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A Roman Milestone from the Northeastern Shore of the Sea of Galilee*

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ABSTRACT: This article presents the context and reading of a previously unpublished milestone found close to the northeastern shore of the Sea of Galilee. The reading revealed that the milestone is dated to the reign of Maximinus Thrax. The context in which it was found, next to remains of a road in the Bethsaida Valley, suggests an alternative route for the road that run through the valley. The proposed course of the road gives new insight into the controversy regarding identification of the Roman Bethsaida-Julias.

INTRODUCTION

MILESTONE IMC 627¹ was found in the 1990s during installation of water pipes in the fields adjacent to the Nahal Sfamnun outlet. Remains of a Roman road were identified at the milestone find spot too. This spot is located *c.* 200 m east of the shore of the Sea of Galilee (fig. 1) in the Bethsaida Valley.

The milestone marked the Roman Imperial highway on the eastern shore of the Sea of Galilee, connecting Bethsaida and Hippos (fig. 1). This highway is part of the longitudinal corridor through the Jordan Valley, from the source of the river next to Caesarea Philippi-Paneas in the north, through Scythopolis, to Jericho in the south (the exact *caput viarum* is unknown). A parallel highway on the western shore of the lake passed through Tiberias and Magdala. This road was dated by the milestone of Hadrian found in Capernaum (IMC 528; Corbo and Loffreda 1976). The eastern road was documented by two milestones north of Hippos (IMC 628–629; Urman 1985: 133, n. 59) and 14 milestones south of Hippos (IMC 456, 460 and 615–626), but most of these milestones are anepigraphic. The Hadrianic date was nevertheless suggested for the road construction between Hippos and Scythopolis as well. Both highways around the Sea of Galilee

* We would like to thank Yoshke Weil from Moshav Ramot who found the milestone, kindly allowed its study and shared the circumstances of its discovery. Further, we would like to thank Arleta Kowalewska for English editing, Alexander Iermolin for his assistance during the study of the milestone, and Mechael Osband for his cooperation. We would also like to recognize David Cohen's contribution in the research of the Hippos-Scythopolis road.

1 The milestone is referred to by its number in the Israel Milestone Committee (IMC) database, available at <http://milestones.kinneret.ac.il/en>.

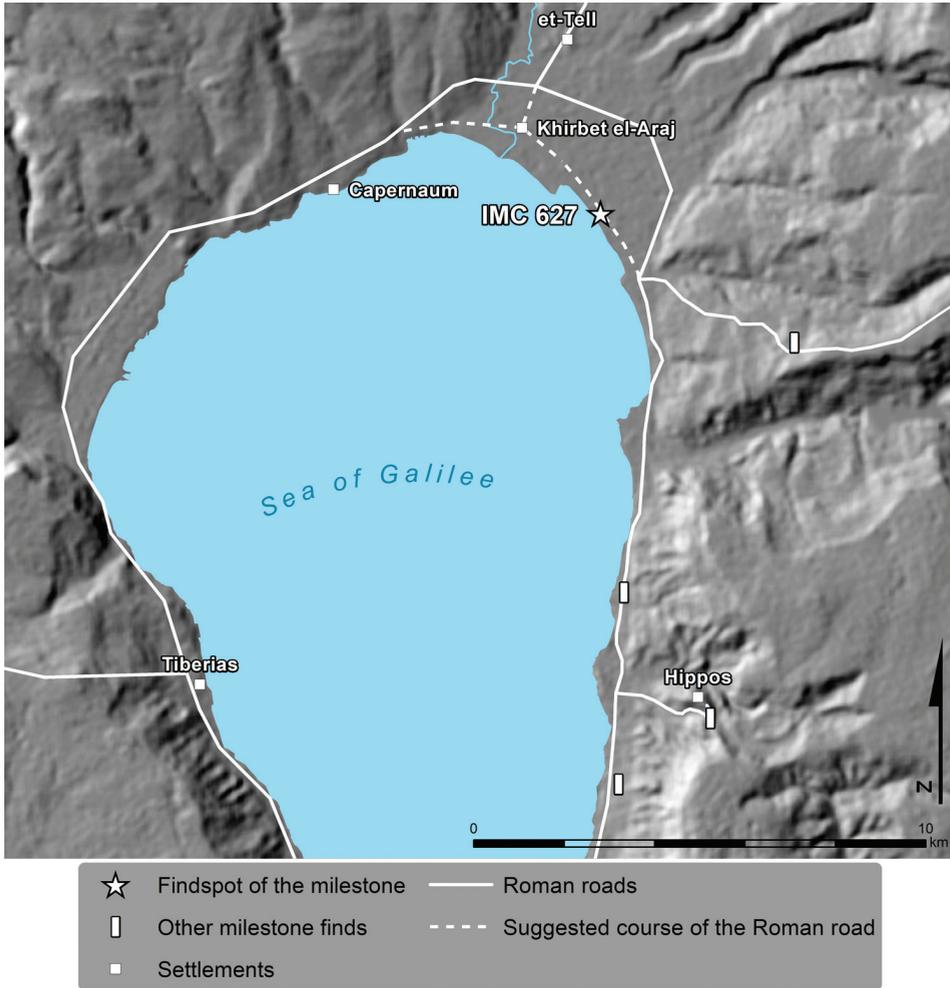


Fig. 1. Map of the region with findspot of the milestone IMC 627 and proposed course of the Roman road

intersected with other regional roads: the Sepphoris–Tiberias road (perhaps of Hadrianic date too; Roll 2009: 13*), the Tiberias–Gadara road that split from the eastern highway south of the lake (Mittmann 1999: 26–27), and another road that split from the northeastern shore of the Sea of Galilee going through the southern Golan Heights to southern Syria (Roll 2009: 13*–15*; Staab, Pažout and Eisenberg 2020: 215–217).

MILESTONE OF MAXIMINUS THRAX, 236–238 CE

This milestone (IMC 627; fig. 2) has the following dimensions: total height: 1.23 m; shaft height: 1.00 m; upper diameter: 0.31 m; lower diameter: 0.39 m:

base width: 0.38 m; base length: 0.40 m; base height: 0.30 m.

The stone is preserved in one piece. The base is round and shallow; the shaft is round and damaged on top; its surface is badly worn, yet some letters are still identifiable. Approximately eight lines can be recognised, with letters 7–10 cm in height.

The following edition is based on personal examination of the stone, along with photographs and a squeeze, taken in July 2018 and now stored in Cologne.

- 1 CAES[---]
 - 2 CIVL[---]
 - 3 VERO [---]
 - 4 [.]AXIM [---]
 - 5 [.] FELAVG [---]
 - 6 ET Ç IVLIO V[---]
 - 7 F[.]OMAXIM[---]
 - 8 [---]LIMO
-
- 0 [IMP(ERATORI)]
 - 1 CAES(ARI)
 - 2 C(AIO) IVL[IO]
 - 3 VERO
 - 4 [M]AXIM[INO]
 - 5 [P(IO)] FEL(ICI) AVG(VSTO) [N(OSTRO)]
 - 6 ET Ç(AIO) IVLIO V
 - 7 F[R]O MAXIM[O]
 - 8 [NOBI]LI(SSI)MO

The addition of the main rank IMP(ERATORI) referring to the emperor Maximinus Thrax corresponds to the regular form. Assuming uniform beginnings of lines, the letters IMP should appear in a preceding line, which is broken off.² After line 8, there seems to be no space left to insert the obligatory titulature CAESARI F(ILIO) AVG(VSTI) N(OSTRI).



Fig. 2. Milestone IMC 627

2 Since the stone looks completely preserved in height, it should be considered that the title IMP was omitted here, as suggested by the generally erroneous and simplified

Isaac (1998: 58–60) lists ten testimonies for Maximinus Thrax (February/March 235–April 238 CE) in Judaea. The closest geographically to the present testimony is a milestone on the road leading north from Scythopolis (Thomsen 1917: 71, no. 246a), on which the distance indication was written in Greek (Thomsen 1917: 72, no. 249 from Nablus), as on Dessau ILS 5844, that was found ‘trans Iordanem, in via Hierichunte Hesbuntem’ (Hisban, Jordan). Another parallel is a fragment of milestone from Caesarea Maritima (Lehmann and Holm 2000: no. 106; AE 1971, no. 474).

DISCUSSION

The milestone and the location of the remnants of the road next to which it was found shed light on the course of the road in the Bethsaida Valley. This road is usually reconstructed running at the foot of the southern Golan Heights, avoiding alluvial flat lands and marshes of Naḥal Daliyot, Naḥal Yehudiyah, Naḥal Meshushim and the Jordan River, assuming that it crossed the Jordan River in the vicinity of et-Tell. In the past, et-Tell was identified as ancient Bethsaida-Julias, a view maintained by R. Arav, the director of the Bethsaida Excavations Project (Arav 2020). This identification was questioned by Schumacher, who also noted remains of a road built over an elevated dyke between et-Tell and Khirbet el-‘Araj (Schumacher 1888: 93–94, 246). Consequently, Kh. el-‘Araj was proposed as the location of Bethsaida-Julias (Avi-Yonah 1976: 40–41; Notley 2007), and an excavation project was recently initiated there (Pfister 2019; Notley and Aviam 2020). The presented milestone was found close to the Naḥal Sfamnun outlet, only *c.* 200 m from the shore of the Sea of Galilee. It suggests that the Roman road that crossed the alluvial fans ran closer to the shore in the Bethsaida Valley than previously assumed. The road would then continue along the coast towards Kh. el-‘Araj, where it turned north and continued to et-Tell along the eastern bank of the Jordan (fig. 1). This suggested reconstruction of the road’s course might be supported by Schumacher’s observations and might imply that Kh. el-‘Araj is Bethsaida-Julias, as ancient testimonies (e.g., Josephus, *Vita* 398–406) also suggest that the city stood on the shore of the lake.

execution of the whole inscription. In that case, the imperial rank would have been solely expressed in AVG(VSTO) [N(OSTRO)] of line 5, and CAES (or CAES[S]) would pertain to both Caesars, to be resolved to CAES(ARIBUS). This would be consistent with the fact that at the end of the inscription there is not enough place to apply the title separately to Maximus. It should be borne in mind, however, that without parallels all this is speculation.

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