A Letter from Joseph Ben Abraham, a Jewish Trader from Aden - Late 1130s CE
On the Indian Bronze Factory of Abraham Yihi in Tamil Nadu

The ancestors of today's affluent artichokar manufacturers in south India have been producing sacred bronze icons for over 1,000 years, so the writer(was this a writer?) in question is not a question. Why display letters from medieval Jewish traders in India? Why single out one of several active communities of traders between India and the Islamic countries during the High Middle Ages (from 10th, 12th, and 13th centuries CE)? The answer is straightforward: the only documents that survive from the medieval period, and that world, are the letters from Jewish overseas traders at the time. The letters were preserved and found in the Cairo Geniza (general repository) — a special storage facility attached to the Synagogues in Cairo. In the Geniza. Hebrew scripts and papers that were placed in the Geniza were known as amhazim, "hebrews," because they were sunned and ensuring claim to preservation was based on their containing the "names" of God. The Cairo Geniza included documents written in Hebrew and other languages that used the Hebrew script, including Judeo-Arabic (like the documents here), Judeo-Persian and more. More than 100,000 documents were saved this way, including over 1,000 complete business letters. These were identified by the late Professor S.D. Goitein of the Institute for Advanced Study in Princeton in his remarkable book, Letters of Medieval Jewish Traders (Princeton University Press, 1993).

The letters are an historical treasure trove that helps us reconstruct many aspects of the medieval world, including the pronouncements of the letters, the world in which the traders lived, the organization of overseas trade, and the types of goods exchanged. As noted on the previous page, the letters from Jewish traders in India provide the only contemporary evidence from the time of the Chola Dynasty (9th – 13th centuries CE) concerning maritime production and trade. It seems Abraham Yihi had a bronze factory on the Tamil Nadu coast and traded in bronze and copper. This letter from a trader named Joseph Ben Abraham, to the Jewish bronze factory owner, reports on vessels and amulets of copper vessels, the suggested resemecommodation of a friendly dealer, orders for more bronze vessels, a detailed description of a beautiful lamp order, and presents sent (including "kosher" cheese). The Tamil Nadu bronze factory described here in the 12th century CE is strikingly similar to the type of entrepreneurial bronze manufactories studied by the UC San Diego ethnoarchaeology teams in Swat Valley. These are different from the handcrafted manufactories, but are part of the range of south Indian metal workshops over the past 1,000 years.

This year, doctor, we received your letter on the 21st of the month of Av. We have been informed about your arrival in the port of the world of all. Please let me know what you have to say. And let me know what you have to say. And let me know what you have to say. And let me know what you have to say. And let me know what you have to say. And let me know what you have to say. And let me know what you have to say. And let me know what you have to say. And let me know what you have to say. And let me know what you have to say. And let me know what you have to say. And let me know what you have to say. And let me know what you have to say. And let me know what you have to say. And let me know what you have to say. And let me know what you have to say.