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The Discovery of the First Abbasid Milestone in "Bilād ash-Shām"

This Milestone was discovered in the vicinity of the town of "Al-Manshiyyah", situated about 12km to the west of "al-Mafraq" city (FIG. 1). The inscription measures 62 x 45cm and is 8cm thick. It is deeply incised on a yellowish stone and is divided into an upper and a lower section. The inscription is composed of 7 lines, with the existence of several lines between the two divisions. There are also traces of lines below the lower section of the inscription, which were done to enable the inscriber to inscribe accurately and horizontally. The inscription is in a good condition and the reading of the text cannot be misinterpreted. If the inscription were completed it would have furnished 14 lines (FIG. 2).
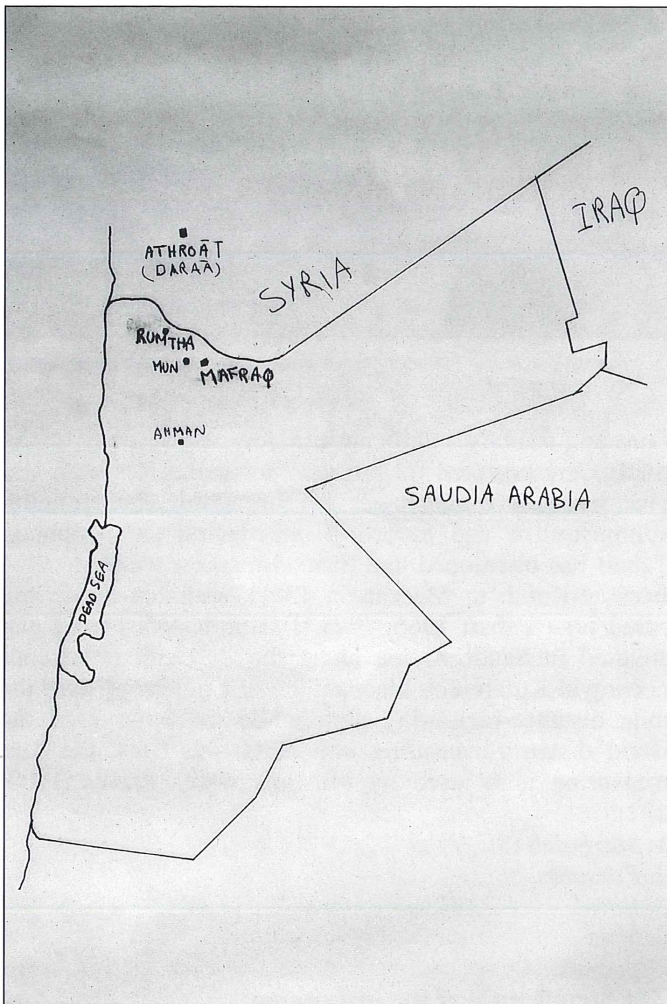
1. Map of Jordan showing the site of al-Manshiyyah.
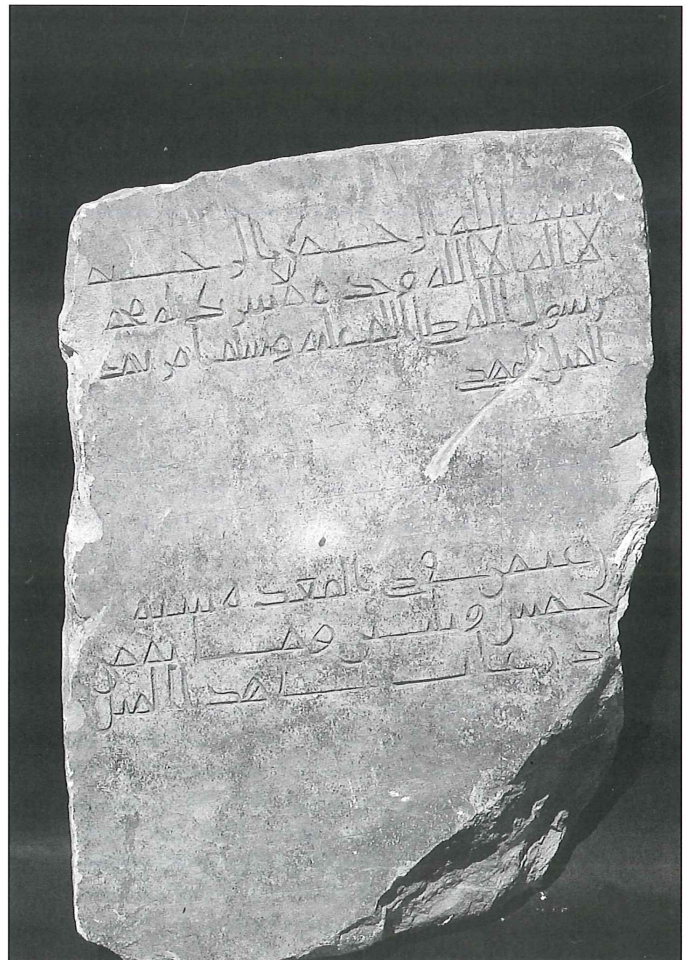
2. Al- Manshiyyah milestone inscription.

The Text

1. In the name of God, the merciful

بسم الله الرحمن الرحيم

2. There is but one God, who has no partner

لا اله الا الله وحده لا شريك له

3. Muhammad, is God's Messenger

محمد رسول الله صلى الله عليه وسلم

4. This milestone was ordered by al-Mahdī

أمر هذا الميل المهدي

5. Bin 'Uthmān in (thi al-Qi'da) in the year

[بن عثمان في ذي القعدة سنة]

6. One hundred and thirty five

خمس وثلاثين وماية من

7. Adhra'āt to this milestone

[اذرعات إلى هذا الميل]

A Brief Overview of Milestones

This is one of the memorial inscriptional milestones indicating the distance between the main road stations and between the Islamic cities. Through reading the date and the name, or nickname of the khalifah, we were able to date the inscription to the time of the first "Abbasid" khalifah. It is necessary here to present a concise historical outline of Milestones before continuing our main story. The Romans, after completing the occupation of Bilād ash-Shām, took care to develop existing roads and construct new ones (Sharon 1999: 2), as in the case of "*Via Nova Traiana*" which connected Ayla with Boṣra, and connected Boṣra with Dar'ā in the south, via Jarash (Parker 1986: 2-3) (FIG. 3)

Damascus used to be the hub of the road-network in Bilād ash-Shām during the Islamic Umayyad and the Abbasid periods. The international highway road commenced its course from Damascus in the south to Boṣra-Adhra'āt, and from there to az-Zarqā'-'Ammān and onward to Tabuk and al-Madina al-Munawara (Ibn Khirdāthabba 1967: 105:). This route is known as the Shami Pilgrimage Road, for the Dar'ā track-road leads to Jarash, then to 'Ammān, and the Boṣra track-road connects with Khirbat as-Samrā' (Darādkeh 1992: 25). Therefore, Muslims took care to construct roads and set up road signs along Pilgrimage Roads. Mail stations and communication centers along these roads were established, especially along roads connecting Damascus, Jerusalem, al-Kufah, Mecca, al-Medina, and Yemen (Rashid 1980: 229-241). After the Khalifah 'Abd al-Malik Ibn Marwan had finished constructing the Dome of the Rock in al-Quds (Jerusalem), the city benefited tremendously from pilgrimage trips. This has been confirmed by the discovery of milestones in Palestine at the sites of Bab al-Wad, Khan Hathrura, Dayr al-Qalt, Abu-Ghosh and 'Aqbet Feek (Sharon 1999: 3-4). The Abbasid khalifahs concerned themselves with the condition of the roads, fully realizing their cultural, religious, communica-
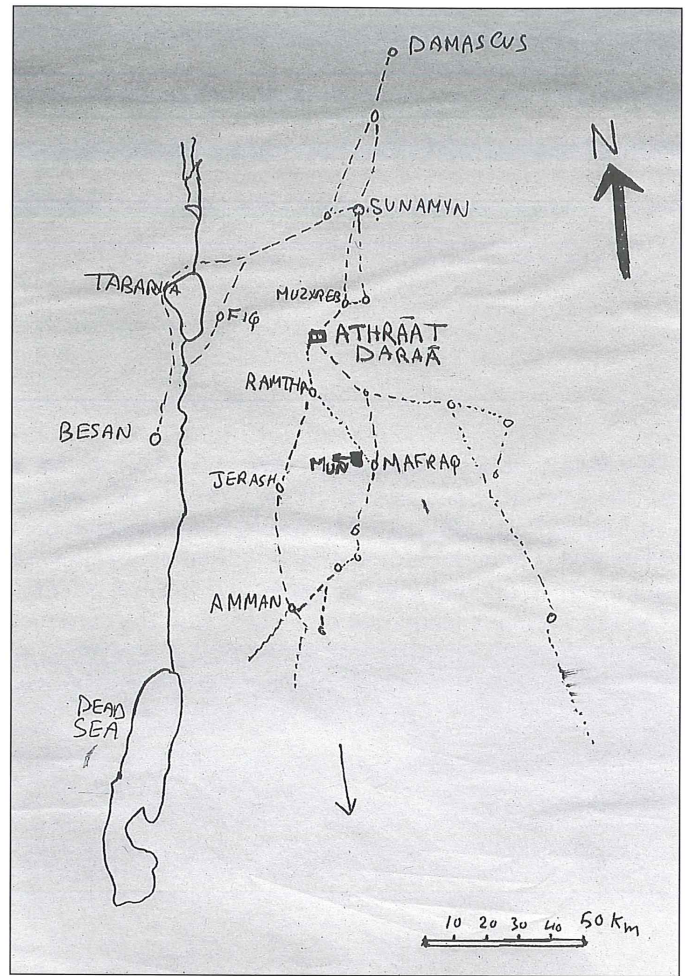

3. Map of *Via Nova Traiana* which connected Damascus and Jarash and other routes.

tions and military significance. Safety and security on the roads were essential for pilgrims, as well as for mail service, freedom of movement and for passing over military, administrative and monetary information and shipping. Ṭabari has mentioned that lit road-markers were installed from al-Kufah to Meccah in 134H, and that they were cared for (Ṭabari 1966: 162). Two milestones were discovered in Saudi Arabia along the Zubayda route connecting al-Kufah with Meccah; the first milestone used the mile distance-measuring unit, while the other used the Barīd distance-measuring unit (FIG. 4). Thus, the four measuring units used by Muslims were (Rashid 1980: 232):

1. *Marḥaleh (Stage)*
2. *Farsahk*
3. *Barīd*
4. *Mile*

The Significance of the Inscription

Three main elements have appeared in this inscription.
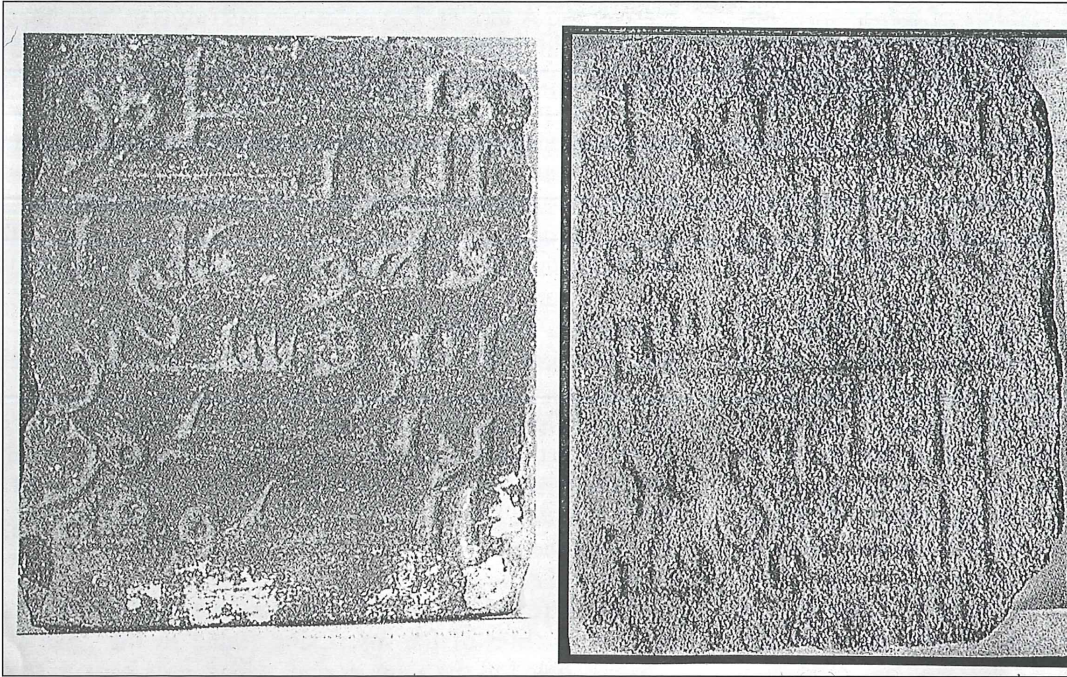
4. Milestone of Zubayyda route.

The first element is in the mention of the nickname al-Mahdī (generous) of the Abbasid Khalifah Abū al-'Abbās as-Saffāḥ, while his true name has not been mentioned. The date revealed in the inscription corresponds with the rule of this Abbasid Khalifah. His true name is Abdullah bin Muhammad bin 'Ali bin 'Abdullah bin 'Abbās (Ṭabari 1966: 401). Al-Mas'ūdi has mentioned that the Abbasid Khalifah Abū- al-'Abbās has been nicknamed al-Mahdī on a Friday night at 13th of Rabi' al-Akhir in the year 132h in al-Kūfa (Mas'ūdī 1967: 338).

A memorial inscription has been found in the mosque in Ṣan'ā' (FIG. 5), in which it is mentioned that Abū al-'Abbās is nicknamed al-Mahdī. Shaker Mustafa – a historian – has said that this nickname was bestowed upon him in Yemen by popular demand in order to grant him a prophetic aura, as the expected return of the Mahdī. The discovery of this milestone in Jordan (Bilād ash-Shām) proves that he was known by that nickname in other territories, as a religious title and for propaganda purposes, especially when we are talking about the early period of Abbasid rule. Abū al- 'Abbās died in the year 136H in al-Anbār ('Iraq), of smallpox, and was buried there.

The second element is in the mention of the city of Adhra'āt to mark the distance between it and the original site of the milestone. Ibn Khirdāthabba explained that Adhra'āt (Dar'ā) was the fourth terminal station on the Shami-Pilgrimage road from Damascus which was called Dhāt al-Manāzil, while al-Ḥarbi said it was the third. Ibn Khirdāthabba referred to it as the town of caravanserais (Ibn Khirdāthabba 1967: 150). This was the case with Ibn Risteh and Idrisi.
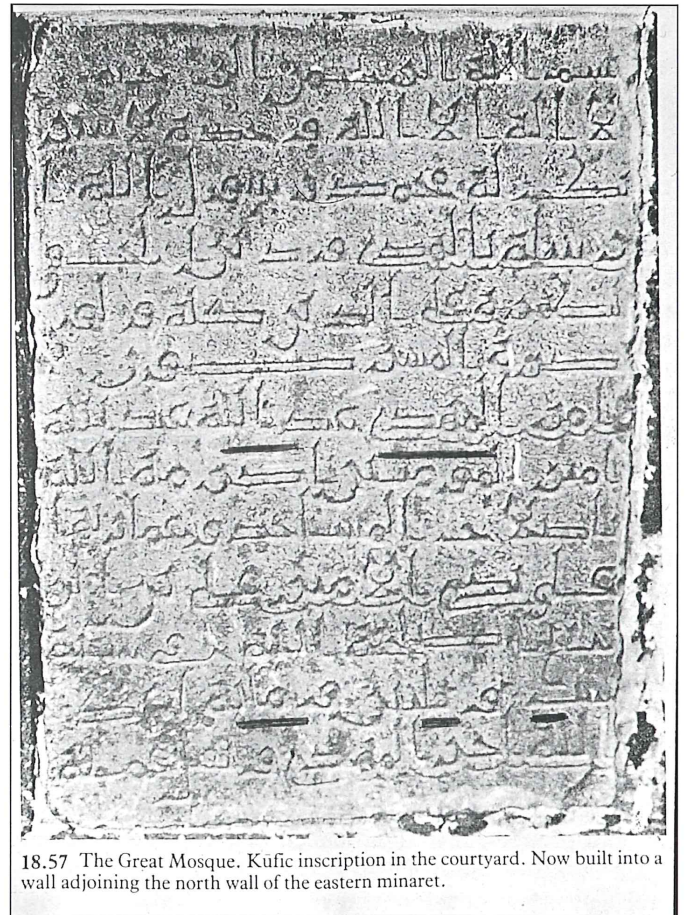
18.57 The Great Mosque. Kūfic inscription in the courtyard. Now built into a wall adjoining the north wall of the eastern minaret.

5. A memorial inscription of Ṣan'ā' mosque, mentioned the nickname of (al-Mahdī).

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By surveying the terminal stations of ash-Shām's pilgrimage road, it becomes clear that caravans headed from Sanamein to Dar'ā (Adhra'āt) then on to ar-Ramthā, or Tall ar-Rumayth (Darādkah 1997: 89-86). Al-Ḥarbi mentions that the next terminal would be az-Zarqā' (Al-Ḥarbi 1981: 653), however, Ibn Ṭulun (T 953) said in his *al Burq al-Sami* that the next station would be al-Fudayn in al-Mafraq. It seems that caravans had the choice of either continuing to az-Zarqā', or stopping over at al-Mafraq because the distance between the two terminals is one day (Darādkah 1997: 94). Therefore, the Adhra'āt station was considered an important mail-center throughout the Islamic periods. The discovery of this document, which dates back to 135H, is indicative of the importance of this town. The oldest literary sources that mention the town are those of Ibn Khirdāthabba at the end of the third century of Hejra (ninth century). Thus, the importance of this inscription is that it can be considered as the first contemporaneous source that attests to the beginnings of the Abbasid Khalifah. It mentions the town of Adhra'āt, and even though the text is incomplete, it tells about the importance of the town. We do not know why the inscription text is incomplete: maybe the inscriber was waiting for more pertinent information to fill in the gaps, or the inscription may have been a prototype model. Whatever is the reason, this inscription is considered as an important document contemporaneous with the rule of Abū al-'Abbās and shows his interest in the conditions of the roads and road signs in Bilād ash-Shām. The third main element in the inscription is in the mention of the inscriber – the artist who worked on the milestone – who was named Ibn 'Uthman, and owing to the gaps existing in the text, we were unable to identify him, but he seemed to be an ordinary man who did not hold an important function in Bilād ash-Shām. It was a practiced tradition to mention in the inscription the name of the ruler who supervised the construction of such a cultural monument, as in the case of the Ṣan'a' mosque inscription where the name of the ruler 'Ali bin ar-Rabī' was written. Also, in an inscription dated to the Umayyad Period, the name of Yaḥya bin al-Ḥakam, who supervised the work on the road connecting Damascus with al-Quds is mentioned (Sharon 1999: 5). Ṭabarī said that the uncle of the Abbasids, Khalifah Abū al-'Abbās as-Saffāḥ, Abdullah bin Muhammed, was appointed ruler over Kur, Damascus and Jordan 'Abdullah bin 'Ali (Ṭabari 1966: 465). For this inscription, it was difficult to ascertain the identity of the maker of the milestone or his profession owing to the incompleteness of the text. However, we point out the political and propagandist significance of this milestone, and that it indicates the Abbasid Khalifahs' concern with cultural and urban development of Bilād ash-Shām. It also shows their strong desire to fight the Umayyads in Bilād ash-Shām; the stronghold of the Umayyads being Damascus and Adhra'āt. The milestone also aims to show that the Abbasid opposition is against the Umayyad house and that this fight has nothing to do with cultural and urban development plan for these territories. This was a message for the common people to win them over to the Abbasid cause, especially during the turbulent time of Abū-al-'Abbās as-Saffāḥ, this milestone attests to such a propagandist policy. Artistic properties of the inscription include the shape of the letters that are characterized by an accurate geometrical form of sharp angles which add beauty and neatness to the inscription. The clarity of the words leave no room for misinterpretation. The lines are horizontal and even because the inscriber has line-marked the inscription before applying the letters. The language of the inscription is sound. However, some of the letters have fallen off as in the word *"Muhammed"* – in the second line – and the letter *alif* in the word *"bihathā"* (herewith) has fallen off, as well as the letter *bā'* in the word *bin* – in the fifth line – and the letter *alif* in the word Adhra'āt.

The introduction of this inscription resembles much the introduction of the inscription found in the Ṣan'a' mosque, dated to the same period, which goes back to the rule of Abū al-'Abbās. Some of the letters were extended to create harmony between the ends of the words with those of the lines, while others resemble previously discovered letters, as in the case of the letter *alif*, which is written straight with a twisted end to the right. We also have the cut-off, *Alef* in addition to its disappearance in the words *'Uthmān* and *Thalāthīn* i.e. (thirty); it is a Koranic influence of a Nabatean origin. As for the letters *sīn* and *shīn*, these came out in the form of rugged triangles (like the teeth of a saw), while the letter *lam alif* appears in an erect triangle form (FIG. 6), as also found in an inscription at 'Asqalan (Palestine) (Ory 1975: Pl.1).

The original Site-Location of the Inscription

It is difficult to determine exactly the original site of the milestone, because it was not discovered *in situ*, and also due to the incompleteness of its text stating the distance between Adhra'āt and the original site of the milestone for which it was intended. However, we were able to conclude that the most suitable location for our milestone must have been the town of al-Mafraq. What led us to take up this position is the following:
1. The milestone was found in the town of al-Manshiyyah, northwest of al-Mafraq.
2. Archaeological surveys of adjacent sites such as al-Khanāṣirī Umm al-Lūlū, Khirbat Tumayra, Brāk al-Khanāṣirī, and Brāk al-Khurayshiyyah, have shown from the pottery finds that the area was inhabited during Islamic periods: from the Umayyad to the Ottoman.
3. The unearthing of the ruins of a road north-west of al-Manshiyyah in a wadi called Wādi az-Zarnūk.
4. New archaeological discoveries at the site of al-Fudayn
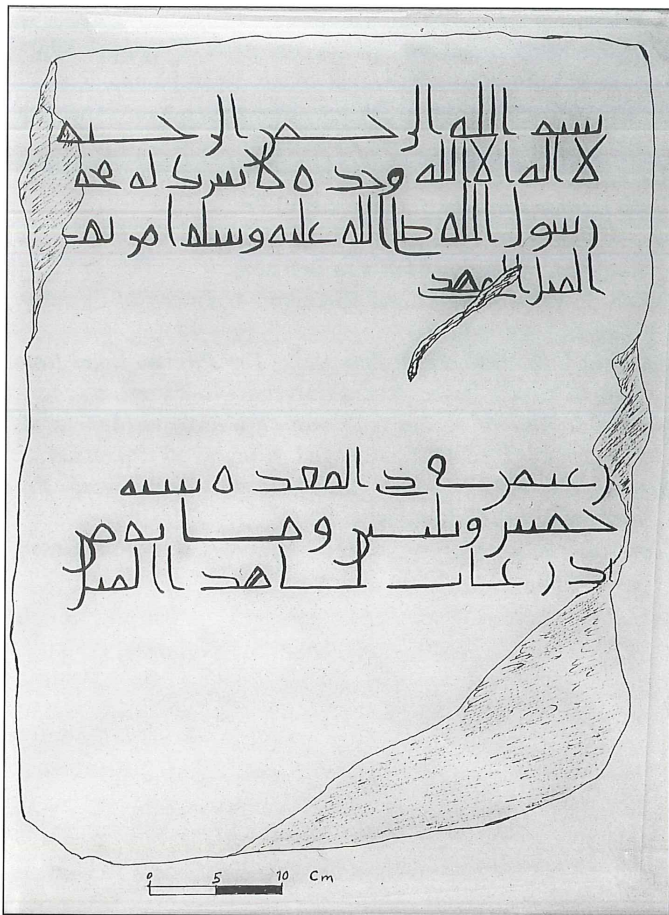
6. Facsimilie of the inscription of al-Manshiyyah milestone.

in al-Mafraq which include a mosque, a palatial residence and a bath which date back to the Umayyad Period and continued to be used until the rule of al-Ma'mūn.

All of these combined factors have prompted us to believe that the most suitable place for the milestone would be al-Mafraq.

Reconstruction of the Inscription

This inscription complements a number of milestones which have been discovered in Palestine, and the number of which was considered incomplete. Professor Sharon has reconstructed and re-written the text in light of previous milestones discoveries (seven milestones) and by referring to other writings contemporaneous with the rule of 'Abdul Malik bin Marwan. Based on recent discoveries, one has to recover the mention of the official responsible for the milestone after the khalifah (Sharon 1999: 5). In reference to the text found at the Ṣanʿā' mosque, the milestone dates back to the rule of Abū al-'Abbās as-Saffāḥ.

Some votive prayers and praises for the khalifah, who ordered the construction of the inscription, can be added to the text, as well as the mention of his name plus his

nicknames. Sharon has reconstructed the text, but overlooked the name of the work supervisor, whose name, in the case of this inscription, can be inferred from the mention of his relation to someone named Ibn 'Uthman. In the case of the inscription of the mosque of Ṣanʿā', the name of the supervisor appeared as 'Ali bin Rabī'.

Therefore, in light of the comparisons made with other writings and historic sources, the following complete text is suggested:

1. In the name of God, the merciful
2. There is but one God, who has no partner
3. Muhammed, is God's Messenger
4. This milestone was ordered by al-Mahdī, the Prince of the faithful
5. God bless his soul
6. The Repairer of roads
7. All the hands of the Prince may God right his path
8. Bin 'Uthmān in (Dhi al-Qi'dah) in the year
9. Of One hundred and thirty-five from
10. Adhra'āt to this milestone
11. Twenty-seven miles
12. O'God reward al-Mahdī
13. And accept from him
14. Amin

Conclusion

According to previous studies, and having researched most of the archaeological finds concerning Islamic milestones, and within the limits of my knowledge, it becomes clear that this inscriptional milestone is the first milestone found in Bilād ash-Shām, particularly in Jordan, and it dates back to the early Abbasid Khalifah, specifically to the time of Khalifah Abū al-'Abbās " as-Saffāḥ". This find brings to our attention the fact that the Abbasid Khalifahs did not neglect Bilād ash-Shām when they transferred the capital and political center from Damascus to Baghdad ('Iraq). The development obligations towards Bilād ash-Shām and its people were not neglected. After all, Bilād ash-Shām and its population constituted a political, religious and propagandist weight for the Abbasids. It is also considered to be the first dated contemporaneous rule. The Islamic document mentions one of the nicknames of the Abbasid khalifah the first, dated to 135H. The inscription of the Ṣanʿā' mosque, which mentions the same Khalifah's nickname, is dated to the year 136H. Also, historical sources have mentioned the nickname of the khalifah at the beginning of the third year of Hijra (historian al-Mas'ūdi).

This inscriptional milestone indicates the continuity of settlement and urbanization east of the Jordan River; this conclusion is strengthened by many milestone finds in the al-Mafraq Governate. In al-Badiya, in particular, the finds mostly go back to the Abbasid periods. The milestone sheds some light on the town of Adhra'āt as an important

terminal station on the concerned road, as attested by historical sources at the end of the third century of Hijra.

Finally, we note the importance of the artistic shapes of the inscription letters in comparison with other contemporaneous inscriptional finds found at other sites.

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