

The Fifth Mīl from Jerusalem: Another Umayyad milestone from southern Bilād al-Shām¹

Katia Cytryn-Silverman

The Hebrew University of Jerusalem

cytryn@mscc.huji.ac.il

Abstract

In 1958 an Arabic inscription written in monumental angular script was found in the woods next to Aqua Bella-^ʿAyn Hemed, on the road between Jerusalem and the coast. The inscription was misfiled in the archives of the Israel Antiquities Authority, remaining unknown to the public for almost fifty years. Following a thorough search of the archives during doctoral research, the author found the original documentation relating to the long-forgotten inscription. The fragmentary inscription is incised into a marble slab, of which only the end of the last three lines remains. The surviving words are in line with the formula found on other milestones dated to the Umayyad period, allowing a reconstruction of the last sentence, and even of the missing upper parts of the inscription. The lines read: “From Jerusalem to this milestone, five miles”.

On 23 February 1958 Yitzhak Rahmani, then chief curator of the department of antiquities of the State of Israel, wrote an internal report on an Arabic inscription which had been brought to his attention (IAA Archives, Mandate Files, in Hebrew):

I met the youth Haim Peter at the school [in Qiryat Anavim-Ma’ale HaHamisha], who found a fragment of a marble slab at the woods next to Aqua Bella, and brought it to the school.

The fragment is most probably the lower left corner of an early Islamic tombstone (*matzeva*), and on it is part of a Kufic inscription.

Rahmani added a schematic drawing to his memo, showing the inscription, a partial and partly faulty Hebrew translation, as well as its measurements. He also noted the inventory number given to the find – 1811 ג.

Despite his accurate translation from Arabic, identifying “the fifth mīl” in the second surviving line, Rahmani puzzlingly defined the inscription as

1 This article forms part of an ongoing postdoctoral research project on the “road archaeology” of southern Bilād al-Shām during the early Islamic period. The research is supported by The Golda Meir Fellowship Fund of The Hebrew University of Jerusalem, under the academic supervision of Professor Amikam Elad of the Department of Islamic and Middle Eastern studies. I would like to express my great gratitude to Professor Elad for his constant encouragement and guidance, as well as his contributions to and comments on this article.

a *matzeva*, commonly translated as a tombstone. That definition, once catalogued in the Department of Antiquities' archives, and eventually recorded in a computer database, led the record astray from the eyes of researchers.

To compound the problem, Rahmani archived this report in the file Abū Ghosh/Qaryat al-ʿInab – and not under Khirbat Iqbalā/Aqua Bella as expected. In the course of my doctoral research on *khāns* in Palestine during the Mamluk period,² in which the archival material on the *khān* of Abū Ghosh was thoroughly examined, I came across Rahmani's report, from which I immediately identified the milestone, which is related to six inscriptions previously discussed by M. Van Berchem, M. Sharon and A. Elad, among others.³

First attempts to locate the milestone in the collections of the Israel Antiquities Authority were unsuccessful, and I decided to publish the inscription based on Rahmani's drawing. While preparing a presentation in Jerusalem in December 2005, a further attempt was made and the milestone recovered.⁴

The inscription

The inscription (figure 1) is incised into a marble slab 9.5 cm thick, whose surviving fragment measures 17 by 27 cm. It is written in early Umayyad monumental angular script, similar to the milestones found in Bāb al-Wād and Abū Ghosh.⁵ Only the end of the last three lines of the inscription remain, in which the lack of homogeneity and proper planning is notable.

- 2 K. Cytryn-Silverman, "The Road Inns (Khāns) of Bilād al-Shām during the Mamluk Period (1260–1516): an architectural and historical study", unpublished PhD thesis, The Hebrew University of Jerusalem, 2004.
- 3 M. Van Berchem, *Matériaux pour un Corpus Inscriptionum Arabicarum (CIA) Syrie du Sud, II, Jérusalem, "Ville"* (Cairo, 1922), 17–29; É. Combe, J. Sauvaget and G. Wiet (eds), *Répertoire Chronologique d'Épigraphie Arabe* (RCEA, Cairo, 1931), i, 8–10; M. Sharon, *Corpus Inscriptionum Arabicarum Palaestinae (CIAP; Leiden, 1997–)*, i, "Abū Ghūsh", 3–5, ii, "Bāb al-Wād", 1–7; iii, "Dayr al-Qalt", 94–108; "Fīq", 220–4; A. Elad, "The Southern Golan in the early Muslim period. The significance of two newly discovered milestones of 'Abd al-Malik", *Der Islam* 76, 1999, 33–88.
- 4 I would like to take this opportunity to thank Ms. Alegre Savariego, curator of the Rockefeller Collections (National Treasures, Israel Antiquities Authority) for her devoted assistance in finding this inscription. The fading inventory number on the inscription had unfortunately been copied upside down, making an already lost and misclassified artifact even more difficult to trace. Fortunately, the inscription was recently photographed and stored with additional unidentified material, allowing a search through the digitized pictures. The inscription is currently stored in the storerooms in Beth Shemesh, under the supervision of Ms. Ayala Lester, who kindly showed it to Professor Elad and me.
- 5 See M. Sharon's reference to this script's style in *CIAP*, ii, 5.



Figure 1. The surviving fragment containing the inscription

The tall letters measure *c.* 5 cm high, while the short ones are *c.* 2.4 cm. A graphic depiction of two arches, also not identical, was incised at the lower edge of the slab, to the left of the last word. It reads:

من
 لميل خمسة
 ال.....

The surviving words are in line with the formula found on the other milestones, allowing a reconstruction of the last sentence, and even for the missing upper part of the inscription. The last lines should be read:

من إيليا إلى هذا الميل خمسة أميال

From Jerusalem to this milestone, five miles.

Based on the formula found in better-preserved milestones, and on the layout of the present inscription in terms of size and spacing, the reconstruction shown in figure is proposed.

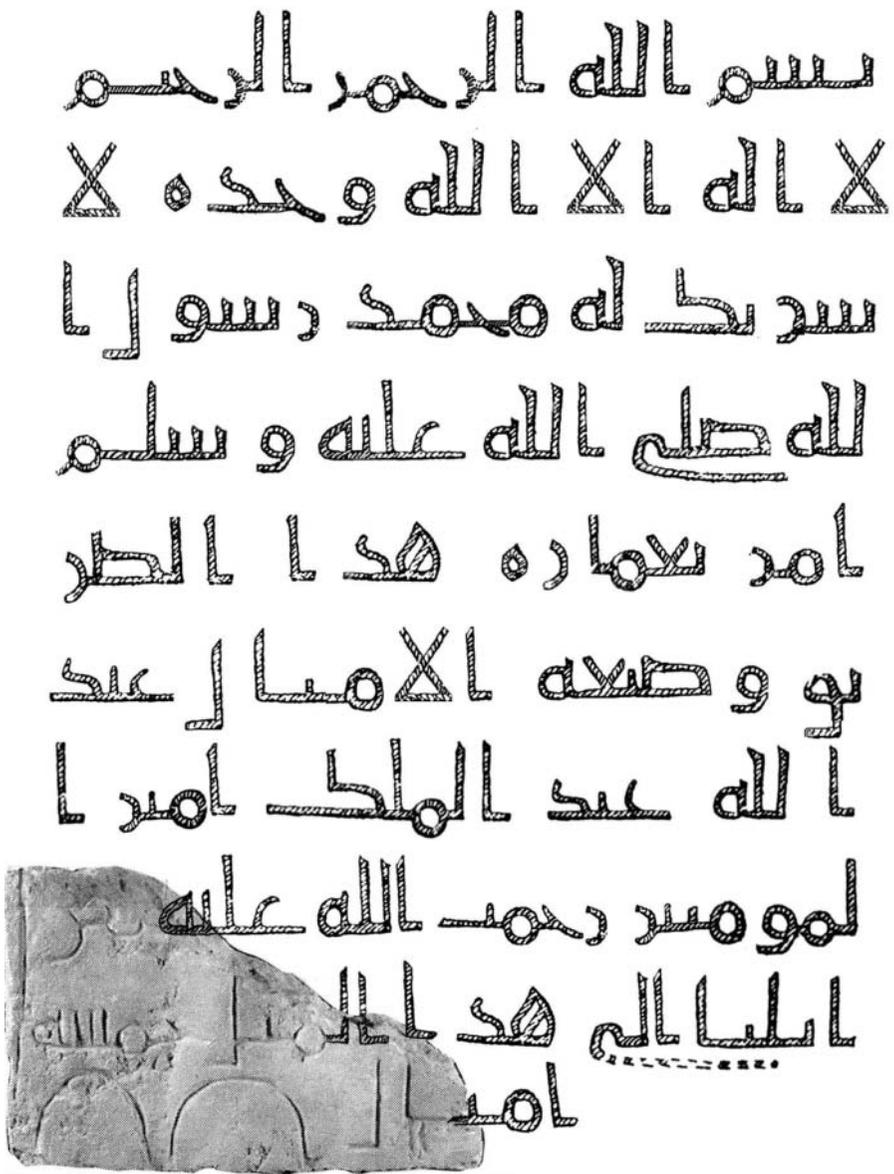


Figure 2. Proposed reconstruction of the Fifth Mīl on the basis of the text and style of the Eighth Mīl found at Bāb al-Wād in 1893

بسم الله الرحمن الرحيم
 لا إله إلا الله وحده لا
 شريك له محمد رسول
 الله صلى الله عليه وسلم
 أمر بعمارة هذا الطر
 يق وصنعة الأميال عبد
 الله عبد الملك أمير
 المؤمنين رحمت (!) الله عليه من
 إيليا إلى هذا الميل خمسة
 أميال

In the name of God, The Merciful, The Compassionate. There is no god but Allah alone; He has no companion. Muhammad is the Messenger of Allah,⁶ may Allah bless him and give him peace.⁷ Has ordered the repair of this road and the manufacture of the milestones, the servant of Allah, ‘Abd al-Malik, the Commander of the Faithful, may the mercy of Allah be on him. From Jerusalem to this milestone – five miles.

Such a reconstruction suggests a marble slab *c.* 51 by 65 cm, dimensions not so different from those of the eighth milestone, found in Bāb al-Wād (57 cm wide and 9 cm thick).⁸ We could even suggest the two were made by the same manufacturer, even though in the latter case limestone was used. It should be further noted that the addition of a decorative motif at the bottom of the inscription has only been noticed in the three milestones on the road from Jerusalem to Ludd/Jaffa – Bāb al-Wād (an amphora flanked by schematic tendrils), Abū Ghosh (a single bunch of tendrils to the right of the inscription), and now the milestone from Aqua Bella, with a pair of arches on the left side.

Aqua Bella/Khirbat Iqbalā

The site of the recovery of the fifth mīl is commonly known as ‘Ayn Hemed, in the vicinity of Abū Ghosh on the road between Jerusalem and the coastal plain (Isr. Grid 162.133), some 12 km west of Jerusalem. The site is best known for its well-preserved Crusader structure of the twelfth century – Dayr al-Banāt,⁹ standing amidst the modern National Park of Ein Hemed.

The natural source of water, as well as its topographical position in relation to the mountain pass between Jerusalem and Bāb al-Wād, classifies Aqua Bella as a probable road station, to be marked by a milestone. That would be the natural continuation and adoption of the Roman path which crossed this region (Figure 3), as reconstructed by Fisher, Isaac and Roll in their work on the Roman roads of Judea.¹⁰

- 6 The only two instances in which the Profession of Faith has survived are in the full inscriptions preserved at the Qatzrin Museum in the Golan, originating from Fīq (Elad, “Two Milestones”, 33–8). Nevertheless, their common appearance in Umayyad inscriptions allows such a reconstruction. See M. Sharon’s brief discussion in *CIAP*, i, “Aqabat Fīq”, 104.
- 7 The addition of *صلى الله عليه وسلم* (may Allah bless him and give him peace) is based on M. Sharon’s reconstruction of Bāb al-Wād’s milestone, to which our present inscription is stylistically related. On the other hand, as brought to my attention by A. Elad, the two inscriptions from Fīq in the Golan lack this expression.
- 8 *CIA*, II, *Jérusalem*, “Ville”, 18. The figure of 0.7 m wide appearing in Sharon’s *Corpus* (*CIAP*, ii, “Bāb al-Wād”, 4) is doubtless a typing error.
- 9 On this courtyard structure, see D. Pringle, “Aqua Bella: the interpretation of a crusader courtyard building”, in B. Z. Kedar (ed.), *The Horns of Ḥaṭṭīn* (Jerusalem, 1992), 147–67; idem, “Khirbat ‘Iqbala”, *The Churches of the Crusader Kingdom of Jerusalem – A Corpus*, vol. 1 (Cambridge, 1993), 239–50.
- 10 M. Fischer, B. Isaac and I. Roll, *Roman Roads in Judaea. II: The Jaffa–Jerusalem Roads* (BAR International Series, Oxford, 1996), 93, plates 24 and 31.



Figure 3. The ancient road to Jerusalem as in December 1917. Courtesy of the Aerial Photography Archive, The Department of Geography, The Hebrew University of Jerusalem.

Nevertheless, it is clear that the fifth *mīl* should not be related to this site, as *c.* 12 km would correspond to the sixth *mīl*, and not the fifth.¹¹ Unfortunately, the casual finding of the present milestone in the woods near Aqua Bella, in such a way that its distance from Jerusalem cannot be determined, makes its study more complicated and its original location still unknown. Having said that, and combining the present data with that already published by M. Sharon, I would like to suggest Qastal (Isr. Grid 163.133) as the place of provenance for the fifth *mīl*, based on the

- 11 On the calculation of the *mīl* in this area according to a 2 km ratio, see *CIAP*, ii, 6. This differs from the approximate calculation by Elad (“Two milestones”, 46), which suggests 2,285 metres for an Umayyad *mīl*. Sharon agrees with Elad’s calculation for the Damascus–Jerusalem road (*CIAP*, iii, 107), unlike that of the Jerusalem road leading to the coastal plain, most probably due to their different topographies.
- 12 D. Pringle, “Qastal”, *Secular Buildings in the Crusader Kingdom of Jerusalem – An Archaeological Gazetteer* (Cambridge, 1997), 118.

topography of the region, even though no archaeological site at that location has so far been found and/or published.¹² Colonia/Motza (Isr. Grid 165.133), included in M. Sharon's reconstruction of the westbound road from Jerusalem, should be thus identified as the fourth mīl.

Interpretation

The milestone recovered in 1958 in the woods near Aqua Bella represents the fifth Umayyad mile on the road between Jerusalem and the coastal plain. The inscription was not found *in situ*, and most probably originates from a site east of Aqua Bella, perhaps Qastal. Nevertheless, the nature of the site, and its proximity to the remains of the Roman road, suggest that Aqua Bella was also part of the road system, as already suggested by Fischer et al. in their work *The Roman Roads of Judaea*. If this is the case, Aqua Bella would be the sixth mile, before the seventh mile at Abū Ghosh, where another milestone, in similar epigraphic style, was found in 1902 during architectural works to the east of the Crusader church.¹³ The eighth mile, found in 1893 near the Ottoman watchtower at Khirbat Ḥarsis next to Bāb al-Wād (Isr. Grid 1524.1360), was not *in situ* either – and its site of origin should be sought further east, most probably at Khirbat Zabbūd (Isr. Grid 158.135) as suggested by M. Sharon.¹⁴

The three milestones on the road from Jerusalem to Ludd/Jaffa have a common style, and differ from the other four not only in their epigraphic style and workmanship, but also in the presence of some decoration at the bottom of the inscription. The significance of the pair of arches at the milestone from Aqua Bella is not clear, but they could either be an architectural representation, or even topographical – perhaps a mountain pass?

Once classified within the same artistic group as the seventh and the eighth mile, it is possible to date the fifth milestone to sometime after ʿAbd al-Malik's death (86/705), following the appearance of the expression *rahmat Allah ʿalayhi* (may the mercy of Allah be on him) which, as noted by Elad, hints at the fact that ʿAbd al-Malik was by that time deceased.¹⁵

The present milestone is thus further evidence for the statement found in *al-Uyūn wa'l Hadāiq fī Akhbār al-Haqāiq* (first half of the ninth century),

13 *CIA, II, Jérusalem, "Ville"*, 19–20. The milestone can still be seen in the souvenir shop of the church.

14 *CIAP, ii, "Bāb al-Wād"*, 7. Sharon's suggestion is strengthened by the archaeological findings registered in Kh. Zabbūd's Mandatory file at the Israel Antiquities Authority (my thanks to Mr Arie Rochman-Halperin for his constant and willing assistance during my searches in the archives of the IAA at the Rockefeller Museum). In July 1930 the site was visited by D. C. Baramki, who described the findings as "remains of primitive foundations of buildings and watch tower".

15 Elad, "Two Milestones", 38.

wa banā al-Walīd al-amyāl fī al-ṭurūq (al-Walīd built milestones on the roads),¹⁶ and to the fact that al-Walīd (r. 86/705–96/715) followed in his father’s footsteps in improving and marking the roads.¹⁷

16 *al-Uyūn wa’l Hadāiq fī Akhbār al-Haqāiq*, ed. M. J. de Goeje and P. de Jong, *Fragmenta Historicorum Arabicorum*, I (London, 1869), 5.

17 See relevant sources for his roadworks in *CIA, II, Jérusalem, “Ville”*, 23, n. 5, as opposed to al-Muqaddasī’s negative testimony from the tenth century in which he says to his uncle: “... surely it was not fitting for al-Walīd to expend the resources of the Muslims on the mosque at Damascus. Had he expended as much in renovating (‘*imāra*) roads, or the water tanks (*maṣānī*), or in repairing (*ramma*) the fortresses (*ḥuṣūn*), it would have been more proper and more to his credit”. Shams al-Dīn Abū ‘Abd Allāh Muḥammad b. Aḥmad b. Abū Bakr al-Bannā’ al-Shāmī al-Muqaddasī, *Aḥsan al-Taqaṣīm fī Ma’rifat al-Aqālīm*, ed. M. J. de Goeje, *Bibliotheca Geographorum Arabicorum* III (London, 1906), 159. English translation adapted from B. A. Collins, *The Best Divisions for Knowledge of the Regions* (Reading, 1994), 146.