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The King of the Tatar in Jerusalem: A Note in Hebrew on the Mongol Advance South

On the road northward from Egypt, northeast of Gaza, a great bridge rises over a brook with no water. The method of construction dates it to the Mamluk era, and textual evidence backs this up: the Mamluk writer Ibn Shaddād al-Ḥalabī (d. 1283) listed it among the bridges built by Sultan Baybars (r. 1260–77).¹ In their fascinating study of the bridges and roads to Mamluk Gaza, Reuven Amitai and Kate Raphael examined and described this bridge, built over al-Ḥaṣī/Shiqma stream near the medieval village Dayr Sunayd and present-day Nativ ha-'Asara. They analyzed it alongside three other Mamluk bridges, built over nearly dry riverbeds in the southern coastal plain of modern Israel: Jisr Jindās, north of modern Ludd, built over the Ayalon river in 1273; a bridge over the Soreq river, near Yavne/Yubnā, built in 1272–73; and a bridge near Ashdod/Isdūd, dated to the Mamluk era, and possibly to the rule of Sultan Baybars, due to its similarity to Jisr Jindās.² In these four cases, the two researchers noted, the Mamluks were not adding a layer to earlier construction, but were the original builders.³ These construction endeavors were meant to facilitate communication and military movement and to develop trade.⁴ The present article will focus on the military aspect.

Mongol forces crossed the Euphrates to invade the Ayyubid and, later, Mamluk, domains numerous times. Twice—in 1260 and in 1299–1300—they reached as far south as Gaza, raiding and ruling cities and countryside from the Golan Heights throughout the Jordan Valley to Jerusalem, Hebron, and more, in the land called by medieval Jewish writers *Eretz Yisra'el*, or the Land of Israel. Yet the Mongols never did stay long. In an early study, Amitai concluded that their con-

¹Kate Raphael and Reuven Amitai, “Bridges and Roads to Mamluk Gaza and Beyond” (forthcoming in *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam*), 1–2, and n. 6. The bridge was built of uniformly cut local stones, in this case *kurkar*, characteristic of the Mamluk method (*ibid.*, 11). I thank Dr. Raphael for sharing this article.

²*Ibid.*, 10.

³*Ibid.*, 7; see also Andrew Peterson, “Medieval Bridges of Palestine,” in *Egypt and Syria in the Fatimid, Ayyubid and Mamluk Eras*, vol. 6, *Proceedings of the 14th and 15th International Colloquium organized at the Katholieke Universiteit Leuven in May 2005 and May 2006*, ed. Urbain Vermeulen and Kristof D'hulster (Leuven, 2010), 297–98 (with no mention of the bridge near Dayr Sunayd).

⁴Raphael and Amitai, “Bridges and Roads,” 12–16.



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DOI: 10.6082/e3qk-mg10. (<https://doi.org/10.6082/e3qk-mg10>)

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trol over the southern areas was loose.⁵ His later examination located traces of Mongol administration, formed during their seven-month rule in 1260, at Ban-yas and al-Şubaybah/Namrūd fortress in the Golan and at Karak in Transjordan. Although a small force was stationed at Gaza, no Mongol administration was established there.⁶

A nearly forgotten Hebrew text forms a bridge between the Mamluk roads and the short-lived Mongol rule. It is part of an exegesis of the Torah, written in the early fourteenth century by Rabbi Nissim ben Moshe of Marseilles. The entire text was edited and published by Kreisel, and the part touching on the Mongols was published by Ḥazani and referred to in several studies.⁷ No English translation of it has been made previously. This article intends to fill this lacuna, and to further develop our knowledge of the seasonal pattern of Mongol activity in *Eretz Yisra'el*.

THE AUTHOR

Nissim is known only from his essay *Ma'ase Nissim* (“Miracle Deed”)—an exegesis of the Torah with a lengthy philosophical introduction.⁸ He referred to himself as “Nissim ben Rabbi Moses ben Rabbi Solomon ben Rabbi Moses of blessed memory, of the diaspora exiled to the state of Marsillia, exiled by Titus from Jerusalem.”⁹ The emphasis he put on Marseilles and the ancient roots of its Jewish community, related to the direct exile from Jerusalem by the Roman commander who conquered and destroyed it in 70 CE, led Sirat to assume it was Nissim’s birthplace as well as his place of activity.¹⁰ His exegesis follows the path

⁵Reuven Amitai-Preiss, “Mongol Raids into Palestine, A.D. 1260 and 1300,” *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* 2 (1987): 247.

⁶Reuven Amitai, “Mongol Provincial Administration: Syria in 1260 as a Case-study,” in *In laudem hierosolymitani*, ed. Iris Shagrir, Ronnie Ellenblum, and Jonathan Riley-Smith (Aldershot, 2007), 123, 137.

⁷*Ma'ase Nissim*, ed. Ḥaim Kreisel (Jerusalem, 2000) [in Hebrew]; Israel Ḥazani, “A Hebrew Source on the Mongol Incursion into the Land of Israel and Jerusalem in 1299,” *Zion* 47 (1982): 344–46 [in Hebrew]; Amitai-Preiss, “Mongol Raids,” 245; Joshua Prawer, *Jews in the Latin Kingdom of Jerusalem* (Jerusalem, 2000), 172 [in Hebrew]; Na'ama O. Arom, “Hebrew Sources,” in *Cambridge History of the Mongol Empire* (Cambridge, 2023), ed. Michal Biran and Hodong Kim, vol. 2.

⁸The text is found in seven MSS. Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale MS 720 was copied ca. 1370, and formed the basis for Kreisel’s edition. Other MSS include MS Oxford, Bodleian, 1294; MS Florence, Laurentian Library, 50; MS Moscow, Russian State Library, Ginzburg collection 572; MS Parma, Biblioteca Palatina, 1418; MS New York, Jewish Theological Seminary of America Library, 2462; and MS London, British Library, 378. See Kreisel, *Ma'ase Nissim*, 49–50.

⁹Kreisel, *Ma'ase Nissim*, 53.

¹⁰Colette Sirat, “The Political Ideas of Nissim ben Moshe of Marseilles,” *Jerusalem Studies in Jewish Thought* 9 (1990): 54 [in Hebrew].



of the great (and controversial) philosopher and leader Maimonides (1138–1204), and sails the sea of the Greek philosopher Aristotle (384–322 BCE). Writing with a rationalist approach, Nissim explained the miracles described in the Torah not as direct interventions by God on earth, but as natural or historical phenomena, propelled by the Divine Will.¹¹

DATING THE WORK

Nissim’s philosophical approach aided in estimating the date of writing, for many historical events are mentioned in his commentary. The scholar and critic Schorr, the first to publish a part of the text, dated it to the early fourteenth century based on the mention of a volcanic eruption on the island of Ischia (1302) that formed a part of Nissim’s commentary on the divine destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah.¹² In later studies, Sirat dated the text to shortly after 1315, and Kreisel added the surmised date of 1324.¹³

MA’ASE NISSIM ON THE MONGOL ADVANCE

The same historically-tuned approach allowed the Mongols to invade Nissim’s text in his commentary on the Torah portion of *Be-ḥuqqotai* (Leviticus 26:3–27:34). This portion describes the blessings that the people of Israel will receive if they obey God’s laws and the curses that will befall them if they do not. Thus, Lev. 26:32 pictures a predicted desolation of the land of Israel: “and I will bring the land into desolation, and your enemies that shall dwell therein shall be desolate in it.”¹⁴ Nissim commented that this divine threat was fulfilled by human hands;

¹¹ For Nissim’s commentary as a bridge between the rationalist and Jewish traditional points of view, see Kreisel, *Ma’ase Nissim*, 7; idem, “The writing and rewriting of *Ma’ase Nissim* by R. Nissim of Marseilles,” in *Écriture et réécriture des textes philosophiques médiévaux*, ed. Jacqueline Hamesse and Olga Weijers (Turnhout, 2006), 312. For Nissim’s unique usage of Aristotle’s *Politics* as a basis for understanding the Torah, see Sirat, “The Political Ideas,” 73–74, 76.

¹² Osias Heschel Schorr, “R. Nissim B.R. Moshe of Marseilles,” *haHalutz* 7 (1865): 103 [in Hebrew]; Kreisel, *Ma’ase Nissim*, 281–82.

¹³ Sirat, “The Political Ideas,” 57–88; the possible date of 1324 is based on a suggested reading of a colophon on a now lost MS; see Kreisel, “The Writing and Re-writing,” 311–12, and n. 4.

¹⁴ Note that in many English translations of this verse, the second verb is rendered as “astonished” instead of “desolate,” since the two verbs derive from the same root; yet Nissim, like other medieval and modern commentators, took the “desolation” meaning. See, for example, Nahmanides’ exegesis: Moshe ben Nahman, *Commentary on the Torah*, trans. Charles B. Chavel (New York, 1971), 3:473.



listing the numerous political upheavals that occurred in the land of Israel—and in the city of Jerusalem in particular—he wrote:¹⁵

While no [people of] Israel dwell in it, our enemies who dwell in it become desolate, and could not settle it, since the days of the Destruction¹⁶ to this day. And how many ruined lands and towns have been greatly rebuilt and resettled following their destructions, and these [lands and towns] are inferior to the land of Israel by ten thousand times!

And wars are constantly wrought on the dwellers of the land of Israel. Rome who had exiled us held it for a time, but not for long. Then the hand of the Ishmaelites [i.e., Muslims] overpowered and defeated them, and held it for a while. Then the Christians awakened to attack, and banished them, and held it. And then the hand of the Ishmaelites overpowered, and they settled in their stead. Then the hand of the Christians overpowered and held it. And after a short while the Ishmaelites overpowered and defeated them, and hold it to this day. Thrice reigned the Christians in the land, and thrice the Ishmaelites, from the day of the Second Destruction to this time.¹⁷ And even when each of these two nations held it, never did they live peacefully, for the sound of fear was constantly in their ears and the terror of wars, each fearing the other. For the Ishmaelites envy the Christians, and the Christians envy the Ishmaelites, for settling the chosen land. Thus, it had never been properly settled until now.¹⁸

And beside this, other nations from the south and the east of the land long for the land and desire it. And once every fifty years, at least, the King of the Tatar¹⁹ ventures with many people and

¹⁵This translation is based upon Kreisel, *Ma'ase Nissim*, 396–97, alongside the MS referred to online at gallica.bnf.fr: Nissim ben Moise ben Salomon de Marseilles, “Seper haNisiym,” BNF MS Hebreu 720, fol. 98.

¹⁶The Roman destruction of the Second Temple, 70 CE.

¹⁷Byzantine rule officially began with the conversion of Emperor Constantine in 312 CE; the Caliph ‘Umar invaded the land, conquering Jerusalem in 638; the First Crusade overran the city in 1099; Saladin conquered most of the land, including Jerusalem, in 1187; Jerusalem, except for the Temple Mount, was handed to Emperor Friedrich II in the treaty of Jaffa/Tel al-‘Ajjul in 1229; and was conquered again for the Muslim side by the Khwarazmians in 1244.

¹⁸Kreisel, *Ma'ase Nissim*, 396; BNF MS Hebreu 720, fol. 98.

¹⁹For this term, see below.



a great host to hold Jerusalem. And then all the inhabitants of the land of Israel flee from the very sound of them, hiding in the caves and in the clefts of the rocks, until the passing of this great host. They leave their homes with no resident, and the city with no man, until the passing of this great host.

For they cannot remain, for the water of the rivers and springs are not enough for them, with their horses, and their camels, for the multitude of their host, nearly as numerous as the host of Sennacherib.²⁰ You will not believe that which is told to you about what I heard and what was related to me from the host of the Tatars as it came to Jerusalem.²¹

And all that is a reason for the desolation of the land, until God wills it and restores his people, and rebuilds the ruins of Jerusalem, and restores his divine presence into the city, and then it shall be inhabited as in the days of old.²²

MA'ASE NISSIM AND THE "KING OF THE TATAR"

While Kreisel and Brayer understood "Tatar" to mean the Khwarazmians, Ḥazani, Prawer, and Amitai took this name to mean the Mongols.²³ This possibility is sustained by the wide usage of the name "Tatar" to refer to the Mon-

²⁰King of Assyria (705/704–681 BCE), who led a campaign into Judea, besieging Jerusalem and leaving it untouched—either because of a heavy indemnity paid (Henry W. F. Saggs, "Sennacherib," *Encyclopedia Britannica*, <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Sennacherib>) or because of a divine force striking his forces at night (2 Kings 18:13 for the siege, 19:35–36 for its end).

²¹Whether Nissim was actually in Jerusalem at the time remains an open question. This phrase might intend to emphasize the above description; and it might have been an introduction to a paragraph that was lost before the earliest copy was made, ca. 1370, for there is no lacuna at this point in any of the MSS.

²²Kreisel, *Ma'ase Nissim*, 397; BNF MS Hebreu 720, fol. 98. This rather optimistic view of the curse of the land's desolation was expressed by earlier Jewish exegetists as well. Both Rashi (1040–1105) and Nahmanides (1194–1270) saw it as an element that could assist a future Jewish return to Zion. See Rashi (Shlomo Yitzchaki), *Commentary of the Pentateuch*, ed. Aharon Samet (Jerusalem, 1990), 3:628 [in Hebrew]; Nahmanides (Moshe ben Nahman), *Commentary of the Torah*, ed. Haim D. Chavel (Jerusalem, 1960), 190 [in Hebrew].

²³Kreisel, *Ma'ase Nissim*, 397, n. 258; Meir I. Brayer, "Nissim of Marseilles' Commentary on the Pentateuch" (Ph.D. diss., Yeshiva University, 1970), 34; Ḥazani, "A Hebrew Source on the Mongol Incursion," 345; Prawer, *Jews in the Latin Kingdom of Jerusalem*, 172; Amitai-Preiss, "Mongol Raids," 60.



gols in Arabic as well as Hebrew texts; moreover, associating the Tatars with the Mongols would agree better with Nissim's commentary, for the Khwarazmians were officially Sunni Muslims when they invaded the land, and their one major incursion would not apply the recurring pattern described in the text at hand. That being said, it is interesting to note that Nissim's description of the Mongols lacks the negative, and often dramatic, phrases used by many writers of the time. The Mongols are referred to here as an element that lays waste to the land, but are not listed as "enemies"; their designation as "other nations," neither Christian nor Muslim, defines them as alien, or new to the region, but human, and not necessarily hostile.²⁴

"HIDING IN CAVES AND IN THE CLEFTS OF THE ROCKS. . ."

This paragraph has an interesting archaeological echo. In a large karstic cave about 11 kilometers south of Nablus that was studied by a team headed by Dvir Raviv, five identifiable coins from the late Ayyubid-early Mamluk periods were discovered. The nature of the cave—its hidden entrance and its relative inaccessibility, alongside its proximity to populated areas—and the findings from at least eight periods, from the Late Chalcolithic to the Mamluk—led the researchers to surmise it was used for generations as a refuge in troubled times.²⁵

"FOR THEY CANNOT REMAIN. . ."—MA'ASE NISSIM AND THE HALT OF THE MONGOL ADVANCE

Nissim's commentary flows into a discussion of the reasons for the halt of the Mongol advance in the trans-Euphrates front. Alongside internal reasons—the death of the Great Khan Möngke (r. 1250–59), followed by an intense domestic struggle that ended, or severely transformed, the unity of the Mongol Em-

²⁴For a similar attitude toward the Mongols, as expressed in other Hebrew texts, see Na'ama O. Arom, "No Fear—Different Images of the Mongols in Three Mediaeval Hebrew Texts," *Acta Mongolica* 10 (2010): 151–56; for a graphic expression of the same, see the outline of the Mongol lands in the fourteenth-century map of Elisha ben Abraham Cresques: Katrin Kogman-Appel, *Catalan Maps and Jewish Books: The Intellectual Profile of Elisha ben Abraham Cresques (1325–1387)* (Turnhout, 2020), 221–22; discussion, 231–35. I thank Prof. Amitai for bringing this research to my attention.

²⁵For the Mongol attack near Nablus in 1260, see Amitai-Preiss, "Mongol Raids," 237; for a general description of the cave and the periods represented in it, see Dvir Raviv et al., "An Archaeological Survey at el-Janab Cave, Central Samaria," *Jerusalem Journal of Archaeology* 3, no. 2 (2022): 233; for a historical discussion of the Ayyubid-Mamluk finds, see *ibid.*, 270–72. For a detailed catalogue of the coins, see Dvir Raviv et al., "The Numismatic Finds from el-Janab Cave in Central Samaria," *Israel Numismatic Research* 17 (2022): 165–80, esp. 168–71. I thank Dr. Raviv for sharing this research.



pire²⁶—there remained the geographical factor. The core of the Mongol army invading Syria consisted of mounted archers riding steppe ponies; this was true in both 1260 and in 1299, as Amitai has convincingly shown.²⁷ Their reliance on pasture, in the Middle East as well as in eastern Europe, was one of their advantages, for they needed no supply lines, so long as pasture and water were available.²⁸ Ghazan Khan (r. 1295–1304), in his invasion of Syria in 1299, challenged the reliance on pasture, accompanying his forces with camels carrying fodder,²⁹ but the problem of water remained. Thus, an ecological boundary arose in the path of this unstoppable army, a boundary that was broken only on fronts that greatly mattered for the Mongols—such as in southern China—and even then, only after years’ long endeavors, and not by traditional steppe warfare.

Southern Syria and the land of Israel are a “grey” area within this ecological boundary, green and watered during most winters but hot and dry from spring-time onward. The eastern winds of the spring, blowing from the desert areas, carry waves of heat and drought;³⁰ while in most years spring lasts from mid-March to mid-June,³¹ heat waves can strike in February as well. These climatic observations were made in modern-day Israel but may offer insight for medieval times as well. Masson-Smith, dedicating a detailed study to the logistical aspect of the Mongol invasion of Syria, concluded that during the summers, only the Orontes/ʿĀṣī River in northern Syria would meet the water needs of a large Mongol army.³² While the outcome of battles was greatly influenced by the strength of the commanders and the motivation of their forces, it might be possible, as Amitai argued,³³ that the overall outcome of the Mongol invasions was affected by water and sun.

²⁶See Peter Jackson, “The Dissolution of the Mongol Empire,” *Central Asiatic Journal* 22 (1978): 186–244; Hodong Kim, “The Unity of the Mongol Empire and Continental Exchanges over Eurasia,” *Journal of Central Eurasian Studies* 1 (2009): 15–42.

²⁷Reuven Amitai, “Whither the Ilkhanid Army? Ghazan’s First Campaign into Syria (1299–1300),” in *Warfare in Inner Asian History (500–1800)*, ed. Nicola Di Cosmo (Leiden, 2002), 223, 253.

²⁸For eastern Europe, see Denis Sinor, “Horse and Pasture in Inner Asian History,” *Oriens Extremus* 19 (1972): 171–84. For Syria, see John Masson-Smith Jr., “Ayn Jālūt: Mamlūk Success or Mongol Failure?” *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 44, no. 2 (1984): 307–45; David O. Morgan, “The Mongols in Syria, 1260–1300,” in *Crusade and Settlement*, ed. Peter W. Edbury (Cardiff, 1985), 231–35.

²⁹50,000 camels, according to Waṣṣāf; see Amitai, “Whither,” 230.

³⁰Yair Goldreich, *The Climate of Israel* (Ramat Gan, 1998), 160, 164 [in Hebrew].

³¹*Ibid.*, 35.

³²Masson-Smith, “Ayn Jālūt,” 340.

³³Amitai, “Whither,” 250, 258; Reuven Amitai-Preiss, *Mongols and Mamluks: The Mamluk-Ilkhānid War, 1260–1281* (Cambridge, 1995), 234.



Apparently aware of these factors, the major Mongol operations in Syria seem to have taken place in autumn and winter.³⁴ The two invasions southward into the land of Israel began in Syria in winter and ended by early spring. In 1260, the Mongol army of Hülegü Khan attacked Aleppo on 18 January;³⁵ Kitbuqa, sent south by Hülegü, wreaked havoc in the regions of the Ḥawrān and the Nablus countryside, reaching Jerusalem, Hebron, and as far as Gaza, then returned to Damascus with most of his force by March–April.³⁶ The two invasions initiated by Hülegü's son and heir, Abaqa Khan (r. 1265–81), both took place during early fall. The first invading force reached as far as Aleppo, attacked and looted the city on 28–29 October 1280, and retreated in November;³⁷ in the second attempt, the Mongol force reached northern Syria in October 1281 and met a bitter end in the battle near Homs at the end of the month.³⁸ Abaqa's grandson, Ghazan Khan, crossed the Euphrates River at the head of his army on 7 December 1299;³⁹ the forces he sent south, led by Mulai, raided the Jordan valley, Jerusalem, and numerous places across the land, reaching Gaza, and returned to Damascus in the middle of March 1300.⁴⁰ Ghazan himself had left Damascus earlier, in February, heading back to the northeast, but his intentions to reconquer the land were clear. Upon leaving Damascus on 5 February 1300, Ghazan issued a royal proclamation, translated by Amitai: "We will return to [this] country in the autumn, and we intend to go to Egypt."⁴¹

This promise Ghazan indeed fulfilled: he led two additional invasions into Syria, both of them during autumn and winter. In the first attempt, Ghazan crossed the Euphrates on 30 December 1300; in the second, he crossed the river on 29 January 1304.⁴² Ghazan's brother and heir, Öljeitü Khan (r. 1304–16), initiated the last major Mongol invasion into Syria; his forces crossed the Euphrates to lay an unsuccessful siege on Raḥbat al-Shām beginning on 23 December 1312, only to retreat at the end of February 1313.⁴³

³⁴ Amitai-Preiss, *Mongols and Mamluks*, 228.

³⁵ See Amitai-Preiss, "Mongol Raids," 236.

³⁶ According to Abū Shāmāh (d. 1267), translated and discussed by Amitai-Preiss, "Mongol Raids," 237.

³⁷ Amitai-Preiss, *Mongols and Mamluks*, 184–85 for the first invasion; 189 for the second.

³⁸ The battle took place on 29 October 1281; *ibid.*, 195.

³⁹ Amitai, "Whither," 230.

⁴⁰ According to Baybars al-Manṣūrī (d. 1324/5), translated and discussed by Amitai-Preiss, "Mongol Raids," 244, 247.

⁴¹ Amitai, "Whither," 260; the date is on 259.

⁴² J. A. Boyle, "Dynastic and Political History of the Il-Khāns," in *The Cambridge History of Iran*, ed. J. A. Boyle (Cambridge, 1968), 5:303–422; see 389 for the first attempt and 393 for the second.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 403.



CONCLUSION

Coming back to the bridge over the dry brook. . . In their research, Raphael and Amitai noted that all four rivers in the southern coastal plan over which Mamluk bridges were built are known to flood during winter.⁴⁴ Each of the aforementioned Mongol operations, however unsuccessful, caused the Mamluk army—whose heart was on the Nile—to rush north to Syria across a wintery, flooded land. Thus, Mongol activity might have contributed to the area’s desolation but was also a catalyst for its development, for it caused the Mamluk sultans to adjust for winter campaigns, to fight when the rivers and streams were full and flooded, and to build bridges where no one had built them before.

⁴⁴Raphael and Amitai, “Bridges and Roads,” 7.

