

## A ROMAN MILESTONE FROM THE 'THIRD MILE ESTATE', ASHQELON

ISRAEL ROLL<sup>1</sup>

A Roman milestone was uncovered in the northern part of the excavated area at the 'Third Mile Estate' site in Ashqelon (see Israel and Erickson-Gini, this volume; Israel 1995a:101; 1995b:119). It was found 50 m to the northwest of the Byzantine estate buildings in a pile of debris that was removed—possibly only slightly—by heavy mechanic equipment that disturbed the site prior to the excavation. The milestone is a segment of a marble column roughly cut at one end and broken at the other (length 1.46 m, diam. 0.51 m; Israel Milestone Committee [IMC] No. 538; Figs. 1, 2). It is unique and clearly differs from the regular Roman limestone milestones found in Iudaea/Palaestina. Most milestones included both a base and a column (Roll 1983:152–153), but it cannot be determined whether this milestone had a base.

The milestone segment bears two lapidary Latin inscriptions: one from the time of Elagabalus (218–222 CE), the other from the reign of Diocletian (284–305 CE). The upper end of the column seems to have been leveled intentionally; the earlier text, which covers more than one half of the column's length, was planned accordingly. The later inscription, which was carved with the column turned upside down (and probably after the base was broken off), covers almost the full length of the column.

### *The Elagabalus Inscription (Fig. 1)*

1. IMP – C[A]ES –
2. DIVI – ANT[O]NINI MA
3. IORIS – PI[I F]I[L] SEVERI PII
4. NEP – M [AU]RELIO –
5. [[ANTO.....]] FELICI –

6. AUG TR P –
7. VIA – ET – P[O]NT RESTITVIT
8. M – P III

### Suggested reading:

1. *Imp(eratori) C[a]es(ari)*
2. *divi Ant[on]nini ma-*
3. *ioris pi[i f]fi[l(io), (divi) Severi pii*
4. *nep(oti), M(arco) [Au] relio*
5. *[[Anto[n]ino pio] ]] felici (invicto)*
6. *Aug(usto) tr(ibuniciae) p(otestatis)*
7. *via(s) et p[on]t(es) restituit*
8. *m(ilia) p(assuum) III*

### Suggested translation:

To the Emperor Caesar, son of the divine Antoninus the Greater, Pius, grandson of the (divine) Severus, Pius, Marcus Aurelius [[Antoninus Pius]], fortunate, invincible, holder of the tribunician power. He restored the roads and bridges. Three miles.

The inscription (0.71 × 0.92 m) consists of eight lines, which vary in height. Line 1 is 8 cm high, while lines 2–8 range from 5 to 6 cm in height. The average depth of the lettering is 3 cm. The inscription is in the dative case, which indicates a dedication to the emperor and his dynasty. This case, which became the regular one on Roman milestones from the Severan era (193–235 CE) onward, was intended by its very nature to emphasize and promote loyalty toward the imperial authority (Pekary 1968:16–22; Chevallier 1997:70–72; Witschel 2002:328–330).

The first two titles in line 1 belong to the reigning emperor, Elagabalus, followed by the names and titles of his imperial ancestors (lines



Fig. 1. The Elagabalus Inscription.

2–4): his proclaimed father, Marcus Aurelius Antoninus, nicknamed Caracalla (211–217 CE), and his proclaimed grandfather, Lucius Septimius Severus (193–211 CE). Delineating ancestry in this way was routine; it is found in a series of epigraphic documents of the period (see, e.g., Dessau 1892, I: Nos. 467, 469, 471, 472, 475). However, what appears to be unique is the term *maioris* attached to Caracalla's name in lines 2–3. To the best of my knowledge, this

combination has no parallels in the epigraphic documents of the period. It could have been used here as a one-time replacement for the title *magnus*, which was first added to Caracalla's name in 213 CE and continued to appear in many inscriptions from the later Severan period (Dessau 1914, IIIa:288–294; Kienast 1996:162–179).

The names and titles mentioned in lines 4–6, together with those in line 1, provide an almost complete titulature of Elagabalus: *Imperator Caesar Marcus Aurelius Antoninus pius felix (invictus) Augustus*. Elagabalus was his imperial name; before he became emperor his name was Varius Avitus Bassianus, originally a priest of the chief oracular deity of Emesa—*deus Sol invictus Elagabalus*. His real parents were Varius Marcellus and Julia Soaemias, who was a niece of Septimius Severus' wife Julia Domna.

Line 5 contains the partially erased cognomen *[[Anto[nino]]*. This was probably done after Elagabalus' assassination, which came in response to his unpopular rule and religious idiosyncrasy, and was followed by a *damnatio memoriae* (erasing of his name from public monuments; Frey 1989:73–100; Millar 1993:300–309; Kienast 1996:172, 173; Ball 2001:411–414; see also Sommer 2004).

Although line 6 would have, at least in earlier inscriptions, indicated a date, it bears no numerals related to Elagabalus' tribunician power, or to his consulship. Hence, the inscription could have been carved at any time during his reign, between May 16, 218 CE and March 11, 222 CE (Kienast 1996:172).

Line 7 bears the formula *via(s) et pontes restituit*. This formula was inscribed regularly on milestones erected in Provincia Palaestina during the reign of Caracalla (Isaac 1998:56–57). It appears on nine documented milestones of Caracalla: three along the Scythopolis–Legio road (Isaac and Roll 1982:77–79); two along the Scythopolis–Jericho road (Avi-Yonah 1966:75; and the unpublished IMC 213); two along the roads leading northward from Scythopolis (Thomsen 1917: No. 244); one

along the road leading from Eleutheropolis northward (Thomsen 1917: No. 276); and one between Diocaesarea and Ptolemais (Avi-Yonah 1946:96). Apparently, Elagabalus continued to use this formula, which also appears on an unpublished milestone marking the eighth mile on the Eleutheropolis–Askalon road (IMC 257).

Line 8 indicates that the milestone marked the distance of three miles from Ashqelon. However, three Roman miles from the spot where the milestone was found—assuming that it was not transported too great a distance from its original location—indicate the distance to the center of Ashqelon rather than to one of its gates. This is not uncommon. Other milestones along Roman roads near entrances to cities also indicated the distance to the city center, such as those found along the coastal highway that approached Caesarea from the north and along some of the roads that converged upon Scythopolis and Eleutheropolis. It seems that in all these cases, a major public structure—*caput viae*—within the city was the starting point from which distances along the roads were measured (Roll 1983:152; cf. Chevallier 1997:64). The *caput viae* of the milestone under discussion could have been the structure that, according to the Madaba map, marked the intersection of the city's *cardo* and *decumanus*, possibly a tetrapylon (Fuks 2001:54–55).

Five additional milestones of the time of Elagabalus have so far been found in Israel. One marked the first mile station on the transversal Antipatris–Gophna road (Roll 2000:41–42). Two, both unpublished, were found along the Eleutheropolis–Askalon road; they marked the distances of two (IMC 413) and eight (IMC 257) miles from Ashqelon (cf. Roll and Dagan 1988:177–178). The other two milestones—like the one under discussion here—were uncovered along the coastal highway. One of these (IMC 540; unpublished), found near Nahariyya and indicating a distance of six miles from Ptolemais, bears several inscriptions, the earliest of which is dedicated to Elagabalus. The other coastal-highway milestone, found

in the 1960s at Ma'agan Micha'el, north of Caesarea, bears an inscription that has been dated to 219 CE, the second year of Elagabalus' reign (Lehmann and Holum 2000:110; cf. Roll 1996:252–254).

The milestones of Elagabalus may have been erected as a sign of loyalty to the reigning emperor. However, they may also have commemorated actual road repairs, carried out along the main imperial traffic artery in the Roman Orient—the coastal highway—which ultimately connected Antioch and Alexandria (Thomsen 1917:15–20), as well as along two of the transversal roads that led to the coast. This seems plausible, as milestone inscriptions implying that road-maintenance was undertaken during Elagabalus' reign were discovered along the Via Nova, the chief strategic north–south highway of Provincia Arabia (Bauzou 1998:195–197, 246), as well as along the roads leading to it that crossed the Rift Valley (Thomsen 1917: No. 219; Piccirillo 1996:29; cf. Roll 2002).

#### *The Diocletian Inscription (Fig. 2)*

1. IMPERATO
2. RIBUSCAESARI
3. BUSFRATRIBUS
4. GAIOVALERIO
5. DIOCLETIANO
6. ETMAVR
7. UALERIO
8. MAXIMIANO
9. PP FF INUI
10. CTIS AUGG
11. ΑΠΟ ΑΣΚ
12. ΜΙ G

#### *Suggested reading:*

1. *Imperato-*
2. *ribus Caesari-*
3. *bus fratribus*
4. *Gaio Valerio*
5. *Diocletiano*
6. *et M(arco) Aur(elio)*
7. *Valerio*
8. *Maximiano*

9. *p(iis) f(elicibus) invi-*

10. *ctis Aug(ustis)*

11. ἀπὸ Ἀσκάλωνος

12. μί(λια) γ'

Suggested translation:

To the Emperors Caesars, brothers Gaius Valerius Diocletian and Marcus Aurelius Valerius Maximianus, pious, fortunate and invincible Augusti. From Ashqelon, three miles.



0 10

Fig. 2. The Diocletian Inscription.

The inscription (0.62 × 1.28 m) comprises 12 lines. The lettering varies in height from 2.5 to 6.5 cm in lines 1–11, reaching 9.5 cm in line 12. The average depth of the lettering is 2 mm. The main inscription (lines 1–10), bearing traces of red paint, is in the dative case. Its letters have a much less formal configuration than those of the inscription of Elagabalus. The letters A and M show strong Greek features; the first letter in line 5, D, is completely Greek. Lines 11, 12 are in Greek.

Lines 4–8 commemorate the name of the emperor, Gaius (Aurelius) Valerius Diocletianus (284–305 CE) and that of his associate, Marcus Aurelius Valerius Maximianus (286–305 CE). Line 3 emphasizes the harmonious nature of their joint rule (hence, “brothers”; Salway 1994:139). The titles in lines 9–10 refer to both rulers. These names are the only chronological clues in the inscription. As Maximianus was proclaimed Augustus on April 1, 286 CE, this is the earliest possible date for the inscription. As Constantius I and Galerius, who became caesars on March 1, 293 CE, are not mentioned in the inscription although they appear regularly on official documents (Barnes 1982:4; Kolb 1995:22, 23; Kienast 1996:262–282), it should be inferred that the inscription was carved no later than February 293 CE.

The last two lines (11, 12), inscribed in Greek, mention the destination of the road—Ἀσκάλωνος—and the distance from it—3 miles—as does the Elagabalus inscription. It can therefore be inferred that this inscription, like the earlier one, indicated the distance to the city’s center, and that the milestone was still in its original place when the second inscription was added. This is the first Diocletian inscription to refer, albeit implicitly, to a *caput viae* in Ashqelon.

The inscription was most probably carved during Diocletian’s large-scale maintenance and repair of main roads and road installations in the southeastern provinces of the Roman Empire, beginning in the early years of his reign (for two different views of this activity, see Isaac 1990:161–218; Parker 2006:547–

562; see also Roll 2007). Diocletian's dynamic policy in the Orient was aimed at facilitating troop movements and supply lines in response to two main threats: frequent and well-planned attacks of the highly-organized armies of the Sassanian Empire; and sporadic but continuous incursions of the nomadic *Saraceni* (Roll 1989:252–260; Millar 1993:174–207; Lewin 2002; for a different view of the nature of these activities, see Isaac 1990).

Some two dozen Tetrarchic milestones found along the strategic Via Nova (Thomsen 1917: Nos. 114, 125b1; Graf 1995:258–259; Bauzou 1998:206–214, 250–251) attest to this policy in Provincia Arabia, as do milestones found along some of the transversal roads

that extended from the Via Nova westward (Thomsen 1917: No. 192; Mittmann 1970:148; Seigne and Augusta-Boularot 1998:283). One of these, a milestone that marked the sixth mile from Esbus to Livias, bears an inscription that is practically identical to the one discussed here (Piccirillo 1996:296–298). West of the Rift Valley, Tetrarchic milestones were found along roads that extended from Scythopolis northward (Thomsen 1917: No. 246b) and westward (Isaac and Roll 1982:81–82). All these milestones, including the one discovered at the 'Third Mile Estate' in Ashqelon, are likely evidence of imperial interest in the protecting and maintaining of strategic highways during Diocletian's reign.

#### NOTE

<sup>1</sup> The late Prof. Israel Roll submitted his manuscript in early 2005. The editors would like to thank Daniel

Varga and especially Prof. Benjamin Isaac for their assistance in preparing the article for publication.

#### REFERENCES

- Avi-Yonah M. 1946. Newly Discovered Latin and Greek Inscriptions. *QDAP* 12:84–102.
- Avi-Yonah M. 1966. A New Dating of the Roman Road from Scythopolis to Neapolis. *IEJ* 16:75–76.
- Ball W. 2001. *Rome in the East: The Transformation of an Empire*. London–New York.
- Barnes T.D. 1982. *The New Empire of Diocletian and Constantine*. Cambridge, Mass.
- Bauzou T. 1998. Le secteur nord de la via nova en Arabie de Bostra à Philadelphie. In T. Bauzou, A. Desreumaux, P.-L. Gatier, J.-B. Humbert and F. Zayadine. *Fouilles de Khirbet es-Samra en Jordanie I: La voie romaine, le cimetière, les documents épigraphiques*. Turnhout. Pp. 101–255.
- Chevallier R. 1997. *Les voies romaines*. Paris.
- Dessau H. ed. 1892–1916. *Inscriptiones latinae selectae* I–III. Berlin.
- Frey M. 1989. *Untersuchungen zur Religion und zur Religionspolitik des Kaisers Elagabal* (Historia Einzelschriften LXII). Stuttgart.
- Fuks G. 2001. *A City of Many Seas: Ashkelon during the Hellenistic and Roman Periods*. Jerusalem (Hebrew).
- Graf D.F. 1995. The *Via Nova Traiana* in Arabia Petraea. In J.H. Humphrey ed. *The Roman and Byzantine Near East 1: Some Recent Archaeological Research* (JRA Supplementary Series 14). Ann Arbor. Pp. 241–267.
- Isaac B. 1990. *The Limits of Empire: The Roman Army in the East*. Oxford.
- Isaac B. 1998. *The Near East under Roman Rule: Selected Papers*. Leiden–New York–Köln.
- Isaac B. and Roll I. 1982. *Roman Roads in Judaea I: The Legio–Scythopolis Road* (BAR Int. S. 141). Oxford.
- Israel Y. 1995a. Ashqelon. *ESI* 13:100–105.
- Israel Y. 1995b. The Economy of the Gaza–Ashkelon Region in the Byzantine Period in the Light of the Archaeological Survey and Excavations of the '3rd Mile Estate' near Ashkelon. *Michmanim*

- 8:119–132 (Hebrew; English summary, pp. 16\*–17\*).
- Israel Y. and Erickson-Gini T. This volume. Remains from the Hellenistic through the Byzantine Periods at the ‘Third Mile Estate’, Ashqelon.
- Kienast D. 1996. *Römische Kaisertabelle: Grundzüge einer römischen Kaiserchronologie*. Darmstadt.
- Kolb F. 1995. Chronologie und Ideologie der Tetrarchie. *Antiquité Tardive* 3:21–31.
- Lehmann C.M. and Holum K.G. 2000. *The Greek and Latin Inscriptions of Caesarea Maritima* (ASOR, The Joint Expedition to Caesarea Maritima, Excavation Reports V). Boston.
- Lewin A. 2002. Diocletian: Politics and limites in the Near East. In P. Freeman, J. Bennett, Z.T. Fiema and B. Hoffmann eds. *Limes XVIII: Proceedings of the XVIIIth International Congress of Roman Frontier Studies Held in Amman, Jordan (September 2000)* I (BAR Int. S. 1084). Oxford. Pp. 91–101.
- Millar F. 1993. *The Roman Near East, 31 BC–AD 337*. Cambridge, Mass.–London.
- Mittmann S. 1970. *Beiträge zur Siedlungs und Territorialgeschichte des nördlichen Ostjordanlandes*. Wiesbaden.
- Parker S.T. 2006. *The Roman Frontier in Central Jordan: Final Report of the Limes Arabicus Project 1980–1989* I, II (Dumbarton Oaks Studies 40) (2 vols.). Washington, DC.
- Pekary T. 1968. *Untersuchungen zu den römischen Reichstrassen*. Bonn.
- Piccirillo M. 1996. La strada romana Esbus–Livias. *LA* 46:285–300.
- Roll I. 1983. The Roman Road System in Judaea. *The Jerusalem Cathedral* 3:136–161.
- Roll I. 1989. A Latin Imperial Inscription from the Time of Diocletian Found at Yotvata. *IEJ* 39:239–260.
- Roll I. 1996. Roman Roads to Caesarea Maritima. In A. Raban and K.G. Holum eds. *Caesarea Maritima: A Retrospective after Two Millennia*. Leiden–New York–Köln. Pp. 549–558.
- Roll I. 2000. Roman Milestones in the Vicinity of Aphek–Antipatris. In M. Kochavi, P. Beck and E. Yadin eds. *Aphek–Antipatris I: Excavation of Areas A and B; The 1972–1976 Seasons* (Documenta et monumenta orientis antiqui 21). Tel Aviv. Pp. 39–46.
- Roll I. 2002. Crossing the Rift Valley: The Connecting Arteries between the Road Networks of Judaea/Palaestina and Arabia. In P. Freeman, J. Bennett, Z.T. Fiema and B. Hoffmann eds. *Limes XVIII: Proceedings of the XVIIIth International Congress of Roman Frontier Studies Held in Amman, Jordan (September 2000)* I (BAR Int. S. 1084). Oxford. Pp. 215–230.
- Roll I. 2007. Crossing the Negev in Late Roman Times: The Administrative Development of Palaestina Tertia Salutaris and Its Imperial Road Network. In A.S. Lewin and P. Pellegrini eds. *The Late Roman Army in the Near East from Diocletian to the Arab Conquest* (Proceedings of a Colloquium Held at Potenza, Acerenza and Matera, Italy [May 2005]) (BAR Int. S. 1717). Oxford. Pp. 119–130.
- Roll I. and Dagan Y. 1988. Roman Roads around Beth Govrin. In D. Urman and E. Stern eds. *Man and Environment in the Southern Shefelah: Studies in Regional Geography and History*. Tel Aviv. Pp. 175–179 (Hebrew).
- Salway B. 1994. What’s in a Name? A Survey of Roman Onomastic Practice from c. 700 BC to A.D. 700. *JRS* 84:124–145.
- Seigne J. and Augusta-Boularot S. 1998. Milliaires anciens et nouveaux de Gerasa. *MEFRA* 110:261–295.
- Sommer M. 2004. Elagabal: Wege zur Konstruktion eines “schlechten” Kaisers. *SCI* 23:95–110.
- Thomsen P. 1917. Die römischen Meilensteine der Provinzen Syria, Arabia und Palaestina. *ZDPV* 40:1–103.
- Witschel C. 2002. Meilensteine als historische Quelle? Das Beispiel Aquileia. *Chiron* 32:325–393.