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SCHOLARS OF JURJAN

Abstract. *This article provides an overview of the history and geographical location of the city of Jurjan, which was historically recognized as a major center of science, Islamic scholarship, and culture. It aggregates historical data concerning the lives and scholarly contributions of four of the most prominent intellectuals originating from this region. Furthermore, the paper highlights the contemporary significance of studying the biography and scientific heritage of the scholars of Jurjan.*

Keywords: *Jurjan, Tarikh Jurjan, Ahmad ibn Ibrahim, Yusuf ibn Hamza, Abdulqahir, Sayyid Sharif al-Jurjani.*

INTRODUCTION

In Islamic history, alongside renowned centers of science and culture such as Samarkand, Bukhara, Khwarazm, Baghdad, Kufa, and Basra, the city of Jurjan holds a highly significant position. Various views exist regarding the etymology and origin of its name. According to the historical chronicle *Tarikh Jurjan* (The History of Jurjan), the city was founded by Jurjan ibn Lavuz ibn Sam, a descendant of the Prophet Noah (al-Sahmi, 1981:5). Geographically, the city was situated southeast of the Caspian Sea, in the northern part of modern-day Iran (National Encyclopedia of Uzbekistan, 2005:218).

Jurjan was one of the most famous and expansive metropolitan areas of the Persian lands. Blessed with abundant water resources and vast fertile territories, it was celebrated as one of the most beautiful cities in the world. A poet once lauded its climate and landscape with the following verses:

*Hiya jannatu-l-dunya allati hiya sajsajun, yarda biha-l-mahruru wa-l-maqruru.
Sahliyyatun, jabaliyyatun, bahriyyatun, yahtallu fiha munjidun wa mughiru.*

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Translation of meaning: “It is a paradise on earth, boasting a moderate climate where both those suffering from burning heat and those freezing from intense cold find comfort. It is a heavenly world encompassing low mountains, well-irrigated plains, seascapes, highlands, and flat fields” (Yaqut al-Hamawi, 1977:119).

The city of Jurjan was conquered by the Muslim commander Yazid ibn al-Muhallab (53–101 AH / 673–720 CE) during the reign of the Umayyad Caliph Sulayman ibn Abd al-Malik (96–98 AH / 715–717 CE).

During the 10th and 11th centuries, Jurjan served as the capital of the local Ziyarid dynasty. Although its broader political dominance fluctuated during this period, Arabic geographers emphasize that it remained the largest urban center in the Caspian region. Jurjan achieved great renown for its agricultural productivity, diverse crop cultivation, and premium silk industry. A river flowing through the city divided it into two distinct districts connected by a bridge: Shahrstan on the right bank and Bakrabad on the left bank.

By the 10th century, the city suffered considerable decline due to continuous military conflicts between the Samanids and the Buyids, during which the Ziyarids frequently shifted allegiance to whichever side emerged victorious. The famous Tower of Qabus (the mausoleum built for Qabus ibn Vashmgir), constructed during the Ziyarid era, remains preserved to this day. Later, during the reign of Amir Timur (736–807 AH / 1336–1405 CE) and the Timurid dynasty, the adjacent city of Astarabad rose to prominence, and the entire province eventually came to be known by that name (National Encyclopedia of Uzbekistan, 2005:219).

During the Middle Ages, Jurjan—as a thriving hub of intellectual advancement—produced numerous distinguished writers, historians, philosophers, traditionists (muhaddiths), and jurists (faqih). In classical Islamic biographical sources, scholars bearing the nisba “al-Jurjani” (الجرجاني) appear frequently. A meticulous study of the biographies of the most prominent among them is essential for researchers to accurately identify which specific scholar is being referenced in primary texts.

MAIN PART

Ahmad ibn Ibrahim al-Isma’ili al-Jurjani

Among these notable intellectuals was the celebrated traditionist Ahmad ibn Ibrahim al-Isma’ili Abu Bakr al-Jurjani, born in 277 AH / 890 CE. Demonstrating an

innate passion for learning from early childhood, he began studying prophetic traditions (hadiths) at the tender age of six, as soon as he reached the age of discernment.

Throughout his educational journey, he studied under dozens of legendary masters of the era, including Jafar ibn Muhammad ibn Musa, Muhammad ibn Abdullah, Abul Abbas Ahmad ibn Muhammad, Muhammad ibn Ishaq ibn Khuzayma, Abu Abdullah Muhammad ibn al-Hasan, and Fadl ibn al-Habbab.

In pursuit of knowledge, he traveled extensively, residing and studying in various major centers across Iran and Iraq, such as Ahvaz, Jurjan, Anbar, Basra, Kufa, Mosul, and Baghdad. In time, he rose to become the leading Imam, a prominent scholar, and the chief jurist of Jurjan.

Abu Abdullah al-Hakim (321–405 AH / 933–1014 CE) observed: “Abu Bakr al-Jurjani was unique in his time, the grand shaykh of the traditionists and jurists, and the greatest among them in leadership, chivalry, and generosity. The people of knowledge held a unanimous, undisputed high opinion of him.”

Over his lifetime, he authored several highly regarded works. His most famous compositions include:

Al-Sahih ala Shart al-Bukhari (The Authentic Hadiths Compiled According to the Criteria of al-Bukhari)

Musnad Umar (The Chronological Hadith Compilations of Umar)

Al-Mu'jam (The Lexicon / Biographical Dictionary)

Due to the exceptional rigor of his work Al-Sahih, he earned the prestigious title of “Sahib al-Sahih” (The Master of the Authentic Compilations) among Islamic theologians.

Hamza al-Sahmi (345–427 AH / 956–1036 CE) noted: “Abu Bakr was also among the foremost leaders of his time in the science of Quranic recitation (qira’at). Whenever he was present in an assembly, no one else would dare to recite out of respect for his mastery.”

Shaykh Abu Ishaq described him stating: “Abu Bakr al-Isma’ili al-Jurjani successfully bridged the domains of Hadith and Fiqh, just as he masterfully balanced religious authority with worldly leadership.”

Hasan ibn Ali al-Hafiz added: “It was practically a duty for Abu Bakr al-Isma’ili to compile a Sunan for himself. Possessing immense natural talent, deep intellect,

discernment, and grandeur, he was fully worthy of standing alongside Muhammad ibn Ismail al-Bukhari (194–256 AH / 810–870 CE).”

Ahmad ibn Ibrahim al-Jurjani transmitted his legal expertise to his son, Abu Sa’d Isma’il, and to many other scholars of Jurjan. His most prominent disciples included Ahmad ibn Muhammad ibn Ahmad ibn Abdullah Abu Sa’id al-Ansari, Abu Hazim Umar ibn Ahmad ibn Ibrahim al-Huzali al-Abdavi, Isma’il ibn Abu Bakr Ahmad ibn Ibrahim al-Isma’ili al-Jurjani, Ahmad ibn Muhammad ibn Ahmad al-Isfarayini Abu Hamid, Husayn ibn Muhammad ibn Abdullah al-Hanati al-Tabari, Isma’il ibn Ahmad ibn Ibrahim al-Isma’ili Abu Sa’d, Ahmad ibn Muhammad ibn Ahmad ibn Ghalib Abu Bakr al-Khwarazmi, Hasan ibn Husayn ibn Muhammad ibn Husayn ibn Ramin, Ibrahim ibn Muhammad ibn Ibrahim ibn Mihran Abu Ishaq al-Isfarayini, Ahmad ibn Ali ibn Yazdad Abu Bakr al-A’war, Abu Bakr Muhammad ibn Idris ibn Muhammad al-Jarjarai, and Umar ibn Ibrahim ibn Ismail al-Harawi.

The Chief Judge (Qadi al-Qudat) Abu al-Tayyib al-Tabari (348–450 AH / 959–1058 CE) recounted: “I traveled to Jurjan with the sole intention of visiting him, believing he was still alive, only to discover upon my arrival that he had already passed away.”

The grand jurist of the people of Jurjan, Imam Abu Bakr Ahmad ibn Ibrahim al-Isma’ili, died in the month of Rajab in 371 AH / 982 CE at the venerable age of 94.

Hamza ibn Yusuf al-Sahmi al-Jurjani

Another legendary figure from this region, immortalized by his historical monograph, was Abul Qasim Hamza ibn Yusuf al-Sahmi al-Jurjani. Best known by his title al-Sahmi, extensive biographical accounts of his life and scholarship can be found in classical biographical lexicons (tabaqat) such as al-Sam’ani’s *Al-Ansab*, Yaqut al-Hamawi’s *Mu’jam al-Buldan*, Imam al-Dhahabi’s *Tadhkirat al-Huffaz*, as well as *Al-Jawahir al-Mudiyyah*, *Bughyat al-Wu’at*, and *Mu’jam al-Udaba*.

While exact historical records of his birth date are missing, al-Dhahabi notes in *Tadhkirat al-Huffaz* that al-Sahmi received his initial primary education in Jurjan in the year 354 AH / 965 CE under Abu Bakr Muhammad ibn Ahmad ibn Ismail al-Surami. Based on this timeline, historians deduce his birth year to be approximately 345 AH / 956 CE.

Al-Sahmi grew up in an environment populated by master memorizers of Hadith (hafiz). Maximizing this opportunity, he mastered the regional sciences before setting

out on extensive academic travels to major centers in Khorasan, including Isfahan, Rayy, Nishapur, and Ghazna. Over his lifetime, he traversed the length and breadth of the Islamic world, visiting Iraq, the Levant, Egypt, the Hejaz, Mecca, Basra, Kufa, Baghdad, Damascus, and Ascalon.

During these travels, he studied under giant figures, including the highly reliable traditionist Ma'mar Abu Muhammad Abdullah ibn Ibrahim ibn Ayyub al-Baghdadi (274–369 AH / 887–980 CE), the master historian Abu Ahmad Abdullah ibn Adiy al-Jurjani (277–365 AH / 890–976 CE)—author of the monumental critical work *Al-Kamil fi Du'afa al-Rijal*—as well as the aforementioned Abu Bakr al-Isma'ili (author of *Al-Jami' al-Sahih al-Mustakhraj*), the great memory master Muhammad ibn Ibrahim ibn Ali ibn Muqri al-Asbihani (275–371 AH / 888–982 CE), the authority on prophetic narrations Abul Hasan Ali al-Daraqutni (306–385 AH / 919–995 CE—author of *Al-Sunan* and *Al-Ilal*), and Abu Zur'ah Ahmad ibn al-Husayn al-Razi (210–264 AH / 825–878 CE).

Concurrently, a massive cohort of subsequent scholars narrated traditions on the authority of Hamza ibn Yusuf al-Sahmi. This distinguished group included Abul Qasim Abdulkarim al-Qushayri (375–465 AH / 985–1073 CE), author of the fundamental Sufi treatise *Al-Risala al-Qushayriyya*, the celebrated compiler Abu Bakr Ahmad ibn al-Husayn al-Bayhaqi (384–458 AH / 994–1066 CE—author of *Al-Sunan al-Kubra*), and the litterateur Abu Amir Fadl ibn Ismail al-Tamimi al-Jurjani (d. 446 AH / 1054 CE).

Regarding his literary output, Imam al-Dhahabi (673–748 AH / 1274–1348 CE) commented: “He authored multiple invaluable texts on biographical evaluation (*jarh wa-l-ta'dil*), identifying authentic reports and hidden defects (*ilal*) in chains of transmission.”

His undisputed magnum opus remains *Tarikh Jurjan* (The History of Jurjan), which stands as an invaluable prosopographical dictionary documenting the scholars and traditionists of the region. He also wrote *Al-Mu'jam*, a dictionary dedicated to cataloging his direct teachers, and *Al-Arba'in fi Fada'il al-Abbas Amm al-Nabi* (Forty Hadiths on the Virtues of al-Abbas, the Uncle of the Prophet), a work specifically cited by Katip Çelebi (Haji Khalifa) in his grand bibliographic encyclopedia *Kashf al-Zunun*. His fourth major surviving contribution consists of his compiled technical questions addressed to his master al-Daraqutni concerning the reliability of narrators, a source heavily extracted by Al-Khatib al-Baghdadi (392–463 AH / 1002–1071 CE) in

his famous *Tarikh Baghdad* (al-Sahmi, 1981:9). After a lifetime of profound scholarly output, al-Sahmi passed away in the city of Nishapur in 427 AH / 1036 CE.

Abdulqahir al-Jurjani

The third titan of this lineage was Abdulqahir ibn Abdurrahman ibn Muhammad al-Jurjani, an extraordinary master of Arabic grammar (*nahw*), scholastic theology (*kalam*), and rhetoric (*balagha*). Regarded as a singular intellect of his century, he is universally celebrated as the foundational formulator and architect of the science of Arabic rhetoric.

Abdulqahir al-Jurjani spent his entire life within his native city of Jurjan. Interestingly, historical manuscripts indicate that unlike his peers, he never traveled outside his homeland in pursuit of knowledge.

He mastered Arabic grammar locally under the tutelage of Abul Husayn Muhammad ibn al-Hasan al-Farsi (d. 509 AH / 1115 CE), who was himself a direct student of the legendary grammarian Abu Ali al-Farsi. Imam al-Suyuti (849–911 AH / 1445–1505 CE) noted: “Abdulqahir al-Jurjani acquired his deep expertise strictly from Abul Husayn Muhammad ibn al-Hasan, as he never left the boundaries of his home province.”

Biographical sources are silent regarding his exact lifespan; however, in scholarly tradition, the volume of a man’s righteous legacies outweighs his years on earth. He also studied under the Chief Judge Ali ibn Abdulaziz al-Jurjani, who passed away in 392 AH / 1002 CE. Whenever Abdulqahir recalled his masters during his writing processes, he expressed immense pride and spiritual joy, a sentiment echoed by the historian al-Anbari. Al-Anbari recorded that Abdulqahir spoke endlessly of his teacher Abul Husayn, as he was the sole prominent linguistic authority available to him within Jurjan. While he did study under other local teachers, their names faded from historical records due to their lack of wider recognition.

Al-Anbari further emphasizes that Abdulqahir’s genius extended far beyond syntax; he was deeply versed in Islamic jurisprudence (*fiqh*), theology, and literary theory. However, it was his revolutionary work in rhetoric and grammar that earned him eternal fame. His contemporary, Al-Hasan al-Bakharzi (d. 467 AH / 1075 CE), praised him with poetic elegance: “His supremacy is celebrated on every tongue. Through his existence, the age he lived in and the city he inhabited blossomed. The finest of nations sang his praises... He stood as a solitary pearl in the ocean of knowledge.”

Abdulqahir al-Jurjani bequeathed an array of priceless linguistic texts to posterity, written in Arabic, which continue to be studied across the Islamic world today. Among his most prominent works are:

Sharh al-Fatiha – A single-volume commentary and exegesis on the opening chapter of the Holy Quran.

I'jaz al-Quran (The Inimitability of the Quran) – Issued in both expanded and abridged editions, these books serve as extensive commentaries on Abu Abdullah al-Wasiti's (d. 307 AH / 919 CE) earlier work of the same name.

Al-Mughni – A monumental thirty-volume exhaustive commentary on Abu Ali al-Farsi's grammatical textbook Al-Idah.

Al-Muqtasad – A condensed, highly practical distillation of the massive thirty-volume Al-Mughni.

Al-Awamil al-Mi'ah (The One Hundred Governing Agents) – A fundamental textbook on Arabic syntax.

Al-Jumal – An authoritative commentary expanding upon Al-Awamil al-Mi'ah.

Al-Talkhis – A further advanced analysis of the grammatical concepts outlined in Al-Jumal.

Al-Umda (or Al-Amad) – A specialized treatise on Arabic morphology (sarf).

Asrar al-Balagha (The Secrets of Rhetoric) – A groundbreaking text analyzing the aesthetics of figurative language.

Dala'il al-I'jaz (The Intimations of Inimitability) – His masterpiece establishing his theory of syntax and semantic harmony (nazm).

Every student or seeker who knocked on Abdulqahir's door returned enriched with profound spiritual and intellectual wisdom. He left an indelible mark on history as a pioneer of Arabic linguistics and died between 471 AH / 1079 CE and 474 AH / 1082 CE.

Sayyid Sharif al-Jurjani

Among the later polymaths who left an extraordinary mark on Central Asian scholarship, Sayyid Sharif al-Jurjani occupies a place of distinct prominence.

Active during the imperial reign of Amir Timur, Sayyid Sharif al-Jurjani was born in 740 AH / 1340 CE in the village of Tagu near Jurjan. His full name was Abul Hasan Ali ibn Muhammad ibn Ali, and his title "Sayyid" denotes his direct lineage to the

Prophet Muhammad (Gumus, 1985:6). Specifically, he was a thirteenth-generation direct descendant of Muhammad ibn Zayd (d. 287 AH / 900 CE), a prominent figure from the Prophetic household (al-Shawkani, n.d.:488).

Al-Jurjani completed his foundational studies in his homeland before traveling to the cultural hub of Herat. There, he studied the core texts of formal logic, specifically *Sharh al-Shamsiyya* (Commentary on the Sun-Facing Treatise) and *Sharh al-Matali'* (Commentary on the Rising Horizons of Logic), directly under their author, the master logician Qutbuddin al-Razi (d. 766 AH / 1365 CE). Recognizing the young man's boundless potential, Qutbuddin advised al-Jurjani to journey to Egypt to complete his high-level training under his own premier disciple, Mubarakshah.

Upon returning from his Egyptian academic expedition, the famed scholar Sa'duddin al-Taftazani (d. 792 AH / 1385 CE) introduced al-Jurjani to the ruler Sultan Shah Shuja. Impressed by his brilliance, the Sultan appointed him as a senior professor at the prestigious Dar al-Shifa Madrasa in Shiraz. Over the next decade, his reputation spread across the continent.

When Amir Timur captured Shiraz in 789 AH / 1387 CE, he chose to relocate Sayyid Sharif al-Jurjani to his imperial capital, Samarkand. In this glorious city, al-Jurjani served as the dean of the scholarly community for nearly twenty years, producing the vast majority of his lifetime writings here. Samarkand became the arena for legendary intellectual debates between al-Jurjani and Sa'duddin al-Taftazani. The echoes of these profound debates reverberated throughout the scholarly world, eventually being compiled into independent treatises. These debates cemented Jurjani's status in the eyes of Amir Timur and contemporary courts. It is recorded that during one of the most intense debates, Amir Timur himself remarked: "In the technicalities of scholastic sciences, Master al-Taftazani may have the upper hand; however, Master al-Jurjani is victorious today by virtue of his noble Prophetic lineage (sayyidship)."

Sayyid Sharif al-Jurjani belongs to a select group of historical figures who left behind an incredibly vast literary output. He wrote nearly a hundred distinct works covering both religious and rational sciences, including scholastic theology, Arabic grammar, philosophy, formal logic, astronomy, mathematics, history, jurisprudence, Hadith studies, Quranic exegesis (tafsir), and Sufism.

Historical accounts describe al-Jurjani as an exceptionally sharp analyst who investigated the most microscopic details of any scientific dilemma. He was a master of

eloquence, an unmatched debater, and a meticulous researcher. His texts on grammar, inheritance laws, and theology remained core curricula in higher education institutions for centuries.

The majority of his writings took the form of deeply analytical commentaries (sharh) and super-commentaries (hashiya). His most celebrated works include:

Theology & Creed: Sharh al-Mawaqif (Commentary on the Stations of Theology), Sharh al-Aqa'id al-Adudiyyah, Sharh al-Asma al-Husna, Risala fi-l-Firqa al-Najiya, and Hashiyat al-Tajrid.

Philosophy, Logic & Astronomy: Hashiya ala Sharh Hikmat al-Ayn, Hashiya ala Sharh Hidayat al-Hikma, Hashiya ala Lawami' al-Asrar, and Risala fi al-Mantiq.

Linguistics: At-Ta'rifat (The Book of Definitions), Sharh al-Izzi, Hashiya ala al-Kafiya, and Hashiya ala al-Mutawwal.

Jurisprudence & Law: Hashiya ala Sharh Mukhtasar al-Muntaha, Hashiya ala al-Talwih, and Sharh al-Fara'id al-Sirajiyyah (The Commentary on Islamic Inheritance Laws).

Sufism: Al-Risala al-Shawqiyya, Al-Risala al-Baha'iyya, and Ta'liq ala Awarif al-Ma'arif.

Exegesis & Hadith: Hashiya ala al-Kashshaf (Super-commentary on al-Zamakhshari's Exegesis), Hashiya ala Tafsir al-Baydawi, Tafsir al-Zahrawayn, Tarjuman al-Quran, Al-Dibaj al-Madhhab, and Hashiya ala Khulasat al-Tibi.

Following the passing of Amir Timur in 807 AH / 1405 CE and the subsequent political instability, Sayyid Sharif al-Jurjani returned to Shiraz. He spent his final years continuing his research there until his death in 816 AH / 1413 CE (al-Jurjani, 2004:234).

Other scholars of Jurjan

Naturally, the history of Jurjan's contributions to human civilization cannot be restricted solely to these four icons. Numerous other masters, such as the traditionist and poet Abu Amir Fadl ibn Ismail al-Jurjani, the eminent physician Abu Sahl al-Masihi (361–401 AH / 972–1010 CE), the traditionist Uthman ibn Said al-Jurjani (d. 346 AH / 957 CE), Muhammad ibn Umayrah al-Jurjani (d. 267 AH / 881 CE), Abu Ahmad ibn Adiy al-Jurjani (d. 365 AH / 976 CE), and the Hanafi jurist Kumayl ibn Jafar (d. 336 AH / 947 CE), all contributed profoundly to establishing the global reputation of Jurjan as an eternal sanctuary of science and culture.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the city of Jurjan, as one of the major centres of Islamic learning, produced generations of outstanding traditionists, historians, grammarians, theologians and rhetoricians whose works shaped several branches of the Islamic sciences. The biographies of Ahmad ibn Ibrahim al-Isma'ili, Hamza ibn Yusuf al-Sahmi, Abdulqahir al-Jurjani and Sayyid Sharif al-Jurjani – together with the many other scholars who bore the nisba “al-Jurjani” – show the depth of the city’s scholarly heritage. A careful, source-critical study of their lives and legacies remains important both for correctly identifying the scholars referred to in the primary sources and for illuminating the contribution of Jurjan to Islamic civilisation.

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