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**Sarah Stroumsa: Maimonides in His World**

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## Maimonides and Mediterranean Culture

FROM THE MANY HONORIFIC TITLES appended to Maimonides' name, "The Great Eagle" has come to be identified as his particular, personal title. This biblical sobriquet (from Ezekiel 17: 3) was meant, no doubt, to underline his regal position in the Jewish community. At the same time, the imagery of the wide-spread wings does justice not only to the breadth of Maimonides' intellectual horizons, but also to the scope of his impact, which extended across the Mediterranean, and beyond it to Christian Europe.

To the extent that the quantity of scholarly studies about an author is a criterion for either importance or fame, Moses Maimonides (1138–1204) stands among the most prominent figures in Jewish history, and certainly the most famous medieval Jewish thinker.<sup>1</sup> The continuous stream of publications dedicated to Maimonides is, however, often characterized by overspecification. Following what appears to be a division in Maimonides' own literary output, scholars usually focus on a particular section of his work—philosophy, medicine, religious law, or community leadership—complementing it by forays into other domains. Each such subject creates its own context: the intellectual or historical environment that we reconstruct in our attempts to understand Maimonides' treatment of a certain topic.

The prevalent tendency to overemphasize disciplinary partitions within Maimonides' own work reinforces, in turn, another already existing tendency: to overemphasize the distinction between Maimonides the Jewish leader and Maimonides the Islamic thinker.<sup>2</sup> Although Maimonides, like many great thinkers, defies categorization, we are prone to search for familiar tags, convenient pigeon-holes in which we can neatly classify his

<sup>1</sup>To illustrate this point, one example may suffice: a search in RAMBI, The Index of Articles in Jewish Studies, published by the Jewish National and University Library at Jerusalem (<http://jnul.huji.ac.il/rambi/>) lists, as articles with "Maimonides" as a key-word in the title, 243 entries published between 2000 and 2007 (and this number does not include Hebrew articles in the same category). On the inflation in Maimonidean scholarship, see also P. Bouretz, "A la recherche des lumières médiévales: la leçon de Maïmonide," *Critique* 64 (Jan-Feb. 2008), 29. Several comprehensive books on Maimonides came out when the manuscript of the present book was already completed, and could not be cited extensively.

<sup>2</sup>For an example of such a distinction, see chap. 5, below, *apud* notes 18–20.

work. The ensuing scholarly result does not do justice to Maimonides. The image it paints resembles Maimonides' famous, very late portrait: imposing and yet flat and two-dimensional. In particular, it depreciates Maimonides' participation in the cultural world of Medieval Islam. In the realms of philosophy and science, and in these realms alone, Maimonides' connection to the Islamic world has been duly and universally recognized. Most (although by no means all) of the scholarly works treating his philosophy are based on his original Arabic works, which are analyzed in the context of contemporary Muslim philosophy. Even in the study of philosophy, however, where Maimonides is recognized as "a disciple of al-Fārābī,"<sup>3</sup> his contribution is seldom fully integrated into the picture of medieval Islamic philosophy. Studies that offer a panoramic view of a particular philosophic issue in the medieval Islamic world would thus, more often than not, fail to make use of the evidence provided by Maimonides. In the study of other aspects of Maimonides' activity, it is mostly the Jewish context that is brought to bear, whereas the Islamic world recedes into the background. Maimonides' legal works are thus studied mostly by students of Jewish law, many of whom treat their subject as if it can be isolated from parallel intellectual developments in the Islamic world. Even the study of Maimonides' communal activity, based on his (usually Judaeo-Arabic) correspondence, tends to paint the Muslim world as a mere background to the life of the Jewish community (rather than seeing it as the larger frame of which the Jewish community was an integral part). At the same time, all too often this Judaeo-Arabic material remains ignored by scholars of Islamic history and society.<sup>4</sup> Maimonides is thus widely recognized as a giant figure of Jewish history, but remains of almost anecdotal significance for the study of the Islamic world.

The aim of the present book is to present an integrative intellectual profile of Maimonides in his world, the world of Mediterranean culture. This world, broadly defined, also supplies the sources for the book. Only by reading Maimonides' own writings *in light of the information gleaned from other sources* can we hope to paint a well-rounded profile, and to instill life in it.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>3</sup>L. Berman, "Maimonides the Disciple of al-Fārābī," *IOS* 4 (1974): 154–78.

<sup>4</sup>In this context one can understand Mark Cohen's earnest plea, "The time has arrived to integrate the Cairo Geniza, alongside Islamic genizas, into the canon of Islamic studies"; see M. C. Cohen, "Geniza for Islamicists, Islamic Geniza, and 'the New Cairo Geniza,'" *Harvard Middle Eastern and Islamic Review* 7 (2006): 141.

<sup>5</sup>Compare, for example, Davidson's approach, for whom "the only way to assess [Maimonides'] training in rabbinics and philosophy, and for that matter in medicine as well, is to examine his writings and discover through them the works he read, studied and utilized." See H. A. Davidson, *Moses Maimonides: The Man and His Works* (Oxford 2005), 80; and

## MEDITERRANEAN CULTURES

The historical reflection on the cultural role of the Mediterranean, as a unifying principle of culture, began already with Henri Pirenne's groundbreaking *Mohammed and Charlemagne*.<sup>6</sup> Shortly thereafter Fernand Braudel, in his pioneering work on the Mediterranean world in the time of Philip II, argued that only a comprehensive approach that treats the Mediterranean as a single unit can enable the historian to understand local developments properly and to evaluate correctly their ramifications and implications.<sup>7</sup> Around the same time that Braudel's book appeared, Shlomo Dov Goitein was working on his magnum opus, the multivolume *A Mediterranean Society: The Jewish Communities of the Arab World as Portrayed in the Documents of the Cairo Geniza*.<sup>8</sup> Like Braudel, Goitein believed that our sources require that we constantly bear in mind the close interconnections and interdependence of the various parts of the Mediterranean. The fragments of the Cairo Geniza—the hoard of manuscripts discovered at the end of the nineteenth century in the Ben Ezra synagogue in Cairo—reflected, like so many snapshots, the life of the Jewish community in Cairo from the tenth century up to modern times.<sup>9</sup> Goitein skillfully brought these snapshots to life, reconstructing the web of economic alliances across the Mediterranean and beyond it, the political and personal ties between the individual writers, and their religious and cultural concerns.

Although Braudel and Goitein did not belong to the same circle of historians, for a half-century following them “Mediterraneanism” became very much in vogue. References to the Mediterranean appeared in titles of many works, and provided a conceptual frame for others.<sup>10</sup> The

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see chap. 2, note 3, below. Compare, for example, Joel L. Kraemer, *Maimonides: The Life and World of One of Civilization's Greatest Minds* (New York, 2008), 14–15. Kraemer's overall approach in this matter is very similar to the one proposed in the present book.

<sup>6</sup>H. Pirenne, *Mahomet et Charlemagne* (Bruxelles, 1922).

<sup>7</sup>F. Braudel, *La Méditerranée et le monde méditerranéen à l'époque de Philippe II* (Paris, 1949); [=idem, *The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World in the Age of Philip II*, trans. S. Reynolds (New York, 1976)].

<sup>8</sup>S. D. Goitein, *A Mediterranean Society: the Jewish Communities of the Arab World as Portrayed in the Documents of the Cairo Geniza* (Berkeley, 1967), 6 v. According to Goitein's own testimony (5:497), he began his work independently of Braudel and read the latter's work only when he was already writing the last volumes of his own.

<sup>9</sup>See Stefan C. Reif, *A Jewish Archive from Old Cairo: the History of Cambridge University's Genizah Collection* (Richmond and Surrey, 2000); *ibid.*, *The Cambridge Genizah Collections: Their Contents and Significance* (Cambridge, 2002).

<sup>10</sup>See, by way of an example, M. J. Chiat and K. L. Reyerson, eds., *The Medieval Mediterranean: Cross-Cultural Contacts* (St. Cloud, Minn., 1988); R. Arnzen and J. Thielmann, eds., *Words, Texts and Concepts Cruising the Mediterranean Sea: Studies on the Sources*,

awareness of the concept's popularity led to a conscious attempt to examine its validity. Peregrine Horden and Nicholas Purcell, in their dramatically titled monumental work *The Corrupting Sea*, thus embarked on an analysis (and defense) of Mediterraneanism.<sup>11</sup>

But what is “the Mediterranean” for the historian? Unlike the well-defined geographical boundaries of the Mediterranean Sea, the cultural boundaries of “the Mediterranean world” are surprisingly flexible, and at times reach impressive dimensions. The center of gravity of Braudel’s Mediterranean lies in its western and northwestern part: Spain, the Maghreb, and Italy, whereas Palestine and Egypt play a relatively minor role in his study—smaller, in fact, than the role accorded to decidedly non-Mediterranean countries such as the Netherlands. Beyond the geographical confines of the Mediterranean stretched Braudel’s “greater” or “global Mediterranean,” which he described as “a Mediterranean with the dimensions of history.”<sup>12</sup> For the sixteenth century, these dimensions expanded to include the Atlantic shores as well as the Portuguese, Spanish, French, and English colonies in the Americas.<sup>13</sup> By contrast, the Mediterranean society described by Goitein on the basis of the documents or the Cairo Geniza tilted toward the east and south. Moreover, it occupied not only the shores of the Mediterranean, but also those areas defined today as the Near East, and its “global” or “historical” dimensions stretched eastward, as far as India.

The term “Mediterranean” is problematic not only because of its geographical inaccuracy. In recent years, the usefulness of treating the Mediterranean as an historical, anthropological, or economic unit has been increasingly questioned. In an interesting volume of essays dedicated to the examination of the thesis of Horden and Purcell, the classical scholar William Harris, for example, cites the definition of “Mediterraneanism” as “the doctrine that there are distinctive characteristics which the cultures of the Mediterranean have, or have had, in common.”<sup>14</sup> He notes “the fact that Mediterraneanism is often nowadays little more than a reflex” and adds that “the Mediterranean seems somehow peculiarly vul-

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*Contents and Influences of Islamic Civilization and Arabic Philosophy and Science Dedicated to Gerhard Endress on His Sixty-Fifth Birthday* (Leuven, 2004).

<sup>11</sup>P. Horden and N. Purcell, *The Corrupting Sea: A Study of Mediterranean History* (Oxford, 2000); and see Adnan A. Husain and K. E. Fleming, eds., *A Faithful Sea: The Religious Cultures of the Mediterranean, 1200–1700* (Oxford, 2007), 4–7.

<sup>12</sup>Braudel, *The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World*, 153, 155. Cf. also R. Brague, *Au moyen du Moyen Age: Philosophies médiévales en chrétienté, judaïsme et islam* (Chatou, 2006), 241.

<sup>13</sup>Ibid., pt. 2, chap. 4.

<sup>14</sup>W. Harris, “The Mediterranean and Ancient History,” in W. V. Harris, ed., *Rethinking the Mediterranean* (Oxford and New York, 2000), 38.

nerable to misuse.” As noted by Harris, “for many scholars Mediterranean unity has meant . . . primarily or indeed exclusively *cultural* unity.”<sup>15</sup> These scholars, he says, were looking for “the basic homogeneity of Mediterranean civilization,” a homogeneity the existence of which Harris then proceeds to disprove.

From various angles scholars now question not only the existence of enough unifying criteria for either the coastland or the deeper littoral countries, but also the existence of criteria sufficient to distinguish these countries from others. Even those who continue to use the term “Mediterranean” do so with an acute awareness of its shortcomings. The Arabist Gerhard Endress, for instance, seems to be addressing the above-mentioned questions when he asserts that, in the Mediterranean world of the Islamic middle ages, “Business interactions, the exchange of goods and books, practical science and intellectual disputes, come together to make a multi-faceted picture; a picture which is in no way that unified, but in which one can recognize many surprising aspects of unity.”<sup>16</sup> For Rémi Brague, “The Mediterranean played a role only when there was a single culture around its shores. This was achieved only with the Roman empire.” Reluctant to abandon the concept altogether, however, Brague counts the world of medieval Islam as an expansion (“une sortie”) of the Mediterranean toward the Indian Ocean.<sup>17</sup>

Regarding the place of the religious minorities in the Islamic world, adherence to “Mediterraneanism” introduces yet another set of problems: that of anachronistic value judgments. In his attempt to capture the place of the Jewish community within the fabric of the wider Mediterranean society, Goitein used the term “symbiosis,” which he borrowed from the field of biology, to illustrate the separate identity that Jews managed to preserve within the dominant Muslim culture, while still being full participants in it.<sup>18</sup> Subsequent discussions of this topic, however, tend to highlight the comfortable, irenic aspects of symbiosis. This tendency is particularly pronounced regarding Maimonides’ birthplace, al-Andalus (Islamic Spain) where the relations between the religious communities are

<sup>15</sup>Ibid., 26 (italics in the original). Cf. also Brague, *Au moyen du Moyen Age*, 240.

<sup>16</sup>G. Endress, “Der Islam und die Einheit des mediterranen Kulturraums in Mittelalter,” in Claus Rozen, ed., *Das Mittelmeer—die Wiege der europaischen Kultur* (Bonn, 1998), 270.

<sup>17</sup>Brague, *Au moyen du Moyen Age*, 240–41. Brague’s perception of the Mediterranean informs also S. Gugenheim, *Aristote au mont Saint-Michel: Les racines grecques de l’Europe chrétienne* (Paris, 2008), 170–72.

<sup>18</sup>S. D. Goitein, *Jews and Arabs: Their Contacts Through the Ages* (New York, 1964), 11, 127. Goitein’s magisterial *Mediterranean Society* dealt mostly with social and economic aspects of this symbiosis, and less with the history of ideas; cf. S. M. Wasserstrom, *Between Muslim and Jew: the Problem of Symbiosis under Early Islam* (Princeton, 1995), 3–12.

described in terms of *convivencia*, in which *las tres culturas* (Islam, Christianity, and Judaism) enjoyed a parallel golden age.<sup>19</sup> Such presentations play down the political, legal, and social differences between the ruling Muslims, on the one hand, and, on the other hand, the Christian and Jewish minorities living under Islamic rule, and present their interconnections in anachronistic terms of universalism and tolerance.<sup>20</sup>

In treating Maimonides as a Mediterranean thinker I seek to study the relative intellectual openness of his world, not to promote its tolerant image. From the religious point of view, this world presented what Thomas Burman, in his study of the Christians in Islamic Spain, judiciously called “pluralistic circumstances.”<sup>21</sup> Whether or not these pluralistic circumstances also entailed religious tolerance is a different issue, which will be discussed in its proper context.<sup>22</sup>

### MAIMONIDES AS A MEDITERRANEAN THINKER

Like Braudel, Goitein was interested in human rather than in physical geography. Although the bulk of his *Mediterranean Society* deals with social and economic history, already in the introduction to this work Goitein clearly defined the focus of his interest: “The subject that interests us most: the mind of the Geniza people, the things they believed in and stood for.”<sup>23</sup> In its fifth and last volume, titled *The Individual*, Goitein included portraits of seven prominent intellectuals, as they emerge from their own writings as well as from the documents of the Geniza. Indeed, Goitein’s original intention was to dedicate the last two volumes of his work to what he called “Mediterranean people,” the individuals whose mind and intellectual creativity were shaped by the Mediterranean society in which they lived.

One should note that the Mediterranean basin did not provide group identity to its inhabitants. In all likelihood none of the persons described by Goitein as “Mediterranean” would have chosen this description for himself, and the same holds true for Maimonides. Born in Cordoba, he

<sup>19</sup>A down-to-earth rendering of what the term intends to convey is given by L. P. Harvey, *Muslims in Spain: 1500 to 1614* (Chicago and London, 2005), 44. Harvey sums it up as “the necessary live-and-let-live of the Iberian Peninsula in the days before the keys of the Alhambra were handed over in January 1492.” On the contemporary, often politically loaded usage of this and related terms, see H. D. Aidi, “The Interference of al-Andalus: Spain, Islam, and the West,” *Social Text* 87 (2006): 67–88, esp. 70 and 78.

<sup>20</sup>See, for instance, M. R. Menocal, *The Ornament of the World: How Muslims, Jews, and Christians Created a Culture of Tolerance in Medieval Spain* (Boston, 2002).

<sup>21</sup>T. E. Burman, *Religious Polemic and the Intellectual History of the Mozarabs, c.1050–1200* (Leiden and New York, 1994), 2.

<sup>22</sup>See chap. 3, below.

<sup>23</sup>Goitein, *A Mediterranean Society*, 1: 82.

saw himself throughout his life as an Andalusian, and identified himself as such by signing his name in Hebrew as “Moshe ben Maimon *ha-Sefaradi*” (“the Spaniard,” or, in less anachronistic terms, “al-Andalusī”).<sup>24</sup> For that reason, it probably would never have occurred to me to describe Maimonides as “a Mediterranean thinker” were it not for Goitein’s insistence on calling the Geniza society “Mediterranean.”

In so far as my choice of calling Maimonides “a Mediterranean thinker” depends on Goitein, it is open to all the criticisms of Mediterraneanism mentioned above. In the case of Maimonides’ thought, however, the term is appropriate in ways that do not apply to the society as a whole. Maimonides’ life circled the Mediterranean basin. The cultures that fed into his thought were, by and large, those of the wider Mediterranean littoral. Those cultures that came from outside this region reached him only to the extent that they were translated into Arabic and thus became part and parcel of the culture of the Islamic Mediterranean.

Furthermore, in contradistinction to the historians who, in choosing this term, have sought to underline the Mediterranean’s distinctive unity, I employ it precisely in order to highlight the diversity within it. Maimonides is a Mediterranean thinker in the sense that he is more than a Jewish thinker, or more than an Islamic philosopher (that is to say, a philosopher pertaining to the world of Islam).<sup>25</sup> In modern parlance, he could perhaps be called “cosmopolitan,” that is, a person who belongs to more than one of the subcultures that together form the world in which he lives. This last term grates, however, because of its crude anachronism as well as because of its (equally anachronistic) secular overtones.

The personal life-cycle of Moses Maimonides remained close to the shores of the Mediterranean, but the main events that affected his life occurred

<sup>24</sup>J. Blau, “‘At Our Place in al-Andalus,’ ‘At Our Place in the Maghreb,’” in J. L. Kraemer, ed., *Perspectives on Maimonides: Philosophical and Historical Studies* (Oxford, 1991), 293–94; G. Anidjar, “Our Place in al-Andalus”: *Kabbalah, Philosophy, Literature in Arab Jewish Letters* (Stanford, 2002). See, for instance, Maimonides, *On Asthma*, 21–22, where the need to prescribe dietary instructions give Maimonides the excuse to recall with nostalgia the tastes of the dishes of the Maghreb and al-Andalus. Regarding the philosophical tradition, see also chap. 4, note 52, below.

<sup>25</sup>On the term “Islamic,” see J. L. Kraemer, “The Islamic Context of Medieval Jewish Philosophy,” in D. H. Frank and O. Leaman, eds., *The Cambridge Companion to Medieval Jewish Philosophy* (Cambridge, 2003), 62 and note 5; O. Leaman, “Introduction,” in Seyyed Hossein Nasr and O. Leaman, eds., *History of Islamic Philosophy* (London and New York, 1996), 1–5; H. Ben-Shammai, “Maimonides and Creation *Ex Nihilo* in the Tradition of Islamic Philosophy,” in C. del Valle et al., eds., *Maimónides y su época* (Madrid, 2007), 103. Throughout the present book, I use “Muslim” to denote that which belongs specifically to the religion of Islam or to the believers of that religion, whereas “Islamic” denotes the culture developed in the world of Islam, by Muslims as well as by others.

in a much larger area, stretching from the Iberian peninsula to the Indian subcontinent.<sup>26</sup> The Islamic polity that Maimonides encountered during his lifetime was not made of one cloth, and his life was spent in no less than four major political entities:

1. From his birth in 1138 in Cordoba until 1148, Maimonides lived under the rule of the Berber dynasty of the *Murābiṭūn* (or Almoravids, according to their Latinized name) in al-Andalus. In the Cordoba of his childhood, ruled by the Almoravids, the Jewish (and Christian) communities were relatively protected, as decreed by Muslim law.<sup>27</sup>

2. In 1148 Cordoba was captured by another Berber dynasty, that of the *Muwaḥḥidūn* (or Almohads), whose highly idiosyncratic interpretation of Muslim law deprived the religious minorities of their traditional protected status. Almohad persecution forced Maimonides' family out of Cordoba, and their whereabouts in the following few years are unclear; they may have taken refuge in northern, Christian Spain (as others, like the Jewish philosopher Abraham Ibn Daud, did), or they may have spent some time in Seville.<sup>28</sup> At any rate, in 1160, when Maimonides was in his early twenties, the family moved to Fez, close to the North African capital of the Almohads, where it remained for about five years.<sup>29</sup>

3. Around 1165 the family left Fez for Palestine, which was then controlled by the Crusaders, and then finally settled down in Fāṭimid Egypt.<sup>30</sup> There, Maimonides became involved in the trade of precious stones, but

<sup>26</sup>For a detailed description of Maimonides' biography, see Davidson, *Moses Maimonides*, esp. chap. 1; J. L. Kraemer, "Moses Maimonides: An Intellectual Portrait," in K. Seeskin, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Maimonides* (Cambridge, 2005), 10–57; idem, *Maimonides: The Life and World of One of Civilization's Greatest Minds*.

<sup>27</sup>On the status of the minorities in Islam, see A. Fattal, *Le statut légal des non-musulmans en pays d'Islam* (Beirut, 1995); Y. Friedmann, *Tolerance and Coercion in Islam: Interfaith Relations in the Muslim Tradition* (Cambridge and New York, 2003). On their status in the *Maghreb*, see H. R. Idris, "Les tributaires en occident musulman médiéval d'après le 'Mī'yār' d'al-Wanṣarīsi," in P. Salmon, ed., *Mélanges d'islamologie: Volume dédié à la mémoire d'Armand Abel par ses collègues, ses élèves et ses amis* (Leiden, 1974), 172–96.

<sup>28</sup>See Maimonides' reference to the ships loading oil at Seville and sailing on the Guadalquivir to Alexandria; *Responsa* 2: 576. See also his autobiographical note in *Guide* 2.9 (*Dalāla*, 187; Pines, 269), according to which he has met the son of Ibn al-Aflaḥ of Seville. There is, however, no positive proof for the assertion that he sojourned all this time (about twelve years) in southern Spain; compare Bos's "Translator's Introduction," in Maimonides, *Medical Aphorisms*, xix.

<sup>29</sup>The question of how they lived, as forced converts, under the Almohads is connected to the issue of forced conversions, on which see chap. 3, below.

<sup>30</sup>S.V. Fāṭimids, M. Canard, *EI*, 2: 850–62; see also M. Ben-Sasson, "Maimonides in Egypt: The First Stage," *Maimonidean Studies* 2 (1991): 3–30; J. L. Kraemer, "Maimonides' Intellectual Milieu in Cairo," in T. Lévy and R. Rashed, eds., *Maimonide: philosophe et savant* (Leuven, 2004), 1–37.

he was mainly supported by his brother David, until David's drowning in the Indian Ocean.<sup>31</sup>

4. Egypt was conquered by the Ayyūbids in 1171, and it is under their rule that Maimonides lived until his death in 1204.<sup>32</sup> The premature death of his brother forced Maimonides to seek another source of income, and he worked as a court-physician to the Ayyūbids in Fustāt (old Cairo).

Each of these political entities is closely associated with a specific school of Muslim law (*madhhab*), and, to some extent, it is also associated with a particular school of thought. The Almoravids are identified with Mālikī law, and typically (or stereotypically) described as opposed to rational speculation in all its forms. An extreme manifestation of this attitude was the public burning of the books of Abū Hāmid al-Ghazālī (d. 1111) in the Maghreb in 1109, during the reign of 'Alī b. Yūsuf b. Tāshufīn (d. 1143).<sup>33</sup>

Like the Almoravids, the Ayyūbids were Sunni Muslims; they, however, followed Shāfi'ite law, and adopted Ash'arite *kalām* or speculative theology.<sup>34</sup>

The Fāṭimids, Ismā'īlī Shi'ites, developed their own system of jurisprudence, based on Qāḍī al-Nu'mān's "Pillars of Islam." The Ismā'īlī "external" law, accessible to all people, served as the legal basis for daily life, while its "internal" part was preached, on different levels, in the Friday *Majālis* and to the initiates. Their theology was shaped by a thorough adoption of Neoplatonic philosophy.<sup>35</sup>

And last, the Almohads were Sunni Muslims who developed their own legal system, although this system cannot properly be called a school.<sup>36</sup>

<sup>31</sup>See IQ, 318; S. D. Goitein, *Letters of Medieval Jewish Traders* (Princeton, 1974), 207–8.

<sup>32</sup>On the Ayyūbids, see Cl. Cahen, *EI*, 1: 796–807 (s.v.). On Maimonides' life in Ayyūbid Egypt, see M. R. Cohen, "Maimonides' Egypt," in E. L. Ormsby, ed., *Moses Maimonides and His Time* (Washington, 1989), 21–34; J. Drory, "The Early Decades of Ayyūbid Rule," in Kraemer, *Perspectives on Maimonides*, 295–302; A. S. Ehrenkretz, "Saladin's Egypt and Maimonides," in Kraemer, *Perspectives on Maimonides*, 303–7; M. Winter, "Saladin's Religious Personality, Policy and Image," in Kraemer, *Perspectives on Maimonides*, 309–22.

<sup>33</sup>See P. Chalmeta, "The Almoravids in Spain," in *EI*, 7: 589–91, (s.v. *Al-Murābiṭūn*); Jamil M. Abun Nasr, *A History of the Maghrib in the Islamic Period* (Cambridge, 1987), 84. On the opposition to al-Ghazālī under the Almoravids, see K. Garden, *Al-Ghazālī's Contested Revival: "Iḥyā' 'ulūm al-dīn" and Its Critics in Khorasan and the Maghrib* (Ph.D. diss., University of Chicago, 2005), 155–89.

<sup>34</sup>See J. Drory, "The Early Decades of Ayyūbid Rule," esp. 296.

<sup>35</sup>See, for example, F. Daftary, *The Ismā'īlis—Their History and Doctrines* (Cambridge, 1990), esp. 144–255; H. Halm, *The Fatimids and Their Traditions of Learning* (London, 1997), esp. 28, 30–45. On their possible influence on Maimonides, see chap. 4, note 61, below.

<sup>36</sup>See, for example, M. Fierro, "The Legal Policies of the Almohad Caliphs and Ibn Rushd's *Bidāyat al-Muṭṭabid*," *Journal of Islamic Studies* 10 (1999): 226–48.

Their jurisprudence, based on Mālikī law, reveals some affinity with the Zāhirī school (although it cannot be identified as Zāhirī).<sup>37</sup> They also developed their own particular theologico-philosophical stance. Regarding theology, they are associated mostly with Ghazālī (that is, with Ash‘arite *kalām*), but some of the Arab historiographers also associate them with the Mu‘tazila school of *kalām*, while others connect them (probably with much exaggeration) to Aristotelian philosophy.<sup>38</sup>

Still wider than the parameters of Maimonides’ biography are the geographical parameters outlined by his literary output. In particular, his correspondence demonstrates a concern with a Jewish society that stretched across the cultural Mediterranean world, from southern France (known in medieval Jewish texts as “Provence”) to Baghdad, and as far south as the Yemen. It seems that in 1174 Maimonides was appointed head of the Jewish community of Cairo (*ra’īs al-yahūd*), an appointment that gave an official administrative frame to his authority among the Jews of Egypt as well as over the Jewish communities of Palestine and the Yemen.<sup>39</sup>

The particular, often difficult circumstances of his life—exile, forced conversion to Islam, and years of wandering in search of a safe haven—gave Maimonides opportunities to encounter a particularly variegated list of political systems, cultural trends, and systems of thought. It would be incorrect, however, to perceive his intellectual breadth only as an inadvertent result of his being what John Matthews has called “an involuntary traveler.”<sup>40</sup> His extraordinary personality and his insatiable intellectual curiosity drove him to make full and conscious use of life’s opportunities.

In the above-mentioned discussions regarding the usefulness of the term “Mediterranean,” historians ponder the existence of a cultural continuity in the Mediterranean region. For Maimonides, this continuity seems to have been an undisputed fact. Some of the philosophical and religious traditions that shaped Maimonides’ thought belonged to his contemporary world, where they all existed side by side and in continuous exchange and debate. Other formative traditions were part of the past history of

<sup>37</sup>On the Zāhirīs, see I. Goldziher, *The Zāhirīs: Their Doctrine and Their History: A Contribution to the History of Islamic Theology*, trans. W. Behn (Leiden, 1971).

<sup>38</sup>Cf. M. Fletcher, “Ibn Tūmart’s Teachers: The Relationship with al-Ghazālī,” *Al-Qantara* 18 (1997): 305–30.; M. Geoffroy, “L’almohadisme théologique d’Averroès (Ibn Rushd),” *Archives d’Histoire Doctrinale et Littéraire du Moyen Age* 66 (1999): 9–47; and see chap. 3, below.

<sup>39</sup>See chap. 2, note 57, below.

<sup>40</sup>John F. Matthews, “Hostages, Philosophers, Pilgrims, and the Diffusion of Ideas in the Late Roman Mediterranean and Near East,” in F. M. Clover and R. S. Humphreys, eds., *Tradition and Innovation in Late Antiquity* (London, 1989), 29.

the Mediterranean, where they succeeded one another, the latecomers conversing with previous ones, transmitting their ideas, polemicizing with them and building on their legacy. Whereas some medieval thinkers tried to ignore past layers of this continuum and to silence them, Maimonides stands out as an avid archaeologist of ideas, a passionate advocate for keeping the memory of the past alive and for the dialectic discourse with this memory.

In an oft-quoted passage in his *Commentary on the Mishnah*, Maimonides draws his readers' attention to his lack of originality in this text. The Mishnaic tractate *Avot* ("The Fathers") is a collection of the Sages' aphorisms, to the commentary on which Maimonides appends an introduction on ethics, known as "Eight Chapters." Introducing this ethical preamble, Maimonides notes the fact that people tend to judge a saying by its author rather than by its contents. The uninitiated is especially prone to reject anything attributed to a suspicious authority. Maimonides adjusted his style of writing to his audience, and since he expected to have the philosophically uninitiated among the readers of his *Commentary on the Mishnah*, he refrained in this text from quoting his philosophical sources in detail.<sup>41</sup> Nevertheless, he could not forgo the opportunity to indicate these sources in a general way, and to admonish:

Know that what I say in these Chapters . . . does not represent ideas which I invented of my own accord, nor original interpretations. Rather, they are ideas gleaned from what the Sages say—in the *Midrashim*, in the Talmud and elsewhere in their compositions—from what the philosophers, both ancient and modern, say; as well as from the compositions of many other people: and you should listen to the truth, whoever may have said it.<sup>42</sup>

Notwithstanding the texts' brevity, the *Commentary* points unambiguously to the identity of the potentially suspect sources: non-Jewish philosophers, both ancient (that is to say, Hellenistic), and modern (that is

<sup>41</sup>By contrast, in his medical writings (and unlike most of his colleagues) he provides references to the sources he quotes; see *Medical Aphorisms*, xxiv–xxv; E. Lieber, "The Medical Works of Maimonides: A Reappraisal," in F. Rosner and S. S. Kottak, eds., *Moses Maimonides: Physician, Scientist, and Philosopher* (North Vale, N.J., 1993), 20.

<sup>42</sup>"*Isma' al-haqq mi-man qālahu*" (literally, "Listen to the truth from he who says it," that is, regardless of the identity of the speaker. See *Commentary on the Mishnah, Neziqin*, 372–73; *The Eight Chapters of Maimonides on Ethics (Shemonah Perakim): A Psychological and Ethical Treatise*, ed. and trans. Joseph I. Gorfinkle (New York, 1966), 6, and cf. his translation, 35–36; R. L. Weiss and Ch. E. Butterworth, *Ethical Writings of Maimonides* (New York, 1975), 60; *Maimonide, Traité d'éthique—"Huit chapitres,"* trans. R. Brague (Paris, 2001), 31–33.

to say, Muslims). The need to justify the use of Greek philosophy was felt by other medieval philosophers. For instance, another, not less famous “apologia” can be seen in the words of philosopher al-Kindī (d. 870), who admonishes the Caliph al-Mu‘taṣim, attributing to Aristotle the following saying: “We ought not to be ashamed of appreciating the truth and of acquiring it wherever it comes from, even if it comes from races distant and nations different from us. For the seeker of truth nothing takes precedence over the truth.”<sup>43</sup>

Maimonides’ admonition thus follows an established philosophical tradition, and one has no difficulty in assuming that he might even have read Kindī. It is, however, less expected to find in his formulation the imprint of another, nonphilosophical source. Kindī’s contemporary Ibn Qutayba (d. 889), a traditional Muslim scholar, wrote an anthology of edifying material for the state secretaries, in the introduction to which we find him quoting the Prophet Muhammad’s learned cousin, Ibn ‘Abbās, who had said: “Take wisdom from whomever you may hear it, for wisdom can come from the non-wise.”<sup>44</sup> As the examples presented above indicate, the idea itself was, by that time, a commonplace among the learned, and Jewish scholars were no exception. It is interesting to note, however, that Maimonides does not support this idea with rabbinic prooftexts, as one could expect him to do in an introduction to a commentary on a Mishnaic text. The similarity of Maimonides’ admonition, in both content and structure, to Ibn ‘Abbās’s saying raises the possibility that he was familiar with it. If so, there would be a shade of irony in his allusion to a Muslim tradition in the advice “to listen to the truth, *whoever* may have said it.” Whether or not Maimonides was indeed familiar (through Ibn Qutayba or through another source) with Ibn ‘Abbās’s formulation of this idea is less significant than the idea they both espouse: the clearly stated methodological principle of reaching out for knowledge, whatever its source might have been.

<sup>43</sup>A.L. Ivry, *Al-Kindī’s Metaphysics* (Albany, 1974), 58; *Kitāb al-Kindī ilā al-Mu‘taṣim bi’llāh fi’l-falsafa al-ūlā*, in *Œuvres philosophiques et scientifiques d’al-Kindī*, ed. R. Rashed and J. Jolivet, vol. 2, *Métaphysique et cosmologie* (Leiden, 1998), 13; cf. D. Gutas, *Greek Thought, Arabic Culture: the Graeco-Arabic Translation Movement in Baghdad and Early ‘Abbāsīd Society (2nd–4th/8th–10th centuries)*, (London and New York, 1998), 158–59; S. Stroumsa, “Philosophy as Wisdom: On the Christians’ Role in the Translation of Philosophical Material to Arabic,” in H. Ben-Shammai et al., eds., *Exchange and Transmission across Cultural Boundaries: Philosophy and Science in the Mediterranean (Proceedings of a Workshop in Memory of Prof. Shlomo Pines: the Institute for Advanced Studies, Jerusalem (28 February–2 March 2005))* (Jerusalem, forthcoming).

<sup>44</sup>Ibn Qutayba, *Uyūn al-akhbār*, ed. C. Brockelmann (Berlin, 1900), 11, lines 5–7. Cf. Gutas, *Greek Thought*, 159; Brague, *Māimonide, Traité d’éthique*, 32, note 25.

## HORIZONS

Like Goitein's Mediterranean society, Maimonides' cultural Mediterranean encompassed the legacy of other religious communities. His world included the cultures of the various communities in the Mediterranean basin of his days: Muslims, Jews, and Christians, with their various denominations and sectarian disagreements. He read their books, including their religious scholarship. He was familiar with their philosophical and religious traditions, and with the mental world, the *imaginaire*, of both educated and simple people. His world also included past and extinct communities, previous layers of the Mediterranean palimpsest, whose imprints were left in Arabic literature. Maimonides fully lived and breathed the culture of his time, including the impact of contemporary culture, as well as sediments of previous cultures like the "Sabians." In Arabic medieval literature, the Sabians are presented as the heirs of ancient paganism, the practitioners of ancient occult sciences as well as the transmitters of philosophy. They are usually associated with the area of Ḥarrān, but most of the books cited by Maimonides were works that circulated in his native Andalus and in North Africa. Maimonides believed that these writings consisted in Arabic translations of authentic ancient Egyptian and Mesopotamian texts, and he wholeheartedly, consciously, and repeatedly admonished his disciple to study them.<sup>45</sup> The integration of this multilayered, multifaceted Mediterranean legacy into all his works is at the core of Maimonides' originality in all his endeavors. It is the prism through which all his works, in all domains, should be read, and we would be missing his originality by examining his activity according to neatly arranged fields.

An exemplary case can be seen in Maimonides' writings on Jewish law (*halacha*), the modern study of which is focused largely on his Hebrew works, and remains the domain of scholars of Judaism. The prevalent tendency in this field is to view Maimonides as one link in the unbroken chain of Rabbinic scholars. The assumption is therefore that, in halachic matters, his source of inspiration must have been solely his predecessors, previous halachic authorities. This approach leaves many of Maimonides' legal innovations unexplained. An integrative approach, on the other hand, would treat all of Maimonides' readings and encounters, Jewish or

<sup>45</sup>See *Guide* 3.29 (and chap. 4, below), but compare *Mishneh Torah*, *Hilkhot avodat kokhavim* 2:2: "Idolaters have composed many books about their cult . . . ; God has commanded us not to read these books at all." Maimonides explicitly notes the distinction between his disciple, who is well prepared for coping with "the fables of the Sabians and the ravings of the Chasdeans and Chaldeans," and other potential readers; see *Guide* 3.29 (*Dalāla*, 380:5–9; Pines, 520).

otherwise, as relevant, indeed essential, for understanding his legal thought. Maimonides' theory of religion was profoundly affected by his uncensored reading in what he believed to be authentic ancient pagan writings. His interpretation of biblical precepts was the result of discoveries he believed himself to have made in the course of these readings. Furthermore, his legal methodology was conditioned by his immersion in the Almohad society, and by his encounter with Muslim law (*fiqh*) in general and with Almohad law in particular. To fully understand Maimonides' legal writings and to duly appreciate his tremendous contribution to the development of Jewish law, all these elements, seemingly external to the Jewish legacy, must be taken into account.

What holds true for *halacha*, the supposedly exclusive domain of Jewish life, is even truer in other domains: political thought, philosophy, science. As succinctly stated by Pines, "Maimonides considered that philosophy transcended religious or national distinctions" and that "[q]ua philosopher he had the possibility to consider Judaism from the outside."<sup>46</sup> The Greek philosophical tradition, as interpreted and elaborated by philosophers from the Islamic East and from al-Andalus, formed the foundation of his philosophical world, and his writings reflect the various shades and nuances that this philosophy acquired over the centuries. Maimonides is commonly categorized as a *faḥḥāṣūf*, that is, an Aristotelian philosopher, and indeed, he himself indicates in various ways his identification with the legacy of the Aristotelian school, or *falsafa*. In his correspondence with his disciple Joseph Ibn Shim'on (d. 1226) and with Samuel Ibn Tibbon (d. 1230), the Hebrew translator of the *Guide of the Perplexed*, Maimonides gives them instructions for their reading, and indicates to them the authoritative texts of Aristotle and his commentators.<sup>47</sup> He gives precedence to Aristotle over his teacher Plato, but he warns his translator not to attempt to read Aristotle alone, and insists that Aristotle must be read together with his authoritative commentators: Alexander of Aphrodisias (early third century), Themistius (d. ca. 387) or Ibn Rushd (Latin, Averroes, d. 1198). These instructions reflect the time-honored school curriculum, as developed in Alexandria and Baghdad, and further cultivated in al-Andalus.<sup>48</sup> In another instance he takes pains, almost pedantically, to note his own credentials: he read texts under the guidance of a pupil of one of the contemporary masters

<sup>46</sup>Pines, "Translator's Introduction," *Guide*, cxxxiv.

<sup>47</sup>See A. Marx, "Texts by and about Maimonides," *JQR* n.s. 25 (1934–35): 374–81; on this letter, see chap. 2, below. See also Pines, "Translator's Introduction"; *Epistles*, 552–54.

<sup>48</sup>See *Epistles*, 552; and see A. Guidi, A. "L'obscurité intentionnelle du philosophe: thèmes néoplatoniciens et Farabiens chez Maïmonide," *Revue des études juives* 166 (2007): 129–45.

of philosophy, Ibn Bājja (d. 1138), and he met the son of the astronomer Ibn al-Aflāḥ (d. ca. 1150).<sup>49</sup> The urge to declare his personal contacts with these masters is another indication of Maimonides' identification with the school tradition. This identification with a school of thought is quite atypical for Jewish medieval thinkers, who, although often classified by modern scholars as belonging to a certain school, do not identify explicitly as followers of that school (for example, by explicit quotations of the canonical works of the school), nor are they quoted in the school's listing of its followers.<sup>50</sup>

The Arabic Aristotelian tradition blended Platonic political philosophy and Plotinian metaphysics with the logic and physics of Aristotle. This blend reflects the metamorphosis of the school tradition as it traveled—through the efforts of Zoroastrian, Christian, and Muslim translators—from Athens to Alexandria, Nisibis, Gundishapur, and Baghdad, and was translated from Greek to Syriac, Persian, and Arabic.

Maimonides' philosophical frame of reference faithfully reflects this legacy. In the same letter to Samuel Ibn Tibbon, Maimonides refers to the great luminaries of philosophy, and although he probably did not intend this letter to offer a list of recommended readings, it mirrors his perception of the landmarks of philosophy. This letter, complemented by occasional remarks culled from Maimonides' other writings, presents a picture of a well-stocked philosophical bookshelf. The basis of this bookshelf is Greek philosophy: first and foremost Aristotle, while Plato, too, is mentioned, although with a certain reluctance and reserve. The philosophical tradition of Late Antiquity is represented by Alexander of Aphrodisias and Themistius, whose works were already part of the teaching in Alexandria. Not surprisingly, the name of Plotinus is never mentioned by Maimonides; this omission is in line with the Arab Aristotelian tradition, where a paraphrase of Plotinus's *Enneads* circulated under the title "The Theology of Aristotle" or as the sayings of "the Greek Sage." The role of the Christians in the transmission of Aristotelianism is also acknowledged by Maimonides, although he had little respect for the Christian theologians as philosophers. Both the sixth-century Alexandrian Christian philosopher John Philoponus and the tenth-century Christian Arab philosopher Yaḥyā b. 'Adī receive from him only pejorative remarks.

<sup>49</sup> *Guide* 2.9 (*Dalāla*, 187; Pines, 269); and see J. Kraemer, "Maimonides and the Spanish Aristotelian Tradition," in M. M. Meyerson and E. D. English, eds., *Christians, Muslims and Jews in Medieval and Early Modern Spain—Interaction and Cultural Change* (Notre Dame, Ind., 1999), 40–68. On the possible circumstances of these meetings, see note 28, above.

<sup>50</sup> See S. Stroumsa, "The Muslim Context of Medieval Jewish Philosophy," in S. Nadler and T. Rudavsky, eds., *The Cambridge History of Jewish Philosophy: From Antiquity through the Seventeenth Century* (Cambridge, 2009), 39–59.

The final layer constituting Maimonides' philosophical heritage is that of the Arab-Muslim world: the tenth-century thinker Abū Naṣr al-Fārābī, who lived in Baghdad, Aleppo, and Damascus (d. 951); Ibn Sīnā (Latin, Avicenna, d. 1037), who lived in Iran; and the twelfth-century Andalusian philosophers Ibn Bājjā, Ibn Ṭufayl (d. 1185), and Averroes.

Sciences—astronomy, medicine, and mathematics—were part and parcel of the philosopher's education, and in Maimonides' references to the sciences we find the same multilayered legacy revealed in his philosophy, beginning with the Stagirite and Hippocrates, through the Hellenistic culture of Late Antiquity (Ptolemy and Galen), to the “modern” Muslim contributions from the East—the tenth-century freethinker Abū-Bakr al-Rāzī (the Latin Rhazes)—and from the West (Ibn al-Aflāḥ).

In addition to this philosophical and scientific “core curriculum,” Maimonides' intellectual world included other philosophical traditions, which, although he rejected them, undoubtedly had a profound influence on his thought. Maimonides boasts of his vast reading, including the study of the so-called Sabian literature. He derides the Sabian lore of magic, alchemy, and astronomy, which he considered to be nothing but “ravings,” the pejorative term he employed to denote their pseudo-science. Nevertheless, he took great pains to collect their books and to study them, before setting off to refute their claims.<sup>51</sup>

The richness and diversity that is unveiled in examining the philosophical tradition that Maimonides inherited from his predecessors are further confirmed and enriched when we examine the profile of his contemporaneous culture. Al-Andalus and the Maghreb were ruled by the Almohads, Sunni Muslims with a rather idiosyncratic theology and law. One of their (still not fully understood) idiosyncrasies involved the forced conversion of what used to be “protected minorities” (*ahl al-dhimma*) and it seems probable that under this law Maimonides' family had to convert (albeit only overtly) to Islam. According to Muslim sources, the Almohads suspected the external nature of such forced conversions. Nevertheless, they expected putative converts to conform to Muslim law and to educate their children accordingly. With this background, it is not surprising to find in Maimonides' theological and legal writings some innovative ideas, which may well reflect the innovations of what has been called the “Almohad revolution.”<sup>52</sup>

When Maimonides finally arrived in Egypt, around 1165, it was still ruled by the Fāṭimids. Like other Ismā'īlī Shī'ites, the Fāṭimids adopted Neoplatonic philosophy as part of their religious doctrine. The Ismā'īlī predilection for the occult sciences received from Maimonides the same

<sup>51</sup>See chap. 4, below.

<sup>52</sup>See chap. 3, below.

harsh remarks as did Sabian science. He also squarely rejected their allegorical hermeneutics.<sup>53</sup> Nevertheless, their particular brand of Neoplatonism seems to have left its mark on his own philosophy, either directly or through the works of Jewish Neoplatonists. As examples of such influence one may cite Maimonides' concept of divine volition,<sup>54</sup> or his use of the concept of the two graded "intentions" as part of the divine economy of salvation.<sup>55</sup>

Maimonides' Neoplatonism also reflects the impact of Sufism (that is, Islamic mysticism). By the twelfth century, largely owing to the impact of Ghazālī, the influence of Sufism had become widespread across the Mediterranean, from Khorasān to al-Andalus. Already in Maimonides' *Guide of the Perplexed*, shaped by Neoplatonized Aristotelianism, one can detect strong mystical overtones.<sup>56</sup> But it remained to Maimonides' descendants to cultivate and develop the Jewish-Sufi trend, and to establish a pietistic, mystical school in Egypt.<sup>57</sup>

In 1171 Egypt was conquered by the Ayyūbids, Sunni Muslims who had adopted strict Ash'arite theology. Maimonides was very familiar with the intricacies of Islamic theology (*kalām*), and is known to have participated in theological discussions with Muslims.<sup>58</sup> But he had little respect for the *kalām*, both in its earlier Mu'tazilite form and in its contemporary dominant Ash'arite version. In the former case, the Jewish context may explain the vehemence of Maimonides' reaction: during the ninth and early tenth centuries, the Geonim (the heads of the *Yeshivot*, or talmudic schools, of Baghdad) had been greatly influenced by Mu'tazilite *kalām*. This holds true also for the Karaite Jews, whose intellectual center was in Jerusalem, and who had practically adopted the theology of the Baṣra school of the Mu'tazila. In Maimonides' lifetime, the intellectual challenge of the Karaites had become much less of a threat for the Rabbanite community, and Baghdad was no longer the undisputed center of the Jewish world. Nevertheless, *kalām* continued to play an important role in Jewish intellectual discourse.

<sup>53</sup>See *Guide* 2.25 (*Dalāla*, 229:25–26; Pines, 328); and see chap. 5, *apud* note 117, below.

<sup>54</sup>As argued by A. L. Ivry, "Neoplatonic Currents in Maimonides' Thought," in Kraemer, *Perspectives on Maimonides*, 115–40.

<sup>55</sup>See chap. 4, *apud* notes 57–59, below.

<sup>56</sup>See, for instance, D. R. Blumenthal, "Maimonides: Prayer, Worship and Mysticism," in D. R. Blumenthal, ed., *Approaches to Judaism in Medieval Times*, vol. 3 (Atlanta, 1988).

<sup>57</sup>See P. Fenton, *Obadiah ben Abraham Maimonides: The Treatise of the Pool=al-Maqāla al-Hawḍiyya* (London, 1981); *ibid.*, *Deux traités de mystique juive: Obadyah b. Abraham b. Moïse Maïmonide (Le traité du puits=al-Maqāla al-Hawḍiyya); David b. Josué, dernier des Maïmonides (Le guide du détachement=al-Murshid ilā t-Tafarrud)* (Lagrasse, 1987).

<sup>58</sup>See S. D. Goitein, "The Moses Maimonides—Ibn Sanā' al-Mulḳ Circle (a Deathbed Declaration from March 1182)," in M. Sharon, ed., *Studies in Islamic History and Civilization, in Honour of Professor David Ayalon* (Jerusalem, 1986), 399–405.

The last few years of Maimonides' life were troubled by an ongoing controversy with the Gaon of Baghdad, Samuel ben 'Eli. The main issue of the controversy was theological: the resurrection of the dead and its meaning. Characteristically, the discussion meandered between various bodies of texts, changing methods according to the context. On both sides, biblical and Rabbinic quotations were brought to bear, employing commonly used exegetical techniques. Both sides also quoted the philosophers: the Muslim Avicenna and the Jewish philosopher Abū al-Barakāt al-Baghdādī (d. ca. 1164), the use of whose names reflect the culture of the educated elite. But it was mainly *kalām* arguments that provided the Gaon with the necessary intellectual varnish. From the testimony of Maimonides' disciple Joseph Ibn Shim'on we know that the Gaon also introduced into the discussion the culture of the common people: divination techniques that were an integral and important part of their religiosity.<sup>59</sup> This kind of popular religiosity was strongly criticized by Maimonides. He regarded it as superstitious, and his aversion to it is expressed not only in his rejection of its practical applications, but also in his scornful criticism of popular sermons. Nevertheless, this popular culture, which, just like the philosophers' highbrow culture, crossed religious boundaries, was an integral part of Mediterranean culture, and Maimonides' *responsa* testify to the fact that these practices were a fact with which he had to contend.<sup>60</sup>

#### TRANSFORMATIONS IN THE JEWISH WORLD

Maimonides' intellectual horizons were restricted neither by his time and place nor by his religious denomination. Nevertheless, the center of his intellectual endeavor was undoubtedly the Jewish world. During his lifetime, the Jewish community underwent several significant changes. As mentioned above, Maimonides' most famous controversy with the Gaon revolved around the issue of the resurrection of the dead. Other disputed issues regarded some of Maimonides' rulings in his *Mishneh Torah*. The subtext of the controversy, however, was neither theological nor legal, but political. As mentioned above, twelfth-century Baghdad was no longer the center of hegemony for Jewish communities. With Maimonides' stature, Egypt overshadowed Baghdad, and the Gaon was fighting to preserve his authority.<sup>61</sup>

<sup>59</sup>See chap. 6, note 62, below.

<sup>60</sup>See chap. 4, below.

<sup>61</sup>See chap. 6, below.

The real rising force, however, was not Egypt. Although Maimonides contributed significantly to the development of the Cairene Jewish center, the balance of forces was tipping more and more toward Europe: Catalonia, southern France, and Ashkenaz (northeastern France and the Rhine Valley). Although the rise of Christian Europe as a political power played a major role in this change, in the present context I shall focus on its narrow Jewish intellectual aspects.<sup>62</sup> In the tenth century, Jews from around the Mediterranean would turn to Baghdad for halachic rulings, and to Arabic culture for philosophy and science. The Jewish communities of southern France had been translating Judaeo-Arabic and Arabic works into Hebrew since the eleventh century. They corresponded with Maimonides, presented questions regarding the translation of his work, and he patiently answered their queries. In the following centuries, the “translation movement” from Arabic into Hebrew gained momentum, and eventually came to include much of the philosophical and scientific Arabic library. Through such translations, the world of Islamic science and philosophy was transferred to Italy, France, and Christian Spain. And it is through such translations, in fact, that European Jews became gradually independent of the knowledge and libraries of their co-religionists in Islamic countries. Maimonides, Avicenna, and Averroes were thus transplanted into non-Arabic, non-Islamic ground, where they continued to play a central role long after the decline of Mediterranean Islamic philosophy.

Like other Jews in his milieu, Maimonides’ language was Arabic, or, to be precise, Judaeo-Arabic.<sup>63</sup> He wrote in a relatively high register of middle-Arabic (that is to say, mixing high classical Arabic with the vernacular), laced with Hebrew words and citations and written in Hebrew characters. This was the language in which he wrote on all subject matters: philosophy, science, and *halacha*.<sup>64</sup> His choice of Hebrew characters was not intended to protect his writings from critical Muslim eyes, as

<sup>62</sup>This changing map of the Jewish world should of course be seen in the context of the transformations of the balance of power between Christian Europe and the Islamic Lands. The two processes, however, do not develop synchronically, and the question deserves to be studied separately.

<sup>63</sup>On written medieval Judaeo-Arabic, and on its relation to the spoken dialects, on the one hand, and classical Arabic, on the other, see J. Blau, *The Emergence and Linguistic Background of Judaeo-Arabic: a Study of the Origins of Middle Arabic* (Jerusalem, 1981), chap. 1; and see S. Hopkins, “The Languages of Maimonides,” in G. Tamer, ed., *The Trias of Maimonides: Jewish, Arabic and Ancient Cultures of Knowledge* (Berlin, 2005), 85–106. Compare George Saliba, *Islamic Science and the Making of the European Renaissance*, (Cambridge, Mass. and London, 2007).

<sup>64</sup>See Hopkins, “The Languages of Maimonides,” 97; and cf. Saliba, *Islamic Science and the Making of the European Renaissance*, 3, who wrongly assumes that for writing on Jewish law Maimonides chose Hebrew.

suggested by his contemporary Muslim scholar ‘Abd al-Laṭīf al-Baghdādī.<sup>65</sup> Quite rightly, Maimonides did not believe that the different script would prevent curious Muslims from getting to know the contents of his work. For this reason, when he was worried about the adverse repercussions that the dissemination of his work might cause, he urged his addressee to be discreet.<sup>66</sup> He wrote in Judaeo-Arabic even when polemicizing against Islam, pleading with his correspondents to be extremely careful in disseminating the work.<sup>67</sup> Writing in Judaeo-Arabic was for him the default option, from which he departed only when there was a specific reason to do so. His medical treatises, composed for his princely Muslim patrons, were probably copied into Arabic characters by a scribe.<sup>68</sup> And he wrote in Hebrew when the recipients knew only, or preferred, that language.<sup>69</sup> For writing the *Mishneh Torah* (redacted around 1178), Maimonides chose Mishnaic Hebrew, as a clear indication of his aspirations to follow the example of Rabbi Judah “the Prince.”<sup>70</sup>

His philosophical work, the *Guide of the Perplexed*, was thus written in Judaeo-Arabic, too. When, however, he was asked to translate it into Hebrew, he was happy for the suggestion that the book be translated, apologizing for his inability to do the work himself, and making excuses for having written the book in Arabic “in the language of Qedar, whose light had now dimmed—for I have dwelt in their tents.”<sup>71</sup> It is interesting to compare Maimonides’ patient cooperation with the translation of the *Guide* into Hebrew with his reaction concerning a request to translate the *Mishneh Torah* into Arabic. This last request was made by a certain Joseph Ibn Jābir, a Jewish merchant from Baghdad, who confessed his

<sup>65</sup>See IAU, 687; B. D. Lewis, “Jews and Judaism in Arab sources,” *Metsudab* 3–4 (1945): 176; and see Hopkins, “The Languages of Maimonides,” 91.

<sup>66</sup>See, for instance, *Epistles*, 298, and 311n5 (probably regarding the chapters of the *Guide* that criticize Muslim *kalām*).

<sup>67</sup>See “Epistle to Yemen,” *Epistles*, 112; A. I. Halkin, *Igeret Teman* (New York 1952); Davidson, *Moses Maimonides*, 487.

<sup>68</sup>See Davidson, *Moses Maimonides*, 434; G. Schwarb, “Die Rezeption Maimonides’ in christlich-arabischen Literature,” *Judaica* 63 (2007): 4, and note 12; Bos, *Maimonides on Asthma*, xxxix; and cf. M. Meyerhof, “The Medical Works of Maimonides,” in S. W. Baron, ed., *Essays on Maimonides: An Octocentennial Volume* (New York, 1941), 272; but cf. T. Y. Langermann, “Arabic Writings in Hebrew Manuscripts: A Preliminary Listing,” *Arabic Science and Philosophy* 6 (1996): 139; Bos, *Medical Aphorisms*, xxxi.

<sup>69</sup>As in his correspondence with the Jews of Southern France, or his response to Obadiah the proselyte; see *Epistles*, 233–41.

<sup>70</sup>And not just because Mishnaic Hebrew is more accessible, as Maimonides explains in his Introduction to the *Book of Commandments*. See also Hopkins, “The Languages of Maimonides,” 97–99, 101.

<sup>71</sup>“Epistle to Lunel,” *Epistles*, 558. I take the description of Qedar to be factual, although theoretically it may be a calque on the Arabic usage of past tense for blessings and cursing (in which case, one would translate, “Qedar, may its sun be dimmed”).

difficulty in reading Hebrew, and pleaded with Maimonides to translate his legal code into Arabic. Maimonides, who some thirty years previously had written his *Commentary on the Mishnah* in Judaeo-Arabic, now turned this request down kindly but firmly. In his justification for the refusal, he insisted on the importance of acquiring a good knowledge of the Hebrew language. Not only does he refuse to translate the *Mishneh Torah*, “for this will spoil its melody,” but he also informs his correspondent of his plans to translate into Hebrew both the *Commentary on the Mishnah* and the *Book of Commandments*.<sup>72</sup> One suspects, however, that Maimonides’ objection to an Arabic translation of his work reflects also the changing linguistic scene of the Jewish world. Indeed, on another occasion Maimonides expresses his regret at having written the *Book of Commandments* in Arabic, “since this is a book that everyone needs” (the implication being that “everyone’s” language is now Hebrew).<sup>73</sup> During Maimonides’ lifetime, Judaeo-Arabic had rapidly moved from being the almost universal lingua franca, for both daily communication and intellectual exchange among the Jewish communities around the Mediterranean (in its Geniza-defined borders), to becoming the specific language of the so called “oriental” Jewish communities. The shift in Maimonides’ linguistic preferences (from Judaeo-Arabic to Hebrew) reflects his awareness of these developments. By urging an interested, passably educated merchant to cultivate his Hebrew, Maimonides seems to respond to linguistic developments as a result of which, he realized, the Jews of Baghdad might find themselves cut off from the rest of the Jewish world.

The change that Maimonides detected was not merely linguistic: in a letter to the Jewish community of Lunel in southern France he gives a poignant overview of the Jewish world in the last years of his life.

Most large communities<sup>74</sup> are dead, the rest are moribund, and the remaining three or four places are ailing. In Palestine and the whole of Syria only a single city, Aleppo, has a few wise men who study the Torah, but they do not fully dedicate themselves to it. Only two

<sup>72</sup>*Epistles*, 409; on this correspondence, see chap. 4, note 126, and chap. 6, note 94, below. The *Commentary on the Mishnah* was translated into Hebrew during the thirteenth century; see Davidson, *Moses Maimonides*, 166. On the other hand, parts of the *Mishneh Torah* may also have been translated into Arabic: see G. Schwarb, “Die Rezeption Maimonides’ in der christlich-arabischen Literatur,” 3 and note 11; idem, “‘Ali Ibn Ṭaybughā’s Commentary on Maimonides’ *Mishneh Torah*, *Sefer Ha-Mada’*, *Hilkhot Yesodei Ha-Torah* 1–4: A Philosophical ‘Encyclopaedia’ of the 14th Century” (forthcoming). I wish to thank Gregor Schwarb for allowing me to read this article before publication.

<sup>73</sup>*Responsa*, 335; *Epistles*, 223; S. Rawidowicz, “Maimonides’ *Sefer Ha-mitswoth* and *Sefer Ha-madda’*,” *Metsudah* 3–4 (1945): 185 [Hebrew].

<sup>74</sup>literally: cities.

or three grains can be found in the whole of Babylon and Persia. In all the cities of Yemen and in all the Arab cities, a few people study the Talmud, but they do so only in a mercenary way, looking for gain. . . . The Jews who live in India do not know the scriptures, and their only religious mark is that they keep the Sabbath and circumcise their sons on the eighth day. In the Muslim Persian cities<sup>75</sup> they read the scriptures literally.<sup>76</sup> As to the cities in the Maghreb—we already know the decrees that befell them.<sup>77</sup> You, brothers, are our only [hope] for help.<sup>78</sup>

Not only the language, but also the content of the *Mishneh Torah* betrays Maimonides' awareness that times have changed. The book includes many rulings that one would not expect to find in a practical, everyday halachic guide book. The main explanation for the ambitious scope of the book is to be found in Maimonides' desire to replace the scattered and fragmented oral law with a single concise and comprehensive treatise. Nevertheless, it is noteworthy that Maimonides' idea of what belongs in such a compendium seems to follow the Provençal rather than the Andalusian model. The Jewish leaders of al-Andalus had indeed limited their halachic compositions to the practical needs of the community, such as contracts and dietary laws, whereas the center in Provence had developed a reputation for a scholarly theoretical interest.<sup>79</sup> The fact that Maimonides included in the *Mishneh Torah* the whole range of halachic lore, practical and not-so-practical, bespeaks his determination to present an authoritative learned work for the whole Jewish world. It testifies to his ability to realize the significance of the shift from the Judaeo-Arabic Mediterranean to the Hebrew-speaking Jewish world of Christian Europe, and to adjust to it.

#### MAIMONIDES AND SAADIA

This rapid panorama of Maimonides' activity gives a foretaste of his broad spectrum: Maimonides the philosopher, the erudite, the man of law, the leader of the community. His own towering personality was, no

<sup>75</sup> *ilgim* is a literal translation of *'ajam*; cf. Shelat, *Epistles*, note 45.

<sup>76</sup> This does not seem to allude to Karaites, but rather to the paucity of Talmudic erudition or to the lack of sophisticated understanding in these Rabbanite communities.

<sup>77</sup> A reference to the Almohads' forced conversion; see further chap. 3, *apud* note 37, below.

<sup>78</sup> *Epistles*, 559.

<sup>79</sup> See B. Z. Benedict, "On the History of the Torah Center in Provence," *Tarbiz* 22 (1951): 92–93 [Hebrew].

doubt, the leading force behind this astounding versatility. At the same time, we must not forget that the historical context has its share in shaping a person. In the case of Maimonides, the great diversity of this context, and what this diversity entails, still remains to be fully appreciated. For example, had the indigenous culture of al-Andalus remained isolated, restricted to “this peninsula,” as the Andalusians sometimes referred to their country, it would probably not have been able to produce a Maimonides. It is the integration of al-Andalus within the Mediterranean world, the close connections of the Andalusian Jewish community with other, Jewish and non-Jewish, communities, and Maimonides’ own Mediterranean biography that combined to shape the whole stature of “the Great Eagle.”

The “Mediterranean culture” that shaped Maimonides had, of course, produced other Jewish leaders and scholars. It is interesting to compare Maimonides to another “Mediterranean thinker” of impressive stature, Sa’adia ben Yosef Fayyūmī, alias Saadia Gaon (d. 942).<sup>80</sup> Like Maimonides’, Saadia’s thought was shaped by his education, travels, readings, and personal encounters, and included the legacy of different schools and religious communities. Like Maimonides’, Saadia’s originality lies in his ability to integrate these diverse sources of influence into a coherent Jewish thought, speaking the universal cultural language of his time while yet remaining entirely Jewish. The differences between the tenth-century Saadia and the twelfth-century Maimonides are not only differences of personality. The distinctive characters of their respective “cultural Mediterraneans” reflect the turning point in the twelfth century. Both Saadia and Maimonides can be seen as high-water marks of the Jewish Mediterranean society. Saadia, in the tenth century, marks the consolidation and coming of age of the Judaeo-Arabic Mediterranean culture. Maimonides, at the close of the twelfth century, marks the turning of the tide, the end of an era: the beginning of the waning of Islamic culture, the rise of European intellectual power, and, as part of this process, the great shift occurring within the Jewish world.

<sup>80</sup>See S. Stroumsa, *Saadia Gaon: A Jewish Thinker in a Mediterranean Society* (Tel-Aviv, 2001) [Hebrew].