

**The ebb and flow of an empire:  
the Ghūrid polity of central Afghanistan in the  
twelfth and thirteenth centuries**

**by**

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## Abstract

The iconic minaret of Djām stands in a remote mountain valley in central Afghanistan, the finest surviving monument of the enigmatic Ghūrid dynasty. The seasonally nomadic Ghūrids rose to prominence ca 545 / 1150-1 when they devastated the capitals of the neighbouring Ghaznawid dynasty. Over the next sixty-five years, the Ghūrids expanded their polity into Khurāsān and the northern Indian sub-continent, before succumbing to the Kh<sup>w</sup>ārazm-Shāh and then the Mongols. Their summer capital of Fīrūzkūh, which is thought to be modern Djām, was abandoned and never re-occupied.

The re-discovery of the minaret half a century ago prompted renewed interest in the Ghūrids, and this has intensified since Djām became Afghanistan's first World Heritage site in 2002. The few studies that have been published, however, have largely been historical or architectural; relatively little archaeological data has been collected from Ghūrid sites and Djām has suffered extensive looting in recent years.

Two seasons of archaeological fieldwork at Djām, the detailed analysis of satellite images and the innovative use of Google Earth as a cultural heritage management tool have resulted in a wealth of new information about known Ghūrid sites, and the identification of hundreds of previously undocumented archaeological sites across Afghanistan. Drawing inspiration from the *Annales* School and Adam T. Smith's concept of an 'archipelagic landscape', I have used these data to re-assess the Ghūrids and generate a more nuanced understanding of this significant Early Islamic polity. In addition to complementing the *événements* which form the focus of the urban-based historical sources, the new archaeological data have enabled me to reconsider the urban characteristics of the Ghūrids' summer capital and explore the issues of Ghūrid identity, ideology and the sustainability of their polity. The use of Google Earth, in particular, represents an advance in archaeological methodology applicable to semi-arid landscapes throughout the region.

### خلاصه موضوع :

منار مجسمه ای جام که در یک دره کوهستانی دوردست در مرکز افغانستان قرار دارد، یکی از بهترین آثار تاریخی سلسله غوریان میباشد. غوریان چادرنشین فصلی به درجه 1-1150 / 545 پیشرفت نمودند، زمانیکه آنها مرکز حکمروایی خاندان غزنویان را در همسایگی شان ویران کردند. غوریان در جریان شصت و پنج سال، قبل از آن که به خوارزم شاه و بعد به مغول ها ببیوندند، حکمروایی شان را تا به خراسان و شبه قاره هند شمالی گسترش دادند. پایتخت تابستانی شان فیروز کوه که جام فعلی میباشد، تصرف شد و هیچگاهی دوباره اشغال نگردید.

کشف دوباره این منار نیم قرن پیش علاقمندی جدیدی را به طرز حکومت غوریان ایجاد نمود و این علاقمندی زمانی تشدید یافت که منار جام منحصیث اولین سایت میراث فرهنگی جهانی افغانستان در سال 2002 شناخته شد. مطالعات اندکی که در این زمینه به نشر رسیده است، بیشتر روی موضوعات تاریخی و معماری منار جام تمرکز داشته است. معلومات نسبتاً کمی که در رابطه به باستانشناسی در سایت های غوریان و جام جمع آوری گردیده است در سال های اخیر شدیداً مورد سو استفاده قرار گرفته است.

دو دور کارساحوی باستانشناسی در ساحه منار جام، از قبیل تجزیه و تحلیل دقیق تصاویر ماهواره ای و استفاده مبتکرانه جستجوگر زمین (Google Earth) به عنوان یک ابزار مدیریت میراث فرهنگی، سبب شد تا انبوه از معلومات جدید در مورد آدرس های انترنتی شناخته شده غوریان و شناسایی صد ها سایت مستند نشده باستانشناسی افغانستان بدست بیاید. با الهام گرفتن از مکتب انالیس (*Annales*) و نظریه آدم سمت (Adam T. Smith)، من این اطلاعات را به منظور شناسایی دوباره سلسله غوریان و ایجاد درک دقیقی از این حکومت مهم قرون وسطی استفاده نموده ام.

بر علاوه تکمیل اوینمینتس (*événements*) که روی منابع تاریخی شهر نشینی تمرکز دارد، اطلاعات جدید باستانشناسی مرا توانایی بخشیده تا مطالعات مجدد خویش را در راستای مشخصات پایتخت تابستانی غوریان دوام بدهم و روی مسایل مانند هویت، ایدولوژی و تداوم طرز حکومت غوریان تحقیق نمایم. استفاده از جستجوگر زمین (Google Earth) بطور خاص نشان دهنده پیشرفت قابل ملاحظه روش باستانشناسی عملی در مناظر نیمه خشکه در سراسر منطقه میباشد.

## **Statement of authorship**

Except where reference is made in the text, this thesis contains no material published elsewhere or extracted in whole or in part from a thesis submitted for the award of any other degree.

No other person's work has been used without due acknowledgement.

This thesis has not been submitted for the award of any degree or diploma in any other tertiary institution.

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Date:

## Acknowledgements

Most archaeological research is a collaborative process that evolves over many years and this thesis is no exception. It is primarily based on fieldwork conducted by the Minaret of Jam Archaeological Project (MJAP), and the analysis of satellite images available through Google Earth by The Archaeological Sites of Afghanistan in Google Earth (ASAGE) project. Although the author has been the driving force behind these projects, it is important to acknowledge the significant input of the many other team members who are listed in the various published and unpublished reports. Particular thanks are due to Dr Alison Gascoigne (co-director of MJAP since 2006), Haji Ghulam Naqshband Rajabi and Dr Martina Ruigiadi of MJAP, and Dr Fiona Kidd and Claudia Zipfel of ASAGE. We would not have achieved as much as we did, without their hard work, skills and enthusiasm.

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سپاسگزاری:

اکثر کارهای تحقیقی یک پروژه مشارکتی است که سال‌های زیادی را دربر می‌گیرد و این پایان‌نامه نیز از این نظر منتزعی نیست. اساساً این پایان‌نامه بر مبنای یک کار ساحوی نوشته شده است، که توسط پروژه باستان‌شناسی منار جام (MJAP)، و تحلیل و تجزیه تصاویر ماهواره ای جستجوگر زمین (Google Earth) توسط پروژه سایت باستان‌شناسی افغانستان در جستجوگر زمین (ASAGE) تطبیق گردیده است. مهم است تا از مساعدت تمام اعضای تیم این پروژه‌ها قدردانی نمایم. سپس ویژه از دوکتور الیسون گاسکوین (Dr Alison Gascoigne) هماهنگ‌کننده پروژه (MJAP) از سال ۲۰۰۶ به این سو، حاجی غلام نقش بند رجبی، داکتر مارتینا روگایدی (Dr Martina Ruigiadi) از پروژه (MJAP) و داکتر فیونا کید (Dr Fiona Kidd) و کلودیا زیپفل (Claudia Zipfel) از پروژه (ASAGE) که بدون زحمات، مهارت‌ها و علاقمندی ایشان، ما قادر به انجام این همه دست‌آورد‌ها نبودیم.

هیچ‌کدام از پروژه‌های ساحوی ما در افغانستان بدون مساعدت مقامات افغانی و همکاران ما در انستیتوت ملی باستان‌شناسی افغانستان (NAIA) امکان‌پذیر نبود. در این زمینه، من به‌طور خاص از آقای عمر سلطان و آقای محمد ضیا افشار از وزارت اطلاعات و فرهنگ، محقق محمد نادر رسولی و معاون سر محقق میر عبدالروف ذاکر از انستیتوت ملی باستان‌شناسی افغانستان و آقای مسعودی از موزیم ملی کابل اظهار امتنان مینمایم. انا رود ریگویز (Ana Rodriguez) و دیگر کارمندان مجتمع حفاظت از میراث‌های فرهنگی افغانستان (SPACH)، دیوید جوری (David Jurie) و کارمندان تیم باستان‌شناسان فرانسه در افغانستان (DAFA)، جولین لیسلی (Jolyon Leslie) از نهاد اعتماد به فرهنگ آغا خان، و روری ستی وارت (Rory Stewart) و کارمندان بنیاد فیروز کوه (TMF) با مشوره‌های با ارزش و حمایت‌های لوجستیکی‌شان در پروژه‌ها ما را یاری رساندند. وحید پروان‌تا، کارمند افتخاری باصلاحیت سفارت افغانستان در لندن، نیز دست‌باز در تشویق ما در این کار ما داشت.

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## Preface

The challenges (and rewards) of undertaking archaeological fieldwork in a country like Afghanistan have been numerous and need to be outlined to put the following research in context. This thesis draws heavily on the work of the Minaret of Jam Archaeological Project (MJAP), which I initiated in 2003 in conjunction with Istituto Italiano per l’Africa e l’Oriente (IsIAO). I embarked on the project, which was under the overall direction of Prof. Giovanni Verardi (IsIAO), envisaging that it would be comprised of three seasons – the great potential and urgent need for archaeological fieldwork at the site were immediately evident when we reached Djām on 8<sup>th</sup> August 2003, although our original remit was merely to conduct an archaeological impact assessment of the proposed route of a new road on behalf of UNESCO and NAIA.

The short 2003 season highlighted the previously undocumented extent of the looting at Djām and the limited data about the site as a whole. Unfortunately, our plans for a second season of fieldwork in 2004 had to be postponed for security reasons due to a rebellion in Ghūr province. Further security concerns in 2005 prompted the Italian government to place restrictions on its institutions’ activities in Afghanistan, so Prof. Verardi suggested that I sever the project’s official link with IsIAO and run MJAP as an independent project. I succeeded in raising A\$67,400 (US\$72,400 – nearly three times the 2003 budget) in funding, enabling us to undertake a highly productive three weeks of fieldwork at Djām in August 2005, again in conjunction with our colleagues in NAIA, and with UNESCO’s approval.

Alison Gascoigne, who participated in the 2005 field season as the project’s ceramicist, joined me as co-director of the project in 2006. Once again, however, despite raising a considerable sum of funding, assembling a highly capable, diverse team and receiving approval from UNESCO and the Afghan authorities, we were forced to postpone the fieldwork, twelve hours before departure. On this occasion, Andrea Bruno, the architect responsible for overseeing the structural stabilization of the minaret, raised objections about our proposed stay in the MoIC rest house at Djām overlapping with his work there and the nature of our planned archaeological fieldwork. Attempts by Prof. Graeme Barker to facilitate a compromise with Bruno and his allies in UNESCO ultimately proved fruitless – we remain perplexed at how non-intrusive archaeological survey work could jeopardize the stability of the minaret which has stood for eight centuries.

The subsequent moratorium on further archaeological fieldwork at Djām increased the importance of other aspects of our research – i.e. the analysis of satellite images available through Google Earth. With the approval of our funding bodies and the MoIC, we decided to use the A\$120,000 (US\$128,500) we had raised to undertake a study of other, less well-

known Early Islamic sites in Ghūr province in 2007, integrating detailed analysis of satellite images and archaeological fieldwork. The collaborative fieldwork we planned with NAIA and students from Kābul University was designed to complement a series of seminars and practicals we gave on archaeological survey techniques in Kābul University in August 2007, as part of Afghanistan's National Development Strategy for capacity building. Bilingual booklets based on the seminars have since been published (Thomas 2009b) and donated to NAIA and Kābul University.

Unfortunately, the kidnappings of twenty-three South Koreans and two Germans in southern Afghanistan just prior to us going into the field, prevented us from leaving Kābul. Although we made good use of our prolonged time in Kābul (Gascoigne & Thomas in prep.; Thomas *et al.* 2008), the repeated frustration of our attempts to conduct fieldwork in central Afghanistan caused us to initiate the *Archaeological Sites of Afghanistan in Google Earth* (ASAGE) project. We are particularly grateful to the trustees of the Cary-Robertson Fund for permitting us to divert funds allocated for the 2007 survey work towards this ground-breaking research, which has been so productive (Thomas & Zipfel 2008; Thomas, Kidd *et al.* 2008; Thomas in press; *inter alia*).

## Note on transliteration and dates

The issue of how to transliterate Arabic, Persian, Turk,<sup>1</sup> Russian and Chinese names and titles vexes every scholar researching central Asia. Despite centuries of argument, no single system has been agreed for each of the various languages and scripts (Morgan 1987: 4); indeed, the number of systems used seems to proliferate, rather than decline with each publication, as authors nominally adopt one of the more commonly used systems, but then apply their own caveats – Willem Vogelsang (2002: x), for example, follows the *Encyclopaedia of Islam* “in the main” (see also Wheatley 2001: xvii). Some profess not to want to make any particular philological argument and do not apply any rigorous system (Christensen 1993: vi); others, especially those writing for a more general audience, generally dispense with diacritics (Kennedy 2006: xxiv), unless they are essential (Lee 1996: xlvi), or useful (Ball 2008: xix), however that is determined.

Given the range of options, and the fact that I am an archaeologist and not a linguist, I have decided to adopt the system used in the *Encyclopaedia of Islam* (Leiden: E.J. Brill; Fig. 0:1), despite its idiosyncrasies which often irritate English-speaking scholars. It should be noted, however, that the *Encyclopaedia of Islam* is not totally consistent, which is unsurprising given the size of the project, the number of contributors and the twelve volumes and index published from 1960 to 2009. The normal spelling of countries, titles and words in common English usage (i.e. words occurring in the *Australian Pocket Oxford Dictionary*, 1980) are retained (Afghanistan rather than Afghānistān, for example; sultan rather than sulṭān, etc.). Plurals are simply made by adding an ‘s’ rather than using the correct format from the original language which can be confusing to non-linguists.

Where an archaeological site is not listed in the *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, I have decided to retain the transliteration in Ball’s gazetteer to avoid potential confusion, although I also refer to alternative transliterations used by other scholars when these differ markedly from those in the gazetteer. Following Ball (2008: xx), I have used the Wade-Giles system for Chinese names.

Dates present a similar, if less intractable problem. Where applicable, I have attempted to provide both AH (Anno Hegirae) and CE (Common Era) dates. The Islamic calendar is lunar, and thus on average eleven days shorter than the solar Julian calendar. It starts with the Prophet’s Hidjra or emigration from Makka to al-Madīna in 622 CE, hence the Anno Hegirae Islamic dates. Where a day and month are not specified, a year in the Islamic calendar will straddle two years in the Julian calendar, and vice versa.

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<sup>1</sup> Following Ball (2008: 28 fn. 5), the term Turk will be used as a noun and an adjective, referring to people speaking one of the Turk group of languages, rather than the terms Turkish or Turkic.

Consonants		Long Vowels		Diphthongs
ء (except when initial)	ذ z	ق k	أ ā	او aw
ب b	س s	ك k	و ū	اي ay
ت t	ش sh	ل l	ي ī	
ث th	ص ṣ	م m		ئى iyy (final form ī)
ج ḡ	ض ḍ	ن n	Short Vowels	
ح ḥ	ط ṭ	ه h	ا a	وو (final form ū)
خ kh	ظ ṣ	و w	و u	
د d	ع ʿ	ي y	ي i	
ذ dh	غ gh			
ر r	ف f			

ʾ a; at (construct state)  
 ال (article), al- and ʾl- (even before the antero-palatals)

PERSIAN, TURKISH AND URDU ADDITIONS TO THE ARABIC ALPHABET:

پ p	ژ zh	ٹ t	ڑ r
ع ʿ	ل or گ g (sometimes ñ in Turkish)	ڈ d	

Additional vowels:

- a) Turkish: e, ı, o, ö, ü. Diacritical signs proper to Arabic are, in principle, not used in words of Turkish etymology.  
 b) Urdu: ē, ō.

For modern Turkish, the official orthography adopted by the Turkish Republic in 1928 is used. The following letters may be noted:

c = di	ğ = gh	j = zh	k = k and k	t = t and t
ç = ç	h = h, ḥ and kh	ş = sh	s = s, ṣ and sh	z = z, z, ḍ and dh

SYSTEM OF TRANSLITERATION OF CYRILLIC CHARACTERS:

а a	е e	к k	п p	ф f	щ shč	ю yu
б b	ж ž	л l	р r	х kh	ы ı	я ya
в v	з z	м m	с s	ц ts	ь ʾ	ѐ é
г g	и i	н n	т t	ч č	ъ ʿ	
д d	й y	о o	у u	ш sh	э é	

0:1 Transliteration style used in the *Encyclopaedia of Islam* (Gibb et al. 1960: xiii)

1. Persian

The system used in the journal *Iran* has been adopted, with the following simplifications:

ض z    ش s    ع ʿ    ظ z    ط t    ص s    ح h    ʿ ʿ

2. Pashto

A standardized system has been formulated by the International Centre for Pashto Studies in Kabul, but to avoid the use of diacritical marks I have used the same system as for Persian, with the following simplifications for the additional letters:

ت t    ښ n    ډ n    ځ ts    څ dz    ښ x    ږ g    ږ r

0:2 Exceptions to the *Iran* transliteration style used by Ball (1982 I: 8)

## Abbreviations

EI – *Encyclopaedia of Islam* (2<sup>nd</sup> edition)

Elr – *Encyclopaedia of Iran*

DjT – *Djāmi<sup>c</sup> al-Ta'riḳh*

ḤĀ – *Ḥudūd al-<sup>c</sup>Ālam*

SH – *The Secret History of the Mongols (Tobchi'an)*

TIB – *The Travels of Ibn Baṭṭūṭa*

TJ – *Tarīḳj-e Janangosha (Ta'riḳh-i Djahān Gusha)*

TMP – *The Travels of Marco Polo*

ṬN – *Ṭabaḳāt-i Nāṣiri*

WHN – *World Heritage Nomination document*

## Acronyms

AKTC – Aga Khan Trust for Culture

ASAGE – Archaeological Sites of Afghanistan in Google Earth

DAFA – Délégation archéologique française en Afghanistan (<http://www.dafa.org.af/> [accessed 21/8/2011])

DIA – Deutsches Archäologisches Institut (<http://www.dainst.org/> [accessed 21/8/2011])

IsIAO – Istituto Italiano per l'Africa e l'Oriente (<http://www.isiao.it/> [accessed 21/8/2011])

LTU – La Trobe University (<http://www.latrobe.edu.au/> [accessed 21/8/2011])

MJAP – Minaret of Jam Archaeological Project (<http://www.arch.cam.ac.uk/~alg1000/mjap/> [accessed 21/8/2011])

MolC – Ministry of Information and Culture

NAIA – National Afghan Institute of Archaeology

SPACH – Society for the Preservation of Afghanistan's Cultural Heritage

UNESCO – United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (<http://www.unesco.org/new/en/unesco/> [accessed 21/8/2011])