A Toponymic Reassessment of the Abil al-Qamḥ Diocletianic Boundary Stone: Identifying Golgol at al-Zūq al-Fauqānī

Roy Marom, Polonsky Academy Fellow,
Van Leer Jerusalem Institute, Jerusalem

http://orcid.org/0000-0002-7897-3537; mighemi@gmail.com

Abstract

A recent study by Ecker and Leibner in the Palestine Exploration Quarterly examined a Late Roman boundary stone discovered at Abil al-Qamḥ (biblical Abel Beth Maacah), contextualizing the inscription within the Diocletianic tax reforms. This article presents a revised identification of Golgol, one of two toponyms mentioned in the inscription, and places it at al-Zūq al-Fauqānī, approximately 1.5 km southeast of Abil al-Qamḥ. Drawing on British Mandate cadastral maps, this study focuses on the Arabic micro-toponym Juneijil (Jnējəl), situated near al-Zūq al-Fauqānī, which preserved the toponym Golgol. This identification offers a more plausible linguistic and geographical correlation with the boundary stone inscription and underscores the need for a broader reassessment of site identifications in the Diocletianic boundary stone corpus.

Keywords: rural settlement; Paneas; rural geography; historical geography; Palestinian toponymy; Roman toponymy; toponymic preservation; micro-toponym

1. Background

Avner Ecker and Uzi Leibner (2025) published a significant paper about a Late Roman (3rd century CE) boundary stone discovered in Abil al-Qamḥ/Tel Abel

Roy Marom. 2025. A Toponymic Reassessment of the Abil al-Qamḥ Diocletianic Boundary Stone: Identifying Golgol at al-Zūq al-Fauqānī.
Jerusalem Journal of Archaeology 8: 51–59.
ISSN: 2788-8819; https://doi.org/10.52486/01.00008.3; https://jjar.huji.ac.il

Beth Maacha. It was one of many boundary stones erected in the territory of Paneas/Caesarea-Phillipi during Diocletian's tax reforms (r. 284–305 CE). According to their reading, the inscription mentions two previously unrecorded rural toponyms: Tirthas (Τιρθας) and Golgol/m (Γολγολ/μ, henceforth Golgol).

Ecker and Leibner have convincingly recognized Tirthas in Kh. Turritha (خربة تريثة; Conder and Kitchener 1881: 121, Sheet II; Palmer 1881: 28; Palestine Grid 2083.2948).[1] They proposed identifying Golgol with Tall al-ʻAjūl (تل العجول; Levantine Arabic: Tell il-ʻjūl; Palmer 1881: 33 [in the indefinite form: Tall ʻAjūl]) on the eastern slopes of Abil al-Qamḥ. This article challenges the latter identification on linguistic grounds and offers a more plausible identification at the ancient site of al-Zūq al-Fauqānī (Levantine Arabic: iz-Zūq il-Fōqānī), 1.5 km southeast of Abil al-Qamḥ and near modern Yuval (Palestine Grid 2055.2943).[2] This new identification is based on name preservation in the Arabic micro-toponym Juneijil (transliterated form of Levantine Arabic Jnējəl) recorded on British Mandate cadastral maps immediately west of al-Zūq al-Fauqānī (Palestine Grid 2053.2943).

2. Ecker and Leibner's Argument for Identifying Golgol at Tall al-ʻAjūl

The boundary stone was discovered in secondary use as a covering slab for a Muslim Mamluk burial at Abil al-Qamḥ, identified with biblical Abel Beth Maacah (Palestine Grid 2045.2961; Panitz-Cohen, Mullins, and Bonfil 2013; Yahalom-Mack, Panitz-Cohen, and Mullins 2018). Ecker and Leibner read the inscription as follows,

> Διοκλητιανὸς καὶ Μαξιμιανὸς Σεβαστοὶ καὶ Κωνστάντιος καὶ Μαξιμιανὸς Καῖσαρες λίθον διορίζοντα ἀγροὺς ὅρια Τίρθας καὶ Γολγολ/μ στηριχθῆναι ἐκέλευσαν Βασιλικὸς ὁ διασημότατος.
> Diocletian and Maximian Augusti, and Constantius and Maximian, Caesars, have ordered this stone to be set up, marking boundaries of fields of Tirthas (and) Golgol/m; Baseileikos, vir perfectissimus (supervised).

Ecker and Leibner reconstructed the village's name as Golgol or Golgom (Γολγολ/μ), and noted that while "quite a few sites with substantial Roman-period remains are known west of tell Abel Beth Maacah, but none bear a name resembling Golgol/m" (Ecker and Leibner 2005: 4). They proposed identifying

1 Despite extensive inquiries with locals from al-Ghajar and al-Mēsāt village (south Lebanon), the author was unable to independently verify the Levantine Arabic pronunciation of this toponym and thus presumes it lost.

2 This article uses the Palestine Grid, the old coordinate system commonly used in archaeological and historical-geographical studies of Israel/Palestine.

the village with "a low, round hill, standing less than a kilometer from the eastern slopes of Abel Beth Maacah ...." (Ecker and Leibner 2005: 5; Palestine Grid 2050.2956; Fig. 1a), offering the following explanation,

> The hill to be identified with Golgol is currently called Giv'at 'Egel—Hill of the Calf—and in the SWP maps is called Tell 'Ajul. 'Ajul derives from the root GL, meaning 'round,' and from which the noun 'calf' derives. The metamorphic forms of the place name 'Gilgal' are Galgala, Jaljul, and 'Al'ala. Given that the ancient name Golgol appears in our inscription, and considering the shape of the hillock that juts out of the valley, a name transformation into 'Ajul is imaginable.

However, this derivation is linguistically untenable. 'Ajul is the SWP (Survey of Western Palestine) rendition of the colloquial Arabic 'jūl, meaning calves (Classical Arabic 'ujūl, as in British Mandate maps: Tell el 'Ujūl), the plural form of the colloquial Arabic singular 'ijəl (Classical Arabic 'ijl). The trilateral root of these words is عجل, cognate with the Hebrew עגל, calf, and its plural form עגלים, calves.

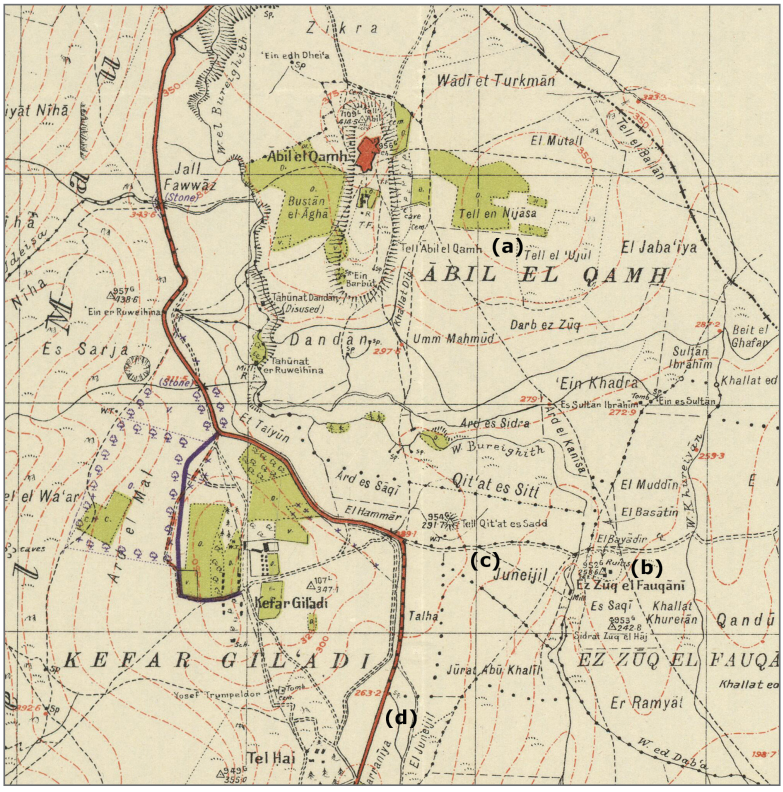

Fig. 1: A section of the Survey of Palestine, 1928, Map of Metulla, (1:20,000): (a) Tall al-'Ajūl, (b) al-Zūq al-Fauqānī, (c) Juneijil, (d) el-Juneijil.

3. The Case for Golgol at Juneijil, al-Zūq al-Fauqānī

Notwithstanding occasional exceptions, toponymic survival is a reliable indicator for locating ancient sites (Zadok 1995–1997; Elitzur 2004). Research conducted in various regions of Palestine indicates a ca. 50%–60% preservation rate of both major and minor 16th–20th century CE place names (including small features like plots of land, individual trees, and rock formations; Marom and Zadok 2023: 277–280).

Of the two possible readings, Golgol and Golgom, only one—Golgol—reflects Levantine toponymic tradition. Indeed, as Ecker and Leibner observed, Golgol derives from an original Semitic root, GLGL, found in Aramaic and Hebrew (2025: 4). This root is well-attested in biblical and post-biblical place names throughout the southern Levant (Muilenburg 1955; Bennett 1972; Elitzur 2004: 146; Reich and Shukron 2010; Bowen and Olavarria 2015; Na'aman 2024). The meaning of *gilgal* is disputed, with scholars proposing to define it as a circle of stones, a cairn, and a plain (Elitzur 2019). Palestinian geographer Salman Abu Sitta recorded at least 15 variations of this name on 1:20,000 British cadastral maps (Abu Sitta 2010: 656–689).[3] The spring of 'Ein Jūjal (عين جوجل, Levantine Arabic: 'Ēn Jūjal), located near al-Khāliṣa, modern Qiryat Shemona (Palestine Grid 2039.2918), may also represent a toponym derived from the GLGL root. However, located 4.5 km south of Abil al-Qamḥ, it is too far from Kh. Turritha to be a sound candidate for the Golgol mentioned in the Abil al-Qamḥ inscription.

Ecker and Leibner (2025) drew on place names in 16th-century CE Ottoman tax registers and the 1870s SWP. They did not, however, consider the vastly larger corpus of place names recorded in Mandatory cadastral maps, where additional pre-Islamic toponyms are recorded. This corpus contains a potential identification for Golgol near al-Zūq al-Fauqānī (Fig. 1b) in the toponym Juneijil (جنيجل) (Fig. 1c). 'Juneijil' is the British rendering of the colloquial Arabic /inējəl/ (from Classical Arabic Junayjil). It is a diminutive form derived from the JLJL root; one that was perhaps reinterpreted as a diminutive form of *junjul* (جُنجُل), the Common Hops (Humulus lupulus). Such diminutive reinterpretations of pre-Arabic toponyms are common in Palestinian micro-toponymy, especially where phonological survival outpaces lexical meaning. The toponym with the definite article appears a second time as a plot of land 1.1 km south-south-west in the lands of al-Zūq al-Taḥtānī, albeit without associated archaeological finds

3 Jaljal, Jaljal Jabāta, Jaljil, Qanāt al-Jaljal, Qanāt al-Jaljal al-Qibliyye, Qanāt al-Jaljal al-Shamāliyye, Juleijil, Rās Juleijil, Waʿrat al-Juleijila, Jiljil Abū ʿAlī, Al-Jiljal, Khirbet al-Jiljil, Ẓahr al-Jiljil, Jilijliya, Jaljuliya (the definite article /el-/ has been rendered here /al-/ and long vowels have been indicated by macrons).

(Fig. 1d). It seems to have derived from the original name at al-Zūq al-Fauqānī, applied to an extension of the land plot towards the south, as is common in Palestinian toponymy (cf. numerous examples in Kabha 2024).

In most Arabic dialects, the voiced velar stop /g/ of other Semitic languages is realized as a voiced postalveolar affricate [j]. In this case, the second consonant, /l/, has changed to /n/ in the colloquial pronunciation, likely reflecting a common phonological tendency in Levantine Arabic to ease pronunciation between adjacent palatal approximants. The same process was documented in the Ayalon Valley, where the original Aramaic toponym *ʿAgalgl transformed into the Arabic ʿAjenjul. The interchange or dissimilation between liquid consonants like /l/, /m/, /n/, and /r/ is a recurrent phonetic feature in West Semitic languages, including Arab Levantine dialects (Zadok 1995–1997; Kogut 1997; Tawil 1999).

It is also important to note that the name "al-Zūq" could not have been al-Zūq al-Fauqānī's original toponym. Rather, al-Zūq originally designated al-Zūq al-Taḥtānī, 3 km south of al-Zūq al-Fauqānī. This conclusion is supported by Robinson's name list (Robinson 1841: III, 342, Appendix II, 136), the French military map of Lebanon (Gélis 1862; mistakenly spelled "es Souk"), and the Rob Roy Map (MacGregor 1870). By the 1870s, the name Zūq had also come to be applied to Zūq al-Fauqānī, with transitional forms documented by the SWP (Conder and Kitchener 1881: 123) and Guérin (1880: 351).

4. Archaeological Evidence from al-Zūq al-Fauqānī

Archaeological information for the northern Hula Valley is limited. Much of the relevant data collected by the Archaeological Survey of Israel remains unpublished, and existing evidence primarily comes from older archaeological publications, isolated discoveries, and limited salvage excavations conducted by the Israel Antiquities Authority (IAA). The official list of ancient sites, the Schedule of Monuments and Antiquities, is outdated, brief, and lacks precision in its chronological designations (for example, it poorly differentiates between the Roman and Byzantine periods, as well as the various "Islamic" periods). This incomplete record reduces the usefulness of archaeological evidence for evaluating proposed site identifications. However, this dearth of comprehensive data simultaneously highlights the importance of these identifications as starting points for future archaeological investigations.

According to archaeological examinations, Tall al-ʿAjūl contains little to no archaeological remains (Ecker and Leibner 2025: 5). The lack of stratified remains, architectural elements, or diagnostic pottery is significant, as boundary

stones marking fiscal landholdings were typically associated with inhabited sites, productive estates, or at minimum, agricultural infrastructure. In contrast, al-Zūq al-Fauqānī is a significant mound inhabited during the Roman, Mamluk, Ottoman, and British Mandate periods (Hartal 2008; Assis 2020). The site has been under investigation since the 19th century. In 1841, for instance, explorer Edward Robinson characterized the site as a village inhabited by "nomadic Arabs, who are mostly if not entirely Ghawarineh [Marsh Arabs], and whose main employment is the raising of cattle, chiefly buffaloes" (Robinson 1841: III, 342). In 1875, French explorer Victor Guérin found a recently abandoned village at Kharbet Khan ez-Zouk el-Fôkani, which he described in detail (Guérin 1880: 351, author's translation):

> A large ruined village, called Kharbet Khan ez-Zouk el-Fôkani. It is limited to the west by the Wādī Dardara, which is crossed by a small bridge, and the water of which turns a mill. It occupies several artificial platforms forming successive levels above the plain. The leveling of many destroyed houses is apparent everywhere: They had been built with more or less well-cut limestone or basalt of various sizes, which now litter the ground or have been transported elsewhere. Cisterns and presses attest to an ancient origin. On the village's highest point, a house still stands; it is of much more recent date.

In the 1870s, the SWP called the site Kh. Zuk el-Haj, apparently after the owner of the recently abandoned house, and they described the site only as comprising "foundations of walls built with basaltic masonry" (Conder and Kitchener 1881: 123). The village was subsequently re-established and remained inhabited until the War of 1948 (Assis 2020).

The Israeli Schedule of Monuments and Antiquities from the 1960s notes "foundations of walls, [an] olive press, bridge built over the ʻAyun stream and four mills" (site 3800/0, Official Gazette no. 1091, p. 1361). More modern explorations revealed extensive evidence of habitation during the Late Roman period. In 1954, a Late Roman lead sarcophagus decorated with a human face and vegetative motifs was discovered (Hartal 2008; Shaked 2016). A Roman burial cave dating from the 2nd–4th centuries CE was found on the southern side of the ruin. It contained 11 *loculi* (burial niches), one hundred oil lamps, several pieces of jewellery, and Roman glassware (Livneh 1964). Other finds included various architectural fragments, notably a portion of an olive press weight (Shaked 2016).

5. Conclusion

Ecker and Leibner's recent article is a significant contribution to our understanding of rural life and administrative frameworks in the Hula Valley during the Late Roman period. While their focus was primarily on the fiscal and historical implications of the Abil al-Qamḥ boundary stone, their identification of Diocletian Tirthas preserved in the SWP also carries important toponymic and historical-geographic implications that merit closer examination.

The expanding corpus of Diocletianic boundary stones from the Hula Valley, the Golan Heights, and the Hauran presents an opportunity for a more nuanced understanding of Late Roman rural geography, toponymy, and settlement patterns. A robust historical-geographical interpretation of these boundary stones must be grounded in careful linguistic analysis and supported by thorough archaeological evaluation of proposed site identifications. Careful reading of British-era maps offers more convincing identifications for some sites mentioned in the Diocletianic boundary stone corpus.

Based on the mistaken identification of Golgol with Tell al-ʿAjūl, Ecker and Leibner assumed that the Abil al-Qamḥ boundary stone was originally located east of Tel Beth Maacha. The revised identification of Golgol with al-Zūq al-Fauqānī places the stone's original location somewhere between Kh. Turritha and al-Zūq al-Fauqānī. The stone was later removed and repurposed for secondary funerary use.

This revised identification not only enhances the localization of Golgol but also highlights the critical role of micro-toponymic survivals in Late Roman historical geography. A fuller study comparing the Late Roman and British-era toponymic repertoires is still ongoing.

Acknowledgements

This work was supported by the Polonsky Fellows Program. The Van Leer Jerusalem Institute is situated on the Palestinian land of Karm al-Ruhban in the al-Talbiya neighborhood of West Jerusalem.

References

Abu Sitta, S. H. 2010. *The Atlas of Palestine 1917–1966*. London: Palestine Land Society.

Assis, R. 2020. Kefar Yuval, Zuq el-Fauqani. *Hadashot Arkheologiyot—Excavations and Surveys in Israel* 132. https://www.hadashot-esi.org.il/Report_Detail_Eng.aspx?id=25778&mag_id=128.

Bennett, B. M. 1972. The Search for Israelite Gilgal. *Palestine Exploration Quarterly* 104: 111–122.

Bowen, M. L. and Olavarria, P. 2015. Place of Crushing: The Literary Function of Heshlon in Ether 13:25–31. *Interpreter: A Journal of Mormon Scripture* 14: 227–239.

Conder, C. R., and Kitchener, H. H. 1881. *The Survey of Western Palestine*, Sheets I–IV: *Galilee*. London: Committee of the Palestine Exploration Fund.

Ecker, A., and Leibner, U. 2025. "Diocletian Oppressed the Inhabitants of Paneas" (ySheb. 9:2): A New Tetrarchic Boundary Stone from Abel Beth Maacah. *Palestine Exploration Quarterly*. https://doi.org/10.1080/00310328.2024.2435218.

Elitzur, Y. 2004. *Ancient Place Names in the Holy Land: Preservation and History*. Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns.

Elitzur, Y. 2019. The Meaning of "Gilgal". *Revue Biblique* 126: 321–343.

Gélis, C. 1862. *Carte du Liban d'Après les Reconnaissances de la Brigade Topographique du Corps Expéditionnaire de Syrie en 1860–1861, Dressée au Dépôt de la Guerre par le Capitaine d'État-Major Gélis*. Paris: Le Ministère de S.E. le Maréchal Comte Randon.

Guérin, V. 1880. *Description Géographique Historique et Archéologique de la Palestine*, Vol. 3: *Galilee*, Pt. 2. Paris: L'Imprimerie nationale.

Hartal, M. 2008. Zuq el-Fauqani. *Hadashot Arkheologiyot—Excavations and Surveys in Israel* 123. https://www.hadashot-esi.org.il/Report_Detail_Eng.aspx?id=858&mag_id=114.

Kabha, M. 2024. *Named Landscapes* (2): *Palestinian Toponymy in Haifa Sub-district in Its Linguistic, Geographical, Historical and Social Contexts*. Haifa: The Arabic Language Academy (Arabic).

Kogut, S. 1997. A Proposed Solution to the Connection between the Textual Variants of 2 Sam 6:14 and 1 Chron 15:27. *Tarbiẓ* 66: 141–147 (Hebrew).

Livneh, M. 1964. A Burial Cave near Kfar Yuval. *Hadashot Arkheologiyot* 11: 9 (Hebrew).

MacGregor, J. 1870. *The Rob Roy on the Jordan, Nile, Red Sea, and Gennesareth etc.: A Canoe Cruise in Palestine and Egypt and the Waters of Damascus*. London: John Murray.

Marom, R., and Zadok, R. 2023. Early-Ottoman Palestinian Toponymy: A Linguistic Analysis of the (Micro-)Toponyms in Haseki Sultan's Endowment Deed (1552). *Zeitschrift Des Deutschen Palästina-Vereins* 139: 258–289.

Muilenburg, J. 1955. The Site of Ancient Gilgal. *Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research* 140: 11–27.

Na'aman, N. 2024. Biblical Gilgal: A Common Place Name or a Cult Site near Jericho? *Tel Aviv* 51: 59–72.

Palmer, E. H. trans. 1881. *The Survey of Western Palestine: Arabic and English Name Lists Collected during the Survey by Lieutenants Conder and Kitchener*. London: Palestine Exploration Fund.

Panitz-Cohen, N., Mullins, R. A., and Bonfil, R. 2013. Northern Exposure: Launching Excavations at Tell Abil el-Qameḥ (Abel Beth Maacah). *Strata* 31: 27–42.

Reich, R. and Shukron, E. 2010. Aramaic Ostraca of the Late Second Temple Period from a Farmhouse North of Jerusalem. Pp. 177–188 in *"Follow the Wise": Studies in Jewish History and Culture in Honor of Lee I. Levine*, ed. Z. Weiss, O. Irshai, J. Magness, and S. Schwartz. Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns.

Robinson, E. 1841. *Biblical Researches in Palestine, Mount Sinai and Arabia Petraea: A Journal of Travels in the Year 1838, 1841*. Boston: Crocker & Brewster.

Shaked, I. 2016. *Map of Meṭula* (7). Archaeological Survey of Israel. Jerusalem: The Israel Antiquities Authority (Hebrew).

Tawil, H. 1999. Late Hebrew-Aramaic לעס, Akkadian Na'āsu: A Lexicographical Note V. *Beit Mikra* 44: 93–95. (Hebrew).

Yahalom-Mack, N., Panitz-Cohen, N., and Mullins, R. 2018. From a Fortified Canaanite City-State to "a City and a Mother" in Israel: Five Seasons of Excavation at Tel Abel Beth Maacah. *Near Eastern Archaeology* 81: 145–156.

Zadok, R. 1995–1997. A Preliminary Analysis of Ancient Survivals in Modern Palestinian Toponymy. *Mediterranean Language Review* 9: 93–171.