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<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/68f5571r>

Journal

Jewish Social Studies, 13(2)

ISSN

0021-6704

Author

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Publication Date

2007

DOI

10.2979/jss.2007.13.2.1

Peer reviewed



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Source: *Jewish Social Studies*, New Series, Vol. 13, No. 2 (Winter, 2007), pp. 1-39

Published by: [Indiana University Press](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4467764>

Accessed: 14-04-2015 19:19 UTC

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Mediterranean Jewries and Global Commerce in the Modern Period: On the Trail of the Jewish Feather Trade

Sarah Abrevaya Stein

ABSTRACT

This article writes Jews into the intertwined histories of colonial economics and modern consumption. It explores the involvement of Mediterranean and North African Jews in the global trade of a single, highly valued luxury good—the ostrich feather—whose exchange linked the economies of the Sahel, Sahara, and Central and North Africa with one another and the fashion worlds of Europe and the United States. Situating the global ostrich feather trade within a larger story of imperial competition over colonial commodities, this article argues that Mediterranean and North African Jewries played an important role in transnational and transoceanic commerce in the modern period; contrary to received wisdom, their involvement in global networks was on occasion weakened rather than strengthened by the process of colonization.

Key words: Sephardim, Mediterranean Jews, North African/Maghrebi Jews, commerce, consumption, imperialism, trade

On February 5, 1914, the High Court of London issued a receiving order certifying that “Isach Hassan, of 101, Leadenhall Street, in the City of London, Merchant, and trading at Jarrow-on-Tyne under the name of W. H. & A. Richardson” was in bankruptcy. At that moment, the bulk of Hassan’s assets were tied up

Sarah Abrevaya Stein, “Mediterranean Jewries and Global Commerce in the Modern Period: On the Trail of the Jewish Feather Trade,” *Jewish Social Studies: History, Culture, Society* n.s. 13, no. 2 (Winter 2007): 1–39

in materials stored in and near the Port of Tyne, in northeastern Britain; the Jarrow Mill held £17,194 worth of Hassan's paper stock, and a £1,000 stock of esparto grass (a coarse grass grown in southern Spain and North Africa used in the manufacture of inexpensive paper) languished on the docks of Tyne.¹

In cooperation with his father, Stanley Hassan, Isach worked as an importer of goods from North Africa. The men hailed from a prominent Livornese Jewish merchant family in Tripoli, and, in addition to retaining important professional contacts in North Africa, they maintained bases of operation in London, Manchester, and Paris, where they operated under the name "Hassanisach." It would be an overstatement to suggest that the Hassans had offices in each of these locales: the London address cited on Hassan's bankruptcy filing referred to a public telephone exchange where they might receive telegrams, and Isach's business stationery mentioned no permanent addresses in Paris or Manchester. Yet the Hassans represented the remains of one of the most powerful Tripolitan Jewish merchant families whose wealth—and geographic and social mobility—had been greatly bolstered by the ostrich feather boom of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.²

At the turn of the twentieth century, Mediterranean Jews³ were heavily involved in a feather-trading web that linked the Sahara and Sahel and the Western and North African economies more generally with one another and with the fashion worlds of Europe and the United States. Jews occupied various stages of the ostrich plume commodity chain. Wealthy Jewish merchants (who tended to be either Moroccan or Livornese and Sephardi, or, in some cases, all three) financed the conveyance of feathers to North Africa's ports via trans-Saharan camel caravans, across the Red Sea, along the Nile, and over the Mediterranean. Poor Judeo-Arab workers were responsible for sorting and packing feathers in Alexandria, Cairo, Tripoli, and Tunis to ready them for sales overseas. And, finally, mercantile families like the Hassans (many of whom were Livornese and Sephardi) oversaw the export of feathers from the major port cities of North Africa—Essaouira (Mogador), Algiers, Tripoli, Benghazi, Alexandria, and Cairo—to Livorno, Marseilles, Paris, London, and other European ports.

Although Jewish involvement in the feather trade was extensive, scholarship on their role has been constrained. Scholars of North and West Africa have long been attentive to the economic importance of the turn-of-the-century ostrich feather trade, in great part because the revival of this commercial network nuances the argument, once canonical, that trans-Saharan and trans-Mediterranean trade was

eviscerated by the expansion of European power in North Africa and the concomitant rise of trans-Atlantic trade. A small but strong body of this literature is cognizant of Jews' role as feather financiers and plume exporters.⁴ These works do not, however, follow the path of feathers or Jewish merchants overseas; they sever the ostrich feather commodity chain on the southern shore of the Mediterranean and fail to situate the work of these merchants within the larger frame of modern Jewish history. As a result, we lack a sense of how Mediterranean Jewish feather merchants, financiers, and sorters fit into a larger, extra-continental story. Drawing on published and unpublished data on North and West Africa's feather trade and archival materials pertaining to the work of individual Jewish feather merchants, this article places the work of turn-of-the-century regional Jewish feather merchants in a more global perspective.

It is something of a truism that Mediterranean Jews were proficient—perhaps the most proficient—commercial and linguistic pioneers of the early modern period, fulfilling Europe's demand for luxury goods from colonial settings, ostrich feathers among them.⁵ However, very little scholarship has attempted to carry these insights forward to the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Instead, it is commonly assumed that the economic vitality of the Jewish Mediterranean waned in the modern period—a trend associated with the gradual degeneration of Salonika as a commercial entrepôt between Europe and the Middle East and, perhaps, with the imagined economic decline of the Ottoman Mediterranean more generally. After the perceived stagnation of the modern period, the canonical assumption is that Mediterranean Jews experienced European imperialism as an expansion of opportunities, particularly in the educational and legal realms.⁶

I will make two interrelated arguments that intervene into this historiography. Building on scholarship that has identified vivacity in local, regional, and ethnic economies of the late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century Ottoman Mediterranean, this article suggests, first, that in the modern period Jews played an important role in transnational and transoceanic commerce.⁷ In fact, by exporting feathers from the region and importing textiles (among other goods) to the region, Jews in the modern Mediterranean remained embedded in the global economic market in luxury goods into the twentieth century.⁸

The second central argument advanced here is that, seen through the lens of mercantile culture, Mediterranean Jews' ability to serve as transregional, transoceanic, translinguistic, and transcultural intermediaries could be *lessened* rather than strengthened by the process

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of European colonization of North and West Africa. Well before the European market for feathers crashed irrevocably (which occurred in 1914, when feather wearing fell out of fashion), the British and especially French governments stifled an indigenous regional feather trading network in North and West Africa that they desperately wanted to dominate but ultimately proved unable to control.⁹ Colonialism in North and West Africa was an uneven development, and, even before colonial rule was established in the region, important shifts had transfigured global trade and the Mediterranean's place in the world economy. And yet, for Jewish feather merchants and for others involved in the ostrich feather commodity chain, colonial occupation—in different places at different times and in all of its varied forms—accelerated a process that “reversed the direction of contact with the outside world. Paradoxically the early colonial period . . . was a time of weakening ties with the world economy, not the creation of new ones.”¹⁰ These insights are significant to the scholar of modern Jewish culture, because they challenge received wisdom about the arc of Mediterranean Jewish economic well-being.

In the pages that follow I will also return to Isach Hassan, whose individual story illuminates broader historical narratives. In particular, this article considers the interplay between the emergent ostrich feather industry of the Cape of South Africa, which relied on the commercial dexterity of the Ashkenazi diaspora, and the older, revived, but nonetheless fragile Mediterranean ostrich feather economy that rested on Jews' mercantile expertise.¹¹ How did Mediterranean Jewish merchants like Isach bridge these distinct regional and subethnic trading networks, transferring their expertise to the expanding Cape-based industry and adapting to the gradual evisceration of trans-Saharan trade? This question is significant because it allows us to identify interplay between modern Ashkenazi and Mediterranean Jews (and their diasporas more generally)—groups that are more often than not viewed in isolation from one another. In bridging this divide, I wish to facilitate the writing of an integrative and comparative history of modern Jewish economic practices, thereby adding nuance to a body of scholarship that presents Mediterranean and Ashkenazi history as comparable but largely noninteractive entities.¹²

“Barbary” Plumes and the Trans-Saharan Caravan

The thirst for ostrich plumes in the European and American cities was the central catalyst for the bustling trade in ostrich feathers in

North and West Africa. A variety of feathers, including those of the ostrich, adorned the hats and clothes of elite European and American women from at least the second half of the eighteenth century, when Marie Antoinette introduced a minor ostrich feather craze by wearing towering plumes atop her hats. But ostrich feathers were not widely employed by the fashion world until the 1880s. This was a decade in which women were gaining ever more opportunity and desire to consume; the bevy of fashion choices they faced was outlined in new kinds of texts targeting the female shopper, fashion magazines among them, while the objects they coveted were displayed ever more alluringly in shopping neighborhoods like London's West End.¹³

The 1880s also represent the first of three decades in which women's hats were worn large and elaborately trimmed. For women of status, the addition of plumage from ostriches, hummingbirds, birds of paradise, herons, and other wild birds was increasingly *de rigueur*.¹⁴ Women's hats reached their most elaborate and wide brimmed in the first decade of the twentieth century, just as the use of ostrich plumes became further popularized by the millinery industry, rendering some type of plume affordable for women of all classes. According to a fashion chronicler who published her report in *The Ladies' Home Journal*, the craze crossed boundaries of age and ethnicity:

Women of the present day are . . . keenly alive to the flattering effect of [ostrich] feathers, so we see them worn even by the grandmothers, whose bonnets are adorned with the demure pompon, while the matron, the young girl and the little child have their hats trimmed with bunches of tips or the long plumes. All ages, sizes and complexions patronize the ostrich feather.¹⁵

As their perceived and actual value grew, ostrich feathers—and, indeed, entire flocks of the birds—were displayed at expositions and world's fairs in Chicago, Philadelphia, Paris, and London. Ostrich feathers could be found wherever there were arbiters of style; a consignment of £20,000-worth of the plumes was even lost during the sinking of the Titanic.¹⁶

As the popularity of wearing ostrich feathers grew, so too did the importance of this commodity to the North and West African and wider Mediterranean economy. Statistics about the feather trade in and through Tripoli provide a particularly vivid illustration of this trend. From the early 1870s to 1883, feathers exported from Tripoli to Europe increased fifteen fold. In 1870, £16,000-worth of ostrich plumes were exported to Tripoli from Western Sudan; by 1874, that

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number had risen to £100,000, and, by 1883, to £236,000. In 1883, a peak year for feather exports, it is estimated that £292,000-worth of ostrich plumes were exported from Tripoli to Europe.¹⁷ During this period, ostrich plumes were commanding higher prices in Europe, but trade within Central and North Africa was also growing to keep pace with demand. At the height of the feather boom, ostrich plumes represented fully half of Tripoli's exports to Europe by value and nearly 80 percent of the city's imports from the Sahara. Although the value and quantity of feather imports to Tripoli slumped in the middle of the 1880s (especially in 1886 and 1887), they revived thereafter and remained robust as late as 1904.¹⁸

Throughout these decades, North Africa supplied the ostrich plumes most admired by European and American consumers. "Barbary" plumes, as they were known, were recognized by their fullness, width at the crown, and density or compactness along the flue. These feathers came primarily not from the Barbary coast, as their name might suggest, but from wild ostriches hunted by settled and nomadic farmers in the southern Sahara and semiarid Sahel, from Timbuktu to the Darfur region.¹⁹ As the commercial value of ostrich feathers rose, more locals were drawn to ostrich hunting; similarly, the small-scale cultivation of ostriches began to proliferate in central Niger and in Sudan, in the regions of Khartoum, Kordofan, and Darfur.²⁰ European and Ottoman authorities, too, paid heed to the mounting sums ostrich feathers were commanding. To ensure that Tripoli would remain a vital center of the feather trade (and to hedge against French interests in trans-Saharan trade), in 1875 the Ottoman authorities conquered Ghat, a crucial entrepôt on the Kano-Tripoli caravan route, and, in the years that followed, introduced new administrative districts in the vicinity.²¹ French consular agents, civil servants, and agricultural economists, meanwhile, debated whether or not the state ought to facilitate intensive ostrich farming in Algeria, Senegal, or other territories under French control (as had the British in the Cape). Other representatives of French interests proposed intervening in the feather trade more aggressively by redirecting trans-Saharan caravan trade towards Algiers, where it could be controlled and taxed, or by conquering crucial trading entrepôts like Timbuktu, which the French acquired in 1894.²²

What shape did the ostrich feather trading network assume in North and West Africa at the turn of the twentieth century? What was its physical and cultural geography? Myriad primary and secondary caravan routes crisscrossed North Africa in the early modern and modern periods; some, particularly those with a primarily religious

function, were oriented on an east-west axis, whereas others, particularly those serving overseas trade, ran south-north. The four principal trans-Saharan routes utilized in the feather trade ran south-north and included the routes that linked Timbuktu to Essaouira (of which there were two: one of which ran through Tishit, the other through Toadeni); Kano to Tripoli; Bornu to Tripoli; and Wadai to Benghazi (see map). As I will show, Jewish feather merchants serviced all four routes and were particularly influential in the first three.

The Mediterranean ostrich feather commodity chain was typical of other commodity chains that wound across the Sahara and through North Africa insofar as it was dependent on the smooth functioning of a complex ethnic and commercial mosaic. As Marie Perinbaum has shown, "all major routes [of trans-Saharan trade], markets and wholesale trade at every stage were administered by merchants and their representatives who worked together on the basis of ethnic ties."²³ Once ostriches were hunted and skinned in the Sahara and Sahel, they were purchased by three groups of merchants from the north: Ghadamasi merchants; Swiri (that is, those from Essaouira) merchants, many Jews among them; and members of the Sanusiya Muslim Brotherhood, a powerful Sufi order. Ghadamasi and Swiri merchants operated on the three major trade routes that extended south from Tripoli and Essaouira, respectively; the Sanusiya dominated commerce on the route from Benghazi to Wadai, though Jews, too, were represented on this route.²⁴ Each of these merchant communities relied on representatives in villages and towns along the trans-Saharan trade routes who would buy ostrich skins (with feathers attached) directly from hunters or through the intermediary of village heads. As feathers were readied for export to North Africa's port cities, other ethnic groups were employed in turn. Ghadamasi merchants commissioned transport animals and armed escorts from the Tuareg, who operated out of the main transit centers of Gat and Air and also operated refreshment stands along the caravan route; Swiri merchants employed the Ait Baha as conveyers and traders of goods.²⁵ There is evidence that, in an earlier period, Jews had led their own caravans northward, but by the late nineteenth century they seem to have absented themselves from this stage of the ostrich commodity chain.²⁶

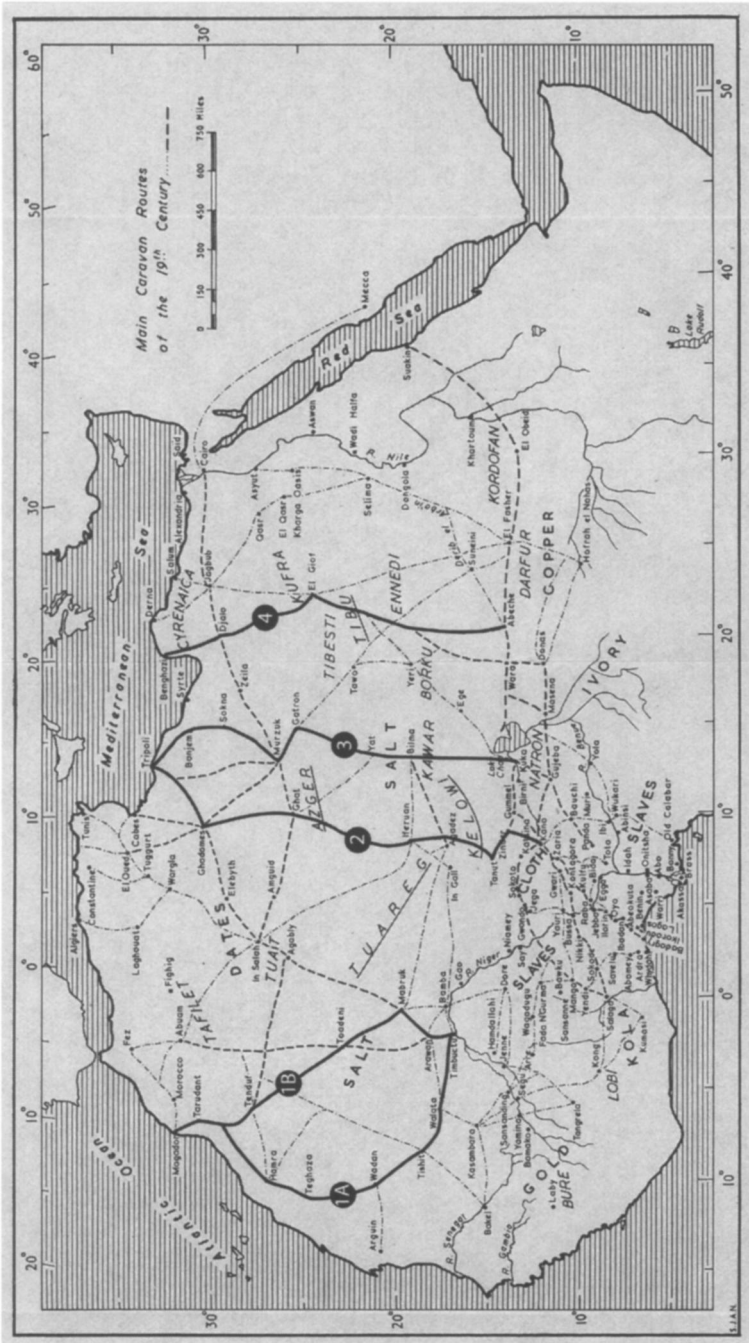
In certain respects, Jewish ostrich feather merchants resembled their non-Jewish peers. Ghadamasi, Sanusiya, and Jewish feather merchants all maintained wide-reaching trading diasporas that stretched across North and West Africa and were cohered by the glue of shared language, religion, and/or place of origin. The Sanusiya,

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Principal trade routes utilized in the Mediterranean ostrich feather trade. (1A) from Timbuktu to Essaouira (Mogador) via Tishit; (1B) from Timbuktu to Essaouira (Mogador) via Toadeni; (2) from Kano to Tripoli; (3) from Bornu to Tripoli; (4) from Wadai to Benghazi. Source: adapted from A. Adu Boahen, *Britain, the Sahara, and the Western Sudan, 1788-1861* (Oxford, 1964), with permission of the publisher.

for example, maintained an informal government in eastern Libya, erecting schools, guest houses, and mosques, such that the “relationship between brotherhood and commerce was symbiotic.”²⁷ Although Jewish traders were not as intent on proselytizing or informal state-building as the Sanusiya, similar attitudes appear to have prevailed. And yet, as we will see, Jewish merchants’ involvement in Mediterranean ostrich feather commerce differed from that of their non-Jewish peers in both substance and degree. In contrast to Ghadamasi merchants, other Swiri merchants, and members of the Sanusiya Brotherhood, Jewish feather traders operated across North and West Africa, along every caravan route on which feathers were conveyed, in foreign ports where feathers were imported and resold, and at various stages of the feather commodity chain.

What allowed Jews to become so influential in the Mediterranean’s feather industry? What was the nature and what were the limits of their involvement in this commercial network? And, in what ways was their success as feather merchants dependent on their being Jews? The following section addresses these questions in turn.

Jews and Plumes

Just as Jews were prominent in the shipping of ostrich feathers across trans-Saharan trade routes, so too did they dominate the purchase, elaboration, and exportation of the plumes. Jewish feather traders, among them Judeo-Arabs and members of the Livornese Jewish commercial diaspora of Tripoli, Algiers, and Tunis, operated across an unusually broad geographic terrain within North Africa. (Their extra-regional connections will be described shortly.) Jewish merchants who dealt in feathers could be found not only in the port cities of North Africa but also in smaller entrepôts throughout the region. During the feather boom that began in the 1870s, settled Jewish feather merchants operated throughout southwest Morocco, in Taroudant, Ilich, Goulmim, and Oufnan, along the edges of the Sahara, and in cities like Tafilalt and Marrakesh; itinerant Jewish feather merchants conducted business in the eastern regions of Morocco, where they could command enormous profits.²⁸ In Ottoman-controlled Tripolitania, large-scale Jewish feather merchants could be found in the pivotal port cities of Tripoli and Benghazi, but Jewish itinerant merchants also operated in regional market towns along the Mediterranean coast and in the Tripolitanian mountains.²⁹ According to one scholar of North African Jewry, in Tripolitania “the trade in ostrich feathers was wholly in Jewish

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hands."³⁰ Finally, Jews dominated the export of feathers from Cairo and Alexandria, and they likely played important roles in the frequent resale and resorting of ostrich plumes that took place at transit stations along the Nile (notably at Asyut) and between the Red Sea and Cairo.³¹ In the words of an observer, writing in 1857,

The Jews are almost everywhere the purchasers [of ostrich feathers]; since it is they who venture afar, visiting the most distant markets or the most remote tribes from European centres. Furthermore, they know better than anyone the customs, language, and means of exchange suited to the style of the Arabs.³²

In addition to serving as prominent feather buyers, Jews based in Essaouira, Tripoli, Algiers, and Tunis (among other locales) financed the conveyance of feathers from the Sahara and Sahel to port cities in the north. Given that trans-Saharan trade tended to operate on credit, the role of financiers was crucial to the smooth operation of the feather industry. For much of the nineteenth century, commercial firms in Tripoli and Essaouira, many of them owned by Jews, advanced Ghadamasi merchants goods imported from Europe—primarily English calico but also beads, mirrors, paper, spices, perfumes, tea, sugar, copper, and other goods—to sell on their return voyage south to Timbuktu, Kano, or Bornu. These firms would be repaid in ostrich feathers and other commodities that were subsequently carried northward.³³

The feather trade always relied heavily on credit. Jewish merchants from Tripoli were in the habit of extending Ghadamasi merchants goods on credit, which the Ghadamasi merchants would repay in Sudanese goods after the passage of six months to a year. However, because these funds were not enough to finance the entire route from Tripoli to Kano, Tripolitanian merchants tended to finance the Ghadamasi merchants' voyage only as far as the commercial entrepôt of Ghat; the Ghadamasi were obliged to finance the remainder of their trip themselves. This dynamic changed somewhat as the value of ostrich feathers began to rise in the 1870s. With plumes commanding ever higher sums in Europe, it became desirable for Jewish mercantile firms in Tripoli to finance the passage of goods all the way to Kano. At this point, the period of credit was also increased from a maximum of one year to as many as three years.³⁴ Thus, as a result of the emergent ostrich boom, in the last decades of the nineteenth century Tripolitanian Jewish firms began extending larger quantities of credit for longer periods of time, staking their fortune on the enduring value of ostrich feathers.³⁵

Not all Jews who were involved in the ostrich feather commodity chain were merchants. Poorer, Judeo-Arab workers were involved in the blue-collar side of North Africa's feather industry. Once ostrich feathers were conveyed to Essaouira, Tripoli, Alexandria, and Cairo, the principal points of export for this commodity, they needed to be removed from the ostrich hide and prepared for sale overseas. There is evidence that the plucking, washing, sorting, and packing of ostrich feathers were the reserve of poor Jewish residents of North Africa's port cities. According to a French consul in Tripoli, writing in 1879, feather sorting in that city was something of a local Jewish industry:

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When the [trans-Saharan camel] caravans arrive in Tripoli, the feathers are still stuck to the hide of a skinned bird. They are delivered in this state to certain Jewish workers whose job it is to pull them out and then proceed to sort them by color and size and finally to classify them . . . after which they are arranged into distinct packets of varied value. This work constitutes a sort of local industry. But due to its simplicity it could be practiced anywhere else.³⁶

Feather sorting *might* have been practiced elsewhere or by other groups, but in practice this was a Jewish trade, possibly even undertaken within the boundaries of the Jewish quarters of North Africa (the *hara* and *mellah*).³⁷ Tripoli was not the only city in which Jews dominated this aspect of the feather trade; in Cairo, Alexandria, and Tunis it fell to Jewish workers to sort, clean, and organize ostrich feathers prior to export.³⁸ Astonishingly, when it became financially advantageous for the higher grades of ostrich plumes to be exported from the Sahara by parcel post and trans-Atlantic steam ship via Lagos, as it did after about 1907, the feathers were re-exported from London back to Tripoli for processing.³⁹

Wherever feather sorting occurred, it was a dirty, unhealthy, and stigmatized job. In the Cape Colony it was the terrain of so-called "Coloured" workers who, as a result of their labors, doubled their risk of contracting tuberculosis.⁴⁰ That feather sorting fell to Jews in North Africa is a reminder of the widespread poverty—and, perhaps, subordinate social status—that was faced by the majority of Jews in North Africa at the turn of the twentieth century. However, Jews were poised to fill this occupational niche not only because they were poor residents of port cities but also because they would have been able to draw on expertise garnered from related work—namely, the processing and tanning of animal skins, which were highly significant occupations for the Mediterranean, North African, and North African

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Jewish economies. Like ostrich feathers, hides represented one of the principal agricultural goods exported from North Africa; they, too, were destined for Venice, Livorno, and Marseilles, port cities in which Jewish merchants were overrepresented.⁴¹

What little we know of the quotidian work of Jewish feather sorters comes from William Coffin, an American consul stationed in Tripoli in the early twentieth century whose interest in introducing American-made cotton cloth and yarn to North Africa led him to conduct detailed surveys of the state of trade in the region. These surveys included a study of North Africa's ostrich feather trade and referenced the work of Tripoli's feather sorters. According to Coffin's account, "Arab" (likely Ghadamasi) merchants delivered feathers to Tripoli sorters in mixed bundles. Thereafter,

The feathers are washed and sorted here, but are not dyed or curled. They are washed in soapy water, and when still wet are beaten. A handful of them are taken by the stems and slapped against the floor with a force that to the uninitiated would seem to be enough to break them into pieces.⁴²

Relying on skilled sorters was critical for feather merchants, explained Coffin, because in the course of the cleaning, sorting, and packaging of ostrich plumes, 10–20 percent of the feathers could be destroyed.⁴³

As I have demonstrated, Jews' involvement in North Africa's feather trade extended over a broad geographical terrain and ran nearly the gamut of the commodity chain. So visible were Jews in the industry that, in this region, as in the Cape, it was rumored that they conspired to keep non-Jews out of the trade.⁴⁴ Felix Matthews, an American consul-general to Morocco, argued in 1881 that

The competition among the Jews and the almost entire monopolization of this trade [in ostrich feathers] by those people has enhanced the value [of feathers], for by contriving to exclude the Christians as much as possible from this commerce, they are often induced to trade beyond their capital, overstocking the market, making a forced trade, and throwing the profits which before were reaped by the Europeans into the hands of the natives.⁴⁵

Matthews' cries of monopoly are echoed in other sources. In his 1880 study of the feather trade, French civil engineer Jules Oudot described Tripoli's Jewish feather merchants as "strangling," "robbing," and "lying." Because of their nefarious behavior, Oudot explains, caravan leaders attempted to sell their feathers directly to the commer-

cial houses of London and Paris, only to find that their Jewish “exploiters” had turned these houses against the caravan leaders by convincing European buyers either to refuse competitors’ feathers or to offer prices so low that caravan leaders would be “forever discouraged from selling their merchandise without going through middlemen.”⁴⁶ Oudot’s tale may have had a basis in reality. In North Africa, as in the Cape, there is evidence that attempts on the part of non-Jewish merchants to bypass Jewish feather exporters did fail. Consider, for example, the case of Mabruk ben Omar, who organized a regular caravan between western Sudan and Tripoli. With the support of the French consul, Mabruk made a failed attempt to “break clear of the middlemen who had a monopoly of the marketing of ostrich plumes in Tripoli by dealing directly with London and Paris importers.”⁴⁷

It is indeed possible that Jews used their overseas contacts to keep potential competitors out of the export side of the feather trade. But it is also possible that the process of exporting and selling ostrich feathers overseas required more skill and contacts than inexperienced competitors expected. Regardless, it must be recognized that accounts of Jews’ monopoly over the feather trade were irrevocably tainted by self-interest. European observers of the feather trade, Matthews and Oudot among them, usually conducted their observations on behalf of French, British, or American entrepreneurs of governmental agencies, which had a vested interest in staking a claim on plume profits. (American entrepreneurs in California, Arizona, and Florida were attempting to build their own ostrich industry in the United States, an ambition the government supported.)⁴⁸ The resulting claims of Jewish monopoly are thus infected by a single question that proved immensely exasperating to foreign observers of North Africa’s feather trade: Why were European and American consuls-general, civil engineers, and merchants (Matthews’ “Christians”) *not* able to circumvent or overtake the existing feather market?

This question betrayed an ignorance of and a disdain for myriad intra-ethnic, intra-religious, and diasporic trading relationships on which the feather trade depended, and it proved willfully blind to the havoc foreign intervention wrought on the North and West African economies. And yet, when all is said and done, Matthews, Oudot, and their peers were not entirely wrong in suggesting that Jews predominated in certain niches in the feather commodity chain, or in suggesting that Jews’ strength in these arenas made it difficult for non-Jews to penetrate these dimensions of the feather industry. Why did Jewish feather merchants succeed where non-Jews failed? Mediterranean Jews succeeded as traders of feathers for many of the same reasons they suc-

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ceeded as traders of other luxury goods destined for export: they had contacts across the Jewish world with whom they shared a language and family ties; they had the experience and skills required; they were established middlemen in Mediterranean society; and they capitalized on mutually beneficial relationships with the reigning authorities. In the next section, I analyze each of these dimensions of human capital.

Jews, Human Capital, and the Mediterranean Feather Trade

The existence of a Jewish diaspora that stretched across the banks of the Mediterranean, spanned North Africa, and reached into Europe and the United States was a critical factor that enabled Jews to succeed in the feather industry of the Mediterranean. This diaspora availed many Jewish feather traders with the overseas familial and commercial contacts that were so important for transregional trade. In the early modern period, Jewish feather merchants in Tripoli directed their feather exports to contacts in Spain, where they resold feathers to members of the aristocracy in the heart of the Jewish quarter.⁴⁹ As early as the seventeenth and throughout much of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, Livorno, Venice, Trieste, and Marseilles proved to be the key import centers for the feather industry; in this period, Jews in the Mediterranean feather trade negotiated with Jewish-owned commercial houses in other Mediterranean ports. Livorno, in particular, predominated as the ostrich feather entrepôt of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, which is not surprising given that, at this time, Livorno was the central hub of an expansive mercantile network in which Jews were preeminent.⁵⁰ One observer of the industry, writing in 1858, noted that “four or five houses are engaged alone in the trade [of ostrich feathers] at Leghorn [Livorno], and their profits are large.”⁵¹

Prior to the feather boom of the modern period, the vast majority of plumes exported from North Africa to Livorno (some 75 percent) were subsequently exported to Paris. The remainder was destined for England. This mercantile geography evolved just prior to the onset of feather mania. Already in the 1850s, London had begun to acquire a monopoly on feather sales, and this monopoly was more or less complete by the time the feather boom began in the 1870s.⁵² (London’s monopoly extended to the sale of feathers from the marabou and bird of paradise, both of which were imported via Calcutta, and the vulture and heron, which were imported from Brazil.) According to the same 1858 observer,

Leghorn, after the decline of its commerce with the Levant, remained the great entrepôt of ostrich feathers, and did business in that article to the amount of about 1,200,000 francs annually. But since the establishment of steam navigation, London has gradually become the principal center of that branch of trade, and Leghorn now only does business to about half the preceding amount; a part of the diminution is, however, owing to the decline which has taken place in prices.⁵³

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After London acquired a monopoly on European feather imports, ostrich feathers from Essaouira, Tripoli, Cairo, and Alexandria were shipped directly to the British capital, and the number of North African Jewish family firms in London (and other British port towns) seems to have grown accordingly.⁵⁴

That Jews were involved in the Mediterranean feather trade prior to the boom of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was critical to their subsequent success. Feather trading required specific expertise—beyond knowledge of the languages and intra- and extra-regional contacts required—that was not easily mastered. Many observers of the industry spoke of the great difficulties associated with entering the feather market. Echoing Matthews' accusations of a Jewish feather monopoly, French commercial journals warned that "The trade in ostrich feathers requires a good deal of experience, as it is easy to be deceived in the quality when they are not prepared."⁵⁵ Julius de Mosenthal, an Anglo-Jew who authored an extensive study on the ostrich feather trade in 1879, was warned that, even before feathers were exported from North Africa's ports, the plumes changed hands many times and were classed and reclassified, sorted and re-sorted, "for the purpose of deceiving the buyer as to the real contents of the bundles," which were "fraudulently packed" so that "the inexperienced buyer is often completely victimized."⁵⁶ Oudot, too, spoke of the chronic falsification of feather bundles by Egyptian Jewish packers, who weighted down their bundles with all measure of "strange matter and sand."⁵⁷ Whether such devious practices were commonplace is impossible to say. Regardless, these warnings emphasize that Mediterranean Jews did not flourish in the feather trade merely because they were experienced merchants or members of a diasporic trading network. They also possessed particular expertise—a kind of feather fluency—that could only be acquired over time.

What do we know of individual North African Jewish feather merchants or feather families? According to a study conducted by the Alliance Israélite Universelle, 14 Jewish-owned European export houses existed in Tripoli in 1890, and an additional 35 were of medium size

and traded in Europe and North Africa.⁵⁸ Of these, three were particularly prominent in Tripoli's feather world: the houses of Hassan, Arbib, and Nahum, all of whom were of Livornese origin and Italian subjects. (Most of the wealthiest Jewish businessmen in Tripoli were of Italian origin, though they had resided in Tripoli for centuries.)⁵⁹ All three houses maintained offices in Britain as well as Tripoli; the Hassan family, as mentioned above, had a commercial toehold in Manchester, London, and the Port of Tyne. In addition to operating in Britain, the Arbib and Hassan families had branches in Paris, a city in which, along with the Guetta family, they dominated feather imports.⁶⁰ In Tripoli itself, the Hassan and Arbib families owned no less than three separate firms in the late nineteenth century; the Nahums, who made much of their fortune in alfalfa, even owned the boats they used to ship goods to England.⁶¹ (There is archival evidence that the Hassan family attempted to become shipping agents as well, though no evidence they succeeded in this regard.)⁶²

In Essaouira, too, prominent Jewish ostrich feather merchants relied on family ties in their commercial operations. The story of Dinar Ohana, perhaps the most prominent Jewish ostrich feather merchant in Morocco, is particularly illustrative of this point. Ohana was a nephew of Abraham Corcos, who, together with his brother Jacob, represented one of the most important Jewish mercantile families in Essaouira. Ohana's relation to Corcos appears to have greatly enhanced his reach as a feather trader. Soon after Corcos was appointed U.S. vice-consul in 1862, he granted Ohana financial protection—a coveted status that exempted the holder from paying taxes and tolls. In the subsequent decades, Ohana flourished as a feather merchant, even when others in the field saw their export operations flounder.⁶³

The importance of familial allegiance to trading firms such as these is difficult to quantify, but its symbolic magnitude is suggested in a story retold by Nahum Slouschz, a Jewish scholar who conducted research on North African Jewry between 1905 and 1916. According to Slouschz, the following "published statement illustrates the spirit of" Tripoli's Jewish feather merchants:

During the panic in the ostrich feather trade, a merchant was ruined. To meet the demands of the creditors he brought them even the jewels of his wife. The father of [Jewish feather merchant] M. L. had lent seventy-five thousand francs to one of his nephews, who had established himself in business somewhere in Africa. The latter lost his entire fortune in speculation. M. L., uneasy about his loan, telegraphed his nephew, but received no reply. Months passed. He gave up the money as lost. Then, one day, he received a thick sealed envelope. He opened it,

and found seventy-five thousand francs accompanied by a simple note in Judeo-Arabic: "Mine I have lost, but yours is sacred."⁶⁴

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Slouschz's tale highlights so much of what was unique about the North African Jewish feather trading diaspora: it was conditioned by risk, sustained by credit, geographically peripatetic, contingent on familial fidelity, and navigated in Judeo-Arabic.

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Jewish traders who operated in and through North and West Africa were exceptionally polyglot. But it appears that most Jewish feather traders were speakers of Judeo-Arabic and tended to keep their account books in this language as well.⁶⁵ So important was knowledge of Judeo-Arabic to the smooth operation of the feather industry that non-Jews in the trade (including European merchants and Muslim chiefs) corresponded in the language through Jewish interpreters and secretaries.⁶⁶ A propensity toward multilingualism also allowed Jews to serve as intra- and extra-regional brokers. Some feather traders relied on a knowledge of Arabic and other local languages in their negotiations with trading partners in North and West Africa, the Sahara, and Sahel, and on a knowledge of European languages—some of which was preserved within families, some of which was acquired in schools funded by the European Jewish elite—when they engaged in overseas trade. Language, ties of kith and kin, geographic dispersal, and inherited and practical knowledge were among the most important resources that Jews in the feather trade commanded.

Thus far, we have considered intra-communal factors that pushed Jews into feather trading and allowed them to succeed in this capacity. But extra-communal factors were also highly significant to these developments. Let us now consider the importance of Jews' relationship to precolonial and early colonial power to their work in the ostrich feather network in the Mediterranean and beyond.

Colonial Economies in Competition

Much of the existing scholarship on Mediterranean Jewries has emphasized the ways in which Jews served as cultural and commercial intermediaries between Europe and colonial North Africa and/or the Middle East, existing, per André Chouraqui's classic formulation, "between East and West." However, if one focuses on the pre- and early colonial periods and explores Mediterranean Jewries through the lens of commerce, it appears that Jewish merchants benefited from being enmeshed in the old regimes of the region and were ad-

versely affected by encroaching European powers. Indeed, as the following pages demonstrate, the transition from precolonial to colonial power had a negative impact on the Mediterranean Jewish feather economy. This interplay seems to have been unique to this regional context. As we shall see, the experience of Mediterranean Jewish feather merchants diverged radically from that of South African Jewish feather merchants, who were quickly emerging as regional competitors. Divergences in the fates of these Jewish mercantile populations are of interest to the Jewish historian insofar as they challenge received assumptions about Jews' relationship to imperialism in the modern period.

A common feature of all Jewish traders in medieval, early modern, and modern North Africa and the Eastern Mediterranean was that they were religious minorities in predominantly Muslim societies. As scholars since Shelomo Dov Goitein have been aware, this dynamic posed certain challenges and also afforded advantages.⁶⁷ Relative to other trading groups, Jews were not perceived to be vying for political power, and this facilitated Jews' work as middlemen, fortifying relationships both vertical and horizontal. Evaluating relationships among North Africa's multiethnic, multilingual, and multisectarian mercantile population (and, more specifically, between the region's Muslim and Jewish feather merchants) is a topic that others are more equipped to address.⁶⁸ Of concern here is how Jews in the feather industry fashioned relationships with the reigning authorities of the pre- and early colonial period in order to augment and stabilize their commercial activities.

In precolonial Morocco, it was Jews' relationship with the old order that allowed them to succeed as merchants, for they were long subsidized and protected by a royal court intent on using trade to consolidate its power. As Daniel Schroeter has shown so vividly, foreign intervention in the late nineteenth century curtailed the sultan's ability to rule and, consequently, the influence of Jewish royal merchants began to wane. When the value of ostrich feathers peaked in the 1880s, some North African Jewish feather merchants, Dinar Ohana among them, prospered. But others faced bankruptcy, even though many Jewish merchant families had begun to serve as protégés and consular agents of European or American states.⁶⁹ A similar dynamic shaped Jewish merchants' relationship to state power in Ottoman Tripolitania. According to capitulations extended by the Ottoman Empire beginning in the early sixteenth century that were meant to encourage trade, all foreign merchants living in Ottoman territory were under the protection of foreign consuls (principally those of France)

and subject to reduced taxes and customs duties. Because most Tripolitanian Jews in the feather trade were Livornese and Italian subjects, they too were eligible for protection by the French (even if their families had dwelt in Tripoli for centuries).⁷⁰ Other members of North African feather families, including over a dozen Arbibs and nearly as many Hassans, sought protégé status from the British, Italian, and American governments.⁷¹

Because the Ottoman state had a vested interest in ensuring that Tripoli remain a vibrant center of trade (and because it wished to thwart French advances on the Sahara), the Ottomans took additional measures to benefit the feather trade. In 1875 they occupied Ghat, a crucial caravan station along the Kano-Tripoli route; subsequently, the Ottomans founded new administrative districts in the Tuareg region. And, after the establishment of a trading route to the coast of West Africa, the state offered economic privileges to Tripolitanian merchants who continued to utilize the Saharan routes, successfully preventing them from relying on a new mercantile route that ferried feathers west via Lagos to the Atlantic coast. These measures facilitated the trade in plumes, ensuring that Tripoli outlived and outpaced Essaouira, Alexandria, and Cairo as North Africa's principal port for feather exports.⁷²

Jews were particularly vulnerable to the encroachment of European power, in a general sense, and to attempts on the part of Europeans to co-opt the feather trade, specifically. European intervention in the feather trade began as early as the 1870s, when French agricultural engineers, government officials, and explorers began urging the French colonial government to facilitate ostrich farming in Algeria, Niger, or Sudan (as had the British government in the Cape) or to redirect the trans-Saharan caravan trade through Algeria, thereby enabling the French to tax and control feather exports. The French were responsive to these efforts, which resulted in a 1907 government-sponsored test of whether the ostrich could be successfully domesticated in French Sudan.⁷³ Although the results of this inquiry were in the affirmative, the French government failed either to reroute or reconstruct the feather trade.⁷⁴ Perhaps this was due to "want of an enterprising spirit among the colonists," as one American consul claimed, or perhaps the French, like the British, viewed trans-Saharan trade as unsafe, expensive, and, because of its importance to the slave trade, inherently unethical.⁷⁵ It is also true that the diffuse structure of trans-Saharan trade as it was traditionally organized made it difficult for any single European power to control commerce across the desert.

In any case, rather than encouraging feather commerce, the ex-

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pansion of European influence in the region, albeit uneven and chronologically choppy, ultimately had a deleterious effect on the feather trade, even though commerce in plumes flourished after the formal colonization of North and West Africa had begun. The extension of European power in Africa disrupted Mediterranean feather trading practices in three principal ways. First, colonial authorities encouraged the abrogation of advantageous treatment afforded certain merchants, many Jews among them. The liberalization of taxation in Morocco—which was encouraged by the French and British, to whom the royal palace was deeply in debt and who benefited from greater access to Moroccan markets—overturned the traditional relationship between the Jewish mercantile elite and the sultan. This had the effect of promoting European mercantile interests and squeezing many indigenous merchants out of the feather trade.⁷⁶ In Ottoman Tripolitania, meanwhile, French merchants and consuls proved increasingly unwilling to affix the advantageous status of protégé on Livornese Jewish merchants, whom they viewed as competitors. At a time when the discrepancy between taxes applied to local and foreigner merchants could differ substantially, the status of protégé was critical to one's success as an overseas trader.⁷⁷

Second, the expansion of colonial control led to the introduction of political boundaries and provoked intra-regional disputes, both of which rendered trans-Saharan travel dangerous and cumbersome. These factors—among others—contributed to the erosion of both the feather trade and Jews' status as the region's principal extra-regional exporters of luxury goods.

Foreign competition represented the third and arguably most important threat to North Africa's Jewish feather merchants wrought by colonial economics. Beginning in the 1860s, the British imperial government in the Cape actively facilitated intensive ostrich rearing by Boer, British, and some Jewish farmers, an investment that ultimately resulted in feathers being ranked fourth in value among commodities exported from the Union of South Africa, following gold, diamonds, and wool.⁷⁸ This industry quickly outpaced North Africa as Europe's and America's principal ostrich feather supplier, though "Barbary" plumes remained the feathers most coveted by European and American consumers. It is ironic (though not coincidental) that in the Cape, as in North Africa, Jews more or less monopolized feather exports. In South Africa, Jewish immigrants from Russian Lithuania, all native Yiddish speakers, came to function as the principal merchants in a trans-Atlantic feather network that thrived until 1914.⁷⁹ The Jewish feather merchants of North and South Africa—

and the feather trades that sustained them—operated more or less independently from one another, and, in a certain respect, their fates were divergent, at least in the short term. Because of the relative success of the South African ostrich industry, Mediterranean Jewish feather merchants experienced a financial bust precisely when the Jewish feather merchants of the Cape encountered a staggering boom. This discrepancy was the result of myriad factors, among them shifts in the geography of commerce in the region. Mediterranean feather commerce was greatly inhibited by the growing inefficiency of the trans-Saharan caravan route that linked Kano and Tripoli. Traders on this path were ever more vulnerable to attack, both because the French occupation of a number of trading towns had provoked intra-ethnic disputes and because the proliferation of rifles in the region abetted banditry. Moreover, new alternative trading routes threatened the preeminence of the trans-Saharan caravan. By 1903, the cost of sending goods by freight from Kano to Lagos and thence south overland and by river to the Atlantic coast had become comparable to that of trans-Saharan travel. Some years later, a rail line linking Kano and the port of Baro promised to reduce the cost of trans-shipment via the Gulf of Guinea by half or a third.⁸⁰ Largely as a result, the quantity of feathers exported from North Africa began to wane even before European and American demand for feathers diminished, a process that began in the winter of 1914. By 1904, Tripoli was exporting roughly a tenth of the feathers it had 20 years earlier. Three years later, the trade in plumage across the Sahara and in Tripoli itself had all but ceased. Having maintained a place of preeminence in the trans-hemispheric feather trade for centuries, the city of Tripoli was essentially falling out of the global market.

Imperial politics were also relevant to the demise of Mediterranean feather commerce. If, in northern and western Africa, the encroachment of European powers threatened to erode a highly functional feather trading network in which Jews predominated, in southern Africa European imperialism actually facilitated the trade of ostrich plumes and Jews' involvement in the global exchange of this commodity. This contrast is significant to the Jewish historian insofar as it unsettles deeply rooted scholarly assumptions about Mediterranean and Ashkenazi Jews' relationship to imperial power. The existing scholarship has tended to emphasize the cultural advantages colonialism wrought on Mediterranean Jewries and has tended to eschew Ashkenazi Jews' relationship to the colonial project—except as it was manifest by early Zionist settlers in Palestine or intra-Jewish philanthropic organizations such as the Alliance Israélite Univer-

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selle.⁸¹ The story of the feather trade presents a reversal of this postulation, offering an instance in which the Sephardi and Mediterranean commercial diaspora was undermined by the expansion of European power and Ashkenazi merchants abetted by it.

An additional convergence between the Mediterranean and South African Jewish feather worlds will occupy our attention in the last section of this article. The stories of these regional Jewish economies merge around the figure of Isach Hassan, with whom our story began. As we have learned, he was a member of one of Tripoli's most successful mercantile families, for whom the trade of feathers was a significant operation at the turn of the twentieth century. Although we lack detailed information about the nature and scope of the Tripolitanian side of the Hassan feather fortune, archival sources illustrate that Isach served as a "feather go-between," connecting the otherwise distinct feather industries of North and South Africa and the Mediterranean and Ashkenazi Jewish commercial diasporas. His story illuminates how one Jewish merchant weathered—and attempted to capitalize on—not one but two highly volatile feather markets.

Isach Hassan, Feather Go-Between

As we have seen, the trade in ostrich plumes remained important to North and West Africa's economies through the first decade of the twentieth century. However, by 1904, Tripoli was exporting roughly a tenth of the feathers it had at the height of its feather boom, 20 years earlier.⁸² As trade across the Sahara became ever more cumbersome and dangerous, and as the Cape feather industry outpaced that of North Africa, the number of bankruptcies filed by Tripoli's merchant community soared, and many feather merchants—Isach Hassan among them—moved into (or increased their investment in) the trade of esparto grass and other commodities.⁸³ Others left Tripoli and even North Africa altogether for Khartoum, Paris, and other locales.⁸⁴ Hassan appears to have been unusual in that he attempted to stay in the feather trade, using his contacts and expertise to capitalize on the growth of the Cape ostrich industry.

Evidence of Hassan's efforts has been preserved in a series of English-language letters exchanged with the Cape-based feather merchant Isaac Nurick over a two-year period, from September 1911 to July 1913.⁸⁵ These letters shed light on the complex commercial machinations that undergirded the trade of so volatile a commodity as ostrich plumes. They also provide an unusually vivid glimpse into the

quotidian challenges that faced feather merchants at the turn of the twentieth century.

At the time of Hassan and Nurick's correspondence, London was well established as the international center of feather sales. By 1876, large-scale public auctions attended by buyers from France, Germany, Austria, and the United States were being held bimonthly in the Commercial Sale Rooms on London's Mincing Lane, one of the principal locales where British "colonial produce" was sold. It seems that Hassan and Nurick met while the latter was in London on business, possibly accompanied by his wife, to whom Hassan frequently sent greetings. One might assume that the fact that these two feather tycoons were Jewish abetted their professional relationship. Yet a turn-of-the-century Lithuanian Jew, native Yiddish speaker, and Cape resident was not the natural bedfellow of a London-based, Livornese Jewish merchant from Tripoli, who may have been more comfortable operating in Judeo-Arabic. This being said, the Jewishness of these men was by no means coincidental to their professional relationship; Jews were, after all, far more likely to be overseas emissaries of the Mediterranean and South African feather trade than were their non-Jewish peers.

In any case, a business relationship between the two men was proposed by Hassan in the early fall of 1911. At that time, Hassan suggested that he be employed to "push the prices" of Nurick's feathers at auction. Apparently Nurick was not quick to agree, for Hassan wrote again in November 1911 to offer further details of the proposed arrangement:

The protection of your feathers

I await your decision. The conditions that I consider fair are that I protect your feathers and charge you ½%, and any lot left on my hands will be put in next sale and any profit or loss to the dividend. This is necessary, because by protecting your feathers I have to bid up and naturally a few lots must fall to me, and if they remain for my a/c [account], the loss might be more than the ½% you pay me commission.

I do not propose this for the sake of my ½%, but for the sake of our friendship and I am willing to do it for you *for nothing* but any lot falling to me must be all for your a/c. In this way I make no profit and no loss.⁸⁶

In sum, Hassan was proposing that he be paid half of Nurick's earnings at a given auction in return for bidding aggressively on Nurick's feathers, which could be identified in brokers' catalogues by Nurick's mark. Naturally there was a risk that Hassan would inadvertently become the

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highest bidder, in which case, Hassan proposed, Nurick should pay for the feathers himself and “recycle” them by selling them at the next auction. Nurick appears to have accepted the terms extended by Hassan, and he was assured almost immediately by Hassan that the arrangement was proving advantageous: after one subdued auction, for example, Hassan reported to Nurick that without their assistance his feathers would have sold for 10–15 percent less than they did.⁸⁷

Flush with this success, Hassan unsuccessfully tried to lure Nurick “and his friends” into either utilizing or cofounding a shipping company for which (in Hassan’s words) “I will be the agent of all the shippers who join us, and I hope that we will have the control as the others will not be able to compete: and I hope to save them some money in brokerage etc.”⁸⁸ Hassan, it would seem, hoped to emulate the operations of the Nahums (another Livornese, Tripolitanian, Jewish family prominent in the feather trade), who used their own ships to convey goods from North Africa to Britain. Given the Hassans’ expertise in transregional trade, this was not an unreasonable ambition. Nurick, however, seems to have shied away from the proposition, and there is no evidence that Hassan’s venture was actualized.

The quasi-legal nature of Hassan and Nurick’s business relationship guaranteed that good relations would not endure. Hassan began to complain that he was not willing to pay cash for feathers “accidentally” acquired through vigorous bidding. He wished, instead, to have the cost of these feathers charged to a joint account in the names of Nurick and Hassan that was to be held by the brokerage firm Hale & Son, one of three British firms that oversaw feather auctions. This arrangement required that Nurick and Hassan alert Hale & Son to their collaboration, thereby involving at least one person at the brokerage house in their shilling scheme. That person was Mr. Hale himself, whether father or son we do not know. In return for accommodating Nurick and Hassan’s partnership, Hale seems to have secured a promise that Nurick would use Hale & Son as his exclusive broker.

Business relations between Nurick, Hassan, and Hale soured quickly. In order not to overbid too extravagantly at auction, Hassan tried to learn what value brokers attached to Nurick’s feather lots. This information, however, was only released at the seller’s instruction and, wrote Hassan to Nurick, “if I asked you to give these instructions, they [the brokers] would know of our combination.”⁸⁹ Without this information, Hassan inevitably overspent, and when he attempted to “return” the mistakenly purchased feather lots to Hale, the latter refused to hold them against a joint Nurick-Hassan account, instead holding Hassan alone financially responsible. In a letter to Nurick, Hassan insisted this

dynamic not be repeated: "In future it must be so [that we are jointly held responsible] because I do not want to lose or make [money] on the joint a/c goods."⁹⁰ Hassan had more to lose than a drop in the value of any mistakenly purchased feathers. The regular attendees of London's ostrich feather auctions were able to recognize lots that made a second appearance on Mincing Street and were prejudicial against feather buyers who handled recycled goods. Remarkd one observer of instances such as this, "[T]he old hands in many cases know when it is so, and pass their remarks freely."⁹¹

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Meanwhile, Hale had a vested interest in the success of Nurick's feather sales. At Hassan's urging, Hale began to bid against Hassan on Nurick's lots, with the knowledge that he could always "recycle" any feathers he was obliged to purchase at a future auction. (Hassan wrote to Nurick: "I told Messrs. Hale to bid [up your feathers] and I would do the same, so that the room should not notice that I was the only bidder.")⁹² With this arrangement in place, Hale was extending three sources of credit to Nurick for feathers that he or his associates had bought or sold at auction: one account was in Nurick's own name; own was jointly appointed to Nurick and Hassan; and one was jointly appointed to Nurick and Hale. This annoyed Hassan, who felt he was losing commission because of Hale. Complaining to Nurick, he urged his associate to remain loyal to him, promising to "engage a special clerk for this business."⁹³

In the meantime, Hale earned Nurick's pique by attempting to counsel him about what feathers to buy, when, and in what quantity—judgments that Nurick felt were his own to make. In anger, Nurick appears to have stopped employing Hale & Son as broker and Hassan as coconspirator. A year passed before the two men would write again. It was Hassan that resumed the correspondence, at a moment when the feather market was beginning to fall on hard times. In two letters penned but one day apart, Hassan pleaded with Nurick to take responsibility for some of the £400 debt that had been incurred when Hassan bid up Nurick's lots.⁹⁴ To sweeten the deal, Hassan offered Nurick presumably unwanted tips about feathers in vogue. A final letter, written just months before the ostrich feather market collapsed, reports that Hassan was unable to return to business and that Hale & Son would soon be reporting the final status of the Nurick-Hassan account. Hassan's last recorded words to Nurick were stubbornly optimistic: "I trust we may soon be able to get this squared up."⁹⁵ In fact, nothing could be further from the truth. The next time Nurick, Hassan, and Hale & Son had reason to communicate, it was through their respective liquidators, with both Hassan and Nurick demanding their debts be honored.

The bottom had fallen out of the ostrich feather market, and neither Hassan nor Nurick would deal in plumes again.

Although Hassan and Nurick ultimately met the same financial fate, in the years before the feather crash of 1914 the risks these two men faced differed because they were operating in different regional contexts. At the time of their correspondence, while some observers of the industry were accurately predicting an imminent feather crash, the value of Cape feathers was as high as it had ever been.⁹⁶ Yet the Mediterranean feather market had been more or less stymied by regional and imperial politics and outpaced by the industry of the Cape. For Mediterranean Jewish feather merchants like Hassan, the first dozen years of the twentieth century were marked not only by personal business failings but also by the prospect that their regional feather economy was ceding ground to another. In this sense, Hassan's correspondence with Nurick is immensely bittersweet. Hassan's letters to Nurick reflect the resilience of one Mediterranean Jewish merchant, but they also reveal how imminently Jewish mercantile culture was threatened in the region. Plumes were to be among the last highly valued luxury goods traded by Mediterranean Jews on the international market. With the evisceration of North and West Africa's ostrich feather market, a centuries-old Jewish regional economic practice was becoming obsolete.

Conclusion

It is striking that the existing scholarship on Jews' role in the Mediterranean ostrich feather trade is by and large written by scholars outside the field of Jewish history. With but one exception—Schroeter's work on the merchants of Essaouira—this scholarship, though acknowledging Jews' significance in the feather commodity chain, has failed to interrogate why Jews predominated in the trade of plumes or how their Jewishness interacted with the shape and direction of the feather commodity chain. Moreover, this scholarship has been focused on writing an intra-regional story, albeit one that is inextricably linked to extra-regional realities.

In this article, I have used the existing scholarship on the feather trade and new archival matter pertaining to the work of individual Jewish feather merchants to peer at this story through a wider geographical and historical lens. I have traced the involvement of Mediterranean Jews along the feather commodity chain, through North and West Africa, across the Mediterranean, and in the commercial

heart of Europe. In so doing, I have redressed several deeply embedded suppositions about Mediterranean Jews in the modern period. This story suggests, first, how centrally Jews figured in the trade of luxury goods from North and West Africa to Europe and the United States in the modern period, notwithstanding shifts in the global position of Mediterranean trade that preceded and jeopardized the region's feather industry. Second, attention to the feather trade presents a different view of Jews' relationship to imperialism in North and West Africa than have studies with an exclusively cultural or legal approach. Seen through the lens of mercantile culture, we learn that the intrusion of European control in these regions had the potential to upset rather than to exploit Jews' ability to serve as commercial intermediaries, curtailing rather than availing Jews' economic opportunities. From this perspective, we may conclude that Mediterranean Jews' experience of colonialism was both more varied and potentially more lugubrious than we have thus far been aware.

Finally, I have focused on individual members of one Jewish mercantile house, that of the Hassan family, in order to consider how Jewish feather merchants responded to the evisceration of the Mediterranean feather trade and the astronomical growth of its competitor, the ostrich industry of the Cape. As the first decade of the twentieth century drew to a close, Isach Hassan attempted to find a mooring in the shifting center of gravity of the feather world. In so doing, he operated less as a feather merchant than as a commercial and cultural go-between. That it was a Jew from the Mediterranean basin of Africa (and, more specifically, a Sephardic Jew of Livornese origin with roots in Tripoli) who should fill this role should by now come as no surprise.

In contrast to other merchants involved in the Mediterranean ostrich feather commodity chain, and in contrast to those Europeans who wished to co-opt it, Mediterranean Jews were unusually fluent in feathers. They had the human capital this fluency required: diasporic reach, shared language, familial ties, inherited skills, and, for a time, felicitous relations with the requisite state powers. Such weighty rudiments were fundamental even in the trade of a commodity so light as a feather.

Notes

The research for this article was supported by a National Endowment for the Humanities Fellowship, a Charles A. Ryskamp Fellowship from the American Council of Learned Societies, by the Memorial Foundation for

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Jewish Culture, and by the Maurice Amado Foundation Research Fund. Additional support was provided by the University of Washington's Department of History, Jewish Studies Program, and Graduate School. An earlier version was presented to members of Stanford University's Taube Center for Jewish Studies and Mediterranean Studies Forum, and as part of the Maurice Amado Series on Sephardic Studies at the University of California, Los Angeles; thanks to my interlocutors and hosts in these locales—Aron Rodrigue, Steven J. Zipperstein, and David N. Myers—for their generosity and insights. Finally, my gratitude is due to the editors of *Jewish Social Studies* and to Daniel Schroeter, Matthias Lehmann, Jordanna Bailkin, and Frederick Zimmerman, all of whom read and provided instrumental comments on this article.

1. C. P. Nel Museum, Oudtshoorn, South Africa, uncatalogued Isaac Nurick exhibit (hereafter CPN IN), "Letter Book [1914]," "In Bankruptcy. In the Matter of Isach Hassan."
2. References to the Hassans' prominence may be found in Stephen Baier, *An Economic History of Central Niger* (Oxford, 1980), 72–73; Ahmed Said Fituri, "Tripolitania, Cyrenaica, and Bilad as-Sudan Trade Relations During the Second Half of the Nineteenth Century" (Ph.D. diss., University of Michigan, 1982), 128; and Mehier de Mathuisieulx, "Une mission en Tripolitaine," in *Renseignements coloniaux et documents* (Paris, 1903), 32.
3. It is indicative of the complexity of Mediterranean Jewish history—and Mediterranean Jewish mercantile history, in particular—that no single term can adequately group or describe its diverse players. It would be anachronistic to call those Jews involved in the feather trade "Sephardi," because so many Judo-Arabs were counted among them. (The Judeo-Arabic population involved in the feather trade was concentrated in and/or hailed from Morocco, Algeria, and Egypt and counted among its ranks some Sephardim descended from Spanish or Portuguese Jews.) Yet to refer to this mercantile population as "North African" belies the diasporic nature of some of its principal participants, namely, the Sephardi families from Livorno who constituted the mercantile elite in (among other places) Tripoli, Algiers, and Tunis. In this article, I choose, for the most part, to refer to the internally diverse body of Jews involved in the feather trade as "Mediterranean." This term, too, is flawed, little accommodating the geographic span of the Mediterranean Jewish diaspora that was so instrumental to its commercial flexibility. For a terse but fair consideration of the socioethnic makeup of North African Jewries, see the introduction in Michael M. Laskier, *North African Jewry in the Twentieth Century: The Jews of Morocco, Tunisia, and Algeria* (New York, 1994).
4. Ralph A. Austen, "Marginalization, Stagnation, and Growth: The Trans-Saharan Caravan Trade in the Era of European Expansion, 1500–1900," in *The Rise of Merchant Empires: Long-Distance Trade in the*

Early Modern World, 1350–1750, ed. James Tracy (New York, 1990); Baier, *Economic History of Central Niger*; Stephen Baier, “Trans-Saharan Trade and the Sahel: Damergu, 1870–1930,” *Journal of African History* 18, no. 1 (1977): 37–60; A. Adu Boahen, *Britain, the Sahara, and the Western Sudan, 1788–1861* (Oxford, 1964); A. Adu Boahen, “The Caravan Trade in the Nineteenth Century,” *Journal of African History* 3, no. 2 (1961): 349–59; Dennis D. Cordell, “Eastern Libya, Wadai and the Sanusiya: A Tariqa and a Trade Route,” *Journal of African History* 18, no. 1 (1977): 21–36; Ross Dunn, “The Trade of Tafilalt: Commercial Change in Southeast Morocco on the Eve of the Protectorate,” *African Historical Studies* 4, no. 2 (1971): 271–304; Mark Dyer, “Export Production in Western Libya, 1750–1793,” *African Economic History*, no. 13 (1984); Fitturi, “Tripolitania, Cyrenaica, and Bilad as-Sudan Trade Relations,” 117–36; Marion Johnson, “Calico Caravans: The Tripoli-Kano Trade After 1880,” *Journal of African History* 17, no. 1 (1976): 95–117; Paul E. Lovejoy, “Commercial Sectors in the Economy of the Nineteenth-Century Central Sudan: The Trans-Saharan Trade and the Desert-Side Salt Trade,” *African Economic History*, no. 13 (1984): 85–116; Jean-Louis Miège, “Le commerce Trans-Saharien au XIX^e siècle: Essai de quantification,” *Revue de l’Occident Musulman et de la Méditerranée*, no. 32 (1981–82); C. W. Newbury, “North African and Western Sudan Trade in the Nineteenth Century: A Re-evaluation,” *Journal of African History* 7, no. 2 (1966): 233–46; Daniel J. Schroeter, *Merchants of Essaouira: Urban Society and Imperialism in Southwestern Morocco, 1844–1886* (Cambridge, Engl., 1988); Terence Walz, *Trade Between Egypt and Bilad as-Sudan, 1700–1820* (Cairo, 1978).

- 5 Beginning in the sixteenth century, the “Spanish-crypto-Jewish world trade network,” as Jonathan Israel has called it, equipped consumers in Western Europe with “sugar, spices, silver and gold bullion, diamonds, pearls, hides, tobacco, cacao, silks and American dye-woods . . . besides numerous other luxury and exotic commodities ranging from Saharan ostrich feathers to indigo, cochineal, ginger and coffee.” Jonathan Irvine Israel, *Diasporas Within a Diaspora: Jews, Crypto-Jews and the World of Maritime Empires (1540–1740)* (Leiden, 2002), 5.
- 6 I explore the historiographic tendencies that surround the treatment of Jews and modern imperialism in “Modern Jewries and the Imperial Imagination,” *AJS Perspectives* (Fall 2005): 14–16. On Salonika’s decline, see Benjamin Braude, “The Rise and Fall of Salonika Woollens, 1500–1650: Technology Transfer and Western Competition,” *Mediterranean Historical Review* 6, no. 2 (1991): 216–36; Minna Rozen, “Contest and Rivalry in Mediterranean Maritime Commerce in the First Half of the Eighteenth Century: The Jews of Salonika and the European Presence,” *Revue des Etudes Juives*, no. 147 (1988): 304–52; and Azriel Shohat, “The King’s Cloth in Salonika,” *Sefunot*, no. 12 (1971–78): 169–88. Useful studies of Sephardi involvement in the trade of modern commodities such as opium, coral, and diamonds include Maisie J. Meyer,

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From the Rivers of Babylon to the Whangpoo: A Century of Sephardi Jewish Life in Shanghai (Lanham, Md., 2003); Francesca Trivellato, "Trading Diasporas and Trading Networks in the Early Modern Period: A Sephardic Partnership of Livorno in the Mediterranean, Europe and Portuguese India (ca. 1700–1750)" (Ph.D. diss., Brown University, 2004); and Gedalia Yogev, *Diamonds and Coral: Anglo-Dutch Jews and Eighteenth-Century Trade* (New York, 1978). Relevant scholarship pertaining to Jews' involvement in trade to, in, and from North Africa will be cited below.

- 7 See, e.g., Virginia Aksan, "Locating the Ottomans Among Early Modern Empires," *Journal of Early Modern History* 3, no. 2 (1999): 103–34; Karen Barkey and Mark Von Hagen, *After Empire: Multiethnic Societies and Nation-Building. The Soviet Union and the Russian, Ottoman, and Habsburg Empires* (Boulder, Colo., 1997); Beshara Doumani, *Rediscovering Palestine* (Berkeley, 1995); and Donald Quataert, *Consumption Studies and the History of the Ottoman Empire, 1550–1922: An Introduction* (Albany, N.Y., 2000).
- 8 On the early history of Jews' involvement in trans-Saharan trade, see M. Abitbol, "Juifs maghrébins et commerce Transsaharien au moyen-âge," in *Communautés juives des marges sahariennes du maghreb*, ed. Michel Abitbol (Jerusalem, 1982); M. Abitbol, "Juifs maghrébins et commerce Transsaharien du VIIIe au XVe siècles," in *Le sol, la parole et l'écrit: Mélanges en hommage à Raymond Mauny*, ed. Raymond Mauny (Paris, 1981); and H. Z. Hirschberg, *A History of the Jews in North Africa*, 2 vols. (Leiden, 1974), 1: 254–61. On Jewish trade in the medieval Islamic and Mediterranean world more generally, see Shelomo Dov Goitein, *A Mediterranean Society: The Jewish Communities of the Arab World as Portrayed in the Documents of the Cairo Geniza*, 6 vols. (Berkeley, 1967), esp. vol. 1, *Economic Foundations*; Shelomo Dov Goitein, *Letters of Medieval Jewish Traders* (Princeton, 1974); and Fernand Braudel, *The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World in the Age of Philip II* (New York, 1972).
- 9 This did not prevent individual colonists from experimenting with controlled ostrich farming. Apparently one English woman, Mrs. Carriere, maintained an ostrich farm near Algiers. See *Ostrich Farming in the United States: Reports from the Consuls of the United States at Algiers, Cape Town, and Buenos Ayres, on Ostrich Raising and Ostrich Farming in Africa, in the Argentine Republic, and in the United States* (Washington, D.C., 1882), 579.
- 10 Baier, "Trans-Saharan Trade and the Sahel," 59. Stephen Baier refers here to villagers in Damergu, in western Niger, who were once economically dependent on the ostrich feather trade.
- 11 I explore the place of émigré Lithuanian Jews in the Cape-based ostrich feather commodity chain—and colonial economics more generally—in "Falling into Feathers: Jews and the Trans-Atlantic Ostrich Feather Trade," *Journal of Modern History* (forthcoming, Dec. 2007), and in *The Pursuit of Plumes: Jews, Ostrich Feathers, and Modern Global Commerce* (New Haven, Conn., forthcoming in 2008).

- 12 Works in this vein include Pierre Birnbaum and Ira Katznelson, eds., *Paths of Emancipation: Jews, States, and Citizenship* (Princeton, 1995); David Cesarani, ed., *Port Jews: Jewish Communities in Cosmopolitan Maritime Trading Centres, 1550–1950* (London, 2002); and Sarah Abrevaya Stein, *Making Jews Modern: The Yiddish and Ladino Press in the Russian and Ottoman Empires* (Bloomington, Ind., 2003).
- 13 Erika Diane Rappaport, *Shopping for Pleasure: Women in the Making of London's West End* (Princeton, 2000); Erika Rappaport, "Art, Commerce, or Empire? The Rebuilding of Regent Street, 1880–1927," *History Workshop Journal*, no. 53 (2002): 95–117; Judith R. Walkowitz, *City of Dreadful Delight: Narratives of Sexual Danger in Late-Victorian London* (Chicago, 1992).
- 14 Georgine De Courtais, *Women's Headdress and Hairstyles in England from AD 600 to the Present Day* (London, 1973); Madeleine Delpierre, *Chapeaux, 1750–1960: [Exposition], Musée De La Mode Et Du Costume, 1^{er} Février 1980–13 Avril 1980* (Paris, 1980); Robin W. Doughty, *Feather Fashions and Bird Preservation: A Study in Nature Protection* (Berkeley, 1975); Edmond Lefèvre, *Le commerce et l'industrie de la plume pour parure* (Paris, 1914); Pamela Swadling, Roy Wagner, and Billai Laba, *Plumes from Paradise: Trade Cycles in Outer Southeast Asia and Their Impact on New Guinea and Nearby Islands Until 1920* (Coorparoo DC, Queensland, Australia, 1996).
- 15 Emma Hooper, "The Use and Care of Feathers," *Ladies' Home Journal* 11, no. 5 (1894).
- 16 "A Loss on Ostrich Feathers," *The Times* (London), Apr. 16, 1912, p. 21.
- 17 Data on ostrich feather exports from Tripoli and elsewhere in North Africa have been presented and debated in a series of scholarly works. These studies, which rely on French and British consular and archival reports, include Baier, *Economic History of Central Niger*; Baier, "Trans-Saharan Trade and the Sahel"; Fituri, "Tripolitania, Cyrenaica, and Bilad as-Sudan Trade Relations"; Johnson, "Calico Caravans"; Lovejoy, "Commercial Sectors in the Economy of the Nineteenth-Century Central Sudan"; Paul E. Lovejoy and Stephen Baier, "The Desert-Side Economy of the Central Sudan," *International Journal of African Historical Studies* 8 (1975): 551–81; and Newbury, "North African and Western Sudan Trade." A brief but thorough discussion of the evolution of this historiography is offered in Lovejoy, "Commercial Sectors in the Economy of the Nineteenth-Century Central Sudan." The most reliable and updated calculations have been provided in Baier, *Economic History of Central Niger*, 234.
- 18 These figures, based on American and British consular reports, have been discussed by a number of sources. The precise statistics cited above are drawn from Baier, *Economic History of Central Niger*, 74, tables I and II, and Fituri, "Tripolitania, Cyrenaica, and Bilad as-Sudan Trade Relations," 78, 126. See also Johnson, "Calico Caravans." Together, these authors counter an argument made in Newbury, "North African

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- and Western Sudan Trade,” that the volume of trade on the three western-most trade routes was in decline after 1875.
- 19 Although European and American buyers tended to call all feathers exported from North Africa “Barbary,” in fact there were at least two varieties of plumes that reached London’s auction block via different routes from North Africa. “Barbary” plumes originated in the Sahara and Sahel and proved to be the feathers most valued by European and American buyers. According to many sources, Barbary plumes were “the most superior in fullness, breadth, colour, and gracefulness” (Lefèvre, *Le commerce et l’industrie de la plume pour parure*, 47). A second variety of feathers exported from North Africa in much smaller quantities was the “Aleppan.” In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Aleppan plumes were conveyed by camel caravan across the Arabian Peninsula and/or Eastern Mediterranean, whence they were sent by barge along the lower Nile to Cairo or Alexandria or transported by caravan to Tripoli. See *ibid.* and Julius de Mosenthal, *Ostriches and Ostrich Farming* (London, 1879). Mark Dyer writes that, in western Libya, “virtually all groups, both nomads and settled,” hunted ostriches on occasion. Dyer, “Export Production in Western Libya,” 126. Other sources refer to ostrich hunting in Damergu and Sennar. It was claimed by some European observers that “from religious scruple, the Mussulman is averse to the mode of plucking the feathers out of the live bird,” a suggestion rendered spurious by the small-scale farming of ostriches in some parts of the Sahara and Sahel. This claim is found, for example, in an 1875 letter from M. Eugene Gros, “a merchant at Cairo and Paris, for many years connected with feather trade of Egypt,” to Julius de Mosenthal, in Mosenthal, *Ostriches and Ostrich Farming*, 233–34.
- 20 On ostrich cultivation in Niger, see Baier, “Trans-Saharan Trade and the Sahel,” 50. Reference to ostrich breeding in Sudan is made in the letter from Gros to Mosenthal in Mosenthal, *Ostriches and Ostrich Farming*, 233–34. Reference to the farming of ostriches by “some tribes of Soudan, of the Upper Senegal, and of the Algerian frontiers” was also made in a letter by United States Consul Alex Jourdan, based in Algiers, to the authors of a state-sponsored study on the feasibility of introducing ostrich farming to the United States. See *Ostrich Farming in the United States*, 582.
- 21 Fituri, “Tripolitania, Cyrenaica, and Bilad as-Sudan Trade Relations,” 71–76, 96–98.
- 22 As early as 1859, the Société d’Acclimatation of Paris offered financial rewards for the successful domestication of the ostrich in Algeria or Senegal and for the breeding of the birds in Europe. The results of subsequent experiments (in Algeria, Marseilles, and Grenoble) were avidly covered in the *Bulletin de la Société d’Acclimatation*. Early proponents of developing the ostrich feather industry in central or eastern Sahara included two Frenchmen: Jules Oudot, a civil engineer, and H. Mircher, an officer. Both published extensive reports on the matter.



- See H. Mircher, *Mission de ghadamès* (Alger, 1863), and Jules Oudot, *Le fermage des autruches en Algérie: Incubation artificielle* (Paris, 1880). Contributing to the effort was August Menegaux, director of the French Museum of Natural History. See A. Menegaux, *L'élevage de l'autruche, récolte et commerce des plumes* (Paris, 1913). These men's efforts were renewed in the early years of the twentieth century by Dr. J. Decorse, who was sent to French Sudan by the colonial government to investigate the viability of ostrich cultivation in the region. See "Protecting African Birds," *Forest and Stream: A Journal of Outdoor Life, Travel, Nature Study, and Shooting* 69, no. 16 (1907). In Britain, similar works by Julius de Mosenthal and Arthur Douglass were highly influential in inspiring and aiding the expansion of ostrich farming in the Cape. See Arthur Douglass, *Ostrich Farming in South Africa* (London, 1881), and Mosenthal, *Ostriches and Ostrich Farming*.
- 23 B. Marie Perinbaum, "Social Relations in the Trans-Saharan and Western Sudanese Trade: An Overview," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 15, no. 4 (1973): 416–36.
- 24 For more on the Ghadamasi diaspora and the commercial activity of Ghadamasi merchants, see Baier, *Economic History of Central Niger*; Baier, "Trans-Saharan Trade and the Sahel"; Fituri, "Tripolitania, Cyrenaica, and Bilad as-Sudan Trade Relations"; Johnson, "Calico Caravans"; Jean-Louis Miège, "Les juifs et le commerce Transsaharien au dix-neuvième siècle," in Abitol, *Communautés juives*; Mircher, *Mission de ghadamès*; Newbury, "North African and Western Sudan Trade"; and Schroeter, *Merchants of Essaouira*. On the Sanusiya in particular, see Cordell, "Eastern Libya, Wadai and the Sanusiya," and Fituri, "Tripolitania, Cyrenaica, and Bilad as-Sudan Trade Relations." On the Swiri, see Daniel Schroeter, "The Jews of Essaouira (Mogador) and the Trade of Southern Morocco," in Abitbol, *Communautés juives*, and Schroeter, *Merchants of Essaouira*.
- 25 Boahen, *Britain, the Sahara, and the Western Sudan*, 107–8. On the Tuareg refreshment stands and the "landlady brokers" who ran them, see Lovejoy and Baier, "Desert-Side Economy of the Central Sudan." On the commercial relationships between Swiri merchants and Ait Baha transporters, see Schroeter, "Jews of Essaouira," and Schroeter, *Merchants of Essaouira*.
- 26 Nahum Slouschz, *Travels in North Africa* (Philadelphia, 1927), 106–7.
- 27 Cordell, "Eastern Libya, Wadai and the Sanusiya," 36.
- 28 This is referenced in Schroeter, "Jews of Essaouira," 379. Jews' capacity as merchants in Morocco more generally is explored in detail in Schroeter, *Merchants of Essaouira*, and Daniel J. Schroeter, *The Sultan's Jew: Morocco and the Sephardi World* (Stanford, 2002). The geographic dispersal of Moroccan Jewish merchants is also discussed in Slouschz, *Travels in North Africa*, 72, 104–11.
- 29 Because no market of feather consumers existed in North Africa, itinerant merchants were unlikely to deal in feathers. On the work of Jewish

- itinerant merchants in the region, see Rachel Simon, "Jewish Itinerant Peddlers in Ottoman Libya: Economic, Social, and Cultural Aspects," in *Decision Making and Change in the Ottoman Empire*, ed. Caesar E. Farah (Kirksville, Mo., 1993); Harvey Goldberg, *Jewish Life in Muslim Libya: Rivals and Relatives* (Chicago, 1990), 68–81; and Fituri, "Tripolitania, Cyrenaica, and Bilad as-Sudan Trade Relations," 127.
- 30 Hirschberg, *A History of the Jews in North Africa*, 168.
- 31 The numerous stops that feathers made along the Nile and en route to and from the Red Sea were outlined in an 1875 letter from M. Goy, "one of the principal ostrich feather merchants in Paris, and for more than 30 years well acquainted with details of NA feather trade," to Julius de Mosenthal, in Mosenthal, *Ostriches and Ostrich Farming*, 234–35. This is also described in Miège, "Le commerce Trans-Saharien au XIX^e siècle," 100. A comparison may be drawn with the early modern Moroccan sugar industry, which was more or less controlled by the sultan and farmed out to local Jewish merchants. Jews were also involved in Morocco's sixteenth-century sugar processing industry. Emily Gotreich, *The Mellah of Marrakesh: Jewish and Muslim Space in Morocco's Red City* (Bloomington, Ind., 2007).
- 32 Cited in Schroeter, "Jews of Essaouira," 380.
- 33 This relationship of credit and commission is described in, among other sources, Paul Pascon, *La maison d'iligh et l'histoire sociale du tazerwalt* (Rabat, 1984), and Schroeter, *Merchants of Essaouira*, 109–10.
- 34 Baier, *Economic History of Central Niger*, 57–78; Johnson, "Calico Caravans," 110.
- 35 When the return on feathers was high, the strategy of aggressive credit extension paid off, with merchants increasing their gain by as much as 160 percent. However, when the bottom fell out of the ostrich feather market, as it did several times in the course of the late nineteenth century, many merchants, especially small-scale ones, were severely affected. Baier, *Economic History of Central Niger*, 75–76; Johnson, "Calico Caravans," 110; Schroeter, "Jews of Essaouira," 378.
- 36 Cited in Newbury, "North African and Western Sudan Trade," 240.
- 37 Cited in Fituri, "Tripolitania, Cyrenaica, and Bilad as-Sudan Trade Relations," 127. Fituri does not document the claim that feather sorting was undertaken in the Jewish district, but this point is echoed in other sources. See, e.g., Baier, *Economic History of Central Niger*, 71.
- 38 Walz, *Trade Between Egypt and Bilad as-Sudan*, 38; Dyer, "Export Production in Western Libya," 126; Miège, "Le commerce Trans-Saharien au XIX^e siècle," 100.
- 39 On the development of shipping feathers extra-regionally, see "Protecting African Birds"; Johnson, "Calico Caravans," 106; and Baier, *Economic History of Central Niger*, 88. The term "processing" appears in a British trade report cited by Johnson.
- 40 "Coloured" people in this region of the Cape were the mixed descendants of Outeniqua and Attaqua Khoikhoi and Boers—whites of Dutch

descent who left the Cape Colony in a series of trek parties in the 1830s and 1840s. For more on the racial makeup of the feather industry in South Africa and Jews' place in this matrix, see Peter Buirski, "Aspects of Material Life in Oudtshoorn, 1860–1927, with Particular Reference to the Labouring Poor" (B.A. honours thesis, University of Cape Town, 1983), and Stein, "Falling into Feathers." Documentation on Coloured sorters' risks of contracting tuberculosis may be found in *Oudtshoorn Courant*, Mar. 12, 1914.

- 41 According to Mark Dyer, the purchase, processing, and export of animal skins from Tripoli was a monopoly of the local pasha, who employed Jewish merchants to conduct the work on his behalf. These merchants oversaw both intra-regional trade in skins and the export of these commodities to Venice, Malta, and Livorno. Dyer, "Export Production in Western Libya," 125. Similarly, the trade of goatskins in Morocco was "entirely in the hands" of Jews from Essaouira and their coreligionists from the south. Schroeter, "Jews of Essaouira," 377; Schroeter, *Merchants of Essaouira*, 83. Hides also constituted an essential commodity in the trade between Tunis and Livorno. Allesandro Triulzi, "Italian-Speaking Communities in Early Nineteenth Century Tunis," *Revue de l'Occident Musulman et de la Méditerranée* 9 (1971).
- 42 William Coffin, "Ostrich Feathers of Tripoli," *Monthly Consular and Trade Reports* 347 (1909): 55.
- 43 Mathuisieulx, "Une mission en Tripolitaine," 32.
- 44 On similar accusations launched against Cape-based Jewish feather merchants, see Stein, "Falling into Feathers."
- 45 Felix A. Matthews, "Northwest Africa and Timbuctoo," *Journal of the American Geographical Society of New York* 13 (1881): 208.
- 46 Oudot, *Le fermage des austruches en Algérie*, 153.
- 47 This tale was conveyed in reports of the Tripoli consuls-general, 1874–94. Cited in Newbury, "North African and Western Sudan Trade," 239–40.
- 48 These efforts were widely reported in the American press. See, e.g., "Ostrich Farming in California," *Scientific American (1845–1908)* 60, no. 14 (1889): 211; "Ostrich Raising," *Current Literature (1888–1912)* 31, no. 6 (1902): 710; Edwin Cawston and Charles E. Fox, *Ostrich Farming in California* (Los Angeles, 1887); S. M. Kennedy, "Ostrich Raising in California," *Overland Monthly and Out West Magazine (1868–1935)* 32, no. 192 (1898): 531; Day Allen Willey, "Raising Ostriches in the United States," *Scientific American (1845–1908)* 90, no. 14 (1904): 275. On the American government's investigation on the viability of domestic ostrich farming, see *Ostrich Farming in the United States*.
- 49 Israel, *Diasporas within a Diaspora*, 173.
- 50 On the centrality of Livorno—and Livornese Jewish merchants—to Mediterranean and extra-regional trade in the sixteenth through eighteenth centuries, see Matthias B. Lehmann, "A Livornese 'Port Jew' and the Sephardim of the Ottoman Empire," *Jewish Social Studies* n.s. 11, no. 2

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- (Winter 2005): 51–76; Lionel Lévy, *La nation juive portugaise: Livourne, Amsterdam, Tunis, 1591–1951* (Paris, 1999); Jean Pierre Filippini, *Il Porto di Livorno e la Toscana (1676–1814)* (Naples, 1998); Trivellato, “Trading Diasporas”; Yogev, *Diamonds and Coral*; Jonathan Irvine Israel, *European Jewry in the Age of Mercantilism, 1550–1750* (Oxford, 1985); and Israel, *Diasporas within a Diaspora*. On ties between Livorno and North Africa, including those of feather families, see Schroeter, *Sultan’s Jew*; Renzo De Felice, *Jews in an Arab Land: Libya, 1835–1970* (Austin, Tex., 1985); Minna Rozen, “The Leghorn Merchants in Tunis and Their Trade with Marseilles at the End of the 17th Century,” in *Les relations intercommunautaires juives en méditerranée occidentale, XIII^e–XX^e siècles*, ed. Jean Louis Miège (Paris, 1984), 51–59; Schroeter, *Merchants of Essaouira*; and Triulzi, “Italian-Speaking Communities in Early Nineteenth Century Tunis.”
- 51 “Trade in Ostrich Feathers,” *Hunt’s Mercantile Magazine* 38 (1858): 652.
 - 52 Other contemporary observers of the feather trade suggested that London’s monopoly on feather trading emerged only in the 1870s, but primary sources indicate otherwise. See, e.g., Lefèvre, *Le commerce et l’industrie de la plume pour parure*.
 - 53 “Trade in Ostrich Feathers,” 652.
 - 54 As Daniel Schroeter has demonstrated, during the nineteenth century the “Berberisco” population of London grew in number and visibility. Schroeter, *Sultan’s Jew*, esp. 55–76.
 - 55 “Trade in Ostrich Feathers,” 652.
 - 56 Mosenthal, *Ostriches and Ostrich Farming*, 233–34.
 - 57 Oudot, *Le fermage des autruches en Algérie*, 145.
 - 58 Cited in Harvey Goldberg et al., “Social and Demographic Aspects of the Jewish Community in Tripoli During the Colonial Period,” in *Judaïsme d’Afrique du Nord aux XIX^e–XX^e siècles: Histoire, société et culture*, ed. Michel Abitbol (Jerusalem, 1980), 80, table 6.
 - 59 Cited in De Felice, *Jews in an Arab Land*, 11.
 - 60 The first feather firm established in Paris by Jewish merchants from Tripoli was that of Cesar Labi and Ange Arbib, which was established in 1860. Mathuisieulx, “Une mission en Tripolitaine”; Baier, *Economic History of Central Niger*, 72, 90.
 - 61 Members of the Nahum family were important philanthropists in and beyond Tripoli; they funded, for example, the building of a Talmud Torah in Tripoli and a synagogue and Talmud Torah in the town of Homs (whence they exported alfalfa). Slouschz, *Travels in North Africa*, 9, 10, 45.
 - 62 On the Nahums’ shipping capabilities, see *ibid.*, 7. Evidence of the Hassans’ interest in creating a shipping company is preserved in correspondence between Isach Hassan and a South African ostrich feather exporter, Isaac Nurick. I will discuss this incident and the correspondence more generally in the text below.
 - 63 Schroeter, *Merchants of Essaouira*, 34–42, 166. Further details of the holdings of the house of Corcos are presented in Jean-Louis Miège,

“Bourgeoisie juive du Maroc au 19^e siècle,” in Abitbol, *Judaïsme d’Afrique du Nord*, 33.

64 Slouschz, *Travels in North Africa*, 105–6.

65 Although scholars recognize the Livornese Jewish diaspora as exceptionally polyglot, they disagree about what languages this population (and its mercantile elite, in particular) spoke, and in what contexts. The Livornese Jewish community of Tunis, for example, which was constituted largely of Conversos from Portugal, maintained communal records in Judeo-Arabic even though some members continued to sign their names in Spanish and Portuguese. Whether this indicates that knowledge of Judeo-Arabic was unusual, however, remains uncertain. Also unknown is whether or not fluency in Arabic was typical of North African-dwelling Livornese Jews or Livornese Jewish merchants. Jean Pierre Filippini, “Le rôle des négociants et des banquiers juifs de Livourne dans le grand commerce international en méditerranée au XVIII^e siècle,” in *The Mediterranean and the Jews: Banking, Finance, and International Trade (XVI–XVIII Centuries)*, ed. Ariel Toaff and Simon Schwarzfuchs (Ramat-Gan, 1989); Lévy, *La nation juive portugaise*.

66 Schroeter, *Merchants of Essaouira*, 115.

67 Goitein, *A Mediterranean Society*.

68 Thanks to Michael Bonine and Aomar Boum, both of the University of Arizona, for discussing their rich work in progress on, among other things, Morocco’s ostrich feather industry. Other recent work on relations between North Africa’s multiethnic, multisectarian, and multilingual traders includes David Gutelius, “We Are Many and We Are One: Sufi Networks and the Social Contexts for Scholarship in the Northern Sahara,” in *Libraries and the Transmission of Islamic Thought in Africa*, ed. Scott Reese and R. S. O’Fahey (Leiden, 2004), and Schroeter, *Sultan’s Jew*.

69 Schroeter, *Merchants of Essaouira*, chap. 10; Schroeter, *Sultan’s Jew*.

70 Rozen, “Leghorn Merchants in Tunis”; Rachel Simon, “The Socio-Economic Role of the Tripolitanian Jews in the Late Ottoman Period,” in Abitbol, *Communautés juives*. Still other Jewish merchants were subjects of France, Holland, Austria, and Spain; indeed, in Tripoli, Jews constituted all or the majority of these “foreign” groups. De Felice, *Jews in an Arab Land*, 11.

71 A list of 161 “unnationalized foreigners protected by consuls in Tripoli” was assembled in 1876 by American Consul Michael Vital, who was stationed in Tripoli. This list includes both Muslims and Jews but is dominated by the names of Jewish merchants and their families. “Correspondences of Michael Vital, Consulate of the United States of America, Tripoli of Barbary, to Department of State,” in *Despatches from United States Consuls in Tripoli, 1796–1885* (Washington, D.C., 1955). I am thankful to De Felice’s *Jews in an Arab Land* for pointing me to this source and to Matthew Olson, Archivist of Civilian Records at the United States National Archives and Records Administration, for helping me locate Vital’s correspondence.

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- 72 Fituri, "Tripolitania, Cyrenaica, and Bilad as-Sudan Trade Relations," 71–76, 96–98.
- 73 "Protecting African Birds."
- 74 Johnson, "Calico Caravans," 97–100; Fituri, "Tripolitania, Cyrenaica, and Bilad as-Sudan Trade Relations," 71–73.
- 75 On European attitudes, policies, and ambitions regarding trans-Saharan trade, see Johnson, "Calico Caravans," and Austen, "Marginalization, Stagnation, and Growth." The rumination on the "apathy" of French colonials was offered by American Consul Jourdan, who was stationed in Algiers at the turn of the century. Cited in *Ostrich Farming in the United States*, 577.
- 76 These dynamics are explored in, among other sources, Miège, "Bourgeoisie juive du Maroc au 19e siècle"; Jean Louis Miège, *Le Maroc et l'Europe, 1830–1894* (Paris, 1961); Pascon, *La maison d'iligh*; Schroeter, "Jews of Essaouira"; Schroeter, *Merchants of Essaouira*; and Schroeter, *Sultan's Jew*.
- 77 Scholarly studies of the decline of the Livornese Jewish mercantile class of North Africa have tended to focus on Tunis. See, e.g., Lévy, *La nation juive portugaise*; Minna Rozen, "The Livornese Jewish Merchants in Tunis and the Commerce with Marseilles at the End of the Seventeenth Century," *Michael*, no. 9 (1985): 87–129; and Triulzi, "Italian-Speaking Communities in Early Nineteenth Century Tunis."
- 78 Board of Trade and Industries (South Africa), "Report No. 55: The Ostrich Feather Industry" (Cape Town, 1925).
- 79 Stein, "Falling into Feathers."
- 80 Baier, *Economic History of Central Niger*, 79–95.
- 81 I explore this historiographic tendency in more detail in "Modern Jewries and the Imperial Imagination."
- 82 The most comprehensive statistics on the feather trade have been assembled by Stephen Baier, who draws on earlier work by Charles Newbury and Marion Johnson, among others. Information on the feather trade in the first decade of the twentieth century is scarcer but includes Fituri, "Tripolitania, Cyrenaica, and Bilad as-Sudan Trade Relations," 181.
- 83 The feather families Arbib, Nahum, and Hassan all moved into the esparto trade after the popularity of ostrich feathers waned. CPN IN, "Letter Book [1914]," "In Bankruptcy. In the Matter of Isach Hassan"; De Felice, *Jews in an Arab Land*, 316 n. 9.
- 84 Baier, *Economic History of Central Niger*, 90.
- 85 More about Nurick may be found in my longer study of the Cape-based feather trade: Stein, "Falling into Feathers."
- 86 CPN IN, Hassan-Nurick correspondence, Nov. 1, 1911.
- 87 *Ibid.*, Dec. 15, 1911.
- 88 *Ibid.*, Dec. 15, 1911. Hassan had also tried to win over Nurick's support for his "new company" in a letter dated Dec. 11, 1911.
- 89 CPN IN, Hassan-Nurick correspondence, Dec. 7, 1911.

90 Ibid., Dec. 7, 1911.

91 Douglass, *Ostrich Farming in South Africa*, 90.

92 CPN IN, Hassan-Nurick correspondence, Dec. 15, 1911.

93 Ibid., Dec. 15, 1911.

94 Ibid., Nov. 6 and 7, 1912.

95 Ibid., July 1, 1913.

96 *Report of the Ostrich Feather Commission Appointed to Enquire into the Ostrich Industry, Including Two Minority Reports. Presented to Both Houses of Parliament by Command of His Excellency the Governor-General* (Cape Town, 1918); Board of Trade and Industries (South Africa), "Report No. 55."

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