

# IC-NACHRICHTEN

Nr. 100

2018



  
INSTITUTUM CANARIUM

 **ICDIGITAL**

Separata ICN100-4



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Keywords: Jordan, funerary monument, text geoglyph, Phoenician script,  
U-shaped monuments, tumulus, enigmatic structures, rhombus.

**Zitieren Sie bitte diesen Aufsatz folgendermaßen / Please cite this article as follows:**

Ulbrich, Hans-Joachim (2018): A Phoenician text geoglyph in the Jordan desert?- IC-Nachrichten 100 (Institutum Canarium), Wien, 63-70 (online)

Hans-Joachim Ulbrich

## A Phoenician text geoglyph in the Jordan desert?

Using satellite services like Google Earth enables a much more precise research in all kinds of geoglyphs. Texts in landscapes were up to now a matter of modern times (see for example the giant SOS geoglyph from Tindouf/Algeria described in this magazine on p. 18). In the badlands and other more desert like regions of Jordan we could describe – beyond the famous "wheel" monuments – a sheer limitless variety of "U-shaped monuments" [USM 

**Structure of the rampart.** The text geoglyph is placed within a rhombus (Fig.1) which has an edge length of 3,54 km and a maximal extension (ME) of 1,39 km. A closer look at the four parts of the rampart reveals that it consists of

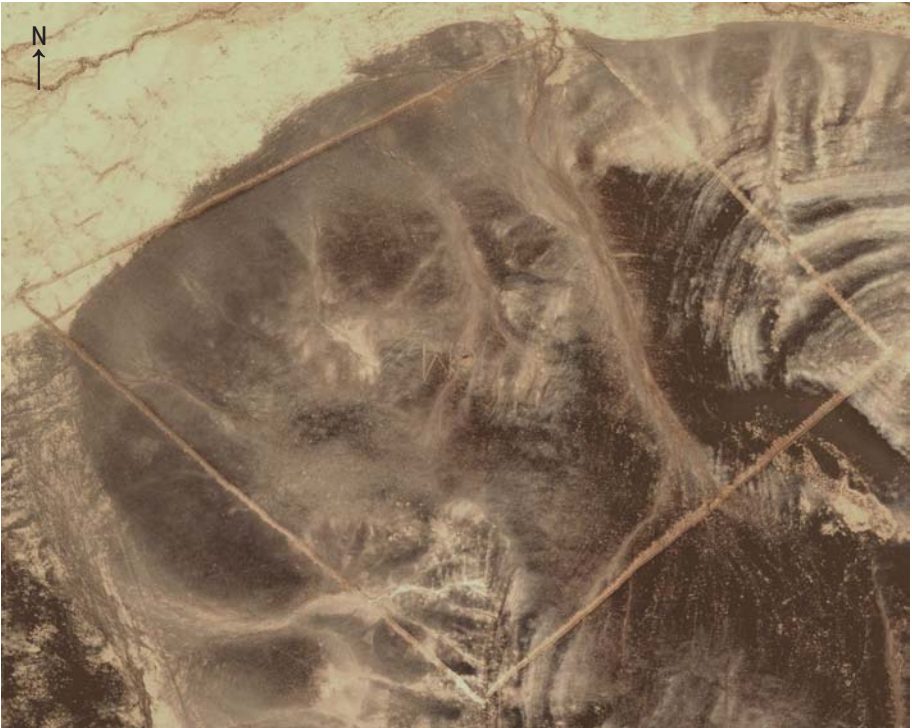
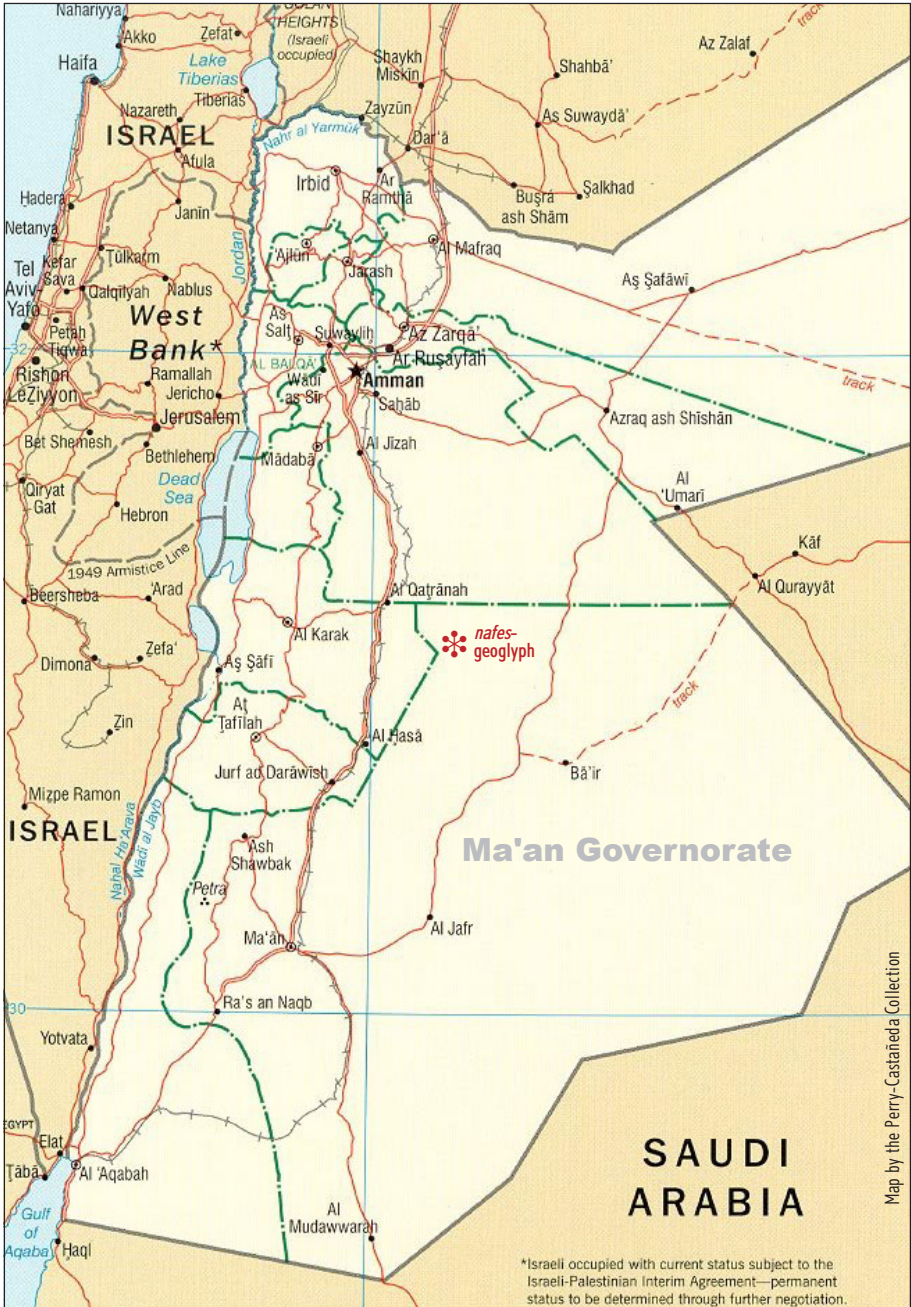


Fig.1 - An artificial rhombus in the Jordan desert – UTM 37RBQ3773146490; see also map on the next page. [Photo: Google Earth]



Map of Jordan: The *nafes*-site is situated in the northwesternmost part of the Ma'an Governorate.





Fig. 2 - Dunes are crossing the rampart (Jordan 37RBQ3803646176). [Photo: Google Earth]

over a thousand parallel USMs (Figs. 2-4). There are quite a few reasons not to consider this as the result of bulldozer operations:

- The ramparts cross valleys and hills where it is especially difficult for a bulldozer to create parallel USMs (northeast in Fig.1).
- The arms of the USMs, the so-called wings, change four times abruptly their direction from outside the main wall to its inner side (example Fig. 3); to work like this would be totally illogic and uneconomic for a bulldozer driver and his contractee.
- Non-recent sand dunes and streams of debris formed by *wadis (oueds)* are crossing the rampart (Figs. 1/2).
- To achieve a rampart of 3,54 km length solely by short parallel earthworks of a bulldozer would have cost a fortune. The average bucket/blade of a bulldozer or caterpillar has a width of around 3 m; this would mean at least 1180 unrealistic parallel actions (if not an estimated 1250 including all tries). If the rampart is the work of an old ethnic (BC) it causes tremendous questions too regarding their manpower and equipment, but those people would have had the time on their side.
- Many USMs still show their round mound which no bulldozer can produce.
- Which motivation could stand behind a modern construction of this dimension? A mining project which was not realised in over 15 years?



Fig. 3 - The USMs of the rampart change their direction abruptly (Jordan 37RBQ3800346832). [Photo: Google Earth]

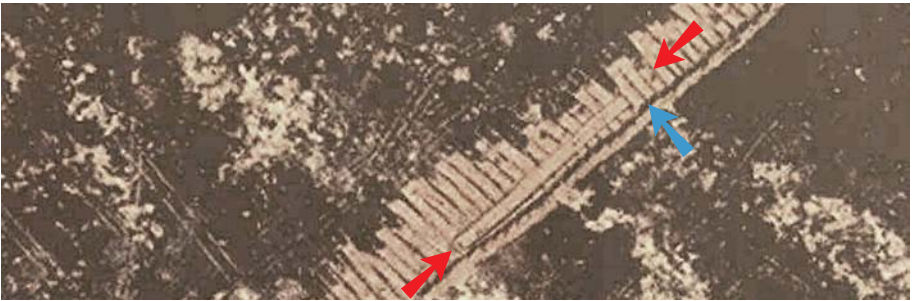



Fig. 4 - The USMs of the rampart are at this place crossed by a very long double-USM with two round mounds (heads): . The double-USM (see red arrows) is crossed by two USMs (blue arrow) of the main wall; this cannot be produced by a caterpillar, neither the round mounds nor the complicated structure. (Jordan 37RBQ3819146308). [Photo: Google Earth]

**Position and structure of the text geoglyph.** The text-geoglyph (Fig. 6) is situated at 37RBQ3769346444 (UTM), near the center of the rhombus (Fig.1). It has a ME of ca. 112 m. It is presumed that the constructors had knowledge of the geographical north and south – like the seafaring Phoenicians. This means that the content of Fig.6 has to be analyzed as is. The walls have apparently two steps (Fig. 9) what can be interpreted like Fig.5a or 5b.



Fig.5 - Both construction methods for two-stepped walls are possible if the view from above is interpreted correctly. Both are common in the Mediterranean region. [Graphic: H.-J. Ulbrich]





Fig. 6 - The big text-geoglyph of Jordan. ME 112 m. [Photo: Google Earth 2010]

**Analysis of the signs.** We see an alphabetical string which – interpreted as Phoenician script – has three consonantic characters which have to be read from right to left. Checking the ancient scripts of the region, the Phoenician variants of the 11.-8. century BC offer the most similarities, although the cursive (more Neopunic looking) Nun is problematic. Fig.8 shows the idealised and integral graphemes which transcribed result in NFŠ (vocalised *nafes*). According to Krahmalkov (2000: 333) this has the meaning of "funerary monument / tombstone". Ricks (1989: 109) gives some further information: This word exists besides in Phoenician also in Qatabanian (nfs), Sabaean (nfs) and Ugaritic (nfš) and can in Qatabanian also have the meaning of "interior/chamber" of a funerary monument.

**Interpretation of the site.** If we take up this idea then there should be a recognizable burial site. There is in fact – directly in the center of the Pe – a structure which well could be rated as tumulus (Figs. 6/9). Regarding the chronology, the supposed age of the script fits more to an exceptional structure of this kind than a younger one (the closer we come near the turn of the eras). Has the tumulus together with the text-geoglyphs a connection to the USM-rampart? The rhomboid form of the surrounding USM line-up recalls countless ancient engravings on rock panels and clay idols and also the many graphics on pottery which all depict this well-known symbol of a vulva. In fact the vulva symbolism has a strong adherence to many funerary cults when we think of reincarnation beliefs.

If we indeed have to deal with a genuine burial site, why then these extraordinary efforts? Was the buried person a king or clan chief? Should the big geoglyphs

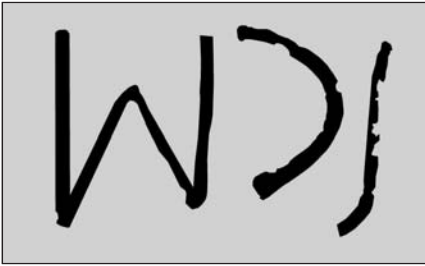


Fig. 7 - The walls which mould the text geoglyphs are partly damaged. [Sketch: Hans-Joachim Ulbrich].

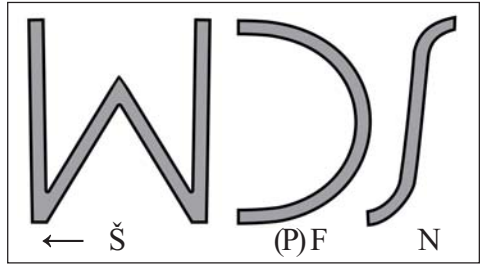


Fig. 8 - This is the idealised result when adopting an early Phoenician script variant. [Graphic: Hans-Joachim Ulbrich]



Fig. 9 - There seems to be a tumulus (width 13 m) in the center of the text-geoglyph for Pe. [Photo: Google Earth 2016]



Fig. 10

[Photo: Google Earth 2010]



Fig. 11

[Photo: Google Earth 2010]

and the rhombus attract the attention of gods like Ba'al-Ḥammon and/or Tanit to the highest degree possible? Local investigators are requested to find out if this site is a fake or is worth to be declared a valuable national monument!

**Other monuments within the rhombus.** Scanning the inner area of the rhombus leads to some more noteworthy monuments. At 37RBQ3754646299 we find a small USM and a stone ring (Fig. 10); and at 37RBQ3758546219 we detect two additional ring structures (Fig. 11). All four constructions and their supposed form probably belong to local protohistoric nomads.

Not clear is the objective of a quadratic field (Fig.12 / 37RBQ3808846512) near the eastern corner of the rhombus. We see a pattern of small square segments filled with a bright material (sand or limestone ?). Highly interesting is the fact that in the Mafraq Governorate exists a second field of nearly exactly the same type (Fig.13 / 37SDS5235201625). Both have probably – at their arid places – a cultic function and not an agricultural one.

**A special view on the desert pistes of Jordan.** The rhombus here described seems to run at two or three points over pistes which look like recent car traces;

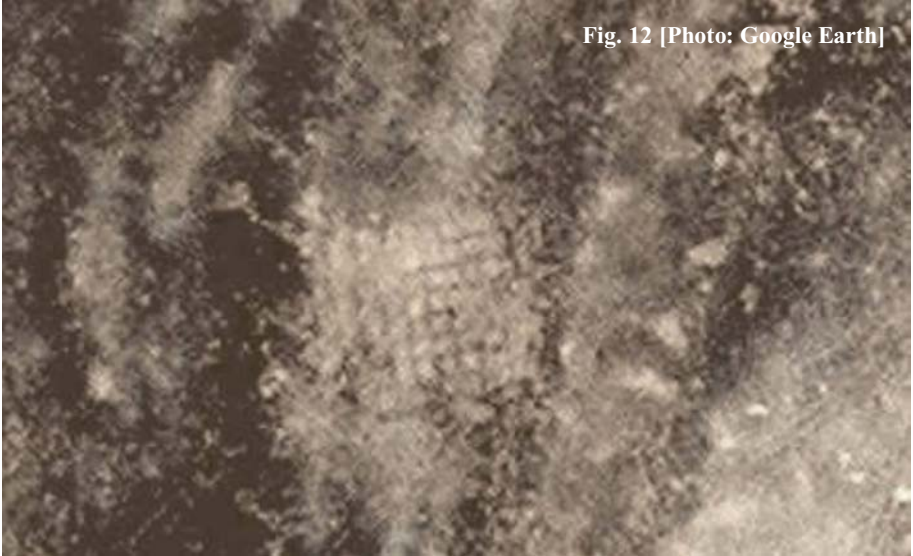


Fig. 12 [Photo: Google Earth]



Fig. 13 [Photo: Google Earth]

but these "pistes" start and end in the nowhere. Therefore it is helpful to know that at the most loneliest places of Jordan there are patterns which show up like hundreds of illogically generated car tracks. It is absolutely impossible that these traces are alone evidence of modern vehicles. Fig. 14 shows such chaos lines from the UTM-reference 37RBQ1659137582 (see also left part of Fig.13). This phenomenon is worth an in-depth investigation of its own.





Fig. 14 - Chaos geoglyphs in the wilderness of Jordan. [Photo: Google Earth / contrast boosted]

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