

# THE WINE KINGDOM OF JUDEA



• ADAM MONTEFIORE

**Y**ou need to be with someone with a lot of knowledge and a good imagination to reveal the hidden secrets of the terrain.

There I was, with the famous archaeologist Prof. Yuval Gadot, clamoring down the forested slopes of the Ramot Forest in the Judean Highlands, near the entrance to Jerusalem. He led the way with the enthusiasm of a child, supported by the deep knowledge of a professor with decades of archaeological finds and ground-breaking papers under his belt. Even though he knew what was coming, there was still some of that infectious boyish enthusiasm, as though he was discovering everything for the first time.

Gadot heads the Jacob M. Alkow Department of Archaeology and Ancient Near Eastern Cultures at Tel Aviv University. While he was studying humanities, he attended a lecture on “Israel in the Iron Age” and was hooked. He knew from that moment he would become an archaeologist.

Since then, his fame has spread as the number of articles he has penned clearly illustrates. It was therefore a privilege for me to find myself on an informal hike with him. His knowledge, enthusiasm, curiosity and modesty were outstandingly apparent on the two occasions that we met.

The ground was very rocky, and patches of solid stone were interspersed with pools of earth. The landscape was decorated with a pine tree forest. The late winter flowers were starting to show themselves, as if gingerly looking out of the window to see if it was spring. We discovered, in close proximity, one wine press, then another, and the ruins of a watchtower.

There is nowhere you can go in Israel without coming across ancient wine presses. I always get a frisson of excitement when I come across one because I can envision someone making wine in ancient times; and when they are found near modern wineries and vineyards, the contrast between ancient and modern is particularly vivid.

Hiking across the rough, hilly terrain, all the untrained eye will see is a flat limestone basin, cut into the rock. It is usually overrun with scrub, and nearby you will often find what looks like a random pile of large stones. It takes an archaeologist, historian or wine lover with a romantic imagination to fill in the gaps. Ancient wine presses are prolific in the Judean Highlands, and they provide a window into ancient times, giving us an opportunity to visualize how wine was made in days gone by.

These wine presses, dug and hewn into rock, would more often than not be close by or actually within a vineyard, for quality control and efficiency reasons. If the newly harvested grapes were too far from the press, there was a danger that the weight of the grapes in the harvest collection baskets would break the skins open, and the natural yeast on the grape skins would cause premature fermentation. The desired product was wine, not vinegar, so the press would most likely be in close proximity to the vineyard.

Isaiah’s “Song of a Vineyard” (Isaiah 5) says: “My loved one had a vineyard on a fertile hillside. He dug it up and cleared it of stones and planted it with the choicest vines. He built a watchtower in it and cut out a wine press as well.”

We learn so much from this. The vineyard was on a slope for drainage and to catch the maximum rays of the sun. The *gat*, or wine press, would be made up of a pressing floor, for stomping on the grapes, and a deep pit, known as the *yekev*, or winery, where the fermentation would take place.

MOST WINE presses in the Land of Israel date from Byzantine times, but there are areas of the Judean Highlands where they date back all the way to the Iron Age, approximately 2,600 years ago. Gadot explained that the wine presses we saw in Ramot were from the earlier period. When there are a number of wine presses in reasonably close proximity, they presumably serviced a number of different plots of vines.

What we saw was not a wine complex of the size discovered in Yavne (c. 500 CE – the largest Byzantine winery ever found), but also they were not examples of domestic winemaking or a village community undertaking. Gadot told me they were most likely part of the agricultural estates owned by a nobleman in Jerusalem. This indicates there was a highly specialized wine economy in what was then the Kingdom of Judea. Much of the agriculture in the surrounding hills was to supply the Judeans and Jerusalem.

There is, of course, no evidence of vines left, and where I visited, there was clearly no room for the large rectangular vineyards of today. Their vines were instead planted



PALESTINIANS WORK in a vineyard growing in the old style, sprawling across the ground. (Prof. Yuval Ganot)



EXAMPLE OF an ancient wine press discovered at Nahal Shmuel. (Nahal Shmuel Expedition)



in pockets of the earth, in suitable places between trees and the solid rock formation, which could not be easily penetrated.

The vine is naturally a climber or crawler. Left to its own devices, it will climb trees or sprawl along the ground, or both. The vines were not trellised or laid out like manicured gardens as they are today. Part of the overgrowth may even have extended to the solid rock, which would help reflect the heat of the sun to aid the ripening of the fruit.

Most sites will display a pile of stones or rocks, seemingly there for no apparent reason. Here, an archaeologist is necessary to reveal the secrets. The land is too stony and rocky for many forms of agriculture. The farmer even today will follow the maxim “If you can, plant fruit trees; but if the ground is inhospitable and nothing else will grow, plant vines or olive trees.”

These stones were impediments that would have had to be removed from the earth to allow the vines to be planted. Nothing would be left to waste. The stones would have been used to build a watchtower for a guard to watch over the precious vines. These may have also been used to provide shelter or been used as a rudimentary ancient tool shed.

The remains of one of these towers, as described by Isaiah, would always be close to the wine press and vineyard. The same stones may have alternatively been used to build a dry-stone wall to demarcate ownership of a plot or to build man-made terraces, particularly in the Judean Highlands.

The finished wines were put in animal skins or clay jugs, known as amphorae. They would then be stored in nearby caves, where it was cool and dark, before being distributed by donkey. In those days, wine consumption was far greater than today. It was considered safer to drink than water, which was dangerous because it was a disease carrier.

In the Judean Highlands area, wine was used to pay taxes, particularly to the Assyrians. From the coastal area, it was traded and exported to Egypt and the Mediterranean Basin. It was a mainstay of the economy.

Wines were not named after grape varieties or made from a blend of known varieties. Most were field or plot blends of whatever varieties happened to be in a particular place. The fetish for varieties is a modern development. The wines were instead named after the style of wine (strong, old, young), the place it came from, or the port from where it was exported (Gaza, Ashkelon, Carmel, etc.).

Wine was flavored in a similar way to a vermouth (with herbs and spices) or a Greek Retsina (with pine resin). The idea was that the flavoring would make the wine palatable, cover up all of the wine’s faults, and act as a preservative. Many of the additions were sweet, like date honey, but some were savory, like seawater. But on the question of additives, there was recently an extraordinary discovery.

GADOT WAS part of the team excavating the City of David of Jerusalem. Is there another place on the planet more fraught and fascinating than this for the archaeologist? The dig took place in two locations. One was on the eastern slopes of the City of David; the other was in the Givati parking lot, west of the hill.

This was where Gadot was working with his colleagues. They found a lot of debris in the easternmost room of Building 101 – an administrative center in Iron Age Jerusalem. There were mere fragments of shattered clay jars, crushed, and in some cases totally destroyed, by the Babylonians.

A layman would have been distraught at the sight. For the skilled archaeologist, though, the excitement was just beginning. Some of these jars were painstakingly and incredibly rebuilt, shard by shard. The process of how they do this beggars belief. That they succeeded at all is a testament to the patience and extraordinary talent of the pottery restorers.



THE JOB of the archaeologist: piecing together the story from a few broken jars.  
(Eliyahu Yanai / City of David Archive)

These jars were found to have once stored olive oil or wine. When they discovered that some of the jars had the stamp of a rosette seal, they realized the jars belonged to the kingdom’s royal economy. They were dated from the time of King Zedekiah, king of Judah in the sixth century BCE.

Using the Organic Residue Analysis (new techniques), they made a sensational discovery. For the first time ever, after analysis of the residue of the wine jars, they found evidence of vanilla. This rare, expensive and exotic luxury would have been imported from the East in the spice routes that crisscrossed the Negev. It would have then been used to flavor the wines of the Judean elite, to take the edge off a rough wine.

Lovers of an oaky Chardonnay will appreciate the sweet comforting aromas of vanilla that come from oak aging. It is easy to gloss over the painstaking work and the long time the whole archaeological process took in a few paragraphs, but their discovery made headlines around the world.

The Canaanites were in their time the world’s best winemakers. They influenced the Egyptians, the first great wine culture, and bequeathed their skills to the Phoenicians, who traded wine to the West, and also to the Israelites and Judeans. It was because of the importance of wine then, in this very place that we call home, that this exalted beverage became an integral part of Judeo-Christian religious ritual and a staple of Western culture.

How exciting it was for me, with the guidance of

Gadot, to see evidence of a Judean wine press and then read his research about the wine preferences of the Judean elite. All this in an area we now call Judean Hills, today one of our finest and most buoyant wine-growing regions. It appears that there is nothing new under the sun. What was, is what will be... and that is part of the magic of our unique wine story.

*The writer is a wine industry insider turned wine writer, who has advanced Israeli wines for 35 years. He is referred to as “the English voice of Israeli wine.” [www.adammontefiore.com](http://www.adammontefiore.com)*



RESPECTED ARCHAEOLOGIST  
Prof. Yuval Ganot. (Sasha Flit)



JARS AT the City of David site, reconstructed with incredible skill. (Sasha Flit)