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“Flames from the Bramble” – The Geography of the Abimelech Episode in Judges 9 and the Identification of Beth-millo

Chris McKinny and Aharon Tavger

Abstract

The account of Abimelech in Judges 9 is filled with geographical details centered around the city of Shechem. Because of these details, past researchers of Abimelech’s ‘gory’ story have been generally able to trace the narrative setting, and even the specific locations mentioned in the account with archaeological ruins (e.g. Arumah at Khirbet el-’Ormah) in the near vicinity of Shechem. In this paper, we offer an additional correlation between one of the biblical toponyms and an ancient site by suggesting that the enigmatic “Beth-millo” of Judges 9 should be identified with the ruin of Tell es-Şufan on the basis of the archaeological, geographical, and toponymic evidence.

Shechem and its immediate vicinity is the setting of the Abimelech episode in Judges 9 (e.g. Mount Gerizim – *Judges* 9, 7). Several toponyms mentioned in the narrative only occur in Judges 9 and/or the preceding Gideon narrative (chapters 6-8). These include the following (for an in-depth discussion of these and all the place names mentioned in the book of Judges, see Gass 2005, 317–340): Ophrah (*Judges* 6, 11, 24; 8, 27, 32; 9, 5), the house of Baal-berith/El-berith (ibid. 9, 4, 46), Beth-millo (ibid., 6, 20), Beer (ibid., 21), Arumah (ibid., 41), the tower of Shechem/Migdal-shechem (ibid., 46-47, 49), Mount Zalmon (ibid., 48), and Thebez (ibid., 50; cf. 2 *Samuel* 11, 21). Several of these sites have been identified with certainty, while the location of others remains debated. Conversely, and while most scholars understand Shechem (Tell Balātah) and its environs to be the setting of Judges 9 (e.g. Fritz 1982; Gass 2005, 305–328; Gross 2009, 480–481; Webb 2012, 691–753; Sasson 2014, 373–405), several early proposals that identified Ophrah of Gideon with sites in the Jezreel Valley and the Shaon Plain (see below) have received some level of acceptance in recently published Bible atlases and other historical

geographical literature (e.g. Beitzel 2009, Map 45; Schlegel 2013, Map 4-6; but see Rainey & Notley 2006, 141). In this paper, we will briefly discuss past research for each of the sites outlined above, and add an additional layer to these proposals by offering a new candidate for the identification of Beth-millo (*Judges* 9, 6, 20).

Identification of places mentioned in Judges 9

Shechem

During the Amarna Age (i.e. 14th century BCE), Shechem was the seat of Lab'ayu and his sons who with their allies attempted to establish their hegemony from the Jezreel Valley to the Judean Shephelah (Finkelstein & Na'aman 2005; Rainey & Notley 2006, 83–85; Finkelstein 2016). In the Bible, Shechem does not appear in the conquest of Canaan (either in the narrative or the list of defeated kings in Joshua 12), but its surrounding mountains of Ebal and Gerizim are cited as the location of a covenant enactment led by Joshua (*Joshua* 8, 30-35). Shechem also appears during a further confirmation of this covenant during Joshua's farewell address (*Joshua* 24, 1, 25-27). Shechem next occurs in the Abimelech narrative (*Judges* 9). This narrative includes numerous geographical, cultural, and historical details, which, when taken together with Shechem's prominence in the Late Bronze and Iron Age I (see below) has resulted in an extensive corpus of literature related to Judges 9 (e.g. Finkelstein 2006; Endris 2008; Heffelfinger 2009; Na'aman 2011; Irwin 2012; Oeste 2012; Finkelstein & Lipschits 2017).

Throughout the second millennium BC, Shechem (Tell Balâtah) was one of the most significant sites (c. 60 dunams) in the entire southern Levant (cf. Toombs 1992, for references to Shechem in the second millennium). Shechem became a major city-state during the Middle Bronze II (Strata 22-15) and remained one of the most important cities in Canaan during the Late Bronze and Iron Age I (Strata 14-11) until the site was destroyed c. 1100 BC (Campbell 1993, 1347-1352; 2002, 169-234). Shechem was heavily fortified during the Middle Bronze IIB-C with a massive 'cyclopean' wall being attributed to Stratum 16 (Campbell 2002, 27-29). This line of fortifications continued to be used (or re-used) until

the Iron I and later during the Iron II.¹ Also during the Middle Bronze IIC (Stratum 16), a massive “migdal” temple (26.3x21 m with 5 m thick walls) was built on the western side of the tell near the western fortified gate of the city (Campbell 1993, 1349–1350; 2002, 9, 141–151). According to the excavators (found initially by the Ernest Sellin-led expedition in 1926), this huge building was destroyed in c. 1550 BCE, and a later, smaller structure (Building 5700/Temple 2 – measuring c. 14x14 m with walls c. 2 m thick) was built over its remains in c. 1450 BCE (Wright 2002, 176–185). To this building were added an altar and a huge standing stone in the front courtyard. This building continued to be used throughout the Iron I when it was destroyed c. 1100 BC (*ibid.*).

Since the George Wright-led excavations, some scholars have associated Temple 2/Building 5700 with the building mentioned in Judges 9. According to this interpretation, Judges 9 refers to this building in several instances within the narrative (Wright 1965b, 80–102; cf. 1965a; Campbell 1983; Mazar 1990, 250–251; Dever 2003, 126–127). These including the following:

1. Abimelech was paid “70 pieces of silver out of the **house of Baal-berith**” with which he hired “worthless and reckless fellows,” who helped him murder his brothers and establish his rule over Shechem and Beth-millo (*Judges* 9, 3–6).

2. A festival in “**the house of their (Shechem’s) god**” in which the Shechemites attempted to appoint Gaal the son of Ebed as their overlord instead of Abimelech (*ibid.*, 26–29).

1 According to the excavators, Shechem was abandoned during the 11th century, but was settled throughout the Iron Age II (Stratum X–VI). The first Iron II stratum (X) ended in destruction that was related to Shishak’s campaign (Campbell 1993, 1352–1353), but it should be noted that the site is not included in the Karnak City List (although Anson Rainey reconstructs No. 59 as Tirzah; Rainey & Notley 2006, 186). In the following layer, which would presumably relate to the Iron IIA, new fortifications were built over the massive Middle Bronze Age walls (Stratum IX), which the excavators suggest could be related to Jeroboam’s rebuilding of Shechem (Campbell 1993, 1353). The site was heavily settled during the 8th century/Iron IIB (Stratum VIII and VII), which was brought to an end by a destruction layer that should probably be related to the Assyrian campaigns against Israel in c. 722–720 BCE during the reigns of Shalmaneser V and Sargon II (*ibid.*). During this era, Shechem is mentioned by the prophet Hosea (6, 9) and in Samaria Ostraca No. 44 in the 15th regnal year of Jeroboam II (Ahituv 2008, 296–297). The Iron IIC (cf. *Jeremiah* 41, 5–6) and Persian periods are represented by the scanty levels of Stratum VI and V (Campbell 1993, 1353).

3. After being defeated in the surrounding fields and within the city itself, the “leaders of the **Tower of Shechem**² entered the stronghold of the **house of El-berith**” (ibid., 46-49).

4. An additional element to this interpretation is associating Temple 2’s standing stone with “the oak of the pillar” (ibid., 6) and the “diviner’s oak” (ibid., 37). This sacred tree is also suggested to be related to Abraham’s “oak of Moreh” (*Genesis* 12, 6), the “oak that was near Shechem” of Jacob (ibid. 35, 4), the “oaks of Moreh” near mounts Ebal and Gerizim (*Deuteronomy* 11, 29-30), and “the oak that was by the sanctuary of Yahweh” during Joshua’s farewell address to Israel (*Joshua* 24, 25-27).

In opposition to this theory, Lawrence Stager argued that the archaeological basis for Temple 2 was insufficient, and that it was more likely that the migdal temple continued to be used from the Middle Bronze II until its destruction in c. 1100 BC along with its associated standing stones and altar (Stager 1999; 2003). In our estimation, and regardless of the exact relationship, the correlation between the temple at Shechem (whether Temple 2/building 5900 or the migdal temple/Temple 1) and the various references to a large fortified temple/tower associated with a covenant (berith) and the gods of El and Baal remains compelling. Thus, it appears that the Tower of Shechem, the house of Baal-berith, and the house of El-berith all refer to the same structure within Shechem that can be identified with either “the migdal” temple or building 5900.

Mounts Gerizim and Zalmon

There is widespread agreement that Mount Gerizim (*Deuteronomy* 11, 29; 27, 12; *Joshua* 8, 33; *Judges* 9, 7) is located at Jebel et-Tor located to the southwest of Shechem (see Lott 1992 for references to Gerizim in post-biblical literature). The exact location of Mount Zalmon has not been agreed upon in the past (e.g. Simons 1959, 297).³ However, it is clear that it must have been located in close proximity to Shechem perhaps as

2 One explanation for the occurrence of “Migdal-shechem” (*Judges* 9, 46-49) as alternate name for the fortified temple (i.e. the “house of El/Baal-berith”) is a possible literary connection with the subsequent passage dealing with Abimelech’s death at the “strong tower” (מגדל עז) of Thebez (ibid., 50-54).

3 Zalmon is also mentioned in Psalms (68, 14), but this may be a reference to a mountain in the Bashan.

one of the lower shoulders of Mount Ebal or Gerizim, as it is mentioned during Abimelech's siege of the "Tower of Shechem" (*Judges* 9, 48) in which Abimelech and his forces climbed Mount Zalmon for bundles of brush to burn the temple. It is possible that Zalmon should be connected with Jotham's צל ("shade"; *ibid.*, 15) and Zebel's צל ההרים ("shadow of the mountains"; *ibid.*, 36),⁴ thus providing a literary connection to Jotham's prediction of the manner of Shechem's demise (*ibid.*, 15) and a reference to the mountain by which Abimelech first attacked his rival Gaal (*ibid.*, 48). If so, then Mount Zalmon both derives from this literary connection and the shade that marks both of the eastern slopes of Mount Gerizim and Mount Ebal as the sun sets in the west while Shechem remains in the light due to the physical gap of the Nahal Shechem (Wadi esh-Sh'air; *fig. 1*). As we shall demonstrate below, the location of Jotham's speech atop Mount Gerizim (or along its northern slopes) is an additional clue for identifying the possible location of Beth-millo.

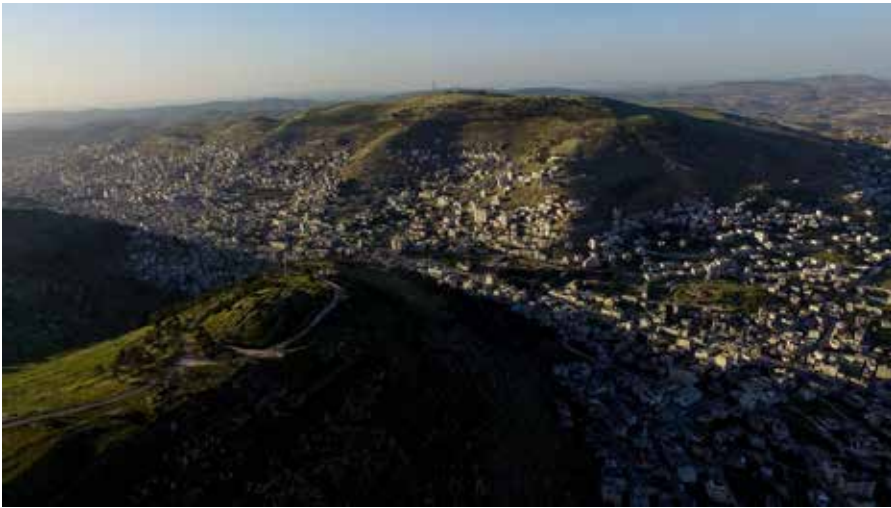


Figure 1: Shechem and Mounts Gerizim and Ebal with the afternoon shade, looking northwest (photo: B. Schlegel) , © Todd Bolen/BiblePlaces.com (used with permission)

4 With regards to the meaning of Zalmon, Donald Schley stated the following:
The name Zalmon is a diminutive nominal form of the Hebrew root *slm*, meaning dark or darkness. The term is related to the Akkadian *salāmu* ("to be/become black, dark"), and in the diminutive form probably means 'the small, dark/black one' (Schley 1992).

Ophrah of Gideon and the Abiezrites

The Ophrah of Gideon (*Judges* 6, 11, 24; 8, 27, 32; 9, 5) is clearly distinct from the Ophrah of the hill country of Benjamin and Ephraim (*Joshua* 18, 23; *1 Samuel* 13, 17; cf. *2 Samuel* 13, 23; *2 Chronicles* 13), which has been conclusively identified with eṭ-Ṭaiyibeh, east of Bethel (for a discussion of the identification of Ophrah and the archaeology of eṭ-Ṭaiyibeh and of the sites in its environs see McKinny 2015; 2016, 314-328; for other proposal see Peterson & Stripling 2017 [in this volume], 82*-83*). Ophrah of Gideon is specifically related to the Abiezrites, a clan within the tribe of Manasseh. The Abiezrites are known from the biblical text (*Joshua* 18, 2; *Judges* 6, 11, 34; 8, 2; *1 Chronicles* 7, 18; cf. *Numbers* 26, 30), but also from the Samaria Ostraca (e.g. Ostrakon No. 13; Ahituv 2008, 275).

Since Gideon's actions against Midian occurred in the Jezreel Valley (*Judges* 7, 1), many scholars have sought to find Ophrah in this region. Frank Abel (1937) suggested that Ophrah should be related to eṭ-Ṭaiyibeh, c. 8 km east of the Hill of Moreh. Zvi Gal thought to identify Ophrah with Kh. eṭ-Ṭaiyibeh, near Taanach (Gal 1982; cf. Rasmussen 2010, 295). Most notably, Zecharia Kallai identified Ophrah with 'Afûla (Kallai 1986, 422-424; cf. also Aharoni 1979, 263). At least part of the rationale for placing Ophrah in the north is based on the fact that Manasseh was allotted several prominent cities (e.g. Beth-Shean) "within Issachar and Asher" (*Joshua* 17, 10-11). However, this ignores the fact that Ophrah is not included among the Manassehite 'exceptions' of which "the people of Manasseh could not take possession of those cities, but the Canaanites persisted dwelling in the land" (ibid., 12; see Simons 1959, 291, for a similar rationale). It is also unclear why Gideon/Jerubaal and then Abimelech with their presumable rule/influence over Shechem would have any connection with a site that is located 70 km away to the north (or 90 km in the case of the eṭ-Ṭaiyibeh near the Hill of Moreh).⁵ Moreover, there seems to be a literary technique at work in Gideon's recruitment from the hills of Manasseh to the battlefield of the Jezreel Valley when compared to Deborah's journey from her "palm... in the hill country of Ephraim" to the same region (*Judges* 4, 4-10; *Psalms* 83, 10-12; cf. Gass 2005, 281; Finkelstein & Lipschitz 2017, 14-16).

5 For the same reason, one cannot accept Isaiah Press's proposal to identify Ophrah at eṭ-Ṭaiyibeh in the Sharon Plain (Press 1955, 746).

In light of these problems, many scholars have sought to identify Ophrah not far from Shechem, in the territory of the Abiezerite clan (on the Abiezerite clan see Lemaire 1977, 57–60; Bornstein 1992, 95–101; Raviv & Zanton 2012, 25–28; Finkelstein & Lipschits 2017, 12–14). Previously, many sites have been suggested (for a comprehensive discussion of the different identifications see Eshel 1982; Gass 2005, 270–278; Raviv & Zanton 2012, 13–25) including the following: Tell el-Far‘ah (Dalman 1912, 31–34; Alt 1927, 36), Silat ed-Dhahr (Simons 1959, 291), Far‘ate (Na‘aman 1989; Finkelstein & Lipschits 2017, 13), Jinsafut (Knauf 1991), Farha (Bornstein 1992, 95). Most notably, Hanan Eshel (1982) argued that the ancient name of the site was preserved at Khirbet ‘Awfar, which is located c. 6 km southwest of Shechem. Due to its proximity to Shechem and Mount Gerizim, and according to other linguistic evidence, Eshel’s proposal was accepted by others (Erich 1983; Rainey & Notley 2006, 139–140; Elitzur 2004, 277–278). Recently, Dvir Raviv and Nachshon Zanton (2012) have built upon Eshel’s proposal by suggesting that the nearby site of Khirbet Şur (1 km to the northeast of Khirbet ‘Awfar) should be identified as Ophrah of Gideon, since the site has remains from the Iron Age I and II, as well as pottery from the Early Bronze, Middle Bronze, and Late Bronze II (Campbell 1991, 69–70). In our opinion, Raviv and Zanton’s suggestion to identify Ophrah of the Abiezrites with Khirbet Şur is compelling.

Arumah of Abimelech

Abimelech’s town of Arumah (*Judges* 9, 41)⁶ has been identified with Khirbet el-‘Ormah, as first suggested by Charles van de Velde (1854, 303; 1858, 288; 1865).⁷ Khirbet el-‘Ormah is located on the ridge east of Sahl Rûjib (‘the Michmethath Valley’), around 8 km southeast of Tell Balâtah. Surveys at the site (Kallai 1972, 168, site 32; Campbell 1991, 50–53; Finkelstein et al. 1997, 805–808) have revealed a tell (15 dunams) with remains from the Early Bronze, Middle Bronze, Late Bronze, Iron I, Iron IIA, Iron IIB, Hellenistic and Roman periods, and noted the presence of a Hellenistic fortification wall (Eshel & Erlich 1988b; Zissu & Raviv 2011; Raviv 2017), glacis and moat. From the summit of Khirbet el-‘Ormah,

6 Jan Simons suggested that Arumah also appears in *Judges* 9, 31, as Beth-arumah (בתרמה) instead of the hapax legomenon תרמה with the preposition ב (normally translated as “craftily”) (Simons 1959, 297; Thompson 1992).

7 Arumah of Abimelech is distinct from Rumah of Judah (*Joshua* 15, 52) and Rumah of Galilee (2 *Kings* 23, 36) (contra Naor 1956). Eusebius’ association of Rumah and Arumah with Remphis/Arimathaea, within the borders of Diospolis (*Onomasticon* 32.6, 80.16), appears to be incorrect.

Shechem can be readily observed across the valley. As noted by Eshel and Zeev Ehrlich (1988a), this line of site fits the description of Abimelech's ambush of the people of Shechem (*Judges* 9, 41–44).

Beer(im)

Beer is only mentioned in *Judges* (9, 21), where it is mentioned as the place to which Jotham son of Gideon fled after the murder of his brothers.⁸ However, the town of Beerim appears several times in the Samaria Ostraca in connection with the Abeizerites (e.g. Lemaire 1977, 30–38; Rainey & Notley 2006, 140, 220–221; Ahituv 2008, 258–310). In light of this, André Lemaire suggested that Beer/Beerim should be connected with Burîn, which is located 2.5 km southeast from Khirbet Şur (Ophrah?) and about 4.5 km south of Tell Balâtah (Lemaire 1977, 57). As pointed out initially by Aryeh Bornstein (1992, 107), Burîn only has remains from the Byzantine period and later (Sion 2000, site 302), thus he suggested that biblical Beer should be located at the nearby ruin of Khirbet en-Nabi (2 km east of Burîn), at the southeast edge of the Mount Gerizim ridge, as was accepted by others (Raviv & Zanton 2012, 26–27; Finkelstein & Lipschits 2017, 13). While this site (also known as Khirbet Mâkhnah el-Fôqa) was identified in the past as Michmethath (Albright 1933, 26; Aharoni 1979, 257; Rainey & Notley 2006, 182), which is twice mentioned as the boundary between Manasseh and Ephraim (*Joshua* 16, 6; 17, 7), other identifications for Michmethath have been raised⁹ allowing Khirbet en-Nabi/Mâkhnah el-Fôqa to mark the location of Beer/Beerim.

8 Eusebius' identification of Beer with a village 8 Roman miles from Eleutheropolis (*Onomasticon* 54.13) does not fit the geographical context of *Judges* 9. Therefore, it is unlikely that Beer can be connected with el-Bîreh (located 10 km northwest of Beth-Shean), as suggested by Simons (1959, 581).

9 According to the text, Michmethath should be located "before/east of [על פני] Shechem" and north of Tappuah (Tell Abu Zarad; *Joshua* 17, 7). Some scholars (e.g. Simons 1959, 160–161, 166; Bull & Campbell 1968, 34–36; Kallai 1986, 400–401; Na'aman 1986, 142–143) suggested that Michmethath refers to a topographical feature – Jebel el-Kabir (mountain located northeast of Shechem) or Sahl Rûjib, the wide valley southeast of Shechem. Related to an eastern position from Shechem, Karl Elliger (1938) proposed that Michmethath could be localized at Khirbet Ibn Nazîr, which is located 3 km southeast of Shechem, and Menachem Naor (1954, 61) proposed Tell en-Najmeh, 1 km to the west, both sites yielded Iron Age pottery in the various surveys (Kallai 1972, 166; Campbell 1991, 43–46; Finkelstein et al. 1997, 719–720). The proposal to identify Michmethath with Kh. Kafr Beita, 5 km southeast of Shechem (Watcher 1968) should be dismissed, as no material prior to the Hellenistic period was found at this site in the surveys (Campbell 1991, 41–43; Finkelstein et al. 1997, 813). For a further discussion of the identification of Michmethath and the border descriptions of Ephraim and Manasseh in the book of *Joshua* see Tavger & Elinson 2013; Tavger in press.

Thebez

At the conclusion of the Abimelech narrative and after he slayed the inhabitants of Shechem, Abimelech turned his attention to the city of Thebez (*Judges* 9, 50). In the conflict, Abimelech would suffer the humiliation of having his armor bearer kill him after being struck in the head by an upper mill stone that had been thrown by a woman from the “tower of Thebez” (*ibid.*, 51-54). In fact, Abimelech’s humiliation apparently became a military proverb for those foolish enough to wander into the throwing range of the defenders of a city’s towers as recorded in 2 Samuel (11, 21). Significantly, this latter passage records Thebez using the same spelling as in *Judge* 9. Thebez is sometimes identified with Ṭubas (e.g. Simons 1959, 297; Dyck 1992; cf. Gass 2005, 333).¹⁰ While acknowledging the difficulty with the supposed toponymic preservation between Ṭubas and Thebez (e.g. Aharoni 1979, 265; Rainey & Notley 2006, 140),¹¹ the geographical situation of Thebez would seem to fit the narrative setting of the Abimelech narrative even if the impetus for his attack on the city is not directly stated (see below). Moreover, Eusebius stated that “Thebes was in the borders of Neapolis. It is at the thirteenth milestone from Scythopolis” (*Onomasticon* 100.4). This distance closely matches the village of Ṭubas, which is c. 14 Roman miles (23 km) from Scythopolis. Surveys within the village have revealed remains from the Iron II, but it does not appear that the modern village is situated over a significant Iron Age ruin (Zertal 2008, site 52). In light of this, Adam Zertal (*ibid.*, 107–109) suggested the following two sites in the vicinity of Ṭubas as possibilities for the location of Thebez: Kh. ‘Eynûn, located 3 km southeast of Ṭubas (*ibid.*, site 58) and Kh. Fuqâha, located less than 1 km north of Ṭubas (*ibid.*, site 47; SWP Kh. Kefr Dukk). Both sites have remains from the Iron I and Iron II, and appear to have been fortified, but Kh. Fuqâha is slightly closer to Ṭubas and better fits Eusebius’

10 Some scholars believed that Thebez is a corruption for Tirzah (e.g. Aharoni 1979, 265; Rainey & Notley 2006, 140). Although Tirzah (Tell el-Far‘ah North) appears to have been one of the most significant ruins in the central hills during the Bronze and Iron Age (cf. Finkelstein 2012; 2013, 66–78 with extensive bibliography), but there is no real reason to make a correlation between Thebez and Tirzah, and, indeed, it seems unlikely that Thebez would be corrupted in two separate passages.

11 See also Simons (1959, 297) for similar logic, but it appears that the Greek (Eusebius - Θηβης) and Latin witnesses (Jerome/Medieval sources - *Thopas*; cf. Zertal 2008, 210–212 for bibliography) to θ would negate the later Arabic witness to ٠/ط even if it is difficult to explain a shift from θ to ٠.

distance than Kh. ‘Eynûn, and, thus, it seems that Kh. Fuqâha is the best candidate for biblical Thebez.

The Identification of Beth-millo

Beth-millo (בֵּית מִלּוֹא; οἶκος Μαλλων) appears three times within the Abimelech narrative of Judges 9:

1. All the leaders of Shechem came together, and all **Beth-millo**,¹² and they went and made Abimelech king, by the oak of the pillar at Shechem (*Judges* 9, 6).
2. At the end of Jotham’s prophecy against Abimelech, he states: Let fire come out from Abimelech and devour the leaders of Shechem and **Beth-millo**, and let fire come out from the leaders of Shechem and from **Beth-millo** and devour Abimelech (*Judges* 9, 20).

These passages can be interpreted in two different ways. According to the most common opinion, Shechem and Beth-millo represent two different parts of the same settlement within Shechem. According to this interpretation, the “leaders of Shechem” would represent the city and Beth-millo would represent either a specific element within or near the town. Accordingly, scholars have suggested various correlations between Migdal-shechem, Beth-millo, Baal-berith, and El-berith (e.g. Böhl 1931, 65–67; Nielsen 1959, 161–167; Simons 1959, 297; Soggin 1967; Boling 1975, 171; Gray 1986, 302–303; Görg 1992; Dever 2005, 169–171; Butler 2009, 249; Webb 2012, 698; for a thorough discussion of the different interpretations see Gass 2005, 305–312; cf. Sasson 2014, 373–405). Another possibility is that Shechem and Beth-millo represent nearby towns whose leaders gathered together at the house of “Baal-berith”/“Oak of the pillar at Shechem” to make Abimelech their leader/king. While the first option remains possible, there appears to be no necessitating textual reason to consider Beth-millo to be directly related to an entity within or immediately adjacent to Shechem, as the two toponyms appear together with separate leadership in Judges 9, 6, 20. Taken at face value, the text could present Shechem and Beth-millo as separate (but nearby) towns with their own leaders (for this option and a few possibilities for the identification of Beth-millo outside of

12 בְּעֵלֵי שֶׁכֶם is usually translated as “the leaders of Shechem”, however, due to the numerous examples of “Baal” in place names, “Baale Shechem” could presumably be related to a toponym (e.g. *Joshua* 15, 9; 2 *Samuel* 6, 2). For a discussion of this phenomenon see Levin 2017.

Shechem see Gass 306–311; cf. Butler 2009, 249). We wish to develop this interpretation further below.

Following this line of rationale, we would like to offer the possibility that the biblical toponym Beth-millo has been preserved at ‘Ain Beit Ilma. The spring of ‘Ain Beit Ilma is located 4 km to the west of Tell Balâtah along the natural ancient route of the Nahal Shechem (Wadi esh-Shâir) south of Rafidia. Today, a refugee camp known as ‘Ain Beit Ilma is situated over the springs. ‘Ain Beit Ilma (‘the spring of the house of Ilma’) was first recorded by the Survey of Western Palestine which noted the presence of a “building of good squared masonry with a round arched vault over the spring, seemingly Roman or Byzantine work. A plain cornice runs along the wall on the interior” (Conder & Kitchener 1882, 170; cf. Palmer 1881, 177). Besides the possible preservation of the initial Beth/Beit/בֵּית, the second element of the names have identical consonants (מִלּוֹ/Ilma), which could possibly preserve the name “Millo” by means of metathesis.¹³ Moreover, Ilma does not appear to have a contemporary Arabic meaning, which, in light of the existence of the perennial spring one might surmise that the Arabic name of “Ain Beit el-Maya” (‘spring of the house of water’) would be a much more suitable name than the meaningless “Ain Beit Ilma”. While this last point is an argument from silence, the existence of a meaningless Arabic toponym that conceivably preserves a slightly corrupted form of the biblical name in close proximity to Shechem would seem to point to the possibility of a connection between Beth-millo and ‘Ain Beit Ilma. In light of this connection, we would like to suggest that the toponym “Beth-millo” derives from the Hebrew root מָלָא, with the meaning of filling water from the spring (i.e. ‘house of filling’).¹⁴

Despite the possibility of a correlation between the Arabic and Biblical toponyms, no ruin was marked near ‘Ain Beit Ilma by the SWP or by other 19th century maps. In the British Mandate period, the site

13 For one example, compare the preservation of Debir with Rabûd (Galling 1954; Kochavi 1974).

14 The toponym “Millo” or “Beth-Millo” is mentioned several more times as a place within Jerusalem (e.g. 2 *Samuel* 5, 9; 1 *Kings* 9, 15, 24; 11, 27; 2 *Kings* 12, 20). Although the meaning of this “Millo” has been commonly understood as a high place or a place with a fill of soil (e.g. Steiner 1989; Görg 1992), we would like to suggest that Millo/Beth-millo of Jerusalem also has the same meaning (i.e. related to the filling of water from the Gihon spring) as our suggestion for Beth-millo near Shechem (Tavger et al. forthcoming).

of Tell es-Şufan (or Tell Sufan)¹⁵ is marked in immediate proximity to 'Ain Beit Ilma. This site is also mentioned by Franz Böhl (1931, 65–67) as Tell Şôfar, who proposed that it should be identified with Migdal-Shechem. The site was first explored by Karol Nandrásky who suggested that it should be identified with Ophrah of Gideon (Nandrásky 1964, 89–90). Following this, Campbell visited the site on several occasions and noted the presence of a Byzantine structure on the summit, as well as pottery from the Late Bronze II, Iron I, Iron II, Hellenistic, Roman, and Byzantine on the summit and terraces (Bull & Campbell 1968, 36–37). According to Campbell, the summit of the tell measures 90x110 meters with an exposed stretch of fortifications for 40 meters on the western side of the tell and the slopes are marked by caves, tombs, and terraces. Later surveys by Kallai (1972, 164, site 8) and Ofer Sion (2000, site 283) revealed similar observations. Salvage excavations were carried out at the site by Zeev Yeivin in 1973 (Unnamed 1973), who found remains in a trench at the top of the tell from the Iron II, Persian and Hellenistic periods.¹⁶

In terms of archaeology, Tell es-Şufan appears to be the largest tell with Late Bronze-Iron II occupation in the immediate proximity of Shechem (as demonstrated by archaeological survey), which would seem to indicate a connection between these two sites throughout these eras. In terms of its geographic position, Tell es-Şufan is situated on a natural route that connects the towns of Samaria and Shechem at a distance of only 3.7 km west of Shechem (Dorsey 1987, 60–61; 1991, 140–141). In fact, if we return to the reference to Beth-millo's usage in Jotham's polemical speech – Tell es-Şufan (Beth-millo?) and Shechem can both be easily observed from Mount Gerizim along a significant road. If our suggestion is correct, then one could interpret Jotham's declaration against “the leaders of Shechem and Beth-millo” as referring to the leaders of the two nearby towns that had gathered together at Shechem in order to “make Abimelech king” (*Judges* 9, 6). Likewise, this route may be mentioned when the “leaders of Shechem” attempted to rob Abimelech by robbing “all who by passed by them along that way” (*ibid.*, 25) presumably by ambushing travelers in the valley by descending

15 Edward Campbell noted that the name Şufan is probably derived from an influential family in Nablus (Bull & Campbell 1968, 36).

16 More excavations at the site were made by Ibrahim al-Fani in 1975 and 1977, but have not been published (Greenberg & Keinan 2009, 42).

from the “mountaintops” (possibly Mounts Gerizim and Ebal).¹⁷ Finally, it would seem possible to infer that the leaders from both towns (mentioned in verses 6 and 20 as “the leaders of Shechem and Beth-millo”) were present at Shechem, and were described as the “leaders of Migdal-shechem” (i.e. the house of El-berith/Baal-berith, see discussion above) when Abimelech attacked it (cf. *Judges* 9, 48). Thus, their fiery destruction would represent the fulfillment of Jotham’s prophecy. In sum, it appears that Tell es-Şufan is an ideal candidate for Beth-millo on account of the following pieces of evidence: the biblical toponym may be preserved in ‘Ain Beit Ilma, the close proximity between Tell es-Şufan and Shechem, and the significant Late Bronze-Iron II remains at both sites which likely indicates the close economic and political ties between the two sites during these periods.

Conclusion

Shechem and its vicinity is clearly the geographical setting of the Abimelech narrative. Following the conclusions of past scholars it appears that Ophrah of the Abiezrites, the place of Gideon, Abimelech’s father, and Jotham, his brother, was located in close proximity to Shechem. The identifications of Ophrah, Arumah, Mount Zalmon, Beer and Thebez in the same region clarify the geographical background of the story and demonstrate that the text is a local narrative that connects these locales to the administrative center of Shechem. Abimelech’s actions as recorded in the book of *Judges* hint at connections with the realities of the central highlands and Shechem during the Amarna Age (e.g. Reviv 1966; Finkelstein & Na’aman 2005). Despite the overarching Deuteronomistic purpose of the Gideon-Abimelech narrative (*Judges* 6-9) that points to Israel’s pursuit of a king to be appointed by Yahweh (e.g. Irwin 2012), the clear similarities to near-contemporary accounts (i.e. the el-Amarna correspondence) and the detailed geographical details in the account allow us to reconstruct the events using the

¹⁷ Although this reference could also be related to the wider ancient road network around ancient Shechem (Dorsey 1987). Presumably, maintaining and taxing the roads around Shechem would have been the primary purpose of Abimelech’s “rule” and his “worthless and reckless fellows” (*Judges* 9, 4). Thus, in the literary context of the narrative, the leaders of Shechem attempted to undermine Abimelech’s rule (*ibid.*, 22-25) before attempting to replace him with “Gaal and his relatives” (*ibid.*, 26, 29). For an analysis of the Abimelech narrative and its textual history see Fritz 1982; Finkelstein & Lipschits 2017.

historical geographical analysis that we have laid out above (fig. 2; for early and late suggested layers in the Abimelech narrative, see Finkelstein & Lipschits 2017, 3–12).



Figure 2: SWP map showing sites mentioned in Judges 9

The presence of another tell with the same periods of occupation, only 4 km west of Shechem, on the main road, and with almost the same topographical conditions as Shechem (Tell es-Şufan is located at the narrowest section of Nahal Shechem, between the Ebal and Gerizim ridges), compels us to re-examine the plot of Judges 9. Locating Beth-millo as a separate site at Tell es-Şufan, sheds light on Abimelech's role as a ruler of the entire area, not only of Shechem itself. This might also better explain Abimelech's attempt to conquer Thebez, which is located just to the north (see above), as part of a failed effort to re-establish his rule throughout this region.

According to the interpretation that we have outlined above, the fire, which destroyed the “leaders of Migdal-shechem” and the building of

El/Baal-berith, constitutes a fulfillment of Jotham's prophecy against the leaders of Shechem and Beth-millo (*Judges* 9, 20). These men perished in the same building in which they conspired to kill Jerubbaal's seventy sons (*ibid.*, 1-6) and where they also conspired together with Gaal to betray Abimelech (*ibid.*, 22-29). This constitutes the fulfillment of the "bramble devouring the cedars of Lebanon" (*ibid.*, 15). Once the "cedars of Lebanon" (i.e. the leaders of Shechem and Beth-millo) were removed, the narrator needed a third-party to complete Jotham and Yahweh's prophetic justice against Abimelech (cf. *ibid.*, 55-57) – enter Abimelech's ill-advised siege of Thebez.

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