



UNIVERSITY OF LEEDS

This is a repository copy of *Abraham's Luggage: A Social Life of Things in the Medieval Indian Ocean World*.

White Rose Research Online URL for this paper:

<https://eprints.whiterose.ac.uk/191380/>

Version: Accepted Version

---

**Article:**

Darley, R orcid.org/0000-0003-0219-418X (2021) *Abraham's Luggage: A Social Life of Things in the Medieval Indian Ocean World*. *Journal of Early Modern History: contacts, comparisons, contrasts*, 25 (3). pp. 265-267. ISSN 1385-3783

<https://doi.org/10.1163/15700658-12342679>

---

© Koninklijke Brill NV, Leiden, 2021. This is an author produced version of an article, published in *Journal of Early Modern History: contacts, comparisons, contrasts*. Uploaded in accordance with the publisher's self-archiving policy.

**Reuse**

Items deposited in White Rose Research Online are protected by copyright, with all rights reserved unless indicated otherwise. They may be downloaded and/or printed for private study, or other acts as permitted by national copyright laws. The publisher or other rights holders may allow further reproduction and re-use of the full text version. This is indicated by the licence information on the White Rose Research Online record for the item.

**Takedown**

If you consider content in White Rose Research Online to be in breach of UK law, please notify us by emailing [eprints@whiterose.ac.uk](mailto:eprints@whiterose.ac.uk) including the URL of the record and the reason for the withdrawal request.



[eprints@whiterose.ac.uk](mailto:eprints@whiterose.ac.uk)  
<https://eprints.whiterose.ac.uk/>

Elizabeth A. Lambourn, *Abraham's Luggage: a social life of things in the medieval Indian Ocean world*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018, 316 pp, ISBN 9781316795453, £21.99.

*Abraham's Luggage* is an exceptional example of a micro-historical study with macro-historical implications. Its focus is a single document, preserved amidst the treasure-trove of Genizah documents that have, since the 19th century, opened up the study of medieval and early modern Jewish communities in the Middle East. It is part of a small but significant subset of Genizah documents relating to Jewish traders doing business with the west coast of peninsular India. On the back and around the edges of an older letter, re-using the precious spare paper, is a luggage list in Judaeo-Arabic. S. D. Goitein identified the writer, on the basis of handwriting in other Genizah documents, as Abraham ben Yiju, a North African Jewish merchant who spent twelve years living near modern Mangalore. Lambourn argues convincingly that this is likely the list, or one of the lists, Abraham used to prepare for his final return from India to Yemen in 1149, along with his two children by an Indian wife (presumed deceased before this departure), and possibly his Indian factor, Bomma.

In places almost illegible, containing words for which no translation can as yet be given - a couple are suggested by Lambourn on the basis of her contextual analysis -, the list is perhaps an unpromising starting point. However, as Lambourn draws the reader through her methodologically diverse forays into the luggage list, she is able to uncover fragments of worlds both intimate and global, and pose numerous questions for future research. The introductory chapters offer a useful summary of the list as an object, the Genizah documents of which it forms a part and Abraham ben Yiju himself. There is also a useful discussion of both lists and luggage, making the case strongly that luggage is a ripe area for new research into mobility, travel and skilled practice in the past. The image that Lambourn evokes here and later in the volume of doing archaeology on a single text foregrounds the crucial importance of materiality to all that follows.

Thereafter, two main sections hinge around the list as a turning point in time. Part I, 'A Mediterranean Society in Malibarat', uses Abraham's luggage to look backwards into his life in India and the construction there of a distinctively Jewish home. The first chapter of this section examines the significance of shopping sent to Abraham by business associates in the Middle East. The act of sourcing, packing and sending a wide range of items, either as commissioned purchases or gifts, generating credit within professional relationships, emerges as critical to forming friendly, often highly personal business networks. Chapters on food culture and the maintenance of Jewish rituals connected to food and drink embed these networks in the space of Abraham's home, highlighting the importance of domestic settings for the embodied performance of identity, especially in a time before caravanserais and inns became part of India's landscape of travel. In this context, for example, raisins emerge as a particularly fascinating and detailed case study of the challenges and possibilities for observation of the Sabbath while far from the Middle East, sustained in part by the regular dispatches of raisins that Abraham received from his associates in Yemen. In these chapters, other documents from the Genizah meet rabbinic judgements, south Asian epicurean manuals and Arabic travelogues to flesh out a culinary and religious life from the luggage list.

Part II, 'A Mediterranean Society at Sea' looks forward to the journey the list was intended to equip. This likely lasted five to six weeks and, as Lambourn explains, is more difficult, if not impossible, to see through a prism of assembled texts. The generic conventions of most medieval literature stubbornly pass over this aspect of travel except for dramatic accounts of disaster and shipwreck. Yet, as *Abraham's Luggage* makes clear, life at sea still had to be lived, and with many of the same concerns as life on land, including maintaining bodily health, religious practice and bodily safety. Here, viewing the list from a 'bodily functionalist' perspective and recognising the constant reality of the sea as a hostile environment unlocks new and equally exciting pathways into the past. The question of potable water - how much of it, how good it was and how people might

draw and use it - reveals the different priorities of European and Indian Ocean shipbuilders with respect to speed and manoeuvrability and draws together medieval medical treatises and military manuals to explore the many functions of vinegar as a simple medicine and part of the knowledge reservoir of a skilled traveller. The presence on the list of a cabin door and planks leads to an examination of postural habits, the subdivision of shipboard spaces and the concerns over privacy of a well-to-do Jewish father travelling with his likely veiled daughter.

The appendix features a new translation of Abraham's luggage list, as well as a parallel transcription into modern Hebrew and modern Arabic. This is explicitly intended to encourage scholars of Arabic to consider dipping their toes into the world of edited Genizah texts. It also features numerous notes on translation. References throughout are full and detailed and exhibit the extensive research, including personal networks criss-crossing the Indian Ocean. *Abraham's Luggage* therefore, in some ways echoes the human networks that Lambourn has so deftly uncovered in the medieval western Indian Ocean. The volume is particularly valuable for its integration of recent archaeological and historical work published in south India.

Viewed as a whole, *Abraham's Luggage* is that very rare thing - an extremely erudite page-turner. Dealing with at times obscure material and branches of learning, Lambourn nevertheless leads the reader clearly through her points, indicates areas of uncertainty or debate and creates a sense of real connection to Abraham and the concerns and complexities of his long voyage. At times the theoretical framing of chapters can seem lengthy but it is never unclear. It is also at times repeated between different chapters, or sectional introductions and the chapters within them. For a reader consuming the whole book in a single sitting, this can jar as familiar sentences occasionally bob back up to the surface. However, this perhaps indicates the care that has gone into creating *Abraham's Luggage* as a resource that can function as an eBook and teaching resource: chapters can be read singly and each would serve well as a starting point for a range of discussions.

In its eBook version, at least, *Abraham's Luggage* is flawlessly produced and well thought out, with hyperlinks enabling quick cross-referencing of chapter endnotes, references to other chapters in the volume and figures and tables. If any criticism could be levelled, it is only that these are too infrequent. Lambourn discusses the difference between the materiality of objects and photographic reproductions, but as imperfect as the latter are, images of many of the objects discussed, giving a sense of their size, shape and use would have supported the reader at several points. To have wanted more, however, is an intentionally ambivalent criticism. More images, perhaps a few more maps for readers less familiar with the western Indian Ocean, could enhance future editions of this book. More discussion about what is meant by labels like Middle Eastern, Indian or Mediterranean would help further to destabilise simple equations of space and identity already thrown into disarray by the story of Abraham's home and travels. More work like this will transform our understanding of Indian Ocean worlds and the people who lived in them. *Abraham's Luggage* will no doubt inspire much of that work and makes a powerful contribution in its own right.

Rebecca Darley, Birkbeck, University of London