

## Archaeological Evidence of Gideon the Judge?

### Inscription from the Time of the Judges uncovered at biblical Ziklag

Nathan Steinmeyer July 21, 2022

Archaeologists officially announced the discovery of a 3,100-year-old inscription from the site of Khirbet al-Ra‘i that may be evidence of Gideon the Judge. Khirbet al-Ra‘i, thought by some to be [biblical Ziklag](#) (e.g., 1 Samuel 30), is a small hill settlement about 2.5 miles west of Tel Lachish, the important [Canaanite](#) city-state and, later, Judahite center famously destroyed by Sennacherib (701 B.C.E.). The Khirbet al-Ra‘i excavation—a joint project of the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, the Israel Antiquities Authority, and Macquarie University—has been carried out every summer since 2015.

The inscription contains the first-ever archaeological occurrence of the name Jerubbaal, known in the Bible as a nickname of the judge Gideon (Judges 6:31–32), and it dates to around 1100 B.C.E.—right about the time that many biblical scholars believe Gideon the Judge would have lived. This may be the first archaeological evidence of Gideon the Judge, but since the biblical Gideon lived in the [Jezreel Valley](#), nearly a hundred miles away, this inscription likely belonged to another Jerubbaal.



An aerial view of the site of Khirbet el-Ra‘i, looking west towards Israel’s coastal plain. *Photo by Emil Aladjem, Israel Antiquities Authority.*

Although it might not refer to the biblical Gideon the Judge, the inscribed name Jerubbaal, which literally means “May Ba‘al be great,” tells us a lot about how the Bible may preserve authentic names from this early period in Israel’s history. While later biblical writers used the word ba‘al to refer specifically to the

Canaanite warrior god Ba'al, the early Israelites likely understood the word simply to mean "lord," with the name Jerubbaal ("May the lord be great") referring to their god Yahweh. Thus, although the presence of the name Jerubbaal would be strange for an Israelite of a later period, it fits right in during the period of the judges.

Written in ink on the sherds of a small jug, in an alphabetic Canaanite script, the preserved name was likely part of a larger inscription that has since been lost. The name likely identified the owner of the vessel, which probably held a precious liquid, such as perfume.



The Jerubbaal inscription, written in ink on a pottery vessel. *Photo by Dafna Gazit, Israel Antiquities Authority.*

At the end of the Late Bronze Age (c. 1150 B.C.E.), [Lachish](#), which some argue was a regional center for the development of alphabetic writing, was destroyed and abandoned for two centuries. No further alphabetical inscriptions are known from the region that date to before the tenth century B.C.E., including those from nearby Khirbet Qeiyafa. That is, until the present find at Khirbet al-Ra'i, from c. 1100 B.C.E.—the very beginning of the Iron Age. We can assume that following the destruction of Lachish, its Canaanite inhabitants fled to Khirbet al-Ra'i, bringing the alphabet with them. The site suddenly found itself not only the largest settlement in the region, but also the bearer of an alphabetic writing tradition.

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