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The Slave of Ms.H.6.

Amitav Ghosh



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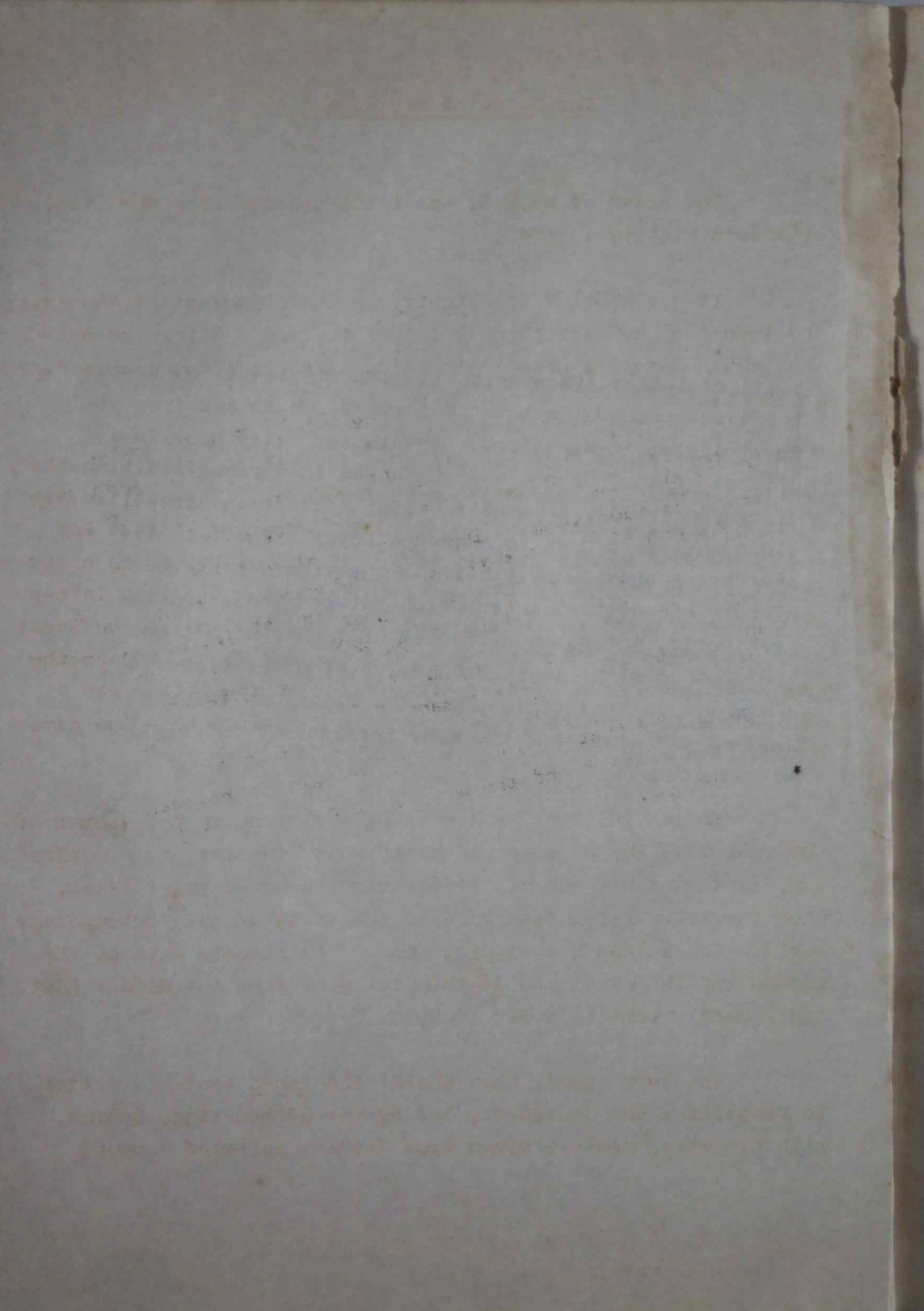
Centre for Studies in Social Sciences, Calcutta  
10, Lake Terrace  
Calcutta- 700029.

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### ABSTRACT

The collection known as the Geniza Documents contains a set of letters from which it is possible to construct the life-sketch of a 12th century Jewish trader from Egypt living in Mangalore. The letters also provide a glimpse of an Indian slave who acted in various positions of responsibility on behalf of this trader and travelled along the sea routes to Aden and Egypt. The two life-sketches suggest many important questions about the history of cultural interaction between India and the Arab world, the cosmopolitanism of the trading towns of the west coast of India and the development of trade languages in that region, marital relations between Indians and Arabs and the many intricacies in relations of servitude.



The Slave of Ms. H. 6.

1

The slave of Ms.H.6. was first ushered upon the stage of modern history in 1942.

It was a brief appearance, in the obscurity of theatres; and then too, he was scarcely out of the wings before he was gone again - more a prompter's whisper than a recognizable face in the cast.

This first appearance occurs in a short article in the Hebrew journal Zion<sup>1</sup>, published in Jerusalem. The article was written by Dr. E. Strauss, and it dealt with new sources for the history of Middle Eastern Jews. It contained, among other things, a transcription in Hebrew characters, of a long letter written by a merchant in Aden and sent to a friend and business associate who was then living in the town of Mangalore, on the southwestern coast of India. The writer of the letter was called Khalaf ibn Ishaq; his friend in Mangalore bore the name Abraham ibn Yiju.

Khalaf ibn Ishaq's letter was written, in the summer of the year 1148 AD: a moment in history as singular, in a curious way, as that other moment, almost eight hundred years later, when the slave first stepped upon the stage of the contemporary world. The Sultan Nūr al-Din, who was to prepare much of the ground for the expulsion of the Crusaders from the Middle East, had recently come to power in Syria.<sup>2</sup>

The very summer that Khalaf ibn Ishaq sent his letter to Mangalore, the Crusaders, led by the German king, Conrad, with his army, newly-arrived from Germany suffered a major

reverse on the plains near Damascus<sup>3</sup>. The price of this defeat was so great, writes the contemporary Arab historian, Ibn al-Athir, that after the battle "the German Franks returned to their country, which lies over yonder, beyond Constantinople, and God rid the faithful of this calamity"<sup>4</sup>. A no less critical battle, fought on the plains west of Alexandria, at al-'Alamin, was to usher in the slave upon his appearance in 1942.

Khalaf ibn Ishaq is probably not ignorant of the events that are taking place at the other end of the peninsula, while he is writing his letter to his friend. He and his fellow merchants in Aden make it their business to keep themselves well-informed. From season to season they follow the fluctuations of the prices of iron, cardamom and pepper in the markets of Cairo. They are always quick to relay news that concerns them to their friends in the Malabar<sup>5</sup>.

But in this letter Khalaf ibn Ishaq does not concern himself unduly with politics or warfare. He and his friends usually prefer to leave the carrying of that kind of news to the travelling merchants and seamen who take their letters to India<sup>6</sup>. Here he writes to Ben Yijū<sup>7</sup> about a certain family matter; sending him news of an itinerant and worrisome brother<sup>8</sup>. He goes on to acknowledge receipt of some goods that Ben Yijū has sent him: a shipment of areca nuts; two locks of Indian Manufacture, and two bowls from a Mangalore brass workshop in which Ben Yijū has an interest<sup>9</sup>. He informs him that he has sent him some presents - "things which have no price and no value" - "two jars of sugar, a jar of almonds and two jars of raisins, altogether five jars"<sup>10</sup>.

It is only at the very end of the letter that the slave makes his entry. Khalaf ibn Ishaq, while sending his good wishes to Ben Yijū and his children, mentions him especially, and sends him "plentiful greetings"<sup>11</sup>.

It is an ordinary trader's letter; the mention of the slave is so brief as to be hardly worth notice. But it happens to come to us from a time when the only people for whom we can even begin to imagine a properly individual, human existence are the literate and the consequential: those who have the means to inscribe themselves physically upon history. The slave of Ms.H.6., was none of those things and it is only because of a series of extraordinary accidents that in his instance the barely discernible traces that the humble and the ordinary leave upon the world happen to have been preserved. If this initial mention of his name echoes so loud eight centuries later, it is surely because that scarcely audible whisper has all the promise of the first murmur of rain in a plague of drought.

In his commentary on the letter, Dr. Strauss described the people who figure in it as "mostly merchants"<sup>12</sup>. That was about all that was known of them then. Dr. Strauss was also careful to note that this is the first document of its kind in which the town Mangalore had been mentioned<sup>13</sup>.

In 1942 even that had the status of a discovery<sup>14</sup>.

2

The slave's second appearance occurred twenty-four years later, in a collection of letters written by Jewish

traders in the Middle Ages, translated into English by S.D. Goitein.

The slave's role is no less brief here, but this time he has a bigger part in the production: he has earned himself a footnote. His second appearance, like his first, occurs in a letter written by Khalaf ibn Ishaq. But in the twenty-four years that have passed between the two he has slipped backwards in time: he is ten years younger now. The letter in which his name now appears was written by Khalaf ibn Ishaq in 1138 AD: Nūr al-Din's father, Sultan Zangi is still alive, busy acquiring cities through well planned marriages, and the troops of the Byzantine Emperor, John Comnenus have withdrawn northwards after a futile campaign in Syria<sup>15</sup>. But here, even more than later, business weighs heavily on Khalaf ibn Ishaq's mind: a consignment of pepper lost in a shipwreck at the Bah al-Mandab; cardamom received and silk dispatched to the Malabar; accounts for a long list of household goods that Ben Yijū had asked to have sent to Mangalore, complete with an apology for the misadventures of a frying-pan - "You asked me to buy a frying-pan of stone in a case. Later on, its case broke, whereupon I bought you an iron pan for a nisafi, which is, after all, better than a stone pan."<sup>16</sup>

But for all the merchandise mentioned in it, the letter's spirit is anything but mercenary: it is lit with a warmth that Prof. Goitein's translation renders, still alive and glowing, in cold English print. "I was glad" writes Khalaf ibn Ishaq, "when I looked at your letter, even before I had taken notice of its content. Then I read it full of happiness and, while studying it, became joyous and cheerful..."



You mentioned, my master, that you were longing for me. Believe me that I feel twice as strongly and even more than what you have described....<sup>17</sup>

Again the slave's brief entry occurs towards the end of the main body of the text; again sends him "plentiful greetings", mentioning him by name. To this mention of his name is attached a footnote. It explains him as: "(Ibn) Yijū's slave and business agent, a respected member of his household"<sup>18</sup>.

Terse as this is, there is a promise of more to come in Prof. Goitein's preface to the book. When this collection appeared, the first two volumes of Prof. Goitein's monumental study, *A Mediterranean Society* had already been published. They had been immediately acknowledged as a landmark in the writing of medieval history. In his preface to the collection of letters, as in many previous publications, Prof. Goitein recorded his intention to publish a similar study of the trade between India and the Middle East in the same period. This was to be his *India Book*<sup>19</sup>, the product of a lifetime of scholarly labour. It was to contain his translations of a corpus of several hundred documents relating to the India trade. The eloquent brevity of that one footnote already contains the pledge that some of these documents would contain more material on the life of the slave.

But thirty years after Prof. Goitein first announced its gestation, the *India Book*<sup>20</sup> had yet to appear; other pressing concerns had pushed it to the margins of Prof. Goitein's scholarly program. It was still under preparation when he died in 1985. The publication of his drafts and notes for the book has been promised, and is still eagerly awaited.<sup>21</sup>

The published oeuvre that Prof. Goitein left behind is immense; the complete bibliography of his work lists over fifty pages of entries. This oeuvre was, naturally, profoundly informed by his lifelong study of the material for his India Book. He had also already published the catalogue numbers of about three hundred documents related to India, including those that concerned Ben Yijū. Other clues to that material lie scattered through his notes and publications like the trail of a windblown treasure hunt. It was this trail of clues that provided the beginnings of the research that has led to this narrative: it is to the pioneering labours of Prof. Goitein that the stories of the slave, and his master, Ben Yijū, are most deeply indebted.

In 1966 however, that footnote rang the curtain upon the slave once again. Thus ended his brief career in the modern world; in an obscurity only a shade less dense than that of his earlier life in the medieval.

3

The slave of Ms.H.6. owes the preservation of his memory to an epical series of accidents and coincidences. The documents in which he figures are part of an immense trove of manuscripts that were discovered in Cairo in the 19th century. They were recovered from a chamber that had been built into the back wall of a medieval synagogue in a quarter of Cairo known as Fustat, or Old Cairo, which was once the capital of Islamic Egypt.

In the Middle Ages Jews, like Christians and Muslims considered it sacreligious to destroy any written token of the name of God. In Jewish communities it was the custom to deposit all such pieces of writing in an appropriate place until they could be buried on consecrated ground, as a safeguard against the possibility of the desecration of God's name<sup>22</sup>. This custom is observed to this day in some Jewish communities.

Synagogues usually had depositories built especially for this purpose. These chambers were known by the term 'Geniza'<sup>23</sup>. Not all the documents deposited in these chambers had to do with strictly religious matters. If the two bags of tricks called 'religious' and 'secular' had been invented then, it could have been said that many of the documents were in fact largely secular in nature<sup>24</sup>. For it was the custom of the community, as it is among many Muslims today, to invoke the name of God in some form, before beginning on almost any piece of writing, whether it was a business letter, or an account, or even a bill of lading because no act was thought to be too ordinary to fall beyond the sweep of God's work. Thus the Genizas were repositories for documents of every kind; they were, so to speak, the sacrosanct wastebin for most of the writings of their congregations.

Of the innumerable Genizas that once dotted the Middle East, only one has survived intact into modern times. This is the Geniza of the synagogue of the Palestinians in Fustat. Documents were deposited in the Geniza in varying amounts for almost a thousand years, beginning in the 11th century and ending in the 19th. In fact, the document that

is thought to be the last to have found its way into the Geniza, is a divorce bill written in Bombay in 1879<sup>25</sup>. Most of the documents that relate to the trade with India however date from the 11th. and 12th centuries<sup>26</sup>: a period in which Egypt, under the rule of the Fatimids, assumed the political and economic leadership of the Middle East. Cairo at this time was probably the premier city of the Old World. It was at this time too that the Jewish communities of the Middle East were most active in the India Trade. Later, in the 13th century, a syndicate of Muslim merchants gradually gained control of the trade, squeezing out other communities. In its prime however, the congregation that prayed at the Synagogue of the Palestinians in Fustat consisted of an extraordinary gathering of people: in the 11th and 12th centuries it probably had no equal in wealth, learning and influence anywhere among the Jewish communities of the world. The great Talmudic scholar Mūsa ibn Maimūn, known to the western world as Moses Maimonides, was one of its members. The 12th century Hebrew poet, Judah Halevy, is known to have prayed there as well.

Most of the prominent members of the congregation however, were traders and merchants. And since, in this period, the trade with the east was the motor of the international economy<sup>27</sup>, many of the merchants of the synagogue of Fustat were inevitably involved in the India trade. Maimonides himself had a hand in the trade, and his brother Da'ūd is thought to have died on his way to India<sup>28</sup>.

The community was also involved in the merchandising of eastern products in southern and southeastern Europe, and

many of its members had extensive connections throughout the mediterranean. Indeed several Jewish merchants based in Fustat are known to have travelled regularly between Europe, Egypt and India<sup>29</sup>.

The merchants of the congregation were as richly varied in their geographical origins as they were well travelled. They came to Fustat from every region of the Arab world: Spain, and Maghreb, Sicily, Iraq, the Levant, and the Yemen. The wealthiest and most influential members of the community in fact, had their origins not in Egypt, but in North Africa, particularly the regions of modern Tunisia and Algeria that were known to the Arab geographers as Ifriqiya.

For centuries the Cairo Geniza was the repository of much of the written material produced by this uncommonly diverse community. The number of documents deposited in it began to decline progressively after the 13th. century, and in time the flow nearly stopped altogether. For centuries after that, the Geniza had the good fortune to be forgotten. Rumours of its existence began to leak out the world in the 18th century. The first confirmed reports date to the mid-nineteenth century<sup>30</sup>. These reports started a small-scale race between the Great Powers for the acquisition of the documents. By the turn of the century, the documents, many tens of thousands in number, had been dispersed over the globe. They are now referred to collectively as the Geniza Documents. The largest collection by far is that of the Taylor-Schechter Collection in the Cambridge University Library.<sup>31</sup> But there are substantial collections also in Leningrad, Oxford,

Budapest, Paris, Vienna, London, Jerusalem and at least two cities in the U.S.A. . Ironically, Cairo, which bred and nurtured the documents over so many centuries, has none left today. Nor, until very recently, have Egyptian scholars and politicians concerned themselves with these documents as they have, for example, with the Gnostic Gospels<sup>32</sup>. Deceived perhaps, by the current divisions of the Middle East they seem content to excise them from their conception of their history.

The body of documents was so large and their dispersal so haphazard that sections of many manuscripts were divided between several collections. It is only because of the painstaking work of scholars such as Prof. S.D. Goitein that some of the connections between these documents have been discovered. Even today, although much labour has been expended on the Geniza collections, it can still truthfully be said that the work on the documents has only just begun.

Amongst the papers of the Geniza, about seventy have been indentified, most of them by Prof. Goitein as being related in one way or another to Abraham Ben Yijū<sup>33</sup>. Some of these are letters sent to him by friends and associates at various points in his travels. The others are letters and a variety of other documents, including poems, accounts and calendrical calculations, that he wrote himself. Ben Yijū also sometimes acted as a scribe for friends who wished to take advantage of his remarkably clear and elegant handwriting<sup>34</sup>. It is this strikingly distinctive hand that has proved to be the principal means for the identification of his papers.

Many individual fragments of paper contain several different documents - a letter from a friend, for example, with other texts written by Ben Yijū in the margins or on the reverse side. Paper was scarce and expensive at the time and in his conservation of it Ben Yijū displayed the care of a craftsman.

Some of the documents relating to Ben Yijū have been published - a few in English translations, and some in Arabic transcriptions. I have myself deciphered and translated fortytwo of these documents from the original manuscripts<sup>35</sup>. It is these few fragments that provide such material as there is on the life of the Slave.

Each of these documents has a story of its own: of travel from Aden and Egypt, to Malabar and Sicily and then back again to Cairo - medieval histories that somersault into a further chronicle of travel and dispersal in modern times. Their history has the baffling elusiveness of lights seen in parallel mirrors: they are both the stuff of history and history itself, as real as a battle or a temple; they are each a living history and a commentary on the writing of history; a mocking aside on how Histories are stolen, bought and traded in the marketplace. The story of the Slave of Ms.H.6 is one tiny spark within the bright lights of this looking glass chamber, faint, elusive and often jeering.

4

If I have deferred the naming of the slave it is because his name is one of the few pegs I have on which to hang a history.

The documents in which the slave's name is mentioned, like most of the manuscripts of the Geniza, are written in a language that has come to be known as Judaeo-Arabic. This is one of the many varieties of Arabic that came into being when the language of the Arabian peninsula came into contact with other languages after the Islamic expansion in the 7th and 9th centuries<sup>36</sup>. Along with the other peoples of the conquered regions Aramaic-speaking Jews were soon assimilated into the use of Arabic<sup>37</sup>.

Arabic-speaking Jews were using Arabic as a medium of literary expression, at least as early as the 10th. century and by the 12th century when Moses Maimonides wrote his Guide for the Perplexed Arabic had become the language in which Middle Eastern Jews discussed their most sacred matters<sup>38</sup>. But theirs' was not quite the language their Muslim contemporaries used in their writing<sup>39</sup>. Muslims, influenced as they were by the language of the Koran, usually tried to write as close an approximation of the classical language as their abilities permitted. The classical language had no such significance for Jews, of course, and as a result they tended to write in a style that was much closer to the spoken Arabic of their time<sup>40</sup>. At the same time, even when Hebrew had ceased to be the language of communication for Middle Eastern Jews, it had lost none of its scriptural and religious significance, and literate Jews devoted much of their education to the study of Hebrew texts. Sections of these texts would often pour out of their memories and many of the Judaeo - Arabic documents of the Geniza are thickly strewn with Hebrew and Aramaic words and phrases. But usually Hebrew passages



occur in the form of scriptural quotations and customary sayings, for not all of those who wrote in Judaeo-Arabic knew enough Hebrew to be able to express themselves adequately in it.

The most important difference between Arabic and Judaeo-Arabic is also the most immediately noticeable: the latter is written in the Hebrew script. To serve this function, the Hebrew alphabet had to be modified because it possessed fewer characters than the Arabic. So diacritical dots, like those used in Arabic were introduced, although in practice, the dots were rarely used and single Hebrew symbols often served for two Arabic characters<sup>41</sup>. But the system still proved workable enough to last over a millenium: it was still in use among the 'Iraqi of Bombay in the 19th century<sup>42</sup>.

It is this script, in a sense, that has sealed a vault of mystery upon the slave's name. In Hebrew, as in Arabic, short vowels are not normally indicated in the written language. So the only clue the documents provide to the slave's name is a set of three consonants: B-M-H. The last of these is probably not a consonant at all, but rather the open vowel known in Arabic is the teh merbūta, often represented by the same symbol. These three characters are all that we have to go on; if they were to be taken at face value they would endow the slave with the puzzling and unlovely name 'Bama' or 'Bamah'<sup>43</sup>.

The first difficulty in looking for a root for this word is that we have no means of knowing what language the slave was named in. It is almost certain that he first came

into Ben Yijū's service while Ben Yijū was living on the Malabar coast. But he may well have been brought there from the far rims of the Indian Ocean - from the slave markets of Zanzibar or Barbera, or, like much of the slave population of the Middle East and north India, from the steppes of Asia, and the mountains of the Balkans and the Caucasus. There are some indications that slaves from western Europe were regularly traded in India and China. Ibn Khordadbeh, the 9th century Persian chronicler, wrote of the Jewish merchants of his time: "they travel from the west to the east, and from the east to the west.... From the west they bring eunuchs, female slaves, boys, silk brocades,<sup>44</sup> furs, and swords. They set off from the country of the Franks on the western sea and travel....to Sind, India and China. On their way back they carry musk, aloes, camphor and cinnamon, and other products of the eastern countries"<sup>45</sup>. A list of the goods exported from the Maghreb to the East, recorded a century later by the geographer Ibn Hauqal, includes women of mixed Byzantine-Berber-Muslim origin, and Byzantine and Slavonic boys and slave-girls<sup>46</sup>.

Evidently, slaves from the coast of the Mediterranean, the interior of Europe, and Africa were regularly sold in India and the Far East in the early Middle Ages. But both the accounts I have quoted predate the lifetime of the slave of Ms.H.6. by centuries. At the time when Khalaf ibn Ishaq was writing of him, the possibility of his having come to the Malabar from Europe was much diminished, for the Crusades had intervened in the meanwhile, severely disrupting the trade routes of the Mediterranean.

There is a hint however, that Ben Yijū may have done business with slave-dealers from the Yemeni town of Zabid. It lies in a couple of sentences in a letter written to him by a correspondent in Aden at some point during his stay in the Malabar. I quote: "This year the traders (jallab) have not come here yet from Zabid....because they are staying (home) to celebrate (the feast of) 'Id. They will only set out after the 'Id.'" <sup>47</sup>

The suggestion lies in the word he he used for 'trader'. It is conspicuously not the word that was generally used for that purpose in such letters. The dictionaries list one of the connotations of this other word as 'slave-trader' <sup>48</sup>.

If Ben Yijū were indeed waiting for a visit from Yemeni slave-traders he would be doing nothing untoward for a man of his time and circumstances. Slavery in his era had none of the connotations that European capitalism was to give it after the 16th century. It was a common practice for merchants in his position to recruit slaves as business agents and apprentices. These slaves were usually manumitted after a period in service <sup>49</sup>.

It is known for certain that Ben Yijū acquired more than one slave during his residence in the Malabar. But if he was actively involved in trading in slaves this is certainly the only indication of it in the documents - and a nuance in a word's meaning counts as a suggestion of a possibility rather than as proof.

The alternative possibilities for the slave's origins brim over. Yet, it seems to me that there are good reasons for believing that he was in fact from the Indian subcontinent. To begin with the puzzling characters in the slave's name are themselves an indication that he was not brought to India from the Middle East. Slaves sold in the markets of the Middle East were usually given Arabic names of a distinctive kind - Lu'lu' (Pearl), for example, and Jawhar (Jewel)<sup>50</sup> - names that placed them just beyond the boundaries of ordinary human society. But the slave's name is almost certainly not of Arabic origin and it bears no names to those market names.<sup>51</sup>

The language of the documents provides only one farther clue to the mystery of the slave's name: in Judaeo-Arabic as in Arabic, doubled consonants are usually represented only by a single character. Since these consonants occur only in the medial position it is possible that the medial 'M' in B-M-A is a doubled consonant. If that were so it would mean that the letters were intended to represent a word which has roughly the shape B-M-M-A. The first vowel in the word is clearly a short vowel, but we have no indication of which it is. The word could be Bamma, but there are several other possibilities as well, such as Bimma or Bomma.

Prof. Goitein suggests a solution to the question of the name in the very footnote in which the Slave makes his second appearance. He reports that A.L. Basham, the historian of ancient India, was of the opinion that 'Bama' "is vernacular for Brahma."<sup>52</sup> The suggestion is that the Slave's name was derived from the name of the Hindu deity Brahma.

If this were so it would be in many ways an entirely satisfactory solution. To those of us who are continually surprised by that word's journeyings - Brahma qattle in Argentina, Brahma beer in Brazil, American made Brahma pick-up trucks in Finland - there would be something wholly appropriate in granting the Slave this well-travelled name. But attractive as it may seem this possibility is not so much a solution as a second riddle posed in answer to the first.

In the first place we may be sure that the Slave's name as it is represented in the documents is not a misspelling, or a mishearing of the word 'Brahma'. That deity was well-known to Arab travellers and geographers, and accurate transcriptions of the name Brahma and of similar words like Brahman, had been current in Arabic since the tenth century<sup>53</sup>. Ben Yijū and his friends would almost certainly have been familiar with the word and with the established conventions for spelling it in Arabic. In any case Ben Yijū, who lived in India for seventeen years, would certainly have been able to provide at least as accurate a transcription as, for instance, the traveller Mas'ūdi who only spent a short time in the country. We may be sure therefore that whatever the Slave's name may have been it was not Brahma.

The name - whether it was Bomma, Bamma, or even Bama - may well have been a derivative of Brahma: indeed it seems almost likely at first glance. But Brahma is a word of Indo-European, Sanskritic origin, while the Slave, if Ben Yijū did in fact acquire him in Mangalore, was probably weaned on a Dravidian language, and given a name current in a Dravidian

tongue. If we consider further that in general, Sanskritic names in Dravidian-speaking regions tend to be appropriated by the upper castes, while the Slave was almost certainly born into one of the lower castes, then the matter becomes more puzzling still. In that apparently simple connection then, there lies a gap caused by historical processes at whose workings we can only begin to guess. And given the sparseness of the sources for the reconstruction of the social history of medieval India the best we can do is to try to explore that gap with such contemporary tools as come to hand, clumsy though they may seem. We have no choice in the matter, for the name Brahma is clearly not a solution but a shaky first step, and it has already tipped us over the edge.

5

Six years or so after Ben Yijū took up residence in Mangalore, not far from that city a man was killed while trying to rescue his masters' cattle from raiders. The man's name was Masaleya Bamma. His masters were known as the 'One Thousand Fighters' and they made a grant of 'wet' land in their servant's memory, and caused an inscription to be carved in stone recording his deed and their commemoration of it. The inscription is dated June 15, 1126 A.D. and it was discovered in what appears to have been Masaleya Bamma's native village, Tilivalli, in Dharwar District, less than two hundred miles in a north-easterly direction from Mangalore<sup>54</sup>. Another inscription of the same period records a marriage between one Setti-Bamma of a merchant family (Vaishya-kula) and a pious woman called Akkanabbe. The inscription was found in Athani Taluka, Belgaum District, about 380 miles north of Mangalore<sup>55</sup>.

The inscriptions prove beyond all doubt that the name 'Bamma' was a common one in the 12th century at least, in the region to the immediate north-east of Mangalore<sup>56</sup>. Other inscriptions of the period prove that there was an active cult of Brahma worship in that area in the same period<sup>57</sup>.

This is worth remarking on, for although the god Brahma is one<sup>of</sup> the deities of the Hindu trinity, the active worship of Brahma is so rare that it has been said "in Hindu devotion Brahma has no following at all."<sup>58</sup> To the best of my knowledge there are no active Brahma shrines today in the region in which the inscriptions were found. Indeed, there could not be, I was once told by a woman of that area, for had not Brahma lusted after his own daughter and forced upon her that primal incestuous act of which the world was born<sup>59</sup>.

Yet Brahma figures regularly as an element in names in that area. Equally, names like Bomma, Bommai and Bommaya are common there, as well as in the region around Mangalore, even today, and in folk etymology they are generally linked to the deity Brahma.

An attractive chain of reasoning seems to suggest itself: a series of links between the Sanskritic Brahma and the Bomma of the inscriptions, and between both and the Slave of Ms.H.6. But that very attractiveness urges caution: the Slave was probably born in the vicinity of Mangalore, and despite the short distance that separates that region from the east, it is in fact a different ecological, linguistic and cultural world.

Mangalore sits upon a distinctive geographical formation: the strip of land that runs the length of the western coast of the subcontinent, along the foot of the range of mountains that stands like a wall between the sea and the massif of the Deccan peninsula. It is a thin shaving of land, barely 25 kilometres wide for much of its length, sliced into fragments by 114 short rivers which flow almost directly from the mountains into the sea<sup>60</sup>. The part which begins to the immediate south of Bombay and runs as far as Trivandrum in Kerala, is an exuberantly green stretch of country with a tropical climate and moderate temperatures. It receives a great deal of rain, but its rivers and canals serve to drain it well, so that excesses of rainfall can be channelled harmlessly into the sea. Unlike the east coast, it is blessedly free of cyclones, tidal waves and sudden floods.<sup>61</sup> Its coastline is generally smooth and the mouths of its many rivers can be used to serve as ports.

Only a short distance, a few dozen miles, separates this strip of land from the plateau to the east. But between them stand the Sahyadri Mountains - the Western Ghats - a formidable barrier, with an average height of almost 4,000 feet.<sup>62</sup> It serves to wring much of the moisture of the monsoons upon the coast: to its west the average annual rainfall ranges between 300 and 500 cm.; to its east, between 60 and 80 cm.<sup>63</sup>. To its west lies a lush well-watered tropical land; to the east a dry semi-arid zone in which water must be carefully husbanded<sup>64</sup>. The western strip grows a good deal of rice, but much of it is also planted with valuable tree crops and spices: coconut, areca-palm, rubber, cashew, pepper and cardamom<sup>65</sup>; the plateau grows mainly cereals and pulses<sup>66</sup>. The land on the coast has



some of the highest levels of productivity in India; the plateau has some of the lowest<sup>67</sup>. Today the land in the district of which Mangalore is the capital, South Kanara, yields from one and a half to four times as much as the land in the transmontane districts of the same state<sup>68</sup>. The figures are telling enough, but the difference between the two ecological regions is not of a gently graded statistical kind; it is so marked and sudden that it can be seen with the naked eye, from an aeroplane.

All along the lower two-thirds of the coast, a cultural divide accompanies the ecological. At the same time, the coastal strip is not a single cultural region either: it contains several, which shade gradually into each other, from the Indo-European-speaking region of the Konkan to the Dravidian-language regions of the south. Often the shores of the short wide rivers that shoot out of the Ghats serve both as boundaries and as negotiating tables between these regions. Each of these coastal regions is distinct, but like a watchmaker's cogs, they are also closely and intricately articulated with each other. Amongst several of the larger castes, for example, there are recognised chains of equivalences which extend from region to region<sup>69</sup>. The regions also have in common the fact that they are all markedly different from their counterparts in the hinterland. The degree of the difference varies at different points: towards the south lie the series of related regions that are now grouped together as Kerala - an area that has some affinities with its eastern neighbour, Tamilnadu, but is

largely a self-contained linguistic and cultural region. Towards the north, in the Konkan, the affinities between the coast and hinterland become more pronounced, although the coast still retains its distinctive identity<sup>70</sup>.

The region around Mangalore forms a kind of multi-jointed hinge: between the northern and southern parts of the coast, and in the manner that those two regions are related to the eastern hinterland. The region is known as Tulunad or Tuluva, after the language spoken by a large proportion of its inhabitants, Tulu. The Ghats and the Arabian Sea serve as its natural boundaries on the east and west, and the two rivers, the Chandragiri and the Sharavati, on the south and north<sup>71</sup>. The region is today a part of the state of Karnataka, whose official language is Kannada, but one of its most distinguished historians has remarked: "...the Tulu country ...has retained to this day its geographical identity and has come to form a part of the state of the Karnataka purely through an accident of history"<sup>72</sup>.

But in the geography of human history no culture is an island, and the fact is that Tulunad is even less so than its neighbour to the south. The Tulu language, for instance, which is structurally akin to Kannada, has a rich repertoire of oral traditions, but it does not possess its own script, and so has not developed its own literature<sup>73</sup>. When it is written, it is usually in the Kannada script, and since late antiquity inscriptions in the region have generally been written in Kannada<sup>74</sup>.

For much of its history the region has had a distinct political identity of its own. For twelve centuries or so it was ruled by a single dynasty, the Alupa or Aluva<sup>75</sup>. The dynasty is first mentioned in Kannada inscriptions of the fifth century A.D., but it probably came into power in the first centuries of the Christian era, for Ptolemy, the Alexandrian geographer of the 2nd. century A.D. identifies the Tuluva region as Olokhoira, a term which is widely accepted to be a corruption of Alvakheda, 'the land of the Alvas'<sup>76</sup>. For most of their history the Alupas preserved a certain measure of autonomy for themselves and their principality by judiciously picking allies amongst the various dynasties that followed each other to power in the regions to their immediate east and south: the Chalukyas of Badami, the Rashtrakutas, the Pallavas, the Chalukyas of Kalyana, and the Cholas<sup>77</sup>. It was in the reign of the Alupa king, kavi Alupendra (c.1110-c.1160) that Ben Yijū came to Mangalore<sup>78</sup>.

In the 14th. century the Hoysalas, after repeated attacks on Tulunad from the east, finally dethroned the dynasty<sup>79</sup>. But even afterwards the area kept a certain distinctiveness, culturally and politically<sup>80</sup>. In effect Tulunad was a region in the sense of the word desa, or the French pays - country is too loaded a term to use - an area like many others in the subcontinent, not 'independent' but distinctive and singular, and precisely because of that, enmeshed with its neighbours in an intricate network of differences.

One aspect of this distinctiveness is that this region, in defiance of the views of Indologists, possesses what seems to be a flourishing cult of Brahma worship. There are said to be several Brahma shrines in Tulunad,<sup>81</sup> and one scholar reports Brahma to be the central deity in one of the most important of Tulu folk epics (paddanas), the myth of the wronged wife Siri.<sup>82</sup>

But upon closer examination the matter turns out to be more complicated still: the images of the Tulu Brahma, for example, seem unrecognisable. In classical Hindu iconography Brahma is usually represented as a four-headed, four-armed figure accompanied by a goose<sup>83</sup>. In Tulunad, on the other hand, 'Brahma' is usually represented as a figure seated on a horse, with a sword in hand<sup>84</sup>. These icons look nothing like the finely moulded bronze and stone images of Sanskritic deities that can be seen in Tulunad's many large and celebrated temples. Images of the Tulu 'Brahma' are usually carved very simply, in wood, and painted in bright colours<sup>85</sup>. Their most remarkable feature is usually the face: a simple oval shape, dominated by a pair of huge eyes, and long curling moustaches, an image that brings to mind images of hero-figures, both in Tulunad and elsewhere<sup>86</sup>. The figures are housed, not in temples, as the classical deities usually are, but in small shrines called Brahma-sthanas<sup>87</sup>. Indeed, all the important temples of Tulunad are either Jaina temples, or temples dedicated to the familiar deities of mainstream Hinduism: Shiva, Vishnu, Krishna, and manifestations of the Devi. To the best of my knowledge there is not a single Brahma temple in their number<sup>88</sup>.

Upon closer reading the 'Brahma' of the Siri folk epic too becomes an increasingly puzzling figure: a personal, often wrathful deity who protects Siri through various trials but eventually punishes her female descendants with a dreadful curse. Siri is herself an unusual kind of female protagonist. Outraged by the preference her husband shows for his mistress, she leaves, taking her child with her, and eventually obtains a divorce and marries again<sup>89</sup>. She would be an improbable symbol of female virtue almost anywhere in India, but she is a key figure in the Tuluva pantheon of heroes and heroines. The matter becomes clearer when we learn that she was born into a caste called Bant, for the Bants are one of many Tuluva communities whose rules of inheritance are primarily matrilineal<sup>90</sup>. Clearly, the virtues she personifies are not those of the patrilineal mainstream of Indian society.

The cult of Siri is closely related to the principal institution of popular religion in Tuluva: a complex of spirit-cults and possession rituals that are known as the cult of Bhūta worship<sup>91</sup>. The sense of the word 'bhuta' in Tulu is very different from the meaning the word carries in some other Indian languages. In northern India the word 'bhuta' generally refers to a ghost or a malign presence, but Tulu bhūtas on the other hand, though they have their vengeful aspects, are often benign, protective figures, ancestral spirits and heroes who have been assimilated to the ranks of minor deities<sup>92</sup>. Some of the deities of pan-Indian myth have been assimilated into the Bhūta cult, but for the most part the Bhūtas are thought of as local, personal deities, and the Tuluva villagers speak of them as "'our' gods"<sup>93</sup>. In some ways the Bhūtas are

comparable to the yakshas, ganas, nagas and devis, who flourish everywhere in Hindu India<sup>94</sup>. But unlike lesser divinities in most places, the Bhūtas of Tulunad are worshipped through an elaborate ritual complex with its own legends, festivals and rites, as well as a form of theatre which bears a family resemblance to the more celebrated Yakshagana and Kathakali styles native to that part of the coast<sup>95</sup>.

The constituency of the cult, so to speak, consists of a certain set of the middle and lower castes of Tulunad. These castes cover a wide expanse of the hierarchy, ranging from ruling landlords to Untouchables. But by tradition, they all play designated roles in the cult - one provides patronage, another tends the shrines, and some enact the rituals - and in certain ways they all participate in the ethos that makes the culture of Tulunad distinctive<sup>96</sup>. Together they form a distinct social group with deep roots in the region, and their shared cultural institutions mark a boundary of sorts between them and the other groups that inhabit Tulunad. Tuluva Brahmins, for example, who are by tradition said to be immigrants into the region, participate only indirectly and in very limited ways in the Bhūta cult<sup>97</sup>.

The most important distinguishing mark of the shared culture of these castes, apart from the Tulu language and the Bhūta cult, is a form of succession and inheritance that is governed by what is known as the Aliya-santana law. By the rules of this system of law, men transmit their immovable property, not to their own children, but matrilineally, to their sister's children<sup>98</sup>.

All the castes that participate fully in the Bhūta cult are governed to some degree by rules of matrilineal succession<sup>99</sup>. The Tuluva Brahmins who for the most part do not, are entirely patrilineal<sup>100</sup>. One of the institutions that the matrilineal Tuluva castes have in common is a set of loose groupings called balis, a term that has been translated as 'lineages'<sup>101</sup>. The institution is evidently of some antiquity for balis are mentioned in several early medieval inscriptions. They are exogamous groupings corresponding to the Brahmanical gotras, except that their membership is determined matrilineally<sup>102</sup>. They also bear some resemblance to exogamous totemic groups since, unlike gotras, they derive their names from a wide variety of sources, such as place-names, personal names, names of deities and so on. The number of such names is considerable: over one hundred and thirty are mentioned in inscriptions alone. Some of the balis were shared amongst the castes, and Bhatt observes that affiliation to the balis gave the non-Brahmin Tuluva "a cohesion, a solidarity in society...."<sup>103</sup>

The principal matrilineal Tuluva castes (or caste groupings) are the Bants, the Billavas, the Mogerars and the Holeyas. A British official, Francis Buchanan, who travelled through South Kanara in 1801, just two years after the British took possession of the area kept detailed records of their relative numbers at that time. At Buchanan's request the Collector of the district, a Mr. Ravenshaw, provided him with a list of statistics which described the composition of the district's population. Buchanan and Mr. Ravenshaw evidently had more faith in the mathematical value of caste than the

'native officers' who collected the information. Buchanan thought the list to be accurate 'with respect to numbers', but he also found it necessary to apologise for the account, while chiding his informants for the hopeless plasticity of their social lives: "The different castes are detailed in the usual confused manner, with which they are spoken of by the native officers of revenue"<sup>104</sup>.

But for Buchanan's caste numbers were power, and he was not deterred. He compiled a formidable inventory which divided the district's total population of a little less than four hundred thousand, into 122 castes, whose numbers ranged from 5 to 50,000. Of the total, the Bants number 52,819, the Billavas 53,764, the Mogera 11082, and the Holeya 52,022<sup>105</sup>. Together these four castes, accounted for about 43% of the district's total population at that time<sup>106</sup>. The proportion does not seem large, but at the time when Buchanan visited South Kanara the district's population had long been swollen by the Konkani immigrants who had been squeezed out of the region of Goa after the Portuguese conquest. Even today the Tuluva are in a majority in the southern parts of the district<sup>107</sup> and it is probably fair to conclude that in the Middle ages they constituted the bulk of the area's population.

Of the four major Tuluva castes the Bants are the highest ranked and until quite recently they controlled most of the land in Tulunad<sup>108</sup>. The earliest epigraphical references to them date only as far back as the 10th and 11th. centuries, but their presence in the area almost certainly goes much further back<sup>109</sup>. As landowners they played a central



role in the organisation of Bhūta-worship, for the cult was closely articulated with gradations of space, each field, village and region being related to a particular spirit or set of spirits<sup>110</sup>. But the actual custodianship of the Bhūta shrines was not in their hands: as a rule the tending of the shrines and the conduct of the rituals were the prerogative of certain Billava sub-castes<sup>111</sup>.

Of the Billavas, Buchanan notes that "(they) pretend to be Sudras, but acknowledge their inferiority to the Bants", and adds that those of them "who are in easy circumstances burn their dead; those who die poor are buried"<sup>112</sup>. They are often characterised as 'today-tappers' like their counterparts in Malabar, the Tiyas, who are also popularly credited with the introduction of coconut farming into south India<sup>113</sup>. They are traditionally associated with the collection of toddy and the distillation of liquor, although the great majority of them are, and probably always have been, cultivators<sup>114</sup>. By tradition they are also associated with the martial arts and the single most famous pair of Tuluva heroes, the brothers Koti-Chennaya<sup>115</sup>, are archetypal heroes of the caste, who symbolise the often hostile competition between the Billavas and the Bants<sup>116</sup>. A Billava sub-caste called Pujari is mainly responsible for the tending of Bhūta shrines and for the conduct of the rituals<sup>117</sup>.

The Mogera, who are variously known as Mogheyara and Magavira, were by tradition the fisherman of Tulunad<sup>118</sup>. Buchanan writes of this caste: "They pretend to be Sudras of

a pure descent, which is rather doubtful...but they acknowledge themselves greatly inferior to the Bants"<sup>119</sup>. By legend and practice they are associated with the sea and sea-faring; an association that is celebrated in the Mogera's own Bhūta cult: the cult of the seafaring spirit, the Bobbariya Bhūta.

The Holeyas were the most disadvantaged of the Tuluva castes: Buchanan characterises them as 'slaves employed in cultivation'<sup>120</sup>. In fact, the term Holeyas appears to lump together several quite different groups<sup>121</sup>. Some of these play key roles in Bhūta-worship, performing special parts in the ritual-theatre and possession-ceremonies associated with the cult<sup>122</sup>.

Mention of the Billavas, Mogeraras and the Holeyas appears fairly late in the inscriptions. The earliest reference to the Billavas, for example, dates only as far back as the 15th. century<sup>123</sup>. But of course this is an indication only of their lack of social power: there is every reason to suppose that all the major Tuluva castes share an equally long history of settlement in the region.

Although the Tuluva castes form a distinct social group they do not, of course, live in isolation from the many other castes and communities that inhabit Tuluva. Of these one of the largest is that of the Tuluva Brahmins. When Buchanan visited Tuluva their numbers added up to almost a tenth of the total population of the district<sup>124</sup>.

The Brahmins were the custodians of the pan-Indian Hindu tradition that formed the complementary other half of the folk-religion of Tulunad. The area has its fair share and more of temples dedicated to the deities of the Sanskritic pantheon, and all of the Tuluva castes who had access to those temples participated in the worship of those deities, just as they did in the Bhūta cult. There was of course, no contradiction in this, for to them the Bhūtas and the Sanskritic deities (devaru) represented aspects of divine and supernatural power that shaded imperceptibly into each other<sup>125</sup>.

The Bhūta pantheon has a hierarchy of its own, a pyramid of divinities which has local spirits and lineage ancestors at its base, the Bhūta-heroes of Tuluva legend higher up its slopes and certain deities known as daivas at the apex<sup>126</sup>. But perhaps an architectural metaphor is inappropriate here, for these rankings are so fluid that new spirits constantly enter at the bottom while the others are swirled upwards and downwards with the passage of time<sup>127</sup>. At its peak this softedged edifice fades gently into the clouds of the Sanskritic pantheon, and hidden in those mists there is a good deal of traffic between them<sup>128</sup>.

It is generally agreed upon that the flow of this traffic was directed by Brahmin priests. The landowners and kings of Tulunad patronised both forms of worship, and temples and Bhūta-shrines were often built close to each other. Sometimes the landlords would appoint Brahmins to supervise the functioning of both temples and Bhūta-shrines, so even though Brahmins did not officiate at Bhūta rituals they were

well-placed to influence the structure of popular religion in the area<sup>129</sup>.

The Bhrahins for their part, had a complex relationship with the divinities of the Bhūta cult. They treated some Bhūtas as ritually impure and relegated their shrines to the outer courtyards of the temples. Other spirits were co-opted and incorporated into the Brahmanical pantheon<sup>130</sup>. Some lesser Bhūtas were transformed into bodyguards for major gods, while the more important Bhūta deities were given Brahmanical indentities or were treated as avatars of Shiva, Vishnu and the Devi<sup>131</sup>. This could not, of course, have been a matter of Brahmin conspiracy. The fact is that the other Tuluva castes must have been willing accomplices in the re-definition of their deities, even though some among them may now be inclined to forget that complicity in the wake of contemporary 'Dravidianist' movements.

The first candidates for Brahmanical co-optation were naturally, the gods who stood at the very top of the Bhūta hierarchy, and foremost among these was a god known as Bermeru or Bemmeru<sup>132</sup>. The final syllable in the name -ru, is an honorific and the name is properly Berme, Birme or Bemme. It is Berme who watches over the fate of the heroes of the folk-epics and it is to him that their protagonists appeal<sup>133</sup>. In the shrines where he is worshipped, he is depicted as a warrior, seated on a horse, sword in hand. He is, in fact, none other than the divinity who is sometimes said to be 'Brahma', But so strong is his character that his co-optation has never quite succeeded; for most Tulu-speaking people he is still Bermeru and even those who refer to him as Brahma usually add his other name in parentheses<sup>134</sup>.

In Tulu legend the name Berme sometimes occurs as a personal name: the father of the heroine Siri, for example, is known as Berme Alva<sup>135</sup>. Both Berme (Bemme) and his alter ego, Brahma, are linked in folk philology to a name that is current among the Tuluva to this day: Bomma<sup>136</sup>. Whether the philological link is actually tenable or not is probably largely a matter of opinion. What is certain is that cognates of both 'Berme' ('Bemme'), and 'Bomma' are closely associated with the naming systems of matrilineal Tuluva castes. It can be established beyond reasonable doubt that both those names were current among the Tuluva in the Middle Ages, for a Bermera-bali, a Bommiya-bali and even a Bommi-settiya-bali<sup>137</sup> are among the many matrilineal balis mentioned in medieval inscriptions<sup>138</sup>. So, whatever the etymological connection between the words Bomma and Berme/Bemme<sup>139</sup>, it is certain that 'Bomma' was widely in currency as a name-element in Tulunad in the Middle Ages.

From that, several related assumptions seem to follow: that the letters B-M-A of Ms.H.6 are actually intended to be B-M-M-A; and that these in turn are meant to spell Bomma, a name current among the Tuluva groups who formed most of the population of the area around Mangalore at the time when Abraham Ben Yijū took up residence there. There is good reason then to believe that the Slave of Ms.H.6 was called Bomma, and that he was born into one of those matrilineal Tuluva castes which have traditionally been linked with Bhūta-worship.

Of course, much of this is founded on the ghost of a letter, the 'm' that may lie locked within the vault of the Geniza's language: on the mere possibility of a doubled consonant

it may be wildly intemperate to make any assumptions at all. But if we were to persist in these rash speculations we would soon arrive at the threshold of a further problem: the question of finding a caste for Bomma.

There is little to guide us: Bomma throws so tiny a shadow that the Geniza yields only three facts about him that are of use here. The first and most obvious of these is the fact of his slavery. The second, that he undertook at least two long journeys by ship, which suggests that he had some acquaintance with sea travel. The third, that he played an important part in Ben Yijū's business, and therefore probably had some acquaintance with trade.

The first of these facts would seem to rule out the Bants, for it is unlikely that a member of the most important landowning community would be sold into slavery. Of the two principal agricultural castes, the Billavas and the Holeyas, the latter seem the more likely possibility since many of them appear to have been bonded serfs living in conditions of extreme poverty. Yet certain other circumstances make the Mogera caste likelier still.

In the first place the Mogerases' affinity for the sea and sea-faring, is well-documented, not merely a matter of customary association. The Portuguese traveller Duarte Barbosa, who travelled extensively on the west coast in the early years of the 16th. century, writes of "another sect of people still lower...which they call moguer...These people

for the most part get their living at sea, they are mariners and fishermen"<sup>140</sup>. They were also closely associated with the Mapilla Muslims, another seafaring community, and with the Middle Eastern traders who lived on the cities of the coast. Barbosa comments: "They are some of them very rich men who have got ships with which they navigate, for they gain much money with the Moors"<sup>141</sup>. Their associations with the Muslims and 'Moors' is commemorated in the legend of the Bhūta who is uniquely the Mogeras' own: the Bobbariya Bhūta, who is said to be the spirit of a Muslim mariner and trader who died at sea.<sup>142</sup> No Mogera settlement is without its Bobbariya shrine: usually a simple pillar and platform of stone, with a wooden mace beside it<sup>143</sup>. None of the communities of Tulunad could have better equipped Bomma for the role he was eventually to play in Ben Yijū's business than the Mogera.

We could assume then, if we so wished, that Bomma was of the Mogera caste since that seems the likeliest possibility. Yet, the exercise may be to no purpose at all: for in dealing with caste, as with schizophrenia, we can never be sure where the fantasies of the analyst end and the plight of the subject begins.

7

The Geniza documents reveal nothing about how Ben Yijū's path came to cross Bomma's. Ben Yijū may well have written to his correspondents in Aden about the matter, for the acquiring of a slave by a trader frequently also meant the introduction of a new employee into the business. But whether he did or not will never be known, for none of the letters Ben Yijū wrote to his friends in Aden ever made their way into the Geniza.

What is left of his correspondence with them is as bafflingly one-sided as an overheard telephone conversation: what Ben Yijū had to say in his letters has to be deduced from the responses in his friends'.

The first positively dateable reference to Bomma occurs in a letter sent to Ben Yijū in 1135 A.D.<sup>144</sup>. Ben Yijū had already been at least three years in the Malabar at the time<sup>145</sup>.

The letter is a remarkable one: one of the most unusual in the Geniza. In part it is a letter of complaint. The cause for complaint is Bomma: his behaviour has outraged the morals of Ben Yijū's correspondent. But Ben Yijū's correspondent has also had another, greater shock recently: Aden, where he lives, has been the target of a naval raid. What remains of the letter he wrote to Ben Yijū after the occasion bears the suggestion that Bomma, upon his very first appearance in the Geniza documents, may have been present at the enactment of a full-blooded historical event, more than a thousand miles away from his home in Mangalore.

The letter has an unusual history of its own. Two copies of it were sent to Ben Yijū from Aden: one is the original letter, in the writer's own hand, and the other is a copy made by a scribe and sent as a precaution against the hazards of the voyage<sup>146</sup>. Both reached Ben Yijū, and in order to make better use of the empty spaces on them, he cut them both into smaller sections. What is preserved of the letter



consists of one fragment from each version. Through some fortunate co-incident the two fragments happen to complement each other perfectly, so that even though a small part of the beginning has been lost, the bulk of the letter has been preserved. But the letter's careers did not end with their delivery to Ben Yijū in the Malabar. The reverse side of one fragment is covered with accounts written by Ben Yijū in the small cramped hand he used for making rough notes and calculations<sup>147</sup>. To him they were probably ordinary, entirely dispensable scribblings. But a few of the names and phrases he happened to jot down in them have made this fragment one of the single most important sources of information on his life.

The man who launched this letter on its career was a key figure in the trade of the Indian Ocean. His name was Madmūn ibn al-Ḥasan ibn Bundar, and he was the Nagid or Chief Representative of the merchants of Aden<sup>148</sup>. He was also the head of the Jewish community of the city, and the superintendent of the port's customs; a man of great influence and importance whose network of friends and acquaintances stretched from Spain to Sri Lanka.

Several of Madmun's letters have been discovered among the Geniza documents. They are the letters of a bluff businessman, crisp and straightforward, but certainly no masterpieces of style. Yet, precisely by virtue of their ordinariness they deserve to rank among the most important testaments of the 12th. century.

The letters are spread over several fragments, some of them written in Madmūn's own hand, and some by scribes. Madmūn himself wrote a terrible hand, a busy, trader's scrawl, forged in the bustle of the marketplace<sup>149</sup>. But he had several competent scribes in his employ, and they produced beautiful copies of his originals, carefully cleaning up his syntax and spelling. Indeed their attention may have sometimes tried their employer's patience, for some of the copied fragments end in swathes of Madmūn's rapid handwriting, as though, tiring of his scribes' fastidiousness, he had snatched the letters out of their hands and added a few last instructions before the ships that were to carry them drew anchor.

Nothing is known of how or where Madmūn and Ben Yijū first encountered each other. The document that is probably the first item in their correspondence was written by Madmūn when Ben Yijū was already in the Malabar<sup>150</sup>. On the evidence of Madmūn's early letters, Ben Yijū's relationship with him at that time fell somewhere between that of an agent and junior partner. Ben Yijū may have worked for Madmūn in Aden, as an employee or apprentice, and it was probably because of Madmūn's support that he succeeded in setting up his own business in Mangalore.

Madmūn's early letters to Ben Yijū are full of detailed instructions, and beneath the surface of their conventionally courteous language there is a certain peremptoriness, as though he were doubtful of the abilities and efficiency of his inexperienced protege<sup>151</sup>. But in his own way he is also indulgent and protective of Ben Yijū: he finds

time to add the occasional encouraging word and he is always solicitous of Ben Yijū's comfort and well-being, never neglecting to send him sugar and raisins from the Middle East. And more than any of Ben Yijū's other correspondents he seems to recognise the value that paper has for Ben Yijū, and often he goes to great lengths to procure him paper of the very best quality<sup>152</sup>.

Ben Yijū's correspondence contains several letters from two other men in Aden. One is a merchant and judicial functionary called Yūsuf ibn Abraham ibn Bundar; on the evidence of his letters, a careful, somewhat pedantic man given to occasional bouts of acute anxiety<sup>153</sup>. The other was Khalaf ibn Ishaq, with whom Ben Yijū and a particularly close friendship.

These three men, Khalaf ibn Ishaq, Yūsuf ibn Abraham and Madmūn ibn Bundar were relatives, and had close connections with one another as well as with a vast network of merchants, both in Aden and far beyond<sup>154</sup>. The threads of their relationships stretched like a cat's cradle across the known world, from Morocco to Malaya: it was a circumstance so dispersed that it almost precluded the notion of exile.

Ben Yijū himself was born into a corner of this far-flung world - at a point not far from its western edge, and he probably reached Aden by way of Egypt. It was a well-worn route, the first stretch of which led from the Mediterranean ports of Rosetta, Damietta and Alexandria, to Cairo by boat<sup>155</sup>. From Cairo it took the traveller, usually by boat again, to the town of Qūs, an important roadhead and trading centre in Upper

Egypt<sup>156</sup>. From Qūs the traveller was required to undertake a twenty-day journey, at a south-south-easterly tack, across a barren and inhospitable stretch of the Eastern Desert<sup>157</sup>. At the end of the journey lay the port of 'Aidhab, which linked Egypt with Aden by way of the Red Sea.

'Aidhab was one of the curiosities of the eastern route: an outpost in a barren desert that existed solely for trade. From the 10th century onwards it was a vital link in the routes to the east. It was visited by a great number of travellers and merchants and it figures in several books of travel and geography<sup>158</sup>. Early in the 15th century the town was destroyed upon the orders of the Sultan Barsbay, and soon all that remained of it was a few ruins and a quantity of Ming pottery<sup>159</sup>.

A curious fragment from the Geniza links Ben Yijū to **this** doomed port. Our first notice of this document occurs in the very letter in which Madmūn records his shock at Bomma's disorderly behaviour. There are two cryptic sentences towards the end of this long letter: "The carrier of this letter will deliver to you a letter from Makhlūf al-Wutūm, which he sent from 'Aidhab, and of which I already have more than 20...He is old, and has become feeble-minded, and he is reaching the end of his life, and doesn't know how to go on"<sup>160</sup>.

The letter that Madmūn forwarded to Ben Yijū evidently reached him: a fragment which is almost certainly a part of Makhlūf's letter travelled with the rest of Ben Yijū's papers

to the Geniza. It reads thus: "My master (Madmūn) accords me all his affection and his services. God knows and has witnessed my love for the master...Shaikh Abraham ibn Yijū bespoke the portorage of 5 bahars (from me). (But) every time I see him he crosses words with me, so that I have become frightened of him. Each time he says to me: Go, begone, perish...a hundred times...(My master Madmūn) deals with me according to his noble character and custom...I spoke previously to the ship-owner about this matter, and he told me I should turn to you...(I ask) of your High Honour, to act in this matter, until you reclaim the (money)... Stand by me in this, and strengthen your heart, oh my lord and master... and extend your help to me...."<sup>161</sup>

Nothing else is known about the writer of this letter. He may have been a trader who travelled often to India, in which case the incident he reports - or imagines - could have occurred there. But Ben Yijū had not been long in India when the letter was sent to him, and it is equally possible that their paths had crossed a few years before in Aden or 'Aidhab. In either case, Madmūn clearly went to a good deal of trouble on his protege's behalf: exercising his judicial powers he issued writs clearing Ben Yijū of all claims and demands<sup>162</sup>.

Madmūn's comments on Makhlūf are the only grounds there are to judge whether he was merely possessed of senile fantasies or whether he was really the victim of some piece of sharp practice on Ben Yijū's part. But Madmūn's letter permits no conclusions either: the dismissiveness of their tone may have been merely a gesture of politeness to spare

Ben Yijū's feelings. Madmūn is hardly to have forwarded the letter to Ben Yijū if he thought the complaint to be entirely unfounded.

There is one last piece of evidence that bears upon this incident. It occurs in a later letter from Madmūn to Ben Yijū. It consists of a brief entry on the debit side of Ben Yijū's account. It says: "For the affair of Shaikh Makhlūf, three hundred dinars exactly"<sup>163</sup>.

Apparently Ben Yijū thought the matter worth settling.

8

The event at which Bomma may have been present occurred in Aden in 1135 A.D. He had probably been sent there to buy goods for Ben Yijū's household. The event was not of any great significance, but it still made an impression deep enough to earn itself a place in a history written a century and a half later<sup>164</sup>. It was nothing more significant than a raid on Aden by a fleet of ships sent by the Amir of Kish (Qais), a tiny island principality at the mouth of the Straits of Hormuz. The then rulers of Kish were given to piratical expeditions which spread much alarm up and down the coasts of the coasts of Africa, India and the Arabian Peninsula. Even distant Cambay, on the west coast of India, had to be fortified against their depredations<sup>165</sup>. The raid to which Bomma may have been a witness was not one of their more successful forays. The defenders of Aden repulsed the raid and the Amir's fleet had to scurry back to Kish as best it could. Still, it threw the city into turmoil and prompted the usually business-like Madmūn to compose a long descriptive passage in his letter to Ben Yijū.

This passage has been published in English by Prof. Goitein: "This year, at the beginning of the seafaring time, the son of al-'Amid, the ruler of Kish, sent an expedition against Aden demanding a part of the town, which was refused, whereupon he sent this expedition... (The fifteen ships) remained in the haven of Aden (awaiting)<sup>166</sup> the incoming ships, but did not enter the city. The people of the city were very much afraid of them, but God did not give them victory or success. Many of them were killed and their ships were thrust with spears and they died of thirst and hunger. The first of the merchants' ship to arrive were the two vessels of the shipmaster Ramisht. They attacked them but God did not give them victory. As soon as the ships entered the port, they were manned with a great number of regular troops, whereupon the enemy was chased from the port and began to disperse on the sea. Thus God did not give them victory and they made off in the most ignominious way, after having suffered great losses and humiliation..."<sup>167</sup>.

The published passage leaves out the first six lines of the document. They are worth retrieving: they show that despite his still lingering alarm, the memory of the raid was not the uppermost thought on Madmūn's mind when he wrote this letter. That honour was reserved for Bomma: he had walked into his office, very drunk, and demanded money.

This is how the lines read: "And after that he (Bomma) started on other things. He said: Give me more money, (what I have) is not enough. He took 4 months money from me, eight dinars. Often, he would come here very drunk, and would not

listen to a word I said"<sup>168</sup>. He ends with the plaintive complaint: "I do not know what the need was for my Master to send him here"<sup>169</sup>. He does not neglect, later in the same letter, to debit Ben Yijū for the eight dinars that he advanced to Bomma<sup>170</sup>.

The letter does not provide any indication of whether Bomma was actually present in Aden when the raid occurred. We must assume that he was. The prospect of a troop of Adenese soldiers being cheered into battle by a drunken Bomma is too valuable to be lightly forsaken.

9

This raid occurred in 1135 A.D. and Madmūn's letter was probably written later the same year<sup>171</sup>. This makes it one of the earliest of the reliably dated documents that relate to Ben Yijū's stay in the Malabar. But it is not the very earliest. The first of Ben Yijū's documents that have been precisely dated was written on the 17th of October, 1132 A.D. in Mangalore<sup>172</sup>.

The date is known because it happens to be a legal document and thus takes note of the place where it was written and the day of its writing. The document was attested by Ben Yijū himself and is of great importance. It is one of the few tiny openings that allow a little light into the dense obscurity of his personal affairs.

In this document Ben Yijū grants manumission to a female slave<sup>173</sup>.



How long he had been in India at the time of its writing we can only guess. Certainly he had been there long enough to acquire slaves and set up a household, so it may have been as much as a year or two which would mean that he had moved to Mangalore in 1130 or 1131 A.D. .

Nothing is known of how old Ben Yijū was at that time. The documents provide no leads at all on when he was born, or even where. The clues to his early life are few and scattered. The leads are so meagre in fact, that we have to deduce what we can from the various ways in which his correspondents write his name.

Ben Yijū's friends are usually addressed by their given name and a patronymic - Khalaf ibn Ishaq, for example. This is, of course, an old and widespread custom in the Middle East. Further names are sometimes added to these: names of prominent ancestors, place-names, nicknames that get attached to a lineage, and so on. The name Ben Yijū was of this kind: it probably derived from the name of a Berber tribe who had once been the protectors of the family. The lineage proved to be large and long-lived: its descendants have kept the name Ben Yijū alive in France and North Africa to this day.<sup>174</sup>

To this lineage name Ben Yijū's immediate family and friends sometimes added a place-name, al-Mahdawi<sup>175</sup>, which links them to the city of Mahdia, now a small town on the Tunisian coast. This name does not necessarily imply that Ben Yijū was born there, but it does establish that he and his family regarded Mahdia as their original home.

There are other chance references in the documents that suggest that Mahdia was the city of Ben Yijū's youth. Many years after he had left the region of the Mediterranean, one of his nephews, trying desperately to trace his whereabouts, wrote a letter to a family friend: "I wished to ask whether (my master) has any news of my uncle, Abraham, known as Ben Yijū for we have not heard from him for some time"<sup>176</sup>. The letter was addressed to Mahdia.

For a brief period between the last quarter of the 11th. century and the first half of the 12th., Mahdia became the most important port in Ifriqiya and a centre of Jewish cultural and economic life. The earlier part of the 11th. century was a period of exceptional instability for the region. The Fatimids of Egypt, growing suspicious of a refractory feudatory, had persuaded two Bedouin tribes, the Banū Hilal and Banū Sulaim to attack Ifriqiya<sup>177</sup>. Over the next several decades the Bedouin laid waste much of that region; Qairawan, the principal city of the region was sacked in 1057 A.D. and then again in 1060 A.D.<sup>178</sup>. Almost all of the city's Jews were driven out, and since the administrative centre of the area had moved westwards, towards Mahdia, many of them went with it. Other more distant threats were developing in the meanwhile - the Norman power in Sicily, and the fanatical Murabiṭin (Almoravids) in the Maghreb - but for a few decades over the turn of the century, Mahdia and its Jewish community appear to have been left in peace<sup>179</sup>. It was probably at this unusually tranquil and prosperous juncture of the city's history that Ben Yijū was born<sup>180</sup>.

Ben Yijū's contemporary, the geographer, al-Idrisi, had a personal acquaintance with Mahdia. He had a few sharp words to say about the quality of the water in its cisterns, but otherwise, he found much to admire in the town: it had pretty buildings, nice promenades, magnificent baths, and numerous caravanserais; its inhabitants were generally good-looking and well-dressed "and altogether Mahdia offered a view of something wonderful"<sup>181</sup>

Mahdia was really two cities, by his account: Mahdia proper, which consisted of the citadel and the Sultan's palace, and the district of Zawila which was as "remarkable for the beauty of its bazars and its buildings as for the width of its streets and its crossroads". Many rich and intelligent merchants lived there, al-Idrisi adds, and the inhabitants of the district wore white clothes and were models of physical and moral perfection<sup>182</sup>.

It is here, in the large and prosperous Jewish quarter, that the Ben Yijū family would have lived. But their family was probably on the margin of their community's prosperity: they do not appear to have been a part of the engine of its creation.

What can be gathered of Ben Yijū's father, Farhīa<sup>183</sup>, from chance references in the documents suggests that he was a religious teacher and scholar, a man of some standing in his community, greatly respected for his piety and learning<sup>184</sup>. He had two sons besides Abraham, Mubashshir and Yūsuf, and one daughter, Barkha<sup>185</sup>.

Barkha figures only incidentally in the papers: all that can be said of her is that she married a man called Marwan, and that her relations with her brother Abraham were always cordial<sup>186</sup>. Mubashshir on the other hand, inspired little trust in his family. His schemes were eventually to earn him his brother Abraham's disgust: "As for Mubashshir, he is a lazy man, malevolent at heart"<sup>187</sup>.

Yūsuf, in contrast, was notably pious and almost foolishly unworldly<sup>188</sup>. Yusuf's three sons, in turn, grew up to be models of piety and learning. Their letters, written in fine, calligraphic Hebrew scripts, are thickly studded, like their father's, with Biblical quotations and allusions. In time their connection with their uncle Abraham was to launch them upon an odyssey that would end in an unexpected intersection with the people of the Malabar coast.

As for Ben Yijū himself, he had something in him of both his brothers - the adventurer and the scholar. He was well-schooled in Hebrew as well as in scripture and religious law, and upon occasion he even served as a judge in inheritance disputes. Several of his writings have to do with religious matters, and he was evidently careful in the performance of his religious duties<sup>189</sup>. Yet, Ben Yijū's piety does not have the demonstrative quality of his brother Yūsuf's: he was no less learned in the scriptures than his brother, but the quotations in his letters are notable more for their appositeness than their quantity.

Ben Yijū also had literary inclinations. He wrote poetry in Hebrew and a few of his verses have survived. They are formulaic eulogies written upon the death of two men he held in great respect<sup>190</sup>. His letters, on the other hand are written in the colloquial, earthy diction of Judaeo-Arabic, in a style that is anything but formulaic. While several of his correspondents take pleasure in playing upon the sounds of words, Ben Yijū's language is always clear and direct, although he is adept enough in the crafts of poetry to slip in, under the deceptively plain surface of his prose, a few scattered images of arresting power and beauty.

While Ben Yijū's father managed to give at least two of his sons a fine education, he was probably at best an indifferent provider. Like many scholars of his day - including for example, Moses Malmonides - he may have dabbled in trade in order to support his family<sup>191</sup>. But his enterprises do not appear to have flourished: certainly he did not bequeath a great material patrimony to his children. His sons Yūsuf and Mubashshir both spent most of their lives in modest circumstances, and Yūsuf's family were eventually reduced to dire poverty<sup>192</sup>. It was probably in order to avoid a similar fate that Ben Yijū entered the transcontinental trade that brought him eventually to Aden.

Ben Yijū was clearly warmly received in Aden, and formed many friendships there. The society of Aden at the time was one which he would have found congenial: a community of prosperous and enterprising merchants who also took a cultivated interest in literature<sup>193</sup>. The milieu must have

been both comfortable and attractive for Ben Yijū, and yet, at some point before 1132 A.D. he left Aden and moved to the Malabar.

There was nothing unusual in itself about his move to India. Merchants involved in the India Trade visited India frequently, and many of them appear to have spent long stretches of time there. Madmūn himself, for example, was clearly well acquainted with the trading community of Mangalore, and had obviously spent a good deal of time there. Within the circumstances of his profession, Ben Yijū's departure for India could be seen as perfectly normal - but for two reasons.

The first is that most of the other Middle Eastern merchants involved in the India Trade travelled back and forth at frequent intervals between the ports of the Indian Ocean and the Mediterranean. There is the example of Halfon ibn Nathane'el al-Fayyumi, a wealthy trader who was probably the man who showed Ben Yijū the ropes of the trade when he first moved to India. Halfon's travels are well-documented for he left behind a rich legacy of papers in the Cairo Geniza. His correspondence shows that over a period of several years he moved almost continuously between Egypt, Spain, Aden and the Malabar<sup>194</sup>. In Ben Yijū's case on the other hand, there is no positive evidence whatever to indicate that he travelled to Aden or Egypt even once during the eighteen years or so that he lived in India.

The second reason lies in a curious manuscript in the Taylor-Schechter collection in Cambridge<sup>195</sup>. The manuscript is about eleven inches long and five and a quarter inches wide; it is badly damaged and some of the text is corrupt and difficult to decipher. Like many such documents, it is a fragment of a much longer letter.

The scrap that has survived contains the beginning of the original letter. The name of the sender of the letter is mentioned in it, but almost as an afterthought, in a hasty scribble above the first line of the main text: it was Madmūn ibn al-Hasan ibn Bundar, Ben Yijū's mentor in Aden.

The name of the person for whom the letter was intended is not mentioned anywhere in the text and the address has been lost with the rest of the letter. Thus there is no definite proof of who Madmūn was writing to. But the fragment also contains a good deal of writing which has nothing to do with the main text: passages written in the margins and on the reverse of the letter. Their contents are of no particular importance; their significance lies in that they are written in another hand - almost certainly that of the person to whom the letter was sent. The hand is unmistakably Ben Yijū's.

Since much of Madmun's letter is very similar in content to the other letters he wrote to him, there can be no reasonable doubt that the letter was sent to and received by Ben Yijū<sup>196</sup>.

The bulk of the main text is perfectly straightforward and deals with routine business matters. Madmūn acknowledges a shipment of areca nuts, mentions the sale of some pepper, and lets Ben Yijū know that certain goods have been delivered to Khalaf ibn Ishaq and Yusūf ibn Abraham.

The puzzling part consists of a short six-line passage. This is my reading of it; in it Madmūn, following the conventional protocols of these letters, refers to his correspondent as 'my master', and to himself as 'his servant':

"Concerning what he (my master) mentioned (in his letter): that he has resolved to return to Aden, but that which prevents him (from returning) is the fear that it would be said that he had acted rashly. His servant spoke to (the King) al-Malik al-Sa'id concerning him...and took from his guarantee as a safeguard against his return, insha'allah. So he (my master) has nothing to fear: (the King) will resolve everything in his court (jalūs) in the country of India (al-bilad al-hind)<sup>197</sup>. And if, God forbid, he were to lose... what he has with him, and his children were part of that..."<sup>198</sup>.

The rest is lost: it was upon this unfortunately incomplete line that Ben Yijū's hands fell when he was tearing up the letter. We can only be grateful that chance spared the few lines of the passage that have been preserved.

No other document contains any mention of whatever matter it was Madmūn was referring to in his letter. Unless



the rest of the letter is discovered some day among the papers of the Geniza, nothing more will ever be known of it.

The passage permits only one positive conclusion: that Ben Yijū's departure from India was not entirely voluntary - that something had happened in Aden that made it difficult for him to remain there or to return.

It could perhaps have had something to do with a debt or a financial irregularity. But by the time this letter was written Ben Yijū was a merchant of some standing. If it were only an unpaid debt that stood between him and his return to Aden, his friends would surely have exerted themselves to settle the matter quickly and quietly. In any case it is improbable, at the very least, that Madmūn would have had to intercede with the ruler of Aden in a purely civil dispute.

The passage is infuriatingly brief, and the careful discretion of Madmūn's language has wound a farther mystery around an affair that is already heavily shrouded in it. For instance, the term he uses to describe the ruler of Aden's safeguard is one of those Arabic words that can spin out a giddy spiral of meanings. The word is dhimma, whose parent and sister words mean both 'to blame' as well as the safeguards that can be extended to protect the blameworthy. Here the word could mean either that the ruler had agreed not to prosecute Ben Yijū for some misdeed that he had been accused of. Or it could mean that he had given him his pledge to protect him from people whose enmity Ben Yijū had cause to fear. In the Middle East, this is the kind of guarantee

that is sometimes extended to the family of a man who has killed someone. The guarantee protects them from a retaliatory killing and permits them to negotiate the payment of blood-money.

This, and that torn last sentence, with its hint that the matter somehow implicated Ben Yijū's kin as well as himself, is all there is to suggest that Ben Yijū may have had to flee Aden because of a blood-feud. For all we know it may just as well have been a question of unpaid taxes.

10

All that is known about the crossing of Bomma's path with Ben Yijū's is that it probably happened between 1130 A.D.. We have no means of knowing how Ben Yijū acquired him or why. But for a foreign merchant setting up in business, the acquisition of a male slave would have been a commonplace matter. The rulers and kings of the west coast, in their keenness to attract trade to their cities, welcomed foreign traders warmly<sup>199</sup> and often even provided them with servants and employees.

The Persian envoy, 'Abd al-Razzaq al-Samarqandi, who was dispatched, much against his wishes, to the court of Vijaynagar in 1442 A.D., had to travel through Malabar on the way. He records that his companions bought some slaves who escaped in the course of their travels. The king of Vijaynagar, hearing of this, personally made good their losses<sup>200</sup>. Duarte Barbosa, travelling in the Malabar sixty or so years later, found that the Zamorin of Calicut "gave to each (foreign trader) a hair to guard and serve him, a Chety scribe for his accounts,

and to take care of his property, and a broker for his trade"<sup>201</sup>.

Barbosa records that these merchants were known collectively as pardesis in Calicut, even though their members included "Arabs, Persians, Guzarates, Khorasanys, and Decanys ....". These were not itinerant traders; they were expatriates who had settled in the Malabar for considerable lengths of time: "they are great merchants, and possess in this place wives and children, and ships for sailing to all parts with all kinds of goods". "The community was large, and so powerful that they even had a court of their own, in which their laws were administered without interference from the Zamorin"<sup>202</sup>.

The pardesis' compensation for their exile was a style of life sumptuous enough to surprise the worldly Persian courtier 'Abd al-Razzaq: "...they dress themselves in magnificent apparel after the manner of the Arabs, and manifest luxury in every particular..."<sup>203</sup>. Barbosa was no less impressed: "These are white men and very gentlemenlike and of good appearance, they go well dressed, and adorned with silk stuffs, scarlet cloth, camlets and cottons: their head-dress wrapped around their heads. They have large houses and many servants: they are very luxurious in eating, drinking and sleeping...". But in the few decades that passed between 'Abd al-Razzaq's visit and Barbosa's the arrival of the Portuguese in the Indian Ocean had brought these merchants, and the ancient cycle of trade on which their prosperity depended to the brink of ruin. Barbosa had good reason to end on a

gloating note: "...and in this manner they prospered until the Portuguese came to India: now there are hardly any of them, and those that there are do not live at liberty"<sup>204</sup>.

Still, Barbosa found the 'Moors' present in force at the Zamorin's court, just as Vasco da Gama and 'Abd al-Razzaq had earlier<sup>205</sup>. The rulers of the Malabar probably depended a good deal on the resident pardesi merchants for advice on the conduct of their trade, and for the direction of their relations with countries and rulers overseas<sup>206</sup>.

These accounts were written more than three centuries after Bomma and Ben Yijū's lifetimes, and they describe a place 200 miles down the coast from Mangalore. But it is still likely that Ben Yijū's way of life in Mangalore was not dissimilar to that of the pardesis of Calicut: the foreign merchants had close links with each other up and down the length of the west coast and they appear to have had traditions which lasted all through the Middle Ages and until the coming of the Portuguese. It is a curious coincidence for example, that like Barbosa's pardesis, with their Nair and 'Chety' employees, Ben Yijū too did business with a certain Sesu Shetty and had an agent called Nair, as we shall see. Like the pardesis of Calicut, Ben Yijū too had a pronounced taste for certain luxuries. He appears to have been fastidious, for example, in matters of clothing.

The people he lived amongst were by preference, generally bare-bodied. 'Abd al-Razzaq notes that most of the people he saw in the Malabar 'have the body nearly naked:

they wear only bandages around the middle, called lankoutah, which descend from the navel to above the knee'. This was true of men and women alike, and for people of all classes<sup>207</sup>. The markers of class distinction among them appear to have lain mainly in jewelry and ornaments<sup>208</sup>. Bomma for example, would probably have worn earrings, and maybe even a necklace or chain, as well as a 'bandage around the middle'.

To Ben Yijū and the Middle Eastern merchants on the other hand, the thought of going bare-bodied would have been shocking, at least as far as it concerned themselves. They would have been accustomed to think of clothes as a double layer of modesty for the body, so that the underrobe that cloaked the body's nakedness, would itself need to be covered in turn, by a further screen of outer clothing. Anything less, would have seemed immodest within the terms of their culture. Their heads, in particular would always have been covered, for in their civilisation, a covered head was seen as a sign of pious humility<sup>209</sup>.

This does not appear to have been a matter on which Ben Yijū was disposed to compromise. In all the seventeen years that he spent in Mangalore he probably always wore the same kind of turban/<sup>and</sup>long robe that he would have worn in Egypt or Aden, at least in public. In several letters and accounts we read of his of the Egyptian robes (fūta) and fine Alexandrian cloaks (maqta')<sup>210</sup> that he imported. Others mention lengths of cloth and kerchiefs which he may have used as turbans<sup>211</sup>. He probably had something of a reputation for being a dapper dresser because one of his correspondents, sending him a shawl

from Aden thought it prudent to extol its qualities: "I have also for my own part, sent for you... a fine new Dibiqi shawl, with nicely worked borders - an appropriate garment for men of eminence"<sup>212</sup>. No matter that in the humidity of Mangalore a turban, robe or shawl would probably take only a week's wearing to grow mildew: Ben Yijū's sense of what he owed himself clearly prevailed over climate and convenience. He was probably never seen on the streets of Mangalore in anything other than his turban and robe. But once he was indoors perhaps better sense prevailed and induced him to exchange his robes for a 'bandage around the middle'.

Amongst the many everyday things that Ben Yijū must have missed in India, the lack of paper seems to have weighed upon him most urgently. In Tulunad, as in most parts of India, the material most commonly used for writing was the palm-leaf, and paper was evidently difficult to obtain. Ben Yijū must have asked for paper in every letter to Aden, for packages were sent to him with virtually every shipment of cargo. He must have been fussy about the quality of his paper too, for his correspondents often added little notes in their letters to let him know that they had exerted themselves to please him. Madmūn for example, informs him in one of his letters that the three packets of Egyptian Talhi paper he has sent are "of faultless quality"<sup>213</sup>, and in another he writes of "two large quires of fine paper, of the Sultani kind - no one knows its like"<sup>214</sup>.

We have reason to be grateful to Madmūn for his pains: the paper he sent Ben Yijū was of such unmatched

quality that even today, eight hundred years later, after enduring several sea journeys, and the dryness of Egypt after the humidity of Mangalore, many of those papers are still in excellent condition and show no sign of the kind of decay that will certainly afflict these pages within, at best, a decade. Ben Yijū probably also imported his ink - or else he may have found a vegetable dye that could be used as a substitute. He was no less careful in the husbanding of his supplies of ink than he was with his paper. For his accounts and other throwaway jottings he would water the ink, while for other writings he would use a thick, dark solution, which remains vivid to this day on certain fragments. He probably used a quill to write with, but there is a distant possibility that he may have used an early prototype of a fountain pen. The concept of a pen with an inbuilt reservoir of ink appears to have been current in Egypt as early as the 10th. century. The Fatimid Caliph al-Mu'izz, is reported to have had one crafted for him, with such success that his secretary was "able to write in the most elegant script that could possibly be desired...."<sup>215</sup>. However, this innovation may not ever have percolated beyond the Caliph's palace, and it is probably likelier than not that Ben Yijū had to make do with a selection of quills. While writing he would often stop to whittle his pens' nibs as they grew blunt, for the change in the texture of his writing can be seen quite clearly - accompanied often, by little splutters of ink, of exactly the kind that everybody who has had a pre-ballpoint childhood will remember from the erratic pens of their schooldays.

Ben Yijū liked to indulge himself in other matters too. Much of the kitchenware for his house was imported from Aden - even such things as frying-pans and sieves<sup>216</sup>. He also had crockery, soap, goblets and glasses sent out from the Middle East. He is known to have imported a velvet-like carpet from Gujarat, via Aden, and his mats came all the way from Berbera in Africa<sup>217</sup>. He seems to have been well-known amongst his friends for his love of sweets: they regularly sent him raisins, and sometimes nougat and dates as well. The palm sugar that was produced on the Malabar coast was clearly not to his taste, for his friends appear to have been under instructions to send him cane sugar from the Middle East at every possible opportunity<sup>218</sup>. On one occasion when Khalaf ibn Ishaq failed in his duty, he added the apologetic note: "Your servent looked for sugar, but there is none to be had this year...."<sup>219</sup>. He must have known that his friend would be disappointed.

Clearly Abraham Ben Yijū is a man who had a taste for good living.

11

It would seem to follow that Ben Yijū, no less than the pardesis of Calicut would aspire to "large houses and many servants". It could well be then that he first acquired Bomma as a hand to work in his house and only later took him into his business.

In either case it would have been an easy matter for Ben Yijū to find a slave in Mangalore. Francis Buchanan,



before travelling to South Kanara in 1801, asked the Collector how many slaves there were in the district, and received the answer: 7924<sup>220</sup>. By his account, agricultural labourers and men of low caste sometimes sold their sister's children, their heirs by matrilineal descent, to raise money.

Buchanan reckoned that "a good slave sells for 10 Pagodas, or about 4 guineas"<sup>221</sup>. This meant about 40 Rupees, at a time when a hired man's daily rice allowance was worth a little more than an anna, and his yearly wage consisted of about 5 1/2 Rs. and the use of a house<sup>222</sup>. In effect, the cost of buying 'a good slave', at Buchanan's valuation, would be only a little more than that of hiring a worker for a year. Buchanan adds that a male slave received about an anna's worth of rice a day, as well as an annual allowance of cloth and a small sum in cash. In addition, a slave's master bore the expenses of his marriage, but his children belonged either to his, or to his wife's master<sup>223</sup>.

For all its apparent precision Buchanan's account is puzzling: for example, just a few pages after he notes the number of slaves in the district as 7924, he describes the Holey caste as 'slaves employed in cultivation' and enters their number as 47,358<sup>224</sup>. It is as though his usage of the word 'slave' and the institutions he was trying to describe were somehow askew, at odds with each other.

Buchanan was writing at a time when the slave trade was one of the pillars of the colonial economy of the Americas, and he, no less than the British officials serving in the

Caribbean, would have understood slavery in the modern Western sense, that is, primarily as an economic circumstance, a way of organising production. But for all their accountant-like precision, that one discrepancy proves that his figures were not equal to the complexity of the circumstances he was trying to describe: his account took the wrong turn somewhere, misled by the signposts of the Enlightenment.

Clearly, what Buchanan called 'slavery' ranged from village-level jajmani relationships of ritual patronage and clientage at one end of the scale, to certain forms of credit at the other, in which pauperised men and women plunged ever deeper into debt with only their bodies and labour power to offer as collateral. It is of course, well known that until recent times creditors often realised debts of this kind by selling the people who formed their living collateral. It could be that the 47,358 Holeyas of Buchanan's description actually fell into the first category, while the 7,924 'slaves' fell into the second.

People of the second category - 'slaves' sold by their families to realise debts or raise money - appear to have been freely traded in medieval Karnataka. An inscription from the early 15th. century indicates that 'cattle slaves and horses' were sold at village fairs<sup>225</sup>. A reference in a 12th. century Jaina work suggests that some of these slaves were traded outside Karnataka, possibly even abroad<sup>226</sup>. Material from the Geniza suggests that this is more than likely. There is plenty of evidence to prove that Indian men and women were regularly sold in the markets of the Middle East<sup>227</sup>, and

considering the close links that Middle Eastern merchants had with the west coast, it would seem to follow that a large number of those Indian slaves came from that region

It could be that Ben Yijū acquired Bomma at one of the villāgē fairs or markets in which slaves were sold. But the weight of the evidence suggests that Bomma was a kind of apprentice to Ben Yijū, and that he began by doing odd jobs and errands (like travelling to Aden) and worked his way upwards in his business.

Buchanan unfortunately, does not supply the Tulu or Kannada terms that he renders as 'slave'. The 15th. century inscription that mentions slave markets, however, uses the Kannada word tottu. It is an ambiguous term, used for servants, and workers hired for lengths of time, as well as 'slaves'. It might be translated as 'serf', but even that apparently, does not do justice to its many connotations. This is inevitable in a way, for the medieval idea of slavery tends to confound contemporary conceptions of both servitude and its mirror image, individual freedom.

In Egypt and parts of India for example, slavery was the principal means of recruitment to positions of power in the state. This puzzled Barbosa, the post-renaissance European, who wrote in his description of the Abyssinians: "... (the Moors) capture many of them, and such captives are much valued by the Moors... and when <sup>they</sup> turn Moors, they become greater emperors than the original Moors"<sup>228</sup>. Secondly, in medieval India and the Middle East, as in many African

societies<sup>229</sup>, slavery appears to have been a means of creating ties of fictive kinship. Wherever kinship played an important organisational role in society, there had to be some parallel institution for creating and initiating new ties and alignments: left to itself kinship would be too narrowly bounded a principle - even in a purely demographic sense - to be workable. Often it was 'slavery' that played that role, and in its origins it had little resemblance to slavery as it understood today - although once it came to be penetrated by modern forms of exchange, after the 17th and 18th centuries, it spelt disaster for the societies that practised it. In the Middle Ages however, it was often a means of creating quasi-familial bonds. Thus, the merchants of Cairo would often take slaves into their family businesses as 'confidants', but just in case they acquired too much power within the family, they would free them once their own sons were grown up<sup>230</sup>.

The most elusive aspect of slavery such as this is the part it plays as metaphor, as an instrument of the medieval imagination. It was the principle that shaped much of traditional education for example, as well as forms of apprenticeship in the arts and crafts. It is well known that in many vocations the lines between apprentice, disciple and bondsman...were so thin as to be invisible: initiation required aspirants to surrender some part of their freedom to their masters. In the tradition of Hindusthani music for instance, as aspirant entered an ustad's tutelage through a right of passage, the *gandh bandh*, a ceremony that turned the young student into his teacher's *banda*, his bondsman<sup>231</sup>.

It is hardly surprising then that Chidanandamurthy's scholarly account of slavery in medieval Karnataka<sup>232</sup> should draw much of its material, not from the standard historical sources, but from the work of a poet - a contemporary of Ben Yijū's and Bomma's - the saint and mystic Basavanna (c.1106 A.D. - 1168 A.D.)<sup>233</sup>. Together with the group of saint-poets known as the vaṅanākaras, Basavanna was to spark a movement of religious pietism and social protest that would burn with a brief but scorching flame in the 12th. and 13th, centuries. It was one of the bhakti movements that swept medieval India, the Virashaiva movement, centred in Kalyana in northern Karnataka, about three hundred miles or so from Mangalore. It was founded on a quest for the dissolution of all difference - of Selfhood, wealth, caste and gender - in the pursuit of the one, attributeless, 'Bodiless God' who, in Ramanujan's wonderful rendering of the Kannada, was the 'lord of the meeting rivers' to Basavanna and the 'lord white as jasmine' to the woman poet Mahadeviyakka. He was a Shiva who belonged neither to a caste nor to a temple:

The rich  
will make temples for Siva.  
what shall I,  
a poor man,  
do?

My legs are pillars,  
the body the shrine,  
the head a cupola  
of gold.<sup>234</sup>

In seeking his Lord Basavanna becomes his Lover's complement, androgynous in the fierceness of his passion<sup>235</sup>:

I wear these men's clothes  
only for you.

Sometimes I am man,  
sometimes I am woman.

O lord of the meeting rivers  
I'll make wars for you  
but I'll be your devotees' bride.<sup>236</sup>

The metaphor that guides Basavanna's seeking is that of the 'slave', the tottu of the inscription, in search of his master. Basavanna is both his lord's lover and his bondsman:

Don't make me hear all day

'Whose man, whose man, whose man is this?'

Let me hear, 'This man is mine, mine,  
this man is mine.'<sup>237</sup>

The imagery would not have been unfamiliar to Ben Yijū. He and his friends were all orthodox, observant Jews, strongly aware of their distinctive religious identity. But they were also part of the Arabic-speaking world, and the everyday language of their religious life was one they shared with the Muslims of that region: when they invoke the name of God in their writings it is usually as Allah, and their invocations more often than not, take the forms current in Arabic usage, such as insha'llah and al-hamdu l-illah. Distinct

though their faith was, it was still a part of the religious world of the Middle East - and that world had been turned on its head by the Sūfis of Islam. Some members of the Synagogue of the Palestinians are known to have been powerfully drawn to Sūfism<sup>238</sup>, and to some extent all of Ben Yijū's contemporaries must have felt its power.

Most Sūfis would have regarded the vaḥanākaras as pantheistic and blasphemous in their desire to merge themselves in their lord. Their own conceptions of extinction (fana) and subsistence (baqa) always assumed an utterly transcendent God<sup>239</sup>. Yet they would probably have acknowledged a commonalty in the nature of their striving, and they would certainly have seen a likeness in their imagery.

For the Sūfis too the notion of being tied, being held by bonds, is the central metaphor of their collective life. Forms of the Arabic root which expresses that idea r-b-t, "to bind, the up", are threaded through their discourse: they range from the brotherhoods called rabīṭa to the murabīṭ of Morocco and rabīṭa kurmak, the Turkish phrase which expresses the tie between the Sūfi Shaikh and his disciples<sup>240</sup>. The Sūfis too drew some of their most powerful images from slavery: metaphors of perfect devotion and love strung together in an imagery of charged spiritual eroticism. Thus, in Sūfi tradition the 11th. century Sultan, Maḥmud of Ghazni - the fearsome and bloodthirsty conqueror of Indian legend - becomes a symbol of mystical longing because of his soldier-slave Ayaz, whose love for his master is so complete that when the mythical Homa appears above them and all of Maḥmud's courtiers

rush towards it - because the touch of its shadow is said to confer kingdoms - the slave Ayaz turns away and steps into the shadow of Mahmūd, because for him no other kingdom exists. In the ties of the perfect love that binds them Mahmūd "becomes, in a wonderful transformation, the slave of his slave"<sup>241</sup>.

The imagery of Basavanna and the Sūfis hangs suspended far above the workaday world of master craftsmen and apprentices, traders and novice accountants. But even the most mundane institutions have their life-giving myths, and in the setting of the distant frame provided by these, the elements of slavery in those relationships would have appeared not as demeaning bonds, but possibly as ties that were in some small way ennobling; possibly also as the addition of almost-familial, human connections, pledges of commitment, to what could just as easily have been a matter of daily wages.

In all likelihood Ben Yijū had read very little, if anything, of the Sūfis, and Bomma was almost certainly wholly ignorant of Basavanna's teachings. It was only after their lifetimes that Tulunad heard rumours of the Vaṇanakarās and even then their influence in that area was slight, at best. But still, Basavanna and the Vaṇanakarās had changed their times by holding in view of for a brief while that other image of religious life, the 'anti-structure' that is written on one of the sides of the spinning coin of Hinduism. Bomma too would have had a glimpse of it for he would certainly have had some acquaintance with that great wealth of popular tradition that has always, and against all odds, kept the shine on the hidden side of that coin.



For his part, Ben Yijū could not have been wholly immune to that range of folk practices and syncretic beliefs which have always formed the hidden and subversive counter-image of the orthodox religions of the Middle East: the exorcism cults, and the customs of visiting saints' graves, praying at ancestors' tombs and such like. It was perhaps that no-man's land of inarticulate counter-beliefs that formed a small patch of level ground between Bomma and Ben Yijū - the Bhūta-worshipping, matrilineally-descended Tulu and the orthodox, patriarchal Jew who would seem to have nothing at all in common.

We cannot know. What is certain is that the bond was powerful enough in the end, to take Bomma away from his homeland, to Egypt with Ben Yijū.

12

Bomma was probably not the first slave Ben Yijū acquired in India. Two documents suggest this: one is the deed of manumission attested by Ben Yijū in 1132 A.D., and the other is its precursor - a rough draft, contained in another fragment<sup>242</sup>. This document is written in Ben Yijū's handwriting on one of the many scraps of paper on which he habitually made notes. It is a draft of a deposition, in formal, legal language, backing up a document of manumission. The term used for 'slave' (anti) in the document, an Aramaic word, leaves no doubt that the slave in question was female.

Of the two, the deed of manumission is, of course, the more important. I have not, to my regret, been able to examine it because it is now in the collection of an institute

in Leningrad. But Prof. Goitein gained access to it, and referred to it in several of his works. By his account, the document records the manumission of a slave-girl by Ben Yijū on October 17, 1132 A.D., in Mangalore<sup>243</sup>.

This is the earliest dated document from Ben Yijū's stay in India; it is probably not a coincidence that it has to do with a woman. Ben Yijū may well have expected to acquire a mistress soon after arriving in Mangalore, for amongst the Arabs India bore a reputation as a place notable for the ease of its sexual relations. If Ben Yijū had read Mas'ūdi, for example, he would have learnt that Indian men were accustomed to make 'young slave girls drink and dance for them'<sup>244</sup>, and had he known of the works of his contemporary, the Sharif al-Idrisi, he would have discovered that in India 'concubinage is permitted between everyone, so long as it is not with married women'<sup>245</sup>. Abū Zeid, listening to travellers' tales in Siraf in the 10th. century heard a great deal of talk about devadasis. "Let us thank God", he writes, savouring his shock, at the end of a long and accurate account of the institution, "for the Koran which He has chosen for us and with which he has preserved us from the sins of the infidels"<sup>246</sup>. Many travellers, like the writer of the Akhbar al-Hind wa al-Sin, were struck by the number of courtesans in India<sup>247</sup>. The Italian traveller, Nicolo Conti, who travelled to India in the early part of the fifteenth century, found that: "Public women are everywhere to be had, residing in particular houses of their own in all parts of the cities, who attract the men by sweet perfumes and ointments, by their blandishments, beauty and youth; for the Indians are much addicted to

licentiousness"<sup>248</sup>. The envoy 'Abd al-Razzaq, was even taken by his hosts - reluctantly, he would like his readers to believe - to an area where courtesans lived: "Immediately after mid-day prayer they place before the doors of the chambers....thrones and chairs, on which the courtesans seat themselves....Each one of them has by her two young slaves, who give the signal of pleasure, and have the charge of attending to everything which can contribute to amusement. Any man may enter into this locality, and select any girl that pleases him, and take his pleasure with her"<sup>249</sup>.

It could be that Ben Yijū encountered his mistress on just such a visit.

The document of manumission furnishes the woman's name: it was spelt A-sh-ū<sup>250</sup>. The name could be a diminutive of the common, Sanskrit-derived name, Asha. But here again arises the problem of ascribing a Sanskrit-derived name to a slave in a Dravidian-language area: the name Asha is credible, but unlikely. There is a remote possibility that the letter sh in the name could be intended to represent the consonant ch, which has no equivalent in Arabic. The name could then have the shape A-ch-ū, and if the medial consonant were doubled in this case as in Bomma's, it could provide a likely name of Dravidian derivation, Achchū. There would also be a certain appropriateness to it, for achchū is often used as a term of endearment in Malayalam and Tulu<sup>251</sup>.

It is hardly a matter of surprise that Ben Yijū found himself a mistress soon after landing in India. What is remarkable is that he chose to manumit her so soon afterwards. It indicates that his intentions towards her were

anything but casual. And since he seems to have celebrated the occasion of her manumission with some fanfare, it seems as though he was issuing public notice of a wedding, or betrothal.

Three years later, when Bomma went to Aden, Ben Yijū was already a father. The proof of this lies in the letter which Madmūn wrote to him in 1135 A.D.. Towards the end of the letter, listing the presents he is sending to Ben Yijū, Madmūn adds: "I have also sent a piece of coral for your son Surūr"<sup>252</sup>.

There is no particular reason to connect Achchū's manumission with Ben Yijū's fatherhood, and yet it is difficult not to. Prof. Goitein, for one, was persuaded, by this coincidence that Ben Yijū had married Achchū, and that Achchū was 'probably beautiful'<sup>253</sup>.

Achchū is not mentioned anywhere else in the entire corpus of documents. Ben Yijū does not once refer to her in his letters or jottings. Nor do his correspondents, who are always careful to greet his children and Bomma, ever mention her or send her their greetings. But this lack may be proof precisely that he did marry her, for only a marriage of that kind - with a slave girl, born outside the community of his faith - could have earned so pointed a silence on the part of his friends.

In Ben Yijū's circle, as among most people in the Middle East, there was a preference for marriages between the

children of brothers, and failing that, between cousins and relatives<sup>254</sup>. This was a preference that Ben Yijū himself shared fully, as we shall see. That he chose to marry soon after his arrival in India is an indication, in part, that he knew he would not soon be able to return to the Middle East to contract a marriage of that kind. Yet, he could well have married into the large and ancient community of Jews in the Malabar. His reasons for not doing so, could not have had anything to do with a lack of orthodoxy in their practices. His near-contemporary, the strict and learned Benjamin of Tudela, not a man to suffer heterodoxy lightly, saw much to approve of in this community: "And throughout the (land) including all the towns there, live several thousand Israelites. The inhabitants are all black, and the Jews are also. The latter are good and benevolent. They know the law of Moses and the prophets, and to a small extent the Talmud and the Halacha"<sup>255</sup>.

But since, despite the obvious alternative, Ben Yiju chose to marry outside the community of his faith, risking the disapproval of his friends, it can only have been because some other consideration overrode all the others. If I hesitate to call it love is only because the documents offer no certain proof of it.

Certainly Ben Yijū's shopping lists do bear the signs of an ardent lover. Some of the clothes he ordered from Aden must have been for Achchū: and the Isfahani kohl

that occasionally figures in his accounts would definitely have been intended for her.<sup>256</sup> As we have seen he spared no expense on creature comforts for his household.

About Achchū's origins, there is only a single clue. It occurs in the accounts Ben Yijū scribbled on the back of Madmūn's letter. The line is: "(Owed) to Na'ir my brother-in-law (sahri), one Manari dinar".<sup>257</sup> The evidence is slight, but it leaves little room for doubt that Ben Yijū had married into that caste, so much beloved of modern anthropology: the matrilineal Nairs of Kerala. This is wholly plausible, for references in several inscriptions show that there was a sizeable settlement of Nairs in Tulunad in that period.<sup>258</sup>

Matrilineality have been more than he bargained for, for his newly-acquired relatives were soon to prove a sore trial to him.

Bomma was not to remain long in Aden. Unkindly, madman sent him back in the same boat that was carrying the letter that complained to Ben Yijū of his servant's revelries. But Madman's letter does not appear to have excited an excess of wrath in Ben Yijū: Bomma continued to work for him and eventually came to play an important part in the running of his business. Nor does Madman appear to have borne Bomma a grudge. In his later letters he is always careful to send his greetings to Bomma.<sup>259</sup> Ben Yijū's other friends in Aden too appear to have gladly forgiven Bomma. Within a few years

Khalaf ibn Ishaq was to write of him affectionately as 'brother Bomma' as we have seen, and in the fullness of time, in recognition, no doubt of his increasing importance in Ben Yijū's business, he was even to honour him with the respectful title of 'Shaikh'.<sup>260</sup>

But in 1135 A.D. Bomma was merely playing the part of courier for his master. Among the things he brought back were several letters written by Madmūn. His letter to Ben Yijū contained detailed instructions about what he was to do with them: "...collect all the letters for the people of Mangalore yourself...and be careful with them because they contain things I need urgently".<sup>261</sup> These letters were part of a regular correspondence between him and certain members of the trading communities (Baniyan) of Mangalore.

He names his correspondents in his next letter to Ben Yijū. "Please deliver most specially to Sesu Shetty (Sūs Siti),<sup>262</sup> and Kanbati and Ishaq the Banian my most distinguished greetings and tell them of my affection for them. Inform them that the price of pepper in this coming year will be 30 dinars a bahar or more, and that of 'renewed' iron will not drop below 20 dinars".<sup>263</sup>

What Madmūn does not reveal is what language his letters to the Baniyan of Mangalore were written in.

One likely possibility is that the letters were written for Madmun in Arabic by a scribe, and then translated for his correspondents in Mangalore by translators.

But, on the other hand, Arabic does not appear to have been widely spoken on the Malabar coast in that period, even by Muslims.<sup>264</sup> The author of the 9th. century Akhbar al-Hind wa al-Sin, who had travelled widely throughout the Indian Ocean, was much struck by this: "One does not know a single Chinese or Indian Muslim or anyone (there) who speaks Arabic".<sup>265</sup>

The other possibility is that the letters were written in Judaeo-Arabic and that Ben Yijū himself translated them orally for the benefit of the Banian of Mangalore. But that raises a farther question: what language did he translate them into? He is unlikely to have achieved fluency in Tulu in the five years or so he had spent in Mangalore. Nor can it be assumed that the Indian traders of his acquaintance would particularly wish to speak to him in their mother tongues. Modern sociolinguistics has repeatedly demonstrated what any visitor to India discovers soon enough: that in India, people often prefer to keep separate the language they use at home, among their kin, and the language in which they deal with the world outside.<sup>266</sup>

A troop of other questions march behind these: in what language did Ben Yijū speak with Achchū? Or with Bomma? Or with the 'Arabs, Persians, Guzarates, Khorasanys, and Decanys' who lived in the Malabar, and with whom, given the nature of his occupation, he must have had to do business?<sup>267</sup> The questions extend far beyond Ben Yijū's immediate experience. Mangalore was by no means unique in its cosmopolitanism; it was one in a chain of trading ports stretching



all the way from Arabia and East Africa to China.<sup>268</sup> Mere common sense suggests that trade in a region as large and as diverse as the Indian Ocean, could not conceivably have been conducted in a tongue that was native to any one group of traders: to function at all the language of business within this community would have to be both simple and widely dispersed.

Given what we know about the practices of Arab traders in the Mediterranean - the other area in which Arabic came into close contact with Indo-European languages - it seems likely that they used a trading jargon or an elaborated pidgin of some kind. The documents provide very few clues about what the nature of this pidgin may have been. It is worth remarking that while the documents contain several proper names of clearly Dravidian origin - Nambiyar, for example, as well as Nair and Tambi - as far as I have been able to determine they do not contain any Dravidian words used as common nouns.<sup>269</sup>

On the other hand, words of Persian origin frequently figure in them. These words often appear to be specialised for use in the region of the Indian Ocean: for example, the word nakhudha, shipmaster, or kardar, 'foreman'.<sup>270</sup> Similarly, travellers who visited the Malabar in the Middle Ages, often, curiously enough, used words of clearly north Indian or Persian origin in their descriptions of the region.<sup>271</sup> Thus, for example, Abu Zeyd al-Hasan uses the term baykarji (bairagi) to describe the mendicants of the Malabar, Duarte Barbosa writes about the pardesis and 'Abd al-Razzaq uses the word 'lankoutah'.<sup>272</sup>

This suggests that Arab travellers in the Malabar used a language that was neither Arabic nor the domestic language of the people of the area. Mas'ūdi, the only Arab geographer who has anything to say about the languages of the west coast, provides a possible solution. Mas'ūdi describes one of these languages as Kririyya, which has been indentified, plausibly enough, as Kannada. To the cities of the coast, on the other hand, he attributes a language called Lariyya. He derives the name from what he calles 'The Sea of Larawi' (baḥr al-larawi), which Nainar has indentified as the Laccadive Sea.<sup>273</sup> In Mas'ūdi's usage the sea that lies off the whole of the west coast is the Larawi Sea: he specifically names Thana and Cambay in Gujarat, along with several ports in Karnataka, such as Saimūr (identified as the modern Shirur), as lying upon that sea.<sup>274</sup> Since the languages native to those areas were entirely different - indeed of different language families - self-evidently he could not have been referring to the languages native to the peoples of those regions. He is obviously referring here to a pidgin which foreign merchants, travellers and Indians used to communicate with each other along the entire length of the west coast: following his usage I shall call it Lariyya. If I am right in supposing that the lexicon of Lariyya was largely of Perso-Arabic and north Indian derivation, it would seem to follow that Lariyya could have been the parent pidgin that ultimately gave birth to Urdū.

It is well-known that trade languages like Sabir and Lingua Franca were widely used for the purposes of trade in

the region of the Mediterranean.<sup>275</sup> It has been suggested that it was these parent pidgins, carried around the world by the Portuguese, that provided the syntactical structure for many of the pidgin and creole languages that developed later in the regions of the Atlantic and Indian Oceans.<sup>276</sup>

But this is surely to ascribe to European intervention a phenomenon that almost certainly preceded it. Considering the volume and extent of trade in the Indian Ocean, it would seem likely, at the very least, that a trade language was already in use there since long before the arrival of the Portuguese.<sup>277</sup> It would follow then that the Portuguese were merely agents in the relexification of linguistic structures that trading links had already carried into the farthest reaches of the Indian Ocean.

Similarly, if we were not so accustomed to associating Urdu with the military camps of the north Indian plains, common sense would surely suggest that the roots of Urdu too must stretch back into that area where the linguistic and cultural differences of the region were most fruitfully transacted: the basin of the Indian Ocean and the Arabian Sea.

The thought of Ben Yijū, sitting in a Bania's office in Mangalore, translating a letter from Aden into a trade language that could be understood most of the way across the Indian Ocean, is not really difficult to conceive, intriguing though it is. What is hard to imagine is how he and Achchū adapted that commercial pidgin to the uses of the bedroom.

Some time after Bomma returned from his riotous visit to Aden, Ben Yijū had reason to use some unaccustomedly strong language. But it was not Bomma who was the cause of Ben Yijū's displeasure.

Again we have Maḍmūn's 1135 A.D. letter to thank for furnishing evidence of this. In the accounts that Ben Yijū wrote on the back of this letter there occurs this short passage: "The remainder of the account with al-Basara (is) 3 mithqals. (Still) owed to him by the kadar, may God curse him, (are) 14 mithqals, for two bahars of cardamom. He (the kadar) did not deliver the cardamom, so I bought for (al-Basara?) two bahars from Fandarina as a substitute, for 17 mithqals."<sup>278</sup>

The matter at hand is clear enough: Ben Yijū had given a middleman, the 'kadar' an advance for a consignment of cardamom. He had then covered his risk by making advance sales of the cardamom to some of his business associates. But then, when the kadar pocketed his advance without delivering the cardamom, he found himself with a debt on his hands and no cardamom to show for it: in effect he was caught in the classic bind of the speculator in commodity futures.

Ben Yijū would have found little comfort in the observations of his famous contemporary, al-Idrisi. "Indians" writes al-Idrisi, "are by nature given to justice and they never stray from this. Their honesty, loyalty and fidelity to contracts is well-known, and they are famous for these qualities, which one finds among them everywhere. Because of

this their country flourishes and their situation is prosperous. Among their other characteristic traits is their love of truth and their horror of vice...It is said that when someone needs to reclaim a debt, all he has to do is to draw a circle in the dust and make his debtor enter it. The debtor cannot leave the circle without repaying his debt".<sup>279</sup> Marco Polo a century later, took note of this same custom in the Malabar. But Ben Yijū had clearly not heard of it; or perhaps, the 'kadar' had proved unwilling to stand still while he drew his circle.

Soon, the affair of the undelivered cardamom took on international overtones. In the late 1130s Yūsuf ibn Abraham, Ben Yijū's associate in Aden, wrote "You, my master, mentioned that you approached the kardal gently in order to get something for us back from him. Perhaps you should threaten him that here in Aden we disgrace anyone that owes us something and does not fulfill his commitments...If he does not pay, we shall issue an official letter of censure and send it to him, so that he will become aware of his crime".<sup>280</sup>

Yūsuf ibn Abraham misspells the middleman's unfamiliar title, both here, and in a later letter, just as Ben Yijū had himself, in his accounts. The word was actually kardar, 'manager' or 'foreman'.<sup>281</sup> Ben Yijū's other correspondents gave the word its proper spellings in their letters, and Ben Yijū himself, was to spell it correctly elsewhere.

Khalaf ibn Ishaq too, had reason to write to Ben Yijū about the matter of the kardar, but he took a different view of the matter. In a letter sent some years after Yūsuf ibn

Abraham's he writes: "As for the delay in the (delivery of the Kardar's) cardamom, may God curse him, I have spoken to some people about the matter, and they said to me that the cardamom was yours, and we had no share in it. It's a matter (to be decided) between you and the Kardar: deal with this thing individually with him, separately from us."<sup>282</sup>

There can be no mistaking his meaning: Ben Yijū, in order to cut his losses, had charged Khalaf ibn Ishaq and Yusuf ibn Abraham's accounts for some part of the money that he had advanced to the kardar. But he was shrewd enough, it seems, to leave the powerful Madmūn out of his schemes.<sup>283</sup>

The usually indulgent Khalaf ibn Ishaq has a few strong words for this bit of slippery dealing on Ben Yijū's part. "Your servant sends you things, trusting that you will (use them) to buy (shipments) - he and others too - without asking for sureties or advances... (Those) who send you supplies do not ask you to use them as advances for things (they) didn't ask you (to buy)."<sup>284</sup>

The affair of the kardar's cardamom dragged on for a long time. In a letter written years later the tenacious Yūsuf ibn Abraham refers to the matter again: "...My Master wrote that the kardal has not paid him anything, including the six mithqals that were advanced by him. My master well knows that it was his decision to give the kardal the money ..."<sup>285</sup>

There is only one other reference to the kardar in the documents. It has no direct bearing on this affair but it does throw some light on it.

The reference occurs in a tiny fragment: a scrap torn from the bottom right hand corner of a longer sheet of paper. The fragment is badly weathered and pitted with holes. It is covered on both sides with closely written text in Ben Yijū's unmistakable handwriting. The writing has faded in parts; the recto is barely decipherable. It appears to be a record of one, or more, shipments of goods. The goods and certain names that occur in the accounts prove that they were written in India. But the text contains no leads at all for the dating of the fragment: all that can be ventured with any certainty on that score is that it was written at some point during Ben Yijū's stay in India - any time between 1131 to 1149 A.D..

The reference to the kardar occurs in the last line but one in the text on the verso. The sentence goes thus: "Remaining (with me) for Nair, the brother of the kardar, 3 fili dirhams".<sup>286</sup>

The term 'brother' as it is used here probably means relative in a general sense rather than sibling. What is curious is that it defines Nair, whom we know to have been Ben Yijū's brother-in-law, by his relationship to the kardar, and not the reverse.

If we read closely enough between the lines there seems to be a suggestion implicit in the construction of the sentence: that it was the kardar who was the link between Ben Yijū and the man he called his brother-in-law, Nair. If we were to read closer still, the sentence might even suggest that it was the kardar who had led Ben Yijū to Achchū. That may have been the reason why Ben Yijū trusted him to the point of making him an advance; or perhaps the kardar saw his advance as his payment for negotiating the liaison.

But it may be rash to read this throwaway sentence too closely: a turn of syntax is meagre evidence.

14

Ben Yiju spent at least seventeen years in India, and for almost all that time he lived in Mangalore. The only other place he is known to have visited for any length of time was a town that the Arabs called Jurbattan.<sup>287</sup> The town has been indentified as the modern Srikandapuram, by Nainar. It lies in the foothills of the Ghats, about 150 km. south of Mangalore, about thirty-five km. inland from Cannanore. It is a small town, surrounded by plantations of cashew and rubber, virtually unknown outside Malabar. Yet, in the Middle Ages, it must have been one of the best known places in India, for there are innumerable references to it in the works of the Arab travellers and geographers.<sup>288</sup> Ben Yijū also had connections with another small Malabar town that was well-known to the Arabs: a town they called Dahbattan, which has been identified as Dharmadam by Nainar.<sup>289</sup> It



lies at the mouth of the Tellicherry river, where the river broadens into a lake before flowing into the sea. Today it is used by a few fishing boats; it cannot have served an ocean-going ship since the Middle Ages. Another town that Ben Yijū had connections with was 'Fandarina' - Pantalayini Kollam, near Calicut.<sup>290</sup> Ben Yijū visited all these towns in the Malabar, yet in all the time he spent in India he probably never ventured further inland than Srikandapuram.

This appears to have been the general pattern among the pardesi merchants. They evidently saw the west coast as their field of operations and kept themselves to it. Their own networks and links with each other extended all the way up and down the coast, irrespective of political, cultural and linguistic boundaries, such as there were. Perhaps for that reason they did not distinguish, as a rule, between the different cultural and political regions of the west coast. Nor, curiously enough, did they distinguish between the coast and the interior.<sup>291</sup> : to them the whole landmass was bilad al-Hind, 'the country of India'. So my use of the adjective 'Indian' for Tulunad, and Bomma, is neither an anachronism nor a display of nationalism: I am merely following the usage of the documents.

This usage was largely in keeping with the academic geography of the Arabs, in which the entire subcontinent, beginning at the eastern border of Sind, and extending to Asaam (Lakshmipura), was called al-Hind, just as all China was known as Sin.<sup>292</sup> But China, was of course, a single political entity; an empire, whose subdivisions were provinces

of the larger state. India, on the other hand, was divided into several 'independant' kingdoms, large and small. The Arab geographers were well aware of this. In their descriptions of India they were careful to specify the regions and kingdoms of India, and they knew very well that the rulers of these kingdoms were not merely often at war, but that a state of continuous, almost ritual opposition, was an essential part of their political structure.<sup>293</sup> Mas'ūdi, for instance, writes: "The kingdoms of India are continually at war with each other, and are divided by their languages and their beliefs".<sup>294</sup> ..

Yet, despite this, they were also insistent that al-Hind had a centre, recognised by all its kings and regions. Over several centuries Arab geographers and travellers were in agreement on this subject: the centre of al-Hind, as far as they were concerned lay in the domains of a king whom they called the Balhara, whose capital was the city of Mankir.<sup>295</sup>

Nainar has suggested that 'Balhara' was the Arabic representation of the title Vallabharaja (Supreme king), which was assumed by most of the Chalukyas and Rashtrakūtas, and that 'Mankir' referred to the city of Malkhed, now in Hyderabad State. The belief that the Islamic, or western, world saw the northern part of the Indo-Gangetic plain as India's centre of gravity is wholly unfounded. Its currency today is probably a result of the intermeshing of the self-image of the late-medieval Persianised tradition in north India with the British reading of India's political geography.

The Arab world - indeed the world at large - in the Middle Ages, had an entirely different conception of al-Hind.

That conception seems to have been indifferent to the steady turnover of dynasties, kingdoms and capitals. Such is its persistence that it seems as though the phrase 'kingdom of the Balhara' was a metaphor rather than a description: a way of saying that al-Hind had its own manner of reconciling the one and the many.

In any case, it would seem that Ben Yijū and his fellow merchants knew nothing at all of the great dynasties and kingdoms of India: there is not a single reference to them in the documents. Their contacts with the rulers of the small principalities they lived in were probably the only dealings they ever needed to have with the political structures of al-Hind.

15

Two children were born to Ben Yijū in India: we can only surmise that Achchū was their mother. The first, a son, was named Surūr. Following the custom of the Arab world, Ben Yijū, after the birth of his son, was often called Abū Surūr (Surūr's father) by his friends. His second child was a daughter, to whom he gave the name Sitt al-Dar, 'Lady of the House', a name that is still common in the villages of Egypt today.<sup>296</sup> Achchū clearly had little to do with the naming of her children.

In his eighteen years in India, Ben Yijū had gained a wife, children, and at least one slave. His letters and accounts show that he had also set up a brass workshop in which workers made locks, did repairs and made various objects to order, some of which were exported to Aden. The workshop was largely run by a man called 'Iyari and his son, who appear to have been people of that region.<sup>297</sup> They must have been skilled craftsmen, for Ben Yijū's friends in Aden sometimes let their imaginations run riot when they sent in their orders. In one of his letters, Yūsuf ibn Abraham, for example, asked Ben Yijū to "make a tray for your servant, of the same size as the other, but with a raised clasp, and a dish...attached to the centre, so that it is above the rest of the tray, in order that whatever drips from it may fall into the tray" 298..

Apart from his income from his workshop Ben Yijū had also been exporting pepper, tempered iron, ginger and areca nuts in large quantities for several years, and he had obviously built up a considerable fortune. All through that time he had been in close touch with his friends in Aden. But in all those years he had been totally cut off from the family he had left behind in Ifriqiya.

Then, after a decade and a half in India, a letter from Aden brought him news of one of his brothers: the disreputable Mubashshir. The letter was written by Khalaf ibn Ishaq, probably in the mid-1140s, a time when Ifriqiya lay crippled by the raids of Roger II of Sicily. In western

Europe, Bernard of Clairvaux's <sup>sermons</sup> had aroused a frenzy of Crusading fervour and the stage was being set for the Second Crusade.<sup>299</sup>

Khalaf ibn Ishaq writes: "Shaikh Abū Ishaq ibn Yūsuf arrived here this year. He reports that your brother Mubashshir has arrived in Egypt. He has asked for a passage to join you: you should know this."<sup>300</sup>

The remains of Ben Yijū's correspondence, one-sided as they are, provide only indirect signs of the impact this news had on Ben Yijū. Ben Yijū must have written back frantic letters to all his friends in Aden, asking for more news. Khalaf ibn Ishaq, wrote back to say: "Concerning the news of your brother Mubashshir, he is well, but he has not arrived here yet."<sup>301</sup> After a while his friends must have given up hope of hearing from him, for Yūsuf ibn Abraham wrote to Ben Yijū: "My master mentioned Mubashshir, his brother: he has not arrived (here) during all this time, and nor have I seen a letter for my master from Egypt. If such a letter for my master appears, his servant will send it to him."<sup>302</sup>

Ben Yijū even took the step of asking his associates in Aden to provide for his brother's passage to India. But in the event, his hopes came to nothing. He learnt of this from a letter written by Khalaf ibn Ishaq. The letter was written in the summer of 1148 A.D.. It happened to coincide with a period of extraordinary turmoil in Ifriqiya and the Maghreb: a time that was to culminate in the utter destruction of the world of Ben Yijū's youth.

Already devastated by the Bedouin, Ifriqiya was now repeatedly attacked by Roger II: from 1143 A.D. onwards for several years, not a single year went by without a Sicilian attack on the north African coast.<sup>303</sup> There followed a wave of emigration out of North Africa.<sup>304</sup> It was this tide that probably carried the Ben Yijū family to Sicily - unbeknownst to Abraham, in Mangalore.

At the same time, the Muwahhids (Almohads) were gaining in strength in the Maghreb and advancing steadily eastwards. Between 1145 and 1146 they took the cities of Oran, Tlemcen and the oasis of Sijilmasa, the hub of the Saharan trade routes. For seven months they tried peaceably to convert Sijilmasa's large Jewish community to Islam. When their efforts went unrewarded they put a hundred and fifty Jews to the sword. The rest, led by their judge, converted. They were relatively lucky: at about the same time 100,000 Jews and Christians were massacred in Fez and 120,000 in Marrakesh.<sup>305</sup>

Ben Yijū almost certainly knew of the events in his homeland. At the same time that Khalaf ibn Ishaq was writing to Ben Yijū in Mangalore, one Solomon Kohen of Fustat was writing a letter to his father, a native of Sijilmasa, in Aden. The letter eventually came to rest in the Geniza.<sup>306</sup> : it was addressed to Judah ha-Kohen Sijilmasi, an important merchant, whose sister was married to Ben Yijū's mentor, Madmūn ibn Bundar.<sup>307</sup> Judah ha-Kohen, known as Abū Zikri was a frequent visitor to India and happened to be a friend of Ben Yijū's.

Barely three years before this he had been stranded in Gujarat after being captured by pirates. On that occasion Ben Yijū had had to help in forwarding him money through the good offices of an Indian merchant called Tinbu.<sup>308</sup> We need have no doubt that Judah ha-Kohen, upon receiving his son's letter, would have sent word to his friends in India about the events in the land of their birth.

It was at exactly this time, in 1148, probably after being long distracted by the news and rumours that had filtered through, that Ben Yijū heard from Khalaf ibn Ishaq.

"I asked (some people) about your brother Mubashshir", writes Khalaf ibn Ishaq. "They said that he is in good health and that everything is well with him. I asked them about his departure for Syria and they said they knew nothing of it, but that all is well with him. Should he happen to come to Aden your servant will do his best for him, without my master's asking because he esteems him (my master) greatly".<sup>309</sup>

We do not know what effect this news had upon Ben Yijū, except that it was at about this time that he decided to leave India. He had already written to his friends in Aden of his wish to return: "Every year you speak of coming to Aden," adds Khalaf ibn Ishaq at the end of his letter "but you never do it".<sup>310</sup>

But this time Ben Yijū did do it. In 1149 A.D., the year after he heard of Mubashshir's return from Egypt, Ben Yijū was in Aden, with all his worldly goods and his two adolescent children.

On September 11, 1149, Ben Yijū was moved to write his brothers a long letter: like everyone who has ever been blinded by the clouds of memory that stir with every step taken in a place once loved and then forgotten, Ben Yijū, upon returning to Aden had waxed sore with longing for places yet more deeply buried in memory.

The letter reads: "My brother, I do not know what to write; so strong is my longing and so ardent my yearning. I ask God to unite us all presently in the best of circumstances.

"This is to announce to you, my brother, that I have set out from India and arrived safely in Aden, may God protect it, with my belongings, life and children well preserved. May God be thanked for this...Now I wish to let you know that I have enough to live on for all of us. May God, the exalted, let this money be a living for me and my children and be sufficient for you as well."

"...I also met the elder Sulayman Ibn Gabbay, and he told me that you have been reduced to one single loaf of bread; therefore, I ask you, my brother, come to me under any



circumstances and without delay...I have a son and a daughter, take them and take with them all the money and riches - 'may God fulfill my wishes and yours for the good'. Come quickly and take possession of this money; this is better than strangers taking it." 311

The letter continues: "And find out who is the best among the sons of my brother Yūsuf or your<sup>312</sup> sister Barkha, for I will marry him to my daughter. If you come (here), we could live in Aden, or we could live in Fustat or Alexandria, since we shall not be able to go to Mahdia, or to Ifriqiya... Give my best greetings to your brother Yūsuf and his children and say to him: your brother Abraham will not, by God, be niggardly with you in anything - the possessions that he has with him are in your hands. And equally, greet my sister Barkha and her children for me, and say the same to them... For the sake of God, and again for the sake of God, do not delay your arrival: come and take the money that I have earned, and use it to trade with, insha'allah. To say less than this would have been enough: if I were to write of all that is in my heart one letter would not do...I heard of what happened on the coast of Ifriqiya: in Irablus (Tripoli), Jerba, Kerkenna, Sfax, Mahdia and Sousse. But I have had no letter to tell me who lives and who is dead. For God's sake, write to me and send the letter in the hands of trustworthy people so that I may have some peace. Shalom". 313

The other side of the paper carries the names of his brothers Yūsuf and Mubashshir. It also bears an address

that perfectly captures the devastation of their lives and homeland "(in)....al-Mahdiyya, if God will, or anywhere else in Ifriqiya". <sup>314</sup>

Ben Yijū had clearly learnt something about his family's circumstances upon arriving in Aden. He knew that Yūsuf and his family had been reduced to dire poverty, and that Yūsuf has recently visited Egypt. He also knew that his brother and his family have moved to Sicily - probably because of the devastation caused by Roger of Sicily's invasion in Ifriqiya. But he did not know yet that Mubashshir had moved to Sicily too, and nor did he know that Yūsuf now had three grown sons, Surūr <sup>315</sup>, Moshe, and Yūsuf. If he had, his plans for his daughter's marriage would have been more specific.

According to custom, all of Yūsuf's sons were eligible contestants for the hand of their wealthy cousin. But by right of seniority, none was more so than the eldest, the pious and scholarly Surūr. But there were trials yet in store for Surūr before he could aspire to the hand of his half-Indian cousin.

But as it happens, this letter did not fulfil the destiny that Ben Yijū intended for it. Instead of reaching Yūsuf it fell into the hands of Mubashshir in the port of Messina in northern Sicily. Yūsuf and his family were then at the other end of the island, in the town of Mazzara. Mubashshir chose not to inform them of the letter: he had probably decided that if someone was to receive his brother

Abraham's wealth between their hands, it may as well be he. Without informing his family, Mubashshir set off to join his brother in Aden.

But rumour proved more conscientious than kinship: somehow Yūsuf and his family got to hear that a letter from Ben Yijū had reached Sicily. In their keenness to learn of its contents they got Surūr to write a letter to a family friend in Mahdia, begging for news: "I am writing these few brief lines because I had heard that my master has returned to his home. I wished to ask him whether he has any news of my father's brother, Abraham, known as Ben Yijū, for we have not heard from him (for some time)...Last year...a letter of his reached Messina, where it fell into the hands of my uncle Mubashshir, who took it with him. We have not seen it, and do not know what was in it. So our minds are in suspense, as we wait to hear news of how he is. May I request my Master, to kindly write us a brief note, to let us know whether he has heard any news of him and where he is...". 316

But the times were hard: the second Crusade was under way now, and the seas were aswarm with warships. Years passed before they heard of Ben Yijū again.

16

Ben Yijū in the meanwhile, had been stricken with misfortune.

A few years after his first letter to his brothers, he wrote a second one to Yūsuf, in Sicily. The folio is

terribly damaged: a large section of one side is missing. But Ben Yijū's handwriting is vividly clear on what remains of the paper, and even though large sections of the text have vanished with the lost segment, the tear providentially spared the few odd words that are crucial in establishing Ben Yijū's meaning. Incomplete as it is, the letter is worth quoting, for the gaps, by some inexplicable coincidence, are no less eloquent of the writer's plight than the text itself.

"I wrote a letter to you a while ago. They reached Mubashshir, but he did not care to deliver them to you: instead he came to Aden himself. I did all that was in my power for him, and more, but the result was disastrous. The events take too long to explain, oh my brother. But God, the Almighty was forbearing and ordained that peace \_\_\_\_\_  
...I have been told that \_\_\_\_\_  
who is learned in the Torah, and two other sons besides \_\_\_\_\_  
hundreds of dinars remain \_\_\_\_\_  
two children like sprigs of sweet basil \_\_\_\_\_  
And the elder died in 'Adan \_\_\_\_\_  
I do not know what to describe of it \_\_\_\_\_  
I have left a daughter, his sister \_\_\_\_\_  
all my goods, for the sake of God \_\_\_\_\_  
this, send your son the \_\_\_\_\_  
and we will rejoice in her and in him, and we will wed them \_\_\_\_\_

Shaikh Khalaf (ibn Ishaq) ibn Bundar, in Aden,  
[asked her hand] for his son. She had lived 3 years in their

house. But I refused him when I heard of your son Surūr. I said: the brother's son comes before people of other lands. Then, when I came with her to Egypt, many people sought her hand of me. So I wrote to you and told you of this. To say less than this would have been enough".

But despite his almost palpable grief, a part of Ben Yijū is still the hardheaded trader: "I have sent for you with Suliman ibn Satrūn...a bag which contains pepper and ginger, mixed up together....May God ordain that it reaches your hands safely. But do not do with this lot, what you did with the last lot of pepper I sent you: you lost it through your feeble-mindedness. Address your letters to me to Egypt; let there be a letter in the hands of your son Surūr..."<sup>317</sup>

Here, at the bottom of the sheet of paper, there follows a line which spills over into the margin. The words are written in tiny, faint letters, as though they have been squeezed out of the writer despite himself.

Suliman and Abraham will tell you of the state I am in: that I am sick at heart. As for Mubashshir, he is nothing but a lazy man; malevolent in spirit. I gave him whatever he asked for, and in return he dealt me a terrible blow. The price of my deeds was a thousand dinars...

On the reverse side of the letter, Ben Yijū adds, after sending his greetings to various people: "And as for me, oh my brother, do not cut me off. If I have not sent

you that which I had set aside for you, forgive me, for I have lost 3 hundred mithqals this year of my merchandise. And Shalom to you and to your son and to your house." 318

The address, written at the bottom of the page, shows that the letter was sent to Mazzara in Sicily.

17

The quiet bitterness of these lines forms an odd contrast to the nostalgic exuberance of the letter he wrote to his brother soon after leaving India. The joy of his return to the Middle East did not survive the treachery of his brother and the loss of that 'sprig of sweet basil', his son Surūr. What he did not say in the letter was that a year after arriving in Aden he had also lost his mentor Madmūn.

At some point in his stay in the Yemen, probably soon after his son's death, Ben Yijū moved from Aden into the highlands of the interior. It was then, possibly, that he left his daughter in the care of Khalaf ibn Ishaq's family.

In the highlands of the Yemen, Ben Yijū was accorded a position of great respect within his community. It was there that he was called upon to act as a judge in inheritance disputes within the community.<sup>319</sup> But Ben Yijū did not long remain in the highlands. Soon enough he was back in Aden, leaving an unlocked house, a wheat mill, and a quarrelsome landlord in the mountains.<sup>320</sup> When Ben Yijū next wrote to Yūsuf he was in Egypt, probably already installed among the members of the congregation of the synagogue of Fustat.

Nowhere in Ben Yijū's correspondence with his brothers is Achchū's name ever mentioned; neither he nor they ever refer to her. Thus we do not know whether she had left India with him. But it is hard to imagine that he would have entrusted his daughter to Khalaf ibn Ishaq's family if she were in Aden.

The conclusion seems inevitable that Achchū had stayed behind in Mangalore, when Ben Yijū left for the Middle East. Perhaps Ben Yijū had had cause to discover for himself, the strength of the ties of matrilineality.

There is no mention of Bomma either in Ben Yijū's letters to his brother, but Bomma's story is not ended yet.

18

Ben Yijū's second letter did eventually reach his brother Yūsuf and his family in Mazzara. Soon afterwards Yūsuf's sons, Surūr and Moshe set off for Egypt. The story of their journey to Cairo is an odyssey in its own right, involving capture by Crusaders, and imprisonment in the conquered city of Acre: In the language of the manuscripts, the width of this paper would not suffice for its telling.

But Surūr was eventually to find his uncle, Ben Yijū, and his cousin Sitt al-Dar. Preserved in Leningrad is a document which lists the items with which Ben Yijū dowered his daughter when she married her cousin.<sup>321</sup>

This then, is certain proof that this child of a Nair woman from the Malabar, did eventually marry her Sicilian cousin, in Cairo. In time Achchū's descendants, by the matrilineal reckoning of her community, have probably come to be spread all over the globe.

As for Surūr, he settled in Egypt with his family, and went on to become a prominent figure in the Jewish community. <sup>322</sup>

Ben Yijū spent some years in Egypt. But soon after his daughter's marriage he disappears from the records. His nephews and son-in-law do not mention him in their later letters to each other; nor has the Geniza yet provided any record of his death. In the absence of definite evidence we are free to imagine the rest of his life as we please.

Of the many conceivable endings the one which is most pleasing to me is the possibility that he returned to the Malabar to live out the rest of his life with Achchū.

19

Bomma's story ends in the city of Philadelphia, in the United States.

In downtown Philadelphia housed in a splendidly modern edifice, lies the Annenberg Research Institute: a centre for social and historical research established by a family which had built an immense fortune upon the



merchandising of a popular weekly guide to American television. In the bowels of this building is a great vault, steel-sealed and laser-beamed, equipped with an alarm system that needs no more than a few seconds to mobilise whole fleets of helicopters and police cars.

Within the soundproofed, humidity-controlled interior of this vault are two catafalque-like cabinets. Inside one of these, encased in sheets of clear plastic and acid-free paper, there lies a curious fragment from the Cairo Geniza. It is written in Ben Yijū's writing, but in the tiny, crabbed characters of an aging hand.

The writing on this fragment is so small, crowded, and faint that it is hard to make sense of the whole of it: only a few words and sentences are decipherable. They reveal the document to be one of Ben Yijū's many sets of accounts. These accounts however are quite unlike those he wrote in India: many of them list purchases of various kinds of bread. In rice-eating Tulunad Ben Yijū would never have found a baker to patronise. That, and the mention of certain names, establishes beyond doubt that the document was written in Egypt, probably in Fustat.

Hidden in this jumble of scribbled lines, and the lists of various kinds of loaves, there is a mention of a sum of money owed to Bomma. <sup>323</sup> ..

We may be certain therefore that Bomma was with Ben Yijū in Egypt, in the mid-1150s. He may even have been a witness to the defeat of the Crusaders' attempts to invade Egypt, and to the accession of the great Sultan, Salah al-Din.

This may well be the tip of an iceberg of Indian involvement in the Crusades.

In Philadelphia then, cared-for by the by-products of 'Dallas' and 'Dynasty' and protected by the might of the American police, lies entombed the last testament to the life of Ben Yijū's drunken slave, Bomma, the Bhūta-worshipping fisherman from Tulunad.

Bomma, I cannot help feeling, would have wholeheartedly approved.

Notes

1. Zion, n.s. V, 1942, Jerusalem. In the English abstract the article is entitled Documents for the Economic and Social History of the Jews of the Near East. The article includes a transcription in Hebrew characters of Geniza Ms.H.6., of the National and University Library, Jerusalem. My translation is based upon Dr. Strauss's transcription.
2. H.A.R. Gibb The Career of Nūr al-Din, pp. 513.
3. Berry: 508-10; Mayer: 103.
4. Maalouf: 150.
5. In T-S 20.137, recto, lines 22-23 - a letter sent to Bin Yijū in Mangalore in 1135 A.D. - an Adenese merchant reports on the state of demand for pepper, and the prices of some other commodities in Cairo that year.
6. In T-S 13 J 7, fol. 27, recto, a letter sent from Aden to Bin Yijū in Mangalore, probably in the late 1140s, one of their friends remarks: "As for the news of Egypt, may master will hear it from the traders..." (lines 18-19).
7. I have used the accepted transcription of the Hebrew from of the name here. In general however, for the sake of convenience, I have transcribed the Jewish names that occur in the documents exactly as they are spelt in the documents.
8. Ms.H.6, Lines 10-14.
9. Ms.H.6, lines 15-16. For Bin Yijū's bronze workshop, see Goitein, 1974: 192. Goitein uses the term 'factory'; to me 'workshop, seems more appropriate.
10. Ms.H.6, lines 17-19.
11. Ms.H.6, line 23.
12. English abstract, Strauss, 1942.

13. See Strauss, 1942: 148-49. I am grateful to Dr. Leon Wieseltier for translating the Hebrew sections of the article for me.
14. I would like to thank my colleagues at the Centre for Studies in Social Sciences, Calcutta, for their comments on an earlier version of this paper. I am grateful in particular to Dr. Partha Chatterjee for his many suggestions and criticisms - but most of all for his encouragement and support.
15. H.A.R. Gibb, Zengi and the Fall of Edessa, pp.459.
16. Goitein, 1973: 189.
17. Goitein, 1973: 187.
18. Goitein, 1973: 191, fn..
19. The work was also known by other names such as India Volume (Tobi:365).
20. See Goitein 1954, and 1980, pp. 43.
21. I would like to thank Dr. A Udovitch, and especially Dr. Mark Cohen, of the Dept. of Near Eastern Studies, Princeton University, for allowing me access to the S.D. Goitein Laboratory for Geniza Research, which is housed in their department at Princeton. Following the Laboratory's terms of functioning, I was allowed to consult only a limited amount of Material, and under restrictions concerning the taking of notes etc. The data that would have been of greatest use to me in this narrative concerns the dating of some of the documents that I have used. The dating of Geniza documents is an abstruse and difficult art and no practised it with greater mastery than Prof. Goitein. But since Prof. Goitein's notes for The India Book are still to be published, I have not referred to his datings or any other previously unpublished material. Fortunately the dates of the most important documents have already been published by Prof. Goitein and other scholars and they are adequate for the purposes of this narrative. I owe an additional debt of gratitude to Dr. Mark Cohen for the support, encouragement and constructive criticism he has given me throughout my research.

22. Kahle: 2.
23. Kahle: 2.
24. Goitein 1973: 6.
25. Goitein 1967: 9.
26. Of. Goitein 1973: 4 .
27. Goitein 1973: 6.
28. Goitein 1973: 207.
29. Of. Goitein 1954 and Strauss 1942.
30. Kahle: 2.
31. Kahle: 5.
32. Of. Pagels: xxv.
33. Goitein 1973: 186.
34. Bod. Lib. Ox. Ms. Hebr. b.11, fol, 15, for example, is a letter written by Bin Yijū in Mangalore, on behalf of one Mahrūz bin Ya'qub. The letter was probably sent to a merchant in Broach.

35. A complete list of these documents is included in the bibliography, under 'Geniza Documents'. I would like to thank the Syndics of the Cambridge University Library for giving me permission to examine and publish excerpts from these documents. I owe a particular debt of thanks to Dr. Geoffrey Khan, of the Taylor-Schechter Genizah Research Unit, Cambridge, for guiding my first faltering steps in the almost absurdly recondite field of Geniza studies, and for all the help and encouragement he has given me ever since. I would also like to thank Menahem Ben Sasson, for his patience with my innumerable queries, and for the time he took in going over some of my transcriptions. A separate tribute needs to be added here to the staff of the Manuscripts Reading Room of the Cambridge University Library, for their unfailing cheerfulness and competence.

36. Ferguson: 49, Versteegh: 17, Blau: 17.
37. See Hirschberg: 149-153 for a fuller treatment of the Arabicisation of North African Jews.
38. Blau: 19-25; Hirschberg: 153.
39. Blau: 23.
40. Blau: 23.
41. See Blau: 34-35, and 134-35, for a more detailed account of the orthography of Judaeo-Arabic.
42. Roland: 17.
43. S.D. Goitein used the form 'Bama' in Letter of Medieval Jewish Traders (1973), but chose 'Bamah' in his 1980 article, From Aden to India (pp. 52).
44. Ifriqiyah was an important centre of silk production at that time. Silk appears to have been one of its principal exports. A treatise entitled The Description of the Finishing of Silk and its dyeing in Differing Colours has been preserved in the Geniza. See Hirschberg: 270.
45. Quoted in Reinaud's introduction to the Geographie d'Aboulfeda, pp.58. The translation from the French is mine. See also Hirschberg: 252.
46. Quoted by Hirschberg, pp.252.
47. T-S 20. 130, lines 43-45.
48. See for example, Wehr-Cowan: 129.
49. See Hirschberg, 181-183, and Goitein 1962. Assaf notes that an eleventh century Spanish poet who translated the outstanding works of Hebrew literature was of servile origin (Assaf 1940). See also section 10, below.
50. cf. Goitein 1962.

51. Dr. Geoffrey Khan has found the name Bamah in a 3rd. century A.H. Arabiĉ papyrus, and he interprets it as a rendering of the Coptic Pamei/Pame (personal communication). It is extremely unlikely however that the b-m-h of Ms.H.6 is intended to represent the same name. In the first place it is spelt differently. Secondly, all the evidence indicates that the slave who bore the name was acquired by Ben Yijū in India.

52. Goitein 1973: 191.

53. The 10th. century Arab geographer Mas'ūdi, for example, who is reported to have lived in Malabar, Sri Lanka, and other parts of the sub-continent, writes in his encyclopaedic compendium Meadows of Gold (Murūj al-Dhahab), that at the beginning of history, when states and societies were being formed, the people of India "looked for an order for their country and their chiefs said: 'We are a primitive people and we are the beginning and the end of things, of principles and words... We will not suffer rebellions or disobedience, or evil designs'. In order to attain this they accepted a chief as their absolute monarch. He was Brahman the Great (al-brahman al-akbar). Wisdom flourished in his regin, and sages occupied the first rank... (pp.149). The Brahman died after a reign of three hundred years and sixty-six years. His descendants have kept to this day the name of Brahmins (al-brahma), and they are honoured by the Indians as the most noble (ashraf) and illustrious kind (ajnas) of people among them" / my translation 7 (pp.154). The word occurs also in al-Idrīsi's geographical work, written in the 12th century Kitab tazha al-mushtaq fi ihtiraq al-afaq.

54. Panchamukhi: 71-2

55. Panchamukhi: 72-3.

56. See also Desai for mention of a 12th century general called "Brahma or Bamma Dandadhisa" (45).

57. An inscription of 1030 A.D. for example, extols a man for being a "meditator the feet of Brahmadeva", (Panchamukhi: 13). See also Bhatt: 358, for other epigraphical references to Brahma worship in medieval Karnataka.

58. Eck: 202.
59. cf O'Flaherty: 33-34.
60. cf. Gazetteer of India: 60-61; Report of the Irrigation Commission, 1972: 254-56).
61. Gazetteer 1973: 89.
62. Gazetteer 1973: 5.
63. Gazetteer 1973: 67.
64. Pillai & Kundu: 55.
65. John & George: 61.
66. Pillai & Kundu: 56.
67. Mitra & Mukherjee: 61-63.
68. Mitra & Mukherjee: 61-63.
69. cf. Bhatt: 230; Buchanan: 217 & Ramesh 1981: 7-8.
70. cf. Ramesh 1981: 8.
71. cf. Ramesh 1981: 4 & Buchanan: 213.
72. Ramesh 1981: 2-3.
73. cf. Ramesh 1981: 7; Upadhyaya & Upadhyaya: 1 & Claus 1979: 96.
74. cf. Ramesh 1970: 73; Bhatt: 20.
75. The name of this dynasty is also spelt, in various inscriptions as Alva, Aluka, and Alapa (cf. Ramesh 1970: 30 & Bhatt: 25). Following the usage current among historians of the region I have used the form Alupa.
76. Bhatt: 18; Ramesh 1970: 26.



77. For a detailed accounts of the history of the Aalupas see Ramesh 1970, Bhatt: 18-41 and Saletore's Ancient Karnataka, Vol. 1., History of Tuluva.

78. cf. Ramesh 1970: 115. Bhatt dates Kavi Alupendra's reign from 1115 to 1155 A.D.(23).

79. Ramesh 1970: 138-149; Bhatt: 35-40.

80. For the later history of the region see Ramesh 1970, Bhatt: 51-141; and Kamath's Tuluva in Vijayanagar Times.

81 Bhatt: plates 323-26.

82. Bhatt: 26.

83. cf. Das: 135; Eck: 107-8.

84. Bhatt writes: "The Brahma...of Tulu-nadu is represented in the form of a warrior seated on a horse with a sword in hand" (357). See also plate 325c in Bhatt's Studies for an illustration of an unusual bronze icon of the Tulu 'Brahma'.

85. This was pointed out to me by Dr. B.A. Viveka Rai, Head of the Dept. of Kannada at Mangalore University. I am deeply grateful to Dr. Rai for this and innumerable other comments and suggestions, for his generosity with his time and his erudition, and for a great many other kindnesses.

86. See Upahdayaya and Upadhyaya: plate 4, and Bhatt: plate 236b. Bhatt describes the images on plate 323 as Bhūta-Brahmas, but their iconography proves them to be of classical derivation - as a glance at plate 325c shows.

87. cf. Bhatt: 357.

88. See, for example, plates 329-402 in Bhatt's Studies in Tuluva Culture. In this long inventory of the temples and icons of Tulunad, there is only one representation of Brahma, a figure carved in wood in which Brahma is depicted in the classical fashion.

89. Bhatt: 26-7.

90. Claus 1979a: 39.
91. cf. Bhatt: 359-366.
92. Nichter: 140; Claus 1973:235; Brückner: 18.
93. Claus: 1973:232.
94. cf. Eck: 61.
95. Upadhyaya and Upadhyaya: 12.
96. Nichter: 143.
97. cf. Bhatt: 237; Nichter: 139.
98. Amongst the Tuluva, as with most groups that are characterised as 'mātrilineal', these rules apply only to certain categories of property. "Between, and even to a surprising degree within, the various castes one encounters an array kinship organisation which cannot easily be covered merely by applying the labels patrilineal and matrilineal" (Claus 1981:213). Claus quite rightly questions the value of what Needham has called 'nomothetic classifications' such as these. In Claus's view some Tuluva kinship institutions are suggestive of double unilineal descent (Claus 1981:234). Where I have used the term 'matrilineal' without qualification it is purely for convenience; the qualifications must be taken for granted.
99. cf. Nichter: 141.
100. See Claus 1981:214. Of course, forms of matrilineal succession are a feature of the organisation of many groups on this coast, the most notable being the Nayar of Kerala, who have achieved an almost unparalleled eminence in the anthropological literature on matrilineality. Some aspects of this literature are discussed at length in Louis Dumont's Marriage in India, the Present State of the Question, part II.
101. Bhatt: 241.
102. Bhatt: 250.

103. Bhatt: 242.

104. Buchanan: 204.

105. This figure includes all the groups which Buchanan lists as 'Whalliaru' (206-7).

106. The percentage of Tulu-speakers in the district appears to have stayed reasonably constant, for their numbers were estimated to represent about 47% of the district's total in 1961 - a figure which would of course, include a large number of Tuluva Brahmins (Karnataka Gazetteer: 94).

107. Class 1981: 212.

108. Buchanan: 213; Claus 1979: 98 & 1981: 213.

109. Bhatt: 233.

110. cf. Nichter: 142. I would like to thank Fr. Alfonsus D'Souza S.J., of St. Aloysius College, Mangalore, a specialist on the religious practices of the district, for pointing out this aspect of the cult to me. For his generosity with his time, and for the kindness and patience with which he introduced me to many other aspects of Tuluva religion, I owe him a great debt of gratitude.

111. Brückner: 18.

112. Buchanan: 239.

113. Bhatt: 226.

114. Bhatt: 226-28.

115. cf. Rai: 9; Bhatt: 360; & Saletore: 1.

116. Claus 1979b: 110; Saletore: 460.

117. Bhatt: 227.

118. Saletore: 464; Bhatt: 228-29.

119. Buchanan: 217.

120. Buchanan: 207.
121. cf. Bhatt: 251-2.
122. Claus 1979a: 47; 1979b: 113.
123. Bhatt: 228.
124. Buchanan: 205.
125. Nichter: 145; Claus 1973:232.
126. See Rai: 9; Claus 1979b: 96; Bruckner: 20, 29 & Bhatt:360.
127. Nichter: 147-9.
128. There is of course, a symbiotic relationship between folk deities and Sanskritic gods throughout Hindu India (see Eck: 68-9.
129. cf. Nichter: 143.
130. Nichter: 141.
131. For a detailed account of the workings of this process see Nichter's article.
132. cf. Brückner: 29; Claus 1979a: 40.
133. cf. Bhatt: 24; Saletore: 496.
134. cf. Claus 1979a: 40; & Prabhu: 25. Bhatt's puzzlement is instructive: "Although it cannot be easily explained, how Brahma who occupies such an exalted position in the Hindu pantheon, is assigned such a low and degraded place amongst the devils (bhūtas) in Tulu-nadu, we may hypothetically say that since devil-worship has been, for centuries, the core of the Tuluvas cult amongst the non-Brahmins, Siva, the Lord of the bhūtas, himself may have been represented being called Brahma." (356).
135. cf. Bhatt: 26.

136. Indeed a 19th. century observer even listed a Bhūta called Bommartaye (Revd A. Manner, Tulu-Paddanalu, 1886, quoted by Bhatt, pp. 379).

137. I have introduced a hyphen here between the elements Bomm-and settiya.

138. Bhatt: 243; 250-1.

139. There may be none at all, for the Bommiya-bali is named after a mythological figure called Bonyannaya (Bhatt: 250).

140. Barbosa: 136. Barbosa's reference to this caste is curious nonever, for it occurs in the context of a long description of the 'sects' of the region around Calicut, what Barbosa calls 'the kingdom of Malabar'. The group of Mogerās he encountered were probably a small community of immigrants from nearby Tulunad for he notes that 'There are very few of these in the country...' (138).

141. Barbosa: 138.

142. Upadhyaya and Upadhyaya: 60; Saletore: 461; Prabhu: 143-4.

143. Upadhyaya and Upadhyaya: 60.

144. T-S 20. 137, recto, and T-S N.S. J 1.

145. Bin Yijū arrived in India at some point before 1132 A.D. (see below, section 8).

146. The first fragment is T-S 20. 137, recto, and the second T-S N.S. J 1.. S.D. Goitein traced the connection between the two fragments (See Goitein 1956, and Shaked's Bibliography).

147. T-S 20. 137, verso.

148. Madmūn bin Bundar's career is extensively chronicled in the Geniza. See, for example, Goitein 1973 (177-182), and 1980 (45).

149. See Goitein 1973, 186.

150. T-S 20. 130. My assumption that this is the first item in Madmūn's correspondence with Bin Yijū is based on a comment in the letter (recto, lines 4 - 5) in which Madmūn mentions the hardships of the voyage to India, which suggest that it was a response to a letter of Bin Yijū's in which he had complained of an unpleasant journey.

151. E.g., in T-S 20. 130, Madmūn chides Bin Yijū: 'My master's accounts are wrong...' (recto, line 40), and in T-S N.S. J 1, probably written soon afterwards, cautions him: 'Be careful with (the letters) and deliver each one to the person to whom it is addressed, by hand, personally, for God's sake' (verso, lines 9 - 10).

152. See for example, the letters' in S.D. Goitein's 1980 article.

153. One of his letters is reprinted in Goitein 1973 (192-197)

154. Goitein 1973: 192.

155. See, for example, Ibn Jubair's *Rahla*, a twelfth century account of a journey from Spain to Mecca Via Egypt, and back (translated into English by R.J.C. Broadhurst and published under the title *The Travels of Ibn Jubayr*).

156. cf. Garcin 1976: 47.

157. The crossing took Ibn Jubair only seventeen days, but the 12th. century geographer, al-Idrisi asserts that it generally took at least twenty days (132).

158. cf. Ibn Jubair (trans. Broadhurst) 63-64; & al-Idrisi, 13

159. Garcin 1972: 190.

160. T-S N.S. J 10, recto, lines 13-16.

161. T-S 13 J 24, fol. 2, recto, lines 6 - 22 and margins.

162. T-S N.S. J 10, recto, lines 16-19.

163. T-S Ms. Or. 1081, J3, recto, margin.
164. cf. Goitein 1956, 248. The historian was Ibn al-Mujawir (died 1291 A.D.).
165. cf. al-Idrisi: 59, 153, & 171.
166. I have substituted the word 'awaiting' here for the Arabic intazarū, which S.D. Goitein translates as 'attending'.
167. Goitein 1956: 256. The passage is a translation of the document T-S 20. 137, recto, lines 9-22.
168. T-S 20. 137, recto, lines 1-5.
169. T-S 20. 137, recto, lines 5-6.
170. T-S 20. 137, recto, lines 41-43.
171. Goitein 1956: 250.
172. Goitein 1973: 202.
173. Goitein 1973: 202.
174. Goitein, 1978: 6; 1980: 45 fn..
175. Khalaf bin Ishaq, for example, added al-Mahdawi to Bin Yijū's name in the Letter that was published by Strauss (National and University Library, Jerusalem, Geniza Ms.H.6.). Bin Yijū himself sometimes added the suffix to his name; for example, in a letter written to his brother Yūsuf in the early 1150s (T-S 12. 337, verso, address).
176. Bod. Lib. Ox. Ms. Hebr., d.66, fol. 139, lines 6-8.
177. Wieruszowski: 16.
178. Wieruszowski: 17.
179. Hirschberg: 115-6.

180. Assuming that he was in his mid-thirties in 1132 A.D. when we first hear of him in India, he would have been born around the turn of the century.
181. Al-Idrisi, 257, my translation.
182. Al-Idrisi: 258-9.
183. The Hebrew form is Perahya.
184. Those of Bin Yijū's correspondents who appear to have known his father write of him in terms of the greatest respect. The writer of the letter on T-S 10 J 13, fol. 6, Yeshu' a Hakohen bin Yaqov, writing in the 1150s, addresses Bin Yijū as 'son of our teacher and master' (line 7). [I am grateful to Geoffrey Khan for translating the Hebrew sections of this document for me.]7.
185. Berakha in Hbrew.
186. Bin Yijū mentions his sister and her husband in a letter written in the early 1150s (T-S 12. 337, verso, lines 4-5). Later in the same letter he writes 'This year a letter from my sister, written in her hand, reached me in 'Aden' (verso, lines 8-9).
187. T-S 12. 337, recto, margin.
188. His letter of T-S 16. 288, for example, is thickly studded with Biblical quotations and allusions, and is evidently the work of a deeply religious, if somewhat confused, person.
189. cf. Goitein 1973: 186.
190. The manuscripts' catalogue numbers are Insitut. Narodov Arii D-55, no. 10, verso, and T-S, Misc. Box 29, fol.4.
191. cf. Goitein 1973: 207-8.
192. In a letter written in the mid-1150s, Shamwal, Yūsuf's youngest son writes to his brothers to tell them that the situation of their household is near desperate, with all their provisions gone and no money left to buy wheat (Bod. Lib. Ox. Ms. Hebr., b.11 (2874), for. 15, recto, lines 34-7). See also Goitein 1973, pp. 202.



193. cf. Tobi.

194. cf. Goitein 1956: 250.

195. T-S Ms. Or. 1080 J 263, verso.

196. Prof. Goitein included the catalogue number of this letter in Shaked's catalogue of Geniza documents, and he must have known of its contents for he described it there as the "first part of a letter sent by Madmūn of Aden to Ben Yijū in India". But his examination of it must have been very cursory for he does not quote it in any of his published references to Ben Yijū and probably did not fully appreciate the implications it has for the story of Ben Yijū's life.

197. The term jalūs could also be translated as 'council', but the reference here must be to a court like the pardesi's courts mentioned by Barbosa (147) (and see below, section 9). This statement seems to imply that the court came under the jurisdiction of the ruler of Aden. The interlocking of these systems of justice urgently needs research.

198. T-S Ms. Or. 1080 J 263, recto, lines 16-22. The meaning of the second part of the last sentence is doubtful, and my reading of it must be taken as provisional at best. It is to be hoped that the India Book will provide a definitive translation.

199. See for example Idrisi: 177.

200. Major: 29.

201. Barbosa: 148.

202. Barbosa: 147.

203. Major: 17.

204. Barbosa: 148.

205. Major: 19.

206. Their thirst for trade sometimes made them eager to ingratiate themselves with foreign powers. 'Abd al-Razzaq recounts that the Zamorin of Calicut, upon hearing of the power of the Persian king Shah Rukh sent him presents and the message: "In this port, on every Friday and every solemn feast day, the Khotbah is celebrated according to the prescribed rules of Islamism. With your majesty's permission, these prayers shall be adorned and honoured by the addition of your name and of your illustrious titles" (15).
207. Major: 17, 'Abd al-Razzaq also notes that this apparel was common to 'the king and to the baggar'.
208. See Barbosa: 87.
209. See Goitein's discussion of attitudes towards clothing as they are represented in the Geniza (1983, 153-59).
210. cf. T-S 1080 J 95, recto, lines 8-9; T-S 10 J 9, fol.24, lines 14-15; T-S 10 J 12, fol. 5, verso, line 9.
211. cf. T-S 8 J 7, fol. 23, recto margin.
212. T-S 18 J 2, fol. 7, recto, lines 15-18.
213. T-S K 25.252, verso, lines 14-15.
214. T-S 18 J 2, fol. 7 recto, lines 19-20. For treatments of the medieval paper industry in the middle east see, E.Ashtor 1977 article, pp. 266-73, and Goitein 1961: 189-193.
215. Bosworth: 232.
216. cf. T-S 20. 137, recto, line 47.
217. cf. T-S Ms. Or. 1081 J3, recto, lines 7-8; & T-S 18 J 2, fol. 7, recto, line 12. For mention of a 'Barūji tanfasa' see T-S K 25.252, recto, line 23.
218. The production of cane sugar was a flourishing industry. in the middle east in the 12th century (see Ashtor 1977).
219. T-S 18 J 5, fol. 1, recto, margin.

220. Buchanan: 203.

221. Buchanan: 228.

222. These figures are computed from Buchanan's reckoning of the cost of maintaining a hired worker (pp.227), the cost of rice (pp.243) and the relative value of currencies (pp.219).

223. Buchanan: 228.

224. Buchanan: 207.

225. Chidanandamurthy: 186.

226. Chidanandamurthy: 183.

227. Several documents in the Geniza offer proof that North African Jews, for instance, kept Indian, Slavonic, Byzantine, Libyan and Negro slaves (Hirschberg: 182). See also Assaf's Slavery and Slave Trade in the Middle Ages.

228. Barbosa: 18.

229. See, for example, Evans-Pritchard: 220-225.

230. Goitein 1973: 13.

231. cf. Wade: 169.

232. Dr. A.K. Viveka Rai very kindly translated this article into English for me.

233. Ramanujan: 61, and cf. Desai: 137, 168.

234. Ramanujan: 88.

235. cf. Ramanujan: 29.

236. Ramanujan: 87.

237. Ramanujan: 70.

238. See S.D. Goitein: A Jewish Addict to Sufism in the time of the Nagid David II Maimonides. Jewish Quarterly Review: Vol. 44, 37-49, 1953-54.
239. cf. Schimmel: 141-3.
240. Schimmel: 231, 237.
241. Schimmel: 292.
242. T-S 12. 458 verso, lines 5-13. I would like to thank Geoffrey Khan for translating the Aramaic words in this document for me.
243. Of. Goitein 1973, 202; & 1967: 20.
244. Mas'udi: 169.
245. Al-Idrisi: 179.
246. See Ferrand: 124.
247. Ferrand: 63.
248. Major: 23.
249. Major: 29.
250. Goitein 1973: 202.
251. I am indebted to Shri S.A. Krishnaiah, Research Officer, Regional Resources Centre for Folk Performing Arts, Udupi, for suggesting this possibility to me. I would like to thank him for illuminating me on many other aspects of Tuluva folklore as well. I would also like to thank Prof. Haridas Bhat for making the resources of the Centre for Performing Arts available to me.
252. T-S N.S. J 1, recto, line 11.
253. Goitein 1973: 202.

254. cf. Goitein 1973: 202, and Falk 1962-63. For a brief review of the literature on cousin marriage in the Middle East see Keyser's article The Middle Eastern Case: Is There a Marriage Rule, and for a lengthy review see Chapter II of my Ph.D. thesis Kinship in Relation to Economic and Social Organisation in an Egyptian Village Community, Oxford, 1982.
255. Benjamin of Tudela: 120-1.
256. For this orders of kohl see, for example, T-S 10 J 12, fol. 5, verso, line 10 ('Ispahani kohl') & T-S 10 J 9, fol. 24, line 18.
257. T-S 20. 137, verso, line 19 (account no. 2).
258. Bhatt: 234-5.
259. See T-S Ms. Or. 1081, J3, verso, line 9.
260. cf. Goitein 1973, 191 & Strauss, 149 (line 23 "to brother Bomma especially from me, plentiful greetings"); and T-S 18 J 4, fol. 18, recto, line 46, "and special greetings to Shaikh Bomma".
261. T-S N.S. J 1, verso, lines 6-8.
262. I am grateful to Dr. B.A. Viveka Rai for suggesting this interpretation of the Arabic spelling of the name.
263. T-S 18 J 2, fol. 7, verso, lines 1-6. See also Goitein 1920, pp. 53. My translation differs slightly from Prof. Goitein's.
264. Prof. Goitein assumed that Hindu merchants knew Arabic (1973: 65, fn.). But there appears to me be no indication of this whatever.
265. Ferrand: 71.
266. See for example, Pandit, pp. 11-12.

267. Several accounts comment on the cosmopolitanism of medieval Malabar. See for example Benjamin of Tudela's Itinerary (12th century) (120-1); the 'Narrative of the Journey of Abd-er Razzak', an account by a fifteenth century Persian envoy to the court of Vijainagar: "Calicut is a perfectly secure harbour, which like that of Ormuz, brings together merchants from every country" (Major: 14). The travelogue of the 16th. century Portuguese sailor, Duarte Barbosa, describes the varied merchant populations of the towns of the Malabar at some length (102-4, 146-8, 149-51, 172 etc.). Barbosa, ironically, was a part of the Portuguese fleet that was responsible for the destruction of the cosmopolitan way of life the Indian Ocean had nurtured since antiquity.

268. Several Arab geographers and travellers described the parts that formed the links in the chain of trade that stretched across the Indian Ocean. See for example, al-Idrisi, 89-91. Chinese and other sources also mention settlements of Persians, 'Brahmins' and Malaysians in Hainan, Canton etc. (cf. Hourani: 62-72).

269. cf. Goitein 1973, pp. 64 for the name 'Tinbu' (Tambi?). The letters NMBRNI occur in T-S K 25.252, recto, line 13. It was probably intended to spell some form of the name 'Nambiyar'. Bin Yijū's accounts on the verso of T-S 20. 137 mention the name 'Nair' as well as two names written as LNGY and LNBV, almost certainly Dravidian forms.

270. cf. Hourani: 65; Goitein 1973: 191 fn.; 193.

271. Hourani: 65.

272. Ferrand: 123; Major: 17.

273. Nainar: 95.

274. Nainar: 95.

275. Versteegh: 114, Whinnom: 296.

276. cf. Holm: 46.

277. cf. Versteegh: 115.

278. T-S 20.137 verso, lines 1-4.

279. Al-Idrisi: 177.

280. Goitein 1973, pp. 193. I have substituted the words 'disgrace' and 'censure' for the words 'excommunicate' and 'excommunication'. The words used in the manuscript (T-S 12.320 recto) are two forms of the Arabic root sh-m-t. I am informed by Dr. Geoffrey Khan that this is not the root that is normally used to designate excommunication in the Geniza documents; it should be read instead as "the metathesized form of sh-t-m (to insult, defame), which is used in Maghrebi Arabic...The letter would, therefore, be referring to some form of public defamation, or 'rogues gallery' (personal communication). Prof. Goitein probably used the term 'excommunicate' on the assumption that the 'kardal' was Jewish. The evidence, as we shall see, suggests otherwise.

281. Goitein 1973: 193.

282. T-S 18 J 4, fol. 18, recto, lines 26-28.

283. Madmūn never mentions the matter in any of his letters to Ben Yījū.

284. T-S 18 J 4, fol. 18, recto, lines 29-31. However, the precise meaning of this passage is unclear, and my reading of it must be treated with caution.

285. T-S 12.235 verso, lines 3-5.

286. T-S N.S. J 10, verso, line 16.

287. Khalaf ibn Ishaq writes in a letter: "Your servant asked about my master, and they said to me he is in Jurbattan with his household and children..." (T-S Misc. Box 24, fragm. 103, recto, lines 25-7).

288. cf. Nainar: 41.

289. Nainar: 32; see also Goitein 1973: 188.

290. Nainar: 35.

291. The Arabic term malabar for the southern part of the coast, for example, rarely occurs in the documents.

292. See for example, the Muruj al-Dhahab of al-Mas'ūdi the 10th. century geographer (pp. 163), and al-Idrisi's Kitab tazha al-mushtaq (pp. 162-183).

293. cf. Ferrand: 48.

294. Mas'ūdii: 163, my translation.

295. See Mas'udi: 177; Idrisi: 173; & Ferrand: 48.

296. cf. Goitein 1973: 202.

297. See T-S 1080 J 95, Account No. 4, lines 1-2.

298. T-S 8 J 7, fol. 23, recto, lines 6-9.

299. Wieruszowski: 23; Perry: 463.

300. T-S 18 J 4, fol. 18 recto, lines 33-5.

301. T-S Misc. Box 24, fragm 103, recto, lines 27-8.

302. T-S 18 J 7, fol. 27 recto, lines 15-19. This passage suggests that this letter was written after T-S 18 J 4, fol. 18, & T-S Misc. Box 24, fragm 103. Altogether there are five documents which refer to Mubashshir. The last of these is Ms.H.6. which has been reliably dated by Strauss as having been written in 1148 A.D.. Since Mubashshir's stay in Egypt does not appear to have been very long, it can be assumed with a fair degree of certainty that the other letters were written in the three or four year period immediately preceding 1148 A.D. From their contents they can be arranged in the following chronological order:

1. T-S 18 J 4, fol. 18.
2. T-S Misc. Box 24, fragm. 103.
3. T-S 13 J 7, fol. 27.
4. T-S 12,235.
5. Ms.H.6 (cf. Strauss)..



303. Hirschberg: 120.
304. Wieruszowski: 23.
305. Hirschberg: 128.
306. Hirschberg: 127.
307. Goitein 1973: 62.
308. Bod. Lib. Ox. Ms. Hebr., b. 11, fol.22.
309. Strauss: 149; my translation.
310. Strauss, *ibid.*
311. I have quoted this part of the letter from Prof. Goitein's translation, published in *Letters of Medieval Jewish Traders* (1973), pp. 203-4. The rest is from my own translation.
312. Ben Yijū's use of the second person plural pronoun here is of course, conventional. I have translated his usage literally, instead of substituting 'our', because, as Ramanujan says, in translation "the letter giveth life and the spirit killeth."
313. T-S 10 J 10, fol. 15 recto, lines 16-22 & 25-27, & verso, lines 5-7.
314. Goitein 1973: 206.
315. His proper name was taken from his grandfather, Farhia, but this name was usually paired with the nickname, Surūr. Bin Yijū's own son bore the same pair of names.
316. Bod. Lib. Ox. Ms. Hebr. d 66, fol. 139, recto, lines 5-13.
317. T-S 12.387 recto, lines 5-31. The dashes indicate the gaps in the text.
318. T-S 12.337, verso lines 9-11.

319. His crafts for three judgements written in this period have been preserved T-S 10 J 9, fol. 24, verso. See also Goitein, Mediterranean Society, vol. I, pps. 194 & 561.

320. In T-S 10 J 14, fol. 2, a correspondent writes to him explaining the steps he has taken regarding his house and landlord.

321. cf. Goitein 1973:202.

322. cf. Goitein 1969.

323. Dropsie Univ. 472.

Geniza Documents

[This list includes only those Geniza documents that I have transcribed and translated myself, and that have been referred to in the course of this paper.]

1. T-S 12.235
2. T-S 12.337
3. T-S 12.458
4. T-S 16.288
5. T-S 20.130
6. T-S 20.137
7. T-S N.S. J 1
8. T-S N.S. J 10
9. T-S K 25.252
10. T-S 1080 J 95
11. T-S Ms. Or. 1080 J 263
12. T-S Ms. Or. 1081, J3
13. T-S Misc. Box 24, fragm 103
14. T-S 8 J 7, fol. 23
15. T-S 10 J 9, fol. 24
16. T-S 10 J 10, fol. 15
17. T-S 10 J 12, fol. 5
18. T-S 10 J 13, fol. 6

19. T-S 10 J 14, fol. 2
20. T-S 13 J 7, fol. 27
21. T-S 13 J 24, fol. 2
22. T-S 18 J 2, fol. 7
23. T-S 18 J 4, fol. 18
24. T-S 18 J 5, fol. 1
25. Bod. Lib. Ox. Ms. Hebr., b.11 (2874), fol. 15
26. Bod. Lib. Ox. Ms. Hebr., b.11 (2874), fol. 22
27. Bod. Lib. Ox. Ms. Hebr., d.66, fol. 139
28. Dropsie Univ. 472.

Abbreviations:

T-S : Taylor-Schechter Collection (Cambridge University Library)

N.S.: New Series

Bod.Lib.Ox.: Bodleian Library Oxford

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