

A Greek Inscription Mentioning ΣΥΚΑΜΙΝΩΝ Discovered off the Carmel Coast

Lisa Ullmann and Ehud Galili

The object under discussion was salvaged from the sea in an underwater survey conducted by the Marine branch of the Israel Antiquities Authority. The site is located in the north bay of Atlit, ca. 10 km south of Haifa (see map on p. 122).

Since the 1960s many archaeological finds have been located in the shallow waters along the coastline of Israel. Objects which had remained buried at the bottom of the sea since antiquity have been recently exposed as a result of human activity like sand-quarrying. This has become more extensive as housing demands and subsequent building activity have increased in Israel over the past decades. Recent discoveries include remnants of ships and their cargoes and submerged prehistoric settlements. The constant threat of treasure-hunting — the bane of archaeology — has been part of the stimulus for underwater rescue-surveys over the past 25 years, aimed at locating, documenting and studying the physical remains of the distant past, and ultimately bringing them to the attention of the academic community and the general public.

In the winter of 1985-6, such a survey was carried out in the north bay of Atlit. A hoard of metal artefacts, stuck together in a lump of sand and encrusted with oxide, was discovered at a depth of 2.5 m, ca. 70 m. off the coastline. After the lump was carefully taken apart and the objects cleaned,¹ the following items were identified:²

- a) a set of four wooden tools;
- b) a bronze figurine of a woman within a metal frame;
- c) a bronze chain with a hook (part of bronze scales);
- d) an unidentified bronze artefact bearing an inscription on both sides.

This last object is ca. 40 cm long, 15 cm wide and 1 cm thick, with a scalloped, rectangular base that is wider and thicker than the rest (6 cm long, 18 cm wide, 3 cm thick) (see fig. 1). In the centre of the base is a hole and above it a cross-bar; this probably was intended for attaching or mounting the object. The shape of the artefact seems to have been oblong, although almost all of one side

¹ This work was performed by Marina Rassovsky, head of the chemical laboratory of the Israel Museum in Jerusalem, and by Ella Altmark of the Israel Antiquities Authority

² Publication by E. Galili and J. Shavit forthcoming.

and most of the middle have been corroded away. There are remains of lattice-work consisting of vines and clusters of grapes, which apparently filled out the middle. The preserved sides have a border ornamented with *guttae*, and a band of 4.5 cm bearing an inscription which reads, on one side [ΥΠ]ΕΡΩΤΕΡΙΑΣ (= ὑπὲρ σωτηρίας), preceded by a lulav, shofar and menorah; and on the other side CYKAMINΩ[N] (= Συκαμινών), followed by a lulav. The letters incised on the solid border are of uniform height (2.5cm), the script is of the late Byzantine rounded type, with *apices* on the iota, kappa and upsilon; the sigma had on first reading a slight crossbar³ which cannot be seen any longer due to problems of preservation.

In the absence of any clear parallel, the function of this object cannot yet be known. The pattern of the lattice-work, the incised symbols and the words of the inscription leave no doubt, however, that this object was connected with the Jewish community of Sucamina; it may have belonged to the synagogue of the town, although no such structure has yet been found. The excavations conducted by Dr. J. Elgavish at Tel Shiqmona in the years 1963-79⁴ indicate that Jewish and Christian communities flourished in the town of Sucamina in the 4th to 6th centuries CE. The town was finally destroyed in the 7th century CE. The Jewish character of the town is also attested by the name under which it is mentioned in the Itinerarium of Antoninus of Placentia:⁵ "Sucamina Iudaeorum". The lattice-work brings to mind similar patterns, such as the marble lattice from a synagogue in Ascalon exhibited in the Israel Museum.⁶ This lattice was found next to a marble slab belonging to the same synagogue which has a dedicatory inscription by five Jews (three of them having Roman names, two with Greek names) containing the ὑπὲρ σωτηρίας formula.

Discussion:

a) The name of the town : CYKAMINΩN (Sucamina, שוקמנה).

Up to now, the name of the town had been known from literary sources only. This is the first time - so far as we know - that an inscription bearing the name of the town has been found, significantly, in this case, in the vicinity of the town

³ As e.g. in *ZPE* 90 (1992) Tafel XVII no. 7 (+ p. 107); Tafel XVIII no. 11 (+ p. 109). See also A. Wilhelm, *Beitraege zur griechischen Inschriftenkunde* (1909), 171.

⁴ See *IEJ* 23 (1973), 117-8; *IEJ* 24 (1974), 283-4; and *The New Encyclopedia of Archaeological Excavations in the Holy Land*, ed. E. Stern (Jerusalem 1993), 1373-1378. For the final publication of the excavations see J. Elgavish, *Shiqmona* (Hakibutz Hame'uhad 1994).

⁵ See below, p. 118, item 3.

⁶ See L. Roth-Gerson, *The Greek Inscriptions from the Synagogues in Eretz-Israel* (Jerusalem 1987) (in Hebrew), 25.

itself. It is not clear whether the form CYKAMINΩN represents an indeclinable noun, as the possible equivalent of the Hebrew name of the town, שְׁקִמּוֹנָה, or whether this is the genitive plural ἡ Συκαμίνων πόλις = “the town of the sycamores” (scil.: עִיר הַשְּׁקִמִּים).⁷

The sycamore was known to have grown in abundance along the coastal plain and in the Shephela, as found in the Bible; cf. 1 Re 10:27 = 2Ch 1:15 ; 9:27 “...as plentiful as sycamores in the Shephela” = “כְּשִׁקְמִים אֲשֶׁר בַּשְּׁפֵלָה לְרֹגֶז”. In fact even nowadays the sycamore is found in the region of Haifa. This might be the origin of the Hebrew name of the town “שְׁקִמּוֹנָה” — *Shiqmona*

Towns with non-Greek names that have the Greek ending -ων are generally of two types:

- 1) Non-Greek towns such as Ascalon and Babylon, whose names are declined.⁸
- 2) Biblical towns and place-names that are not declined, such as Zion, Hebron, Hermon.⁹

Strabo, writing at the beginning of the Common Era (probably reflecting a pre-Herodian source)¹⁰ mentions that between Acre and the “Tower of Strato” (Στράτωνος Πύργος = Caesarea) there is “Mt. Carmel and the memory of names of towns as the only remains of former towns, Συκαμίνων πόλις, Βουκόλων καὶ Κροκοδείλων πόλις” (*Geographica* 16.2.27). In this context it seems that the gen. pl. is meant : “the town of the sycamores”.¹¹

Josephus, *AJ* 13,12,3 (=XIII,332) says that Ptolemaeus Lathyros crossing over from Cyprus came “...εἰς τὴν Συκαμινων καλουμένην”. Here it is difficult to decide which of the two forms is meant : either the indeclinable form Συκαμινων, or the gen. pl.¹²

Claudius Ptolemaeus *Geogr.* 5.15.5 (ed. C.F.A. Nobbe) writing in the mid-2nd century CE lists the names of towns along the Phoenician coast, going south

⁷ See LSJ s.v. συκάμινος: I (= μορέα) mulberry tree; II σ. ἡ Αἰγυπτία = συκόμορος; s.v. συκόμορος: I sycamore-fig; II συκάμινος II = Heb. shikema.

⁸ See e.g. Hdt. 1,105,2 ἐν Ἀσκάλῳ πόλι; Hdt.1,184 τῆς δὲ Βαβυλῶνος ταύτης; et cf. LXX 2 Sam 1:20 ἐν ταῖς ἐξοδοῖς Ἀσκαλῶνος; LXX Ps 137:1 ἐπὶ τῶν ποταμῶν Βαβυλῶνος.

⁹ See e.g. LXX Ps 135:21 εὐλογητὸς κύριος ἐκ Σιων; LXX Nu 13:22 ἦλθον ἕως Χεβρων; LXX Jos 11:3 ...τοὺς ὑπὸ τὴν Αερμων; LXX Ps 133:3 ὡς δρόσος Αερμων ἢ καταβαίνουσα ἐπὶ τὰ ὄρη Σιων.

¹⁰ See M.Stern, *Greek and Latin Authors on Jews and Judaism* (Jerusalem 1976), 1, 114 (p.290).

¹¹ et cf. Plinius *HN* 5,75 *memoria urbium Dorum, Sycaminum*.

¹² Indeclinable noun like Βεζεθα in *BJ* 2,328 διὰ τῆς Βεζεθα καλουμένης ἀνεώθουν; or Βελζεδεκ, in *BJ* 3,25 κώμης Βελζεδεκ καλουμένης Or gen.pl. as in *BJ* 4,611 τῆς Ἐλεφάντων καλουμένης πόλεως cf. Strabo above.

from Berytos (= Beirut); all the inflected forms are in the nom., among them Πτολεμαῖς, Συκαμινών.¹³

The town Sucamina is mentioned in three Itineraries of the Holy Land:

1. In the Itinerarium Antonini Augusti (of ca. 300 CE)¹⁴ it is called "Sycamina".

2. The Itinerarium Burdigalense (of the year 333 CE)¹⁵ mentions "Sicamenos".

3. The writer who describes the voyage of Antoninus Placentius (of the years 560-570 CE)¹⁶ calls it "Sucamina Iudaeorum".

In sum, it appears that the form in our inscription is the name of the town. I have not come across the name for its inhabitants, except for the mention in Steph. Byz.¹⁷

The "ὑπὲρ σωτηρίας" formula.

This wide-spread formula is an entreaty for the continued well-being of living persons. It is frequently found in inscriptions on objects dedicated in a sanctuary, a synagogue or a church. The subjects of the request can be the whole community (the state and its citizens),¹⁸ or the rulers of the state — this is very frequent in the Roman empire and its provinces, sometimes out of gratitude for benefits received and mainly in the hope for future benevolence.¹⁹ In the Byzantine period donations made — for the restoration of damaged buildings, the laying of mosaic floors *et sim.* — contain wishes for the well-being of the church-fathers and also for the benefactors themselves, without mentioning names of the latter.²⁰ The Jewish inscriptions of this type (i.e. containing the "ὑπὲρ

¹³ According to Honigmann in RE there are *variae lectiones*: Συκαμίνων, Συκαμινών, Συκάμινον, Συκάμινος. The entry in Steph. Byz. s.v. reads: Συκαμινων, πόλις Φοινίκων, τὸ ἐθνικὸν Συκαμινίτης. Eusebius, *Onomastikon* (ed. Klostermann) p.108, l.30 has "...καὶ ἡ Συκάμινος".

¹⁴ See *Itineraria Romana*, ed. O.Cuntz (Leipzig 1929), 149:5; et cf. M.Stern (n. 10 above) 2,470a (p. 488).

¹⁵ See P.Geyer (1898) *Itinera Hierosolymitana saeculi IIII-VII / Palestine Pilgrim Texts vol. I* "The Bordeaux Pilgrim" p. 16 (cf. App. II p.42).

¹⁶ See P.Geyer *Itinera Hierosolymitana et descriptiones terrae sanctae* p.160: "Antonini Martyris perambulatio locorum sanctorum"; et cf. Celestina Milani *Itinerarium Antonini Placentini: Un viaggio in Terra Santa del 560-570 d.C.*

¹⁷ See n.13 above.

¹⁸ See, e.g., SEG XXXVII (1987) nr. 89: Brauron, sanctuary of Artemis, 3rd cty BC (?): "ἡ πόλις ... ἀνέθηκε τῇ θεῷ ὑπὲρ σωτηρίας τοῦ δήμου τοῦ Ἀθηναίων".

¹⁹ See, e.g., OGI 678.1 (Egypt, 2nd cty. CE): "... ὑπὲρ σωτηρίας ... Αὐτοκράτορος Καίσαρος Τραϊανοῦ Σεβαστοῦ".

²⁰ See, e.g. Lea DiSegni in *Christian Archaeology in the Holy Land* (Jerusalem 1990) p. 383, no. 3 (Horvat Hesheq, 519 CE): "...ὑπὲρ σωτηρίας Δεμετρίου διακόνου

σωτηρίας" formula) which were found in Palestine are collected by L. Roth-Gerson in *The Greek Inscriptions from the Synagogues in Eretz-Israel* (Jerusalem 1987, in Hebrew). She lists seven such inscriptions, found in Ascalon (nos. 2 and 3), Beisan (nos. 7 and 8), Gaza (p. 100, and no. 23) and Caesarea (no. 28), most of them from the 5th century CE.²¹ On p. 150 L. Roth-Gerson gives a summary of these inscriptions; she adds that the formula is also found in dedicatory inscriptions of Jews in the Diaspora — in Syria,²² Egypt and Asia Minor, but has not been found (so far) in Europe. All the Jewish inscriptions listed above are donations made by private persons who indicate the motive for their bequests and contain wishes for the well-being of the donor himself and/or members of his family. This formula is found in Greek inscriptions written by Jews, who followed the conventions of that language; there is no parallel formula in Hebrew or Aramaic (L. Roth-Gerson, *ibid.*). These inscriptions are written on stone-pillars, lattices, marble slabs, mosaic-floors. In the Israel Museum in Jerusalem a bronze object is exhibited, which is termed a "gem" by A. Reifenberg (*Ancient Hebrew Arts*, New York 1950, p. 143). It shows a menorah, shofar and palm-branch (lulav) on one side (obverse) and on the other side (reverse) bears the inscription "ὑπὲρ σωτηρίας Κυρας Μαρωνας".²³

According to the archaeological context, the artefacts in the hoard were probably taken from Sucamina after the destruction of the town in the seventh century and put on board ship to be used as scrap-metal, but the ship sunk not far from the town. As stated above, there are so far no parallels for this kind of artefact, and no functional use can be ascribed to it. We may suppose that it was an offering for a public building such as a synagogue. It may have been attached vertically by its base to a stone or wood surface, such as a wall or a table, or it may have been incorporated as ornamentation within a structure such as a door. The names of the donor and/or members of his family were most likely written on the parts now corroded away. If the original shape really was oblong, as suggested above, there could have been space for ca. 12-16 letters. In the absence of even one surviving letter, however, personal names can not even be conjectured. But on the example of the inscription in the synagogue at Apamea (*CII* II, 804),

(καὶ) Γεοργίου υἱοῦ..."; p. 268, no. 3 (Khirbet el Beiyûdât, 560-570 CE): "...ὑπὲρ σωτηρίας τῶν καρποφορούντων)..."

²¹ No. 3 is from 604 CE; no. 8 maybe from the 4th cty CE.

²² See, e.g., J.-B. Frey *CII* II, nos. 804, 806-811.

²³ An inscription found in the agora of Thasos (1st or 2nd century CE) also has a request for the well-being of the donor himself and members of his family; see *IG XII Suppl.* (1939) no. 413 = *Bull. Hell.* LVIII (1934) 484 ff (M. Launey). This inscription is on a statue of Herakles (kneeling, as archer) and reads: "Antigonos, out of gratitude, made a gift to Herakles Kallinikos for his own salvation and that of the members of his household..."

Ἰλάσιος Εἰσακίου ἀρχισυνάγωγος Ἀντιοχείων ὑπὲρ σωτηρίας Φωτίου
 συμβίου καὶ τέκνων..., might one indulge in speculation such as the following:
 one side: [ἀρχισυνάγωγος] Συκαμινῶν
 other side: ὑπὲρ σωτηρίας ἑαυτοῦ καὶ τοῦ οἴκου] or [ἑαυτοῦ καὶ τῶν
 τέκνων / τῆς συμβίου] *vel sim.*

The Hebrew University
 The Israel Antiquities Authority

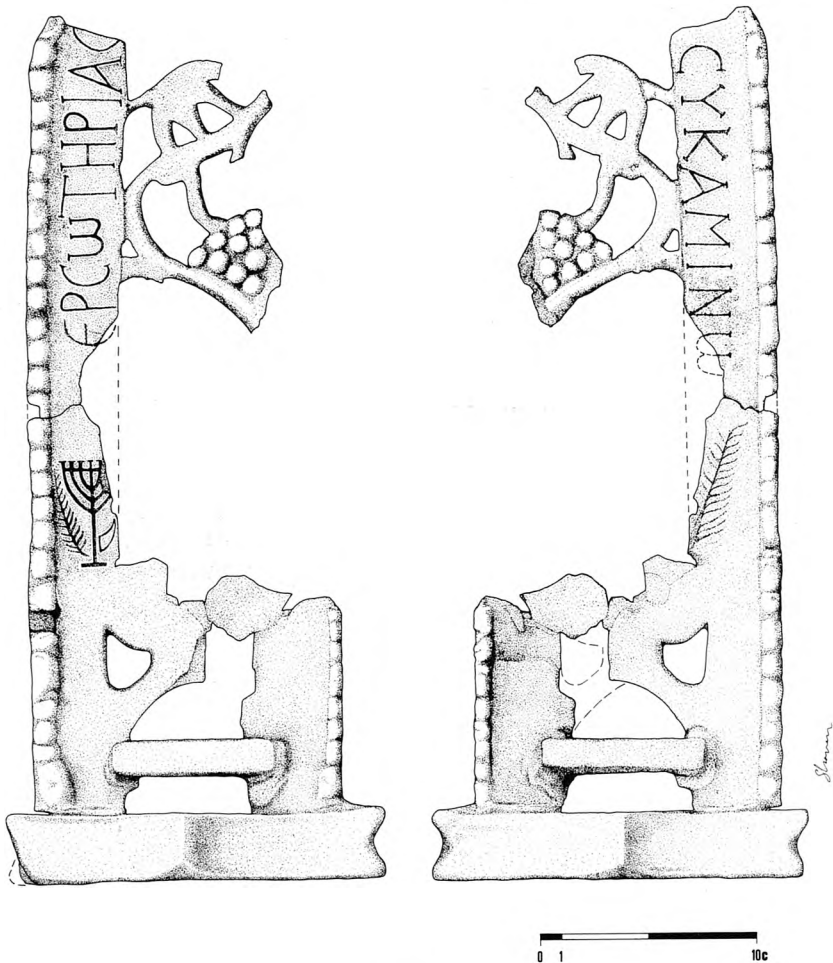


Fig.1

