

## Machaerus

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There is a narrative account of the Gospels that has a consistent and complementary confirmation from a 1<sup>st</sup>-century historian outside the Bible: the imprisonment and beheading of Saint John the Baptist. This is the only Gospel passage for which we have a parallel narrative in a non-Christian work of the same era. The aforementioned textual reference is founded on the testimony of Flavius Josephus, the Romanophilic Jewish historian of the imperial Flavian dynasty, in Rome: “John, that was called the Baptist: for Herod slew him [...] he was sent a prisoner, out of Herod’s suspicious temper to Machaerus castle, and was there put to death” (*Antiquitates Judaicae* 18.5, 2).

The historical data of the *Antiquitates* on John’s arrest and jail by Tetrarch Herod Antipas are attested by all the Gospels, and their accounts are consistent with and complement that of Josephus. The authenticity of this textual evidence, as a genuine historical reference, was confirmed by Eusebius Pamphili, the bishop of Caesarea Maritima, in ca. 324 CE: “John called the Baptist [...] of Herod’s suspicion John was sent in bonds to the citadel of Machaerus, and there slain” (*Historia Ecclesiastica* 1.11, 4–6).

From the beginning there was a very serious holy tradition concerning Machaerus in Christianity, even though the historical city was destroyed by the Romans and had disappeared from the maps already by the end of the 1<sup>st</sup> century. Still, Machaerus was always commemorated as the historical place of the Golgotha (or Calvary) of Saint John the Baptist, including in the pertinent *eulogium* in the *Martyrologium Romanum* for the memorial day of Saint John the Baptist’s persecution, 29 August: “*Memoria passionis sancti Iohannis Baptistae, quem Herodes Antipas rex in arce Macherontis in carcere tenuit et in anniversario suo, filia Herodiadis rogante, decollari praecepit.*”

However, there is another unique character of the historical place of the Calvary of the Baptist: its genuine Gospel setting survived the last two millennia as a time capsule. After the destruction of Machaerus by the same *Legio X Fretensis* of the Roman army that had destroyed Jerusalem approximately a year earlier, the ancient city was completely abandoned, its ruins buried under the accumulated wall-destructions of the ancient buildings, and Mount Machaerus was never inhabited again.

The archaeological excavations on the site have been in progress since 2009, on behalf of the Hungarian Academy of Arts and the Jordanian Department of Antiquities, in close scientific collaboration with three academic institutions: the Jerusalem Studium Biblicum Franciscanum, the École biblique et archéologique française de Jérusalem, and the Cobb Institute of Archaeology at Mississippi State University. The archaeological legacy is perfectly



Fig. 1. In the Vatican, the author (center) receiving the Pontifical Gold Medal and the Diploma of Pope Francis from Cardinal Gianfranco Ravasi, president of the Pontifical Commission for Sacred Archaeology (left), and the Secretary of State of His Holiness, Cardinal Pietro Parolin (right). (Photo copyright and courtesy of the Papal Household, Vatican City.)



Fig. 2. The Pontifical Gold Medal of His Holiness Pope Francis. (Photo copyright and courtesy of the Papal Household, Vatican City.)

contextualizing the historical sources, and vice versa: the related textual references are precisely meeting the revealed archaeological evidence. They are in complete harmony.

More than a decade of study of the archaeological legacy of the site, together with well over one hundred thousand architectural fragments, revealed the third unexpected surprise: there is enough archaeological information to reconstruct the historical built legacy of the monuments and to expose the original architecture of the once magnificent Herodian palace and city of Machaerus. Today Machaerus, together with Jerusalem, is the most authentic Gospel-related site in the Holy Land, and we may provide the most reliable and trustworthy Gospel setting through its surviving archaeological legacy.

The author won the 2020 Vatican Prize of the Pontifical Academies for his Machaerus archaeological excavations and Edizioni Terra Santa final report publications (Milan, 2013, 2015, 2019), and Pope Francis awarded him the Gold Medal of the Pontificate in 2021 (Figs. 1-2). In addition to these, the first scientific synthesis was published by the Hungarian Academy of Arts in Budapest (2021) (Fig. 3).

**References:**

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Project website: [machaerus.org](http://machaerus.org)

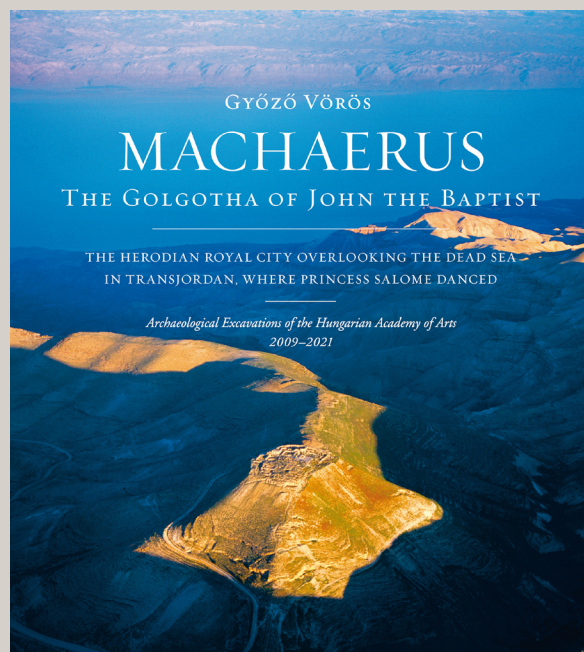


Fig. 3. The cover of the first scientific synthesis (412 pages), published by the Hungarian Academy of Arts, Budapest, 2022.