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A Boundary Stone from Kafr Nafaḥ and the Preservation of Ancient Place Names in the Northern and Central Golan Heights

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A Roman imperial boundary stone, erected under Diocletian in c. 300 CE, was reused as a covering stone of a fourth-century CE grave. It bears the Greek names of the villages Ramathana and Kapharnapha, identified as the late Ottoman villages Ramtaniyye and Kafr Nafaḥ. This is the first instance where ancient names were preserved by the modern ones in the central Golan Heights, overturning previous assumptions in this regard. Archaeological evidence from both sites confirms their existence in the Roman and Byzantine periods. It seems that the preservation of the name of Kafr Nafaḥ is due to its location along an important road. Although the original location of the stone remains unknown, its findspot suggests that the boundary between the two villages was near Kafr Nafaḥ.

Keywords: Golan, boundary stone, Greek, epigraphy, toponomy, private nouns, Via Maris, Kafr Nafaḥ, Roman period, Byzantine period

Introduction

In the excavation conducted in 2020 at Kafr Nafaḥ (Alexandre and Avshalom-Gorni, forthcoming; Fig. 1),[2] a Roman imperial boundary stone bearing a Greek inscription was found, reused as the end-stone of six basalt slabs covering an intact cist grave lined with basalt stones; the grave was dated by two coins and an intact glass bottle to the late fourth century CE (Levy, forthcoming; Gorin-Rosen, forthcoming). The boundary stone (1.0 × 0.3 × 0.2 m; Fig. 2) was partly dressed, placed with the inscription facing up. The letters (4–5 cm high) were engraved rather carelessly and are very shallow, possibly due to weathering; they were barely legible without a strong raking light. The reading of the inscription was made possible through a 3D scan performed by Avshalom Karasik of the Israel Antiquities Authority Artifact Treatment Laboratory (Fig. 3).[3]

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[2] Permit No. A-8828/2020.

[3] The technique used a hand-held laser scanner and dozens of reflective tabs affixed to the stone as reference points for triangulation data. Computer software integrated the readings into a 3D image.

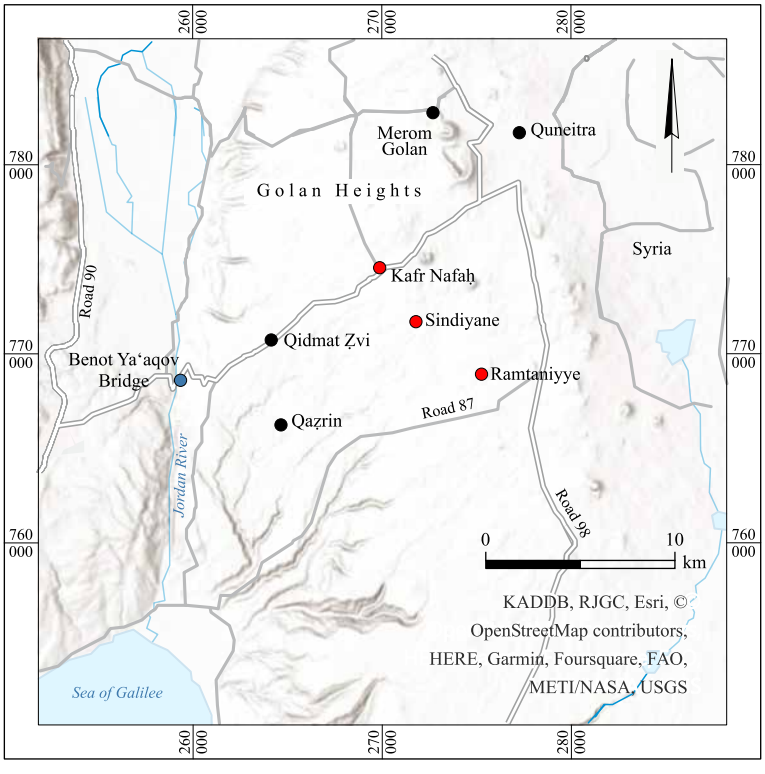

Fig. 1. Location map of the sites discussed in the article.

THE INSCRIPTION

The text is the standard short version of similar boundary stones (see below):[4]

	ΛΙΘΟΝΔΙ	Λίθον δι
	ΟΡẒΟΝΤΑ	ορ(ί)ζοντα
	ΡΑΜΑΘΑ	Ραμαθα
4	ṆΑΚΕḲẠ	να κὲ Κα
	ΦΑΡΝΑΦΑ	φαρναφα
	Α[Θ?]	Α[Θ?]

Λίθον διορίζοντα Ραμαθανα καὶ Καφαρναφα Α[Θ?]

Translation: Stone marking the boundary (between the villages) Ramathana and Kapharnapha.

[4] We thank Leah Di Segni for confirming our reading.

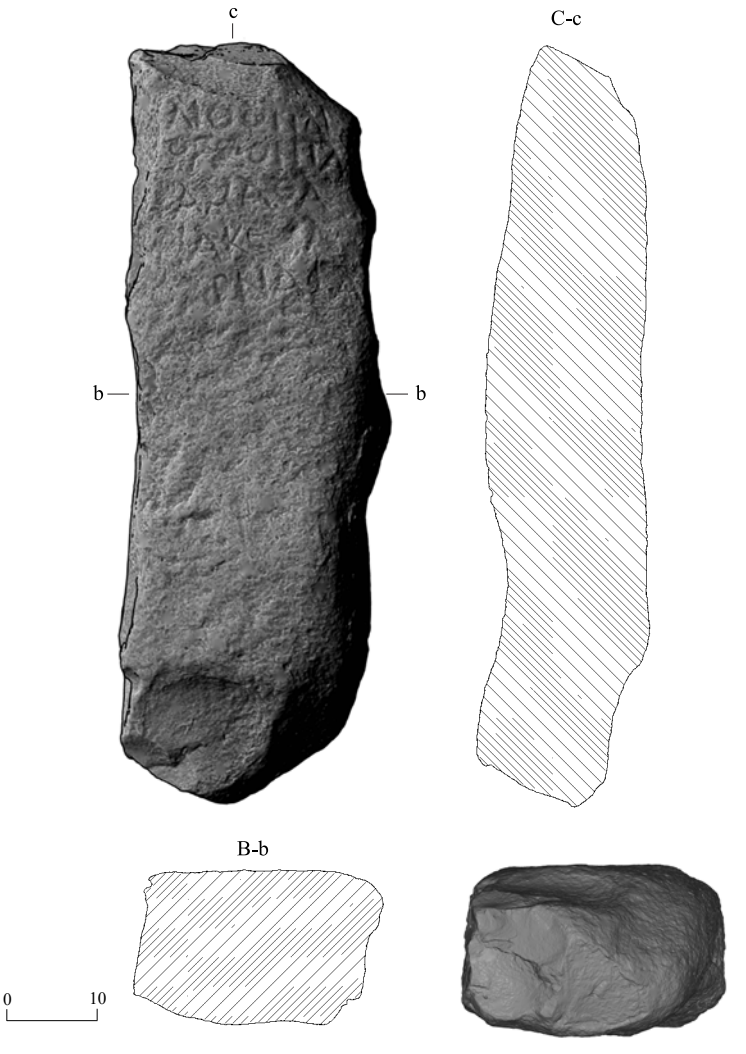

Fig. 2. The boundary stone.

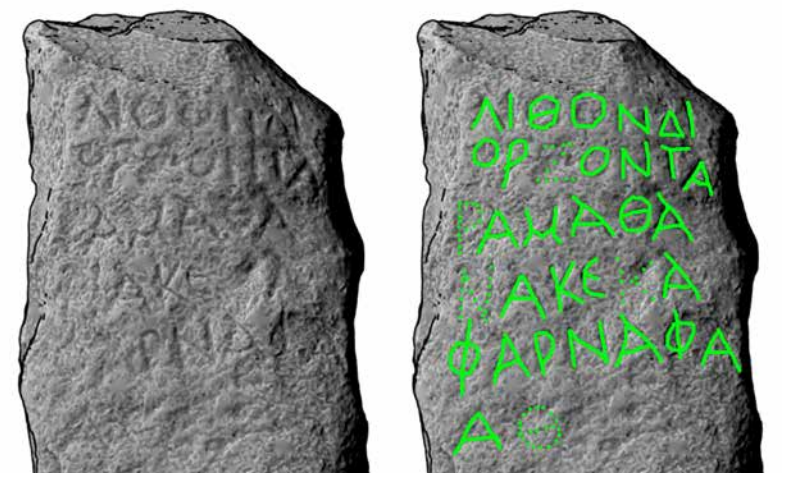

Fig. 3. Detail of the Greek inscription (left), with enhanced letters (right).

Commentary

In Line 2, it seems that there was no I after the P. In Line 3, the reconstruction of P is uncertain but probable. The last line, Line 6, is unclear. The A could possibly be the last letter of the place name, Καφαρναφαα, or it may be the beginning of other words that were planned but not executed. The last letter of the inscription could either be a *theta* or a lunar *epsilon*; however, none of the existing long-version texts of boundary stones contain a word beginning with AΘ or AE.

We suggest identifying the village names mentioned in the inscription with Kafr Nafaḥ and Ramtaniyye in the central Golan. The order of the names apparently does not necessarily indicate the proximity of the stone to the site bearing the first name.

BOUNDARY STONES

This stone joins over 40 boundary stones known from the Ḥula Valley, the Golan and the limestone massif of Syria, the Hauran and Batanea. These stones were set up as markers of the boundaries between lands of neighboring villages, following a taxation reform and survey initiated by Emperor Diocletian in 296/7 CE. The inscriptions have either a long version, mentioning the four ruling emperors at the time, the names of the surveyors who carried out the work and the names of the villages concerned, or a short one, in which only the names of the villages on whose boundary the stone was set up are mentioned. These inscriptions enabled the reconstruction of the provincial boundaries between Palaestina, Phoenice and Arabia in the fourth century CE. Boundary stones have been studied systematically, including a comprehensive bibliography by Syon and Hartal (2003) and Hartal (2005:422–427); a detailed study of the boundary stones from the Golan was accomplished by Hartal (2005:350–352).[5]

The Preservation of Village Names

Many site names in the Levant were preserved from ancient times. Some 262 out of about 475 biblical place names in the Holy Land have been fully identified, 190 (40%) of them were preserved in the modern place names (Aharoni 1967:371–385). In the Classical period, 75% of the 450 historical place names listed in the Gazetteer of the *Tabula Imperii Romani–Iudaea Palaestina* (Tsafrir, di Segni and Green 1994) were preserved until modern times, enabling the identification of sites mentioned by Josephus and the Gospels, and in the rabbinic literature. This is true concerning the regions of Galilee and Judea, while most of the historical place names in the Golan Heights have been lost.

The discovery of the Kafr Nafaḥ boundary stone inscription is therefore an important catalyst for reconsidering the question of preservation of ancient place names in the northern

[5] The boundary stones found in the Galilee will be republished in the forthcoming Volume 5 (Galilee) of the *Corpus Inscriptionum Judaeae Palaestinae*.

and central Golan Heights. In the past, scholars, including one of the authors of this paper, argued that most place names from the Roman and Byzantine periods were not preserved in the northern and central Golan Heights (Hartal 2005:345–353; 2012a: Heading 10; Ben David 2010). Their argument was based on two main facts: (1) all five Greek ancient place names from the central Golan Heights (ancient Gaulanitis) mentioned by Josephus are not preserved; (2) the modern names of almost all the synagogue sites in the central Golan are apparently new Arabic names, unknown from historical sources.

Up to the present discovery, 21 Roman-period boundary stones have been found in the Golan Heights: 15 in the Paneas district, 5 in the Hippos district and 1 in Gaulanitis. Of these, 14 mention place names: 11 in the Paneas district, 1 in the Hippos district and 2 from Gaulanitis.

In the Paneas district, only one name—Paneon—was preserved in the Arabic form, Banias. Hartal (2005:351) pointed out that based on three boundary stones found near Quneitra, about 10 km northeast of Kafr Nafaḥ, some historical names can be identified: Sarisa (Καρίσα), with the site of Quneitra; Berenike (Βερενίκη), with Surman; and Achana (Αχανα), with Khirbat el-Makhfi or with Bab el-Hawa; none of the ancient names were preserved. In comparison, many village names appearing on boundary stones from Arabia were preserved in modern names (Sartre 1992). One of the boundary stones from the Gaulanitis district, found at the site of Ahmadiyye in secondary use, bears the names Arimos and Eusom:[6] the former is probably the ancient name of Ahmadiyye, and the latter may be the ancient name of Qaẓrin. Thus, none of the names from the northern and central Golan have been preserved to modern times. The only name found on a boundary stone in the southern Golan—the Hippos district—is Kapar Haribu (Καπαρ Ηαριβου), a name also known from rabbinic sources and preserved in the Arabic name Kafr Hareb. Thus, the discovery of the Kafr Nafaḥ boundary stone inscription, citing two place names in the northern and central Golan that are preserved to this day, is most welcome, challenging the previous conclusions concerning the preservation of ancient place names in these regions.

The Prefix "Kefar" in Place Names

For sites bearing names with the prefix "Kefar", or variations thereof, it is reasonable to assume that the name preserves the ancient name, even if that name is unknown from ancient sources. The prefix "Kefar" as a place name appears only once in the Bible (Joshua 18:24). In the gazetteer of Eretz Israel in the Hellenistic, Roman and Byzantine periods (Tsafrir, Di Segni and Green 1994), this prefix[7] is recorded 31 times in rabbinical sources and 14 times in Greek and Latin sources. The editors of the gazetteer suggested 36 identifications based, among other considerations, on the preservation of the X component of "Kefar X". In nine cases, the prefix "Kefar" was preserved and documented also in the late nineteenth century,

[6] The reading of the names on this stone is very uncertain.

[7] The word appears in various forms: Capar, Caper, Caphar, Kafr.

six of which are located in northern Israel: four in the Galilee and two in the Golan. In the 1596/7 Ottoman tax census (Hütteroth and Abdulfattah 1977), the prefix "Kafr" appears in 85 place names, and in the index of the Survey of Western Palestine (Stewardson 1888), it appears 43 times.[8]

As for the Golan, Schumacher documented three place names with the prefix "Kefr": Naphakh, Harib and el-Ma. Kafr Harib, as noted above, is known from rabbinical sources (Tos. Shebiit 4:10; JT, Demai 22d) and from an inscription on a boundary stone, as well as from the 1596/7 Ottoman tax census (Hütteroth and Abdulfattah 1977:196). Other place names with the prefix "Kafr" mentioned in the 1596/7 Ottoman tax census include Kafr Sab, which remains unidentified, Kafr el-Ma and Kafr Aqib (Hütteroth and Abdulfattah 1977:196)—the last also mentioned in rabbinical sources (JT, Nazir 57d) and in a donation inscription from the Byzantine-period phase in the Ḥamat Gader synagogue (Sukenik 1935:140).

THE ARCHAEOLOGICAL EVIDENCE

Kafr Nafaḥ

The name was documented in the late nineteenth century by Schumacher (1888:177), who transliterated the Arabic name of the village as "Kefr Naphakh"; however, he did not offer a translation for the name Naphakh. The village, 40 dunams in size, was surveyed in 1967 by Gutmann, and in 1968 and 1972, by Urman. In the time that had passed since Schumacher's survey, ancient stones were incorporated into the Ottoman village buildings and courtyards, some of which bore decorations: architrave elements; a relief of an eagle's wing and two ornate stone brackets; a fragment of a console with fluting; and two parts of a voussoir depicting a wreath and a schematic tendril, populated with a small relief of a lion.

A statue from the Roman period, probably of Athena, was also found in the village. The goddess is depicted holding a shield decorated with the head of Medusa in relief. Along the edge of the shield was a Greek inscription, of which only five letters survived, not enough to reconstruct it (Hartal 2012b: Figs. 42–45). The head, arms and feet of the statue did not survive. The rear of the statue is coarsely worked, and it seems to have been placed against a wall or in an alcove (Gregg and Urman 1996:132–133, No. 105; Ovadiah and Mucznik 2000:90–91). The statue was attributed to the second or third century CE (Ovadiah and Mucznik 2000:91), indicating that in Roman times the village was pagan.[9]

Urman (1985:192) noted Roman and Byzantine pottery at the site. In a later publication, Gregg and Urman (1996:133) stated that according to the pottery collected at the site, there was a small settlement here in the Roman period. The village expanded in the Late Roman

[8] The combination "Khurbet Kefar" appears 19 times.

[9] Mixed villages in antiquity are the exception rather than the rule.

and early Byzantine periods, as attested by the Late Roman pottery collected in a survey (Hartal 1989:108).

Dauphin and Schonfield (1983:194–196) surveyed the site in 1978 and found a section of a paved road, which they identified as the *Via Maris* that supposedly passed between the Benot Ya‘aqov Bridge and Quneitra. The surveyors hypothesized that Kafr Nafaḥ was a way-station (*mutatio*) providing supplies to travelers on the road. Yet, according to Hartal, who conducted a comprehensive survey of the northern Golan Heights, no evidence was revealed of a Roman-period road along the presumed route. Such a road may have existed only in the Mamluk period, when the Benot Ya‘aqov Bridge was first built across the Jordan River; therefore, the road segment should perhaps be dated to this period.

Several architectural elements decorated with crosses were incorporated in the houses of the Ottoman village, indicating that it was populated by Christians in the Byzantine period. Four Greek tombstone inscriptions, probably from the Byzantine period, were published by Gregg and Urman (1996:136–137). In 2005, a small salvage excavation at Kafr Nafaḥ (Abu Zedan 2009) yielded a few potsherds from the Roman and Byzantine periods above the bedrock and beneath the Mamluk-period phases. A few sporadic Roman- and Byzantine-period sherds were also retrieved from accumulations within thirteenth–fourteenth-century buildings exposed in the 2020 excavation (Alexandre and Avshalom-Gorni, forthcoming).

Ramtaniyye

The first place name on the boundary stone, Ramathana, is preserved in the name of er-Ramtaniyye, a Late Ottoman-period village situated 8.5 km southeast of Kafr Nafaḥ as the crow flies. The site was first documented as “er-Rumsaniyeh” by Schumacher (1888:231–235; for the Arabic spelling, see Schumacher 1888:292, with no translation offered) and is one of the richest sites in the Golan in the Byzantine period, including decorative architectural elements, some of which are most finely executed.

The site was surveyed in 1967 by Gutmann (Epstein and Gutmann 1972:267–268, Site 71), who briefly described a chapel and a nearby burial cave, and supplied plans and photographs of reliefs from structures in the village. In 1969, the village was intensively surveyed by a team headed by Urman, providing photographs of the buildings and various architectural items (Gregg and Urman 1996:187–192). The most extensive survey of the site was carried out in 1982, 1983, 1985 and 1988 by an expedition headed by Dauphin and Gibson (1992–93:24–29; Dauphin 1993). In 1996, a survey headed by Ben-Efraim reexamined the remains at the site, documenting numerous sherds from several occupation phases, including the Late Roman period. Christian inscriptions in Greek were published from the site (Gregg and Urman 1996:187–192; Dauphin et al. 1996:324–329). A total of 18 Byzantine-period Greek tombstone inscriptions were recorded by the IAA surveyors (Hartal and Ben-Efraim 2012a: Site 9). In 2002 and 2005, Hartal documented and published the uninscribed reliefs (2005:321–325).

DISCUSSION

The place where the boundary stone was originally erected—between the fields of the two villages mentioned in the inscription—remains undetermined; however, it is unlikely that the heavy stone was carried too far from it. Most of the other boundary stones found in the Golan Heights were also reused in villages, such as Buq‘ata, Quneitra, Faḥm, ‘Ashhe, Ahmadiye and Afiq (Hartal 2005:426–427, Table 17). The boundary stone mentioning Kapar Haribu was found in secondary use as a tomb cover in the Roman–Byzantine-period cemetery (Hartal and Ben-Efraim 2012b: Site 100), 2 km from Afiq and 3 km from Kefar Ḥaruv, apparently near its original location between the two Late Roman-period settlements of Fiq and Kapar Haribu. Another boundary stone, found in the fields of Kibbutz Merom Golan, apparently not far from its original location, mentions the names of Achana and Sarisa, identified by Hartal as Khirbat el-Makhfi and Quneitra respectively; the stone was found approximately 2 km from both sites. It seems therefore that stones that were not carried into late-Ottoman-period villages may well be near their original place of erection. In the case of the present boundary stone, this would lead to the surprising conclusion that notwithstanding the 8.5 km distance, the fields of Ramtaniyye almost reached Kafr Nafaḥ.[10]

Based on the survey data, and the 2005 and 2020 excavations at Kafr Nafaḥ, there was a settlement gap in the region between the late Byzantine–Early Islamic and the Ayyubid-Mamluk periods, as well as between the Ayyubid–Mamluk period and the late nineteenth century. The boundary stones found just 10 km northeast of Kafr Nafaḥ bear the names of three villages—Achana, Sarisa and Berenike—that were not preserved in the late nineteenth century toponomy, as most names in northern and central Golan. The names on the boundary stone presented here are an exception, further supporting the observation that the prefix “Kefar” indicates the preservation of an ancient name. If the name Kapharnapha was preserved down to the Mamluk period, then its continued preservation may be attributed to the main road to Damascus that passed through the site following the erection of the Benot Ya‘aqov Bridge in the Mamluk period.[11]

[10] The only site midway between Kafr Nafaḥ and er-Ramtaniyye is Sindiyane, a twentieth-century village built on top of a ruin. Although some Roman- and Byzantine-period pottery was collected here, early building remains are very sparse, and no Byzantine tombstones with Greek inscriptions, common in the major Byzantine villages in the northern Golan, were found. In the Roman and Byzantine periods, the site was apparently only a small farm.

[11] Although there is no direct evidence of an older road along this route, this is the most logical course for such a road. The excavations at the site of Meẓad ‘Ateret, just south of the Benot Ya‘aqov Bridge, suggest the existence of a ford there from very early times (Ellenblum and Boas 1999).

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