

Irit Ziffer

THE THRESHING FLOOR IN REALITY AND METAPHOR

Dr. Irit Ziffer is curator of the Ceramics and Nehushtan (metals) pavilions at the Eretz Israel Museum, Tel Aviv. She studied archaeology and ancient Near Eastern cultures at Tel Aviv University, where she received her Ph.D. in ancient Near Eastern art. She has curated, among others, the exhibits *At That Time the Canaanites Were in the Land* (1990); *Islamic Metalwork* (1996); *O My Dove That Art in the Clefts of the Rock: The Dove Allegory in Antiquity* (1998); *The Corn Spirit* (2002); and *In the Field of the Philistines: Cult Furnishings from the Favissa of a Yaoneh Temple* (2007).

Food reflects society. Bread, the staple food of all humankind, has become synonymous with the sustenance of life, as so well reflected in the Egyptian Arabic word *aysh*, derived from the root 'yš, "to live." No wonder, then, that from its early beginnings bread production was likened to human life, and each stage in grain husbandry became synonymous with a human stage. Fecundity, procreation, and reproduction of the fields – and of human life – belong to a timeless, boundary-crossing, instinctive tradition both in popular belief and in formal ritual.

Ways of life in the Near East have persisted since antiquity and can be traced in archaeology. Living analogies help us understand ancient practices, and no interpretation of the past can go beyond our consciousness learnt from the present. In other words, ancient work methods, as depicted in art and literature, can be reconstructed on the basis of surviving traditional methods and customs, which, conversely, shed light on ancient visual and written material. With the adoption of

mechanized technologies, however, traditional practices are gradually being abandoned and becoming extinct, to be found only in descriptions in ethno-archaeological literature, and the tools they used are being sold off as romantic relics of a dying tradition.

The present discussion focuses on a stage in bread production that is not often dealt with: threshing and the lore that evolved around the threshing floor. The interplay of ethnographic descriptions with written sources and with visual material from various periods permits the reconstruction of a full picture of how work was done on the threshing floor, from its earliest beginnings – which can be traced in art to the second half of the fourth millennium BCE – through the present day. In examining the significance of the threshing floor within the broad cultural framework of traditional Middle Eastern agriculture, biblical and ancient descriptions and terms may be cited along with citations from literature and art from later periods, since, basically, until the introduction of modern mechanized

technologies, nothing changed in the production of our daily bread.

The Threshing Floor

According to biblical descriptions, the harvested grain crop was brought to the threshing floor – *gōren* in Hebrew – where the grain was separated from the chaff and winnowed (Numbers 18:30; Ruth 3:2). Legumes and small, delicate garden seeds were threshed there as well (Isaiah 28:27).

The Hebrew root *grn* is cognate with Akkadian *g/qarānu* – "to stack up, pile on" straw, tribute, etc., or "to store up grain, oil, wealth, goods"¹ – and its derivative *magrattu*, "grain storage place, threshing floor," also the name of a month.² Another cognate is Arabic *jrn*, "crush, cut, grind," from which derive the threshing surfaces *jurn* (Egyptian *gurn*), both the grinding stone and the threshing floor. In Arabic the threshing floor is also called *baydar*, a loan word from Aramaic *idra*, as in Daniel 2:35: "broken in pieces ... like the chaff of the summer threshing-floors [*'idrey qayit*]." '*Idra*' yields *bit*



Fig. 1: Village threshing floors, Judea. Photo: David Amit.

'*idrey* – "house of threshing" – and thence *bi darey*, from which *baydar* derives in turn. These terms are



Fig. 2: Agricultural scene. In the middle register farmers are shown winnowing with a winnowing fork and shovel, as well as by beating. In the lower register a scribe records the amount of grain delivered to the granaries. Egypt, Old Kingdom, 2575–2134 BCE. Collection of the Bible Lands Museum, Jerusalem.

also related to Akkadian *adru*, *adratu*, "threshing floor," and also "fields" or "houses" in Neo-Assyrian.³ Two place names on the ancient southern border of the tribe of Judah, Addar (Joshua 15:3), and Hazzar-addar (Numbers 34:4; also mentioned in the Karnak lists of Pharaoh Shoshenq I, 945–924 BCE), also seem to be called after the threshing floor.

When fields were owned jointly by the inhabitants of a village, a level rocky outcrop or a plot of land that could be leveled was set aside as a threshing floor.⁴ Each family was allotted a space on the threshing floor, which could serve a village community for hundreds of years and was also used as a place of social gathering (Fig. 1).⁵ The public threshing floor was also known in ancient times. A fifteenth-century BCE document from Nuzi mentions threshing areas (*magrattu*) that were contiguous to one another, with rights

of use granted to local peasants.⁶ In present-day traditional village societies with individualized cultivation and raising of livestock, each family that grows grain crops has its own threshing floor near the house, or near its plot of land if that is too far from the house, since it is easier to transport sacks of grain than bound sheaves of wheat or barley.

The threshing floor is not plastered or paved with stones; it is a flat piece of land in a place where the ground dries quickly. Leveled from time to time with a wooden board,⁷ it is kept clean and hard by long use.⁸ After the bound sheaves of grain are brought to the threshing floor, their ties are undone, and the stalks of grain are spread over the circular threshing area. Threshing separates all the elements of the crop: The grains separate from the hulls – the chaff – and the straw is crushed. The crop can be threshed by beating with a flail (Judges 6:11; Ruth 2:17; Fig. 2). More usually, however, it is done by draft animals, mainly young heifers that have not yet been trained to the yoke (Hosea 10:11) and are guided



Fig. 3: Nineteenth-century threshing scene. From: C.W. Wilson, *Picturesque Palestine, Sinai and Egypt*, London 1880, I, p. 201.

around the floor with a goad, as illustrated in Egyptian wall paintings from the New Kingdom; or by means of a threshing sledge (Hebrew: *môrag*) drawn by a team of oxen, donkeys, horses, or camels (Fig. 3); or sometimes by only one animal.⁹

Most likely, the use of animal power for drawing the threshing sledge dates to the second half of the fourth millennium BCE, when animals were first used to pull a plow. In the ancient Near East and in the Bible, the crushing of the crop by an animal's hooves or a drawn implement symbolizes distress, coming apart, and disintegration (Isaiah 21:10, 41:15–16; Amos 1:3; Micah 4:13; Habakkuk 3:12). The same simile is found in the annals of the kings of Assyria. Tiglath-pileser III (744–727 BCE) declared that he had “threshed [name] as with a threshing tool” (*kīma dayašti adiš*).¹⁰

The threshed crop is heaped up in one or more piles, and when a favorable wind blows, it is winnowed to separate it into its various components. The best time for winnowing is at night when gentle breezes blow, for strong winds may blow the seeds into the chaff (Ruth 3:2). Winnowing is performed outside the threshing floor. The straw and grains are tossed into the wind with a winnowing fork (Hebrew: *ma'bēr*, *mizreh*, *magôb*; Fig. 4) or shovel (*raḥat*; Arabic: *raḥa*). The heavy grains fall in one place and the chaff farther away (Hosea 13:3; Psalms 1:4). Winnowing is described in a letter from a peasant of the Old Babylonian period as *zukku*, “purification,”¹¹ and in this sense it seems to have stood behind a Hittite magical incantation: “As the wind chases away the chaff and carries it far across the sea, so also may it chase

away the bloodshed and impurity of this house and carry them far across the sea.”

A finer sifting of the grain from chaff and pebbles was done with a sieve or winnowing-fan (Hebrew: *naāppāh*, *kēbārāh*). In the Ugaritic Baal epic, the destruction of the god Mot by the goddess Anat is depicted in the imagery of threshing: Anat cleaves Mot with a sword – apparently a threshing sledge¹³ – roasts his remains in the fire, grinds them¹⁴ between millstones, and scatters them in a field so that the birds will eat them. In Mot's complaint to Baal, the afflicted god adds winnowing with a riddle or sieve to his misfortunes.¹⁵ In the Hittite-Hurrian myth “The Song of Ullikummi,” Kumarbi, the grain god, tells his son: “Let him chop him fine like chaff. Let him grind him underfoot (like) an ant. ... Let him scatter all the gods down from the sky like flour.”¹⁶ Sieves (or fans) for sifting grains (Arabic: *minsaf*) were standard household equipment in rural Palestine into the twentieth century. In the Bible, the term for winnowing (*mizreh*, *zēriyyāh*) is also used in the sense of scattering and exiling (Leviticus 26:33, Isaiah 29:5, Jeremiah 15:7; cf. Job 21:18). Straw was burnt for fuel, used for cattle feed and fertilizer, or chopped fine for preparing building clay or mud. The chaff was of no value and was not used.

At the conclusion of the harvest season, an “offering from the threshing floor” was set apart



Fig. 4: Winnowing in the Hebron region. Photo: Yohanan Ben Ya'akov. Man and His Work Collection, Eretz Israel Museum, Tel Aviv.

for God (Numbers 15:20, 18:27). When the Hebrew slave was set free in the seventh year, his master had to give him of his sheep and goats, and of the produce of his threshing floor and wine-press (Deuteronomy 15:14). During the Sukkoth (Tabernacles) festival, the crops were brought from the threshing floor and the wine-press (Deuteronomy 16:13), a combination that symbolizes all of humanity's food (Numbers 18:27; 2 Kings 6:27).

Social and Religious Functions of the Threshing Floor

Because space was limited in the towns, the threshing floor was situated outside the walls. The Mishnah (*Baba bathra* 2:8) states explicitly that it was to be 50 cubits away from the city, since the chaff blown about during winnowing might be injurious to health. From the story of Ruth, who went down from the city to the threshing floor (Ruth 3:3), the Jewish sages deduced that threshing floors ought to be in a low spot (Ruth *rabbah* 5:2). But according to 1 Kings 22:10,

the threshing floor of Samaria was next to the city gate,¹⁷ and Jeremiah 15:7 has: "And I fan [winnow] them ... in the gates of the land." It seems, therefore, that threshing floors were commonly near the city gate. The Ugaritic texts, too, give the impression that threshing floors were near the city gate (*b'p tgr*).¹⁸ The threshing floor near the city served as a place for large gatherings; it was a site of public ceremonies and rituals. King Ahaziah of Israel and King Jehoshaphat of Judah sat on thrones on the threshing floor before the city gate of Samaria and "prophets prophesied before them" (1 Kings 22:10; 2 Chronicles 18).

The Ugaritic Aqhat epic relates that Daniel sat on the threshing floor among the mighty of the land to judge the cause of widows and orphans:

Now Daniel, man of Rapiu,
The hero, man of the Harnemite,
Gets up and sits by the gateway,
Among the chiefs on the threshing
floor;
Takes care of the case of the
widow,
Defends the need of the orphan.

Perhaps the expression "to sit on the threshing floor" in the Nuzi documents means something like "to claim justice." Another interpretation sees the threshing floor mentioned in the Aqhat epic as referring merely to an open space; to judge the cause of widows and orphans, in this view, refers not to the actual passing of judgments on them, but rather to extending social justice by allocating them portions of grain at the threshing floor. This custom is still in force in modern rural Arab societies, in which grain is distributed (*qit'ah*) to the needy at the threshing floor.²⁰ Ugaritic texts also tell of the journey of the

shades (*rapiuma*) – the deceased ancestors – to Daniel's threshing floor to join in the summer's drinking feast.²¹

The Temple in Jerusalem was erected on the site of a threshing floor. The story of the appearance of an angel of destruction to David at the threshing floor of Arauna, high above its surroundings; the purchase of the place and the raising of an altar there to stay the plague from the people (2 Samuel 24:16–25; 1 Chronicles 21:15–30); and Solomon's subsequent construction of the Temple there (2 Chronicles 3:1) suggest that the threshing floor preserved its religious functions among the Jebusites and Israelites as well. Cultic activities seem to have been performed at the threshing floor of the Iron Age IIA city gate of Betsaida.²² In first-millennium Assyria, the god Nabu owned his own threshing floor; a man would bring barley produced by his field "to give the barley [paid for the field] to Nabu on his threshing floor."²³

Mourning rituals for the dead also took place on the threshing floor. Genesis 50:10–11 relates that the sons of Jacob who returned from Egypt to bury their father in the Land of Canaan made such a great mourning at "the threshing-floor [*gōren*] of Atad, which is beyond the Jordan" that the Canaanites called the place Abel-mizraim – "the Mourning of Egypt." At the end of the nineteenth century, Arabs still conducted wakes and weddings at the threshing floor, and Egyptian peasants kept the common bier in its place near the *gurn* outside the village into the twentieth century.²⁴ For thousands of years, it seems, many aspects of the ethnography of the peoples

of the Middle East have been connected to the threshing floor.

Love and Marriage on the Threshing Floor

In most cultures, the agricultural process of treading grain to obtain seed has a transferred sexual meaning: to "tread" a woman.

The threshing floor as the arena of lovemaking is well apparent in religious cuneiform literature. In the Old Babylonian Agushaya Hymn, Ea, god of water and of wisdom, copulates with Ishtar on the threshing floor after she has perhaps made a sexual assault upon him: "He had her bend over the threshing floor."²⁵ Letters from Assyrian officials, a love song, and a hymn to the gods Nabu and Tashmetu make clear the role of the threshing floor in the Sacred Marriage. The course of the ritual, which took place at the beginning of the month of Iyyar (II) in the city of Kalah, can be sketched in broad outline. The nuptial bedchamber (*bēt erši*), situated in the inner parts of the temple, is prepared for the erotic meeting of the gods, who are conveyed there in a procession (*ḥammūtu*). The divine couple stays in the bedchamber for several days, from the 5th to the 10th of the month, during which the offerings of the royal family are brought before the gods, and a royal banquet – that is, a sacrificial meal – is served. On the 11th day, Nabu comes out of the bedchamber, first to the threshing floor (*adru*) of the palace and thence to the garden (*kiriū*), where a sacrifice is performed, after which he returns to his dwelling.²⁶ Going to the garden belongs to the standard imagery of Mesopotamian and biblical love poetry and is acted out ritually in the celebrations of

divine love. The threshing floor that Nabu visits prior to entering the garden should be regarded as part of this standard imagery of love poetry.

In the Song of Songs, the round form of the threshing floor and the mounded sheaves of grain are metaphors for the beauty of the Shulammitte: "Thy navel is like a round goblet, wherein no mingled wine is wanting; thy belly is like a heap of wheat set about with lilies" (7:3). Perhaps her golden-hued skin, evoking the ripe ears of grain, shines through her diaphanous garment.²⁷ The heap of wheat surrounded by lilies seems to be an erotic image, for the kisses of the beloved are likened to lilies: "My beloved is mine, and I am his, that feedeth among the lilies" (2:16); "His lips are lilies dropping with flowing myrrh" (5:13). Both the navel and the belly may indicate the pudenda; in talmudic Hebrew, "chambers of the belly" is a euphemism for a woman's intimate parts (BT *Shabbat* 31b). In the conceits of this love poetry, surrounding the heap of wheat with lilies reflects the custom of surrounding the threshing floor – especially the mound of threshed grain – with brambles (Hebrew: *'atad*) as a protective measure: "as a threshing floor surrounded by thorns" (Mishnah *Sotah* 13:61). Conceivably, the name of the threshing floor of Atad (Genesis 50:10), where Jacob was mourned by his sons, echoes this practice. The Church Fathers interpreted "thy belly" as the belly of the Virgin, likened to a field, and the grains of wheat as the fruit of her womb, Christ. In Christian iconography from the fourteenth century on, this image was made graphic, in the form of the Virgin's dress decorated with sheaves.²⁸



Fig. 5: Silver medallion designed by Zeev Raban, depicting Ruth in the fields of Bethlehem, produced at the Bezalel Academy in the 1940s. Shlomo Mousaieff Collection.

According to Hosea 9:1, religious prostitution rituals took place at the threshing floor: "O Israel... thou hast gone astray from thy God, thou hast loved a harlot's hire upon every corn-floor. The threshing floor and the wine-press shall not feed them." Perhaps Hosea's threshing floor was the site of the Sacred Marriage rite.²⁹ The Babylonian Talmud (*Nedarim* 50a) relates that one of the greatest sages, Rabbi 'Aqiva (second century CE), who started out as a poor, ignorant shepherd, slept with his beloved wife on the threshing floor. He is described as pulling straw out of her hair and saying that if he could afford it, he would crown her with a "Jerusalem of Gold" – an expensive piece of headgear shaped like the battlements or towers of a city, which was worn by women of high status (later, when he achieved greatness, he is said to have bought her this ornament).³⁰

The erotic implications of what was done on the threshing floor are also suggested in the Book of Ruth. The story takes place in Bethlehem – the "place of bread"

or grain. At the outset of the story, famine has driven Elimelekh and his family to leave their native town for Moab. When food again becomes available in Judah, the family's surviving members, Elimelekh's widow Naomi and her widowed daughter-in-law Ruth, return there at the beginning of the barley harvest (Ruth 1:22). Ruth and Boaz become acquainted during the harvesting of his field (Chapter 2), and the sexual dimension begins to open. Naomi thinks that Boaz, a relative of hers, ought to take Ruth as his wife, in a kind of levirate marriage that will also enable him to take possession of the family's abandoned plot of land. She gives Ruth instructions on how to approach him: "Wash thyself..., and anoint thee, and put thy raiment upon thee, and get thee down to the threshing floor," and there, at night when he lies down to sleep, "go in, and uncover his feet, and lay thee down, and he will tell thee what thou shalt do" (3:3–4; Fig. 5).³¹ As Josephus (*Antiquities* V:328) has it: "Naomis schemed to bring Ruth to his side, deeming that he would be gracious to them after consorting with the child." Ruth does as Naomi has instructed her, in a manner designed to suggest that Boaz, having completed his agricultural treading on the threshing floor, should "tread" her. In the morning, though no carnal relations apparently have taken place, she slips away before the outside world is awake, following Boaz's warning: "Let it not be known that the woman came to the threshing floor" (3:14).

The sexually charged context of the story, and Boaz's secrecy about Ruth's nocturnal visit, invite an understanding of the deeper significance of Ruth's visit to the threshing floor.³² In an act of repressed



Fig. 6: Threshing with a *nūrag*, Lower Egypt. Photo: David Amit.

eroticism, Boaz says to her: "Bring the mantle that is upon thee, and hold it"; he pours six measures of barley into her kerchief and sends her away (3:15).³³ Boaz's generous gift represents the product of the threshing process, and also the fertility of the couple's future union,³⁴ the treading of her as a heap of grain in the sense suggested in the Song of Songs.

What really happened on the threshing floor? The fourth-century CE Palestinian Rabbi Yudan had no doubt that Boaz could not fall asleep until the morning. In a midrash (Ruth *rabbah* 6:8), he relates that Boaz did not succumb to his desires and did not touch Ruth. But earlier, the same midrash (6:3) has it that Ruth "took hold of him like a skin-rash," and that he stroked her hair, asking whether she was spirit or woman, and whether she was pure, whereupon she responded that she was a woman and pure – and so, "permitted." Judah Hadassi, a Karaite sage in twelfth-century Constantinople, accused the rabbis of luridly imagining that Boaz copulated with Ruth on the threshing floor.³⁵ The choice of the threshing floor as the arena for Naomi's scheme becomes clear in view of a talmudic expression (BT *Nidah* 41b) referring to *mqm dšh*

(the place of threshing) as the place where the virile member performs intercourse – that is, the vulva.³⁶ Boaz took Ruth and she became his wife, and the Lord gave her conception. She bore a child, Obed, who begot Jesse, and Jesse begot David. The threshing floor of Bethlehem was the place where the Davidic dynasty (also said to have produced Christ; cf. Matt. 1: 1–17) was established.

In the romance of Daphnis and Chloë by Longus (ca. the turn of the third century CE), the shepherd, Daphnis, asks the hand of Chloë of her parents, Dryas and Nape, as they work on the threshing floor. Daphnis commends himself as being knowledgeable about cutting and planting vines, plowing the ground, and winnowing grain in the wind. Nape, Chloë's mother, is described as driving her oxen on the threshing floor to crush the stalks with her threshing sledge, encrusted with sharp stones.³⁷

In 1873, the German consul in Damascus, Dr. J.G. Wetzstein, published a detailed ethnographic study on the threshing sledge and its varied uses in Syria.³⁸ He noted the cultural connotations of the threshing sledge, which was used in wedding ceremonies as well as in funerary rituals. A man would

dedicate his threshing sledge to the day of his death, when his body would be laid out on the sledge and he would be mourned. In the marriage ceremonies of Syrian Arabs, both Muslims and Christians, held in the spring month of March, the threshing sledge was brought out from the barn, where it was kept during the winter, to the threshing floor, which was covered with spring flowers. A stage two cubits high was erected on the floor, and the sledge was placed upon it. A colorful rug was draped over the sledge, and on it were set two cushions (*martabah*) embroidered with gold thread and filled with ostrich feathers, like the cushions on a royal throne. Throughout the seven days of the wedding celebration, the bridal pair sat on the sumptuous threshing sledge (*nuraj*), crowned in royal style (Fig. 6). The invitees acted the parts of a royal entourage (*diwan*), headed by a *wazir* ("minister"), the villager who brought the sledge to the stage. War songs were declaimed in which the groom was represented as a king vanquishing a fortress, and songs and dances were performed before the couple. On the seventh day a festive meal was served, which the groom attended in his regular clothes, his face smeared with a paste containing chopped straw for good luck.

The customs observed by the German consul seem to reflect an antecedent depicted in seals of the Uruk-Jemdet Nasr style (ca. 3100–2900 BCE), on which a figure bespeaking noble status is seated on a sledge pulled by an ox. On a seal impression from Arslantepe-Malatya in eastern Anatolia (Fig. 7)³⁹ and on a cylinder seal in the Jonathan Rosen collection in New York

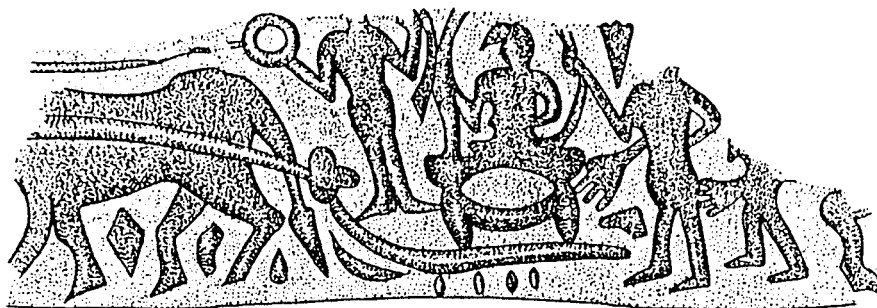


Fig. 7: Seal impression from Arslantepe-Malatya, late third millennium BCE, showing a figure sitting cross-legged in a litter dragged by an ox. M. Frangipane and A. Palmieri, "Perspectives on the Protourbanization in Eastern Anatolia: Arslantepe-Malatya – An Interim Report on the 1975–1985 Campaigns," *Origini*, 12 (1983), fig. 67.

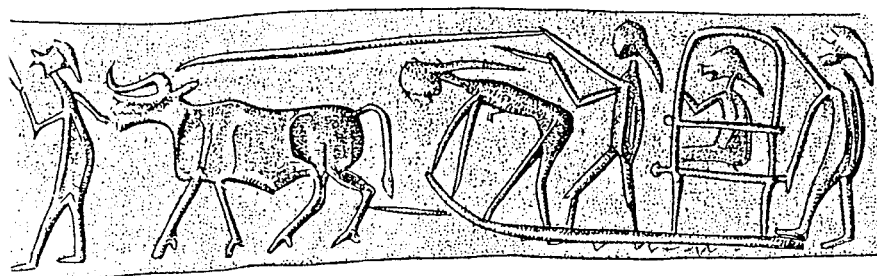


Fig. 8: Cylinder seal from the Jonathan Rosen Collection, Jemdet Nasr period, showing a pigtailed figure carried in a threshing sledge litter. From: W. Nagel and E. Strommenger, "Der frühdynastische Kultschlitten: Ein Vorläufer des Wagens?" in P. Calmeyer et al. (eds.), *Beiträge zur altorientalischen Archäologie und Altertumskunde: Festschrift Barthel Hrouda*, Wiesbaden 1994, fig. 2.

(Fig. 8),⁴⁰ sharp protrusions can be seen clearly at the bottom of the conveyance, showing that the scene is to be regarded as a ritual involving a canopied litter on a threshing sledge. Amiet postulated that the dragged litter was an early transport vehicle used in ancient religious ritual contexts – perhaps some sort of fertility rite associated with the harvest.⁴¹ Ceremonial sledges of this kind, the Early Dynastic Sumerian *HAR-ḫa-da*, were made of exotic wood and belonged to princesses. An actual sledge was found in Queen Pu-abi's grave at Ur.⁴² Identifying the seated figure on the seals is problematic. The one

in the Rosen collection has hair falling down its back, which may indicate that the figure is a woman,

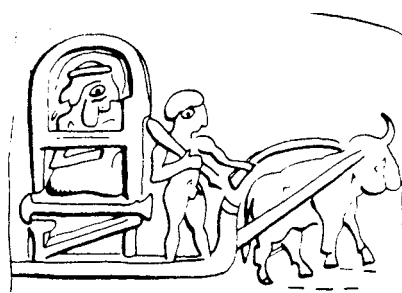


Fig. 9: The priest-king riding in a canopied litter dragged by an ox. From: P. Amiet, *La Glyptique Mésopotamienne Archaique*, Paris 1961 (reprinted 1980), no. 662.

but it may also suggest a kerchief for tying one's hair such as those worn by Egyptian peasants, both men and women, when working on the threshing floor.⁴³ On a steatite plaque in the British Museum, a man is depicted with a hair style characteristic of the EN, the priest-king of the Uruk period (Fig. 9). Apparently, both men and women were conveyed in the threshing sledge-litter, perhaps to sacred weddings conducted on the threshing floor.

The Jewish sages dubbed the threshing sledge "bed of *turbal*" (Mishnah *Parah* 12:10), possibly because of its resemblance to a bed; or perhaps the term preserves a similar early concept of the sledge with a seat upon it as a vehicle for sacred marriages. The word *turbal*, in the language of the sages, derived from Latin *tribulum* – "the dragged one."⁴⁴ In *Res rusticae* ("On Agriculture," first century BCE), Varro mentions two types of threshing sledges (1:52): the board sledge, which has sharp stones or iron spikes inserted into it and an upturned front end to ease the dragging (*tribulum*); and the Punic threshing sledge (*plostellum punicum*), a board moving on small, serrated iron wheels. This latter type, still in use in primitive Arab agriculture (Fig. 10),⁴⁵ is alluded to in Isaiah 28:27–28: "For the black cumin is not threshed with a threshing sledge, neither is a cart-wheel turned about upon the cumin. ... And though the roller of his wagon and its sharp edges move noisily, He doth not crush it." It seems that the types of dragged threshing implements have not changed from ancient times almost to our day. Of course, in modern, mechanized agriculture, the combine harvester reaps, threshes, winnows, and sifts the



Fig. 10: Egyptian *nūrag*. Man and His Work Collection, Eretz Israel Museum, Tel Aviv.

grain, and loads it automatically.⁴⁶

In the sixteenth century, wedding feasts and ceremonies were popular motifs in the art of Germany and the Netherlands. Pieter Brueghel's "The Peasant Wedding Feast" (ca. 1565) is set at the threshing floor, where the grain is heaped to wall height (Fig. 11). The villagers display rath-

er unrestrained joyous behavior. They eat lustily, drink to excess, and generally are rambunctious and quite unhygienic – not at all like their more cultivated, refined urban contemporaries. But they live real lives, free of sophistry and pretensions.⁴⁷ In the background is an additional group that wants to join in the fun. Two sheaves hang



Fig. 11: Pieter Brueghel, "The Peasant Wedding Feast," c. 1565. Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna. Reproduced by permission.

on the wall. The bride sits against a backdrop of blue cloth with a crown suspended over her, reminiscent of the hanging Sassanian crown that passed to the West by way of Byzantium.⁴⁸ The crown hanging over the bride, who sits with crossed hands and an inane expression on her face, seems to be a parody of the simple peasant girl represented as a queen on her wedding day.⁴⁹

Fascination with the threshing floor is also much in evidence in the Hebrew literature of early Zionist settlement in Eretz Israel. In the novel *Belo niv* by Zvi Schatz (who was killed together with the writer J.H. Brenner in May 1921), an impossible love affair between Uri and Hadas, a married woman, is played out on threshing floors in the Galilee. David Shimoni's idyll *Yovel ha'eglonim* describes the lascivious lovemaking of the crowd participating in the celebrations of fifty cart drivers on the swelling mound of a threshing floor, under a silvery moon. The popular song "I Heard a Tale" by Yirmiyahu Rosenzweig, a veteran of the settlement of Menahemiya in the Jezreel valley (Fig. 12), recalls the old Syrian custom of the bridal pair seated on the threshing board:

I heard a tale of a moonlit night,
said the lad to the maiden on a starlit night.
Lovers whispered on the moonlit threshing floor.
The boy said to her: Come along, and tu-lu-lu,
she replied. On a threshing floor
under a bright moon eyes sparkled,
lips stuck together. ... Lovely Esterika,
fair and cheeky, ... come sit with me
on the threshing board, and I'll tell you
how it whirls – on the moonlit night
on the threshing floor.



Fig. 12: The threshing floor at Menahemiya, early twentieth century. Courtesy of the Municipality of Menahemiya.

- 1 A. Black, Andrew George, and Nicholas Postgate (eds.), *A Concise Dictionary of Akkadian*, Wiesbaden 2000 (second corrected printing), p. 285, s.v. *qarānu*.
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- 20 Smith, "Meaning of Goren" (above, note 3), p. 43; J. Gray, "The Goren at the City Gate: Justice and the Royal Office in the Ugaritic Text 'Aqhat,'" *Palestine Exploration Quarterly* (1953), p. 121.
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- 43 As suggested by M. Bietak in the discussion following my lecture at the Israeli Academic Center in Cairo on February 22, 2005. Moreover, it has been pointed out to me that children are often mounted on the threshing sledge to augment its weight for more efficient threshing. These may be identified with the figures depicted on the threshing board in the Rosen seal.
- 44 Pliny, *Historia Naturalis* I:298.
- 45 Dalman, *Arbeit und Sitte* (above, note 5), pp. 78–91; L.A. Moritz, s.v. "Dreschen," in K. Ziegler and W. Sontheimer (eds.), *Der Kleine Pauly*, Stuttgart 1965–1975, II, pp. 162–163; G.C. Hillman, "Traditional Husbandry and Processing of Archaic Cereals in Recent Times: The Operations, Products and Equipment that Might Feature in Sumerian Texts II: The Free-threshing Cereals," *Bulletin on Sumerian Agriculture*, 2 (1985), p. 8.
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