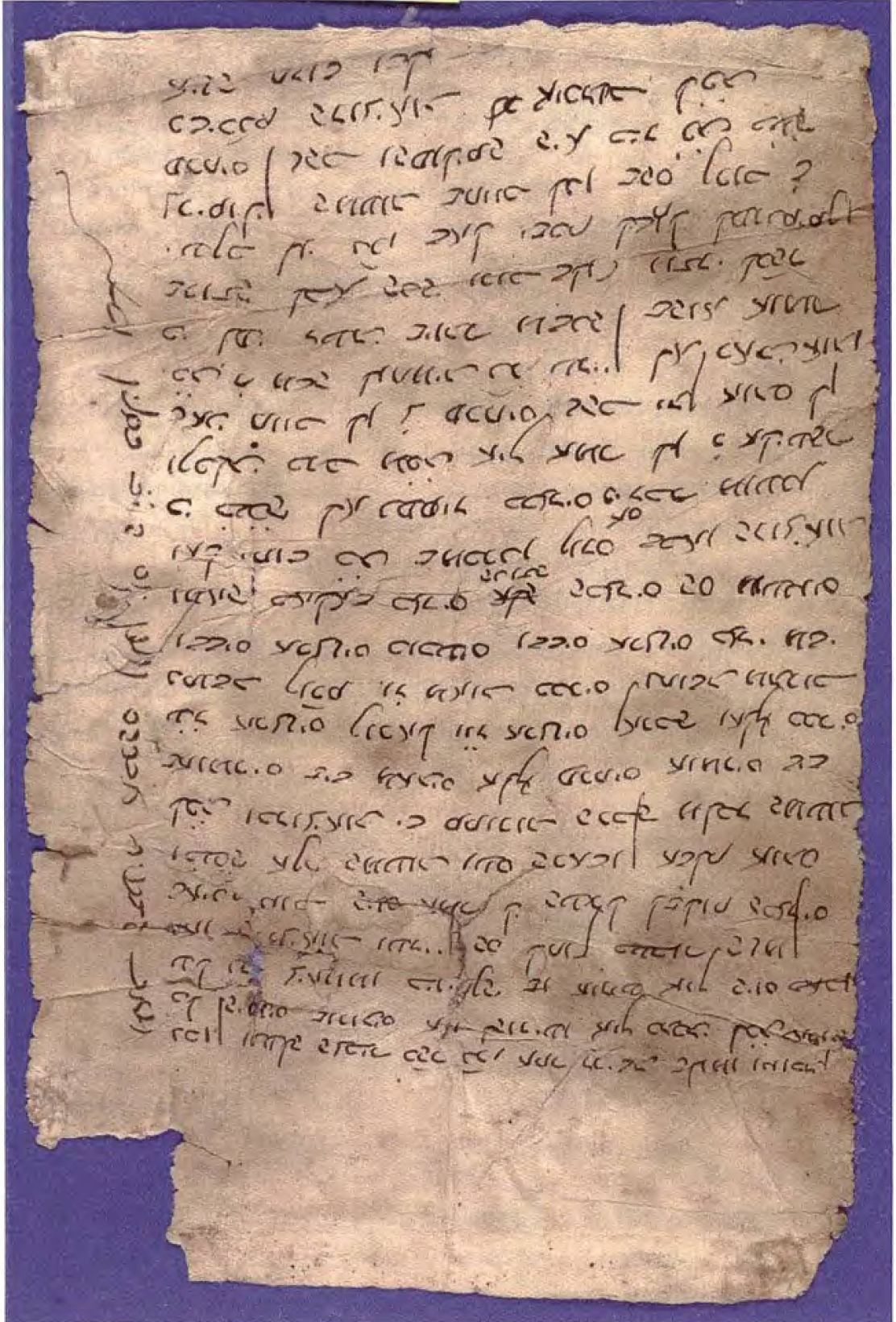
34 Preserved in the Hebrew Union College Library, Cincinnati, HUC 1034. It was published in: DAVID, חברה יהודית ים-תיכונית (note 8), p. 314.

35 Lines 6-8.

36 First letter, p. 2, lines 8-13.

37 See above, p. 8.

Mosses collection IV, 93r, lines: 13-14 (see note 32 above)  
 I thank Dr Ben Outhwaite, director of the Taylor Schechter Gemzarb Research Unit,  
 The Cambridge University Library  
 for kindly having given the permission to publish the three facsimiles.





(3) The next document – a deed concerns a partnership deal between Judah Castro and Namer Varioti on ostrich feathers marketing and shipping from Alexandria to Venice, signed by them in 1553/4.<sup>38</sup> According to this deed, Judah Castro's share was three quarters and Namer Varioti's one quarter. This deal was divided into two parts. The first part was signed by Judah Castro on [שי"ד] שנת חושה (November 14<sup>th</sup>, 1553) in Alexandria.<sup>39</sup> At that time, the Castro family was well established in Egypt, and some of its members, of whom we know, belonged even to the upper class and high society in both in Egypt as well as Jerusalem. Among them was R. Abraham Castro who probably was expelled from Spain in 1492 and settled in Cairo. He himself as well as his descendants, two or three generations, took an active part in the Jewish community and belonged to its leadership in Cairo and Jerusalem, and they were also involved in business, commerce and finances.<sup>40</sup> The second part of the afore-mentioned deed was signed by Namer Varioti in Cairo on שבט שנת חושה (January 29<sup>th</sup>, 1554).<sup>41</sup> In the beginning of the first part of the deed, Judah Castro states:

בהיות שאני החתום למטה שלחתי קפאס נוצה לויניסיא. משקלו מאה וארבעה רטלין בסך מאה וששה עשר פרחים זהב ויניסיאנוס וכ"ד מידי חוץ מהוצאות והמכסים שיש עליהם פה ועד ויניסיאה.<sup>42</sup>

As the undersigned, I sent a *qafiz*<sup>43</sup> of ostrich feathers to Venice weighting one hundred and four *ratls*<sup>44</sup> in the sum of one hundred and sixteen Venetian gold

38 Stored in the Cambridge University Library, Or. 1080. J133; published in: DAVID, חברה יהודית ים-תיכונית (note 8), pp. 293-294. English translation in: DAVID, "The Role of Egyptian Jews" (note 9), pp. 117-118.

39 He does not mention his home town, but from the context we can derive that he resided in Alexandria.

40 On them see: DAVID, חברה יהודית ים-תיכונית (note 8), pp.109-140, 257-272, 285-300; DAVID, *To come to the Land* (note 20), pp. 140-141, 167, 225, 248. Abraham's son R. Jacob Castro, a famous rabbinical figure in Egypt, was also engaged in commerce; see: JACOB S. SPIEGEL, "הרב ר' יעקב קשטרו (מהריק"ש) וחיבוריו" in: *עלי ספר* (*Alei Sefer*) 16 (1989-1990), pp. 5-36.

41 Namer Varioti is known also as addressee of an Arabic letter, which can be found in the Cambridge University Library, T-S Misc. 22, 191.

42 Lines 1-4, 21-22.

43 A traditional Arabian unit of measure for quantities including volume, that was used in the East, see: WALTHER HINZ, *Islamische Masse und Gewichte, Umgerechnet ins metrische System* (Leiden, 1955), pp. 48-50.

44 The most often used Arabian unit of measure for weight in the Near East (the Europeans called it *rottolo*), but in each country, it had different value. For the *ratl*

florins and twenty four *mu'ayyad*<sup>45</sup> exclusive of the expenses and duties from here to Venice.<sup>46</sup>

(4) Further information regarding ostrich feather trade can be found in four fragments of an uncompleted long letter that was written on יום ו' כ"ג יום לחדש השון ש"י (14.11.1549). Its writer, Isaac son of Yehiel, a resident of Cairo,<sup>47</sup> was *fattore* of the anonymous addressee who probably resided in Gaza.<sup>48</sup> At that time, Gaza too was a commercial centre and special place for caravans mediating the overland trade between Egypt and Syria via the Land of Israel.<sup>49</sup> The writer, in fact an Italian, had his roots in Germany or in its vicinity. He frequently used Italian terminology, but also some Yiddish words.<sup>50</sup> Therefore, it seems to be very likely that the addressee too originally comes from Italy, otherwise, he certainly would not have understood the Italian terminology. The writer reports to the addressee about his massive commercial activities in several commodities, such as: textile, agricultural products, spice, perfume etc. It seems that not all the stuff of commerce he mentions was domestic. At least part of it was exported to Europe. In this context he mentions Venice. Twice he mentions the ostrich feathers, as he records:

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in Egypt and Jerusalem, see: HINZ, *Islamische Masse und Gewichte* (note 43), pp. 28-30; AMNON COHEN, *Economic Life in Ottoman Jerusalem* (Cambridge, 1989), p. 130.

45 An Egyptian coin, in use in the 15<sup>th</sup>/16<sup>th</sup> centuries, named after the Mamluk Sultan al-Mu'ayyad Shaykh al-Mahmūdī (1412–1421); see: PAUL BALOG, *The Coinage of the Mamluk Sultans of Egypt and Syria* (Numismatic Studies; New York, 1964), pp. 299-306.

46 See: DAVID, "The Role of Egyptian Jews" (note 9), p. 117.

47 He mentions that everything was sold in האן חליל *Khan al-Khalili* (line 11) the famous market in central Cairo, which exists still today. On this market, see: OLA SEIF and JAYME SPENCER, *Khan al-Khalili, a comprehensive mapped guide to Cairo's historic bazaar* (Cairo, 1991).

48 Three fragments are preserved in Cambridge University Library: T-S AS 214, 40; T-S AS 212, 54 and T-S AS 212, 55. The largest fragment is preserved in the Jack Mosseri Collection IIIa. 9 (L 2) (note 32). On this document, see: DAVID, חברה יהודית ים-תיכונית (note 8), pp. 54, 310, 357, 380-381. Among the Cairo Genizah documents are preserved the remains of a few folios of a commercial ledger that was written by the same trader in the same year, stored now in the Cambridge University library: T-S Arabic 30, 232 and T-S NS 83, 19.

49 On Gaza as a commercial centre at that time, see: AMNON COHEN and BERNARD LEWIS, *Population and Revenue in the Towns of Palestine in the Sixteenth Century* (Princeton, 1978), index, and on the commercial activities of the Jews in Gaza at that time, see: ABRAHAM DAVID, "עזה – מרכז לסחר בין מצרים לארץ ישראל במאה ה'ט"ז," in: *Mahanayim* (second series) 2 (1992), pp. 184-191.

50 The script is Italian-Ashkenazic handwriting.

והנוצה שכתבתי לכ"ת שיש בקפאס או קופה אחת שהיא חצייה שלנו.<sup>51</sup>

Regarding the feathers which I wrote his honour that is existed in a *qafiz*<sup>52</sup> or one *kuppa*<sup>53</sup> which half of its in our possession.

תמהתי מאד על כתבך שכתבת לי שלא אשלח שום מין נוצה.<sup>54</sup>

I was wondering regarding your letter you wrote me that I should not send any kind of feathers.

To sum up. As we saw, during the Late Middle Ages and Early Modern times Egypt served as a crossroad and pivotal point for trade between Orient and Occident and *vice versa*. The Genizah documents reflect the high level of involvement of Egyptian Jews in domestic and international trade, especially with Europe. That they played a main role in the trade with Italy, especially with Venice, can easily be explained and understood in view of the fact that in the sixteenth century in Egypt lived quite a number of Jewish merchants of European origin, such as merchants from the Iberian Peninsula, Italy, and central Europe. They easily could converse and negotiate with European traders in their own languages. Furthermore, as in their countries of origin, so in Egypt too, engagement in trade and other commercial activities was widely spread and a most common occupation among European Jews.<sup>55</sup>

The focus of this article was on one commodity only, the ostrich feathers and the trade with them, as reflected in documents from the Cairo Genizah that dating back to the middle of the 16<sup>th</sup> century, incidentally survived. From the above-mentioned documents we learn that in Egypt apparently was a great demand for ostrich feathers to sell them subsequently on the market in Venice. Does that mean that ostrich feathers trade between Egypt and Venice was particularly flourishing in the fifties of 16<sup>th</sup> century? I do not think so, for those documents have found incidentally, and other documents from the Cairo Genizah and other sources may present a different picture. Nonetheless, we have reason to assume that ostrich feathers were a typical and quite popular commodity in the commercial exchange between Egypt and Europe (via Venice) in the 16<sup>th</sup> century and maybe even before, too.

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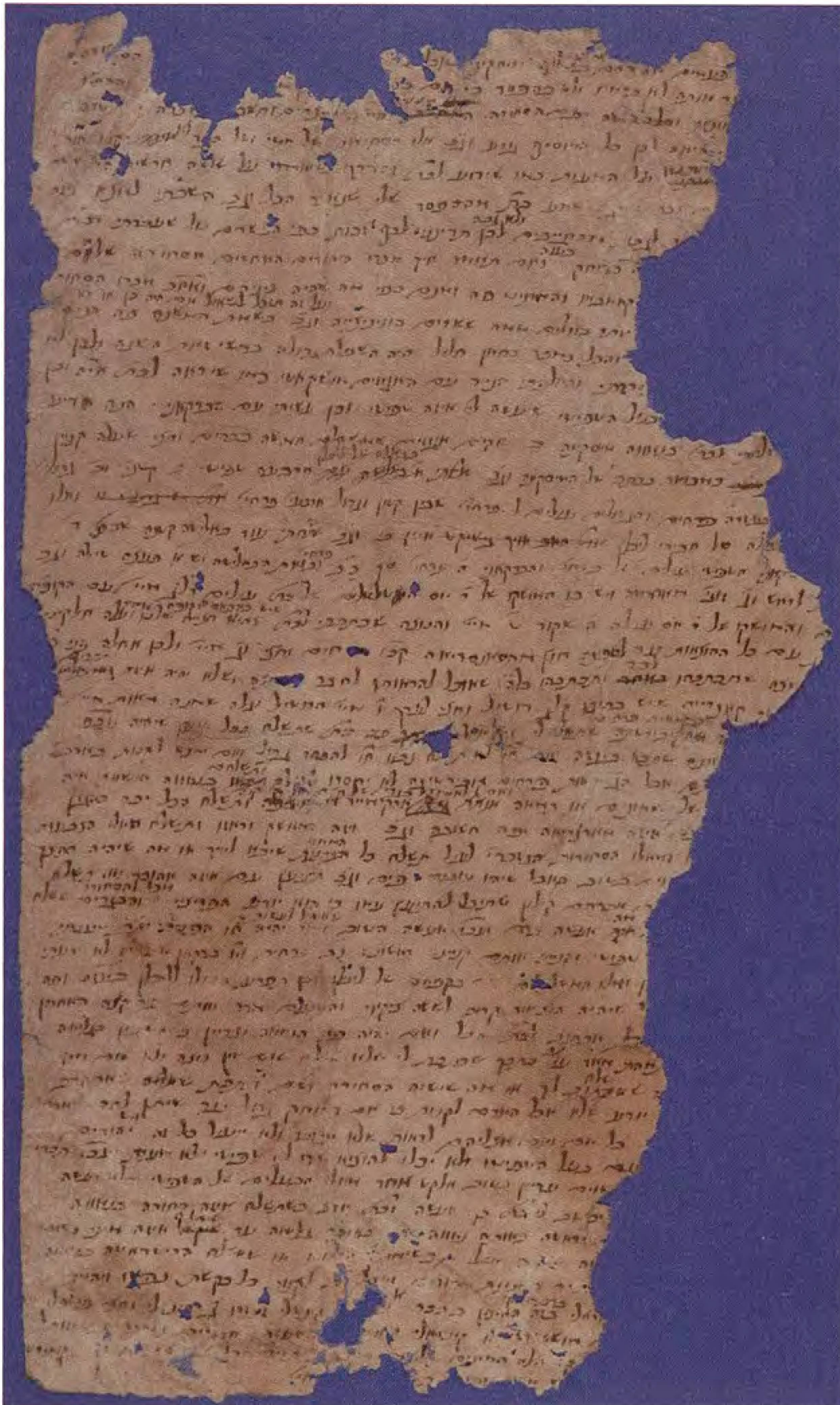
51 Mosseri Collection IIIa, 9 (L 2), line 20.

52 On *qafiz*, see note 43 above.

53 In ancient Hebrew, this term means “basket”, see: LEVY, *Wörterbuch über die Talmudim und Midraschim* (note 16), vol. IV, p. 270. In the 16<sup>th</sup> century, the term seems to have been used as unit of measure for volume. Its quantity, however, is not clear.

54 Mosseri Collection, IIIa, 9 (L 2), line 37.

55 Cf. DAVID, “The Role of Egyptian Jews” (note 9), pp. 99-106.



Mosseri Collection IIIa.9r, lines: 20, 37 (see note 32 above)