

Men Only: Hebrew-script Inscriptions from Jām, Afghanistan

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Abstract: In 2005, the *Minaret of Jām Archaeological Project* team documented five tombstones with inscriptions in Hebrew script at Jām in central Afghanistan. Three of these inscriptions have never been recorded before, and they bring the total number of tombstones with inscriptions in Hebrew script found at the site to seventy-four. The tombstones indicate that there was a sizable Jewish population present at the summer capital of the Ghūrid dynasty, but curiously they only relate to males. The analysis of the inscriptions supports earlier suggestions that the Jewish community in Afghanistan originated from Persia.

Introduction

The world heritage listed Minaret of Jām towers over the ephemeral ruins of what is thought to be Fīrūzkūh, the twelfth-century summer capital of the little-known Ghūrid dynasty (Figure 1). The site is also important for the discovery in 1962 of a cemetery marked by tombstones with inscriptions in Hebrew script (Figure 2). Graves can still be seen eroding out of the wadi bank. Recent plans to build a road close to the site prompted the formation of the *Minaret of Jām Archaeological Project*. This multi-disciplinary project conducted two seasons of fieldwork at the site in 2003 and 2005 (Thomas *et al.* 2004; Thomas & Gascoigne 2006).

During the latter season, local villagers alerted the Project

to a tombstone (*Inscription 1*) that was discovered amongst the building materials being used by workmen who were repairing gabions at the base of the minaret. Rubbings and photographs were taken of the tombstone that is now stored in the *Ministry of Information and Culture* rest-house at Jām for safekeeping. This is also the location of another tombstone (*Inscription 2*), whilst a third tombstone (*Inscription 3*) was found in a wadi nearby, at the supposed site of Ghiyath al-Din's Governor's house at Kush Kak. The author thanks David Thomas, *Minaret of Jām Archaeological Project* for permission to publish these inscriptions and their photographs. A longer version of this paper appears in the *Journal of Jewish Studies* LXI:1 (Spring 2010).

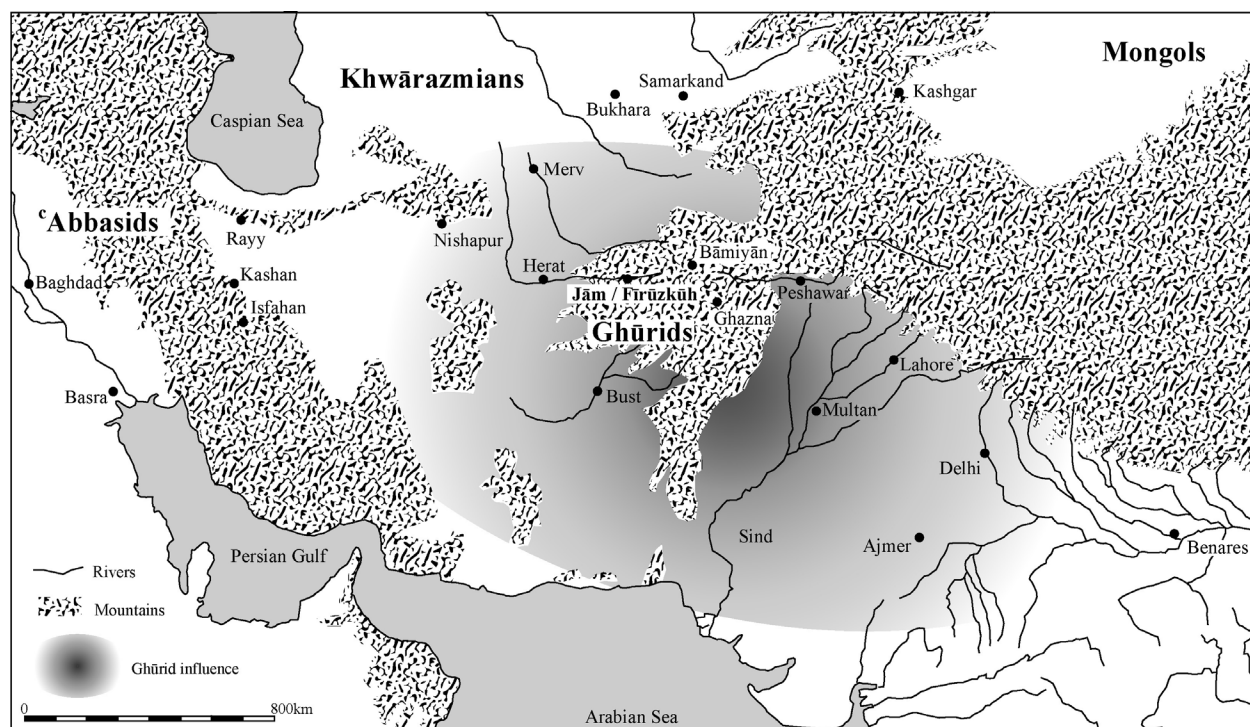


Figure 1: The Ghūrid 'world' at the end of the twelfth century.

The Inscriptions

Tombstone No.	Provenance
Tombstone 1	Gabion materials
Tombstone 2	Village guesthouse
Tombstone 3a, 3b	<i>in situ</i> , in wadi

Table 1: Provenance of inscribed tombstones from Jām

Gheraldo Gnoli (1964), Eugen Rapp (1965, 1971, 1973) and Shaul Shaked (1981, 1999) have published various tombstones since the first discoveries in 1964. The three new inscriptions bring the tally of published tombstones to seventy-four.

The inscriptions are written in Hebrew script, but include many Persian loan-words indicating that the Jewish community probably originated in Persia and moved eastwards to Afghanistan (Fischel 1965: 152).

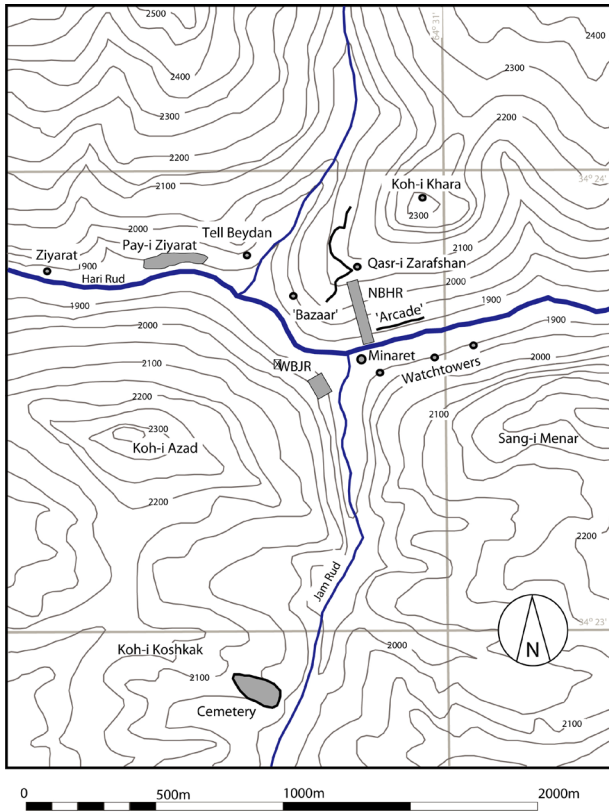


Figure 2: A contour plan of Jām.

Tombstone 1 (Figure 3)

Location: Stored at the Ministry of Information and Culture rest-house, Jām.

Discovered amongst the building materials being used by workmen repairing gabions.



Figure 3: Tombstone 1. Copyright David Thomas

בן דויד {....}

{....} *bn dwyd*

Translation: {....} son of David

Commentary: The inscription, midway on the face of a single block, is in an advanced state of deterioration. Several characters can be detected, suggesting בן ‘son’ followed by the patronym דויד {ד} ‘David’.

Tombstone 2 (Figure 4)

Location: Stored at the Ministry of Information and Culture rest-house, Jām.

זרגר רוז {י} שבת יה [א]

zrg rrwz{y} šbt yh [’]

Translation: goldsmith, the day Saturday, the 15th ...

Commentary: The single line records the deceased’s occupation; זרגר ‘the goldsmith’ is a transliteration of the Persian noun زرگر (Steingass 1932: 615). This stone probably formed part of a composite tombstone and date of death, but is incomplete as the block has been broken at both ends. The upper and lower registers of the stone-face show no trace of characters from a preceding or following line.

{י} רוז ‘day’ is another Persian loan-word روز ‘day’ that has been transliterated, together with the *izafe* (Steingass 1932: 592). שבת ‘Shabbat’, Saturday commonly occurs in inscriptions where it is combined with a number to indicate the day of the week, in this case יה ‘15th’.

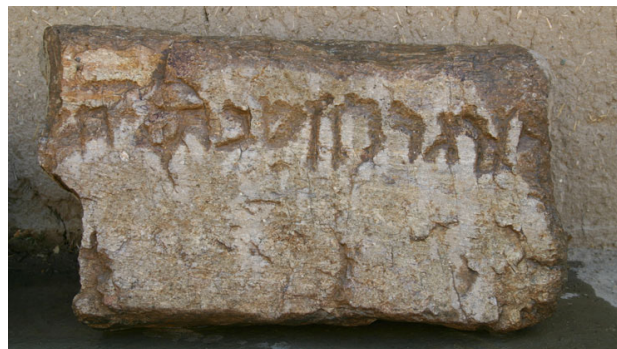


Figure 4: Tombstone 2. Copyright David Thomas



Figure 5: Tombstone 3 (a). Copyright David Thomas



Figure 6: Tombstone 3 (b). Copyright David Thomas

Tombstone 3 (Figures 5 & 6)

Location: Remaining *in situ* in wadi.

Two sides: side (a) 2 lines, side (b) 1 line.

Side (a) 2 lines:

line 1: 11 characters, line 2: 15 characters

יעקב בן אברהם
y'qb bn 'brhm

Translation: Jacob son of Abraham

בן יצחק מערוף בו {תק}
bn yshq m'rwþ bw {tq}

Translation: son of Isaac known as “the strong”

Side (b) 1 line on one face:

line 1: 9 characters

סאל הזאר תנט
s'l hz'r tnt

Translation: year one thousand 459 [Seleucid i.e. 1148 C.E]

Commentary: The 3 lines of the inscription, which follow the natural contours of the unhewn tombstone, record the name of the deceased “Jacob son of Abraham son of Isaac, known as ‘the strong/steady’” together with the year of his death. This is given, as was the norm, in Seleucid dating: 1459, i.e. 1148 C.E. The inscription supplies Jacob’s patronyms (father and grandfather) “Jacob son of Abraham son of Isaac”, together with his sobriquet מערוף בו {תק} “known as ‘strong, steady’”. מערוף is a transliteration of the Persian term معروف “known as”. The adoption of a ‘nick-name’ by a member of the community occasionally occurs in other inscriptions where, in each case, the name is introduced by מערוף + the inseparable prefix Beth.¹ Jacob had no accompanying epithets indicating rank or position, as sometimes occurs in other inscriptions e.g. הלוי “Levite”, הכהן “priest” and התגר “merchant”.² Without any epithets, the deceased appears to have been an ordinary member of the community. Side (b) is singular in that its dating formula combines both Persian and Hebrew numerals. סאל “year” is the transliterated Persian loan-word سال and הזאר “thousand” is the transliterated Persian numeral هزار “thousand”³ which, in combination with the Hebrew date

תנ"ט, forms the year of the deceased's death. תנ"ט is typically distinguished by the supralinear incision cut by the mason at the juncture of the stone's two faces.⁴

Conclusion

The tombstones provide fascinating insight into the religious demography of Afghanistan during the medieval period, attesting a Jewish community at Fīrūzkūh for nearly two hundred years. The dating of *Tombstone 3* to 1148 C.E. places it just a couple of years after the alleged founding of Fīrūzkūh (d. 541 A.H./1146-7 A.H.) (Bosworth 1961:119). The prosperity that was realised under the Ghūrid dynasty would have encouraged mercantile communities to the city. Ghur still retained in the eleventh century its reputation as a pagan land that supplied slaves to markets in Herat and Sistan.⁵ The Jewish community may have been involved in such –and other– merchandise including luxury items, even before the establishment of the Ghūrid capital, as Ralph Pinder-Wilson has suggested (1985: 180 n. 37). Their situation may have been akin to that in Kabul and Ghazna where, during Ghaznavid times, colonies of Indian traders were permanently resident (Pinder-Wilson 1985: 124 n. 27).

However, there is an enigma surrounding the cemetery at Kush Kak. To date, all recorded tombstones only name men, suggesting that the cemetery was an exclusively male preserve. Given that the Jewish community spanned numerous generations and was serviced by religious personnel, it seems extraordinary that no females were commemorated. Undoubtedly, the commissioning of tombstones was expensive, and was probably the prerogative of the influential or wealthier echelons of the community. As such, female members of the community may have been buried with husbands or male family members, their presence remaining unrecorded. Alternatively, women may have been buried elsewhere. Whatever the case, the tombstones' male only affiliation is exceptional and raises important questions about the composition of the medieval Jewish community at Fīrūzkūh and its burial practices that beg excavation and further investigation.

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Endnotes

- 1 Cf. Rapp, 1965, inscription 11.2 = Gnoli, 1964, IX.2, Rapp, 1965, inscription 11.2 מערוף במלך "known as king", Rapp, 1971, inscription 35 ma' ruf barawuh "known as wistful"
- 2 Shaked, 1981, pp. 80-81 discusses the various titles of public office which occur on the tombstones, commenting specifically on תגר "corresponding to Arabic and Persian tājir", with a footnote reference to the term's usage in the Genizah documents where it designates major mercantile activity. Cf. S.D. Goitein, *A Mediterranean Society* (Berkeley: 1971) II, p. 190 and n.33.
- 3 Steingass, 1932, p. 1497 هزار. The author extends her thanks to Nicholas Sims-Williams for discussion about this word.
- 4 Inscriptions usually employ *plene* dating, but occasionally abbreviated dates are given. Cf. Rapp, 1965, inscription 1.3 סאל תנ"ט i.e. 1427 Seleucid = 1115 C.E.
- 5 Bosworth, 1961, p. 121, reiterates on 122 that Ghur was valuable for slaves.