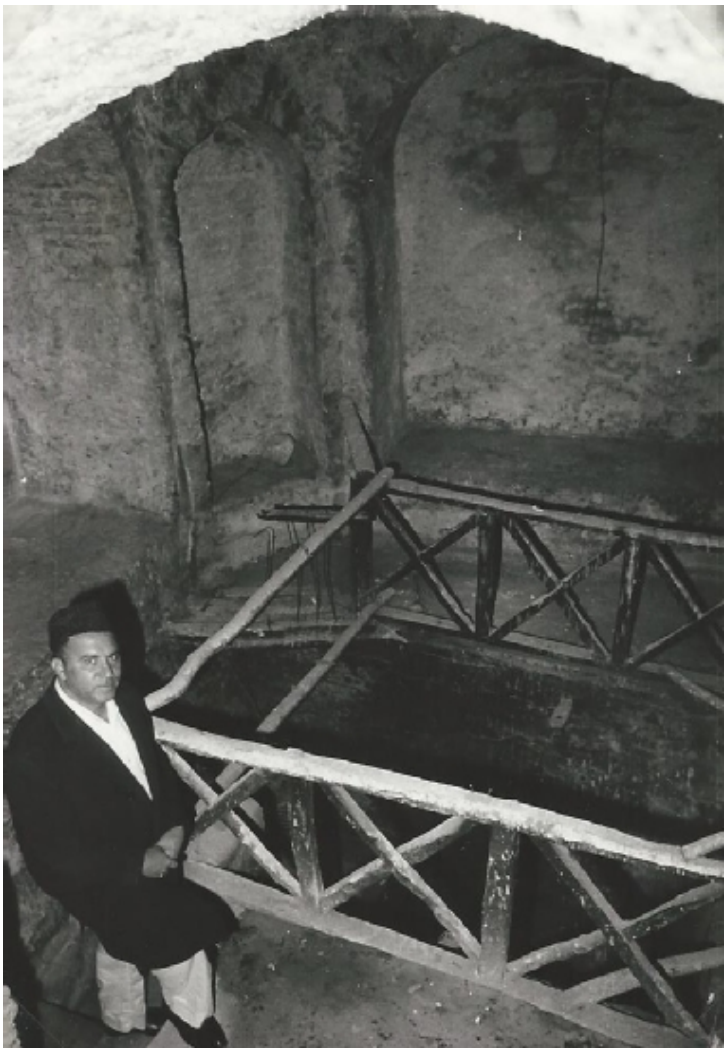
The Synagogues of Herat, Afghanistan

This project explores the four synagogues of Herat, that represent a powerful testimony to the Jewish presence and history in western Afghanistan. These structures speak to the complex spectrum of transnational and international religious activities between Islam and other religious traditions as an integral and even constitutive part of the history of the local civil society. A variety of dynamic forces such as urban development and the influence of new religions shaped the history and character of Herat city after the enormous demographic impact of the Mongol invasion of Central Asia (1219?24 CE), which culminated in the conquest of the Khwarazmian Empire by Genghis Khan. The strength of subsequent metropolitan development in the region is best testified by the remains of numerous large cities, such as Herat. Central Asian cities were highly cosmopolitan, with their citizens following many different religions, such as Buddhism, Christianity, Judaism, Hinduism, Manichaeism, and Zoroastrianism. In the nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth century, Herat was home to one of the largest, most diverse Jewish communities in modern Afghanistan. As in many areas of the world, Herat?s Jews were deeply involved in all levels of trade (internal, inter-community, and international). Their influence reached its peak after World War I when the Jews of Afghanistan became a significant religious and economic force in Central Asia. Herat?s four synagogues represent a microcosm of the present state of the city?s historic and vernacular architecture, making both its Muslim and non-Muslim architectural heritage worthy of investigation.

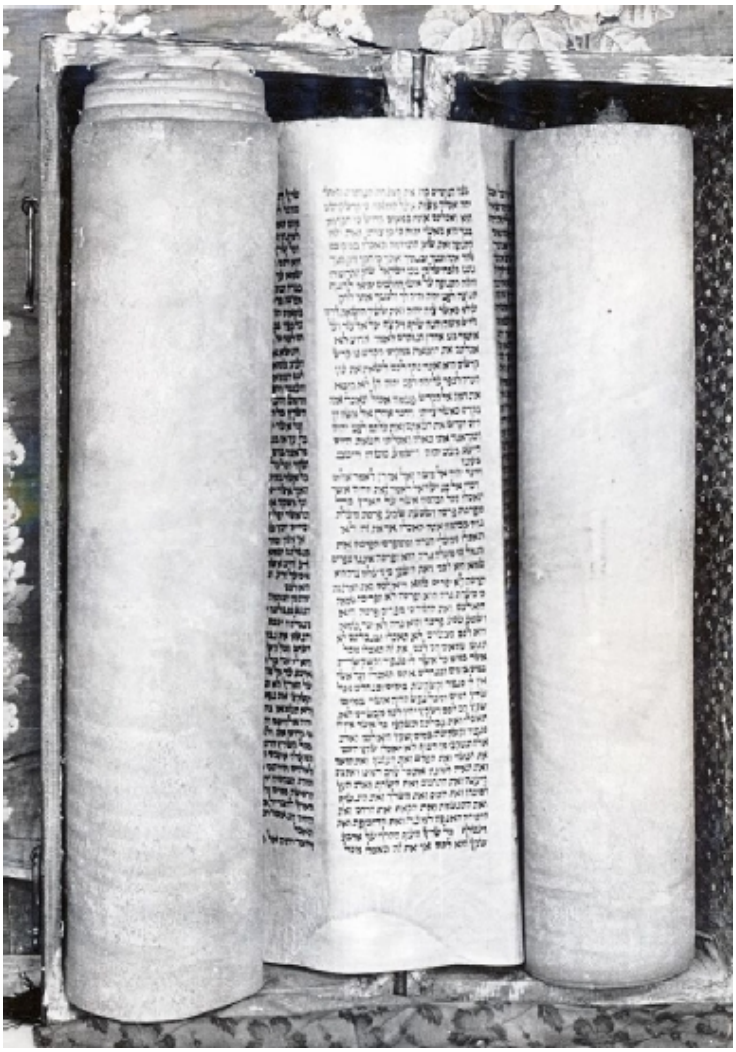
The Mullah Garji, or Mullah Ashur Synagogue, in 1973 (now mostly in ruins); exterior view showing the Entrance and courtyard - Courtesy of Werner Herberg, 1973 (www.museo-on.com)

The Mullah Garji, or Mullah Ashur Synagogue, in 1973 (now mostly in ruins); interior view showing the richly painted west wall with the aron ha-qodesh (ark) against the western wall - Courtesy of Werner Herberg, 1973 (www.museo-on.com)



Octagonal pool (mikva) that was used for ritual purification, Mullah Garji, or Mullah Ashur Synagogue, in 1973 - Courtesy of Werner Herberg (www.museo-on.com)

Contemporary studies that typically rely on methods and theoretical approaches focusing on sociopolitical and religious contexts are often criticized for being partisan?usually to romanticize the situation of non-Muslims and stigmatize Muslims for their intolerant behavior toward Jews and Christians. This bias also extends to some degree to analyses of their religious buildings. The goal of this study, however, is to use different theoretical approaches and methods to divide the four synagogues in question into three areas: (a) history, (b) architecture and design, and (c) physical and symbolic links to Herat?s three main centers, the Commercial Center (Chahar Suq, the ?four bazaars?), the Royal Center with the Ikhtiyar al-Din Fortress and Citadel (Qal?a), and the Religious Center focusing on the Masjid-i Jami (Friday Mosque). This chapter aims to address how Herat?s urban architecture represents sacred realities and how spatial patterns of development relating to the four synagogues exist in urban contexts, connecting with Herat?s other religious monuments. In light of the complexity of this challenge, this chapter delves deeper into the sacred buildings and spaces by exploring how the four synagogues reflect complex layers of local, regional, and Jewish cultures.



Torah Scroll from the Mullah Samuel Synagogue (ca. 1845-50) now Hariva School, Herat, Afghanistan - Courtesy Werner Herberg,1973 (www.museo-on.com)

The hybrid architectural composition of the four Herat synagogues, characterized by variations in Jewish tradition, provides exceptional archaeological evidence not only of their intrinsic ties to Judaism but also their place in the Afghan landscape. The once outstanding Mullah Garji Synagogue, also known as the Mullah Ashur Synagogue, was named for Mullah Mattityah Garji, the presiding rabbi of the Jewish community of Herat. The building now lies in ruins, totally collapsed, due to disuse and neglect since the late 1970s when Herat?s remaining Jews departed. Indeed, many other sacred buildings with beautiful interiors no longer exist due to a lack of maintenance. Fortunately, the Mullah Samuel or Shamawel Synagogue (ca. 1845?50), located directly opposite the market, was restored in 2009 during the Aga Khan Historic Cities Programme (AKHCP), supported by the Aga Khan Trust for Culture. Following the principles of utilitarian ?architectural repurposing? after its restoration in 2009, the building complex is used to house the Hariva School, a maktab (primary school) for Muslim boys. The Gol or Gulaki Synagogue was constructed in the late nineteenth century (specific dates unknown) as the private property of the wealthy upper-class Gol family. As such, the Gol Synagogue reflects the family?s exceptional status, patronage, and power. Restored in 2009 by the AKHCP, it has been converted into the Hazrat Belal Mosque, although it was probably used as a mosque as soon as the Jewish community left Herat in the late 1970s. The synagogue?s exceptional location in the Bar Durrani Quarter near the Royal Center with the Ikhtiyar al-Din Fortress and Citadel?coupled with its architecture and interior design?attest to different channels of communication and reciprocal

influences between Herat?s Jewish community (especially its wealthier scions) and the Muslim majority.

The Gol Synagogue or Gulaki Synagogue converted into the Hazrat Belal Mosque with the mihrab (prayer niche) as the most sacred part of the qibla (direction facing Mecca), 2015 (photo by Sarajudin Saraj) - Courtesy of www.museo-on. com

The Mullah Yoav Synagogue, built from 1788 through1808, was also abandoned in the late 1970s, but was already in disrepair by the time fighting broke out in the western quarter of the Old City after the 1978 uprising. The restored Mullah Yoav Synagogue is now used as an educational center for children from the surrounding neighborhood, reflecting both the building?s adaptive use and the change the Jewish Quarter has undergone since its abandonment in the late 1970s. While the dates when the four synagogues were constructed are known for certain (between the late eighteenth and early twentieth century), there is no documentation to show whether they were entirely new buildings for their time or were built over the ruins of older structures. Certainly, the Mullah Samuel Synagogue shows evidence of an earlier existence. If indeed these synagogues rose from pre-existing foundations, it is difficult to determine the form of the original building and the nature of the intermediate stages of construction.

The Mullah Yoav Synagogue used as a living room in 1973 - Courtesy Werner Herberg (www.museo-on.com

Herat?like other Islamic cities such as Aleppo, Cairo, Fez, Isfahan, Jeddah, and Sana?a?is the embodiment of a living city with traditional Islamic influences. Its architectural design was, for the most part, predetermined by Herat?s geometric urban concept and system, which was designed to meet the Islamic requirement to face toward Mecca (qibla). The city?s historic and vernacular architecture, and its exceptional surviving architectural heritage of both Muslim and non-Muslim origins, illustrate the complex processes of a global cultural transition. Targeting the ?internationalist dimensions? of two world religions (Islam and Judaism) by using reverse theoretical approaches and methods, this investigation of Herat?s four synagogues in an urban context illustrates the complex processes and design elements through which like-minded believers could be identified through their shared beliefs (?communities of opinion?).84 It also reveals the role of religion as the driving force reflecting the unity and diversity of the Muslim and Jewish identities and the practices of the Jewish Diaspora living in the Muslim world.

Documentary evidence analyzed for this project has enabled a partial reconstruction of the original architectural structure of Herat?s four synagogues. Their design and construction followed styles that combined both local and universal elements?while also deeply influenced by variations in Jewish tradition. The history of these four remarkable buildings?beginning with their construction from the late eighteenth to the early twentieth centuries?to the time when they closed in the 1950s, Herat being abandoned completely by Jews in 1978, and then bombed by the Soviets in the 1980s?is one of transition, cultural adaption, and reciprocal influences between Herat?s Jewish minority and the majority Muslim population. This reciprocity is demonstrated in the intricacies of Herat?s Jewish life on the macro and micro scale?from Herat City to the detailed interiors of the four synagogues.

In examining sacred realities in an urban context, religious cultural exchanges, and the transnational historical experience of different faith communities in an increasingly globalized and politicized world, the present study suggests that we need to rethink our current understanding of the concepts of ?religion,? ?religious identity,? and ?freedom of religion? in the modern world. Indeed, it is hoped that this chapter will contribute to a critical understanding of both ancient and contemporary globalized religious dynamics. It suggests the need to critically reflect on intercultural influences (political, social, religious) in light of religious multiculturalism and the

transnational historical experience of different faith communities.

Finally, this research may also spark an interest in determining how intercultural and international negotiations on (religious) self-definition can both reduce conflicts and facilitate the peaceful coexistence of different religious communities. This area of inquiry is becoming visibly important, based on the growing and increasingly unscrupulous influence of religious splinter groups that attempt to promote their own political interests while disregarding the long-held traditional beliefs that have hitherto bound together and governed communities of faith.

Source:

Lintz, Ulrike-Christiane.?Reflection of Sacred Realities in Urban Contexts: The Synagogues of Herat.? In: Mohammad Gharipour, ed., Synagogues in the Islamic World, Architecture, Design, and Identity. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2017, 51-72

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