

**MATERIAL
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BETWEEN JEWS AND
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MATERIAL ENCOUNTERS BETWEEN JEWS AND CHRISTIANS

**FROM THE SILK AND SPICE ROUTES TO
THE HIGHLANDS OF ETHIOPIA**

Edited by
**BAR KRIBUS, ZAROUÏ POGOSSIAN, AND
ALEXANDRA CUFFEL**

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Chapter I

MATERIAL ENCOUNTERS BETWEEN JEWS AND CHRISTIANS IN THE EAST AN INTRODUCTION

Alexandra Cuffel, Zaroui Pogossian, and Bar Kribus¹

IN SCHOLARLY CIRCLES and popular discourse in the West, there has long been a tendency to understand medieval Jewish–Christian relations through the lens of the interaction between these two communities in Western Europe and the Byzantine Empire, including when examining art historical and other material culture evidence for these interactions.² Such a focus, however, does not do justice to the richness and diversity of the Jewish and the Christian worlds. In both above-mentioned regions, Jews mainly lived as a minority under Christian rule, and Christian dominance was a central factor in shaping the nature of relations between the two groups.³ Beyond these regions, however, Jews and Christians often encountered each other on different terms—as two

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2 See, for example: Blumenkranz 1966; Corrigan 1992; Epstein 2011, 1997; Faü 2005; Franco and Urquizar-Herrera 2019; Frojmovic 2002; Kogman-Appel and Meyer 2008; Laderman 2013; Levine 2005; Lipton 2014, 1999; Mellinkoff 1999; Patton 2012; Revel Neher 1992; Rowe 2011; Shalev-Eyni 2010.

3 From the extensive literature see: Bonfil et al. 2012; Bowman 1985; Champagne and Resnick 2018; Dagron and Déroche 2010; González de Caldas Mendez 2000; Irish 2016; Jordan 1989; Kohen 2007; Ray 2023; Sapir Abulafia 2011; Sharf 1995; Soyer 2007; Starr 1939; Stow 2007; Stroumsa and Limor 1996; Tolan et al. 2014; Utterbach and Price 2013.

Chapter 2

LIGHT ARCHAEOLOGY AT YEGHEGIS JEWISH CEMETERY ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION

Michele Nuccioti¹

Introduction

This chapter summarizes the results of a case study carried out within the framework of the territorial archaeological investigation “The Making of the Silk Roads in Vayots Dzor,” launched in 2013 in collaboration between the University of Florence and Yerevan State University (Nuccioti, Petrosyan et al. 2015; Nuccioti and Pruno 2020; Figure 2.1) as well as within the field activities in Armenia of the ERC JewsEast project (Pogossian 2018).² The methodology adopted in the investigations, for the first time in Armenia, is that of Light Archaeology, a scientific approach to territorial studies originating in Italian historical-archaeological research from 1970 to 2000 (Nuccioti and Vannini 2019) that can be defined as: territorial, non-destructive, and stratigraphic. For example, the reconstruction of production and operational chains, typical of Tiziano Mannoni’s “Archeologia Globale” (Nuccioti and Pruno 2021), as well as stratigraphic analyses of architectural contexts, operationally formalized in Italy between the 1970s and 1990s by Mannoni, Roberto Parenti, and Gian Pietro Brogiolo (summarized in Brogiolo and Cagnana 2012), play a central role in this field. The approach makes it possible to elaborate stratigraphic sequences (and therefore relative chronologies) without archaeological excavations, saving time compared with traditional territorial survey methodologies and so allowing a more detailed investigation of the cultural and

¹ SAGAS—Florence University. Michele Nuccioti is an Associate Professor of Medieval Archaeology at the University of Florence and coordinates the university’s Section of Archaeology and Ancient Orient since 2020. He leads the Italian archaeological mission “The Making of the Silk Roads” in Armenia and serves as a Senior Researcher for Material Culture section in the ERC Project “Armenia Entangled: Connectivity and Cultural Encounters in Medieval Eurasia 9th–14th Centuries” (ArmEn). Prof. Nuccioti has also directed the “Medieval Petra–Shawbak Project” Italian archaeological mission in Jordan since 2019 (and as co-director since 2002), focusing on Crusader–Ayyubid–Mamluk archaeological heritage. With more than ninety contributions in international publication venues, his expertise covers the Eurasian Middle Ages, Silk Road archaeology, European medieval settlement, light archaeology, and public archaeology.

² The project “The Making of the Silk Roads in Vayots Dzor” received support from Florence University, Yerevan State University, the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs (since 2014) and the EU Erasmus+ KA107 (since 2016).

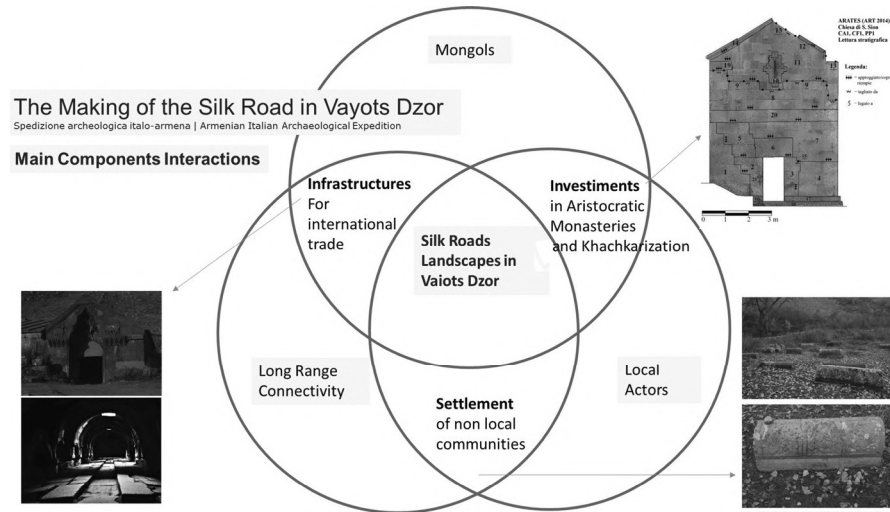


Figure 2.1. Key components and relationships identified in “The Making of the Silk Road” Project for analyzing the transformation of the landscape of Vayots Dzor in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries

ideological contexts in which the transformations of a given landscape took place. Light Archaeology datasets constitute a body of material sources independent of the written, epigraphic, historical-artistic, and typological-architectural traditions.

As an example, in Vayots Dzor Light Archaeology has proved capable of updating and revising on a sound architectural-stratigraphic basis (vs. stylistic-formal analyses) chronologies of construction phases of important architectural complexes, such as those of the Arates monastery, near Yeghegis, permitting new interpretations on the historical motivations underlying the process of site development (Nucciotti and Petrosyan et al. 2015).

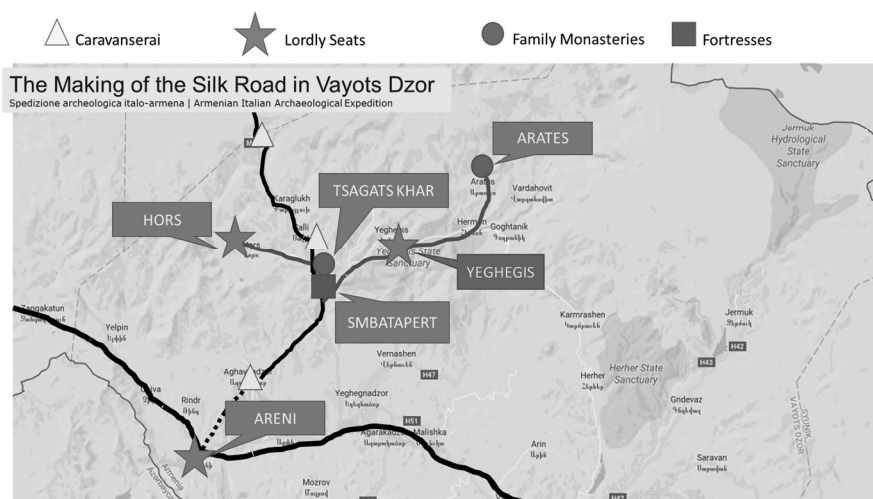
The final publication of the results of the research on Yeghegis is currently being prepared. For a more detailed presentation of the methodologies and conclusions, some of which will be anticipated here below, we refer the reader to this publication.

Material Aspects

The Jewish cemetery of Yeghegis is a cultural and archaeological site of great scientific importance. Being the only one so far identified in Western Asia, and more specifically in the eastern region of Greater Armenia, it constitutes an invaluable testimony for the investigation of medieval entanglements in a vast geographical area, between the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries (1266 and 1346/7 on the basis of the oldest and the most recent of the inscriptions), during the period of Mongol domination and the political establishment of the Orbelian principality. Its discovery and extensive analysis,

including excavation and publication by Michael Stone and David Amit (2002; 2006), undoubtedly form the basis of any possible interpretation of the site. Our work, within the framework of Light Archaeology research, aimed at clarifying aspects left open by the studies of the Israeli colleagues, and particularly to reconstruct the history of the settlement within the broader development of Yeghegis as a centre of power in the late Middle Ages (and the role played by Vayots Dzor and Orbelian Armenia in the Mongol and, more specifically, Ilkhanid imperial organization—Map 2.1).

From an operational point of view, we carried out a precision topographic survey with the integrated use of a laser total station and photogrammetric modelling, using drone and terrestrial photos; we analyzed the traces of the working and finishing tools of the tombstones (examining stone surfaces showing well-preserved toolmarks), in order to compare them with finishing tools identified on the surfaces of ashlar from contemporary architectures preserved in Yeghegis (e.g., the Zorats' Church and the Cupola Church); we undertook micro-photogrammetric 3D models of the inscriptions in Hebrew and Armenian from the Jewish and Orbelian cemeteries of Yeghegis (Stone 2011) as comparison; we stratigraphically analyzed the architectural complex on the northwestern edge of the cemetery (Stone and Amit 2006, 100–101 and plans), carrying out a photogrammetric survey; we identified and filed masonry types of the above architectural complex for comparison with masonry types of the mills located near to the Jewish cemetery (Stone and Amit 2006, 100–101 and plans); we compared unsquared stone masonry-types of the area under investigation with the ones dated via archaeological excavations at the religious-productive complex of Zorats' (for which a chronological stratigraphy of masonry types through Light Archaeology was also undertaken).



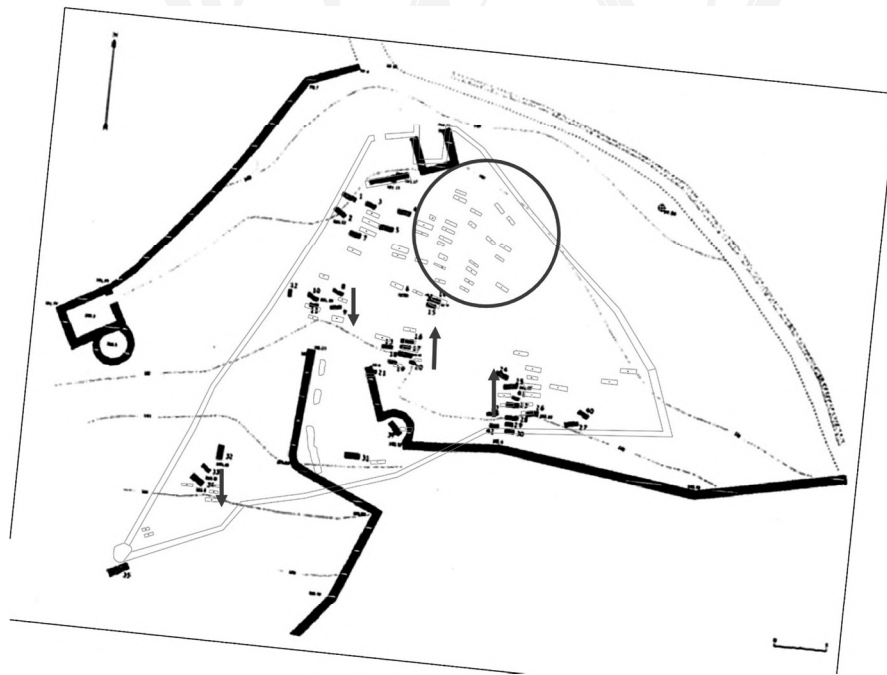
Map 2.1. Area surveyed by “The Making of the Silk Road” project in the vicinity of Yeghegis

Results

Topography of the Cemetery. The precision survey of 2018 revealed significant inconsistencies with the site-plan published by Amit and Stone (2002, 106). The differences relate to positioning and the number of tombstones.

With regard to positioning, the 2002 plan shows topographical errors in the location of clusters of tombstones, although, in many cases, such clusters can still be identified in the precision survey of 2018. They can be described as rotation and translation errors.

With regard to the number of tombstones, the 2002 survey recorded considerably fewer tombstones than were actually present on the site in 2018. For example, the area marked by the circle, near the present access, shows twenty-nine tombstones that were absent in the first survey (many more if one considers also the area outside the circle—Map 2.2). In this case the inconsistency is due to the combination of two intertwined factors: (a) the re-location into the funerary site of tombstones retrieved from outside, sometimes reused in ancient structures (e.g., the mills) or modern ones (e.g., the pillar of the bridge crossing the stream in the north of the site; ref. Stone and Amit 2006, 100, 123); (b) the possible, although unspecified and unpublished, discovery of additional tombstones at the site, after the publication of the reports.



Map 2.2. The Jewish cemetery in Yeghegis: Overlay of the 2002 map (thick black lines) with the 2018 precision survey (lighter lines). Positioning errors (shown by the arrows) and clusters of tombstones (circle) not recorded in 2002 are indicated

Processing and Finishing of Tombstones. This study is still in progress and therefore it is not possible to express conclusive views. In general, the set of dressing tools recorded on the surfaces of the tombstones (that, unfortunately, could only be sampled in a limited number of cases, due to the degradation caused by lichen, weathering, and mechanical wear of many specimens) appears to be consistent with those used for smoothing stone surfaces of the outer walls at the church of Zorats' (approx. early fourteenth century). In one case, indeed, there is a good identification between the finishing tool of stratigraphic unit 305 from the Zorats' church and tombstone no. 49 (Stone and Amit 2006, 112). It is a flat-bladed chisel with a length of 1.6 cm and a 0.23 cm section. The inscription associated with the tombstone (no. 18), which commemorates the death of Rachel b. Eli, is unfortunately undated. From the comparison we would therefore hypothetically propose the beginning of the fourteenth century, when the church of Zorats' was consecrated by Bishop Stepan'os Tarsayich of Syunik' (Figure 2.2).

Inscription Technology. Detailed analysis of the characters and the use of tools in the production of the inscriptions, with measurements obtained from a high resolution micro-photogrammetric 3D model, show a contrast between the inscriptions of the Jewish and Orbelian cemeteries. The epigraphs of the Orbelian cemetery are cut with a relatively large sharp blade, whereas in the Jewish cemetery all the inscriptions (which show different degrees of expertise by various writers) are cut with the use of a pointed tool and, occasionally, with small flat-bladed chisels (used across), as can be easily observed from the cross-sections of the carvings (Figure 2.3). The funerary monuments of the two cemeteries, therefore, were produced with the same stone, the decorations appear to have been carried out using similar tools, while the technology of the epigraphic bands differs markedly. It is highly likely then that workshops where the tomb monuments were produced, up to the level of the decorations, were available locally to both the Christian and the Jewish communities. The epigraphs, on the other

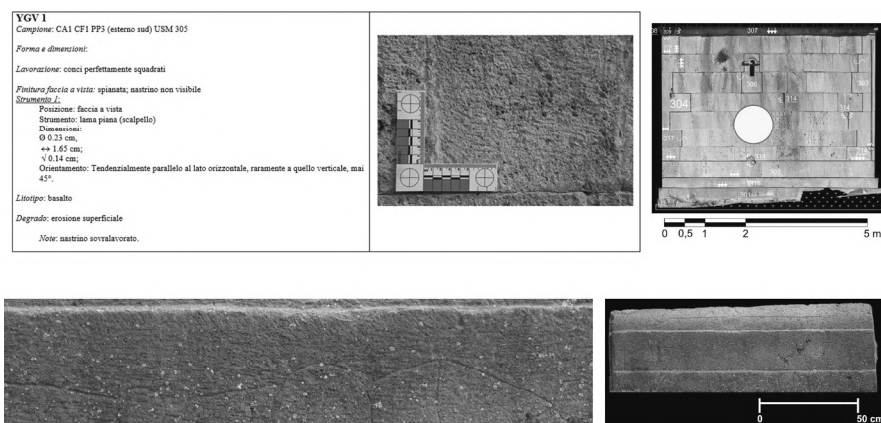


Figure 2.2. Comparison between (above) toolmarks from unit 305 from Zorats' church and (below) tombstone 18 at the Jewish cemetery



Figure 2.3. Comparison of inscription techniques between an epigraphic band from the Orbelian family cemetery (left) and an inscription in the Jewish cemetery (right). Cross sections are measured using micro-photogrammetric 3D models

hand, were cut on demand upon request of the buyers and entrusted to specialized craftsmen, in different languages and with different levels of quality. The epigraphic quality documented at the Orbelian cemetery is notably absent in the Jewish inscriptions, if not, occasionally, hinted at by well-paginated texts.

The Northwest Architectural Complex. The building or complex of buildings consists of a series of rectangular rooms placed in a line, with access from the outside and internal connections. The structures were identified during the 2001 and 2002 excavations conducted by David Amit (Stone and Amit 2006) and interpreted as a residential complex with domestic equipment for food preparation (namely a *tonir* oven and a grain mill). The proposed dating to the same period of the Jewish cemetery is based on the discovery of two copper coins from the “Mongol period” and on unspecified ceramic finds recovered during the excavation, that were entrusted to Husik Melkonyan for publication, which was never completed (Stone and Amit 2006, 100).

Light Archaeology brought a new interpretative hypothesis for the whole complex. First, the so-called *tonir* is not in the form of a vertical oven, nor does the construction in lithic slabs seem to back such an interpretation. Instead, it is most likely a silo for storing grain. Interestingly, the room adjacent to the one in which the silo is located shows a series of small square niches arranged along all the walls a few centimetres above the hypothetical floor level (Figure 2.4). Comparisons with similar structures found in the East, particularly with twelfth- and thirteenth-century domestic architectures from the Levant, allow this structure to be interpreted as a chicken coop (ref. Boas 2010, 137—Figure 2.4, bottom right). In connection with the silo, in which feed was likely stored, the entire complex (or what is currently visible) can therefore be interpreted as a facility for intensive rearing of poultry.

Similar structures are also found among those excavated by Husik Melkonyan (Melkonian and Hakobian 2016, 148 for building 9 and, based on Light Archaeology, also in building 2) in the architectural complex of Zorats’, interpreted as subsidiary structures of a possible monastery located around the church between the thirteenth and

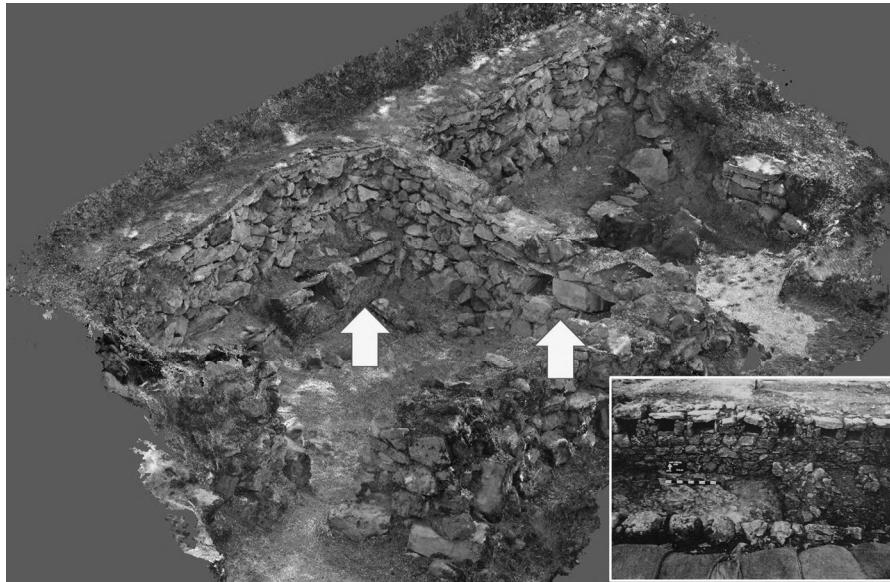


Figure 2.4. Yeghegis Jewish cemetery: the northwest complex with a perimeter series of small square niches (indicated by the arrows). Bottom right: Chicken coop from the twelfth to thirteenth-century site of Har Hozevim (Israel—from Boas 2010)

fourteenth centuries. Even there, although not explicitly linked to poultry rearing, the rooms have been associated with systematized and well-structured (food) production cycles.

Masonry Types. The analysis of masonry types associated with structures located near the Jewish cemetery, namely the Northwest Architectural Complex and a series of (ancient but later) water mills nearby, show the absence of ashlar, which, instead, are characteristic of monumental architecture in medieval Yeghegis, particularly the two extant medieval churches. Masonry types similar to those observed nearby the Jewish cemetery are, however, recorded in the architectural complex located around the church of Zorats'; archaeologically investigated by Husik Melkonyan, some can be dated, based on the results of the excavations, to the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries (Melkonian and Hakobian 2016). Light Archaeology analyses carried out on these structures allowed the processing of chronological sequences for such "coarse masonries." The contextual presence of distinct although contemporary building traditions in the site of Zorats', using respectively squared materials (churches) and non-squared ones (domestic architecture—Figure 2.5), makes the situation at Yeghegis appear comparable to other contemporary Eurasian rural medieval contexts in Italy (Rocca San Silvestro and Segesta—Bianchi 1996) and Jordan (Shobak, Nucciotti and Pruno 2016). In Yeghegis it also appears likely that long-term building traditions associated with



Figure 2.5. Stratigraphy of masonry types in unsquared stones from the architectural complex of Zorats' church

non-specialized builders who were part of the local settled community, may be listed among so-called “little traditions,” to use the terminology of Oystein LaBianca (2007; 2011). Alongside such local *longue-durée* techniques, hegemonic political actors would occasionally employ high-quality building traditions, or “great building traditions,” for the construction of monumental architecture such as in churches. These are most likely the work of specialized, itinerant teams of medieval master-builders. Indeed, it is not possible to imagine that “great traditions” of stone-cutting or architectural design resided permanently in a small community such as Yeghegis, where monumental buildings are limited to the thirteenth-century Cupola Church and to the Zorats' Church of the early fourteenth century, with no evidence of a continuous use of similar stone-cutting techniques in the surviving civil buildings.

Such an observation, however, cannot apply to the production of tombstones, whose need was, instead, constant, and shows advanced cutting and smoothing techniques. One can therefore imagine that Yeghegis might have been home to a community of stone-cutters specialized in the manufacturing of tombstones, during its heyday, from the mid-thirteenth to about the mid-fourteenth century. Areas of overlap between the groups of itinerant master-builders and local tombstone-makers can also be imagined, as is clear from the use of similar stone-cutting tools. However, the two groups should be considered distinct, given that skills of (shall we say) sculptural cutting do not necessarily include the technical know-how needed for architectural production, such as preparing lime mortar, knowledge of statics, and the management of workflows in a building site.

Conclusions: Why Yeghegis and Why Exactly in Yeghegis? In Search of a Possible Interpretation

At the end of the Light Archaeology investigations of the Jewish cemetery, as part of the territorial analyses carried out for the project “The Making of the Silk Roads in Vayots Dzor,” some conclusive remarks can be made.

First, the chronology of the cemetery coincides with when Yeghegis was the most important settlement in the area, in turn coinciding with the presence at the site of the main Orbelian *palatium*. It is therefore quite likely that the local Jewish community was attracted by the move of the “rural capital” of the Orbelian principality from Arpa / Areni to Yeghegis, and is therefore possibly a community that performed functions related to the local princely court and administration.

Such a link is supported by material sources, including the Ilkhanid titling of “Mar Khawaja Sharaf al-Din” on inscription no. 19 (Stones and Amit 2006, 108–9). In fact, the Orbelians developed their dominion in the area of Yeghegis under the same political Ilkhanid umbrella. Moreover, one of the Jewish tombstones (no. 9) shows a decoration of interwoven geometric patterns that appears, almost identically, in one of the tombs at the Orbelian cemetery, as well as in a decorative plaque in the Orbelian mausoleum church in Noravank (St. Astvatsatsin built by architect Momik around 1339). Additionally, the same decoration appears in the vestibule of the Selim caravanserai, built by Cesar Orbelian in the 1330s (Figure 2.6).

Such a pattern was explicitly used by the Orbelian for public display, and it is quite unlikely that the public use of a symbolism so closely associated with the ruling family, by a member of Yeghegis Jewish community, may have happened without the consent of

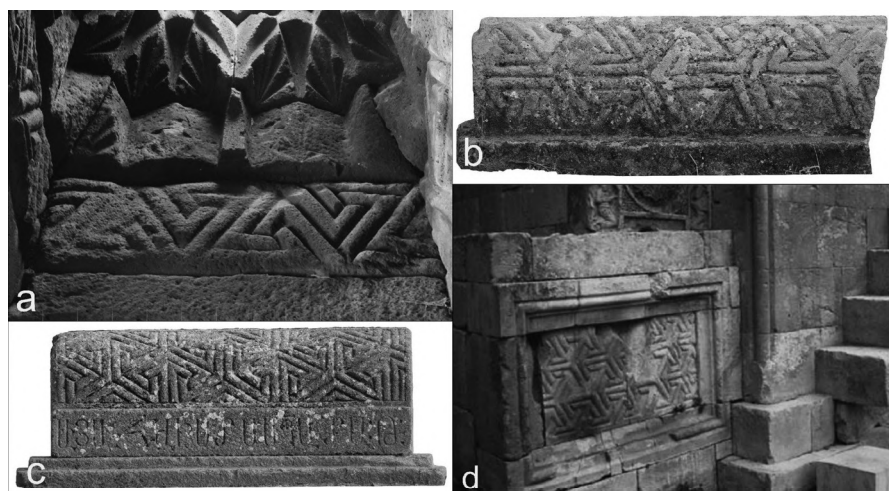


Figure 2.6. Interwoven geometric patterns compared: (a) Selim caravanserai, (b) Yeghegis Jewish cemetery, (c) Yeghegis Orbelian cemetery, (d) Noravank St. Astvatsatsin

the princes (similar, if you like, to the use of military insignia or uniforms with elements of rank, today).

All the above strongly supports the interpretation of a Jewish community settled in Yeghegis as a direct consequence of the relocation to the same site of the Orbelian *palatium*.

Why the positioning of the Jewish cemetery is specifically within the site of Yeghegis, is more complex, partly because of the *de facto* uniqueness of the site. Unfortunately, there are no comparable case studies from Western Asia and most studies on contemporary Jewish cemeteries concern European sites such as, among the most important, York (dated 1177–1290, about 1000 burials, ref. McComish 2000), Bologna (fourteenth–sixteenth century, 400 burials, ref. Curina and Di Stefano 2019), Barcelona (tenth–thirteenth century, ref. Colomer 2010) or Venice (from 1390, ref. Fabbiani 2016). In this last case funerary inscriptions in Hebrew were added, in the sixteenth century, on Roman *stelae* of an imperial epoch. On the other hand, except in Venice, the largest medieval cemeteries in Europe lack preserved tombstones. This is the case, for instance, in York, where it is assumed that perishable materials were used for the inscriptions, but also in Bologna or Barcelona, where the epigraphs were removed (or reused as building material, in the Spanish site), following political disagreements with ecclesiastical and secular authorities.³ In general, discussion of the “essential” elements and preferred location of historical Jewish cemeteries relates mostly to Euro-Mediterranean case studies (ref. Menachemson 2007, 1–7).

With such background, far from optimal for our case, with great caution, one can try to formulate a range of hypotheses for explaining the selection of the specific location of the Jewish cemetery at Yeghegis.

The positioning of most well-known comparable sites (in medieval Europe) appears to basically depend on three factors, namely: the possession of land by a wealthy member of the Jewish community (as in the case of Bologna); a public concession of land by local political institutions (as in the case of Venice); occasionally a long-term concession (in the Venetian case, emphyteutical) of Christian or monastic lands.

Without pushing the interpretation too far, in the case of Yeghegis, the presence of a poultry rearing facility near the Jewish cemetery, similar to the structures excavated near Zorats’ monastery, may offer an enticing clue. Additionally, also the presence of water-mills organized in a vast productive compound in the vicinity of the Jewish cemetery may relate to the presence of an organized landed entity that may have entrusted (or sold) to the local Jewish community a suitable space for a funerary area. Also, in this case the alternative (or pseudo-alternative if we consider the network of links among

³ However, a remarkable epigraphic corpus for Jewish cemeteries is available at the portal “PEACE—Portal of Epigraphy, Archaeology, Conservation and Education on Jewish Funerary Culture” (<https://peace.sites.uu.nl>), which collects more than sixteen hundred inscriptions between the first and fifteenth centuries, mostly from Germany (1,151) and Israel (more than four hundred).

the entities) is between a concession of the Orbelians or of monastic lands (with my personal inclination for the second possibility).

Pending further clarification, I would however like to conclude this chapter with a short remark on Public Archaeology.

The research of Michael Stone and David Amit has not only made important archaeological and historical data available to the scientific community but has also contributed to the creation of an equally important cultural site. Anyone who visits the Jewish cemetery in Yeghegis will notice the presence of small stones placed on top of the tombstones by visitors, who in this way, following a traditional ritual, attest to their passage and respect for a long-gone Jewish community that lived close to the Armenian Silk Road between the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries (Figure 2.7). This seems worthy of note and reflection, both as an example of “death-spaces” as elements of modern and historic tourist landscapes (Tanaś 2006, but also Colomer 2010), and showing the need for further research on a shared medieval Eurasian culture of which history and archaeology show evidence (ref. again on Vayots Dzor, Babajanyan and Franklin, 2021) despite being long ignored (if not denied) by national histories.



Figure 2.7. Team from Florence University and the ERC JewsEast Project during Light Archaeology analyses at the Yeghegis Jewish cemetery in 2018

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