

KÉ HABER?

Ancient Jewish Burial Stones Newly Discovered in Rhodes

by Aron Hasson

In July 2023, some of the oldest evidence of Jewish presence in Rhodes was discovered through the research efforts of the Rhodes Jewish Historical Foundation (RJHF) in collaboration with Archaeologist Nikos Mastrochristos, a Ph.D. graduate from the University of Athens.

Initial examination has determined that one of the burial stones belonging to “Haim Provençal” was from 1363, during the Hospitaller Knights’ rule over Rhodes. His tombstone would be the oldest known artifact, indicating the Jewish presence on the island. Prior to this discovery, the oldest known Judaic artifact of Rhodes was the Rhodes Siddur of 1426. (1)



**The translation from Hebrew is: Tombstone of the young man, Haim Provençal, the son of Shlomo, who died in the month of Tamuz 5123. (2)
This Hebrew date is equivalent to the Gregorian date of June/July 1363.**

The last name Provençal likely indicates the person was from the region of Provençal, France. Safe haven migration from France to Rhodes is understandable, considering the 1306 expulsion of Jews from France. Reviewing the history of southern France and Rhodes, we see specific connections with the Hospitaller Knights. (3)



Another ancient burial stone that is not as conclusive due to its deterioration over centuries. The date appears to be the Hebrew year 5181, equivalent to 1420 or 1421.

(cont.)



The third burial stone was of Isaac Benveniste, who died on the 3rd day of Kislev 5541. (The Hebrew date is equivalent to Dec. 1, 1780).

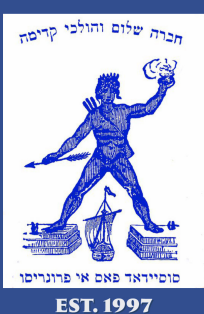
The background of this research started in 1999 in coordination with the Greek Archaeological Department in Rhodes, Ministry of Culture, 4th Ephorate of Byzantine Antiquities (Dodecanese), led by Director Maria Michaelidou and Assistant Director Anna Maria Kasdagli. At that time, the RJHF translated Hebrew inscriptions on 18 stones of various shapes and sizes. The RJHF concluded that the stones were Jewish burial stones from the 1770s to the 1890s with the following Jewish names: Ferera, Franco, Huniu, Soriano, and Surmani. It is believed that those burial stones were from the infamous 1938 Jewish tombstones that were repurposed and used for building material, which was enforced by the Italian Fascist Governor of Rhodes, Cison de Vecchi, who also implemented the anti-Jewish Laws during the same period.

The preliminary presentation of the newly discovered burial stones is under further review and verification. Additional investigation will continue, which is expected to add to the Jewish history of Rhodes. These tombstones are from the Collection of the Archaeological Service, Ministry of Culture, and are subject to copyright from the Greek Archaeological Department.

For more information on the Ancient Tombstones of Rhodes and featured findings by the Rhodes Jewish Historical Foundation, go to:

www.rhodesjewishmuseum.org/cemetery/newly-recovered-tombstones/

1. The Siddur is housed in the Bodleian Library at Oxford University in the UK. A background of the Rhodes Siddur of 1426 was published in the "Ke Haber?" newsletter of the Rhodes Jewish Historical Foundation, 2009.
2. Confirmation of this translation has been affirmed by: Rabbi David Rue, an expert in analyzing the age and origin of ancient Hebrew. Dr. Dov Cohen, the Head of Salti Institute for Ladino Studies at Bar-Ilan University. Professor Paul Fenton, well-known scholar relating to Judaic studies. The original translator of the burial stone was Rhodesli descendant Isaac Menashe of Ra'anana, Israel.
3. While Jews have lived on Rhodes since Biblical times, significant connections existed between Provence, France, and Rhodes, beginning with the 1310 conquest by the Hospitaller Knights: the first five Grand Masters of Rhodes came from Provence. The inhabitants of Rhodes living near the Hospitallers were Greeks, Latins, Catalans, Southern French, indigenous Romaniote Jews, and other immigrant Jews. They were merchants, pilgrims, mercenaries, sailors, bureaucrats, doctors, and others. In 1344, the Grand Master of the Knights of Rhodes maintained 19 members of the military-religious order from Provence and Auvergne. Luttrell, Anthony. *The Town of Rhodes 1306-1356*. City of Rhodes, 2003.



RHODES JEWISH HISTORICAL FOUNDATION
10850 WILSHIRE BLVD STE 750
LOS ANGELES, CA 90024
310-889-4260
WWW.RHODESJEWISHMUSEUM.ORG

TO ALL RHODESLIS, WE INVITE YOU
TO SHARE YOUR FAMILY STORIES AND
PHOTOGRAPHS FOR FUTURE PUBLICATIONS.
EMAIL US: INFO@RHODESJEWISHMUSEUM.ORG