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Addendum to November 2011's Fragment of the Month

FRAGMENT OF THE MONTH ARCHIVE

Fragment of the Month: November 2021

Kalah in the lands of Java: T-S Ar.30.42

Marina Rustow

Map of the area discussed in this article

Abraham Maimonides (henceforth Maimuni, d. 1237), the son of Moses Maimonides, handled two legal cases about Jewish traders in Southeast Asia. It's remarkable that he handled any at all, seeing as he was 8,000 kilometers away in Fustat.

Goitein published both cases in translation fifty years ago in *Letters of Medieval Jewish Traders* (nos. 46 and 47). One case appears in a court testimony, the other in a query and responsum, both in Maimuni's hand.

How common was it for Jews to travel to Southeast Asian ports in the thirteenth century? Voyages to Southeast Asia were the exception among Jewish traders, who for the most part remained in the western Indian Ocean: the Red Sea ports, the gulf of Aden, Gujarat, and the Konkani and Malabar coasts.

Around 1204, for instance, a Jewish trader ventured into the eastern Indian Ocean. A conciliatory letter he sent to his wife appears in *Letters of Medieval Jewish Traders* (no. 45); she had evidently rebuked him for staying away for too long. The trader explained that after losing everything and nearly dying in a shipwreck, he had taken out a loan and attempted to recoup his losses through further trade, venturing onward "to the lands beyond the Malabar coast."¹

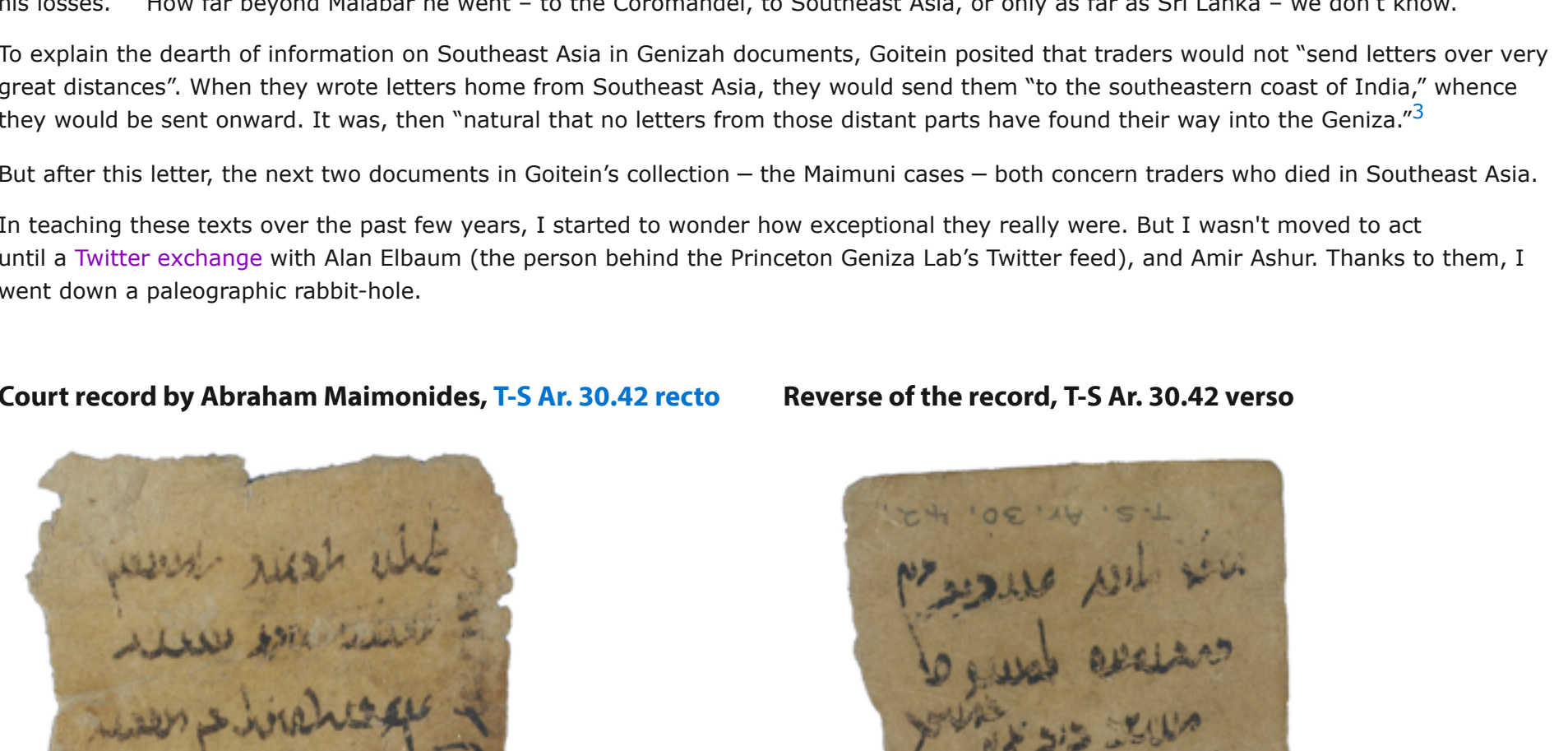
It was only this trader's duress that brought him beyond Malabar – or so Goitein argued, footnoting this sentence in apparent amazement: "This is the Coromandel coast of South-east India [his emphasis]. Very few of the thousand or so Jewish India travelers mentioned in the Geniza went as far as the Coromandel coast, but beyond it, next to none. Our traveler had to take this exceptional trouble in order to replace his losses."² How far beyond Malabar he went – to the Coromandel, to Southeast Asia, or only as far as Sri Lanka – we don't know.

To explain the dearth of information on Southeast Asia in Genizah documents, Goitein posited that traders would not "send letters over very great distances". When they wrote letters home from Southeast Asia, they would send them "to the southeastern coast of India," whence they would be sent onward. It was, then "natural that no letters from those distant parts have found their way into the Geniza."³

But after this letter, the next two documents in Goitein's collection – the Maimuni cases – both concern traders who died in Southeast Asia.

In teaching these texts over the past few years, I started to wonder how exceptional they really were. But I wasn't moved to act until a Twitter exchange with Alan Elbaum (the person behind the Princeton Geniza Lab's Twitter feed), and Amir Ashur: Thanks to them, I went down a paleographic rabbit-hole.

Court record by Abraham Maimonides, T-S Ar. 30.42 recto **Reverse of the record, T-S Ar. 30.42 verso**



"Death in Malaya"

T-S Ar.30.42 is a court record in Maimuni's unmistakable hand, dated according to the Muslim and Jewish calendars (10 Rajab 623H and 10 Tamuz 1537 Sel. = 7 July 1226). Maimuni had found himself, either once again or not for the last time, in the unenviable position of rendering a legal decision regarding the death of a trader in Southeast Asia.⁴

Most of the document is intact; its purpose is clear. A Jewish trader named Abū Sa'īd al-Levi b. Abū I-Ma'ānī testified before the court to the effect that one of his fellow traders had died in a place called Kalah (כָּלָה), "in the lands of ...". Abū Sa'īd further testified to having "verified and checked" his information "when he arrived in the Malabar, in India (*ḥina dukhālihi ilā al-ma bar min bilād al-hind*), perhaps from Egypt. Abū Sa'īd is likely to have understood that his comrade's disappearance could create legal complications: Jewish law would not permit his widow to remarry unless her husband's death could be legally verified. And so Abū Sa'īd made an effort to check the information about his death, perhaps planning to testify about it on his return to Fustat.

So far, this case is nothing extraordinary. When traders from Egypt and other places around the Mediterranean ventured into the Indian Ocean basin, they tended to stay away for several years at a time, traveling with the semianual monsoons. Many left spouses and children behind, and uncertainty in their wake; not all returned. Letters kept them connected to their home communities so long as they were alive; but their death or disappearance could create legal and financial complications at home.⁵

What provoked my attention wasn't the case itself, then, but rather the holes in Goitein's translation. There are spots on the verso (recto as conserved) where the ink had rubbed off along two creases.

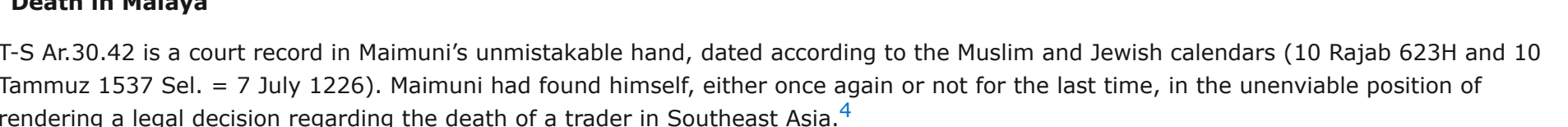
One lacuna occurs just after the toponym Kalah, which is described as "in the lands of ...". Goitein called Kalah, probably correctly, on the west coast of the Malay Peninsula. He also identified it as Kedah, a port in the northwest corner of present-day Malaysia; that identification turns out to have been somewhat arbitrary.

Modern scholars have debated Kalah's precise location on the Malay Peninsula since 1718, and they still haven't reached a consensus. The medieval Arab geographers placed Kalah equidistant between Sīrāf, in Iran, and China (by which they probably meant southeastern Chinese ports); that would put it on the Malay peninsula, but it's not clear that they knew precisely where.⁶ Modern scholars fall into three camps, two of which place Kalah on the thousand-kilometer stretch of coast between Phuket in modern Thailand and Klang in Malaysia. It's unclear why Goitein followed the opinion he did.⁷

As for the phrase following Kalah, Goitein noted that it was "partly effaced, which is a pity, for the medieval Arabic name of the Malay peninsula has not yet been established with certitude."⁸ The transcription Goitein left in his files also suggests that he never deciphered it.

Goitein may, however, have been asking the wrong question: it isn't necessarily the Arabic name for the Malay Peninsula that follows Kalah. It may be some more general toponym. At least that's what the compound toponym *bilād al-...*, "the lands of ..." implies: such constructions usually point to a broad region. Medieval traders used *bilād al-hind*, "the lands of India," to mean something like "the Indian Ocean basin." A Genizah letter containing several such vague toponyms mentions travelers who had arrived in Aden from many places: "the rest of *bilād al-hind*" (suggests) the "Zen," was considered "the coast of East Africa and possibly Madagascar"; and *bilād bar barbarā wa-habash* ("the coast of Berbera and Abyssinia" — the horn of Africa). "The *bilād al-* paradigm would lead us not to expect an area as specific as the Malay Peninsula.

By now, I was intrigued. The document promised information not just about Jewish traders in thirteenth-century Southeast Asia, but also about eastern Indian Ocean ports and medieval Egyptians' perception of them. Then there was the provocation of Goitein's ellipsis ("the lands of ..."), and the further inducement of Alan's tweet enthusiastically announcing, "There's one undeciphered word!" I already sensed a whiff of quarry in the air; then, Amir's resigned response to Alan — "If you have a better reading ..." (again the ellipsis) — sent me bounding down the rabbit-hole.



Close-up image of T-S Ar.30.42 recto, line 6

Finding Java

Before encountering this document, I had never attempted to decipher Maimuni's cursive, highly Sefaradi, and also somewhat peculiar hand. It took me a few hours of reading documents in his hand to adjust my eyes to it. A few hours after that, I was no longer a good reader. I could make out *...k[...]* but I still couldn't read two crucial letters.

So I called my colleague Michael Laffan, a historian of Southeast Asia. He hastened to remind me that he doesn't know Hebrew script. I didn't care, because his Arabic is excellent and what he does know are the ports of medieval Southeast Asia. As though solving a crossword puzzle, he began suggesting four-letter words that, with the definite article, could complete the phrase "Kalah, in the lands of ..." There was one that I immediately liked on paleographic grounds and he on historical ones: *al-Jāwa*.¹⁰

Laffan followed up with some references I could check. That was when I learned what blind luck it had been to interest him in my plight: one of his first publications had to do with names for Southeast Asia in medieval Arabic texts, and one of those names was *al-Jāwa*.¹¹ The article is nearly fifty pages long, so here's the *tl;dr* version.

In medieval Arabic, Java and similar toponyms didn't refer only to the island east of Sumatra and south of the Malay peninsula. They were more vague, less stable, and more interesting, comprising parts or all of insular and peninsular Southeast Asia. Variants of the toponym are attested in Arabic, Chinese, Sanskrit, Khmer, Old Malay and other languages. They include Jāba, Jāva and Zābaj. They each, in turn, have multiple valences, referring to specific islands or the entire region. Geographers, Laffan reminded me, didn't like throwing away old terms, so they moved them around on the map.

To untangle this welter of contradictory sources and usages, I then read hundreds of pages of scholarship, much of it as contradictory as the sources it discussed, not all of it edifying. Laffan's way through the maze made particularly good sense for my Maimuni-related purposes, because a crucial shift took place during the thirteenth century. It was then that Arabophone geographers ceased to use the term *al-Jāba* (*جَاوَا*) and began to use *al-Jāwa* (*جَاوَا*) instead. The change reflected not just a phonetic but a geopolitical shift. From Ibn Khuradadhbih (d. ca. 912) to al-Idrisi (d. 1165), Arab geographers had used *al-Jāba* to refer specifically to Sumatra; there was a different (though similar-sounding) term for Southeast Asia more broadly, Zābaj, which referred more or less to Śrīvijaya, and was a Buddhist theocracy with its capital at Palembang in southeastern Sumatra. Starting in the thirteenth century, however, the preferred term became *al-Jāwa*, also used as a general regional designation. Thus Yāqūt (d. 1229) and Ibn Sa'īd (ca. 1270) depicted *al-Jāwa* as the gateway to China (*bilād al-sīn*).¹²

Why this shift in nomenclature? Laffan argues that the waning of Jāba and Zābaj, and their replacement with Jāwa, reflect the fall of Śrīvijaya in the late twelfth century. While there is very little by way of solid information about Śrīvijaya, the consensus is that between the seventh and twelfth centuries, it controlled Sumatra, large parts of the Malay Peninsula and shipping through the Malacca Strait, in intermittent alliance or opposition with dynasties from Java. Maritime archeology confirms that Palembang was a trade entrepôt connecting the Islamicate world with southern China; three ninth- and tenth-century shipwrecks excavated fairly recently in the Java Sea (the *Bolting*, *Intan* and *Cirebon wrecks*) contained mixed cargoes of Chinese, Arab and regional Southeast Asian goods, packed so as to suggest that both Arab and Chinese goods could be bought locally in Palembang.¹³ It seems that Śrīvijaya did command the sea route between southern China and the Indian Ocean.

But by 1200, Śrīvijaya had been contracting for some time — with a corresponding impact on nomenclature. The new regional power was a kingdom based in eastern Java — hence the rise of *al-Jāwa* as the new synecdoche for Southeast Asia. There is a hint of this geopolitical shift in a Chinese geographic and commercial compilation written by a Song dynasty maritime trade official in Quanzhou, Zhao Rukuo (1170–1221): Zhao depicts Southeast Asia as dominated not by a single trade empire — this would have been Śrīvijaya some decades earlier — but by two. When Java (the island) replaced Śrīvijaya as the regional superpower, the Arab geographic imaginary likewise reoriented itself away from Sumatra (Jāba) and toward Java (Jāwa). By the time Maimuni heard our testimony in 1226, due to the new centrality of Java (the island), Jāwa (the term) came to stand, by synecdoche, for the entire region of Southeast Asia.

Yāqūt, a precise contemporary of Maimuni, further permits us to understand the valence of the term *al-Jāwa*. Describing "the lands of China (*bilād al-sīn*)," he writes: "the first of these is *al-Jāwa*, to which one sails on a sea that is difficult to navigate and quick to destroy. Then come the clear [waters] of the lands of China."¹⁴ The "difficult sea" in question, I would posit, is likely to have been a stretch of the South China Sea between Vietnam and Palawan (the westernmost big island of the Philippines) called Dangerous Ground, which remains uncharted today due to its steep and sudden reefs; mariners on the route from Malaysia to China avoid Dangerous Ground as studiously now as they did in the thirteenth century. For Yāqūt, if one sails from the Indian Ocean to China, one first encounters *al-Jāwa*, then Dangerous Ground, before reaching China proper. *Al-Jāwa* might, then, refer to the Malay Peninsula, the southern end of the South China Sea and the Java Sea — all or any of the above. In thirteenth-century texts such as Maimuni's testimony, *al-Jāwa* should be understood as Southeast Asia, insular and peninsular. What follows Kalah is, then, an elastic term.

If I have this right, the Maimuni testimony may hold as much significance for Southeast Asian history as it does for research on the Genizah: it offers a contemporaneous view of Southeast Asian geopolitics at the twilight of Śrīvijaya — evidence of awareness as far away as Egypt of the shift from one eastern empire to another.

There is one additional complication. It doesn't change the picture much, but I add it in the interest of full disclosure.

Above, I wrote that no one is really sure where Kalah was, and that two of the three schools of thought on the matter agree that it lay along a thousand-kilometer stretch of the west coast of the Malay Peninsula. The third school of thought maintains that Kalah, too, is an elastic term — that more than one major port on the west coast of the Malay Peninsula may have gone by the name.

The archeologist and diplomatic historian Alastair Lamb suggested, nearly a decade before Goitein published his *Letters*, that Kalah referred not to a precise location, but to "a general region in which [there] were entrepôts" that "tended to move up or down the west coast of the Malay Peninsula" depending on the period.¹⁵ In Lamb's view, Kalah is a generic term rather than a proper noun. If he is right, "*kalah min bilād al-Jāwa*" would mean something like "a port in Southeast Asia" — a fittingly vague description of a place very far away.¹⁶ This would, in turn, raise the question of whether Kalah was unfamiliar enough to Maimuni's court to warrant further specification — *Abū I-Faḍl b. Mukhār al-Iṣkandarī* died in Kalah, a place in Southeast Asia" — or so generic as to require it — "Abū I-Faḍl b. Mukhār al-Iṣkandarī died in a port city in Southeast Asia."

We don't, then, know exactly what Maimuni intended by Kalah. But his witnesses and the others in his court knew what he meant by *bilād al-Jāwa*: it was an integral part of the "geography of trade and traders," to borrow from Jessica Goldberg. With all due tentativeness, then, I would like to suggest that *al-Jāwa* is the missing word in Goitein's transcription, and that Southeast Asia may not have been as far off the mental map of medieval Jews as we once thought. Here is my *revision* of Goitein's edition and translation.

Latecomers to Indian Ocean Trade?

About a month ago, in preparing a lecture on some of these ideas, I reread a classic study *Mohammed, Charlemagne and the Origins of Europe* by Richard Hodges and David Whitehouse, first published in 1983.

When I was a graduate student I had read the book to find out why there were hoards of Abbasid coins across northern Europe. (Answer: slave-traders from the Islamic south paid for slaves captured and sold in the Christian north.) But I skimmed Chapter 6, on trade between the Abbasid world and China because I was interested in Islamicate history mainly for what it could tell me about medieval Jews, and medieval Jews east of the Tigris seemed marginal to the concerns of Jewish history.

I now regret my indifference. As I reread Chapter 6 — carefully this time — I realized that Hodges and Whitehouse present piles of evidence that traders had crisscrossed the sea routes between the Abbasid world and China, especially between 800 and 1100. Some of it comes from Sīrāf, a port in southern Iran that was a burgeoning entrepôt and had traded with China as far back as the second century C.E., as Whitehouse discovered when he excavated it in the 1970s.¹⁷

The book appeared many years before ninth- and tenth-century shipwrecks containing cargoes of mixed Chinese, Islamicate-world and Sumatran provenance were excavated in the Java Sea. When I reread it, I had just finished reading through the archeological reports on those shipwrecks. As all this information on the Indian Ocean trade began to reach critical mass in my mind, I suddenly understood something about the traditions of trade and seafaring into which Genizah traders entered when around 1080 they began venturing toward Red Sea ports, Aden and the Malabar coast. That, in turn, made me see something new in them as well: belatedness. Given the robustness of trans-Asian maritime commerce over the course of the first millennium, the Indian Ocean traders of the Genizah — Ibn Yijū, al-Leḍī, Madmīn b. Yefet and many others whom we know about from Goitein and Friedman — were latecomers.

Just how late should be evident from the *Periplus of the Erythraean Sea* — a sailing log and gazetteer of the western Indian Ocean written in koiné Greek, possibly in Egypt, in the first century of the Common Era. The compiler of the *Periplus* — as Hodges and Whitehouse put it, "had information about not only Sri Lanka, but also the east coast of India." Why, then, should we be surprised to find thirteenth-century India traders rounding Cape Comorin (Kanyakumari) in southern India? The *Periplus* likewise describes wine and tableware from the Roman Mediterranean reaching Anikamedu, a trade emporium near Puducherry, to which excavations have now added amphorae, lamps, glassware, coins and beads dating to the millennium between the second century BCE and the eighth CE. Why, then, shouldn't we find Fatimid glass stoves in sunken ships off Java? Perhaps the question at the heart of the "India Book" material isn't so much why Jewish traders of the Mediterranean turned toward the Indian Ocean in the late eleventh century; after all, long voyages to search for difficult-to-procure goods tended to yield higher profit margins. The question is, rather, what, if anything, had been stopping them earlier.

Five more documents

My admittedly small paleographic breakthrough provoked me to ask myself for the first time how conscious of Southeast Asia your average Jew was in the thirteenth century — not people like Yāqūt and Ibn Sa'īd, whose business was amassing knowledge of things far away, nor even the traders, whose business was staying abreast of far-off markets. The Maimuni testimony is but one document that hints at an answer to that question. Here are some others:

1. The second Maimuni document that Goitein translated was a legal query regarding the death of a trader in Faṣṣūr (now Barus), a port on the northwest coast of Sumatra that was famous for its camphor. Goitein published a translation of the upper-left quarter of the page (ENA 4020.41); Mordechai Akiva Friedman subsequently joined it to T-S Misc. 27.3.2.¹⁸ In this case, the witness's testimony couldn't save the trader's widow from the fate of an *agunah*. (Even though Goitein knew of only the second fragment, the "lacunamancy," as Gideon Bohak calls it, in his unpublished edition has proven to be largely correct.)

2. There are two additional appearances of Faṣṣūr in Genizah documents that I'm aware of. The first is in a letter from Alexandria, undated but probably from 1100–1150, reporting, among other things, on some Genoese merchants' collection of a debt in Aden, and the prices of some goods (Bodl. MS. Heb. b 3/26).¹⁹ One of the goods in question is camphor from Faṣṣūr, *al-kāfir al-faṣṣūrī* (verso, line 6). Gil misread the phrase as *al-kāfir al-maṣūrī* — perhaps another instance of how surprising the appearance of Southeast Asia was in Genizah documents.²⁰

3. The other attestation of Faṣṣūr is in a letter from Aden ca. 1180 mentioning the prices of camphor from Faṣṣūr and China (T-S Misc. 28.187).²¹ Not only were commodities from Southeast Asia arriving in Aden; the letter itself was sent from Aden to a trader in Southeast Asia, whence it was eventually carried back to Egypt and deposited in the Genizah. Products mean little; the address of the letter is scrawled on verso in unpointed Arabic script; Friedman read it, tentatively but plausibly, as *Lawāmand*, which is an island in the Mergui archipelago off the coast of southern Myanmar.

4. Java appears in two additional letters, neither of them dated. The first is from a trader in India to his cousin in Egypt (T-S 10.118.10).²² Among many other family matters, the writer sends greetings and congratulations to his relative Ibn I-Muṣā on his safe return from *al-Jāwa*.

5. In the other letter, brought to my attention by Alan Elbaum, a writer inquires about his uncle and fellow traders "who had entered *al-Jāwa*" (T-S 12.85).²³ In both these documents, we can now understand the toponym *al-Jāwa*, with all due impression, as "somewhere in Southeast Asia."

Footnotes

1 Goitein, *Letters*, doc. 45 (*India Book* 7, doc. 60, unpublished), gives the shelfmark ENA 2739.16, but the current shelfmark is ENA 2739.17.

2 Goitein, *Letters*, 223n9.

3 Goitein, *Letters*, 227.

4 The other case is in the query and responsum T-S Misc. 27.3.2 + ENA 4020.41, which is undated; see below

5 For a parallel case, see *India Book* 2, 71 (PER H 161).

6 G. R. Tibbetts, *A Study of the Arabic Texts Containing Material on South-East Asia* (Leiden, 1979), 118–28.

7 In support of his view, Goitein (*Letters*, 228n4) cites Streck's article s.v. "Kalah" in the 1927 edition of the *Encyclopaedia of Islam* (streamlined but essentially unchanged in the second edition), but Streck is considerably more agnostic on the matter: I suspect the reason for Goitein's choice may have been a passage in Albert Hourani's *Arab Seafaring in the Indian Ocean in Ancient and Early Medieval Times* (Princeton, 1951), a slender book of outdated erudition that Goitein must have read soon after it was published. Following the Arab geographers in describing the voyage from Sīrāf to China in the ninth century, Hourani writes that after the Nicobar islands, "The next port was Kalah Bar, probably at the modern Kedah in Malaya, which became more important in the tenth century under changed conditions. From there some sailed to Sumatra and Java, but we hear more of the voyages to China" (71).

8 Goitein, *Letters*, 228n5.

9 *India Book* 2, doc. 71 (PER H 161).

10 One of the challenges of Maimuni's hand is the similarity of his *k* and *ḥ*. Compare the *ḥ* in Rajab (verso as catalogued, line 6) and tājir (recto, line 1) with the *k* in *tājir* (recto, line 1) and *wa-lammā* (recto, line 9), as well as the first *ḥ* in *dhā* (recto, line 9). Compare also the *k* in *al-Daḡūrī* (recto, line 2). The loop of the *n* isn't easily visible, since the ink has rubbed away (compare the shape of the *n* in *dukhāni*). As for the dot above what I read as *ḥ*, there are many dots on the page that appear to be stray marks.

11 Michael Laffan, "Finding Java," see also Tibbetts, *Study*.

12 Horst Liebenow, "The Sirens of Cirebon: A Tenth-Century Trading Vessel in the Java Sea," PhD diss., University of Leeds, 2014, 114.

13 F. Wüstenfeld, ed., *Jacut's geographisches Wörterbuch*, 6 vols. (Leipzig, 1866–73), vol. 1, 506; Laffan, *Finding Java*, 34; cf. Tibbetts, *Study*, 55.

14 Alastair Lamb, "A Visit to Sīrāf, an Ancient Port on the Persian Gulf," *Journal of the Malaysian Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society* 37 (1964): 1–19; Lamb, "Takuapa: The Probable Site of a Pre-Malaccan Entrepôt in the Malay Peninsula," *Malayan and Indonesian Studies: Essays Presented to Sir Richard Winstedt on His Eighty-Fifth Birthday* (Oxford, 1964), 76–86.

15 This seems to be the interpretation of Lamb's hypothesis in Brian E. Colless, "Persian Merchants and Colonization in Medieval Malaya," *Journal of the Malaysian Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society* 42 (1969): 10–47 (23), and, following Colless, in Hodges and Whitehouse.

16 Claude Guillot, "La Perse et le Monde malais. Échanges commerciaux et intellectuels," *Archipel* 68 (2004): 159–92.

17 Goitein, *Letters*, no. 47; *India Book* 7, doc. 33, unpublished; Friedman, "Responsa of R. Abraham Maimonides from the Cairo Geniza a Preliminary Review," *Proceedings of the American Academy for Jewish Research* 56 (1990): 29–49 (48); idem, *India Book* 1: *Joseph Leβof, Prominent India Trader*, Hebrew (Jerusalem, 2009), 6.

18 Goitein, *India Book* 7, doc. 36 (unpublished), ed. Moshe Gil, *In the Kingdom of Ishmael* 4, doc. 794.

19 Friedman corrects him in Goitein and Friedman, *India Traders*, 505n11.

20 Goitein and Friedman, *India Traders* 2, doc. 65.

21 Goitein, *India Book* 7, doc. 62, unpublished; see my *edition-in-progress* and also the PGP *description*.

23 Unpublished; see Alan Elbaum's *edition*.

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