

Masons' Marks of Antiochia Hippos and Roman Syria-Palaestina

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Masons' marks are a well-attested phenomenon among Classical-periods sites; however, often they are not fully documented and researched. The lack of a comprehensible database impedes interpretation of these marks and the possibility of their further use as archaeological evidence. The paper strives to relive this research void by presenting the findings of a survey of masons' marks conducted in Antiochia Hippos and a list of other marks of Roman Syria-Palaestina.¹

The survey conducted at Antiochia Hippos (Sussita) of the Decapolis yielded identification of almost 400 marks engraved in stones in the quarry for accounts and indication of assembly order. Masons' marks were documented on local building stone in various Roman period sites of Syria-Palaestina, from rural sites of the chora of Hippos, through other cities of the Decapolis, to Herodian and Nabatean constructions.

The gathered material gives insight not only as to the function of the marks, consequently indicating how the construction process of different structures was organized, but also as to a relative and absolute dating of the constructions that the marks appear on. The study of masons' marks of Syria-Palaestina reveals some curious trends connected to their dating and geographical distribution, such as the particularly numerous occurrences on the first and second century AD – dated basalt monumental architecture that indicate a certain work organisation of local basalt craftsmen at the time.

Introduction

Masons' marks are signs put on the surface of stones by stonemasons during quarrying and processing of the raw material and during construction. They are present in almost all historical periods, closely connected to the use and appearance of quarries and high-quality stone construction.

Masons' marks in Roman and Byzantine times were a continuation of the tradition attested in the Classical Greek architecture. Based on architectural² and epigraphical studies,³ three main types of marks can be classified according to function: construction marks (indications of how to position an architectural fragment and could have been applied in the quarry or on the building site), accounting marks (employed in overseeing and documenting the work and products of stonemasons), and identity marks (worker's signature). A recent study of Roman Imperial-times mason's marks proposes a more accurate classification: marks used within a quarry, marks for use outside of the quarry, construction marks, and marks of workshops.⁴

Masons' Marks of Antiochia Hippos

The ancient city of Hippos was built on the crest of Mount Sussita about 2 km east of the Sea of Galilee. The city was founded in the first half of the 2nd century BC as Antiochia Hippos, later to be known as one of the Decapolis. After the conquests of Pompey in 64–63 BC the city was incorporated into Provincia Syria and flourished throughout the Roman and the Byzantine period, up to the fatal earthquake of 749 AD.

The major excavation of the site began in 2000, under the auspices of the Zinman Institute of Archaeology, University of Haifa, Israel, and continues up to this year onwards. Large areas of the city centre have been exposed, and in recent years the excavations expanded outside the city walls. The results of the research are published in a series of yearly monographs (2000–2010), two summary volumes of the 2000–2011 excavation seasons, and additional articles.⁵

The first masons' marks to be discovered in Hippos were Greek letters and other simple designs carved in basalt paving stones of the forum and the *decumanus maximus* (fig. 1). A few similar marks were later identified on the walls of the basilica. The flagstones and the ashlar most probably date to the end of the first century AD. The marks do not show any pattern to their distribution and fit in the category of workshop accounting marks – marks made in the quarry or in a workshop next to it, by which workers or teams signed their product to ensure proper payment. Since only some of the stones carry marks, it well might be that only one stone per cart load or day's work needed to be marked.⁶ The presence of these kind of marks all over the *forum* and the *decumanus maximus* indicates that the paving of these spaces must have originally been a single undertaking. A variety of 20 shapes of the marks indicates some system of supervision of the work of many basalt craftsmen (individual or workshops) working alongside one another.

The masons' marks on column parts were noted in various places around the site, mostly only some years after their excavation. There are 15 fragments on which marks were noted without a doubt – 14 made of basalt, and one made of marble. The marks on column fragments can be divided into two types. Those of the first type are similar to the marks on flagstones. The marks of the second type are letters accompanied by a series of lines (fig. 2), completely different in shape and size from the marks on paving stones. The first type of marks on column parts is ambiguous, some of them might have indicated assembly order, but some might have been accounting marks, like the ones on flagstones. The marks of the second type are clear examples of construction marks. They all consist of a letter and a series of lines. Some drums on which the marks were identified clearly belonged to the colonnades of the basilica, and some other possibly to the colonnade of the *decumanus maximus*. Since the drums have the same diameter but differ in height, the marks might have been needed to ensure the unified height of column shafts of a certain building/construction.

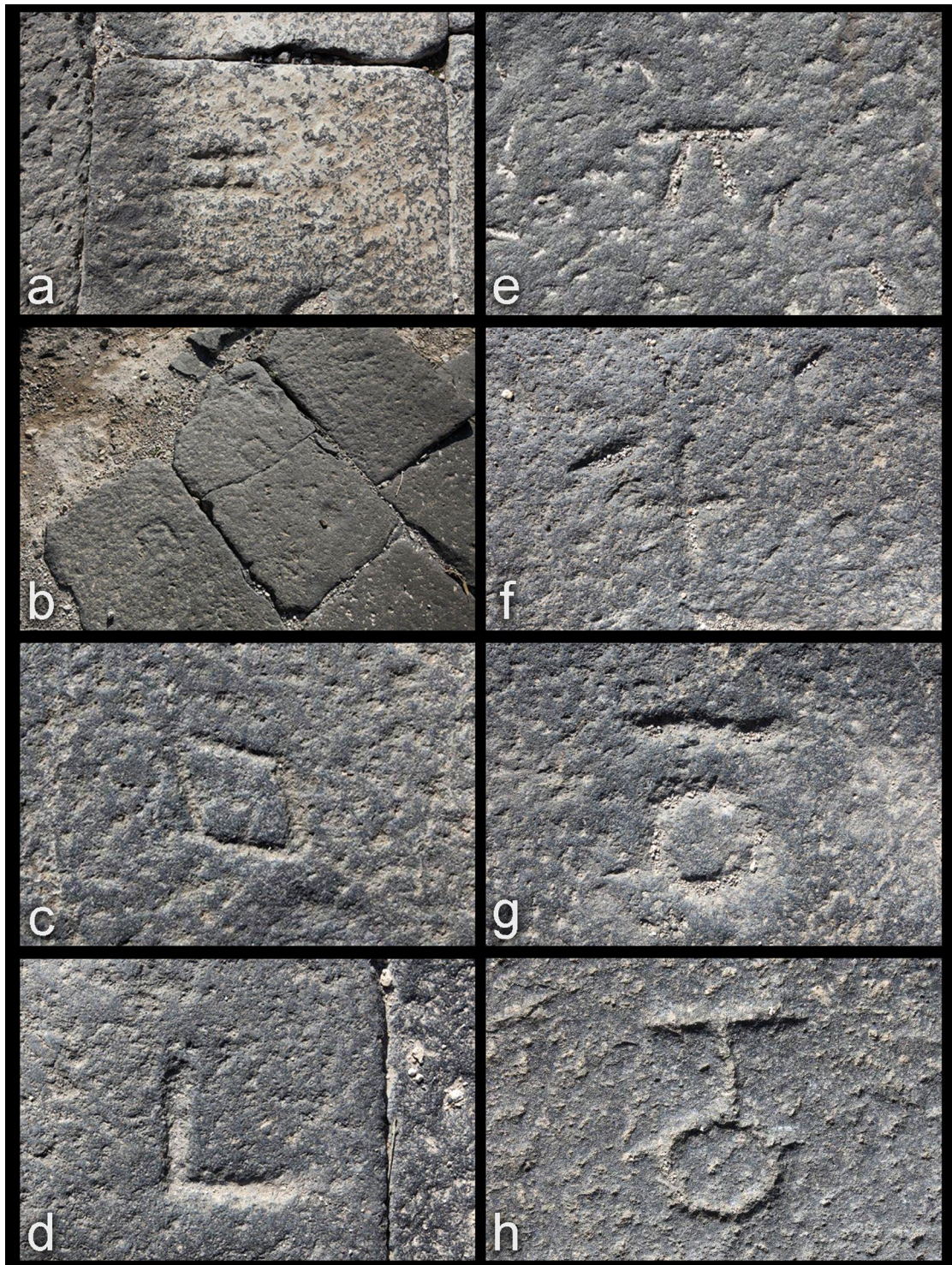


Fig. 1: Photographs of some of the accounting marks from paving stones of the *forum* and the *decumanus maximus* of Hippos.

Masons' Marks in Roman Syria-Palaestina

Marks that can be classified as accounting were noted mainly in the region of the Decapolis in: Gadara (figs. 3–4),⁷ Hammat Gader,⁸ Canatha,⁹ Gerasa,¹⁰ and most recently in Majduliyya (fig. 5).¹¹ Other examples of accounting marks are known from Ramat haNadiv,¹² small forts in the Judean Desert,¹³ and possibly the walls of the Temple Mount.¹⁴

The construction marks were noted in the Decapolis and its surrounding areas at Gamla,¹⁵ Philadelphia,¹⁶ and Gerasa.¹⁷ All other examples of construction marks were documented on Herodian and Nabatean architecture in: Jericho,¹⁸ Cypros,¹⁹ Herodium,²⁰ Masada,²¹ Khirbet el-Muraq,²² Jerusalem,²³ Archelais,²⁴ Omrit,²⁵ Oboda,²⁶ Wadi Rum²⁷ and Petra.²⁸

As can be noted, masons' marks appear on many of the Roman period sites of Syria-Palaestina; however, their state of research is very partial and some have not



Fig. 2: Construction mark “BIIII” documented on basalt drum in the area of the odeion at Hippos.



Fig. 3: Mason mark documented on the paving of the *decumanus maximus* at Gadara.



Fig. 4: Masons' mark documented on the vault of one of the passages of the Western Theatre of Gadara.



Fig. 5: Masons' marks documented on the bench of the synagogue in Majduliyya.

been published at all. Although it is impossible to give full comparisons of shapes or other details and the list of examples is surely not a full one, some conclusions can be suggested.

Conclusions

Almost 400 masons' marks have been documented at Antiochia Hippos. Some of the marks had an accounting function, and some were used to facilitate construction. All the marks were most probably engraved on the stones in the quarry workshop. The marks are evidence that the paving of the main public spaces of the city was a single operation, connected to the construction of the basilica as well. The construction marks are an additional evidence of the construction method of the buildings on which they appear – the architectural fragments were finished and fitted to one another in the quarry, and only then transported to the construction site.

Marking stone products to facilitate construction and for accounting purposes was a practical solution used by Herod the Great, the Nabatean rulers, and some other constructors, especially in the Decapolis region. In the case of Herodian

and Nabatean architecture, the presence of marks is connected to the sponsoring body. The case of the region of the Decapolis is probably connected to the source of funding as well. There are multiple other structures built at the same time, yet without the use of marks. The structures that use marks employed the same system of work organization, which the sponsoring body implemented.

All the examples of the marks presented here are concentrated in the period between the end of the first century BC and the second century AD. As this period saw a building boom throughout the region, it is not surprising that masons' marks appear then. Accounting marks are known from public construction in the Decapolis, and from Herodian-period architecture. Construction marks are slightly more widely distributed, including the Decapolis and its surrounding area (e.g. Gamla), numerous Herodian constructions, as well as Nabatean public buildings. The marks that appear in the area of the Decapolis are all dated within a span of around a century – from the end of the first through the second century AD. None of the earlier or later constructions, of which there are many, carry any marks. Consequently, we propose that the presence of marks can serve as an indicator of absolute chronology.

The accounting marks consist of letters or other simple designs. Some shapes have been noted in more than one place, but the sets as a whole are not the same. The size of the marks and their position on architectural fragments vary as well. The construction marks always appear as alphabetical symbols, but the systems of their use differ. Sometimes the letters stand on their own, marking pieces of construction consecutively; in other cases, numbers accompany the letters. The numbers are often recorded as lines or slashes, but sometimes they take on a form of an alphabetical numeral. The configuration also differs, though the most prevalent seems to be the one in which the letter indicates a column and the number the position of the drum within the shaft. There are no rules as to the position of a mark on a stone; even on drums, the marks are engraved in different places around the upper face and the sides. The schematic form of most marks makes it impossible to consider them with epigraphical tools in order to indicate dating or provenance. The marks often do not look like letters familiar from epigraphy, and variations, such as letters written backward, are present. A possible explanation is that the marks were made by illiterate workers, who simply copied a shape, not always with full accuracy.

Masons' marks are just a small detail of architecture; they often go unnoticed in excavations and have been neither studied nor published sufficiently. The lack of published examples, and consequently the lack of a comprehensible database, impedes interpretation of these marks. It is the hope of the authors that this paper will help archaeologist to understand the phenomenon of masons' marks, making them a useful tool rather than a puzzling find. With their observations the authors hope to spark a discussion, and explore the possibility of using the marks in many ways.

Notes

¹ This text is a short summary of the presentation given during the congress. The full extent of the research is to published in Kowalewska – Eisenberg 2019.

² Martin 1965, 221–31.

³ Guarducci 1987, 418–419.

⁴ Soler Huertas 2016.

⁵ Segal et al. 2014, Eisenberg 2016, 2017 and 2018. The monographs and the full list of publications are accessible online at <<http://hippos.haifa.ac.il/index.php/publications>> (21.06.2020).

⁶ Such an explanation has been proposed for the marks on the Servian Walls of Rome (Lugli 1957, 199–207).

⁷ The marks have not been published, besides a brief mention in Batayneh et al. 1994, 379. The authors documented and photographed the marks during a visit to the site in May 2017.

⁸ Solar 1997, 41–45; Sukenik 1935, 28.

⁹ La Torre 2002, 207; Peuser 2000, 223.

¹⁰ The marks have not been published, but some were photographed by the authors during a visit to the site in May 2017.

¹¹ Majduliyya is a Jewish Roman period settlement on the northern edge of Hippos territorium. The marks familiar to the authors from personal communication with the archaeologist of the site, Dr. Michael Osband, and were documented and photographed by the authors in September 2016.

¹² Hirschfeld 2000, 328.

¹³ Bar – Adon 1989, 4. 6. 22.

¹⁴ Mazar 2011, 158.185. 188. 192–193 and 210; Reich – Baruch 2016, 119.

¹⁵ Peleg-Barkat 2010, 161–162.

¹⁶ Almagro 1983, fig. 8.

¹⁷ Crowfoot 1938, 223, and documented by the authors in May 2017.

¹⁸ Peleg-Barkat 2013, 246 fig. 10.26; Pritchard 1958, 12.

¹⁹ Peleg-Barkat 2013, 252 fig. 10.36.

²⁰ Eshel 2015, 464–469.

²¹ Foerster 1995, 80–99.

²² Damati 1982, 120.

²³ Avigad 1983, fig. 179.

²⁴ Hizmi 1990, 260; Peleg-Barkat 2010, 172.

²⁵ Nelson 2015, 25.

²⁶ Negev 1965.

²⁷ Savignac – Horsfield 1935, 250 pl. VIII.

²⁸ Salmon 1965, 73–78 pl. XLVII–L.

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