

# Living Like a Judge

## A House at Khirbet el-Maqatir from the Time of the Judges

By Gary A. Byers

In 1995, I submitted my thesis to Baltimore Hebrew University. Entitled “The Central Mountains of Iron Age 1A Palestine: A Pattern of Autonomy among Settlements, Houses and their Inhabitants,” my focus was on life during the 12th century BC (Iron Age 1).

I got interested in the topic because I wanted to know the people of the Bible better, and I figured studying their houses was a great way to get to know them. Getting to know people by observing what was sitting around their houses was a technique I had “perfected” as a pastor in Frederick, Maryland where I lived and served.

It might surprise some to know that my thesis conclusions back then, based on the most recent archaeological data at the time, have continued to be supported as additional evidence is uncovered every year in excavations. But of no surprise is how the archaeological evidence is totally consistent with the biblical record.

Unfortunately, all my research was done in the library because I had never excavated an Iron Age 1 (IA1) house from the time of the Judges. I still hadn’t—until this year (2013) at Khirbet el-Maqatir (KeM).

### Khirbet el-Maqatir

This was our eleventh season of excavation at KeM, ten miles north of Jerusalem in the West Bank. Dig director Dr. Bryant Wood wanted me to excavate a pile of stone rubble at the northwest corner of the Late Bronze Age city wall of the

Canaanite city of Ai, captured by Joshua about 1400 BC. Since my square sits between the 90’s excavation of two Israelite houses from the Judges period, we are certain this is what I have under my stone pile, too.

As frequently seen in the hills of Israel’s West Bank, farmers from the post-biblical world tended to clear grain fields by piling stones on top of still standing ruins. While they also took many of these stones to build their own houses, eventually these ancient ruins were completely covered over with small boulders and cobble stones. The same phenomenon was true of KeM’s first century house excavated in 2011 (Byers 2012).



Michael Luddeni

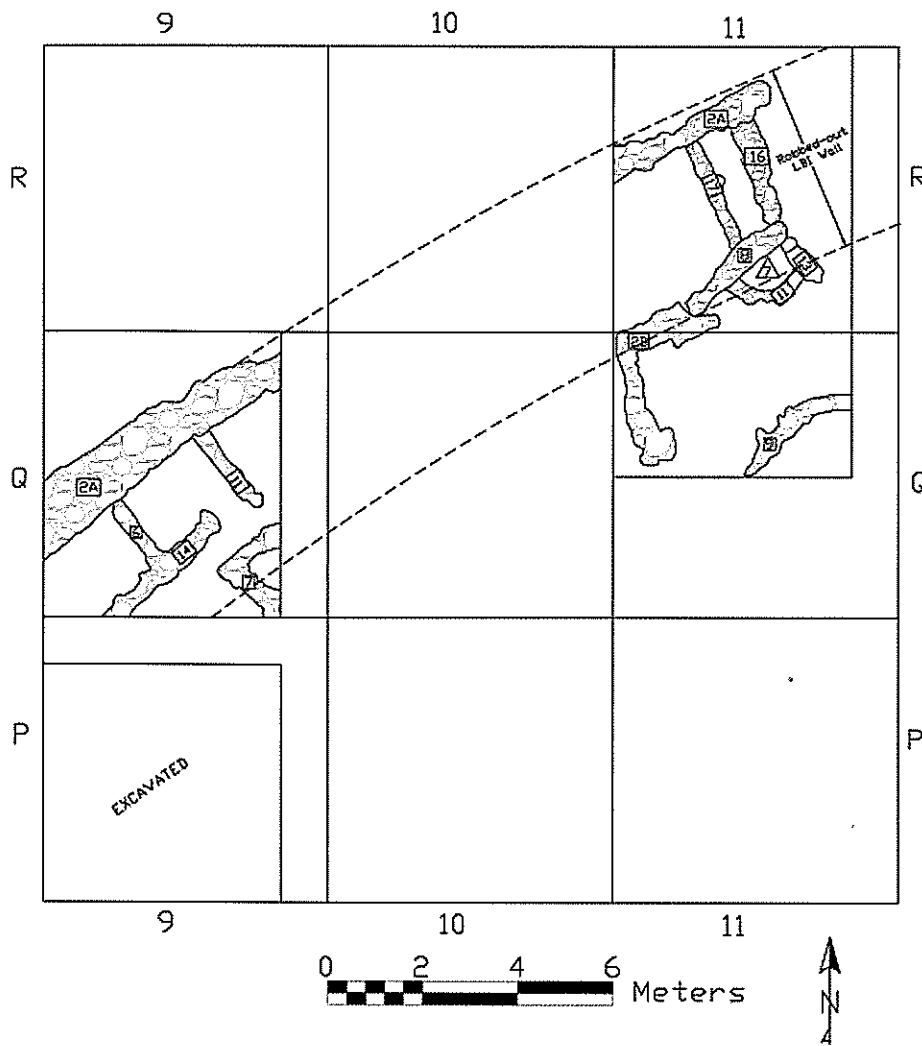
**This interior wall was still standing over 5 feet high under a pile of stones when excavated in 2011. Known as a fenestrated wall, it was a common feature of New Testament era houses, and was the first century AD counterpart to the 12th century BC interior pillared house walls. Both are generally understood to separate domestic stables from the rest of the house.**

While these stone piles are a bit difficult to excavate by hand, they are actually a blessing to archaeologists. Whatever was buried under them centuries ago has hardly changed since.

Admittedly, we have literally only begun to scratch the surface of my Israelite house and have not reached a floor level yet. All we have to show at the moment are a few fragmentary stone wall lines, lots of broken pottery from the time of the Judges, a large grinding stone and a number of the ubiquitous flint nodules chipped into generally round slingstones. Yet, this is precisely the material we expect to find in a house from the time of the Judges.

### Iron Age 1 Villages in the Time of the Judges

A quick review of our current understanding of IA1 villages would be helpful. Archaeologists have long noted the settlement change in Israel’s highlands—region of Samaria in the north,



Jerry Taylor

**Plan of fragmentary evidence of previously excavated houses** from the time of the Judges, built along the inside of the northwest corner of the Canaanite city wall at KeM. The author is excavating the squares between these two houses.

required a central authority to construct. There were no city walls or gates, and no administrative centers or temples in these villages. So it is not surprising that no type of royal inscriptions have been found in these villages, either—in fact, hardly any evidence of writing at all.

### Iron Age 1 Houses in the Time of the Judges

Inside these unique new villages, houses are constructed on a new plan, as well. In its most basic form, there is a single rear room running the width of the house. Three long rooms are attached perpendicular to it, with the doorway into the structure generally at the opposite end of the central room (Stager 1985; Faust 2005; Miller 2006).

While exterior walls were generally stone-constructed to the roof, the interior walls separating the three long rooms were frequently constructed as rows of stone pillars. Since the central room was typically a courtyard, the pillared walls often had benches, storage bins, mangers or a low curtain wall built between the pillars.

Not surprisingly, this new house plan has come to be known as a “pillared house” or a “four room house.” Beginning to appear throughout the central hills in the 12th century BC, the plan eventually spread across the Holy Land and remained the most popular house type for the next 600 years.

through all of Benjamin to the southern slopes of Judah’s Hebron hill country—beginning in the 12th century BC (IA1). It is the time of the Judges in the Bible (Faust 2005; Miller 2006).

After the Conquest of Canaan, the Israelites did not quickly or completely occupy the land (see Judges 1). In fact, they apparently spent a few generations continuing to live in tents before settling in unwalled villages. The archaeological evidence of their settlement, beginning in the early 12th century BC, is amazingly consistent across the central mountain region. It is the time and the place for so much of the Book of Judges.

These newly settled villages were very different from the Canaanite and Philistine cities found along the coast and in the major valleys. They were also different from what was in this region, both before and after. KeM was walled in the Bronze Age (the city of Ai) before our Judges village, and walled again later in the Hellenistic period. During IA1, it appears to be a simple cluster of houses.

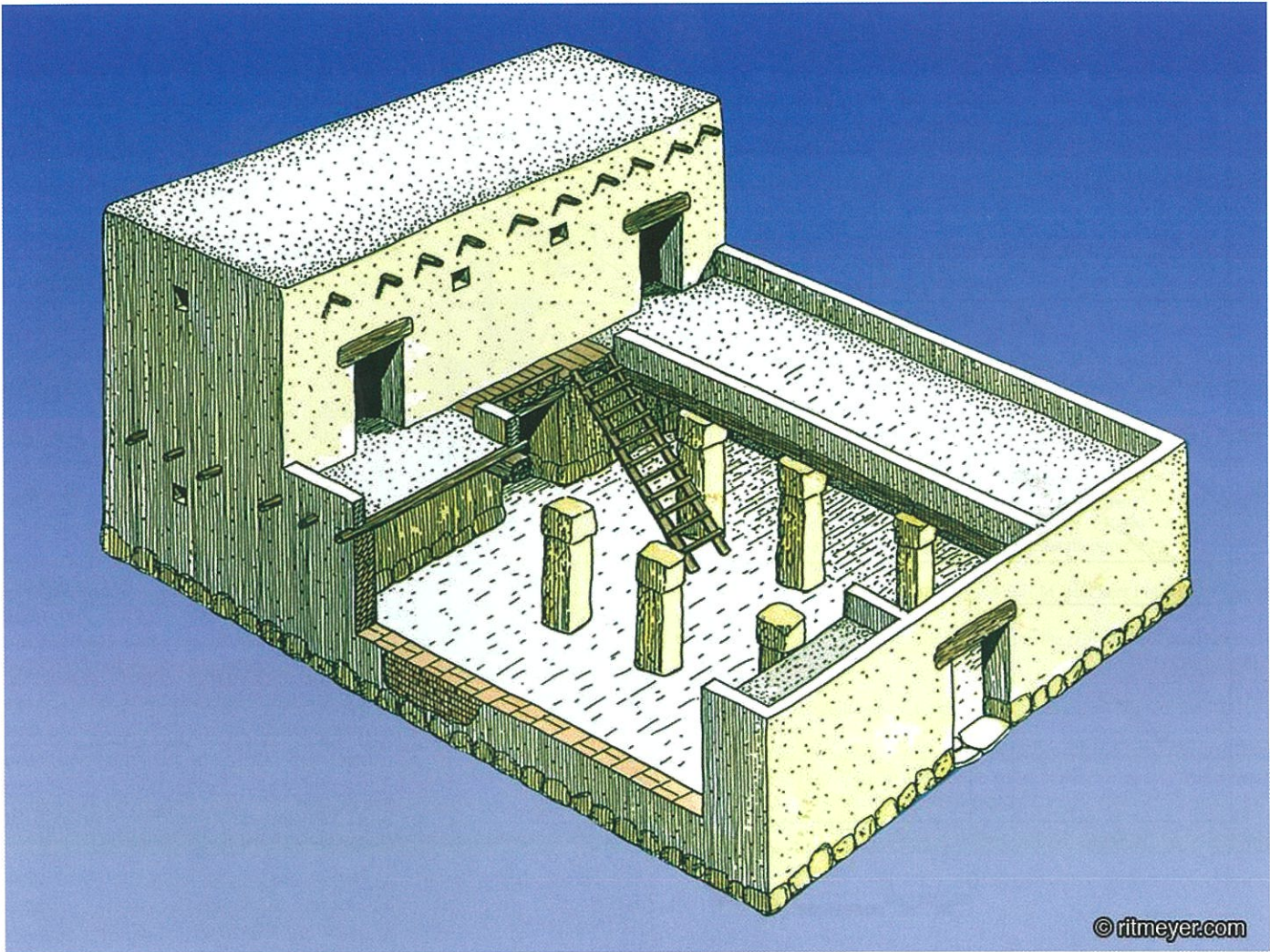
Along with no city wall, these villages did not seem to have any governmental buildings—structures which would have

### The Contents of Iron Age 1 Houses in the Time of the Judges

Inside these houses, archaeologists find very standard forms of cooking pots and large storage jars. Along with a few other jars, jugs and bowls, this was the extent of a meager pottery repertoire used by the families who lived in these houses. The vessels were very plain, not decorated, and almost never are any imported pieces found. Of course, this was very different from the cities in the coastal plain and major valleys (see Faust 2005; Miller 2006).

Grinding stones for processing grain are very common in all these houses. Mangers suggest some animals were kept in the house, probably a few sheep and goats based on their numerous bones identified in excavations. To one’s surprise pig bones were absent!

In comparison to the cities of the coastal plain and major valleys, few luxury items were found in these houses. Minimal metals of any kind, but iron in particular—unusual since this



Leen Ritmeyer

While every house was slightly different, archaeologists have identified a general plan and type that began in the central hills of Canaan during the time of the Judges and proliferated throughout the Holy Land during the next 600 years. This reconstruction of that standard plan, drawn by KeM architect Leen Ritmeyer, included one room across the back with three adjacent perpendicular long rooms. The central room was generally a courtyard with the doorway opposite the rear room.



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1990's excavation in this square exposed these walls, built into the remains of the Canaanite city wall on the city's north side (view to the west). The first inhabitants of this house probably excavated the city wall, themselves, and reused the stones to build their house. No interior pillars were identified in this house. The author is excavating a new square at the top of the picture.

period is IA1! That's what makes these communities so different. While iron implements begin to appear in the cities elsewhere, they are much rarer in these houses.

### The Khirbet el-Maqatir House in the Time of the Judges

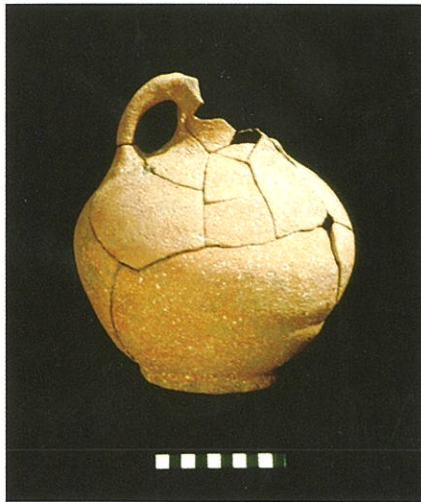
The house I am now excavating at KeM is no doubt like the two excavated on each side and consistent with the pattern in the region. All appear to be built with the rear room against the solid inside of the Bronze Age city wall. Unfortunately, the perpendicular rooms, including the central courtyard and doorway were not buried under our stone pile and have not been well preserved. We hope to find better evidence in the one we are excavating.

The ceramic repertoire from our house is precisely what has been found elsewhere—mostly



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**Found outside the Iron Age 1 houses at KeM** was this cooking pot from the time of the Judges.



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**This jug from the period of the Judges** was found, along with a basalt grinding stone and a limestone roof roller, in one of the houses adjacent to the author's square.

large storage jars and cooking pots. The agricultural nature of our village can be seen from the large grain grinding stone and numerous chipped flint nodules.

While regularly considered slingstones, some of these chipped nodules are a bit large and more squared than rounded. They may not have been created as slingstones but for domestic use as pounders or grinders in the kitchen or around the house. Of course, in a battle defending your city, you would sling anything at your enemy—including the proverbial “kitchen sink” or, in this case, the kitchen grinding and pounding stones!



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**While most of these chipped flint nodules from KeM** are slingstones from the two battles fought at Ai (Joshua 7-8), some are domestic pounders from the Israelite houses dating to the time of the Judges once located here.



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**Modern reproduction of an ancient sling** created by a local Palestinian in Jerusalem. The smooth stone in the sling pocket came from the Elah Brook where the author found 5 smooth stones—like David did for his battle with Goliath.

## Conclusion

The Bible offers an interesting conundrum that connects with KeM. It sits within the

tribal region of Benjamin, along Benjamin's northern border with the tribe of Ephraim. Three times the Bible mentions what might be understood as specially trained left-handed Benjamite warriors (Ju 3:15, 20:16; 1 Ch 12:2). Two of the three references mention left-handed slingers.

Whether by nature or nurture (see SeEVERS and Klein 2013), left-handedness in the ancient world was considered unique, even sinister (the Latin term for “left”). Yet, in the tribe of Benjamin (Hebrew: “son of my right hand”) are left-handed military specialists!

Whether lefthanded, righthanded or ambidextrous, archaeological evidence at KeM is consistent with what is known of IA1 throughout the central hills. KeM was another of those small 12th century BC villages in total harmony with the biblical description of life during the time of the Judges.

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