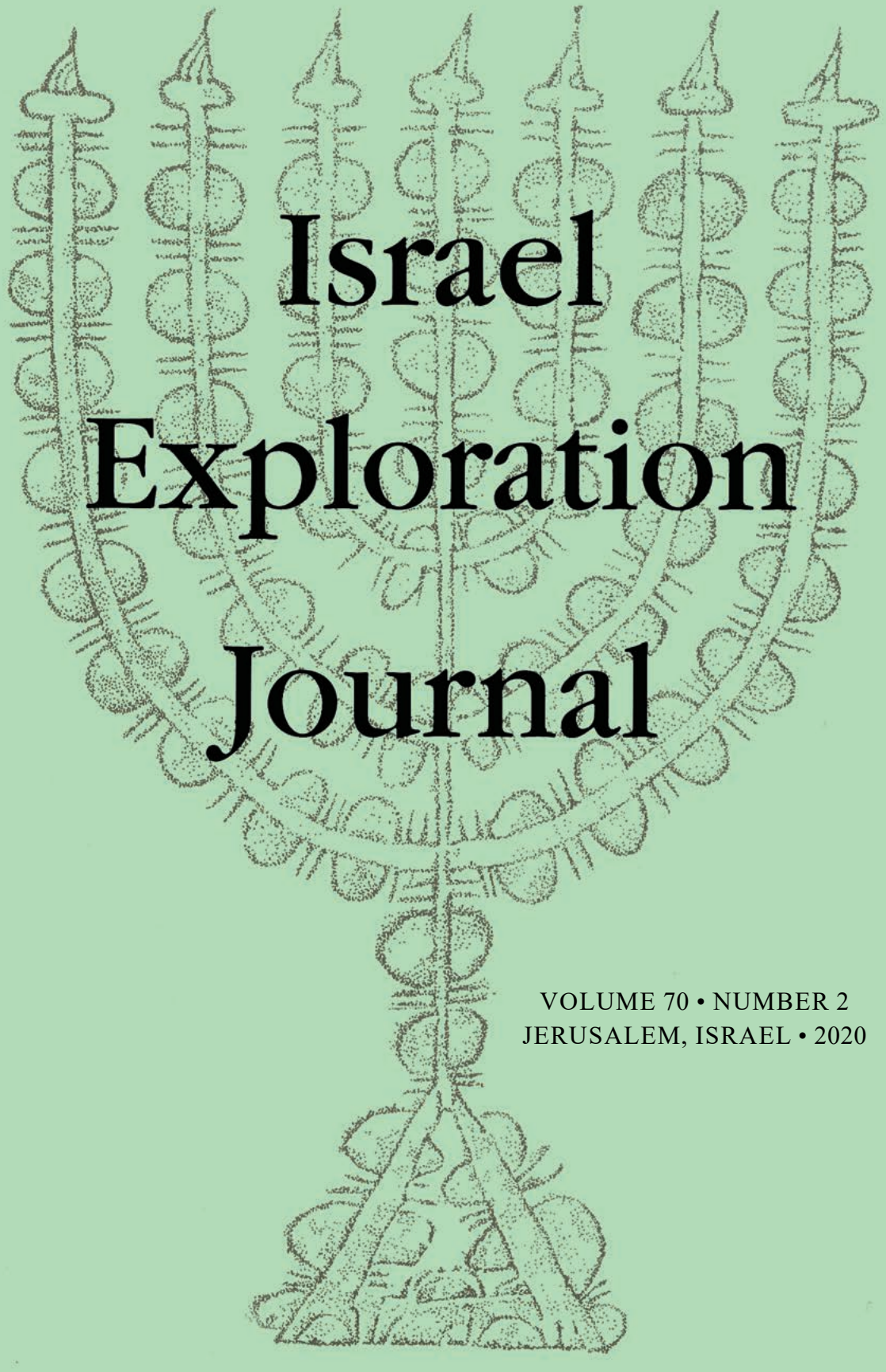

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In the Footsteps of Prince Albert Victor and Prince George of Wales: Rediscovering the Nukheileh Dolmen Field*

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'... the discovery of dolmens at Banias was the culminating point of antiquarian interest in the Royal tour' (Conder 1882d: 231)

ABSTRACT: On April 25, 1882, Prince Albert Victor and Prince George of Wales (later King George V), guided by R.E. Conder of the Palestine Exploration Fund, explored the sources of the Jordan River. On their way westward to Tel Dan, in a region known as the Nukheileh, they discovered several dolmens. The dolmens were some of the earliest ever reported from the Levant, and the discovery was a highlight of the royal party's Holy Land expedition. Over 130 years have passed since they visited the region. The ancient road they walked fell out of use many decades ago — its path overgrown and forgotten — together with the exact location of the dolmens. Following the footsteps of Conder and the two princes, we conducted a detailed archaeological survey of the region and succeeded in relocating the forgotten 'Royal Dolmens' of the Nukheileh. The 'Royal Dolmens' are part of a larger dolmen field covering much of the northern Hula Valley, one of many such fields forming the megalithic landscape of the Intermediate Bronze Age of the Upper Jordan River basin.

INTRODUCTION

On an April afternoon in 1882, on the road leading to Tel Dan, the soon-to-be King George V, his older brother Prince Albert Victor and their guide Claude

* This paper summarizes the work of many scholars who contributed to the survey of the 'royal' Nukheileh dolmens over the last two years. A significant part of the research was done within the framework of the M.A. Program in Galilee Studies at Tel-Hai College. The survey was supported by the finds of the Israel Nature and Parks Authority and the Israel Antiquities Authority (IAA). We wish to thank the IAA researchers for their assistance, in particular Michael Peleg (drone photography), Yael Aleph (photography), Arieh Rochman (archive assistance), Roy Liran (measurements and GPS), Michal Birkenfeld (GIS analysis) and Anastasia Shapiro (map drawing). We are grateful to all the members of the survey squad, in particular Chris Tal-Smith, Tamar and Jonathan Berger, and the 2016 10th-grade class of Har VaGai High School.

Reignier Conder (1848–1910) identified megalithic structures next to the path. These four structures, defined by Conder as dolmens, were to become the most significant scientific contribution of the young princes' worldwide tour. The small dolmen field surrounding the 'Royal Dolmens' became known as the knoll of the Nukheileh (Conder 1882d). Since Conder's report, a period including over one hundred years of research, the Nukheileh 'Royal Dolmens' seem to have been forgotten (e.g., Epstein 1985; Fraser 2018; Greenberg 2002; Hartal 1987; 2006).

Dolmens are megalithic structures ranging from the British Isles to Japan and Korea in the east and to the Horn of Africa in the south (Broome 1940; Fraser 2018; Niel 1970). Most of the dolmens outside the Levant belong to the local Neolithic cultures. In most cases, they are well pronounced in the landscape and were easily identified and accessible for research. Yet even today, it is difficult to determine their chronology and to draw conclusions as to why they were built by people of such diverse cultural entities spread over such a vast territory. Dolmens vary in shape, size, rock type, stonemasonry and architectural design, and many attempts have been made to describe and classify their structural variety. They typically consist of a single chamber built of standing walls and roofed by one or more large capstones. In many — but clearly not all — cases, the chamber is set in a stone pile, called a tumulus or cairn, which may be surrounded by an outer wall.

In the Levant, dolmens are found from Turkey to Egypt and east into the Arabian Desert (Braemer, Cleuziou and Steimer 2003; Fraser 2018; McCorriston *et al.* 2011), with large numbers located primarily in Syria, Jordan and Israel. Levantine dolmens were first observed by travellers and researchers in the early nineteenth century (Conder 1885; Stekelis 1962; Turville-Petre 1931). After more than 100 years of study, nearly all aspects remain in dispute. Such aspects include construction technique, morphological typology, function and, primarily, their date of construction. Confounding research efforts is the fact that dolmens, while visible and quite pronounced in the Levantine landscape, have been robbed and reused throughout the region's history. Moreover, most of the dolmens are located in rural areas, mountain foothills and rocky terrain, largely overlooked by development and major archaeological enterprises (Sharon *et al.* 2017 for references). Recently, however, research of the dolmen phenomenon in the region of the Jordan Rift Valley, the Hula Basin and the Golan Heights has gained momentum (Fraser 2018; Freikman 2014; Hartal 2017b), contributing new data to the picture formed by Conder (1886), Stekelis (1935), Epstein (1985), and other scholars (for recent overview, see Berger and Sharon 2018).

In the spring of 2016, we initiated an archaeological survey on a quest to rediscover the long forgotten 'Royal Dolmens' and to evaluate their significance within the Nukheileh landscape (Berger and Goren 2018). The study results are presented here. The northern Hula Valley has seen much disturbance over the past 100 years. Changing geopolitical borders, development, agriculture and water

drainage have all affected the region and made the identification of four small dolmens a challenging enterprise. Despite the obstacles, the identification was successful, resulting in new data regarding both the dolmens and the surrounding context of the megalithic landscape of the Hula Valley.

THE DISCOVERY OF THE DOLMENS IN 1882

Prince George of Wales and Prince Albert Victor set out on a three-year voyage across the vast British Empire on the deck of the *HMS Bacchante* as part of their naval training at the prime of the Victorian era (Cook 2008; Rose 1997). The Middle East segment took place during the latter part of their imperial cruise, when they were the guests of Ottoman Sultan Abdul Hamid II. As they toured Egypt, accompanied by the German archaeologist Heinrich Karl Brugsch, the princes experienced actual archaeology field work, digging for treasures in ancient graves (Prince Albert Victor and Prince George of Wales 1886).

The *HMS Bacchante* docked at Jaffa on March 28, 1882. The two princes, accompanied by Canon John Neal Dalton, their tutor from childhood, went inland on a forty-day expedition across Syria, Jordan, Lebanon and Palestine (fig. 1). The expedition was guided by Conder, a leading expert who had headed the PEF Survey of Western Palestine (Cobbing 2012; Moscrop 2000). The route resembles that undertaken by their father, King Edward VII, exactly twenty years earlier (for details of their adventures see Conder 1882c; 1882d; Dalton 1882; Hopkins 1902; King Edward VII 1862; Lewy 2000; Nicolson 1953).

On the morning of April 25, 1882, after spending the night by the ruins of the Roman temple of Kadesh in the Upper Galilee mountains overlooking the Hula Valley, they set out northward. The company enjoyed an early morning break at the Crusader castle of Chateau Neuf (Hunin) and started the ride eastwards, towards the Banias and Tel Dan in the northeastern Hula Valley. Their path, following the road leading from the Mediterranean to Damascus, took them down the Naphtali Mountains and across the low escarpment of the northern Jordan Rift Valley. This route bypassed the swamps and lake occupying the southern part of the Hula Valley, crossed the Hasbany River on an ancient bridge and continued over the low plateau leading up to the archaeological city of Tel Dan (Arabic: Tell el-Kady; figs. 1–2).

> Immediately north-west, nearly a mile distant from Tell el Kady, a low hillock, covered with blocks of hard black basalt, commands an extensive view on all sides… is just such a site as is found, in Moab or in Gilead, to present a field of dolmens and menhirs ... the basaltic knoll close to Tell el Kady. The knoll is known only to the Arabs as ‘the ruin of the little palm’ (Nukheileh), but it has clearly been a dolmen center… (Conder 1882d: 225–226)

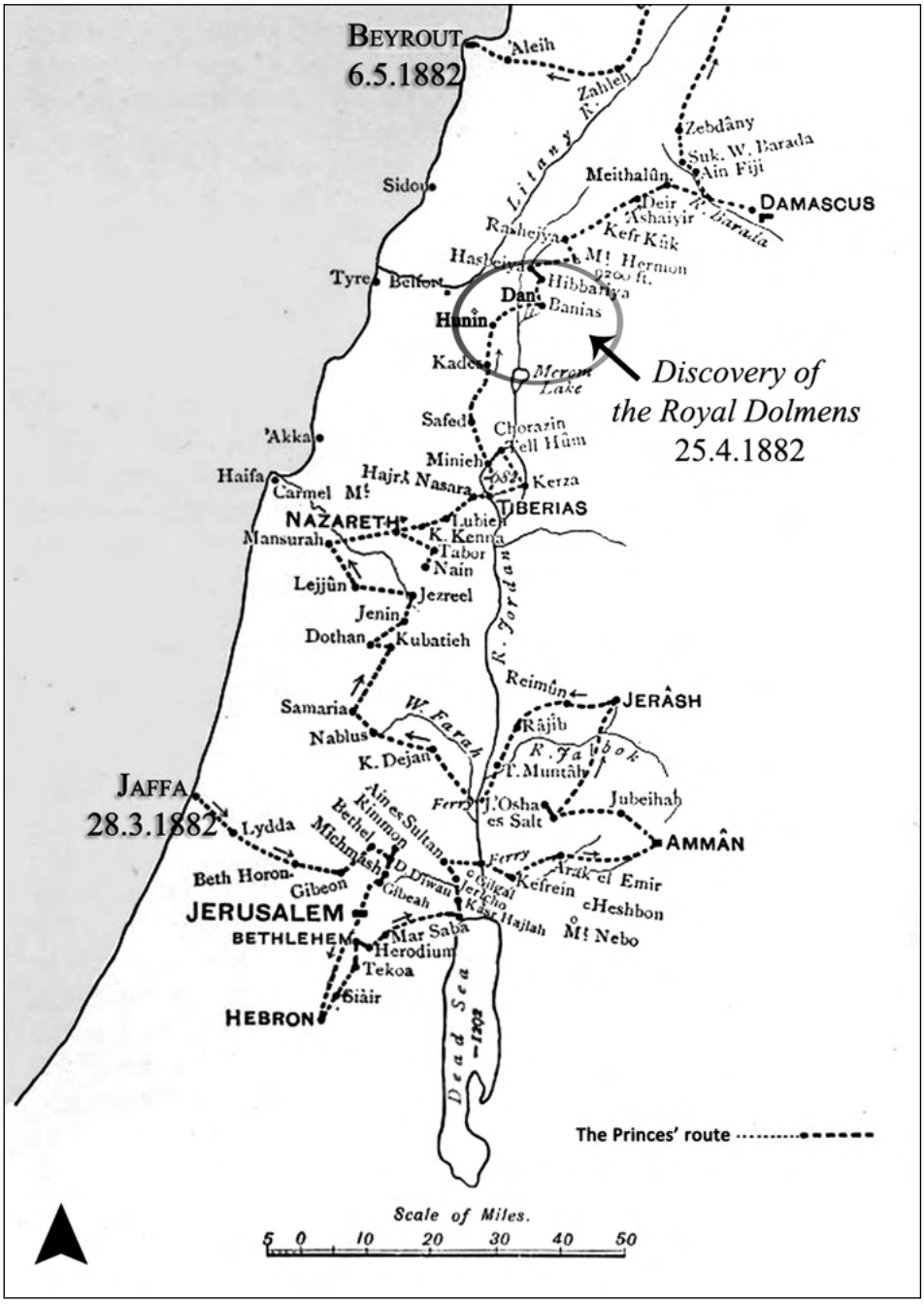

Fig. 1. Holy Land tour map of Their Royal Highnesses, 1882 (Prince Albert Victor and Prince George of Wales 1886: 558)

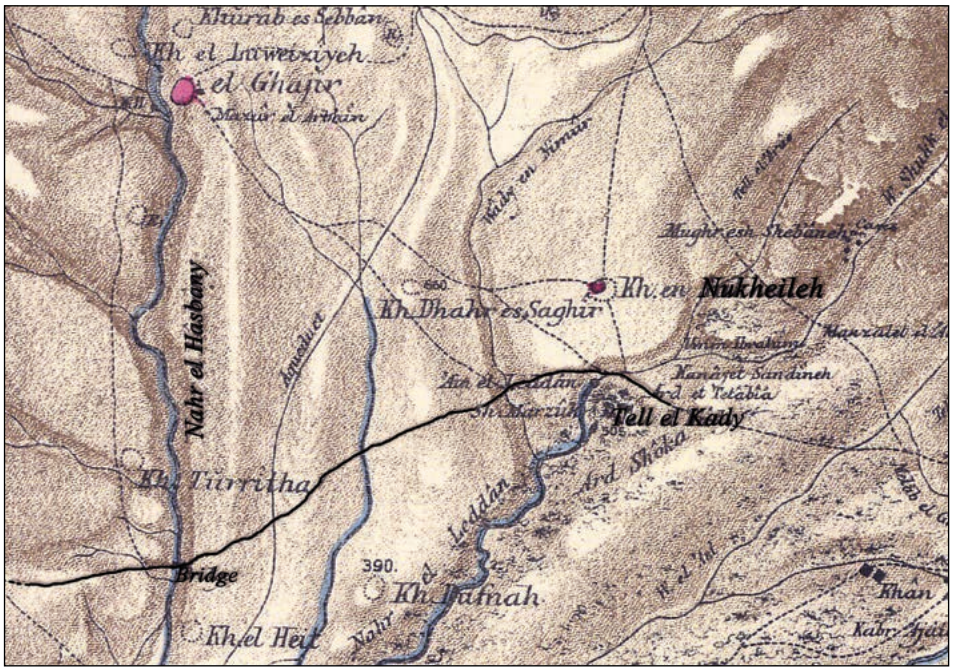

Fig. 2. Road to Tel Dan and the Nukheileh area (Palestine Exploration Fund 1880: Sheet 2)

They were the first to describe the dolmens at this locality, even if clearly not the first explorers to take this road (Guérin 1880; Kitchener 1878), which made Conder comment: 'it is very curious that they should not previously have attracted the attention of the many visitors who must have passed close by them in going to Tell el Kady' (Conder 1885: 249).

The royal party reported four complete dolmens from the Nukheileh, in addition to several other structures described as deliberately destroyed (fig. 3). The westernmost dolmens were discovered immediately after they crossed an unnamed river: 'just above the road from Abl to Tell-el-Kady, and immediately on crossing the stream without a name […] two of the dolmens stand close together' (Prince Albert Victor and Prince George of Wales 1886: 698–699). The first dolmen was reported to be covered by a capstone, 1.5 m long and 0.9 m wide. It was supported by three standing stones with smaller stones placed in the gaps between the massive wall stones for better balance. The dolmen was surrounded by a circle of stones. Conder described this dolmen as 'the most perfect example' (Conder 1885: 248; fig. 3:I).

The second dolmen (fig. 3:II) was located slightly southeast of the first. It was built of a stone tablet, 1.5 m long, supported by bedrock at its western end, with its eastern end lying on the ground. Conder defined this type of monument as a 'demi-dolmen', a term adopted from the Scottish architectural historian James

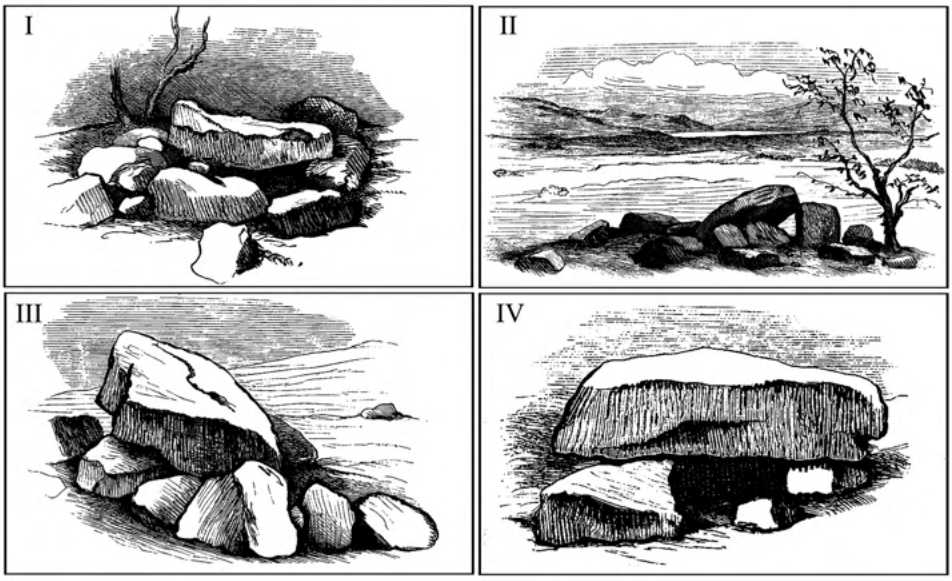

Fig. 3. The 'Royal Dolmens': four dolmens found by Conder and the princes (Conder 1882d: 226–229)

Fergusson (Conder 1882c; 1889; Fergusson 1872). It seems that a simple typo led Conder, and later the princes, to apply the term 'semi-dolmen' when later referring to this second dolmen (Conder 1882d: 228; Prince Albert Victor and Prince George of Wales 1886: 699).

The third dolmen (fig. 3:III) was described as a slanted stone table: A capstone measuring about 1.5 m in length was stabilized on top of a standing stone, surrounded by a circle of stones similar to that surrounding dolmen I, with no burial chamber. The fourth and easternmost dolmen (fig. 3:IV) was built from a square capstone, 1.2 m long, supported by three standing stones. The royal party viewed all four dolmens as human-made structures requiring technical and engineering knowledge for their elevation and stabilization (Conder 1882d).

In addition to these four dolmens, Conder, Dalton and the princes identified several others, all destroyed and fallen, for which no measurement, sketch, or specific identifying details were supplied (Conder 1882d). The 1882 discovery of the Nukheileh dolmens doubled the total number of dolmens described from western Palestine by the end of the nineteenth century (Conder 1901) and were only the second basalt dolmens reported by the PEF survey (Conder, Kitchener and Palmer 1881; Kitchener 1877).

Notably, Conder's observations of the Nukheileh dolmens led him to draw some important conclusions regarding Levantine megalithic structures. He noticed that the primary feature of the Nukheileh dolmens was a circle of small stones surrounding them and noted the small size of the dolmens in comparison

to the ones he studied in Amman and Moab. Conder claimed that the small size was due to the heavy weight of the basalt slabs at Nukheileh compared to the lighter limestone and sandstone used east of the southern Dead Sea Valley (Conder 1882d). Today, it is clear that his conclusion is incorrect, as gigantic basalt capstones have been reported from the Hula Valley and the Golan (Epstein 1985; Sharon *et al.* 2017).

When reflecting on the function of Levantine dolmens, he suggested that beyond their use for burial (Conder 1882a; 1882b), the Nukheileh dolmens were used for religious rites (Conder 1882b; 1882d), perhaps related to the important religious centre of the city of Dan located immediately to the southeast. Specifically, Conder suggested that the dolmens were altars used in pre-Israelite or Canaanite sacred practice: 'we may have the remains of the sanctuary erected by Jeroboam to the calf idol… it is possible that the dolmens mark a yet older religious centre' (Conder 1882d: 229). Conder and Dalton attributed the numerous damaged and destroyed dolmens in the Nukheileh to deliberate destruction during a period of fundamental, iconoclastic reaction. They interpreted the absence of dolmens in Judaea and Samaria as supporting their conclusion that the Nukheileh dolmens were destroyed by the ancient Judaeans in the Old Testament period (Prince Albert Victor and Prince George of Wales 1886; Conder 1882b; 1886).

THE NUKHEILEH

The Nukheileh is a low basaltic escarpment in the northern Hula Valley, measuring approximately 10 m^2 and located between the Hasbany River gorge to the west and the foothills of Mount Hermon to the east. The northern slopes of the basaltic terrain are bounded by the cultivated fields of the village of Ghajar, and the escarpment's southern slopes merge into the Hula swamps. After the withdrawal of the Ottoman Empire at the end of World War I, the border between the French and British mandates was drawn through the centre of the Nukheileh. A few decades later, at the conclusion of the Mandatory period, this small region became a focal point of geopolitical conflict between the states of Israel, Syria and Lebanon. The dolmens were damaged by the digging of trenches and erection of military posts and army compounds on the hills and embankments of the Nukheileh. During 1964 and 1967, the area was an active war zone (Argaman 2007).

In addition to military activity, extensive engineering enterprises during the first part of the twentieth century destroyed the Nukheileh. The area was crossed by the Trans-Arabian Pipeline (TAPline), carrying oil from Iraq to the Lebanese coastline. The laying of the pipeline was a vast construction project, involving massive digging into the ancient basaltic landscape from east to west (fig. 4). As part of this operation, a wide diversion trench was dug through the entire southern part of the Nukheileh to protect the streams and water bodies of the region from accidental oil leaks from the pipeline (Kaufman 2009; 2014). During the latter

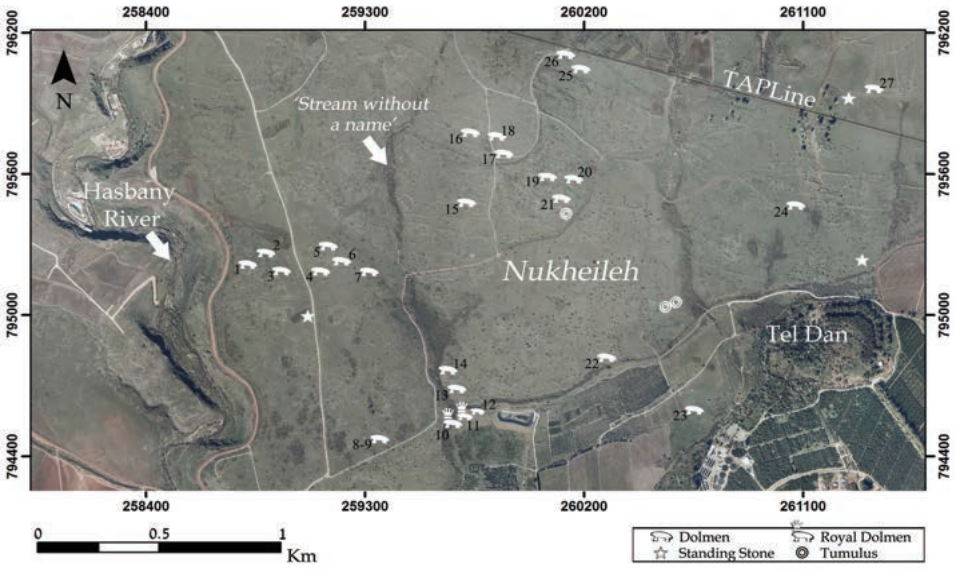

Fig. 4. The Nukheileh Dolmen Field. Icons indicate individual dolmens and megalithic structures. Background image used for this figure printed with the permission of the Survey of Israel © 2018

half of the twentieth century, the area was subject to intensive agricultural development as well as illegal basalt stone quarrying, primarily affecting the eastern section of the Nukheileh.

An archaeological survey was conducted at the Nukheileh during the late 1990s (Hartal 2017a; Shaked and Shemesh 2016), but no dolmens were reported. In the spring of 2016, we conducted a survey of the Nukheileh (IAA license S713/16). The survey was initiated with two primary goals. The first was to reconstruct the path taken by the royal party to Tel Dan and relocate the lost and long forgotten dolmens they described. The second was to establish the archaeological context for these dolmens by identifying characteristic features of the Nukheileh megalithic landscape.

SURVEY METHOD

In preparation for the Nukheileh survey, historical and recent maps, aerial photos, satellite images and written descriptions of the region were collected and analyzed with the use of GIS. The actual survey was executed by walking the region and recording the finds using a GPS-device with accuracy to about 20 cm. In the second stage, an RTK device (accuracy to 1 cm) was used for individual mapping of the monuments discovered. The measurements were calibrated with the use of Israel Mapping Center (MAPI) ground stations. Aerial photography and mapping with drones was also carried out, in particular where landscape conditions were

challenging. All resulting data was processed and analyzed with ESRI's ArcMap software.

More than 20 dolmens and megalithic monuments were located during the Nukheileh survey (table 1). They form a vast dolmen field spreading from the eastern bank of the Hasbany River to the foothills of Mount Hermon (fig. 4). In addition to dolmens, many other related archaeological elements were recorded including cupmarks, large upright stones and tumuli (artificial piles of stones). Various ancient structures and agricultural complexes were also mapped, primarily attributed to post-dolmen periods. The body of data collected in the survey will be published elsewhere (Berger, in press). Here we focus on the dolmens and related monuments and remains.

Table 1. Dolmens of the Nukheileh

#	Location ITM		Features				Special Features / Remarks
	North	East	Surrounding Feature	Surrounding Diameter (cm)	Chamber Dimension (cm; length, width height)	Capstone Size (cm)	
1	795166	258800	–	–	185 × 90 × 50	130 × 80 × 25	
2	795270	258890	–	–	170 × 130	–	
3	795254	258919	Ring Wall	750	220 × 130 × 90	250 × 160 × 60	
4	795288	259072	Ring Wall	400	110 × 75 × 30	120 × 80 × 30	
5	795290	259090	Ring Wall		200 × 170	–	
6	795275	259113	Ring Wall	480		180 × 90	
7	795268	259145	–	–	–	80 × 65 × 35	
8	~794400	~259240	–	–	–	–	Dolmens demolished (2014)
9			–	–	–	–	
10	794562	259691	Round Terrace	400	170×80×60	150 × 90 × 50 150 × 95 × 30	Royal dolmen #1 Cup marked stone found 5 m north to the dolmen
11	794577	259726	Ring Wall	480	200 × 95 × 110	150 × 120 × 30	Royal dolmen #2 – demi dolmen
12	794580	259734	Ring Wall	430	–	–	Ruined
13	794650	259690	–	–	90 × 75 × 20	80 × 75 × 30	
14	794787	259653	–	–	–	70 × 30 × 30	Demi dolmen

Table 1 (continued)

#	Location ITM		Features				Special Features / Remarks
	North	East	Surrounding Feature	Surrounding Diameter (cm)	Chamber Dimension (cm; length, width height)	Capstone Size (cm)	
15	795542	259646	–	–	–	100 × 50 × 20	Demi dolmen
16	795727	259754	Ring wall	500	–	–	Ruined
17	795685	259841	Ring wall	400	70 × 50	–	Ruined
18	795706	259828	Round terrace	400	130 × 115 × 40	–	
19	795616	260042	Ring wall Tumulus	350 900	190 × 110 × 90	90 × 65 × 20 160 × 70 × 40 80 × 60 × 20	On top of a mound
20	795661	260122	Ring wall Tumulus	500 700	140 × 80	100 × 80 × 20	Ruined On top of a mound Standing stone and a cup marked stone near tumulus western rim
21	795489	260102	Ring wall Tumulus	350~570 650	180 × 60 × 50	135 × 130 × 40	On top of a mound
22	794823	260303	Tumulus	650		180 × 90 × 40 100 × 50 × 30	
23	794596	260639	Rectangular terrace	400	170 × 100	120 × 120 × 40 100 × 35 × 20	Chamber located at northwestern corner of the terrace
24	795272	261110	–	–	–	200 × 80 × 50	Demi dolmen
25	796063	260224	–	–	–	80 × 80 × 25	Demi dolmen
26	796063	260224	–	–	150 × 90 × 50		On top of a mound
27	795971	261388	Ring wall Tumulus	1400 1800	600 × 160 × 100	–	On top of a mound Ring wall built up to three courses high

RESULTS

Reconstructing the Royal Path and Relocating the 'Royal Dolmens'

On their way east toward Tel Dan, the royal party followed the ancient road leading from the Lebanese coast town of Tyre to Damascus. Tracking the actual path in the heavily disturbed landscape of the Nukheileh was challenging. Our efforts focused on the section of the road between the old bridge over the Hasbany River and Tel Dan (fig. 2). Due to the location of the area on the political border and within a conflict zone, the actual road ceased to exist decades ago (Berger and Goren 2018). Identifying the crossing point of the 'stream without a name' mentioned as a geographical reference was even more difficult due to wild vegetation overgrown on the banks of the small brook. Current road crossings are marked by military tank tracks and similar landscape marks.

In their report, the princes and Conder mention a location with an: '...extensive view on all sides' (Prince Albert Victor and Prince George of Wales 1886: 698) in immediate proximity to the crossing point of the 'stream without a name'. A hilltop marked as a triangulation point indicating the height of 202 m above sea level (Survey of Israel 1950) seemed a suitable candidate for this viewpoint noted by the royal party. This hill, named Shauqa Fauqa in the maps, is where the ruins of a Syrian military outpost are visible (fig. 4; Berger and Goren 2018). Surveying the banks of the 'stream without a name' some 500 m south of the viewpoint, we located five dolmens (fig. 4, nos. 10–14). Two of these dolmens were identified as the dolmens described by the royal party (nos. 10 and 11 in table 1 and fig. 4; see also figs. 5–7). The capstone of dolmen no. 10 was broken

Fig. 5. 'Just above the road from Abl to Tell-el-Kady, and immediately on crossing the stream without a name […] two of the dolmens stand close together' (Prince Albert Victor and Prince George of Wales 1886: 698–699); I) second royal dolmen; II) first royal dolmen; III) 'the stream without a name'; IV) road from Abl to Tell el-Kady; V) Naphtali Mountains

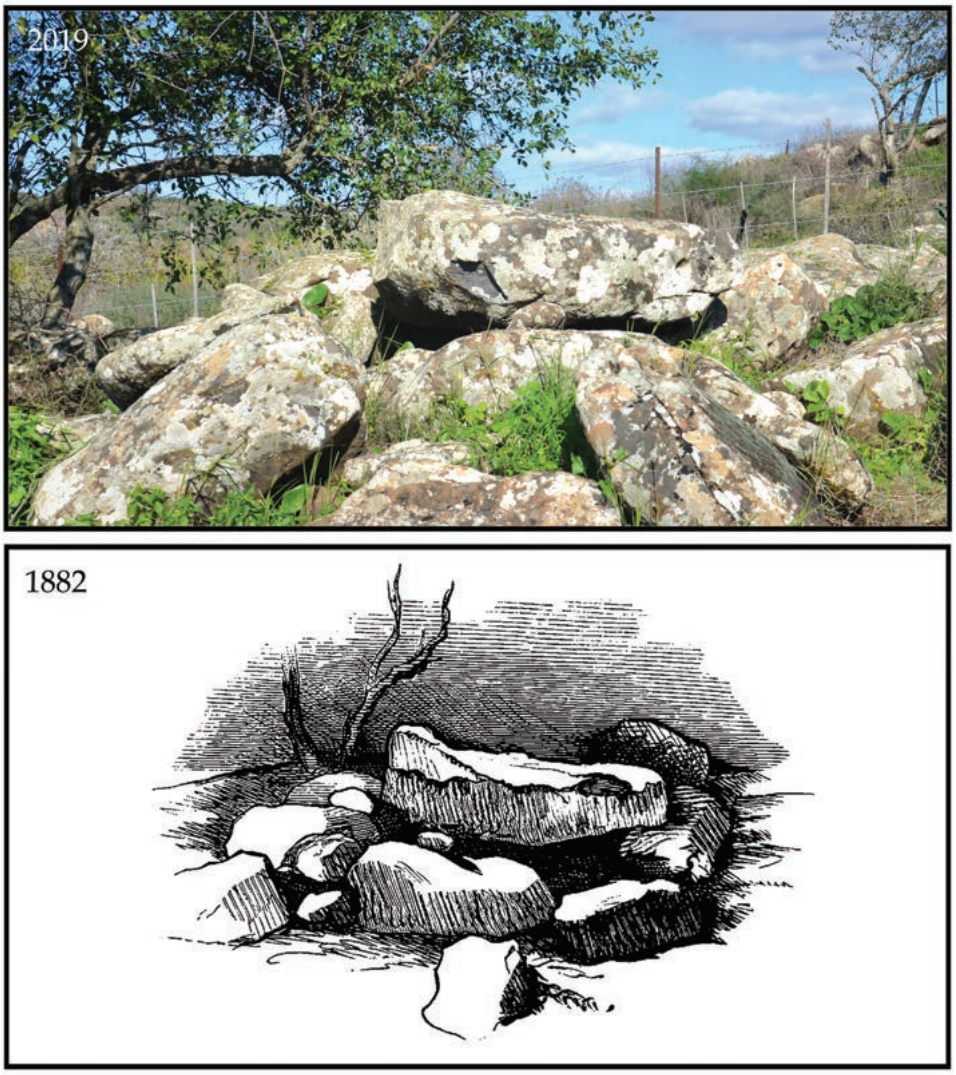

Fig. 6. Royal dolmen no. 1: then and now

subsequent to its discovery by the princes. Other than this unfortunate damage, it seems that the two dolmens and their surroundings remained unchanged for over 130 years. Even the trees drawn near the dolmens in 1882 still stand today (figs. 5–7). The route of the deep trench dug in later years after the TAPline project to protect water sources from an oil leak runs adjacent to the ‘stream without a name’. The two additional dolmens described by Conder and the princes in 1882 were not located, suggesting that they were destroyed by this trench. The same holds true for the ancient road travelled by the royal party.

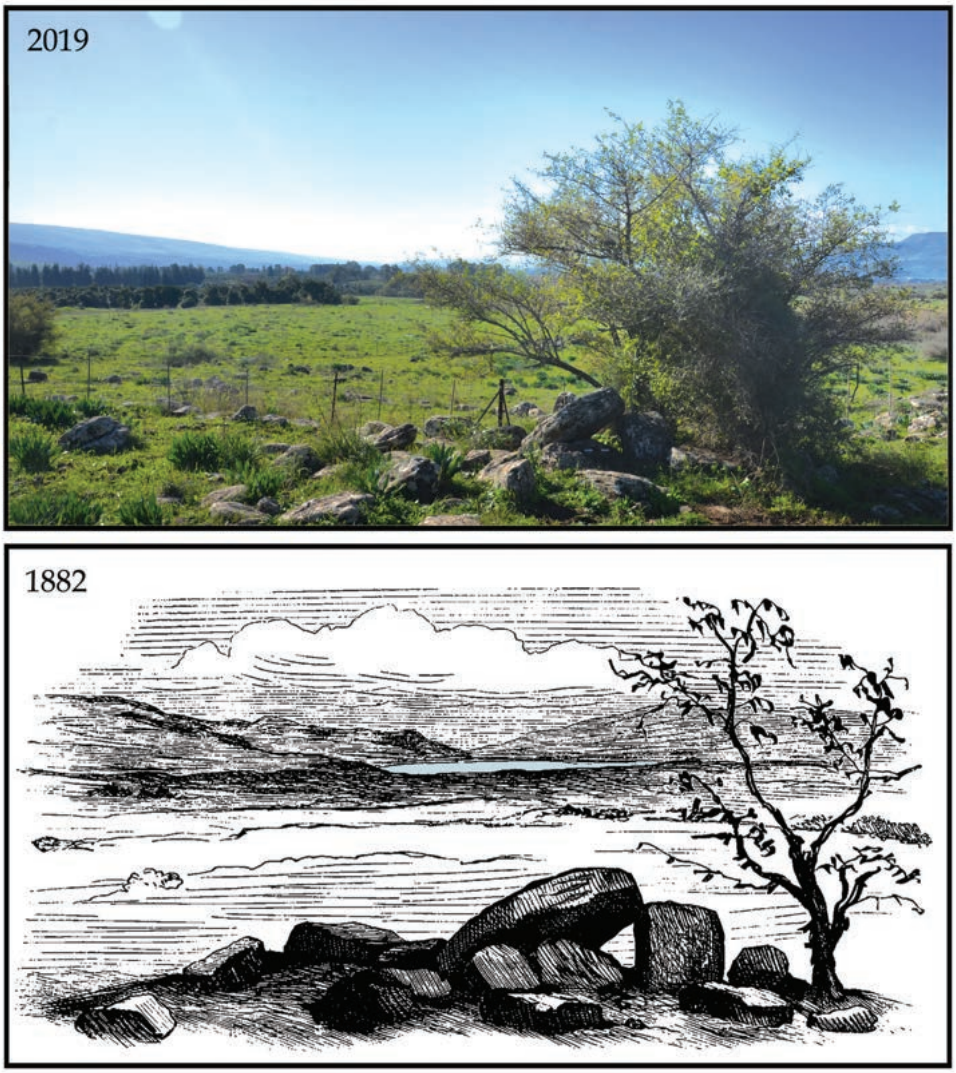

Fig. 7. Royal dolmen no. 2: then and now

The Nukheileh Dolmen Field

The Nukheileh survey resulted in the identification of an extensive dolmen field occupying most of the region. The survey confirmed what Conder and the princes had assumed based upon their brief visit to the region: that the dolmens they discovered are part of a greater dolmen landscape. In comparison to the massive fields of the Golan, the density of the Nukheileh dolmen field is quite low (fig. 4). For example, the Shamir dolmen field contains more than 400 dolmens in a similar 3 km^2 area (Sharon *et al.* 2017). High densities were also recorded in

Dir Saras and other Golan Heights localities (Epstein 1985; Hartal 2017b). The low density of Nukheileh dolmens resembles the pattern observed for dolmen concentrations in the foothills of the Naphtali Ridge and elsewhere in the Upper Galilee (Berger and Sharon 2018; Stepansky and Bron 2011).

The Nukheileh dolmens were constructed from local basalt slabs and boulders in a variety of types and sizes (table 1; figs. 8, 9). They are relatively small compared to dolmens in many fields in Israel and Jordan (Alexander 2017; Berger and Sharon 2017; Epstein 1985; Fraser 2015; Freikman 2014; Hartal 2017b; Stepansky 2005), yet well within the size range of the dolmens of the Upper Galilee (Stepansky 2012; 2014) and the western slopes of the Golan Heights, such as at Lehavot HaBashan and Givat HaEm (Berger and Sharon 2018; Hartal 2017a: 98). Similar to dolmens of other localities, the smallest Nukheileh dolmens (e.g., nos. 7, 13–15, 17, 25; fig. 8) are unsuitable for burial of a complete adult body. This fact runs counter to the generally accepted definition of a dolmen as a megalithic tomb (Fraser 2015) and led Conder to suggest that they were use for cultic ritual rather than for burial (Conder 1882a; 1882b; 1885; 1889). Other possibilities include their use for secondary and partial burial or for the burial of children.

Most of the Nukheileh dolmens (19 of the 27 structures; table 1, nos. 1–10, 13, 17–21, 23, 26, 27) are simple single-chamber dolmens covered by a single or up to a few large capstones (types A and B in Zohar's 1992 typology). The next most common type (five structures; table 1, nos. 11, 14, 15, 24, 25) is the demi-dolmen identified by Conder (after Fergusson). The demi-dolmen typically consists of a single large basalt slab with one end lying on the ground and the other supported by a single smaller crude stone (figs. 7, 8:III). Although this type is quite rare in the Levant (Fraser 2015; Hartal 2017b), it is found in the Upper Galilee (Berger and Sharon 2018: figs. 11, 15) as well as in Jordan (Conder 1889). One of the Nukheileh dolmens (table 1, no. 22; fig. 9:IV) could not be attributed to any of the suggested dolmen typologies (Fraser 2015; Hartal 2017b). This is a double-chambered dolmen. The chambers are located at the rim of the surrounding tumulus and not at its centre as in most encircled dolmens in the Nukheileh field. Two of the dolmens (table 1, nos. 12, 16) were heavily damaged and their typology could not be determined.

Sixteen of the Nukheileh dolmens are encircled by a ring wall, terraces, or tumulus, ranging in diameter from 3.5 to 5 m. The exceptions are dolmen no. 3 (fig. 9:II) and dolmen no. 27 (table 1). These are the largest dolmens in the field, encircled by ring walls measuring 7.5 and 14 m respectively, with a large chamber in the middle. While these ring walls are typically simple circles of crude basalt stones, the wall surrounding dolmen no. 27 still stands to a height of up to three courses.

Additional dolmen-related stone monuments were recorded during the survey. These include two small 'menhir like' standing stones (fig. 10:I), three

Fig. 8. Nukheileh's small-scale dolmens; I) dolmen no. 13; II) dolmen no. 7; III) demi-dolmen no. 25

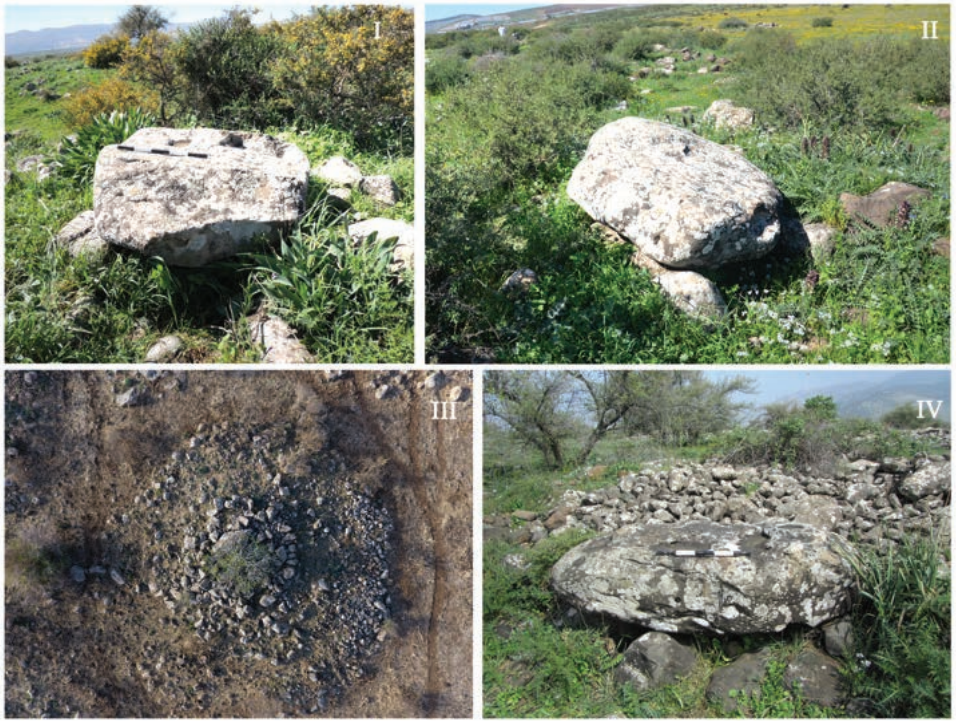

Fig. 9. Dolmens of the Nukheileh; I) dolmen no. 21; II) dolmen no. 3; III) dolmen no. 19; IV) dolmen no. 22

large tumuli and large cupmarked stones scattered in the landscape (fig. 10:II). The tumuli found are surrounded by massive circular walls, built up to two or three courses high (fig. 10:III). All of the tumuli have round, shallow crater-like depressions at their top. This element was recently documented in several dolmen tumuli in the Golan Heights and the Korazim Plateau (Alexander 2017; Berger and Sharon 2017).

Fig. 10. Dolmen-related stone monuments; I) standing stone; II) cupmarked stone; III) tumulus

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The 1882 discovery of the Nukheileh dolmens is one of the pioneering discoveries in the study of the Levantine megalithic phenomenon. The project presented here — to reconstruct a day's journey of the 1882 royal expedition and relocate the dolmens reported — was not without its challenges. These stemmed primarily from the dramatic regional landscape changes in the years since the visit of Princes George of Wales and Albert Victor and C.R. Conder. After detailed study of the available documentation, application of advanced mapping and recording methods and, most of all, meticulous and high-resolution surveying of the area, the lost dolmens were found.

The survey revealed that the four dolmens described by Conder were part of a dolmen field covering a large area of the northern Hula Basin basalt escarpment. Twenty-seven dolmens were identified in this field (fig. 4; table 1). The Nukheileh field is not very extensive or dense in comparison to other fields in the Southern Levant; however, it falls well within the range of the dolmen phenomenon of the Hula Basin (Berger and Sharon 2018). The Nukheileh dolmens are relatively small, made of unmodified large basalt slabs, with most of the dolmens consisting of a single chamber covered by a large capstone. Many of the dolmens are surrounded by a circle of medium-sized stones, but only a few had large tumuli.

The two 1882 dolmens that survived the landscape upheavals of the intervening years are surprisingly unchanged (figs. 6, 7). Even the trees drawn next to the dolmens may be the same ones recorded in the new survey. The capstone of dolmen no. 10 was subsequently broken, but even this breakage is along a crack that was drawn by Conder (fig. 6). The other two dolmens described by the 1882 royal party were probably destroyed during the construction of the slope designed to block the spread of accidental oil leaks in the TAPline running to its north (fig. 4).

The 1882 discovery strengthened the hypothesis that Conder was formulating about the function of dolmens. Observing the small dolmens of the Nukheileh and the megalithic monuments without burial chambers led him to suggest

their use for cultic rites rather than for burial (Conder 1882b; 1882d; 1885). The proximity of the dolmens to the important ritual centre of Tel Dan, with its biblical temple, supports Conder's view of the dolmens as places of sacrifice during several historical periods (1882d). The royal party's discovery of the Nukheileh dolmens took place only a few months after Conder completed his survey of Eastern Palestine (Hartal 1987). The Nukheileh dolmens were Conder's last dolmen discovery in the Levant, marking the end of his pioneering research (Fraser 2015).

Conder wrote that the discovery of the dolmens was a highlight of the princes' Holy Land expedition, a special moment that would connect King George V to the Palestine Exploration Society throughout his life (Palestine Exploration Fund 1936). The rediscovery of the long forgotten Nukheileh dolmens has demonstrated that such megaliths survive even in heavily disturbed landscapes. It has enabled us to shed new light on important discoveries made by pioneering researchers, highlighting their contribution to the study of Levantine dolmens and to the ever-growing body of knowledge on the still somewhat mysterious subject of megalithic structures in human culture.

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