Men Only: Hebrew-script Inscriptions from Jām, Afghanistan

Erica C.D. Hunter

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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

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Tombstone No.</th>
<th>Provenance</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Tombstone 1</td>
<td>Gabion materials</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tombstone 2</td>
<td>Village guesthouse</td>
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<tr>
<td>Tombstone 3a, 3b</td>
<td>in situ, in wadi</td>
</tr>
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Table 1: Provenance of inscribed tombstones from Jām


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).

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.

Translation: {...} bn dwyd

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 'דוד David'.

Tombstone 2 (Figure 4)

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

Translation: [8] zrgr rwz[...] sht yh [‘]

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.

‘שָׁבָת שבת’, Saturday commonly occurs in inscriptions where it is combined with a number to indicate the day of the week, in this case ‘יה 15th’.

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.
**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

Translation: Jacob son of Abraham

\[ \text{יעקב בן אברהם} \]

Translation: son of Isaac known as “the strong”

\[ \text{בעו} \]

Side (b) 1 line on one face:
- line 1: 9 characters

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 “the strong/steady”.

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 the inseparable prefix Beth. Jacob had no accompanying epithets indicating rank or position, as sometimes occurs in other inscriptions e.g. “Levite”, “priest” and “merchant”. 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.

"year" is the transliterated Persian loan-word "סאל" and "thousand" is the transliterated Persian numeral "هزار" which, in combination with the Hebrew date
forms the year of the deceased’s death. זה 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 Firuzkūh 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 Firuzkūh (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 Firuzkūh and its burial practices that beg excavation and further investigation.

Erica C.D. Hunter
Department for the Study of Religions,
School of Oriental and African Studies,
University of London

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Thomas, D.C., G. Pastorii & I. Cucco 2004 Excavations at Jām, Afghanistan, East and West 54 (Nos 1-4) 87-119.

Endnotes
3 Steingass, 1932, p. 1497. 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 13 ראתא רוֹ לָשֵׁנִי i.e. 1427 Seleucid = 1115 C.E.
5 Bosworth, 1961, p. 121, reiterates on 122 that Ghur was valuable for slaves.