

The Jewish Communities of the Silk Roads

by

Robert Lanquar

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*To Isabel, my beloved wife,
To our six grandchildren around the world*

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Introduction

The Silk Roads and the Making of Global Trade

The Silk Roads are among the most successful historical images ever invented. They summon an elegant and instantly legible story: caravans crossing deserts, bazaars stacked with pepper and porcelain, monks and merchants trading manuscripts as readily as textiles. The term itself is strikingly recent. It was coined in the 19th century by the German geographer Ferdinand von Richthofen, who sought a convenient label for a complex web of trans-Eurasian exchanges. The term's late birth matters because it reveals a central structuring tension: the Silk Roads are simultaneously a material history of routes and infrastructures and a modern narrative device that organizes the past into a single, seductive metaphor.

We have to treat "Silk Roads" not as one road, nor even as one system, but as layered, shifting ecologies of mobilities, overland and maritime, imperial and local, peaceful and coercive, sometimes convivial, open and policed. And it makes one further claim, decisive for the argument that follows: the continuity of these ecologies depended less on the grand strategies of empires than on the practical capacities of diasporic communities, those groups, mainly diasporas, able to move across frontiers, translate between legal regimes, and sustain trust at long distances.

Among these diasporas, Jewish communities played a distinctive and often pivotal role from early antiquity through the early modern transition. Their participation was not incidental, nor limited to a few heroic travelers. It was structural: rooted in literacy, legal culture,

community institutions, multilingual competence, and far-flung family and credit networks that could survive political disruption. To say that Jewish communities were “decisive” is not to claim they were the only agents, or even always the dominant ones. On the contrary, the Silk Roads were a shared world: Sogdians, Armenians, Greeks, Lebanese-Phoenicians, Persians, Arabs, Berbers, Indians, and Chinese merchants all contributed to the circulation of goods and ideas.

How did Jewish travelers see, speak, and write about these trade routes from the Early Middle Ages until the 19th century? The key manuscript remains that of Benjamin de Tudela, considered by Jules Verne to be the best geographer of his time, the first to talk about China, the first to count and tell the story of the communities he visits.

The documentary mass of the Cairo Genizah, the travel accounts of medieval figures, and the early modern correspondence of Sephardic and converso merchants in Iberian (especially Portugal) and Dutch imperial worlds allow us to reconstruct the history of the Jewish Diaspora, among other Diasporas, not as a romantic abstraction but as a practice of survival, a negotiation with climate, disease, violence, and changing regimes of power.

Historiography of the Silk Roads

Any serious study of the Silk Roads must confront a historiographical paradox. The more scholars have criticized the “Silk Road” as a single coherent entity, the more popular the concept has become. A first wave of scholarship treated the Silk Roads as a meaningful unity: an East–West corridor whose significance lay in long-distance trade and cultural transmission. Later work complicated this view, emphasizing fragmentation, regional specialization, and the importance of maritime routes. In recent years, a third wave has argued that “Silk Roads” often functions less as an analytical category than as a modern myth-

making machine, an Orientalist, sometimes anti-colonialist, projection that turns a messy world into a usable past.

This book works within that critical tradition, also against its most stunning conclusion. Yes, the Silk Roads can be a myth, especially when imagined as a single artery of peaceful exchange. But the critique becomes sterile if it implies that connectivity itself is fictional. The routes were real; the circulation of commodities and texts was real; the movements of merchants, pilgrims, captives, and migrants were real. The task is therefore not to choose between “myth” and “reality”, but to show how realities generated myths, and how myths in turn shaped realities, by inspiring travel itineraries, legitimizing policies, and organizing memory.

In this regard, the recent “global history” revival of the Silk Roads is instructive. Peter Frankopan’s synthesis (and the debates it provoked) exemplifies a major contemporary impulse: to counter Eurocentric narratives by relocating the world’s center of gravity eastward and describing long-term global history as a story of exchange across Afro-Eurasia.

The reception of such syntheses also highlights a recurring problem: the ambition to narrate the whole can encourage a return to sweeping generalization, sometimes at the cost of precision and evidentiary control. Methodologically, this argument aligns more closely with approaches that reconstruct connectivity from the ground up: through letters, contracts, legal disputes, and micro-histories of merchants and communities. The Genizah documents, analyzed most influentially by S. D. Goitein, constitute a social archive of connectivity, an everyday paper trail of trust, partnership, kinship, and risk management across the Mediterranean and the Indian Ocean. The Genizah, in this sense, is not simply “evidence about Jews”; it is evidence about how premodern globalization actually worked.

At the same time, we remain attentive to the critique of romantic “diaspora-as-network” narratives. Scholarship on trading diasporas has demonstrated that trust does not arise automatically from shared identity and that commercial cooperation is often sustained by institutions, not sentiment. Early modern studies have demonstrated the necessity of legal frameworks, state incentives, and inter-community negotiation. Accordingly, the Jewish diasporic connectivity is not a magical cultural trait but a historically contingent achievement, reproduced through courts, contracts, marriage strategies, community regulation, and the constant balancing of solidarity with competition.

Globally, Jewish history is paradoxically overinterpreted and under-documented. We inherit many narratives, but far fewer primary traces than we would wish, especially for the everyday worlds that mattered most: modest trading partnerships, itineraries of apprentices and pilgrims, the credit note that saved a family on the road, the rental contract for a vineyard beyond the walls. That is the main difference between the manuscripts of Benjamin of Tudela, the Sephardi, and Petahia of Regensburg, the Ashkenazi, as we will see later.

Even the Jewish Encyclopedia, so precious for mapping names, places, and bibliographic lineages, often reveals, by its very lacunae, how uneven the archive can be: abundant for elites and capitals, intermittent for ports, market towns, and secondary corridors that were, in practice, the true capillaries of exchange.

This scarcity should not be treated as a weakness in our analysis, but as a historical datum in its own right. The absence of records is rarely neutral. It is frequently the downstream effect of expulsions, forced conversions, ecclesiastical censorship, confiscations, and the mundane fragility of paper in damp warehouses and river towns. In Iberia (Spain + Portugal) in particular, the long occultation of Jewish

presence, described by scholars of contemporary Spanish memory such as the French Danielle Rozenberg, not only suppresses a community; it also reshapes what could be remembered, collected, and taught, narrowing the public archive long after the medieval documents themselves had vanished.

What emerges is a method: reading silence as structure. When a city's Jewish quarter is reduced to a street name, a legend, or a fragment of architecture, absence itself becomes evidence. A telling example is Lunel, near Montpellier in medieval Occitania. Once a major center of Jewish learning, it hosted the Tibbonides family, whose translations, most notably of Maimonides, transmitted Andalusian philosophy, medicine, and science from Arabic into Hebrew and onward into Latin Christendom. Despite this decisive role in European intellectual history, present-day Lunel offers almost no public trace of the Tibbonides' legacy.

Such erasure reflects selective preservation: what societies choose to monumentalize and what they allow to dissolve. This is why scholarship on Sephardic memory, including Sylviane Serruya's work on inherited recollection across the western Mediterranean, is crucial. Family narratives, ritual practices, and local commemorations function as *shadow archives* where official documentation is sparse or ideologically filtered.

The renewed scholarly attention to figures such as the 16th-century humanist Benito Arias Montano, supported by research institutions such as the CSIC (Spanish National Research Council), is therefore not merely philological but civic. By reconstructing translations, marginalia, and knowledge networks, scholars reveal how Jewish memory circulated, stalled, or resurfaced. In this perspective, scarcity itself becomes an argument: the history of routes is also the history of fragments and of the labor required to make them speak again.

Before “Silk Roads”: Connectivity in Antiquity and the Early Jewish Diaspora

Long-distance exchange predated the Silk Roads by millennia. Late Bronze Age trade linked Mesopotamia, the Levant, Egypt, and the Indus Valley; later imperial formations, Achaemenid Persia, Hellenistic kingdoms, and the Roman Republic or Empire, created infrastructure, currency regimes, and bureaucratic corridors that intensified mobility. In other words, the Silk Roads did not appear *ex nihilo*. They emerged as a later name for older patterns, now expanded, layered, and connected into wider systems.

Jewish history is embedded in this *longue durée*. From the Babylonian Exile onward, Jewish communities developed outside the Promised Land (in Hebrew, *Ha'aretz ha-Muvtahat*) as permanent, institutionalized diasporas. These communities were not merely remnants of displacement; they became urban minorities whose survival depended on legal adaptability, literacy, and inter-regional communication. In late antiquity and the early medieval period, Jewish networks linked Babylonia, the Levant, Egypt, North Africa, the Byzantine world, and eventually Western Europe.

What distinguishes Jewish participation in premodern exchange is not simply the presence of merchants, but the existence of community forms capable of sustaining them: synagogues as nodes of information, rabbinic courts as institutions of dispute resolution, charitable systems as safety nets for travelers, and letter-writing cultures that allowed information to circulate rapidly relative to the pace of travel itself. By the time the medieval world produced more visible transcontinental routes, Jews were already positioned by historical circumstance and social organization to act as intermediaries.

The Silk Roads as Plural Routes: Overland and Maritime, Steppe and Sea

One of the most important historiographical corrections in recent decades has been to insist that the Silk Roads were never only overland. Maritime routes through the Red Sea, Persian Gulf, and Indian Ocean were at least as vital, often more reliable, and sometimes more profitable than caravan corridors across Central Asia. The Genizah documents, in particular, illuminate a dense commercial world in which ships, seasonal monsoon winds, and port cities created an alternative “Silk Road”, a southern maritime arc linking the Mediterranean to the Indian Ocean.

This maritime perspective also changes how we understand Central Asia. The famed cities of Samarkand, Bukhara, and Khiva were crucial nodes, but they were not universal gateways for everything moving “East–West”. They were parts of a patchwork of routes, with different goods traveling through different corridors depending on political stability, toll regimes, and environmental conditions.

In this world, the functions of diaspora were not ornamental; they were technical. Trade depended on people who could do three things: translate across languages and legal cultures, finance long-distance transactions through credit and partnership, and guarantee trust when state enforcement was weak or unpredictable.

Jewish communities, alongside other trading diasporas, repeatedly performed these functions. But their documentary visibility, especially through Hebrew and Judeo-Arabic sources, allows us to observe the mechanics of exchange with rare clarity. These merchants had to cohabit with merchants of other religions. What rules and beliefs did they observe?

Monotheistic Economies and the Architecture of the Silk Roads

The Silk Roads were never merely corridors for silk, spices, precious metals, or technologies. They were, above all, human systems of trust, sustained across vast distances by institutions capable of organizing credit, managing risk, transmitting information, and regulating exchange among strangers. In this respect, the three monotheistic religions, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, did not simply accompany the Silk Roads; they actively structured their economic ecology. Each tradition developed normative frameworks that shaped commercial behavior, facilitated long-distance trade, and enabled diasporic resilience in environments marked by political instability, ecological uncertainty, and cultural plurality. But it is very important not to forget the religions of Asia, Buddhism, Hinduism, Shamanism, and Taoism, which believes of their economies in a similar way.

Rather than constituting rigid “religious economies”, these traditions generated portable institutional logics: legal norms, ethical expectations, community solidarities, and mechanisms of mutual aid that could travel with merchants and adapt to local conditions. The Silk Roads thus emerged not only as geographical routes but as moral and legal spaces, where faith-based norms intersected with pragmatic commerce.

Judaism offers perhaps the clearest illustration of this mobility from antiquity onward. This condition, far from marginalizing them economically, encouraged the development of translocal commercial networks grounded in kinship, education, and law. Jewish legal tradition devoted exceptional attention to contracts, partnerships, debt, guarantees, weights and measures, and dispute resolution, precisely the issues that dominate long-distance trade.

These norms were enforced not by states but by community courts and reputational sanctions, allowing trust to circulate where formal institutions were weak or absent. For example, the *Tavole Amalfitane* (Amalfi Tables or Maritime Code) in the 11th century emerged from a need to codify the complex and diverse customs of a busy Mediterranean trade environment where Jewish merchants were key players, but the creation of the code itself was an Amalfitan initiative. Jewish merchants adapted themselves to these mercantile realities, often deferring to the *Custom of the Merchants*.

Diasporic Jewish merchants provided more than goods. They offered services essential to mobility: lodging, food adapted to dietary laws, credit on short notice, currency exchange, translation, and information about routes, customs, and political risks, even handicrafts. During the Crusades, Jewish women, while often victims of violence, were also active economic agents, involved in handicrafts like weaving, embroidery, silk-spinning, and parchment-making, working alongside Christians or Muslims, and even acting as entrepreneurs and moneylenders (microfinance type).

Such services proved indispensable along pilgrimage roads and commercial arteries alike. Ports, caravan cities, and border zones, Alexandria, Marseille, Narbonne, Baghdad, Aden, became magnets for Jewish settlement not because of privilege, but because the density of trade allowed community life to flourish. Jewish economic ethics did not reject profit; they sought to discipline it through fairness, responsibility, and community obligation. Wealth circulated not only as capital, but as charity, education, and hospitality, reinforcing the infrastructure of movement.

Christianity, particularly in its medieval European forms, influenced the Silk Roads through a different but complementary dynamic. While theological debates over interest and usury shaped attitudes toward

money-lending, Christianity's most significant economic contribution lay in its institutionalization of mobility. Pilgrimages to Jerusalem, Rome, and Santiago de Compostela generated sustained demand for roads, bridges, inns, ports, and shipping services. These pilgrimage routes overlapped extensively with commercial networks, creating hybrid corridors of devotion and exchange.

Urban Christianity fostered the rise of self-governing cities, merchant guilds, fairs, and maritime republics. Legal innovations such as insurance contracts, bills of exchange, and partnerships allowed capital to move without the physical transport of coin. While Jews were often restricted from certain professions, they were simultaneously integrated into urban economies as financiers, physicians, artisans, and intermediaries. Their presence was frequently tolerated because their services were necessary. Thus, even where exclusionary theologies prevailed, pragmatic convivence often emerged along trade routes.

Islam, however, provided the Silk Roads with their broadest and most integrated economic framework. From the 7th century onward, Islamic polities created a vast zone of relative commercial unity stretching from the western Mediterranean to the Indian Ocean. Arabic functioned as a shared administrative and commercial language, while Islamic law offered detailed regulations governing trade, partnerships, inheritance, and liability. Contracts such as the *mudaraba* (profit-sharing investment) enabled capital owners and traveling merchants to cooperate efficiently across distance.

Equally important were Islamic infrastructural institutions. Caravanserais, funded by charitable endowments (*waqf*), provided secure lodging, water, storage, and medical care to travelers of all faiths. Ports, customs houses, and market inspectors ensured predictability and fairness. The annual pilgrimage to Mecca further

reinforced mobility, synchronizing religious obligation with commercial opportunity. Jewish and Christian merchants operated extensively within this Islamic economic sphere, often benefiting from its relative legal clarity and tolerance toward “People of the Book”.

Across these traditions, a shared pattern emerges: religion functioned less as an obstacle to commerce than as a technology of coordination. It produced trust where none could be assumed, stabilized expectations across cultures, and allowed individuals to cooperate without shared citizenship or language. The Silk Roads thus depended not only on empires and armies, but on ethical systems capable of crossing borders.

These same dynamics also generated tension. Periods of crisis, pandemics, wars, climatic shocks, or economic contraction often triggered scapegoating, expulsions, and the breakdown of convivence. Jews, in particular, were repeatedly transformed from indispensable intermediaries into imagined enemies, accused of hoarding, poisoning, or conspiracy. Such episodes remind us that the very invisibility and adaptability that made diasporic networks effective also rendered them vulnerable to suspicion. Economic success did not shield communities from violence; it sometimes intensified it.

Understanding the Silk Roads through the lens of religious economies, therefore, complicates triumphalist narratives of globalization. Exchange was never purely benign. It was embedded in power, belief, fear, and memory. What endured were not empires but networks, fragile, adaptive, and often rebuilt after catastrophe.

In our time marked once again by global anxiety, climatic disruption, pandemics, and mass migration, the lessons of these historical economies remain strikingly relevant. The Silk Roads remind us that long-distance exchange requires more than infrastructure: it requires

trust, shared norms, and institutions capable of humanizing distance. Monotheistic traditions, in particular, for all their differences and conflicts, contributed decisively to this achievement. Their economic cultures shaped not only the movement of goods and the survival of diasporas, but the movement of people, ideas, and memories across continents, an inheritance that still underlies our globalized and interconnected world.

The Archive that Makes the Silk Roads Real

The Genizah: Hidden Archives of Jewish Life

A genizah, from the Semitic root g-n-z (“to hide” or “to store”), is a concealed repository within a synagogue, cemetery, or community building in which worn or unusable texts connected to Jewish religious life were deposited. Because any written fragment might contain the divine name, such materials could not be destroyed and were instead set aside for eventual ritual burial. In practice, genizot preserved far more than liturgical texts: they accumulated letters, contracts, accounts, and everyday writings, unintentionally producing the most intimate documentary record of medieval Jewish life. Etymologically, Genizah resonates with the Persian ganj (“treasure”) and the Arabic janāza (“burial”), encapsulating its function as both grave and archive, place of concealment that paradoxically preserves historical memory. Genizot existed wherever Jewish communities settled, from Yemen and Central Asia to South Asia, but most were lost to time, violence, or deliberate erasure. In medieval Iberia, Hebrew manuscripts were frequently scraped and reused as palimpsests, underscoring the rarity of any surviving Genizah.

The most celebrated example is the Cairo Genizah, discovered in the 19th century in the Ben Ezra Synagogue of Fustat, whose vast corpus transformed the study of the medieval Mediterranean and Silk Roads. Recently, the so-called Afghan Genizah, which surfaced after 2013, has revealed Jewish life along Afghan caravan routes between the 11th and 13th centuries. Written in Hebrew, Aramaic, Judeo-Arabic, and Judeo-Persian, these documents point to predominantly Karaite communities embedded in long-distance trade networks.

No single source challenges the notion of the “Silk Road as myth” more effectively than the Cairo Genizah, preserved in the Ben Ezra Synagogue. Containing hundreds of thousands of fragments spanning nearly a millennium, the Genizah preserves commercial letters, contracts, and legal records that document partnerships, shipping arrangements, prices, risk management, disputes, and family strategies across the Mediterranean and beyond. The work of Shlomo Dov Goitein (published in Berkeley, California) remains foundational in demonstrating that medieval trade was not a marginal circulation of luxury goods but a dense, institutionalized commercial system grounded in everyday practice.

The Cairo Genizah reveals three crucial features of this system. First, Jewish merchants were fully embedded within the Islamic commercial world, operating in Arabic, using Muslim infrastructure, and engaging with Islamic legal and economic norms. The Silk Roads thus appear not as bridges between isolated civilizations but as shared commercial ecologies. Second, trade depended as much on information as on goods. Letters conveyed prices, reputations, and political risks; information itself functioned as a commodity, sustained by trust networks. Third, mobility generated ethical and religious reflection. Merchants negotiated profit alongside obligations of Sabbath observance, charity, and community taxation. In this sense, the Silk Roads were not only economic systems but moral laboratories, where commerce, law, and ethics were continuously recalibrated across religious traditions.

Numerical Knowledge as Commercial Infrastructure: Indian–Arabic Numerals and Jewish Transmission

The Genizah world also makes visible a quieter form of connectivity: the movement not only of goods and letters, but of techniques,

especially techniques of calculation. Among the most consequential transmissions across Afro-Eurasia was the diffusion of Indian positional arithmetic (later called “Hindu–Arabic numerals”) through Arabic scientific culture and into Latin and northern Europe. Jews did not “invent” this numerical system. Their role was different and, for the history of trade, decisive as mobile translators, teachers, scribes, and commercial intermediaries.

From the 9th century onward, Indian arithmetic entered Arabic scholarly traditions and practical commercial life. By the 12th century, Jews living under Islam and in the Christian kingdoms of Iberia were unusually well positioned to transmit it: many were bilingual (Arabic–Romance), literate in Hebrew, and increasingly conversant with Latin learning environments. In Iberia and Provence, and mainly in the Free Cities of Italy¹, Jews participated in the translation and re-codification of Arabic science, astronomy, calendrics, and arithmetic into Hebrew, creating a portable corpus that could travel with rabbis, physicians, students, and merchants.

Although Leonardo Fibonacci of Pisa (born c. 1180) is often credited with introducing Hindu–Arabic numerals to Latin Europe in the early thirteenth century through his *Liber Abaci* (1202), this narrative obscures earlier and parallel channels of transmission. A crucial but less visible contribution is Abraham ibn Ezra (c. 1089–1167), whose *Sefer ha-Mispar* (“Book of Number”) introduced the logic of the Hindu–Arabic place-value system to Hebrew readers several decades before Fibonacci.

Ibn Ezra did not merely describe foreign numerals; he explained the underlying mathematical principle that made them revolutionary:

¹ Mainly, communes and independent republics (often under the nominal suzerainty of the German Empire).

positional notation and the use of zero as a functional placeholder. Writing for Jewish communities across Iberia, Provence, Italy, and the eastern Mediterranean, he adapted numerical notation to Hebrew letter-based conventions, while preserving the computational advantages of decimal positional calculation. This allowed readers trained in traditional gematria and abjad-style numeration to grasp advanced arithmetic, multiplication, division, and extraction of roots, without abandoning familiar symbolic systems.

The importance of *Sefer ha-Mispar* lies in its role as an intellectual bridge text. Jewish scholars, merchants, and administrators who mastered these methods operated across Islamic and Christian worlds, carrying mathematical practices along the same commercial and scholarly routes as goods and texts. Ibn Ezra's work thus demonstrates that the transmission of numerical knowledge into Europe was not a single event centered on Fibonacci, but a multi-layered process involving Jewish intermediaries who translated, explained, and naturalized mathematical concepts across linguistic and cultural boundaries.

In this sense, Ibn Ezra stands as a key figure in the pre-Latinization of Hindu–Arabic mathematics, preparing the conceptual ground on which Fibonacci's later synthesis could take hold. This “Hebrew scientific” channel mattered because Hebrew manuscripts circulated in Europe. Jewish diasporic connectivity functioned as a transmission belt: translating methods, standardizing them for new audiences, and embedding them in the practical mathematics of European commerce.

The Karimi Traders: The Islamic Commercial Infrastructure of the Red Sea and Indian Ocean

To foreground Jewish networks does not mean ignoring the powerful merchant formations that structured trade in the broader Islamic

world. Among the most significant were the Karimi merchants, a prominent group associated with the Red Sea–Indian Ocean trade, especially in connection with Egypt and Yemen, and later the Mamluk economy. Their importance is well attested in classic scholarship and later surveys of Red Sea commerce.

The Karimi are mentioned here for two reasons. First, the Indian Ocean was not a vacuum waiting to be connected by diasporas; it was already organized through Muslim shipping, customs regimes, and merchant groups with strong political leverage. The Karimi were deeply entangled with state fiscal systems and the provisioning of major urban markets. Second, the historiography on the Karimi intersects directly with the examination of the Genizah fragments. Goitein himself wrote on the beginnings of the Karimi merchants.

This is not merely a technical point: it helps correct a common romantic misreading in which Jewish merchants appear as uniquely “global” actors. In reality, Jewish traders were one strand in a broader commercial tapestry in which Muslim merchant groups like the Karimi could dominate key circuits. The interaction between Jewish “India traders” and the Karimi world illustrates a central theme: connectivity depends on overlapping infrastructures, some community, some imperial, some commercial-corporate, and even sometimes convivial. When those infrastructures align, trade expands; when they collide, routes shift.

Three Medieval Thinkers on Trade

Across the medieval Mediterranean world, economic life was not theorized in isolation from ethics, law, or political order. Maimonides (completed *Mishnah Torah*, c. 1178), Ibn Khaldun (*Muqaddimah*, 1377), and the Florentine Coluccio Salutati (*Civic writings*, late 14th century) belong to distinct religious and cultural traditions, yet they converge

on a shared understanding of trade as a moral and institutional practice rather than a purely technical activity.

For Maimonides, commerce is inseparable from justice. In the Mishnah Torah, completed in Egypt around 1178, commercial law occupies a central place, insisting on honest weights, truthful representation, and the prohibition of fraud. Economic exchange, in his view, is a social covenant: when deceit enters the market, trust collapses, and the community itself is endangered. Prosperity thus depends on daily ethical discipline, enforced by law but sustained by shared moral norms.

Ibn Khaldun, writing in 1377 in his *Muqaddimah*, articulates a broader sociological vision. He argues that injustice, whether excessive taxation, arbitrary confiscation, or insecurity, destroys the incentives that sustain production and trade. Economic vitality arises only where political authority protects property and limits its own predatory impulses. For Ibn Khaldun, prosperity follows justice as a structural principle of civilization: when trust erodes, cities decline, and states weaken.

Coluccio Salutati, chancellor of Florence in the late 14th century, approaches the same question from within the emerging tradition of civic humanism. Although not an economist, he consistently links the flourishing of commerce to republican liberty, legal stability, and responsible governance. Trade, for Salutati, thrives where laws are predictable, contracts enforceable, and citizens protected from arbitrary power.

Together, these thinkers offer a sober definition of *convivence* in commercial terms between traders of different religions and diasporas. It is not sentimental harmony or the absence of conflict, but a practical equilibrium of law, justice, and trust, the conditions under

which diverse groups can trade, lend, insure, translate, and travel together without constant fear. Such convivence, fragile yet durable, explains how multi-religious societies along the Silk Roads sustained economic life across centuries of difference.

Travelers as Narrative Infrastructure: Benjamin of Tudela and Petahia of Regensburg

If the Genizah reveals the documentary underside of connectivity, travel narratives reveal its public face, how Jews conceptualized their own mobility and the geography of their people. In the 12th century, two travelers, Benjamin of Tudela and Petahia of Regensburg, produced accounts that have become canonical precisely because they demonstrate that medieval Jewish life was not locally bounded but transregional.

Benjamin of Tudela's *Sefer ha-Massa'ot* offers a wide-angle map of Jewish communities stretching from Aragon (Spain) across the Mediterranean and into the Middle East and beyond. His account often records numbers, community leaders, institutional structures, and economic vitality. Copies of his manuscript circulated, but the first print edition was made in Ottoman Constantinople in 1543.

Petahia's travelogue *Sibbuw ha-'Olam*, by contrast, produces a moral geography: less concerned with scale than with religious practice, community discipline, and the ethical texture of Jewish life under different regimes. His itinerary begins in Regensburg, in Bavaria, on the Danube, a major axis of trade routes. The contrast is more than literary. It is historiographical. It forces us to treat "Jewish connectivity" as plural: made of trade, learning, pilgrimage, rumor, and moral evaluation at once.

Petahia almost certainly spoke an early form of Yiddish, or more precisely, a Judeo-German vernacular, alongside Hebrew. By the 12th century, Ashkenazi Jews in the Rhine–Danube region commonly used such a spoken language in daily life, while reserving Hebrew for writing, scholarship, and liturgy. His travel account was composed in Hebrew, the shared literary language of Jewish travelers, which enabled its circulation far beyond Ashkenazic lands. The work survived in manuscript form and was first printed in the 16th century, notably in Prague, ensuring its preservation and wider diffusion.

Modern scholarship has repeatedly insisted that these texts cannot be read naively: both incorporate hearsay, stylized elements, and narrative conventions of medieval travel literature. But their value is not diminished by such caution. On the contrary, their mixture of observation and report is precisely how medieval global knowledge worked: diasporas were not merely a theme; it is a method for connectivity.

From Mediterranean–Indian Ocean to Atlantic: The Portuguese Shock

The Silk Roads did not end in the late Middle Ages; they mutated. The key transformation was not simply technological, but geopolitical: the emergence of Iberian maritime empires, above all Portugal's *Estado da Índia*, which sought to control Indian Ocean commerce through fortifications, naval power, and monopolistic practices, for example, in Ceylon, the actual Sri Lanka. This was not a smooth continuation of old routes; it was a violent attempt to re-engineer them.

For Jewish history, the Portuguese moment is doubly significant. It coincided, after 1492, with the culmination of the Inquisition's persecution, and thus produced a massive dispersal of Sephardic and converso populations into new commercial nodes: North Africa, the

Ottoman Empire, Italy, and eventually Northern Europe, in the Low Countries (Holland). These displaced communities carried with them Iberian languages, commercial skills, and networks of credit and information that could be redeployed in emerging Atlantic, Indian, and later Pacific Ocean economies.

The Portuguese reconfiguration of the Indian Ocean also provides a crucial comparative frame. Earlier medieval connectivity relied on dispersed trust networks and negotiated relationships with local authorities. The Portuguese model introduced centralized coercion: passes, blockades, fortress-tolls. However, even in this system, commercial life continued to depend on intermediaries who could move between worlds, linguistically and legally. In Ceylon, their Inquisition was terrific and dreadful. Jewish and converso merchants were not outside these dynamics; they were often entangled within them, sometimes benefiting, sometimes suffering, always adapting.

The Dutch Pivot: Amsterdam as a Northern Terminal of the “Silk Roads”

If Portugal represents the imperial attempt to seize the Indian Ocean trade, the Dutch represent the corporate-bureaucratic transformation of global commerce. The rise of Amsterdam and the Dutch East India Company (VOC) created a new infrastructure of long-distance exchange: standardized contracts, joint-stock investment, more systematic insurance and shipping regimes, and an expanding informational apparatus.