

## CHAPTER 7

# YEMEN AND INDIA FROM THE RISE OF ISLAM TO 1500

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### INTRODUCTION: SEARCHING FOR THE JEWISH COMMUNITIES OF EARLY YEMEN AND INDIA

The Jewish community of the Yemen is well known for having been amongst the oldest in the Arabian Peninsula with origins in the early first millennium CE, if not far earlier since oral traditions recall a first arrival even before the destruction of the First Temple in 587 BCE. As one of the most important contemporary scholars of Yemenite Judaism, Yosef (Joseph) Tobi, and other scholars, have noted, this timeline has strongly impacted scholarship on Yemenite Jewry,<sup>1</sup> leading some of the early scholarship on Yemenite Jews to express a “romantic, even Orientalist, view that perceives this community as . . . embodying unchanged ancient tenets of Judaism from the Talmudic period, and resembling an ‘authentic’ old Jewish society.”<sup>2</sup> This chapter joins a body of more critical approaches now emerging that understand Yemenite Jewry as a dynamic and complex society and it is for this reason that readers find the Yemen paired here with India, a region where firm evidence for a Jewish presence before 1500, and in particular the matter of first arrivals, continues to elude scholars and generates as much debate as the Yemenite material.<sup>3</sup> If this chapter skirts the question of “first arrivals,” it nevertheless links the two regions because a large proportion of it will focus on the exceptional documentary corpus known as the Cairo Genizah and more specifically the body of documents

<sup>1</sup> Joseph Tobi, *The Jews of Yemen: Studies in Their History and Culture* (Leiden, 1999), chapter 16, “Trends in the Study of Yemenite Jewry.”

<sup>2</sup> Bat-Zion Eraqi Klorman, “The Jews of Yemen,” *Oxford Bibliographies*, <https://tinyurl.com/y2ky7unh>.

<sup>3</sup> See Nathan Katz’s excellent *Who Are the Jews of India?* (Berkeley, 2000); also Arthur Michael Lesley, “Shingly in Cochin Jewish Memory and in Eyewitness Accounts,” *Journal of Indo-Judaic Studies* 3 (2000), 7–20; and more recently, Ophira Gamliel, “Back from Shingly: Revisiting the Premodern History of Jews in Kerala,” *The Indian Economic and Social History Review* 55, 1 (2018), 53–76.

that S. D. Goitein nicknamed his “India Book,” material relating to the Jewish trade between the eastern Mediterranean and South Asia, via the Yemen. While the Yemen, and ‘Aden in particular, remain at the center of “India Book” documents, all of this material is deeply entangled through trade, travel, and marriage with South Asia and wider Mediterranean and Indian Ocean networks. The wider context for these connections is, of course, the trans-Eurasian trade boom of the period. The “India Book” material within the Cairo Genizah offers exceptional opportunities to flesh out for the Yemen, but also India, what otherwise remains the barest bones of Jewish history. This material, together with local literary production and extra-communal sources dating to the twelfth to fourteenth centuries – much of it in fact recovered from the Cairo Genizah – offers the potential for new histories and discourses.<sup>4</sup> We start, though, with these barest of bones and the broad outlines of the history of Jews in the Yemen and India.

#### SEVENTH TO ELEVENTH CENTURIES CE

Jewish communities have a long history of settlement in the Arabian Peninsula from the Ḥijāzī towns of Medina, Khaybar, and Taymā’, to al-Qaṭīf near the al-Aḥṣā’ Oasis on the coast of the Gulf, and in the Ḥaḍramawt and the Yemen.<sup>5</sup> Particularly well-documented and studied is a period of notably strong “Judaizing” tendencies in the Peninsula before 522 CE and which culminated in a short-lived Jewish kingdom based in

<sup>4</sup> The “India Book” corpus is still in the course of edition, translation, and publication with “books” 5 to 7 still awaiting publication. For books 1 to 4, see S. D. Goitein and Mordechai A. Friedman, *India Traders of the Middle Ages: Documents from the Cairo Geniza (“India Book”)* (Leiden, 2008); S. D. Goitein and Mordechai A. Friedman, *Joseph Lebdi, Prominent India Trader: India Book I, Cairo Geniza Documents* [Hebrew] (Jerusalem, 2009); S. D. Goitein and Mordechai A. Friedman, *Madmūn, Nagid of Yemen and the India Trade: India Book II, Cairo Geniza Documents* [Hebrew] (Jerusalem, 2010); S. D. Goitein and Mordechai A. Friedman, *Abraham Ben Yijū, India Trader and Manufacturer: India Book III, Cairo Geniza Documents* [Hebrew] (Jerusalem, 2010); Mordechai A. Friedman and S. D. Goitein, *Halfon the Traveling Merchant Scholar: India Book IV/A, Cairo Geniza Documents* [Hebrew] (Jerusalem, 2013); S. D. Goitein and Mordechai A. Friedman, with the assistance of Amir Ashur, *Halfon the Traveling Merchant Scholar: India Book IV/B, Cairo Geniza Documents* [Hebrew] (Jerusalem, 2013).

<sup>5</sup> Gordon D. Newby, *History of the Jews of Arabia from Ancient Times to the Eclipse under Islam* (New York, 1988); and also Serguei A. Frantsouzoff, “Judaism in Hadramaut on the Eve of Islam,” in Ephraim Isaac and Yosef Tobi, eds., *Judaeo-Yemenite Studies: Proceedings of the Second International Congress* (Princeton and Haifa, 1999), 27–32; and references in note 6.

Ḥimyar, in Yemen, until it fell to the Aksumites in 540.<sup>6</sup> Nevertheless, it is difficult to communicate strongly enough quite how sparse sources on the Jewish communities of the Yemen are after this period, and this in spite of the determined work of Joseph Tobi and others to recover fresh material from Jewish and Islamic sources. Only in the seventeenth to eighteenth centuries does material become more abundant and it is this that forms the true starting point of most histories. In large part this void must be a consequence of the repeated and often forced displacements of Jewish communities in the Yemen over their long history, displacements sometimes within a single town, at other times across the whole country, during which precious documents and other sources were lost or destroyed. As an example one might cite Robert B. Serjeant and Ronald Lewcock's research on the Jews of Ṣan'ā', which was unable to establish with any certainty where the earliest Jewish quarters and synagogues of the medieval city had been located.<sup>7</sup> The marked lack of urban archaeology in Yemen, even before the 2015 Civil War, has certainly not helped the situation – yet, as Joseph Tobi concludes,

the large amount of information about Judaism found in the early Muslim sources, whose handing down was very largely the work of converts from Yemen and north Arabia ... contains clear evidence that the writings of the Jewish Sages were well-known to the Jews of Yemen.<sup>8</sup>

And one can perhaps infer from this that the community was thriving.

The location of these aforementioned settlements and the Ḥimyarite kingdom together with other scattered finds point to the early involvement of Jewish communities in trans-Arabian trade between the Mediterranean and the Indian Ocean. There can be no denying Yemen's advantageous geographical position, straddling the Red Sea coast and the shores of the western Indian Ocean, ensured that it played an important part in trans-regional maritime trade between the Mediterranean and Indian Ocean well before the rise of Islam. 'Aden offered a particularly safe harbor and prominent wayfinding point for ships but the ports of both coasts were ideally situated to offer access to four major axes of maritime communication: East of the Yemenite coast lay the direct transoceanic routes to

<sup>6</sup> The French bibliography is especially rich, see in particular Iwona Gajda, *Le royaume de Ḥimyar à l'époque monothéiste: l'histoire de l'Arabie du sud ancienne de la fin du IV<sup>e</sup> siècle de l'ère chrétienne jusqu'à l'avènement de l'Islam* (Paris, 2009); and Christian J. Robin, ed., *Le judaïsme de l'Arabie antique* (Turnhout, 2015).

<sup>7</sup> In Robert B. Serjeant and R. Lewcock, "The Jews of Ṣan'ā'," in Robert B. Serjeant and R. Lewcock, eds., *Ṣan'ā': An Arabian Islamic City* (London, 1983), 391–431.

<sup>8</sup> Tobi, *Jews of Yemen: Studies*, 36.

southern India's Malabar and Konkan coasts and to Sri Lanka; alternatively, ships might hug the coasts to travel northeast along the Arabian shore to points that allowed access to the longer sailing seasons along the top of the western Indian Ocean to Sind and western India, or into the Gulf. To the northwest the Red Sea led up toward Egypt and the Mediterranean, and finally to the south was the long coast of the Horn of Africa and the entire eastern African seaboard. These routes and Yemen's central position in them are already evident in a first-century CE Greek-language merchant manual known as the *Periplus of the Erythrean Sea*. Although Jewish travelers and merchants are not mentioned in this source, traces of a third-century synagogue at the Ḥaḍramī port of Qāni', the center of the region's trade in aromatics, notably frankincense, evidence the later importance of Jewish mercantile activity in this area and contact with the wider Indian Ocean world.

The Yemen, by the later sixth century under Sasanian Persian government, was the last region of Arabia to join the newly emerging Muslim state, in this instance through the peaceful conversion of its Sasanian governor in 628. As was typical of such top-down conversions, the inhabitants of the Yemen became de facto Muslims with the exception of Yemenite Jews and Christians. Arab sources tell us that Muḥammad ordered his military commander, Mu'ādh b. Jabal, not to force Islam upon them and to treat them with respect.<sup>9</sup> Yemenite Jews in effect acquired *dhimmī* status, that is, non-Muslim peoples protected under Muslim law, a covenant system also made with other conquered "Peoples of the Book" such as Christians, Sabaeans, and sometimes Zoroastrians and Hindus. Tobi underlines the fact that Yemenite Jews did not pose a threat to the new polity, and were on the contrary socially and economically important, a fact that encouraged Muḥammad to adopt a more conciliatory approach.<sup>10</sup> Tobi cites Islamic traditions according to which Yemenite Jews were among the Arab armies that subsequently conquered Jerusalem in 636 and North Africa in the second half of the seventh century, likely, Tobi suggests, as "suppliers of provisions and services."<sup>11</sup> The financial and logistical importance of Jewish merchants during times of war is an issue that arises again in the interpretation of at least one Indian grant of privileges to a Jewish group.<sup>12</sup> Few Yemenite Jews, it seems, were converted to Islam, although among those that did were

<sup>9</sup> Joseph Tobi, *Jews of Yemen under the Shade of Islam from its Advent to the Present Day* [Hebrew] (Jerusalem, 2018), 31, citing 'Umar b. 'Alī b. Samūra al-Ja'dī, *Ṭabaqāt Fuqahā' al-Yaman* (Beirut, 1957), 18.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 32. <sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 37. <sup>12</sup> See later discussion in this chapter.

scholars such as Ka'ab al-Aḥbār, remembered among scholars as the earliest Muslim authority on Jewish tradition.

While protected status brought freedom of religion and protection of property and personal security, it also entailed a number of restrictions and regulations, by far the most resented of which was the yearly *jizya*, a poll tax on earnings, and sometimes land. Additionally, according to the Yemenite sources, Jews were required to pay one dinar's worth of textiles for every adult; another source sets the total impost at 2,000 cloak-lengths of cloth, each worth 40 dirhams.<sup>13</sup> The choice of cloth as a means of payment may suggest that at least some Jewish communities were involved in urban crafts and trade, areas of activity that characterized the community well into the modern era.

With the rise of the Umayyad (661–750) and later 'Abbāsīd (750–1258) caliphates and the shift of their imperial capitals first to Damascus and later Baghdad, the Yemen slipped to the political periphery of the Islamic world. Tobi notes an absence of written records about the Jews of Yemen until the rise of the Fāṭimid caliphate in North Africa (from 909) and Egypt (from 969). Nevertheless, Yemen's enviable position relative to East-West trade and its natural connections to the western Indian Ocean remained and there is reason to believe that it continued to be important commercially. The 'Abbāsīd geographer Ibn Khurrādādhbih, writing around 870, mentions the ports of Shiḥr in Ḥaḍramawt and 'Aden, both known sites of Jewish settlement. While the latter had, he notes, neither wheat nor livestock, ambergris, musk, and aloes were abundant there and it was an entrepot for goods from Sind, India, and China, from the country of the Zanj and from along the length of the Red Sea.<sup>14</sup> New archaeology along the East African coast, in the Comoros Islands and Madagascar over the last decade, is demonstrating the vitality of connections between these areas and the Arabian Peninsula. The eastern coast of Arabia was thus a vital hub in both North-South and East-West trade and it is the latter that leads us to the Jews of India.

As in the Yemen, Indian Jewish tradition seeks to place its foundations early in the Diaspora, in this case in the early first millennium, after the destruction of the Second Temple in Jerusalem in 70 CE. However, hard physical or textual evidence of a Jewish presence is often much later or largely circumstantial and does not even point in the first instance to the Yemen. That is not to say that the Diaspora did not reach India or other

<sup>13</sup> Tobi, *Jews of Yemen*, 35.

<sup>14</sup> Ibn Khurrādādhbih, *Kitāb Masālik wa-l-Mamālik*, ed. Michael J. de Goeje (Leiden, 1889), 52.

locations, or that Jews were not active in Indo-Roman and late antique trade, but simply that the evidence is fragile and complex.

The evidence is stronger after the rise of Islam, although through sources very different from those that survive for the Yemen. A few literary references suggest the presence of Jewish travelers and the existence of established Jewish communities across trans-Eurasian networks from the ninth century onward. A tenth-century account of trade with India and China by Abū Zayd Sirāfi counts Jewish merchants alongside Muslims and Zoroastrians killed at the eastern Chinese port of Guangzhou (Arabic, Khānfū) in 878–79 during the revolt of Huang Chao.<sup>15</sup> A later collection of seafaring tales commonly referred to as the *Book of the Wonders of India* (*Kitāb 'Ajā'ib al-Hind*) and ascribed to the Persian sea captain Buzūrg b. Shahriyār includes a story about an 'Omānī Jew, Iṣḥāq b. Yahūda, who had made his fortune in China.<sup>16</sup> At a period when the Middle East was in the process of Islamization, but certainly far from being mostly Muslim, it is clear that Jews were just another West Asian faith community active across the Indian Ocean, alongside Zoroastrians, Christians, and, of course, Muslims. With India and Sri Lanka as essential stopping points on the sea routes to China, we may guess that Jewish merchants at the very least sojourned in South Asia on their way to and from China.

The Jews of the Arabian Peninsula spoke Arabic and often used Arabicized versions of their names, a practice that makes the identification of Jewish individuals particularly difficult, especially when sources from this period rarely signal ethnicity and religion explicitly. India preserves two important documents that highlight the centrality of onomastics in the identification of Jewish presences. The names of five Jewish witnesses appear on a grant document, inscribed on copper plates in the Indian fashion, awarded to a Persian Christian church at the southern Malabari port of Kollam (Quilon) in 849.<sup>17</sup> Four Jewish individuals are immediately obvious as the last group of witness statements is written in Judeo-Persian (see Figure 7.1(a)):

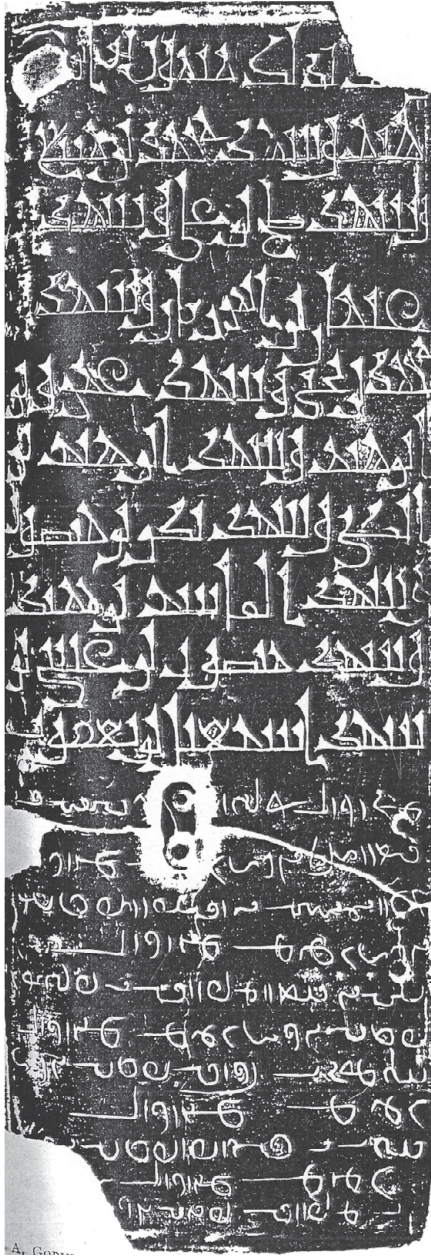
<sup>15</sup> *Akhhār al-Sin wa-l-Hind*, with a supplement by Abū Zayd al-Ḥassān Sirāfi; Arabic edition and English trans. Tim Mackintosh-Smith, *Accounts of China and India: Abū Zayd al-Sirāfi*, in Philip F. Kennedy and Shawkat M. Toorawa, eds., *Two Arabic Travel Books* (New York, 2014), 69 (section 2.2.1).

<sup>16</sup> Buzurg b. Shahriyār, *Kitāb 'Ajā'ib al-Hind*; trans. and ed. Greville S. P. Freeman-Grenville, *The Book of the Wonders of India* (London, 1981), 62–64, now understood to belong to a larger compilation of tales gathered in early Fāṭimid Cairo. See Jean-Charles Ducène, “Compte Rendu d'Abū Imran Musa ibn Rabah al-Awsi al-Sirafi, *al-Ṣaḥīḥ min akhhār al-biḥār wa-'ajā'ibihā*, édité par Yusuf Al-Hadi,” *Journal Asiatique* 298, 2 (2010), 579–84.

<sup>17</sup> See the longer discussion with further references in Pius Malekandathil, *Maritime India: Trade, Religion and Polity in the Indian Ocean* (Delhi, 2010), 38–61.



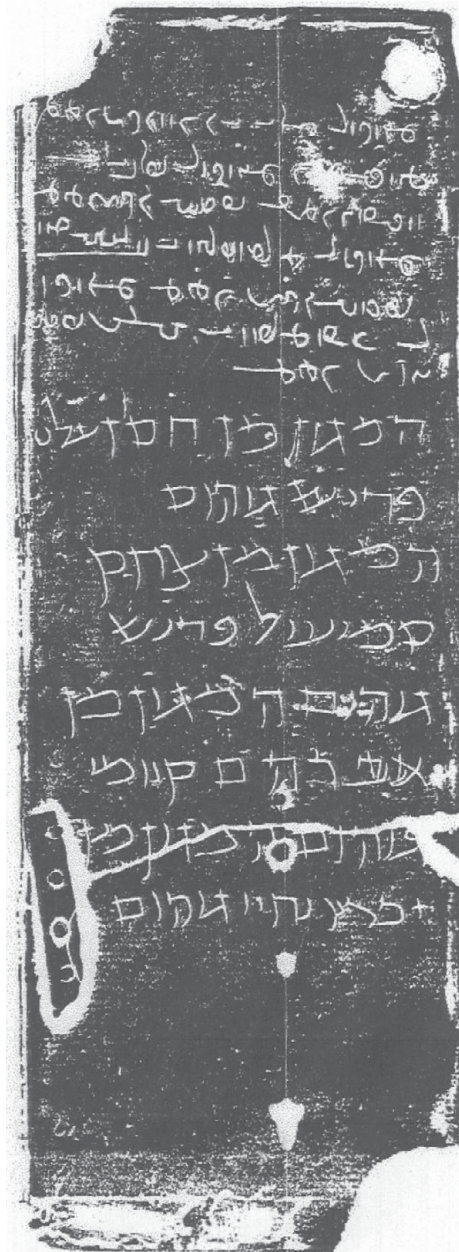
(a)



Figures 7.1(a) and 7.1(b) Inked rubbings of one of the incised copperplates from the Kollam grant of 849 CE. Three groups of witness statements are visible: in Arabic, in Pahlavi, and in Judeo-Persian

Source: Gopinatha Rao, 1920

(b)



Figures 7.1(a) and 7.1(b) (cont.)



Likewise I, Ḥasan ‘Alī, am witness to it. Likewise I, Ṣahaq Sama‘ēl, am witness to it. Likewise I, Abraham Quwamī, am witness. Likewise I, Kuruš Yaḥiya, am witness.<sup>18</sup>

The fifth Jewish witness is less easy to spot. The Persian Jewish names appear alongside witness statements in Pahlavi, recording the names of both Zoroastrian and Christian witnesses, and eleven names in Arabic (Figure 7.1(b)).<sup>19</sup> It is the last witness, Ismā‘īl b. Ya‘qūb, who may be identified as Jewish; an Arabophone Jew rather than a Persian-speaking Jew, his name is an obvious transposition of the Hebrew name Ishmael b. Jacob. The grant document does not clarify whether these five individuals were simply sojourning traders – Kollam was a vital watering point on the sea route to China – or residents of the port. However, the existence of a church supported by the local Cera ruler of Malabar suggests that at least one West Asian faith community was permanently settled at the port of Kollam.

A second important document from India confirming the existence of Jewish settlements there is the grant document still held by the Jewish community of Kochi (Cochin). Inscribed in Malayalam and dated to around 1000, it records the trade privileges accorded to the Anjuvanam trade association of Kodungallur (Muyirikoddu), then a principal port of the Cera kingdom, as well as other benefits including the headship of the trade association accorded to a certain Issuppu Irappan (Figure 7.2).<sup>20</sup> As earlier at Kollam, the various rights and privileges which he, and indeed his descendants, received in perpetuity make the mercantile activities of the Anjuvannam association abundantly clear: Issuppu Irappan is granted revenue from “tolls by the boat and by carts, *Anjuvannam* dues” and was “remitted [the] duty and weighing fee as well as being exempted from [the] payments made by other settlers in the town to the king.”<sup>21</sup> There is nothing in the grant wording explicitly stating the religion of this individual; rather, it is the fact that the document was retained in the ownership of the Jewish community of Malabar for centuries that points to this

<sup>18</sup> Carlo G. Cereti, “The Pahlavi Signatures on the Quilon Copper Plates (Tabula Quilonensis),” in Werner Sundermann, Almut Hintze, and François de Blois, eds., *Exegisti Monumenta: Festschrift in Honour of Nicholas Sims-Williams* (Wiesbaden, 2009), 31–50.

<sup>19</sup> Roberta Giunta provided the Arabic readings in *ibid.*, 37–38.

<sup>20</sup> Muttayil G. S. Narayanan, “The Jewish Copper-plates of Cochin,” *Cultural Symbiosis in Kerala* (Trivandrum, 1972), 23–30 and 79–82; and Muttayil G. S. Narayanan, “Further Studies in the Jewish Copper Plates of Cochin,” *The Journal of Indo-Judaic Studies* 6 (2003), 19–28.

<sup>21</sup> Narayanan, “The Jewish Copper-plates of Cochin,” 81.



Figure 7.2 The Kodungallur copperplate grant of 1000 CE, still in India in the possession of the Jewish community, now in Kochi (Cochin)

Source: Photograph courtesy of Ellen Goldberg

having been a grant to a Jewish individual, Issuppu Irappan, and his community. Here we face another onomastic challenge, working back from the Malayalam rendering of a name to the original West Asian name it sought to transcribe. One possible reading is the Arabic Yūsuf al-Rubbān, Joseph the Sailor, or more specifically “pilot”; another reading is simply Yūsuf Rabban, Joseph the Elder.

More than the Kollam plates, the Kochi plates offer insights into the integration of this Jewish community into the local political and social and cultural landscape. The Indian scholar Muttayil G. S. Narayanan, who studied these plates over a long period of time, observed that the award was made two years after another southern Indian dynasty, the Colas, launched a military campaign in Malabar and that the privileges were awarded in the presence of six of the district governors and the head of the army, in effect a council of war. Narayanan therefore suggests that the grant was made in return for the loyalty of West Asian merchant groups, possibly specifically the Jewish community in this case, and perhaps even in return for their

financial support of the Cera campaign against the Colas.<sup>22</sup> We do not know if Jews remained at the headship of the Anjuvannam at Kodungallur after the Cola conquests but the Jewish community there certainly continued to be prominent in trade in the long term. The grant document also makes clear that the headship came with a number of highly symbolic ceremonial privileges, known in a number of grants as the seventy-two privileges; among these were “the right to employ [the] day lamp, decorative cloth, palanquin, umbrella, kettledrum, trumpet, gateway, arch, arched roof.”<sup>23</sup> Records such as these lend credibility to more general references in Islamic sources to a Jewish presence along the Indian coast, allusions that might otherwise seem more literary topos than historical fact. Thus, Abū Dulaf Mis‘ar b. Muhallil’s largely lost tenth-century text, the *‘Ajā’ib al-Buldān* (*Wonders of Countries*), states that at Saymur, the present-day site of Chaul, south of Mumbai, “there are Muslims, Christians, Jews and Fire worshippers. . . . there are mosques, Christian churches, synagogues and fire temples.”<sup>24</sup> This last passage is an important reminder that the pattern seen among Jewish communities was part of a wider commercial and social policy among Indian rulers, namely, to offer land for settlement and to support the establishment of places of worship for communities they wished to attract to their domains.<sup>25</sup> The status of the Jewish community and its quality of life in India could not be in greater contrast to that of Yemenite Jews.

There is no equivalent to the Cairo Genizah for the early western Indian Ocean but Jewish merchants are a persistent, if faint and irregular, presence in the sources from the coasts of the Arabian Peninsula to India and Sri Lanka.<sup>26</sup> Implied presences such as these are not full proof; nevertheless, it is difficult to explain the subsequent “great leap” of Mediterranean

<sup>22</sup> Muttayil G. S. Narayanan, *Perumals of Kerala: Political and Social Conditions of Kerala under the Cera Perumals of Makotai (c. 800 A.D.–1124 A.D.)* (Kerala, 1996), 55.

<sup>23</sup> Narayanan, “The Jewish Copper-plates of Cochin,” 81.

<sup>24</sup> Gabriel Ferrand, *Relations de voyages et textes géographiques arabes, persans et turks relatifs à l’Extrême-Orient du VIII<sup>e</sup> au XVIII<sup>e</sup> siècles*, 2 vols. (Paris, 1913), 1:223.

<sup>25</sup> Elizabeth Lambourn, “Describing a Lost Camel: Clues for West Asian Mercantile Networks in South Asian Maritime Trade (Tenth–Twelfth Centuries CE),” in Marie-Françoise Boussac, Jean-François Salles, and Jean-Baptiste Yon, eds., *Harbours of the Indian Ocean: Proceedings of the Kolkata Colloquium 2011 (Median Project)* (Delhi, 2016), 351–407.

<sup>26</sup> For overviews of Jewish trade in India before 1300, see Ranabir Chakravarti, “Reaching Out to Distant Shores: Indo-Judaic Trade Contacts (up to CE 1300),” in Nathan Katz, ed., *Indo-Judaic Studies in the Twenty-First Century: A View from the Margin* (Gordonville, VA, 2007), 19–43; and also André Wink, “The Jewish Diaspora in India: Eighth to Thirteenth Centuries,” *The Indian Economic & Social History Review* 24, 4 (1987), 349–66.

Jews into Indian Ocean trade at the end of the eleventh century, or indeed Benjamin of Tudela's contemporary record of Jewish communities along the Indian seaboard<sup>27</sup> without accepting the premise of a long-standing if discreet prior presence.

#### YEMEN AND INDIA IN THE "INDIA BOOK"

If the Yemen and India had been linked for millennia already, it is only since the discovery of the "India Book" documents within the Cairo Genizah, and more particularly the publication in 2008 of the first large batch of documents under the title *India Traders of the Middle Ages*, that all manner of interactions between the two regions can finally be examined at some level of high resolution. It is difficult at present to say categorically whether the connected world that emerges from the "India Book" is paradigmatic of centuries of Jewish habitation between the two areas, or simply a brief unusual period of interconnectivity. In any case, the documents allow us to see a history of Yemenite Judaism that is far from the constant narrative of Zaydī Muslim oppression that characterizes many existing narratives, and also one that materializes more clearly the nature of contact between Yemenite and Indian Jews.

If the Yemen had occupied a somewhat peripheral position in the Islamic world after the departure of the center of the early Islamic state from the Arabian Peninsula, the rise of the Fāṭimid state in North Africa and its subsequent shift of capital to Cairo in the 960s reinvigorated the Red Sea as a major axis of trade and communication between the Mediterranean and the Indian Ocean. The Yemen itself had been in a state of turmoil since the second half of the ninth century, a period of factional fighting and competition which ultimately resulted in the establishment in the Yemeni highlands of the Shī'ī imāmate that was to shape Yemen until the 1960s, and in fact continues to do so today. The Zaydī imāmate was founded in 901 by Yaḥyā b. al-Ḥusayn and has left comparatively ample and early sources on its treatment of the Jewish community, an unexpected wealth understandably exploited by Jewish historians such as Joseph Tobi, who dedicates chapters on Imām al-Hādī's attitude toward the Jews of Yemen as detailed in sources such as the *Sirāt al-Hādī* of 'Alī b. Muḥammad al-'Alawī (later tenth century) or Yaḥyā al-Yamanī's *Anbā' al-Zaman fi Akhbār al-Yaman* (late ninth/early tenth century).<sup>28</sup> The topic

<sup>27</sup> Benjamin of Tudela, *The Itinerary of Benjamin of Tudela*, trans. Marcus N. Adler (London, 1907), 67.

<sup>28</sup> See, for example, the chapters on these works in Tobi, *Jews of Yemen: Studies* (in English), and Tobi, *Jews of Yemen* (in Hebrew). A new cooperative digitization and

has been of keen interest to Jewish scholars of the Yemen given the increasingly harsh treatment of Yemenite Jews under Islamic law from the fifteenth century onward. In this chapter, however, we wish to highlight another set of sources: documents generated within the Jewish community of the earlier period that speak not of the legalistic theory behind Jewish habitation in the Yemen but of the nature of daily life. Beyond the highlands, along the Tihāma coast and around ‘Aden, another Shī‘ī dynasty, the Ismā‘īlī Ṣulayḥids, together with their appointed governors in ‘Aden, the Zuray‘ids, administered Jewish communities and an increasingly busy through traffic of Jewish traders.

The late eleventh century witnessed a sudden irruption of Mediterranean Jews into the Indian Ocean trade world, a move economic historian Jessica Goldberg has described as a “breathtaking leap.”<sup>29</sup> As the previous discussion of the early Jewish presence in the western Indian Ocean has perhaps made clear, this “breathtaking leap” is in fact only so from a Mediterranean perspective; Jewish merchants otherwise had a very long prior history in Indian Ocean trade. It is surely no accident, then, that in the earliest sources from the documentary Genizah for ‘Aden, it is a Jew of Iranian origin who emerges as the key figure at the port. Japheth b. Bundār was an India trader in his own right but also ‘Aden’s *wakīl al-tujjār* or “representative of the merchants.”<sup>30</sup> Tenth-century observers had noted a strong Iranian presence in ‘Aden and up the Red Sea to Jeddah, which must surely have included Iranian Jews, but the route and timeline of Japheth b. Bundār’s arrival in ‘Aden remains obscure.<sup>31</sup>

Several factors nevertheless aided this connection, one certainly being the Fāṭimids’ development of what French historian David Bramoullé has identified as the first coherent and articulated Fāṭimid policy in the Red Sea and Indian Ocean after 1073.<sup>32</sup> Another is the undoubted prominence

research project on the Zaydī Manuscript Tradition (ZMT) led by the Institute for Advanced Study, Princeton, and the Hill Museum and Manuscript Library (HMML) in Minnesota will perhaps open the door to the identification of further relevant material; their portal is at [www.ias.edu/digital-scholarship/zaydi\\_manuscript\\_tradition](http://www.ias.edu/digital-scholarship/zaydi_manuscript_tradition).

<sup>29</sup> Jessica L. Goldberg, *Trade and Institutions in the Medieval Mediterranean: The Geniza Merchants and their Business World* (Cambridge, 2012), 305.

<sup>30</sup> Goitein and Friedman, *India Traders*, 37, with references in n1 to the documents in which Japheth b. Bundār is mentioned. On the problems of understanding the nature of merchant leadership, see Roxani Margariti, *Aden and the Indian Ocean Trade: 150 Years in the Life of a Medieval Arabian Port* (Chapel Hill, 2007), 178–81 and 183–84.

<sup>31</sup> By contrast, *EJW*, s.v. “Ibn Bundār, Ḥasan, Abū ‘Alī (Japheth)” (Michael G. Wechsler), suggests that Japheth was a very recent arrival.

<sup>32</sup> David Bramoullé, “The Fatimids and the Red Sea (969–1171),” in Dionisius A. Agius et al., eds., *Navigated Spaces, Connected Places: Proceedings of Red Sea Project V* (Oxford, 2012), 127–36; also Goldberg, *Trade and Institutions*, 170–72 and 176–77.



of the Jewish community in Fāṭimid trade, scholarship, and court life.<sup>33</sup> The representatives of the merchants in Egypt and in ‘Aden were both Jewish and it was Japheth’s greatest achievement, as ‘Aden’s representative, to consolidate the easterly and westerly arms of ‘Aden’s trade. Through him, a trio of strategic marriages united the families of the Egyptian and ‘Adenese representatives of merchants. Japheth’s son Maḍmūn was married to a sister of Judah Abū Zikrī ha-Kohen, the powerful representative of the merchants in Egypt, while Japheth’s niece, his sister’s daughter, married Judah Abū Zikrī ha-Kohen himself and moved to Egypt. Finally, her brother Maḥrūz b. Jacob was married to another of Judah’s sisters, who in turn came to live in ‘Aden.

### YEMEN AND INDIA IN THE INDIA TRADE

A huge number of Jewish merchants and fortune seekers now transited through ‘Aden and other Yemenite ports on their way to locations all along the western Indian seaboard, also to Sri Lanka and even beyond. Mediterranean Jewish traders arrived comparatively late into the India trade and tended to fit themselves into well-established, already millennium-old patterns of exchange: spices and iron from southern India or textiles and lac gum from western India were exchanged for copper and scrap brass, known as cullet, silver, and sometimes gold, coming from the west; at other times foodstuffs or medicinal foods rare in parts of India such as raisins or white sugar, also Middle Eastern glass.<sup>34</sup> Noticeably absent from Genizah records are some of the most prestigious items traded between the two areas – horses and slaves – amidst a growing market for horses for warfare in India and Indian slaves for household service in the Middle East. The first at least is likely to have been under government control; as for the second, the Genizah sources suggest that Jews were not involved in the slave trade beyond purchasing slaves for their personal use, mainly for domestic work.<sup>35</sup>

<sup>33</sup> See, for instance, the rising of the Tustarī family during the first half of the eleventh century. On the Tustarīs, see Moshe Gil, *The Tustaris: Family and Sect* [Hebrew] (Tel Aviv, 1981). On the development of Jewish and Karaite leadership at this period, see Marina Rustow, *Heresy and the Politics of Community: The Jews of the Fatimid Caliphate* (Ithaca, 2008).

<sup>34</sup> For an excellent overview, see Goitein and Friedman’s introduction to *India Traders*, though one should read Goitein and Friedman’s list of commodities with caution as they conflate items supplied for Jewish homes in India with commodities for trade.

<sup>35</sup> Craig Perry, “The Daily Life of Slavery and the Global Reach of Slavery in Medieval Egypt, 969–1250 CE” (PhD diss., Emory University, 2014); also Amitav Ghosh, “The Slave of Ms. H. 6.,” *Subaltern Studies* 7 (1992), 159–220.

The “India Book” material is far from published, but even from the current four volumes it is clear that hundreds of Mediterranean Jews entered the India trade between the late eleventh and mid-thirteenth centuries, joining already well-established Yemenite Jews and Jews from other parts of the Indian Ocean world. Many Mediterranean Jews kept their main residence with their wives and children in Egypt or the Yemen and made round trips out to India for trade. Others, however, settled in South Asia for extended periods, with some never returning west, as correspondence about abandoned wives and subsequent changes to the legal terms of engagement contracts testifies. In many prenuptial and marriage documents we find travel restrictions and stipulations regarding the freedom of movement of the husband. These conditions would define the duration of the husband’s absence, and in several cases even order the husband to ask his wife’s permission before setting off on such a journey. Elsewhere husbands were required by law to hand their future wives conditional divorce decrees, to be implemented if they failed to return within an agreed time frame. In one betrothal deed, a husband is forbidden from forcing his wife to travel with him should she not wish to.<sup>36</sup> Depending on different couples’ situations and temperaments, some surviving agreements either forbid the husband from traveling or, conversely, forbid him from traveling without his wife if she is willing to travel; if unwilling to travel, wives often stipulated that their departing husbands should leave behind sufficient provisions for themselves and any children.<sup>37</sup> It is probably no surprise that some long-term sojourners married locally, the best-documented instance being that of the North African Jew Abraham Ben Yijū, whose life on the Malabar coast and marriage to an Indian slave have occasioned repeated scholarly interest.<sup>38</sup> Whether travelers to India were short-term or long-term sojourners, it is abundantly clear that their experience of India had a long-term effect

<sup>36</sup> John Rylands Library, Manchester B 3001, from 1100 to 1138. On this and other stipulations, see Amir Ashur, “Protecting the Wife’s Rights in Marriage as Reflected in Pre-nuptials and Marriage Contracts from the Cairo Geniza and Parallel Arabic Sources,” *Religion Compass* 6 (2012), 381–89.

<sup>37</sup> For example, CUL T-S NS 226.7. On the development of new stipulations and marriage contracts, see Amir Ashur, “The India Trade and the Emergence of the Engagement Contract: A Cairo Geniza Study,” *The Medieval Globe* 3, 1 (2017), 27–46, and the sources cited therein.

<sup>38</sup> Amitav Ghosh, *In an Antique Land: History in the Guise of a Traveler’s Tale* (New York, 1994); the portions relating to Ben Yijū in Goitein and Friedman, *India Traders*; and Elizabeth Lambourn, *Abraham’s Luggage: A Social Life of Things in the Medieval Indian Ocean World* (Cambridge, 2018).

on Judeo-Arabic culture, linguistically and in terms of material culture and food culture.<sup>39</sup>

While western India and the Malabar coast appear to have been particular foci of trade, the Genizah sources indicate that Jewish traders traded at, or at least transited through, most of the principal ports and cities along the full length of India's western seaboard where they were part of already cosmopolitan settlements. Yet this was not the only pattern: analysis of the trade activity of Abraham Ben Yijū in northern Malabar suggests that they also targeted small, newly formed port polities where we have little evidence for preexisting international trade with the Middle East. This strategy assured Ben Yijū access to a broad range of resources, markets, and craft expertise.<sup>40</sup> Our sources naturally only capture a portion of this trade – by the very nature of their survival in Cairo's various *genizot*, we only see the correspondence returned to Egypt – however, odd references to a group of Jewish goldsmiths heading to Sri Lanka or to merchants not heard of since they sailed for maritime Southeast Asia suggest that these Jewish networks were far wider. Across this vast area Jewish merchants proved their adaptability and trade acumen. As Roxani Margariti has shown, beyond the Middle East the success of their business depended on new forms of trade partnership and new partners from across the social spectrum of each locality;<sup>41</sup> across this vast area they learned to function within different monetary systems and pre-monetized economies.<sup>42</sup>

One of the most frustrating aspects of the Genizah material for India is certainly its lack of detail about the Jewish communities that already existed there as witnessed by the earlier Kochi grant of 1000 and referenced later in the twelfth century by Benjamin of Tudela. Putting aside the

<sup>39</sup> Elizabeth Lambourn, "Borrowed Words in an Ocean of Objects: Geniza Sources and New Cultural Histories of the Indian Ocean," in Kesavan Veluthat and Donald Davis, Jr., eds., *Irreverent History: Essays for M. G. S. Narayanan* (Delhi, 2014), 363–414.

<sup>40</sup> Elizabeth Lambourn, "India in the 'India Book': 12th-Century Northern Malabar through Geniza Documents," in Claire Hardy-Guilbert et al., eds., *Sur les chemins d'Onagre: histoire et archéologie orientales. Hommage à Monik Kervran* (Oxford, 2018), 71–84.

<sup>41</sup> Roxani Margariti, "Aṣḥābunā l-Tujjār – Our Associates, the Merchants: Non-Jewish Business Partners of the Cairo Geniza's India Traders," in Marina Rustow, Roxani E. Margariti, and Arnold E. Franklin, eds., *Jews, Christians and Muslims in Medieval and Early Modern Times: A Festschrift in Honor of Mark R. Cohen* (Leiden, 2014), 40–58. See also Ophira Gamliel, "Who was the Fadiyār? Conflating Textual Evidence in Judaeo-Arabic and Old Malayalam," *Ginzei Qedem* 14 (2018), 9–42.

<sup>42</sup> Roxani Margariti, "Coins and Commerce: Monetization and Cross-cultural Collaboration in the Western Indian Ocean (Eleventh to Thirteenth Centuries)," in Francesca Trivellato, Leor Halevi, and Catia Antunes, eds., *Religion and Trade: Cross-cultural Exchanges in World History, 1000–1900* (Oxford, 2014), 192–215.

matter of whether the latter actually traveled to India in person, Benjamin's mapping of communities is insightful not only for the possible sites of Jewish settlement that he refers to – notably at al-Gingaleh (likely Kodungallur, otherwise known as Shingly) and in Sri Lanka<sup>43</sup> – but for the way in which he sees the Yemen as part of India, a geographical construct that in fact goes back through the Islamic conquests into classical antiquity. Through the documentation that survives from, and about, Abraham Ben Yijū, we see that the conversion of female slaves probably played a part in the spread of Judaism in the area, while the Hebraized names of some of Ben Yijū's workmen may also be clues to other conversion processes.<sup>44</sup>

### JEWISH COMMUNAL ORGANIZATION IN YEMEN AND INDIA

Nevertheless, 'Aden was the undisputed hub of Middle Eastern trade in the western Indian Ocean and the Bundār family appears to have enjoyed an exceptional status and tight control over this. Japheth b. Bundār's son Maḍmūn inherited his father's position as representative of the merchants and is even known to have traded in partnership with the Muslim Zuray'īd governor of 'Aden, Bilāl b. Jarīr. Surviving letters refer to their outfitting of a ship in partnership for a trade venture to Sri Lanka.<sup>45</sup>

The representative of the merchants played a key role and much about the nature of the position has been revealed through Genizah sources. The role was neither that of a guildmaster, since European-style guilds were not found in the Muslim world at this period, nor was he a government official, but something in between – freer and more flexible. His main job was to serve as a legal representative of visiting merchants, and in many cases he himself was a foreigner or son of a foreigner. The responsibilities of this position developed over time and the representative of the merchants came to control a large range of mercantile services, receiving commodities and buying and selling them, receiving mail, apportioning profits, and maintaining a warehouse (*dār wakāla*) in which all the activity took place. In 'Aden, the representative of the merchants held an official position in both Jewish society and the state in which he was active. In a Genizah document from around 1135, Maḍmūn b. Japheth b. Bundār, the representative of the merchants in 'Aden and the nagid of Yemen, is

<sup>43</sup> Benjamin of Tudela, *Itinerary*, 67.

<sup>44</sup> See discussions in Lambourn, *Abraham's Luggage*, 60–63; and Ophira Gamliel, "Aśu the Convert: A Slave Girl or a Nāyar Land Owner?" *Entangled Religions* 6 (2018), 201–46.

<sup>45</sup> Goitein and Friedman, *India Traders*, 611.

described as “one who is appointed by the exilarchs and the heads of the yeshivas over all of Israel and invested with the trust of the rulers who are overseas and those who are in the desert.”<sup>46</sup> That is, he signed agreements with the rulers and tribal leaders who controlled the main trade routes, he was acknowledged by the local Muslim ruler, and he was regarded as the head of the Jews of Yemen. The role would appear to be substantially different from that of the headship of the Anjuvanam trade association seen earlier in Kodungallur in Malabar, which involved a substantial role in tax collection and brought ceremonial privileges. However, in both cases the heads of the merchants played a vital role as mediators in international trade and in the supervision of mercantile groups within local society.

The headship was not a matter of honor alone, but was also a matter of jurisdiction, for the Jewish merchants used to bring their judicial issues in front of Jewish courts in Yemen, and a single judicial network operated from India to Spain. For example, we find a letter from the rabbinical court in Fuṣṭāṭ sent to the rabbinical court in ‘Aden regarding the estate of an Egyptian merchant who had been shipwrecked near ‘Aden.<sup>47</sup> Another paradigmatic Genizah document is a quittance issued by the rabbinical court of Fuṣṭāṭ to the nagid Maḍmūn II for around 173 dinars, representing the estate of a merchant drowned “near Yemen.” The estate was salvaged by the nagid and sent by him via a Muslim *qāḍī* to the dead man’s heir in Alexandria.<sup>48</sup> In another case, the rabbinical court in Yemen approved evidence attesting to the death of a merchant in a shipwreck, but applied to the rabbinical court in Egypt for corroboration: “We may not make a ruling to permit or prohibit in this case before those who are greater than us, our rabbis the judges of Egypt.”<sup>49</sup>

With an important role to play in international commerce and a burgeoning stature in the geopolitics of the Judeo-Islamic world, Yemen and the allegiance of its Jewish congregations became of increasing interest to competing Jewish leaders in Iraq and Egypt as they sought to build up their influence there. Yemen’s Jewish communities were fully aware of the broader politics and accordingly positioned themselves carefully between the two academies, maintaining regular correspondence with their respective geonim. While the Bundār family, of Persian origin, had close relations with the head of the Babylonian yeshivot in Iraq, Jews of Mediterranean origin were naturally more closely connected to Cairo but these were not

<sup>46</sup> National Library of Israel 4° 577.2/15 (Goitein and Friedman, *India Traders*, 398).

<sup>47</sup> CUL T-S 13 J 8.17, published in Goitein and Friedman, *India Traders*, 524–29.

<sup>48</sup> CUL T-S NS J 242 (Goitein and Friedman, *India Traders*, 542–43).

<sup>49</sup> Papyrussammlung Erherzog-Rainer, Österreichische Nationalbibliothek, Vienna, H 161 (Goitein and Friedman, *India Traders*, 530–40).



exclusive routes of communication. Thus, in one letter addressed to the Palestinian gaon in Cairo, Japheth b. Bundār's son Maḍmūn sends a query about the ritual status of Chinese porcelain vessels and the measures appropriate for their purification.<sup>50</sup> Such letters also demonstrate that the Jews of Yemen were wealthy enough to send financial support to the academies of Cairo and Babylonia; the aforementioned letter alludes to enclosures of donations in kind for the gaon and other members of the yeshiva. From other letters we learn that an organized collection of funds destined for Fuṣṭāṭ was not uncommon in 'Aden.<sup>51</sup>

The language of many of these letters is itself fascinating because they were written not in Aramaic – the language of the Babylonian academies – but in Hebrew. The holy language was often preferred for communications of a more official or rhetorical nature, and was considered a suitable language of communication for communal affairs too. From the letters from 'Aden, discovered in the Cairo Genizah, we learn just how strong the Yemenite Jewish tradition of writing in a highly elaborate Hebrew was. These letters are also useful for revealing where Jews were settled in the Yemen. The Babylonian gaon Sherira sent a letter in multiple copies to eight centers in Yemen outside Ṣan'ā', the capital of Yemen at the time: one to al-Ḥabīl and its vicinity, one to 'Aden and four nearby settlements, another to Taraj in the northern tip of Yemen, and finally one to the city of Ṣa'ada.

#### BETWEEN CAIRO AND BAGHDAD: THE DOUBLE *RASHUT*

One of the most startling pieces of evidence for the careful positioning of the Yemenite Jewish community between the two academies is their use of the *rashut*, the traditional statement of allegiance to the head of the academy.<sup>52</sup> While this most commonly took the form of a public declaration in the synagogue before the cantor's reading of the prayers or the preacher's delivery of his sermon, it is also found as a formula added at the start of the text of marital agreements and other legal documents. It consisted of the name of the serving Head of the Jews along with his sometimes quite-bombastic titles. The *rashut* formula appears to have been

<sup>50</sup> Elizabeth Lambourn and Phillip I. Ackerman-Lieberman, "Chinese Porcelain and the Material Taxonomies of Medieval Rabbinic Law: Encounters with Disruptive Substances in Twelfth-Century Yemen," *The Medieval Globe* 2, 2 (2016), 199–238.

<sup>51</sup> See note 54.

<sup>52</sup> On the *rashut*, see Mordechai A. Friedman, "R. Yehiel b. Elayakim's Responsum Permitting the *Reshut*" [Hebrew], in Ezra Fleischer, Mordechai A. Friedman, and Joel Kraemer, eds., *Mas'at Moshe: Studies in Jewish and Islamic Culture Presented to Moshe Gil* (Jerusalem, 1998), 328–67.

introduced into documents in Egypt as a privilege of the *negidut* (the rulership [of the Jews]) by the Palestinian gaon Maṣliaḥ ha-Kohen b. Solomon, who ruled as *ra'īs* (head) in the period 1127–39. Following its introduction, however, the *rashut* became a cause of controversy in Yemen, where certain members of the community appear to have been allied with the Babylonian academy. Maḍmūn b. Ḥasan, the Jewish representative of the merchants who himself later became a local *nagid*, sent a letter to the wider Jewish communities of Yemen asking them to add Maṣliaḥ Ga'on's name to their public recitation of the *rashut* formula. Testimony sent from the city of 'Aden, however, relates how a Jewish visitor from Ṣa'da in northern Yemen was censured for mentioning the Palestinian gaon in the Sabbath service, despite this having previously been the practice in 'Aden, and was forced to make a public apology.<sup>53</sup> In the face of such energetic support for the Babylonian cause, even in southern Yemen, Maḍmūn backed down and promulgated the removal of the mention of Maṣliaḥ Ga'on from the *rashut* in Yemen. Among the opponents to Maṣliaḥ's authority were Egyptian Jews in 'Aden, who, it seems, were partisan members of Fuṣṭāṭ's Babylonian community, rather than followers of the Palestinian yeshiva. Further evidence of this can be seen in letters sent by a Yemenite Jew, Jacob b. Salīm, to the Palestinian yeshiva in Fuṣṭāṭ. In one, he reports collecting large sums of money on behalf of Maṣliaḥ Ga'on from the inland town of al-Juwwa. In another letter, he explains that he is unable to collect funds for the Palestinian cause from the port city of 'Aden, due to a controversy having erupted in the community, and he himself has been forced to decamp to al-Juwwa. This is evidently as a result of the growing Babylonian influence in the port city, probably given increasing impetus by the arrival there of merchants from the Babylonian community of Fuṣṭāṭ.<sup>54</sup>

Proof, if it were needed, that Yemen and India were intimately connected at this period, and that *rashut* formulae remained very diverse, is the fact that the earliest surviving document to carry a so-called double *rashut* comes

<sup>53</sup> For further discussion on the controversy, see Friedman and Goitein, *India Book IVIA*, 115–28; Arnold E. Franklin, "Shoots of David: Members of the Exilarchal Dynasty in the Middle Ages" (PhD diss., Princeton University, 2001), 115–27; Arnold E. Franklin, "Relations between Nesi'im and Exilarchs: Competition or Cooperation?" in Benjamin Hary and Haggai Ben-Shammai, eds., *Esoteric and Exoteric Aspects in Judeo-Arabic Culture* (Leiden, 2006), 310–12.

<sup>54</sup> Based mostly on Amir Ashur and Ben Outhwaite, "An Eleventh-Century Pledge of Allegiance to Egypt from the Jewish Community of Yemen," *Chroniques du manuscrit au Yémen* 2 (2016), 34–48. The letter from Jacob b. Salīm was published by Amir Ashur and Ben Outhwaite, "Between Egypt and Yemen in the Cairo Genizah," *Journal of Islamic Manuscripts* 5 (2014), 203–14.

from a draft of a deed of manumission for a female slave written at the port of Mangalore in India in 1132: “Under the *rashut* of our master Daniel, the great *nasi* (exilarch), the Head of the Congregations of all Israel . . . and under the *rashut* of our gaon Maṣliaḥ ha-Kohen, the Head of the Yeshiva of the Pride of Jacob.”<sup>55</sup> Written by the well-known North African merchant Abraham Ben Yijū, this document reveals not only the earlier practice in the Yemen but also its implementation among some Jews in India.

#### MATERIAL CULTURE OF THE JEWISH COMMUNITIES IN YEMEN AND INDIA

Little remains of what we might fairly describe as a golden age of the Yemenite Jewish community either in ‘Aden or elsewhere. Roxani Margariti’s 2007 study of the port’s commercial and urban life, *‘Aden and the Indian Ocean Trade: 150 Years in the Life of a Medieval Arabian Port*, established an important benchmark in terms of the potential of the Genizah material to contribute to new histories of the Yemen and yet as she repeatedly points out, the material culture of ‘Aden itself and its Jewish communities remains hard to grasp beyond written and cartographic sources. As is the case also for the many Indian cities and ports where Jewish merchants traveled and traded, medieval archaeology has barely been undertaken in ‘Aden itself and the gulf produced by its absence is noticeable. The Genizah material comes into its own here as a valuable source even if it cannot be corroborated by material remains. The mercantile elite of Yemen, and of ‘Aden in particular, emerge as avid consumers of luxury homewares and foodstuffs unavailable in the Yemen but sourced through their vast networks stretching out both to the East and to the West. These took their place alongside more mundane objects and foodstuffs from the immediate locality, be it in the Yemen or indeed in India. The household of Abraham Ben Yijū in Malabar emerges from the documentation with particular clarity and confirms this tendency, mingling local southern Indian objects and foods with a range of imports from across the Indian Ocean as well as the Mediterranean. In Ben Yijū we see the lengths a well-off merchant of North African origin might go in order to maintain a Mediterranean identity and ritually observant household on the Indian coast, and so understand the importance of homes as places of business and status symbols among this mercantile elite.<sup>56</sup>

<sup>55</sup> As appeared in a deed of manumission of Ashū, a slave girl purchased by Abraham b. Yijū, St. Petersburg Institute of Oriental Studies, Russian Academy of Sciences, D55.10; see Goitein and Friedman, *India Book III*, 162–66.

<sup>56</sup> Explored at length in Lambourn, *Abraham’s Luggage*, passim.

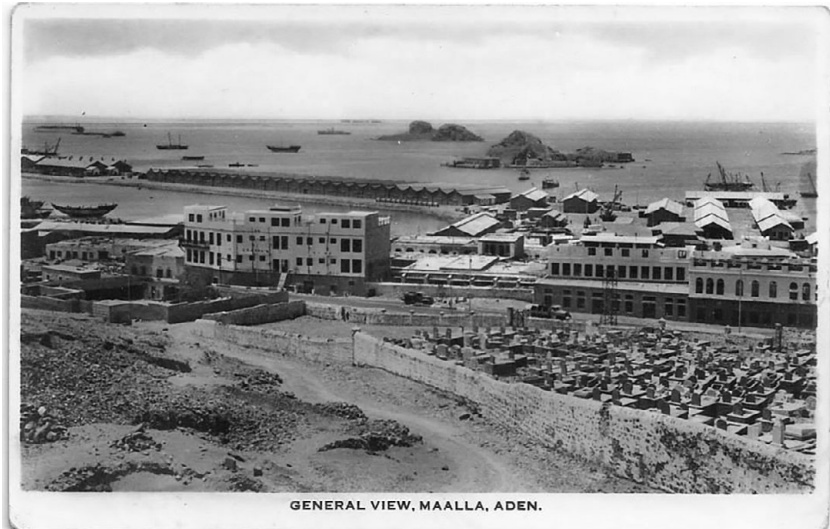


Figure 7.3 View of the Jewish cemetery at al-Ma'allā, 'Aden, from a 1950s postcard by Rehamim Bensoor

Source: Image courtesy of the 'Aden Jewish Museum, Tel Aviv

Paradoxically, the most enduring material remains of medieval Judaism in the Yemen and India are cemeteries and a few scattered inscriptions.<sup>57</sup> Figure 7.3 shows a view of 'Aden's substantial Jewish cemetery at al-Ma'allā, as it survived in the 1950s or 1960s. The medieval tombstones from such sites set a fascinating counterpart to the picture of Jewish homes that emerges from the Genizah. As this tombstone preserved in the British Museum shows (Figure 7.4), the tombstones made from 'Aden's volcanic basalt were almost crude in execution, likely deliberately so, and communicate in death a lack of ostentation quite opposite to the lavishly furnished homes of the living.

#### YEMEN AFTER THE FĀṬIMID PERIOD

The collapse of the Fāṭimid state and the advent of Ayyūbid control over Yemen in the later twelfth century brought turbulent times to many Jewish communities. In the Yemen, messianic expectations among local Muslims led to a period of religious persecution, with many Jews forced to convert to Islam. At the same time, in the equivalent of 1172–73, a false

<sup>57</sup> Extensively published, see Aviva Klein-Franke, "Tombstones Bearing Hebrew Inscriptions in Aden," *Arabian Archaeology and Epigraphy* 16 (2005), 161–82, with extensive bibliography.



Figure 7.4 Carved basalt tombstone, one of a pair incised in Hebrew to the memory of Madmyah, the daughter of Se'adyah, the son of Abraham, who died in 1644 of the year of contracts (Seleucid era, equivalent to 1333 CE) (99 x 72 x 15 cm)

Source: British Museum accession number 1886,0711.2 © The Trustees of the British Museum



messiah arose there and through his preaching attracted many Jews. It was in the context of this perceived internal threat to the community that the leader of the Yemeni Jewish community, Jacob b. Nethanel Fayyūmī, approached Maimonides, then Head of the Jews in Egypt, who wrote the now-famous “Epistle to Yemen” – in fact a compilation of several responsa establishing the falsity of the so-called messiah’s claim and entreating Yemeni Jews to keep their faith.<sup>58</sup> Maimonides’ communication earned him an enduring place in Yemeni Judaism, a fact noted in the later fifteenth century (1489) by the Italian rabbi Obadiah da Bertinoro, who remarked in a brief description of Yemenite Jews that “they do not possess the Talmud but Rav Alfasi (Isaac Alfasi, 1013–1103) with commentary and Maimonides, may his memory be blessed. And everyone, big or small, is proficient in Maimonides, because they only study him.”<sup>59</sup> Maimonides’ works were also, it would seem, of central importance to Indian Jews, described around the same time by the Portuguese traveler and Jewish convert to Christianity Abraham Franco, who reported that the “sixty tractates (of the Talmud) are not among us, only a few of them, and all of the Maimuni (Maimonides’ code, the *Mishneh Torah*) is in our hands.”<sup>60</sup> If, during his lifetime, Maimonides (1138–1204) had lamented what he considered to be a lack of religious education among Indian Jews,<sup>61</sup> references such as these point to the wide and enduring impact of his *Mishneh Torah* in the Jewish world of the Indian Ocean.

Yemeni Jews continued regular contact with Jewish centers around the Mediterranean and Middle East. The aforementioned letters from the Babylonian authority Sherira Ga’on were sent to Yemen two decades before Moses Maimonides’ “Epistle.” After Maimonides’ death, his son and successor, Abraham Maimonides, is also remembered for another exchange of letters with the Yemen about various aspects of Jewish practice such as the amount of the marriage payment stipulated in the *ketubbah*, the “open” and “closed” sections written in Torah scrolls, betrothal in front of two witnesses, the permissibility of gluing a piece of cotton in a book on the Sabbath, and, inevitably perhaps, the issue of the appointed time of the Messiah – as

<sup>58</sup> The epistle to Yemen has been researched and discussed intensively; see, amongst others, Mordechai Akiva Friedman, *Maimonides, the Yemenite Messiah and Apostasy* [Hebrew] (Jerusalem, 2002), 37–48.

<sup>59</sup> Abraham Yaari, *Iggerot Ereš Yisra’el: shekatvu ha-yehudim ha-yoshevim ba-areš le-ahibem she-ba-gola mi-yney galut bavel ve-’ad shivat šiyon she-be-yamenu* [Hebrew] (Tel Aviv, 1943), 140. See *ibid.*, 542–43, for the sources cited.

<sup>60</sup> Cited in Arthur Michael Lesley, “Shingly in Cochin Jewish Memory and in Eyewitness Accounts,” *Journal of Indo-Judaic Studies* 3 (2000), 15.

<sup>61</sup> A famous lament included in his letter to the Jews of Lunel in France; see Avraham Lichtenberg, *Anthology of the Maimonides Responsa and Letters* (Leipzig, 1859), 3:44.

Maimonides himself had discussed in his “Epistle.”<sup>62</sup> Other matters, such as the question of the types of bread and wine suitable for the correct performance of the full grace after meals and the agricultural calendar in Yemen, offer important insights into the difficulties of translating Judaism’s two key ritual foods, namely, grape wine and wheat bread, beyond the Mediterranean, to Yemen (and indeed India).<sup>63</sup>

Ayyūbid rule over Yemen came to an end in 1229 to be replaced very rapidly by a new, independent regional dynasty, that of the Rasūlids, founded by ‘Umar b. ‘Alī in 1235. As Indian Ocean and trans-Eurasian trade boomed, the Yemen could only benefit and with it, we suppose, Yemen’s Jewish communities. Genizah materials largely peter out for the Yemen by this period, leaving scholars once again reliant on Islamic sources for Jewish history. While the poll tax and other marks of *dhimmi* status continued to be imposed – for example, during the reign of the Rasūlid al-Ashraf Ismā‘il II (r. 1427–38), the Jews of Ta‘iz were forced to wear a colored belt and destroy new synagogues in the city<sup>64</sup> – on the other hand, we also hear of Jews active at the sultan’s court. Around 1397, the Rasūlid sultan al-Manṣūr employed a Jewish physician, and another Jew was in charge of the treasury in ‘Aden in the beginning of the fifteenth century.<sup>65</sup> Yet conversion continued to be rewarded and the sources speak of a procession through the city of Zabīd of newly converted Jews bestowed with robes of honor.<sup>66</sup>

The Rasūlid period was also one of intellectual exchange between Jewish and Muslim scholars. Jews had long been exposed to Muslim philosophical literature; in the Yemen this was often of an Ismā‘īlī orientation, but intellectual currents also flowed in the opposite direction when a Yemenite Jew transcribed Maimonides’ *Dalālat al-Ḥā’irīn* (*Guide for the Perplexed*) from its original Judeo-Arabic – that is, written in Arabic but in Hebrew characters – into Arabic script so that it would be available to Muslim scholars.<sup>67</sup>

<sup>62</sup> There are thirteen responsa sent from Abraham Maimonides to the Yemen; see nos. 82–94 in Abraham Maimuni, *Responsa*, ed. Abraham H. Freimann and S. D. Goitein (Jerusalem, 1937), 107–36; also Mordechai A. Friedman, “A Dispute between a Yemenite Divine and R. Abraham Maimuni concerning the Marriage Payment and the Authority of Tradition” [Hebrew], *Te’uda* 14 (1998), 139–92.

<sup>63</sup> On the full grace after meals with sorghum and millet bread, see discussion in Lambourn, *Abraham’s Luggage*, chapter 5, 129–60.

<sup>64</sup> Tobi, *Jews of Yemen*, 68, citing ‘Abd al-Wahhāb b. ‘Abd al-Raḥmān Burayhī, *Ṭabaqāt Ṣulahā’ al-Yaman al-ma’rūf bi-Ta’rikh al-Burayhī* (Ṣan‘ā’, 1994), 198, 218.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.* (Burayhī, *Ṭabaqāt*, 177).

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, 70, citing ‘Alī b. al-Ḥusayn al-Khazrajī, *al-‘Uqūd al-Lu’lu’iyya fī Ta’rikh al-Dawla al-Rasūliyya* (Beirut, 1983), 2:200–208.

<sup>67</sup> Tobi, *Jews of Yemen*, 70.

Even fewer references and insights survive from the brief Ṭāhirid period between the fall of the Rasūlids in 1454 and the Ottoman conquest of 1517. Overall, however, the narrative appears to be one of diminishing social status amidst growing contact with the wider Mediterranean world. An Arabic chronicle from the Yemen mentions the activity of a Jewish rebel and messianic figure in the Ḥaḍramawt between 1495 and 1500, known simply as “the messiah from Haiban.” Ṭāhirid intervention quashed the threat and with it the Jewish community of Ḥaḍramawt. Those who were not killed or did not convert to Islam moved to ‘Aden.<sup>68</sup> Nevertheless, even at this period, pockets of Jewish culture still thrived in the Yemen: Ṣan‘ā’ was evidently a center of active Jewish manuscript culture as witnessed by a group of at least five manuscripts produced in the second half of the fifteenth century.<sup>69</sup> Of these, one justly famous illuminated copy of the Pentateuch is now available in its entirety online through the British Library. Copied with exceptional passages of micrography, its fine double-page finispiece, illustrated here as Figures 7.5(a) and 7.5(b), records that it was finished on the equivalent of 15 August 1469 CE for Ibrāhīm b. Yūsuf b. Sa‘īd b. Ibrāhīm al-Isra‘īlī, likely by the scribe Benaiah b. Se‘adyah b. Zechariah b. Marga (d. 1490), who had already copied a manuscript of the *Former Prophets* for the same patron in 1460–61, and was to produce other texts for him into the 1470s. The manuscript’s illumination, believed to have been carried out by the scribe himself, is fully in the Yemenite style and entirely comparable with contemporary Islamic illumination and decoration from other Yemenite contexts; it should come as little surprise perhaps that the finispiece is in Arabic and uses the Muslim (Hijrī) calendar.<sup>70</sup> Another illuminated and finely bound copy of the Pentateuch carries a colophon recording its production in Ṣan‘ā’ in 1515 (1826 of the Seleucid era) under the patronage of Aaron b. Amram b. Joseph.<sup>71</sup> This important manuscript remains, as far as we know,

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, 74–76; S. D. Goitein, *The Yemenites: History, Communal Organization, Spiritual Life*, ed. Menahem Ben-Sasson [Hebrew] (Jerusalem, 1983), 135–38. The Arabic chronicle is discussed in Robert B. Serjeant, “Material for South Arabian History,” *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 13 (1950), 294.

<sup>69</sup> See list of manuscripts published by the famous scholar of Islamic art Richard Ettinghausen in “Yemenite Bible Manuscripts of the XVth Century,” *Eretz-Israel* 7 (1964), 32–39.

<sup>70</sup> The entire manuscript has been digitized by the British Library and is available at <https://tinyurl.com/b82b9zhr>.

<sup>71</sup> Formerly in the collection of Westminster College, Cambridge, the manuscript was unfortunately deaccessioned in 2007 and sold at Sotheby’s into a private collection; see “Sale catalogue online Western manuscripts,” June 29, 2007, lot 32, <https://tinyurl.com/tehyud>. The manuscript’s present whereabouts are unknown.

(a)



Figures 7.5(a) and 7.5(b) Illuminated double-page finispiece from the so-called San'a Pentateuch, completed in Ṣan'ā', Yemen, on the equivalent of 15 August 1469 CE. The illuminated Arabic finispiece gives the date as ٨٧٤ ٦ Ṣafar and the name of the patron as Ibrāhīm b. Yūsuf b. Sa'īd b. Ibrāhīm al-Isra'īlī

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(b)

Figures 7.5(a) and 7.5(b) (*cont.*)



unpublished. While much note has been taken of the family genealogy subsequently written around the colophon, the manuscript is bound in a box binding, a technique particular to the western Mediterranean and likely evidence for the migration of a Sephardic Jewish bookbinder to the Yemen after 1492. The manuscript was purchased in the late nineteenth century by A. E. Saffrin in Jerusalem from a family of “impoverished Yemenite Jews” and subsequently made its way to the United Kingdom. If this manuscript’s later history fulfills every expectation of the standard narrative of Yemenite Judaism as one of displacement and loss, its production points to the continued vitality of Yemen’s Jewish communities and their ongoing connections to the wider Diaspora in the early sixteenth century.

### THE JEWS OF INDIA AFTER THE TWELFTH CENTURY

Indian Jews, as much as their Yemenite peers, fade into comparative obscurity after the later twelfth century and the end of coverage within the Cairo Genizah even as they prospered. Islamic sources of the first half of the fourteenth century refer to Jewish communities along the Malabar coast at Shaliyat (Chaliyam), Shingly (likely Kodungallur), and at Fandarayna (Pantalayini Kollam, near modern Koyilandi); stories about a former site of Jewish settlement at Kunja-Kari (Chennamangalam) are also reported by Ibn Baṭṭūṭa.<sup>72</sup> What little else we know comes from surviving inscriptions, now carefully tended by the remaining Jewish communities in India. A woman’s gravestone inscribed to the equivalent of 1264 and found just south of modern Mumbai, and a synagogue foundation inscription from Kochi dated the equivalent of 1344, corroborate the Islamic sources. It is impossible to draw conclusions about community size or indeed origins from such sparse material; however, new techniques of human DNA analysis now offer some fresh details. Genetic analyses of Keralan Jews, while repeatedly confirming that “Cochin Jews have both Jewish and Indian ancestry,”<sup>73</sup> also suggest continued and active exchanges with the Middle East after the twelfth century. A 2016 study by Yedael Waldman and colleagues noted in particular “a significant recent Jewish gene flow into this community 13–22 generations (~470–730 years) ago,

<sup>72</sup> See Gamliel, “Back from Shingly,” 64, with references and identifications of each site.

<sup>73</sup> Yedael Y. Waldman, Arjun Biddanda, Maya Dubrovsky, Christopher L. Campbell, Carole Oddoux, Eitan Friedman, Gil Atzmon, Eran Halperin, Harry Ostrer, and Alon Keinan, “The Genetic History of Cochin Jews from India,” *Human Genetics* 135, 10 (2016), 1127–43, [www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC5020127/](https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC5020127/).

with contributions from Yemenite, Sephardi, and Middle-Eastern Jews.”<sup>74</sup> Broadly speaking, then, the genetic evidence points to continued contact and intermarriage between Indian Jews and the wider community from the mid- to late thirteenth century through to the mid-sixteenth century. One later source at least suggests that some Indian Jews were prominent as middlemen in the pepper trade and traveled to Cairo as part of their business, a millennium-old route of interaction that explains exactly this genetic pattern. The Italian rabbi Obadiah b. Abraham da Bertinoro noted in the 1480s that he had previously encountered two dark-skinned Indian Jews in Egypt and that “people say that most of the pepper and spices that they sell originated from their land.”<sup>75</sup> More than their business activity, however, da Bertinoro was interested in Judaism in India; his report, however brief, offers an important insight into a community otherwise undocumented until the sixteenth century. Obadiah writes that

we could not determine whether they follow the laws of the Karaites or the Rabbimates, because they seem to keep a few customs of the Karaites, such as not keeping fire in their houses in Shabbat, but they follow the Rabbimates in other customs. And they say they are affiliated with the tribe of Dan. . . . This is what I have seen and heard with my own eyes and ears, although the two persons knew only very little Hebrew, and their Arabic is hardly comprehensible to the people of this land.<sup>76</sup>

This report bears out data from the slightly later and better-known letter received in 1520 by David Ibn Abi Zimra from the Cochin Jews. Discussion of the passage has naturally focused around the dispute between more recently arrived Jews who possessed “lineage” and the majority of Indian Jews seen as descended from intermarriages with local Indians and slaves, exactly the intermarriage pattern documented for Abraham Ben Yijū in Mangalore in the mid-twelfth century. However, equally important are the details it gives about the port’s Jewish community barely a quarter century after the establishment of direct contacts with Europe and the western Mediterranean. The letter notes that Cochin’s Jewish community numbered 900 households, the majority of which (800) were Indian Jews. They were, furthermore, “rich, devout, and charitable,” close to the royal house and the government, and therefore the main intermediaries for merchants.<sup>77</sup> Few original documents or

<sup>74</sup> Ibid.     <sup>75</sup> Yaari, *Iggerot Eres Yisra’el*, 133 (sources cited in *ibid.*, 542–43).     <sup>76</sup> Ibid.

<sup>77</sup> Discussed in Katz, *Jews of India*, 61–62; also Gamliel, “Back from Shingly,” 59–60. For the text of the letter, see J. B. Segal, “White and Black Jews of Cochin: The Story of a Controversy,” *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland* 2 (1983), 228–52.

manuscripts of any age have survived in India itself and it is thus often through European and Middle Eastern eyes that this community's distinctive practices emerge. Important work by José Alberto da Silva Tavim on the records of the Portuguese Inquisition tribunals held in Goa in the 1560s brings details from the interrogation of Indian Jewish converts on the community's Purim celebrations, their ritual use of raisin wine (another feature shared with the Yemen), and so much more.<sup>78</sup> Notwithstanding Portuguese and other European influences along the western seaboard, India's Jewish communities remained prosperous and influential as witnessed by the magnificent teak Kadavumbagan synagogue built in Cochin between 1539 and 1544, the ceiling of which was rebuilt in the Israel Museum.<sup>79</sup> While the Torah ark is of later manufacture, the surviving coffered ceiling may well be original. As the *Ṣan'ā'* Pentateuch of 1515 reminds us, Yemen was also not a cultural desert and there are opportunities in both places to refine our understanding of what may initially appear to be periods devoid of history.

Recovering the stories of both Yemenite and Indian communities is undoubtedly a complex endeavor. With the exception of the material in the Cairo Genizah, sources and material remains are few before the eighteenth century. Both histories have also been constrained by the gaze of Middle Eastern and European Jews, too easily distracted by the "black" skins of Yemenite and Indian Jews, bodily signs of the "exotic" east in which these communities were perceived to live. The Jews of Yemen and India enjoyed a long and often intertwined history, and one equally connected with the wider Jewish Diaspora. While there is no denying the reduced status of the Yemenite Jewish community as *dhimmīs* within an Islamic state as compared to that of Jewish communities in India, neither condition guaranteed a single outcome: prosperity and status or persecution and poverty. If we are to recover and complicate these histories, we need to widen our understanding of what exactly makes history. Arabic sources offer, as Joseph Tobi showed for the Yemen, an important new angle; likewise, the potential of the Cairo Genizah made available through the efforts of S. D. Goitein and Mordechai Akiva Friedman has allowed a new generation of scholars to revolutionize Indian Ocean history and with it Jewish histories in the Yemen and India. But we must also look

<sup>78</sup> José Alberto da Silva Tavim, "Purim in Cochin in the Middle of the Sixteenth Century according to Lisbon's Inquisition Trials," *Journal of Indo-Judaic Studies* 11 (2010), 7–24.

<sup>79</sup> Published in Orpa Slapak, ed., *The Jews of India: A Story of Three Communities* (Hanover, 1995), 56–63; the later (eighteenth or nineteenth century) Torah ark is now preserved in Israel at Moshav Neḥalim.

to deaccessioned manuscripts, to epitaphs and foundation inscriptions, to inquisition records, to Malayalam Jewish oral records as mined by Ophira Gamliel, to synagogue interiors, and one day – hopefully – to archaeology as well. Yemenite Jews were a dynamic and complex society; Indian Jewry was no less so, and at times the two shared an interconnected history.

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