

IRON AGE SILOS AND THE STORY OF *Gideon*

By Mark A. Jenkins

The story of Gideon depicts an action designed to conceal wheat in a *gat*—a type of installation typically identified by translators as a “wine press.” I would argue that this translation decision may in fact be too specific for the type of installation the author had in mind. An examination of the terms translated as “press,” coupled with an examination of the use of *gt* at Ugarit, reveals that the word may have simply been a reference to generic farming installations. In addition, if the word in Judges 6 may also be considered a “farming installation,” then the text may preserve an ancient memory of the use of the extensive pitting activity of Iron Age I in the Central Hills of Canaan.

Gat and the “Winepress”

Judges 6:11 introduces the hero Gideon threshing wheat in a *gat* in the area of Ophrah, the location of which is uncertain.¹ The actions of Gideon relate directly to the general insecurities explained in 6:2–4. The Israelites “made for themselves the dens which were in the mountains and the caves and the strongholds” (NASB) because Midianites and Amalekites were invading the region and destroying all of their grain. The actions of Gideon in relation to his *gat* must be understood, then, for the purpose of concealing his grain. The translation of *gat* as “wine press” is universally agreed upon by all of the standard lexicons. Brown, Driver and Briggs give this definition as the only option, except when used in combination as a place name.² Koehler and Baumgartner do the same, but add that it was the part of the wine press used to crush grapes.³ The typical ancient winepress was hewn

from the bedrock and consisted of an upper basin used to trample the grapes, connected by a channel to a larger basin below. The upper basin, which was much smaller, would then be characterized as the *gat* according to majority opinion. The reason why this specific distinction is made is because there is another word used in Hebrew that is translated as “wine press” or “wine vat.” This word is used in Isaiah 5:2 to describe how God’s beloved constructs a stone-hewn *yeqeb*. The rationale, then, in all of the standard lexicons is that the *gat* was an upper basin used to crush grapes, while the *yeqeb* was the vat in which the juice gathered. What is significant about this interplay of seemingly interchangeable words is that the Hebrew Bible prefers the use of *yeqeb* by more than three to one. The use of *gat* as an independent noun, which is subsequently translated as “wine press,” is used only five times, one of which is in Judges 6:11. On the other hand, the word *yeqeb* is used 16 times and translated as “wine press,” “wine vat,” or simply “press.” Aside from the use of *gat* in Judges 6, the remaining four uses of this word occur in Nehemiah 13:15, Isaiah 63:2, Lamentations 1:15, and Joel 4:13, the latter three of which are used in poetic verse. In



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A treading winepress, in which people stomped on the grapes to release the juice, which was then drained out of the winepress through a hole on one end of the vat.

addition to its use as a common noun, *gat* is often used in collocation with other words to produce place-names, a phenomenon not seen with the use of *yeqeb* unless it is used in a genitive construction, as in the latter part of this story where the king of Midian is killed at the *yeqeb z°ēb*. If the traditional

understanding of *gat* is true, then it is not surprising that many commentators seem puzzled by the seeming impossibility of threshing wheat in a small basin used for crushing grapes.

Gt at Ugarit

The word *gat*, however, is not unique to Hebrew. The word is sometimes used at Ugarit, especially in legal texts, and there its definition is not so clear. According to Pardee, there is fairly broad agreement in Ugaritic studies that the Ugaritic word, which is attested in a few legal texts as part of a farming installation, in all likelihood corresponded to the press.

According to Del Omo Lete and Sanmartin, the word is defined as a “wine, or olive press,” with an extended meaning of “farmstead.”⁵ Bordrueil and Pardee define the word *gt* as a “farming installation with its buildings,” and further relate its etymology with *gn*.⁶ The texts in their *Manual of Ugaritic* that utilize the word include one letter and two legal texts, the translations from which are “farm,” “buildings,” and “farming installation” respectively.⁷ Schniedewind and Hunt define *gt* as simply an “agricultural center,”⁸ and in at least one text, define the word as an “agricultural/royal estate.”⁹ Pardee believes that the designation as a royal estate is too narrow, citing the example of RS 94.2965 where Yabninu, who is not of royal descent, acquires a *gt*, which is translated as a “farming installation.”¹⁰

In addition, at Ugarit the word *gt* appears to be the equivalent of Akkadian *dimtu*, “which had its own semantic evolution, from tower to fortified farm buildings to the farm itself.”¹¹ It is intriguing that the *Chicago Assyrian Dictionary* (CAD) defines the word as “tower” or “fortified area;” a usage that spans the Old Babylonian, Elamite, and Middle Babylonian periods.¹² In addition, the Elamite and Middle Babylonian usage of *dimtu* could also designate a “fortified area in the countryside,” and further, some include a “threshing floor.”¹³ The significance of this discussion is that all of these uses of *gat* or *dimtu* are roughly concurrent with dates that may be considered as the period of Judges. It may be possible that the term *gt/dimtu* in these texts suggest that the nature of the farming installations included the idea of security as well. The CAD summarizes the use of this word in the following way:

Apart from its primary use to refer to towers of all kinds, *dimtu* appears in several specific usages. In the OB [Old Babylonian] period, *dimtu* denoted fortified areas outside of cities and villages, which, as a rule, contained threshing floors and were sometimes quite extensive. They could develop into walled settlements...and must have originally been fortified in some way (perhaps with earthworks) to be called *dimtu*.¹⁴

The use of *gat* in the biblical text as “wine press” is the minority expression by three to one, and further, the book of Judges stands alone as representative of stories



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Above: Typical wine presses from Tell Burna.

closest to the time period when Ugarit was flourishing. The prophetic uses of the word *gat* in Isaiah 63, Lamentations 1, and Joel 4 appear to refer to a wine press, but perhaps only inasmuch that a farm installation would include a wine press, and poetic verse often utilizes the extent of semantic range to satisfy a parallel construction. However, I would argue that the reference in Nehemiah could refer to a “farmstead.” The verse states,

At that time I saw people in Judah treading wine presses on the Sabbath. They were also bringing in stores of grain and loading them on donkeys, along with wine, grapes, and figs (NASB).

In this verse the people of Judah are *תָּרְכִים גָּתוֹת* (treading) on the Sabbath, and *וּמְבִיאִים* (and bringing) stores of grain and loading them on donkeys. It could be argued that the bringing of grain is consequential to treading the *gat*. Might this passage be better understood that the people of Judah were “going about their farms, bringing stores of grain and loading them”? Nevertheless, the use of *gat* in Judges may be closer to the understanding of *gat* in the Ugaritic and Akkadian language suggesting that Gideon is threshing his wheat in a “farm installation,” perhaps even with the idea of security inherent in the understanding of the word. After all, the rationale for Gideon’s actions was for the purpose of making his grain secure from the Midianites. Furthermore, it is tempting to draw correlations from *dimtu* in that Gideon’s “threshing” may also infer the presence of a threshing floor as well at this *gat*. Although this explanation is tentative, there is an archaeological phenomenon in the Central Hill Country beginning in Iron Age I that may lend some credibility to this idea.

Iron Age Silos

At the beginning of the 12th century, one of the characteristic features of growth in the Central Hills was the proliferation of small pits. Pits are found at virtually every Iron I site, and many from early Iron IIA, from Dan to Beersheba. Currid stated that “so numerous are these pits at some sites they are considered the most characteristic feature of Iron Age I occupation.”¹⁵ In some cases, they are the dominant feature with very few contemporary structures associated with them. Although these pits may have served a variety of functions, grain storage appears to be the accepted function of most of these subterranean structures.¹⁶ On the basis of this explanation alone, a grain silo would be considered a farm installation and satisfy the most basic meaning of *gt* in Ugarit.



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An Iron Age I silo cut into a Middle Bronze context at biblical Shiloh.

The most prominent types of pits were of two varieties, the cylinder and “beehive,” or bottle-shaped pit.¹⁷ The cylinder pit was typically lined with stones, while the beehive pit had a narrow opening and widened at the base. The relative density and arrangement of such structures at several sites is somewhat enigmatic. At several sites the pits are located between buildings in seemingly haphazard arrangement. At Tell en-Nasbeh more than 50 were found, and in one area of 60 square meters, there were five complete pits and portions of three more.¹⁸ Tell Beit Mirsim yielded 20 pits in an area of approximately two dunams.¹⁹ At Shiloh, in an area of 150 square meters, 14 stone-lined pits were found, two of which contained carbonized wheat.²⁰ Izbet Sartah contained 43 pits, so dense in one area that the walls of the pits practically touched each other.²¹ Paul Lapp uncovered 17 pits in areas SW 1–9 at Tell Ta’annek which he dated to the 12th century BC.²² At Hazor, also from the 12th century, Yadin found 22 pits in an area of 330 square meters. More recently, Ben-Ami discovered an additional 70 in the upper part of the city, which he dated to the 11th century BC.²³ And finally, Shechem exhibits the same activity in the 12th century with one area of approximately 121 square meters containing seven such pits.²⁴ Additional sites exhibiting this pitting activity include Aphek, Dan, Beersheba, and Tel Zeror, to name a few.²⁵

The use of the small pit for grain storage on such a sweeping scale appears to be a unique feature of Iron Age I. Although there are examples of pits in the later stages of Iron I and the early stages of Iron II, their use is not nearly as prolific. Ilan comments that “apparently, it was not a common practice either before or after Iron Age I, that is, in the Late Bronze Age or the Iron Age II A.”²⁶ Although some pits have been found at places such as Megiddo, they are much larger in size. Grain storage practices during Iron II tended to lean more



An Israelite “four-room house” with stone silos at Izbet Sartah.

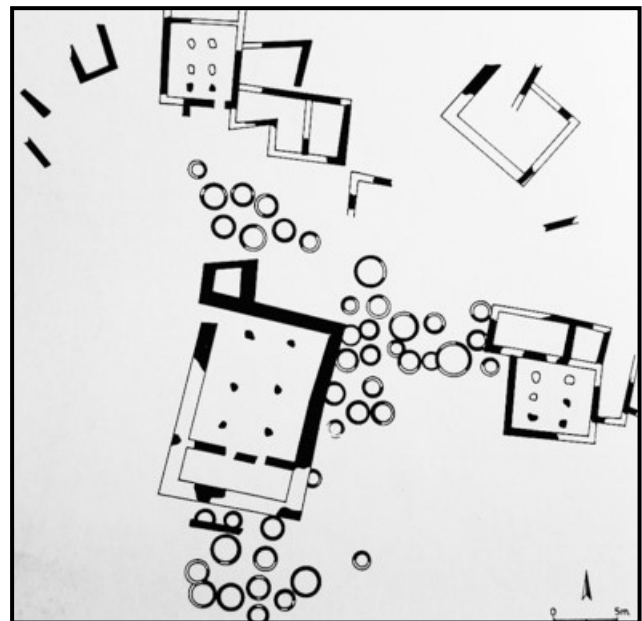
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towards centralized community structures. A common type of facility was rectangular in shape containing either solid wall corridors or pillared divisions.²⁷ These types of buildings can be found at a majority of Iron Age II sites in Israel.²⁸

Even if the use of these structures is generally agreed upon, there are still many enigmatic features regarding their practicality. First, why were they grouped in such random fashion and arranged so close to family dwellings? Ilan suggested that the proximity of pits to dwellings may have been related to ownership by specific family units.²⁹ At Shechem, one pit was constructed so close to the previous foundation of a Late Bronze wall that an unfortunate accident seems to have resulted in a worker’s death.³⁰ Not only are the groupings somewhat haphazard, but working them appeared to be a potentially deadly business as well.

Second, if this type of storage was effective for long-term storage, why was it abandoned for a larger, more centralized type of facility? According to Finkelstein, “the explanation is quite simple. A proliferation of silos generally characterizes groups in the process of sedentarization or societies organized in local rural frameworks.”³¹ Political stability in later periods gradually made it more preferable to store grain in large *pithoi* for better control of storage and to better facilitate its trade as a commodity.³² With the rise of monarchy and a more centralized control of the people of Israel, public storage facilities simply made more sense than maintaining dozens of small silos. If larger granaries are preferable under more centralized government, what is the motivating factor to build smaller ones when there is not a centralized government?

The initial connection regarding pitting activity in the story of Gideon was proposed by John Currid.³³ Here Currid focused on the introduction to the story of Gideon in 6:1–4. Verse 2 states: “The power of Midian prevailed against Israel.



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A top plan of an Israelite “four-room house” surrounded by silos at Izbet Sartah.

Because of Midian the sons of Israel made for themselves the dens which were in the mountains and the caves and the strongholds.”³⁴ The word in this passage translated as “dens” is actually the plural of the Hebrew word *minharah* מִנְהָרָה which he believes is a direct reference to these Iron Age pits. I believe he was correct in his assertion that the story preserved a memory of pitting activity, but in this verse, *metsadoth* מִצְדוֹת or “stronghold” might be a better candidate.

Certain enigmatic features of these Iron I pits can be explained if one sees the primary function of these pits to be adequate concealment and storage of grain in times of great

insecurity. In the spirit of the Akkadian word *dimtu*, the basic idea included not only farming installations, but security as well. If the word *gt* in Ugarit is indeed related to *dimtu*, the word may suggest farming installations with the purpose of providing security of produce, a stronghold if you will. Concealment and security may, in fact, be the purpose of pitting activity.

The enigmatic features of the construction and distribution of these pits can be answered by the following propositions. First, at some sites such as Shechem, Tell Ta'annek and Hazor, the dominant architectural structures appear to reflect the pitting activity, with only scant remains of buildings.³⁵ If Ben-Ami is correct in his estimation that the inhabitants of Hazor were “nomadic or semi-nomadic,” then it is reasonable to assume that the inhabitants may not have lived among the silos. Numerous grain silos were kept in a farm installation that seemed secure. Although fortifications do not appear to be involved, the fact that they were hidden in the ruins of a tell gave the builders a psychological facade of security. Second, within established villages, the fact that many of these pits were located between houses and other buildings suggests that they were placed in areas that could be watched closely and would not immediately be suspect to potential raiders. Because these granaries would have been sealed and covered, they could easily have been blended into the surrounding landscape by covering them with earth or other debris. Third, it cannot be assumed that all of the pits in a given area were in use contemporaneously. Any number of silos may have been open at given times for consumption, while others remained closed and hidden. Fourth, the effort that would have been needed for locating, opening, and destroying the silos and their contents would have been inhibited by such a random arrangement. The grain silo in and of itself would have been included in the general definition of a farm installation, but more importantly, they were farm installations that provided a feeling of security in insecure times.

Conclusion

It has been generally accepted that the Iron Age I pits of the Central Highlands were constructed for the purpose of storing grain or other perishable goods. However, there are enigmatic features associated with these pits, namely their excessive numbers and their arrangement within a given occupation. The story of Gideon, most likely reflecting a 12th century BC time period, suggests that the insecure socio-political climate of the day caused the Israelites to hide their grain from various foes. Gideon himself is introduced hiding his grain in a subterranean structure. Although this structure is called a *gat*, and translated as “winepress,” the word as it is used in Judges might be better understood as simply a “farm installation,” as it is understood in Ugarit. And further, inherent in this definition with its “buildings” or other structures may be the idea of security. The rationale for Gideon’s actions is that they were motivated by concerns for security. If it can be accepted that the Iron Age pitting phenomena can be explained as adequate concealment of grain in times of insecurity, then the story of Gideon may preserve an ancient memory of *gat*, or “secure farm

installation,” which may reflect the most dominant settlement indicator in the Central Hills of Canaan in Iron Age I.

If this is true, and Judges 6 does preserve an ancient memory of the purpose of this prolific pitting activity, it is difficult to avoid possible significant ramifications. The stories in Judges generally depict the formative period before there was a unified Israel under one king (or more). Most of the stories in Judges betray the tribal and regional nature of the events they describe, and the general insecurity of the times. The dominant narrative today is that the nation that would become Israel began in this formative stage as a cobbling together of indigenous Canaanites, based in part on the continuation of certain Canaanite ceramic traditions. One of the most recent excavations of pitting activity was at Hazor, published in an article by Doron Ben-Ami. An examination of the ceramic assemblage associated with some 70 newly discovered pits displayed a “departure from the Canaanite pottery tradition; some of the types herald the beginning of ceramic traits that become common in the subsequent period.”³⁶ These settlers in the Central Hills had a unique propensity for digging holes, and at least at Hazor, had a unique ceramic style. Regardless of what one believes about the identity of these newcomers, the practice of digging these pits appears to be absent from the Canaanite and Philistine lowlands. Furthermore, the fact that they are literally found from Dan to Beersheba suggests that there was a modicum of unity, at least in one aspect of a shared material culture. At one time, it was believed that the four-room house, the collar-rim jar, and the pit silo were indicators of Israelite settlement in the land. Although the first two have been dismissed as such, there may actually be a biblical memory of the latter. The story of Gideon in Judges 6 may preserve a memory of the use of these pits.

Endnotes for this article can be found at www.BibleArchaeology.org. Type “Endnotes” in the search box; next, click the “Bible and Spade Bibliographies and Endnotes” link; then page down to the article.



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