



# Mount Machaerus

An Introduction to the Historical, Archaeological, and Pilgrim Site  
Overlooking the Dead Sea in the Kingdom of Jordan

Győző Vörös



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The American Center of Research  
*Amman, Jordan—Alexandria, Virginia*

FRONT COVER ILLUSTRATIONS: (*upper*) Edward Armitage, *Herod's Birthday Feast*, 1868, oil on canvas, 155 x 277 cm, Guildhall Art Gallery, London; (*middle*) the re-erected columns of the Herodian royal palace crowning Mount Machaerus, 2019; (*lower*) theoretical architectural reconstruction of the royal Herodian citadel of Machaerus, with a cutaway bird's-eye view from the south.

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TO MY DARLING WIFE, NOÉMI,  
AND TO OUR BELOVED CHILDREN,  
ALEXANDER AND SALOME ALEXANDRA,  
IN MEMORY OF OUR MAGICAL YEARS IN JORDAN

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## Foreword

The evocative Citadel of Mukawer, or Machaerus to the ancient world, is a site that is redolent with the narrative and wonder of history and faith. It is one of those very special places that seem to exist beyond time and in its own space. It sits in a deeply imbued landscape that brings to life the resting chronicle of belief, devotion and struggle. This abandoned hilltop site with its faded but once-magnificent fortified royal palace, occupies a strategic point overlooking the Dead Sea in the modern Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan. It has been known to us for generations as Qalat Mishnaqa. This is the place where, according to the Roman historian Flavius Josephus (*AJ XVIII 5, 2*), one of the holiest men of the biblical era, the Prophet Yahya ibn Zakariyya, was imprisoned and executed by the Jewish Tetrarch Herod Antipas almost 2,000 years ago. This story of death for faith and for love of an ideal makes Mukawer so much more than a fascinating archaeological site. It sits in the landscape of religious memory as a testament and place of pilgrimage, not only for Muslims, but for Christians too. In our country, our beloved Prophet Yehya is Saint John the Baptist by another name. He is the valiant predecessor of Jesus Christ and, indeed, he is rightly considered to be the Patron Saint of Jordan.

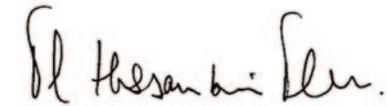
FIGURE 1: Aerial photograph of Machaerus (2004) in the first rays of the rising Sun, with the Dead Sea in the background: on the West Bank, to the southwest, Masada, with the Oasis of Engedi, is visible.

I am delighted that, over the last fifteen years, the Hungarian Academy of Arts has conducted vital and sensitive archaeological excavations and architectural surveys on this historic place. They have done so in collaboration with the Jordanian Department of Antiquities under the leadership of the present author. This worthy monograph of Professor Győző Vörös is published by the American Center of Research in Amman for the general public, including the religious pilgrims and the secular touristic visitors. We, who value the importance of Mukawer to faith and history, are delighted that the author gives such a clear historical, archaeological and architectural overview of this important site. He meticulously and insightfully describes the results of field research over the last two and a half centuries. Following the German–Frisian rediscovery of the citadel in 1807, and the French–Dominican search for its Lower City in 1909, American–Baptist, German–Protestant and Italian–Franciscan excavations and surveys had been conducted on the archaeological site since 1968, before our Hungarian friends arrived in July 2009. The story of these excavations and analyses form the modern narrative of this ancient site.

The landscape in which Mukawer sits is one that any pilgrim or archaeological school, cannot fail to be mesmerized by. In the immediate vicinity of the citadel are two further important places of pilgrimage: the Baptism Site of the Prophet Issa (Jesus) at “Bethany beyond the Jordan” (John 1, 28), and Mount Nebo, where the Prophet Musa (Moses) glimpsed the Promised Land and passed away to join his Maker. We feel proud and privileged to be able to welcome all Muslim and Christian pilgrims and visitors to these holy sites in Jordan, where we are blessed with a wealth of destinations for pilgrimage commemorating our shared history of faith, struggle and religion. The welcome that we reserve for those

who seek to discover the roots of their faith was given global attention with the visit of His Holiness Pope John Paul II in 2000, and the visits of Their Holinesses Pope Benedict XVI in 2009 and Pope Francis in 2014. They came as pilgrims to the Holy Land and all those who follow them will receive the same warm and joyous welcome.

We are honoured to act as custodians of sites such as Mukawer. These great remnants of other ages enable the adherents of the Abrahamic Faiths to explore their common roots and to share their stories with pilgrims and travellers from the global human family.



**HRH Prince El Hassan bin Talal**  
Amman, 21 February 2023



## Introduction

There is a narrative account of the Gospels that has a consistent and complementary confirmation from a first-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* XVIII.5, 2) (FIGS. 1–7).

The historical data of the *Antiquitates* on John’s arrest and jailing 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. AD 324: “John called the Baptist [...] of Herod’s suspicion John was sent in bonds to the citadel of Machaerus, and there slain” (*Historia Ecclesiastica* I.11, 4–6).

From the beginning there was a very serious holy tradition concerning Machaerus in

FIGURE 2: Helicopter shot of Machaerus (2004) in the first rays of the rising Sun, with the Dead Sea in the background: on the West Bank, to the west, Qumran and Jerusalem are visible.

Christianity, even though the historical city was destroyed by the Romans and had disappeared from the maps already by the end of the first 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 the Baptist's persecution, 29 August: "*Memoria passionis sancti Ioannis 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 contextualizing the historical sources, and vice versa: the related textual references are precisely meeting the revealed archaeological evidence. They are in complete harmony.

The more than fifteen years' 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, together with Jerusalem, Machaerus 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.

Győző Vörös  
Jerusalem, 29 August 2023



FIGURE 3: A satellite image of the Holy Land, view from south. The dominant geographical positions of Machaerus and its royal Dead Sea port, Callirrhoe, opposite Jerusalem, are clearly visible. The imprisoned John the Baptist sent his disciples from Machaerus to Jesus in Galilee, probably to Capernaum (Matthew 11:2–6; Luke 7:18–23).

## I. Historical Sources on Mount Machaerus (First Century AD)

The number of first-century written sources related to our archaeological site is extremely high, compared to other Transjordanian fortresses or cities of the Holy Land. Among these sources, we have four that describe Machaerus by even highlighting its name. These four can be divided into two groups. The first includes the notes of two great geographers of the ancient world, Strabo and Pliny the Elder, of fascinating historical detail. The second comprises two works by Flavius Josephus, the most important Roman historian of first-century Judea.

Our earliest written source is Strabo's *Geography* (*Geographica*), which was completed sometime before the author's death in AD 24. This is followed by the *Natural History* (*Naturalis Historia*) of Pliny the Elder, where Machaerus is also mentioned by name. This work was written over half a century later, and appeared in about 77, after the end of the First Jewish War. In chronological order, our third author of the first century who described and mentioned Machaerus by name in his two *opera magna*, the *Jewish War* (*Bellum Judaicum*) and the *History of the Jews* (*Antiquitates Judaicae*), was Flavius Josephus. His first work appeared around the same year as *Naturalis Historia*, originally in Aramaic, and was soon translated into Greek. It gives a detailed geographical description of the fortified royal



FIGURE 4: Map of the Holy Land in the era of the Gospel scenes (ca. AD 28–33), after the division of Herod’s kingdom and the Roman annexations of Samaria, Judea, and Idumea.



FIGURE 5: *In the foreground*, the Old City of Jerusalem in the afternoon sunshine, viewed from the west, toward the Dead Sea. The golden cupola of the Dome of the Rock shines like the Sun. *In the background*, the archaeological site of Mount Machaerus on the far shore of the Dead Sea is encircled on this old aerial photograph.



Herodian settlement and its environment, which in the nineteenth century was instrumental in identifying the ruins of the lost ancient city. The second one includes the report of a highly important historical event, already quoted in the introduction in a shortened form:

Now some of the Jews thought that the destruction of Herod's army came from God, and that very justly, as a punishment of what he did against John, that was called the Baptist: for Herod slew him, who was a good man, and commanded the Jews to exercise virtue, both as to righteousness towards one another, and piety towards God, and so to come to baptism; for that the washing [with water] would be acceptable to him, if they made use of it, not in order to the putting away [or the remission] of some sins [only], but for the purification of the body; supposing still that the soul was thoroughly purified beforehand by righteousness. Now when [many] others came in crowds about him, for they were very greatly moved [or pleased] by hearing his words, Herod, who feared lest the great influence John had over the people might put it into his power and inclination to raise a rebellion, (for they seemed ready to do anything he should advise,) thought it best, by putting him to death, to prevent any mischief he might cause, and not bring himself into difficulties by sparing a man who might make him repent of it when it would be too late. Accordingly, he was sent a

FIGURE 6: The principal gate of the holy city of Jerusalem, called the Damascus Gate, with the Dome of the Rock and Machaerus (marked with an arrow) in the background.

prisoner, out of Herod's suspicious temper, to Machaerus (Μαχαιρούντα), the castle I before mentioned, and was there put to death.

—Josephus, *Antiquitates Judaicae* XVIII, 5, 2

It is generally accepted that the account given by Josephus about John the Baptist (dated to ca. 93–94) is genuine and authentic from the point of view of historical criticism. The text is witnessed in all the relevant manuscripts, without exception; its vocabulary, style, and general message are in harmony with the other works of Josephus. The authenticity of the eighteenth book of the *Antiquitates* was confirmed by Origen, who in about AD 250 wrote the following:

For Josephus in the eighteenth book of the Jewish Antiquities bears witness to John as the one who was “the Baptist” and who promised purification for those who were baptized.

—Origen, *Contra Celsum* I, 47

In ca. 324, Eusebius likewise endorsed the reliability and validity of the description of Josephus when he cited the relevant text in his *Ecclesiastical History*, which we have already quoted in the introduction. Meanwhile, Eusebius was the first to clearly state that the description of Josephus does not contradict the Gospels, but rather is a confirmation of, and a “testimony” to them. His still valid observation includes the following:

John the Baptist was beheaded by the younger Herod, as is stated in the Gospels. Josephus also records the same fact, making mention of

Herodias by name, and stating that, although she was the wife of his brother, Herod made her his own wife after divorcing his former lawful wife [...]. The same Josephus confesses in this account that John the Baptist was an exceedingly righteous man, and thus agrees with the things written of him in the Gospels.

—Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History* I, 11, 1 and 3

In the New Testament of the Bible, all the Gospels talk about the imprisonment of John the Baptist, albeit without mentioning the name of Machaerus. Among them, *Matthew* and *Luke* specifically talk about the messages exchanged between the Baptist, who was imprisoned in Perea (Eastern Judea), and Jesus of Nazareth, who was in Galilee at that time. (This conversation may have come from the Jesus-*logia* of the so-called Q source, or *Logienquelle*.) Furthermore, the Gospels of *Mark* and *Matthew* give detailed descriptions of the dramatic circumstances of the imprisonment and execution of John the Baptist. They are of the opinion that the confinement was a consequence of John the Baptist's criticism of the second marriage of Tetrarch Herod Antipas with his sister-in-law Herodias, the lawful wife of his brother Philip. According to their narratives, the execution of John took place on the Tetrarch's birthday after Herodias's daughter danced for Antipas in front of the guests and her uncle promised her that she could ask for anything she wanted. On her mother's advice, the girl asked for the head of John the Baptist, which she received from the Tetrarch on a tray. The date of the event according to Luke (3:1) was about AD 29. Now let us listen to what the most detailed historical source tells us about them, preserved as an integral part of the Gospel according to Mark. The parallel version of the Gospel according to Matthew (14:1–12) is a shortened form of the following account:



King Herod had heard about him [Jesus] since by now his name was well known. Some were saying, “John the Baptist has risen from the dead, and that is why miraculous powers are at work in him,” others said, “He is Elijah,” others again, “He is a prophet, like the prophets we used to have.” But when Herod heard this, he said, “It is John whose head I cut off; he has risen from the dead.” Now it was this same Herod who had sent to have John arrested, and had had him chained up in prison because of Herodias, his brother Philip’s wife whom he had married. For John had told Herod, “It is against the law for you to have your brother’s wife.” As for Herodias, she was furious with him and wanted to kill him, but she was not able to do so, because Herod was in awe of John, knowing him to be a good and upright man, and gave him his protection. When he had heard him speak, he was greatly perplexed, and yet he liked to listen to him. An opportunity came on Herod’s birthday when he gave a banquet for the nobles of his court, for his army officers and for the leading figures in Galilee. When the daughter of this same Herodias came in and danced, she delighted Herod and his guests; so the king said to the girl, “Ask me anything you like and I will give it you.” And he swore her an oath, “I will give you anything you ask, even half my kingdom.” She went out and said to her mother, “What shall I ask for?” She

FIGURE 7: Caravaggio, *The Beheading of Saint John the Baptist*, 1608, oil on canvas, 370 x 520 cm, detail. Altarpiece of the oratory of Saint John’s Co-Cathedral in Valletta, Malta. This is the only work by Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio that bears his signature (“f[ra] Michelang.o”), which can be seen in the blood spilling from the cut throat of Saint John. The characters in the imaginary prison of the Machaerus Gospel scene are depicted in contemporary, early seventeenth-century clothes.

replied, “The head of John the Baptist.” The girl at once rushed back to the king and made her request, “I want you to give me John the Baptist’s head, immediately, on a dish.” The king was deeply distressed but, thinking of the oaths he had sworn and of his guests, he was reluctant to break his word to her. At once the king sent one of the bodyguards with orders to bring John’s head. The man went off and beheaded him in the prison; then he brought the head on a dish and gave it to the girl, and the girl gave it to her mother. When John’s disciples heard about this, they came and took his body and laid it in a tomb.

—Mark 6:14–29

It is a very complex and quintessential narrative, not easy to understand at first reading. It deals with six locations and not less than ten movements (entries and exits) in sixteen Gospel verses, which is something absolutely unique in the Gospels! There are three architectural spaces inside and three places outside the fortified royal city of Machaerus that we concern ourselves with: the place of the arrest (A), the subsequent location of the disciples of John (D), and the tomb in the cemetery (T), which obviously must have been outside the Herodian city. The banquet hall of the Tetrarch (B) and the quarters of Herodias and her daughter (H) were certainly in the royal palace, whereas the prison of the Baptist (P) must have been situated within the fortified city walls, but outside the luxurious royal palace. As it is clearly trackable, there are ten movements, five entries and five exits, six of which were from or into the Banquet Scene. In the translated English words of the Gospel narrative: “*sent, arrested, chained up, came*

*in, went out, rushed back, sent, went off, brought, gave, came, took, laid.*”

We can see the sequence of movements in the schematic drawing of the following illustration.

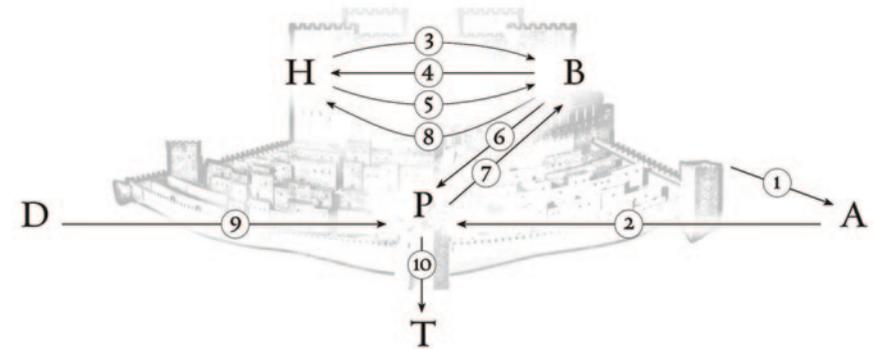


FIGURE 8: The schematic drawing that illustrates the sequence of the Machaerus movements during the calvary of Saint John the Baptist in Mark 6:14–29.

Josephus (*Antiquitates* XVIII, 5) provides important additions to the Gospel accounts. We learn, for example, that the first wife of Herod Antipas was a foreign princess, the daughter of the Nabataean King Aretas IV Philopatris. He mentions that Herodias (the second wife) was previously married to Herod (probably Herod Philip, see Mark 6:17 and Matthew 14:3) and the name of her daughter was Salome. According to Josephus, the scenes of both the imprisonment and execution of John took place in Machaerus.

Consequently, in addition to the previous sources by Strabo, Pliny the Elder, and Josephus, there are complementary ones that do not mention Machaerus by name but report on historical events that, according to Josephus, happened within its walls. We may call the latter group of text

passages—which are independent from the previous ones but are indirectly connected to them—biblical sources, which include all the Gospels of the New Testament. The connecting link between these sources is the previously quoted account of Josephus, wherein he testifies that the imprisonment and the execution of John the Baptist took place in Machaerus. From this perspective, we may call the former group “extra-biblical sources” and can classify the two groups as follows:

FIRST-CENTURY WRITTEN SOURCES ON MACHAERUS,  
IN CHRONOLOGICAL ORDER

EXTRA BIBLICAL SOURCES (Direct)

Geographical and historical references

STRABO, *Geographica* (completed before his death in 24)

PLINY THE ELDER, *Naturalis Historia* (ca. 77)

JOSEPHUS, *Bellum Judaicum* (between 75 and 79)

JOSEPHUS, *Antiquitates Judaicae* (ca. 93–94)

BIBLICAL SOURCES (Indirect)

Descriptions of the Gospels of the New Testament, in relative chronology

MARK

Q-SOURCE (cited by Matthew and Luke)

MATTHEW

LUKE

JOHN

Not only can we sort our nine written sources (all known to us in Greek) according to their dates of creation or identify them as being biblical or extra-biblical accounts, but we can also classify their *contents*, based on historical chronology: they report on past events in sequential order. Concerning the three

classical periods of Machaerus, we have descriptions providing us with essential information on the historical landscape and the appearance of its once magnificent monuments.

Josephus provides a breathtaking account of the Herodian foundation of the royal city of Machaerus (in ca. 30 BC), describing the relation of the citadel palace (acropolis) and the connected lower city (*suburbium*) as well. It would become the Herodian Gospel scene, about sixty years after its foundation, where Saint John the Baptist was imprisoned and where the Hasmonean royal princess Salome danced.

But when Herod came to be king, he thought the place to be worthy of the utmost regard, and of being built upon in the firmest manner, and this especially because it lay so near to Arabia; for it is seated in a convenient place on that account, and hath a prospect toward that country; he therefore surrounded a large space of ground with walls and towers, and built a city (πόλις) there, out of which city there was a way that led up to the very citadel itself on the top of the mountain; nay, more than this, he built a wall round that top of the hill, and erected towers at the corners, of a hundred and sixty cubits high; in the middle of which place he built a palace (βασιλειον), after a magnificent manner, wherein were large and beautiful edifices. He also made a great many reservoirs for the reception of water, that there might be plenty of it ready for all uses, and those in the properest places that were afforded him there. Thus, did he, as it were, contend with the nature of the place, that he might exceed its

natural strength and security (which yet itself rendered it hard to be taken) by those fortifications which were made by the hands of men. Moreover, he put a large quantity of darts and other machines of war into it, and contrived to get everything thither that might in any way contribute to its inhabitants' security, under the longest siege possible.

—Josephus, *Bellum Judaicum* VII, 6, 2

The above description is the most precious written document on the architectural heritage of the Herodian royal acropolis-palace and of the connecting (lower) city. However, Josephus also recorded historical events associated with the palace as well, including the ones its walls had witnessed. The Herodian city existed only for two generations, from about 30 BC until AD 36, when the Nabataean King Aretas IV Philopatris had it destroyed. After the death of the Jewish King Herod Agrippa I in AD 44, Roman troops annexed Judea and stayed among the renovated ruins of the naturally defended Machaerus citadel, no more a fortified royal palace, only a military garrison. Among the peoples who lived in its rebuilt lower city, we can also find a Zealot Jewish community. We are informed by Josephus that at the beginning of the Jewish War (AD 66), these rebel Zealots successfully seized the citadel of the Roman garrison, which he describes as “the upper citadel,” whereas for the settlement below, he explicitly uses the expressions “lower” and “the lower part of the city.” Josephus gave a gripping story (*Bellum Judaicum* II, 18, 6, and VII, 6, 4) about the final destruction of the fortress during the winter of 71/72 by Lucilius Bassus, then prefect of Judea and commander of the Legio X Fretensis.

The three chapters of the history of Machaerus can be reconstructed *exclusively* on the basis of the nine first-century

historical sources through their intertextual analysis along the following timeline, in order to provide a clear understanding of its more than a hundred-and-fifty-year history. At the beginning, Machaerus had been a short-lived Hasmonean fortress, which was destroyed by the Romans. A generation later, Herod the Great founded the city with its mountain-top fortified royal palace (on the ruins of the erstwhile Hasmonean fortress), which was destroyed two generations later by the Nabataeans. Upon the ruins of the Herodian citadel an Early Roman military garrison was erected, and together with the rebuilt lower city, it became a sanctuary for the rebels of the first Jewish war. Six years later, after the war, the city of Machaerus was destroyed once more by the Romans. The exact historical context unfolds before our eyes through the relevant classical sources of Strabo, Pliny the Elder, Josephus, and the four Gospels.

LATE HELLENISTIC (HASMONEAN) PERIOD  
*ca. 90–57 BC*

The Machaerus fortress was erected by King Alexander Jannaeus in about 90 BC. During the reign of his widow, Queen Salome Alexandra (76–67 BC), it became one of the royal treasure houses of the Hasmonean rulers until 63 BC, when the Roman general and statesman Gnaeus Pompeius Magnus (Pompey the Great) demolished its walls. King Aristobolus II tried to seek protection for his one thousand soldiers in Machaerus in 57 BC; consequently, he reinforced the ruined walls, but the Romans captured and destroyed the Hasmonean fortress two days later for the second time, led by the Syrian provincial governor Aulus Gabinius. (Sources: Strabo, *Geographica* XVI, 2, 40; Josephus, *Bellum Judaicum* I, 8, 5–6; VII, 6, 2; Josephus, *Antiquitates Judaicae* XIV, 5, 4 and 6, 1; XIII, 16, 3.)

HERODIAN PERIOD  
ca. 30 BC–AD 36

In about 30 BC, King Herod the Great erected a city on Mount Machaerus, surrounded by fortified walls and towers, and provided large cisterns to it. By replacing the ruins of the Hasmonean fortress, he built a magnificent royal palace for himself on the mountaintop within the citadel that could be reached through a road leading up within the lower city. As a result, Machaerus became, “next to Jerusalem, the most strongly fortified place in Judea” (Pliny the Elder, *Naturalis Historia* V.15, 16). Following the death of King Herod in 4 BC, his son Herod Antipas inherited the fortified city together with the territories in Peraea and Galilee. The castle of Machaerus thus became the only hereditary royal palace of the Tetrarch from his father. (Sources: Josephus, *Bellum* VII, 6, 2; Josephus, *Antiquitates* XVII, 8, 1; XVIII, 5, 1–2 and 4.)

According to Josephus (*Antiquitates* XVIII, 5, 2), Antipas imprisoned and executed John the Baptist within the fortified walls of Machaerus city, and the Gospels give detailed descriptions of the circumstances (Mark 6:14–29; Matthew 14:1–12; Luke 9:7–9). The imprisonment of the Baptist is attested by all the Gospels (Matthew 4:12; Mark 1:14; Luke 3:20; John 3:24), and two of them even make mention of an exchange of messages during his confinement between him and Jesus in Galilee through his disciples (*Logienquelle* in: Matthew 11:2–6 and Luke 7:18–23). Through the Gospel of Luke (3:1–3), we are able to date the historical events of the imprisonment and beheading to about AD 29. The Nabataean King Aretas IV Philopatris, the former father-in-law of Tetrarch Herod Antipas, defeated the troops of his former son-in-law in AD 36 and destroyed the Herodian Machaerus (Josephus, *Antiquitates* XVIII, 5, 1–2).

EARLY ROMAN PERIOD  
AD 44–72

After the death of King Herod Agrippa I in 44, the ruined city of Machaerus, together with Peraea, came under the control of the Roman Praefectus Judaeae in Jerusalem. On the ruins of the original Machaerus citadel a military garrison stronghold was erected for the Roman army (Josephus, *Bellum Judaicum* II, 18, 6). In 66, the citadel was taken over and reinforced by the Zealot rebels of its lower city. After the destruction of Jerusalem, upon the order of Emperor Vespasian, the Romans conquered Machaerus for the third time during the winter of 71/72 with their Legio X Fretensis, under the commandship of the Roman Legatus of Judea Province, Lucilius Bassus. The fortress of Machaerus was then destroyed and it vanished into oblivion (Josephus, *Bellum Judaicum* II, 18, 6; IV, 9, 9; VII, 6, 1 and 4).

IT SHOULD BE NOTED that *all* of the above historical information about the lost Gospel site of Machaerus was already known and acknowledged from the accounts of these first-century geographers and historians, but prior to its rediscovery in 1807, no one knew where the historical place itself had been situated.



FIGURE 9: This color photograph shows the untouched, virgin archaeological site on the mountaintop of Machaerus, as seen from the east. It was taken on October 21, 1966, during a study visit by the Jerusalem French Dominican Fathers of the École Biblique in Jerusalem.

## II. Rediscovery and Research History (1807–2007)

It was only after 1,735 “lost” years that on 17 January 1807, the German-Frisian explorer Ulrich Jasper Seetzen (1767–1810) successfully identified, and thus rediscovered, the ruins of the ancient royal castle of Machaerus. He based his explorations partly on the accounts of Josephus and partly on the name of the nearby village, Mkaur, as it was then called (today they pronounce it as *Mukawer*), in which he recognized an etymological reflex of *Machaerus*. The academic community is in general agreement that Seetzen was the first to rediscover and correctly identify the citadel of Machaerus. From his brief but accurate description it is evident that he personally visited the hilltop ruins:

From the indication of the location, I was convinced that this had to be the name of the place. The ruins here are very significant; they have a single entrance, which leads over a long bridge, and there are still very large ashlar blocks that belonged to the former masonry. [...] Mkaur lies on the high summit of the long Attarus mountain and at its north end is close to the south side of the Zarqa Ma'in. The sides of Machaerus Mountain are extraordinarily

rocky, rugged, and unsurpassable from three sides.

— Ulrich Jasper Seetzen, *Reisen durch Syrien, Palästina, etc.*, pp. 330–334

His discovery was published in a monograph, but only forty-four years after his death, in 1854, in Berlin. This late publication, however, does not alter the fact that Seetzen found ancient Machaerus, which he not only identified and described in his posthumous book but also precisely indicated and scientifically documented on a Dead Sea map he published in 1810 and printed in the Thuringian city of Gotha. Consequently, at the border of the small Transjordan village, Seetzen discovered an isolated mountain overlooking the Dead Sea whose geographical place and geomorphological formations properly fitted the ancient descriptions of Strabo, Pliny the Elder, and especially Josephus, concerning the Hasmonean-Herodian royal castle of Machaerus. The limited surface ruins and the visible geographical evidence matched the first-century literary sources. However, the identification of the unexcavated ruins on an etymological and geographical basis was an indirect and indefinite one: without the archaeological evidence, it was only a well-based scientific theory (FIG. 9).

The decisive archaeological evidence that allowed the identification of the conical hill near Mukawer village with its hilltop ruins as the ancient citadel of Machaerus was discovered only 158 years later, by another German scholar, a compatriot of Seetzen, named August Strobel (1930–2006). It was in October 1965 that the then thirty-five-year-old August Strobel first visited the still unexcavated Machaerus hilltop. As he recalled nine years later:

An excursion of the German Evangelical Institute for Archaeology of the Holy Land [in Jerusalem] was supported by the Department of Antiquities [of Jordan]. On a sunny afternoon we drove from Amman to Mukawer to visit the ruins [...] While standing on this high top-flattened place (699/700 m above sea level), I discovered a line of stones, looking like a wall and encircling the whole area around the fortress. I then surmised, and now it is beyond all doubts, that these stones, artificially arranged, represent the remains of the Roman circumvallation erected in AD 72 at the end of the Roman-Jewish war, still visible in the landscape of Mukawer (FIG. 10).

— August Strobel, *Observations about the Roman Installations at Mukawer*, pp. 101–102

It was a landslide discovery at Machaerus, the most important one since Seetzen. Strobel published his extraordinary academic observations in 1968. He discovered an Early Roman, 3.5 km-long circumvallation stone wall, very similar to the one around Masada—in fact its parallel, twin monumental structure, erected by the same military legion. He arrived at the brilliant scientific conclusion that, in antiquity, the Herodian fortress of ancient Machaerus had to stand in the epicenter of this long Early Roman siege wall with sixteen military camps! The unfinished agger-ramp provided further evidence for the identification of these unexcavated ancient ruins with the structures

FIGURE 10 (following pages): The archaeological remains of the Machaerus circumvallation monuments of the Legio X Fretensis. The archaeological and topographical interpretation is demonstrated by the superimposed topographical labels and graphics of a 2014 aerial photograph (APAAME\_20141013\_MND-0142), after the re-erection of the Herodian columns.



mentioned in Josephus's description of the siege of Machaerus in AD 71/72. In light of all this, it was a conclusion of crucial importance that the city was besieged by the same Fretensis that captured Masada in the following years (FIG. 11). According to the ancient historical sources, during the Early Roman period the only place where a military siege—including a circumvallation wall with an encircled rampart—was executed against a fortress by the Tenth Legion in the Transjordan area was Machaerus. Thus, the circumvallation wall (from the Latin verb *circumvallare*, “to surround with siegeworks”) was undoubtedly the missing link that was necessary to identify the ancient historical site beyond a doubt before its archaeological excavations began (FIG. 12).

The Third Arab-Israeli War, fought between June 5 and 10, 1967 (also known as the “Six-Day War”), hit the Kingdom of Jordan hard. Losing its heart—the holy city of Jerusalem, with the west bank of the holy Jordan River—and receiving floods of Palestinian refugees made life in this little desert kingdom bitter and very challenging. But this historical moment also marked the beginning of a new era for archaeological research in Transjordan, a geographical entity among artificial political borders (previously a remote hinterland of ancient Palestine), which became formally independent from the Jerusalem institutes of archaeology and academic research only after 1967. As a result, new research institutes were created in the post-Six Day War Transjordan Hashemite kingdom. The first of these was the Amman establishment of the American institute (ACOR) in 1968, followed by its British (CBRL), French (IFPO), German (GPIA), and Italian (FAI) counterparts. (The last was organized through the Franciscan Archaeological Institute in the Mount Nebo Friary of the Custody of the Holy Land, under the protection of the Vatican.)



FIGURE 11: During the First Jewish Revolt, the Tenth Roman Legion also built a 2.5-mile-long (c. 4-kilometer-long) circumvallation wall around Masada—the Jewish rebels' last stronghold—in the Judean Desert. The remains of this siege wall, as well as Roman siege camps A, E, G, and H, the siege ramp, and King Herod's northern palace wing, are marked on the classic photograph by Zev Radovan. The military agger-ramp was completed neither at Machaerus nor at Masada.

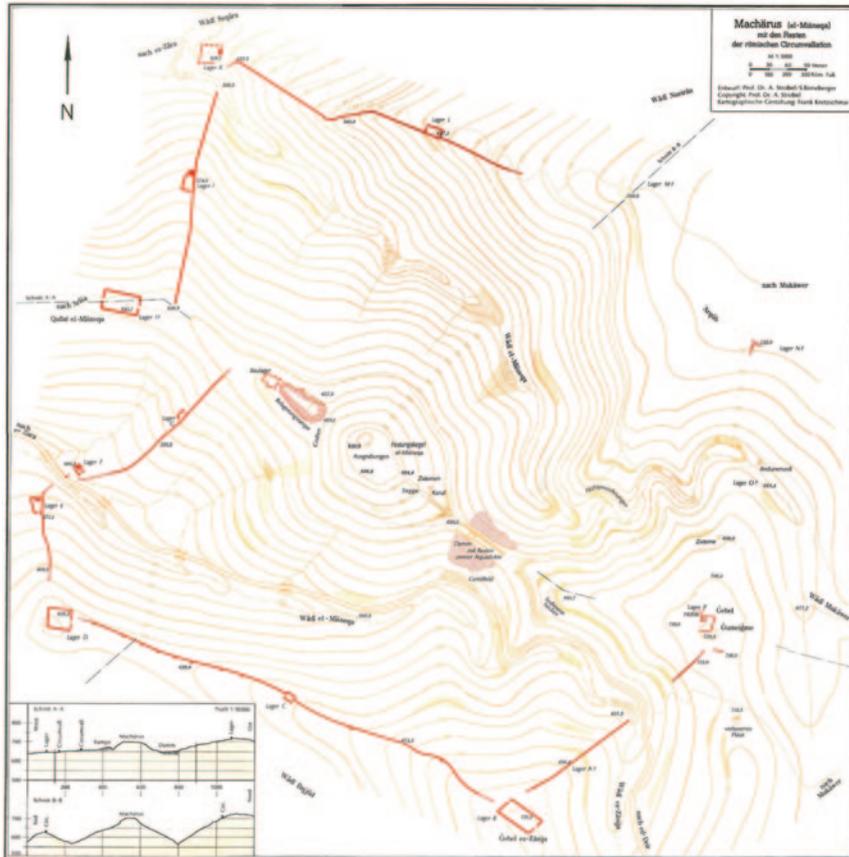


FIGURE 12: The professional survey documentation of the German Protestant team on the 3.5-kilometer Roman circumvallation wall around Machaerus, led by August Strobel and published in 1974. The German survey of March 1973 incorporated the results of the American Baptists' surveys of the archaeological site, originally started by Anson Rainey in April 1965 and completed by the surveyor team of Jerry Vardaman in June 1968 (as part of their large-scale archaeological mission). Strobel had access to, and referred to, the unpublished 1965 and 1968 Jerusalem manuscript documentations, as well. However, the German survey team neglected the mountaintop itself, just mentioning "Ausgrabungen"—i.e., excavations.



FIGURE 13: This June 1968 photograph by Jerry Vardaman has his autograph label: "Machaerus — The top of Mishnaqah — Fatal trenches." In the background (behind the Bedouin children), the excavators at Area A. View toward the east.

This bloody war produced the first "archaeological sondage," a long dugout trench on Mount Machaerus, an approximately 30-meter-long and a good meter deep, more-or-less east-west-oriented zigzag rifle pit. The first photograph of this military construction was taken in 1968 by Jerry Vardaman; he labeled it "fatal trenches" (FIG. 13). This June 1967 dugout, situated at a right angle to the Dead Sea frontline, was made by the Fedayeen, the local defenders against Israeli troops. Two thousand years after the Zealots, in 1967, the Machaerus mountaintop of unique military and strategic importance became once again a rebellious, fighting focal point against the



FIGURE 14: This 1978 aerial photograph was taken from roughly the same angle on the long, zigzag rifle pit seen in the previous field photograph, FIG. 13. *In the background*, sections of Area A and, *in the foreground*, excavation Area B are observable.



FIGURE 15: Mount Machaerus, which naturally has the shape of a truncated cone, looked so artificial in the eyes of members of the American Baptist Mission that they thought the whole mountain was an enormous “tell,” a huge, artificial mound. They printed their Machaerus excavation cards in Kentucky (and then filled them out in Machaerus) with the heading “Tel el-Mishnaqah.” This photograph, taken in June 1968, right before excavations began, shows the still-untouched mountaintop of the archaeological site, with a view toward the Dead Sea.

new lords of Jerusalem—this time not the Romans, but modern Israelis. Mount Machaerus, standing at ca. 1,150 meters above the Dead Sea, still has the same exceptional geographic location as in antiquity, with a breathtaking panorama spreading as far as as-Salt (ancient Saltus) in the north, Masada in the south, and Alexandreion-Sartaba, Jericho, Jerusalem, Bethlehem, and the Hebron mountains in the West Bank.

The Fedayeen could clearly see the Israeli movements on the field and in the air but could do nothing against them. However, these long “fatal trenches” became a vital and significant reference for the first excavators, an “archaeological sondage,” as it were, being the first “window” to the past of the citadel. Accordingly, the dig-pioneers opened their *Area A* next to the eastern, and *Area B* next to the western end of this 1967 war dugout (FIGS. 14–15) The first scientific, archaeological *excavation* research team ever to Machaerus started its initiating fieldwork under American colors on the first anniversary of the outbreak of the Six-Day War: on June 5, 1968. But it was just a coincidence. They were not Zionist Jews but pious Southern Baptist Christians from Kentucky, headed by an ordained Baptist minister, E. Jerry Vardaman (1927–2000) from the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary (FIG. 16).

The archaeological excavations and surveys, conducted by the American E. Jerry Vardaman, in June 1968, lasted only for three weeks, but under the supervision of fourteen highly professional archaeologists and a lot of local workmen. In the meantime, they transported all their 4,973 archaeological finds from Machaerus, with the permission of the Jordanian Government, to the United States. These Machaerica archaeological objects were treasured in thirteen large unopened boxes in the basement of the Cobb Institute of Archaeology at Mississippi State University until the present



author started to study them in the company of their original and extremely professional excavation archives in 2013. The American scholars had never published a word on their very successful Machaerus excavations; these were all published in 2015 (in *Machaerus II*) by the present author (FIGS. 17–18).

The second and the third Machaerus excavations were led (during 1978–1981 and 1992–1993) by two well-known professors of the Studium Biblicum Franciscanum in Jerusalem: Fathers Virgilio Corbo OFM (1918–1991), and, after his death, by his former student Michele Piccirillo OFM (1944–2008). Although the scientific results of their excavations could not have been included in evaluative academic final reports (as they were waiting in vain for the publications of the 1968 American-Baptist mission), they did publish four very short preliminary articles. Nevertheless, a summarizing monograph-chapter and an article were published on the 1978–1981 ceramic and the 1978–1980 numismatic inventories by the Franciscan members of the Corbo-team, Stanislao Loffreda OFM (1932–) and Michele Piccirillo, respectively.

From the architectural point of view, Father Corbo concentrated primarily on the excavations of the citadel, and his final result was a sketched layout: the first ground plan on the interior of the fortified Herodian hilltop palace. The Corbo-headed Italian archaeological mission was also the first to prove *in publications* (as Vardaman did not publish his results!) that the Trans-Dead-Sea castle of Machaerus was unquestionably one of the mosaic-decorated fortified royal palaces of King Herod the Great in ancient Judea. They were also the first to confirm in preliminary reports the accounts of

FIGURE 16: This Kodak slide, a field photograph taken in June 1968, depicts the southern part of the citadel with the Dead Sea in the background, viewed from east. *Area A* excavations are in the foreground (in Sections V3 and U3). In the background, on the left, *Area B* (Section S4) and, on the right, *Area CV* (sections R6 and R7) are observable.



FIGURE 19: Dig director Father Virgilio Canio Corbo OFM (left) is supervising the excavations of the Machaerus royal bathhouse in the autumn sunshine in 1979. Near him, we see the freshly discovered *in situ* Ionic column base (with an excavation basket placed on it). In the center, his colleague and later successor, Father Michele Piccirillo OFM, is standing in a white T-shirt. Twenty-seven local Bedouin workmen can also be seen on the photograph.



FIGURE 17 (opposite page, upper): The caption by the dig director, E. Jerry Vardaman, on this slide reads: "Photographer taking shots of vaulted cistern area—R. Dajani at bottom of ladder." Rafiq Dajani was Vardaman's Jordanian excavation co-director. View from the northeast.

FIGURE 18 (opposite page, lower): The caption on the original 1968 Kodak slide, written by Vardaman, reads: "Area C. Vaulted cistern. Sifting carefully all dirt coming from vaulted cistern. Vardaman & Dajani between workers." View toward the west.



FIGURE 20: The 1979 discovery of the Herodian mosaic in the tepidarium hall of the royal bathhouse in Machaerus was a real sensation in scientific and art-historical circles. The upper *in situ* photographs and the reconstructed mosaic presentation in the Madaba Archaeological Park seen here were created entirely with black and white tesserae (later, in 2011, we found many red pieces, as well). This is the oldest known mosaic art (dating from ca. 30 BC) ever discovered in Jordan.

FIGURE 21: The archaeological finds from the Herodian bathhouse during the 1979 excavation season of the Jerusalem Franciscans included objects from the last (Zealot) period of the fortress: coins, ceramics (a juglet and a so-called Herodian lamp are presented here), and bone objects (hairpins, spoon, etc.).





FIGURE 22: Together with the Ionic one, another *in situ* column base came to light during the 1980 excavation season, this time in the Doric style (without base decoration). The photographs of the *in situ* Attic (left) and the “barefoot” *in situ* Doric column (right) bases are presented here with their original findspot indicated on this 1981 aerial photograph; view from the northeast.

Josephus regarding the Hasmonean and First Jewish Revolt presence at the citadel, by means of architectural, ceramicological, and numismatic evidences. Probably their most amazing discoveries were the tepidarium mosaic of the royal Herodian bathhouse (the oldest known example of mosaic art in Jordan) and the unearthing of the Herodian royal court with the remains of eleven Doric column prints on its stylobates, one of them with a still *in situ* Doric column base. The archaeological mission of Virgilio Corbo was an extraordinary success, but he could not crown it with the excavation final report, as he was waiting for the publications of the American Baptists (FIGS. 19–22).

The Second Italian-Franciscan Excavation (1992–1993) started just six months after the death of Corbo. His disciple Father Michele Piccirillo had two important developments on Mount Machaerus, parallel with his excavations in the Byzantine settlement of Mukawer (1991–1994). He excavated in full the 9.5-meter-deep and ca. 70-square-meter Herodian cistern in the center of the royal courtyard and discovered the most precious architectural elements of the Herodian royal palace at the bottom of this cistern (FIGS. 23–24). Secondly, he convinced the Department of Antiquities of Jordan to build a proper road to the top of the citadel. As Father Piccirillo died prematurely in 2008, he had not published anything about his work there, except for a very brief summary on the internet in 2004. As mentioned previously, his Franciscan predecessor, who excavated there before him for four years (1978–1981), the late Father Virgilio Corbo, had not published his results, either. We studied, evaluated, and prepared for publication the neglected Franciscan graphic and photographic archives in Jerusalem, and the connected archaeological material in the storerooms of the Mount Nebo Friary, under the full academic support of the fathers of the Jerusalem Studium Biblicum Franciscanum (FIGS. 25–28).



To make the site even more problematic, not only did two generations of Franciscan archaeologists die without publishing their excavation reports, but, as mentioned previously, the first archaeological fieldwork (1968) carried out by the American Baptists remained entirely unpublished as well, without as much as a single article. Consequently, seven seasons of archaeological excavations took place in the preceding forty years, before the death of Father Piccirillo in 2008, and essentially nothing was known, nothing was published. So much information was seemingly buried with the three excavators (the Baptist minister Jerry Vardaman passed away in 2000) that there was a real danger of losing the archaeological legacy of the partly excavated Machaerus citadel for good. This precarious situation could have easily resulted in the *dethronement of Machaerus as an authentic, genuine historical site, an original Gospel scene*, and the partially excavated ancient monuments could have perished with their lost archaeological context. Needless to say, the excavations were far from over.



FIGURE 23: This dramatic field photograph and the photograph in FIG. 24, both from the Jerusalem archive of the Studium Biblicum Franciscanum (SBF), were taken during the Second Franciscan Mission, conducted by Michele Piccirillo OFM, in 1992. As the 9.5-meter-deep Herodian cistern in the Doric royal courtyard was completely excavated, we can see its bottom full of architectural elements, waiting to be salvaged; view from above. The dressed stones that had fallen into the cistern during the Nabataean destruction of the Herodian royal castle in AD 36 were too heavy to be lifted up by human force.

FIGURE 24: This photograph, taken from the southwestern corner, shows the bottom of the Herodian water cistern (seen from above in FIG. 23), which was certainly filled with harvested rainwater in AD 36. This must have been the reason why the architectural elements survived in such perfect shape (together with their *in situ* stucco decorations): the water-head mitigated the gravitational force affecting the heavy stone architectural elements. Before the discovery of this precious treasure trove of Herodian architecture, only four(!) Machaerus column drums were known, two of them discovered in 1979 and 1980 as *in situ* bases by the First Franciscan Mission (see FIG. 22).



FIGURE 25: One of the archaeological storerooms in the Mount Nebo Franciscan Monastery, during our 2017 evaluation process of the 1978–1981 Machaeriaca. *In the foreground*, doctoral students of archaeology, the Italian Roman Catholic priests Don Gianantonio Urbani (left) and Don Stefano Vuaran; *in the background*, Tamás Dobrosi (left) and the author.

FIGURE 26: Another moment inside the Mount Nebo Friary archaeological storeroom during the 2016 evaluation and documentation of the Herodian stucco works of Machaerus. *From right to left*: Father Amedeo Ricco OFM and Imre Balázs Arnóczki working on graphic documentation of the archaeological finds; Master István Őri-Kiss and Father Gianantonio Urbani preparing photo-documentation; the author studying the fragments on the left.



FIGURE 28: A unique Herodian floral decoration from the royal bathhouse of Machaerus. The forty-eight pieces of gypsum molding fragments had been discovered by Father Corbo's Franciscan archaeological excavations in 1979; they were reconstructed by the research team of the Hungarian Academy of Arts in 2016–2017 (by Balázs Imre Arnóczy and Tamás Dobrosi) and restored by Maestro Franco Sciorilli in 2018 for the centennial birthday feast of the late Father Corbo.

FIGURE 27 (*opposite page*): The author with his wife, Noémi, and their little Amman-born daughter, Salome Alexandra, in the archaeological storeroom of the Mount Nebo monastery.

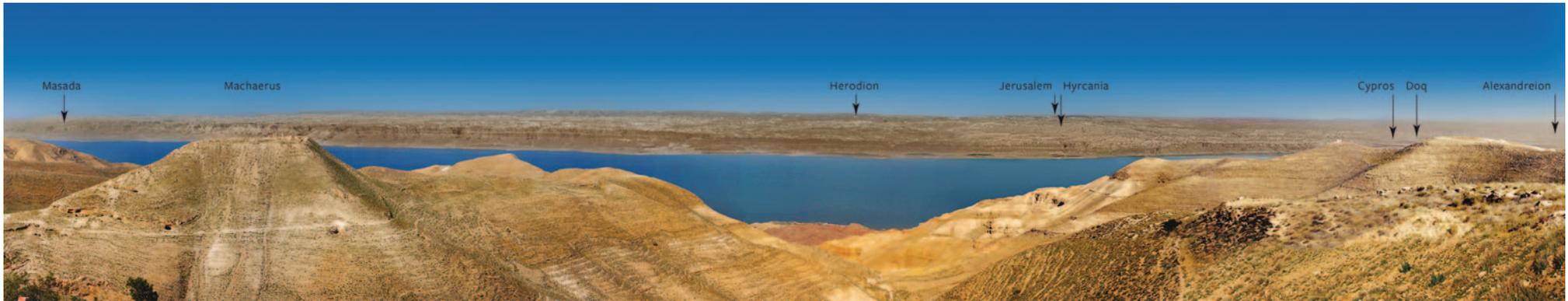
# III. The Excavations of the Herodian Royal Palace (2009–2019)

Our initial Machaerus survey in 2009 had a very clear aim: to document all available information and to describe the ruins of the citadel by graphic and photographic means. In the following years, we extended our methods to include 3-D scanning and drone examinations. Regarding our architectural surveys, the most important results of our scientific investigations have been determining the three historical periods of Machaerus and analyzing the architectural space development of the buildings in detail, both individually and in the context of building complexes as well. We extended our comprehensive architectural descriptions of the ancient monuments to all those building elements that were no longer *in situ* on the archaeological site. Following the architectural surveys, we prepared three-dimensional digital models of the monuments to provide a basis for later theoretical architectural reconstructions with the help of computer visualization. It was obvious that our twenty-first-century research tools, software, and computers—as opposed to the “analog” equipment of our predecessors in the previous century, prior to the onset of the digital era—gave us access to a completely new dimension of research.

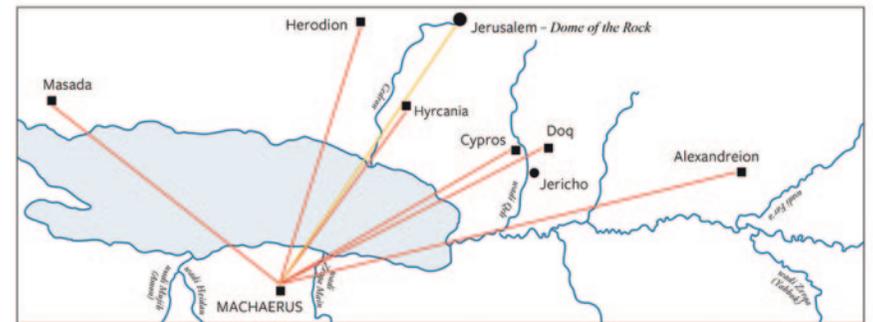
We carried out extensive field and wall examinations on the groups of remains using the methods of building diagnostics and archaeological stratigraphy. Our research methods

included the so-called comparative archaeological and architectural inspections as well. The Machaerus castle had been an element of a network of military fortresses created to defend Jerusalem from the east during the first centuries BC and AD. After Jerusalem itself, these fortresses (Masada, Herodion, Hyrcania, Cypros, Doq, and Alexandreion), which formed an enormous shield around the Holy City from the east, represent the closest Late Hellenistic (Hasmonean), Herodian, and Early Roman architectural parallels and archaeological analogies in relation to Machaerus in ancient Judea. Therefore, our research team spent extensive periods on the West Bank to conduct comprehensive archaeological and architectural examinations of these important fortifications and studied all the other known Hasmonean and Herodian archaeological sites of the Holy Land and their specialist literature, in order to better understand the ancient monuments of Machaerus. Subsequently, taking the architectural legacy and archaeological material of these fortresses as a point of reference, we were able to create the first authentic, theoretical architectural reconstructions of Machaerus (FIGS. 29–30).

We used the information thus gained from the legacy of previous archaeological excavations to complement our data. I felt it was my moral obligation to posthumously publish the results of late colleagues in separate chapters and format, as a token of my respect to their academic dignity and personal achievements. At the same time, their results—which we were able to harmonize and synthesize with ours—helped us better understand the citadel. In retrospect, we have to admit that Machaerus greatly benefited from being excavated by three different academic institutions and their respective teams: American Baptists (Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, Kentucky), Italian Franciscans (Studium Biblicum Franciscanum, Jerusalem), and Hungarian secular professionals



FIGURES 29–30: The panoramic photograph with its complementary Dead Sea map demonstrates the direct optical links between Machaerus (on the left, in the foreground) and the important Herodian royal properties on the west bank of the Dead Sea, including the capital of the ancient kingdom, Jerusalem. Machaerus holds a key position in the eastern shield of the Holy City and was a huge metaphorical sword against the Nabataeans. View and map orientation are toward west. This pair of illustrations clearly confirms why Pliny the Elder wrote in AD 77: “next to Jerusalem, Machaerus was the most strongly fortified place in Judea” (*Naturalis Historia* V. 15, 16). Without Machaerus the Hasmonean-Herodian military network could have collapsed.



(Hungarian Academy of Arts, Budapest). This versatile background made the archaeological site even more authentic, as the different academic teams arrived at the same scientific conclusions—not to mention the pioneer mission of the German Protestants and the academic collaboration of our French Dominican and Jordanian Muslim friends.

The scientific research and detailed study of the tell—the three layers of successive occupations on the mountaintop can be considered a small artificial mound, in Arabic, *tell* or *tall*—yielded very important results. The analysis of the stratigraphical layers in the excavation profiles gave us a clear understanding of the three subsequent periods of the accumulated archaeological remains. It was possible to establish from the available architectural, ceramological, epigraphical (ostraca), and numismatic data that the ruins of the Late Hellenistic Hasmonean fortress of Alexander Jannaeus were being reused for the foundation of the once magnificent fortified Herodian palace. In addition, the remains of the Herodian royal palace perfectly correspond to those of the well-dated and studied Herodian palaces on the West Bank. The architectural and archaeological similarities of their bathhouses (Masada, Herodion, and Cypros), aqueducts (Hyrkania and Alexandreion), or Doric peristyle courtyard (Alexandreion) with those of Machaerus were striking and overwhelming. They must have been the fantastic achievements of the same architects and master builders! At the same time, it was also possible to establish that the remains of the Early Roman military garrison (which were in turn reused by the Zealots during the First Jewish War) had been erected on the ruined walls of the Herodian palace. The walls of the Early Roman garrison ran on top of the ruined Herodian foundations, where we found a high number of coins from the second and third years of the First Jewish War (AD 67 and 68). Thus, the destruction of the Herodian palace by the Nabateans in



AD 36 was clearly detectable and convincingly demonstrable (FIGS. 31–37).

To give the reader a statistical idea and a clear overview of the archaeological remains that came to light during the fifty years of the complete excavations of the Herodian citadel (1968–2018), let me give a list of these well-dated pieces of archaeological evidence: 53 ostraca (with Aramaic, Hebrew, Greek, and Latin inscriptions); 137 datable coins; well over ten thousand ceramic pieces (open vessels: plates, bowls, cups, goblets; tableware: jars, jugs, juglets, flasks; cooking vessels: pots, bowls; storage jars; several imported amphorae; Hellenistic, Herodian, and even

FIGURE 31: The ground plan of the surviving ruins of Machaerus citadel from the Hasmonean period (ca. 90–57 BC). “Now when Alexander [Jannaeus], the king of the Jews, observed the nature of this place, he was the first who built a citadel here [...] though it was done after a poor manner” (Josephus, *Bellum Judaicum* VII, 6, 2 and I, 8, 6).

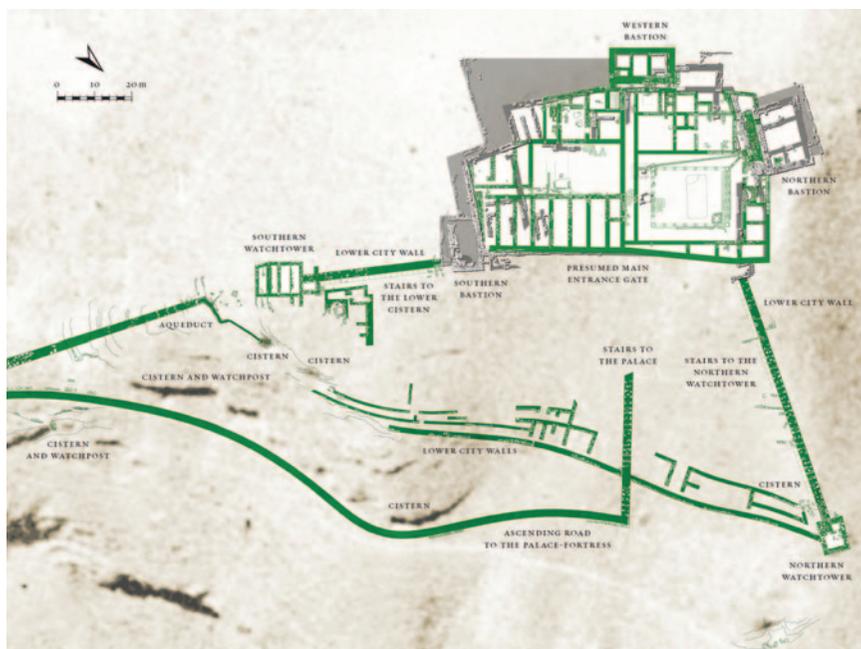


FIGURE 32: The ground plan of the surviving ruins of Machaerus city and citadel (see FIG. 33) from the Herodian period (ca. 30 BC–AD 36). “When Herod came to be king, he thought the place to be worthy of the utmost regard, and of being built upon in the firmest manner, and this especially because it lay so near to Arabia; for it is seated in a convenient place on that account, and hath a prospect toward that country; he therefore surrounded a large space of ground with walls and towers, and built a city (πόλις) there, out of which city there was a way that led up to the very citadel itself on the top of the mountain” (Josephus, *Bellum Judaicum* VII, 6, 2 ).

imported Italian lamps; etc.); 58 stone vessels; hundreds of glass objects; numerous metal objects: gold, lead, bronze, and iron artifacts; 156 stone ballistic projectiles; 14 opus sectile pieces; ca. 3 square meters of *in situ* opus tessellatum mosaic art (with red, white, and black tesserae); over five hundred gypsum molding pieces; over three hundred colored fresco fragments; etc., etc. These objects were all published with color photos and drawings in my Machaerus trilogy, in addition to the aforementioned ceramological and

numismatic studies of Fathers Loffreda and Piccirillo. These pieces of archaeological hard evidence provided a coherent corpus that enabled us to put Machaerus on the map of the Holy Land in an authentic form, similar to Masada or Herodion. Let us note, however, that the Herodian fortresses on the West Bank of the Dead Sea were all converted into Byzantine monasteries—Herodion even became a crusader fortress. Machaerus was the only one to survive intact, like an archaeological time capsule from the period of about 90 BC–AD 72 (including

FIGURE 33: “Nay, more than this, he built a wall round that top of the hill, and erected towers at the corners, of a hundred and sixty cubits high; in the middle of which place he built a palace (βασιλειον), after a magnificent manner, wherein were large and beautiful edifices. He also made a great many reservoirs for the reception of water, that there might be plenty of it ready for all uses, and those in the properest places that were afforded him there. Thus did he, as it were, contend with the nature of the place, that he might exceed its natural strength and security (which yet itself rendered it hard to be taken) by those fortifications which were made by the hands of men” (Josephus, *Bellum Judaicum* VII, 6, 2).



the era of the authentic Gospel scene), never to be reoccupied again! It is thus a site that survived completely undisturbed since antiquity (FIGS. 38–70).

We have already mentioned that the final reports of the excavations were published in three academic monographs, the so-called Machaerus trilogy. They appeared as volumes 53, 55, and 56 of the distinguished *Collectio Maior* series, a large-size archaeological book series of the Studium Biblicum Franciscanum of Jerusalem, comprising 1,548 pages. Following their respective publications in 2013, 2015, and 2019, I made several book launches and academic presentations, including, among other places, in the Royal Palace of Amman on June 13, 2019, upon the invitation of HRH Prince El Hassan bin Talal, our royal patron. Taking advantage of the COVID-19 pandemic, in 2022 I published a 420-page scientific evaluation of the biblical aspect of the historical site, *Machaerus: The Golgotha of John the Baptist*, which was published by the Hungarian Academy of Arts in Budapest (FIGS. 71–74).

FIGURES 34–35: In the *photograph*, which faces toward the west, the excavated ruins of the long polygonal surrounding wall of our citadel below the Dead Sea horizon can be seen running over the ruined (AD 36) Herodian walls. This long surrounding wall of poor quality, which rises over the Herodian level, is visible all around *the citadel map*, in blue. This is the enceinte of the Early Roman period, built by the Roman army after the death of King Agrippa I (AD 44), and used by the Machaerus Zealots during the First Jewish War (AD 66–72).

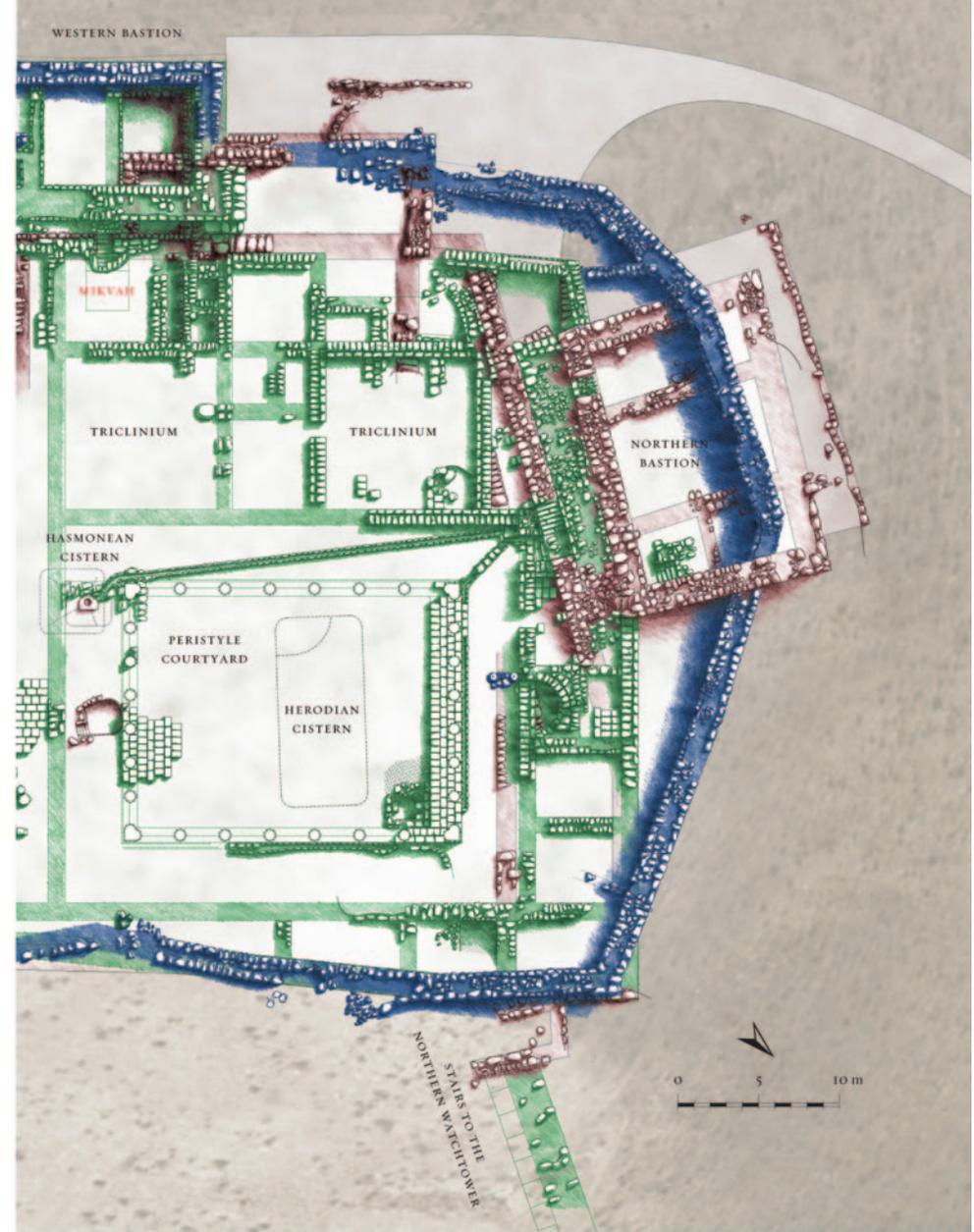
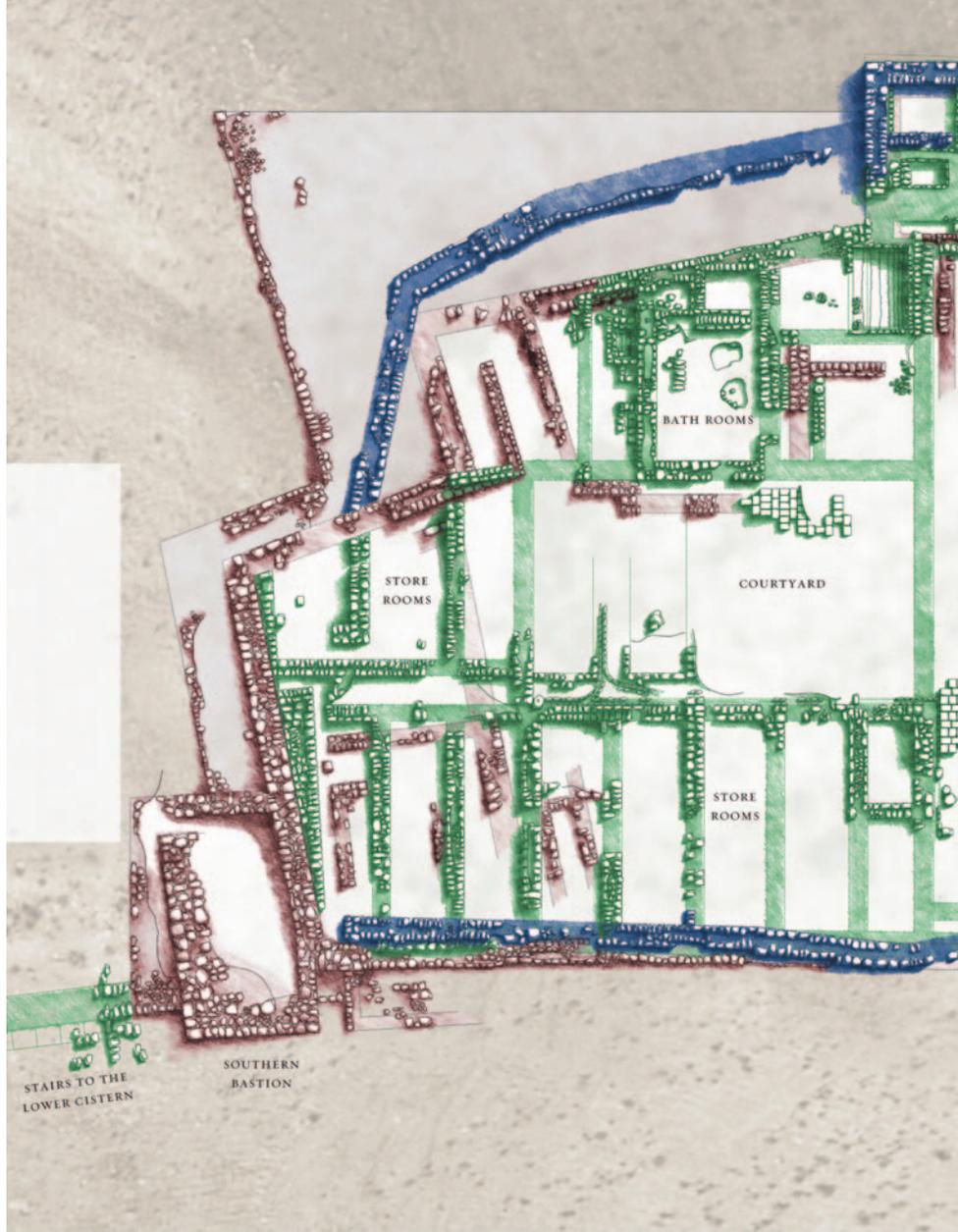


FIGURE 36: The architectural layout of the Herodian royal palace, with the colored wall remains of the three subsequent historical periods of the citadel. As is clearly observable, it was divided by the main corridor in the center. The architectural three-dimensional space of the only surviving place with an intact, original roof—the vaulted mikveh—is marked in red. Both sides of the palace had an open-air courtyard in their centers. The southeastern (*left*) side had a beautiful royal garden, with the Ionic bathhouse on its southwestern side, and storerooms (probably for military equipment) on the other sides.

Meanwhile, the northwestern (*right*) side of the palace had a paved Doric peristyle courtyard at its center, which served as the royal Herodian court with the apsidal throne niche in its axial-symmetry center. It was the heart of the entire Herodian fortified royal palace. On the southwestern side of the royal court, there was a two-level triple-hall royal triclinium, used for dining; its staircase leading to the upper floor survived with nine steps intact. To the north of the royal court, we discovered during the 2016–2018 excavation seasons the previously unknown northern wing of the palace, with the fourth (originally Hasmonean) fortification tower (see FIG. 37b).

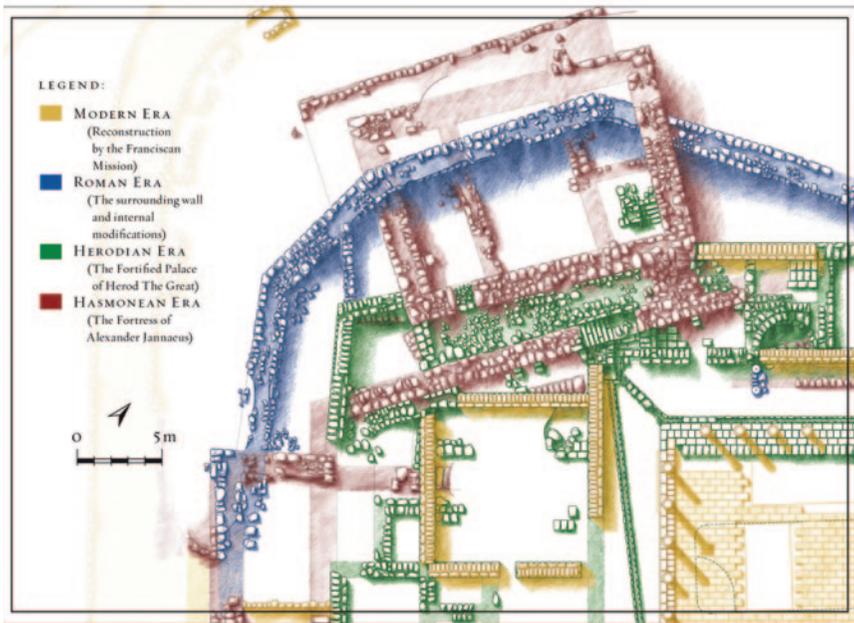


FIGURE 38: We can see the interior of the smaller Herodian mikveh by the southwestern bastion, with its still *in situ* segment-vaulted roof.

FIGURE 37a (opposite page, upper): After the 1993 Franciscan restoration project, the ruins of Machaerus reflect the same four building phases of monument construction in each historical period. This detail of the multicolored ground plan clearly indicates the relevant phases of building activities. In FIG. 37b we may see the chronologically divided but mostly reused ancient built legacies in tricolor, without the modern interventions.

FIGURE 37b (opposite page, lower): The architectural layout of the archaeological ruins of the citadel, divided by the main corridor of the Herodian palace. The architectural space of the only surviving place with an intact original roof, the vaulted mikveh (ritual bath) (seen in FIG. 38), is marked in red. The 2019 ground plan depicts the northern citadel wing as well, with the fourth tower, which was discovered during the 2016–2018 archaeological excavation seasons and revealed the monumental Herodian royal ritual bath, which is the largest mikveh ever discovered in Jordan.

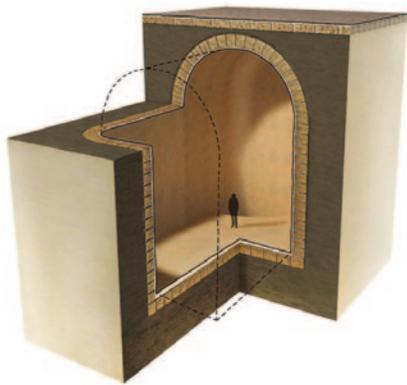
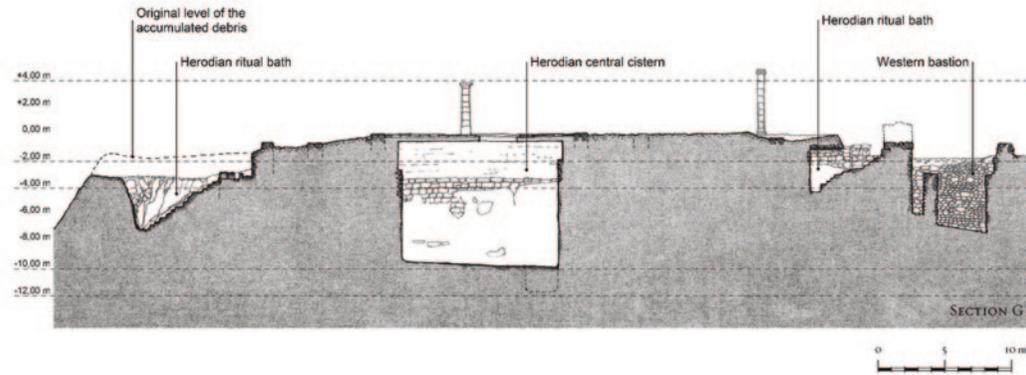
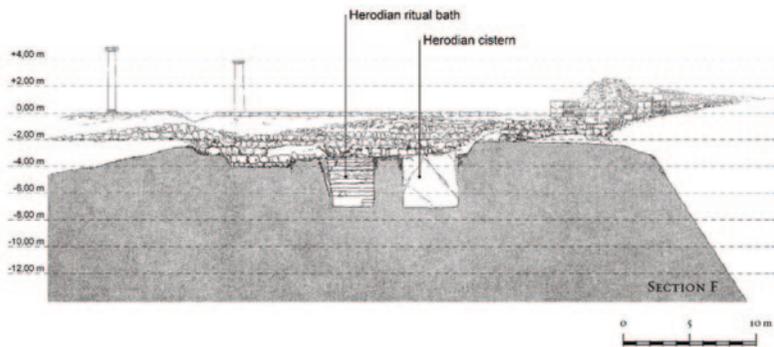


FIGURE 39: The interior of the fully excavated central Herodian cistern of Machaerus citadel, with its reconstructed, 3-D architectural model. The space measures 11.75 x 5.4 meters and is 9.5 meters deep.



FIGURE 40: The author completes the excavations of the 15.5-meter-deep central Hasmonean cistern of the Machaerus citadel (reused during the Herodian period), with its reconstructed 3-D model. The architectural appearance of the previously unexcavated conical space, which had been equipped with a capstone since antiquity, ends in a 4 x 4-meter square, like a sloping stack base.



ARCHITECTURAL SURVEY 2016.

FIGURE 41: The northwestern-southeastern (*above*) and the northeastern-southwestern (*below*) sections of the citadel testify to the huge vertical dimensions. The fall between the levels of the capital top of the re-erected 4.75-meter-tall Ionic column (above the Herodian floor level; the flat slab on top of the capital is called an abacus) and the bottom of the completely excavated, 15.5-meter-deep Hasmonean cistern (below the Herodian floor level) is more than 20 meters.

FIGURE 42: The fully excavated and marvelously preserved monumental twelve-step plastered pool was one of the three Jewish ritual baths (*mikva'ot*) of the Herodian royal palace of Machaerus, with close parallels of ancient Jewish ritual baths in Qumran and Hebron; view toward the west.



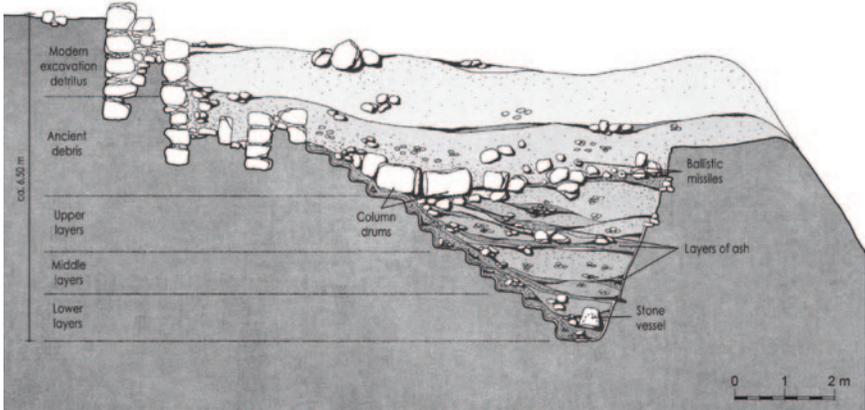


FIGURE 43: Two steps of our detailed stratigraphical studies. In the *upper photograph* (taken from above), we can see the horizontal section-cut with the two *in situ* newly discovered column drums. *Below*, a detailed stratigraphical drawing of the 6.5-meter-deep longitudinal vertical section-cut in the monumental royal Herodian mikveh. A huge quantity of imported luxurious archaeological material belonging to the Herodian palace came to light from the bottom of this Jewish ritual bath, sealed by the well-datable AD 36 destruction layer.

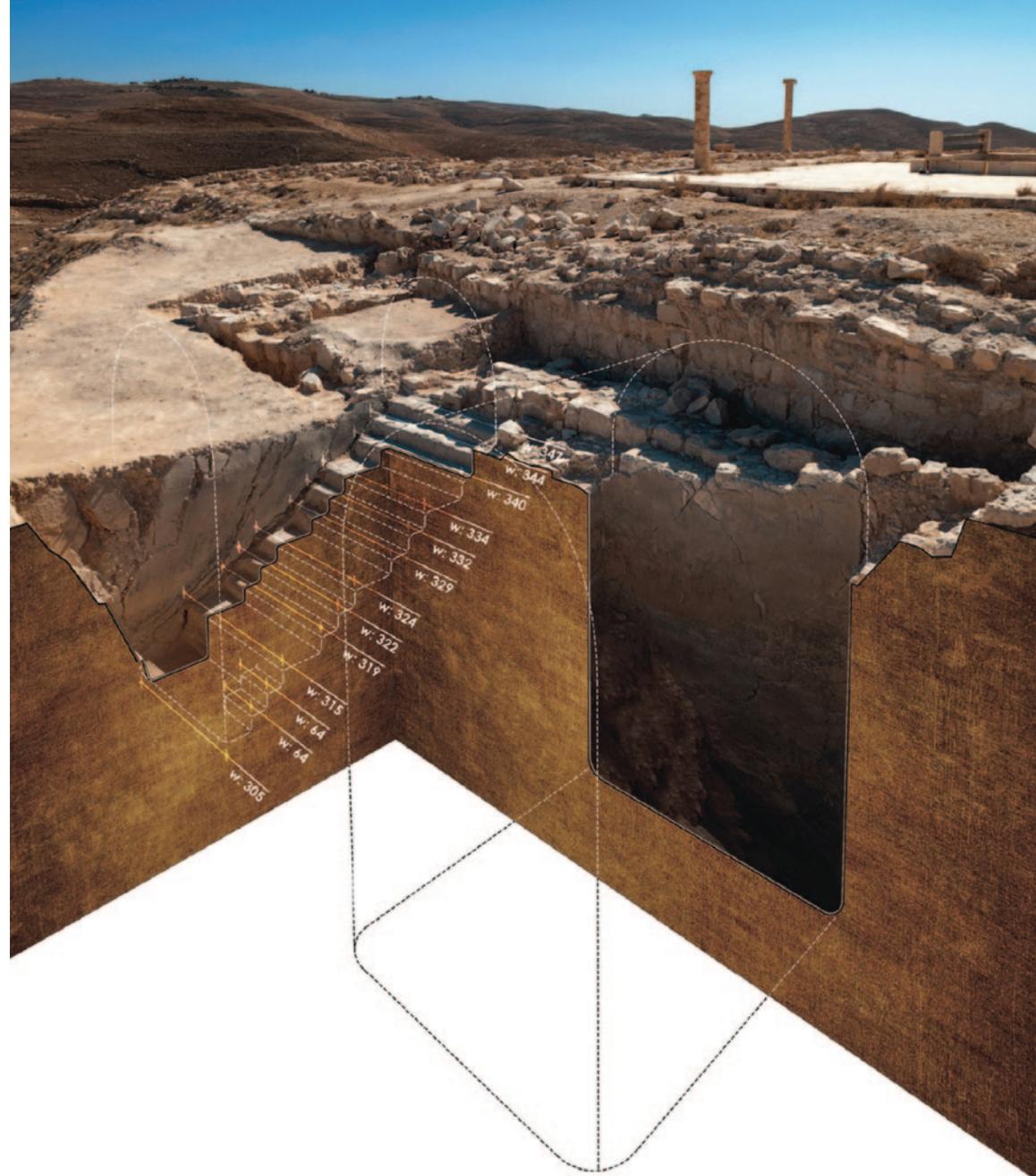


FIGURE 44: This digital photographic cutaway illustration schematically shows the architectural spaces of the tandem water pools with the plausible vaulted roofs above them. If calculated with an 80-centimeter-thick roof skin, the top of the half-cylinder roofs would be just below the floor level foundation of the Herodian royal courtyard.

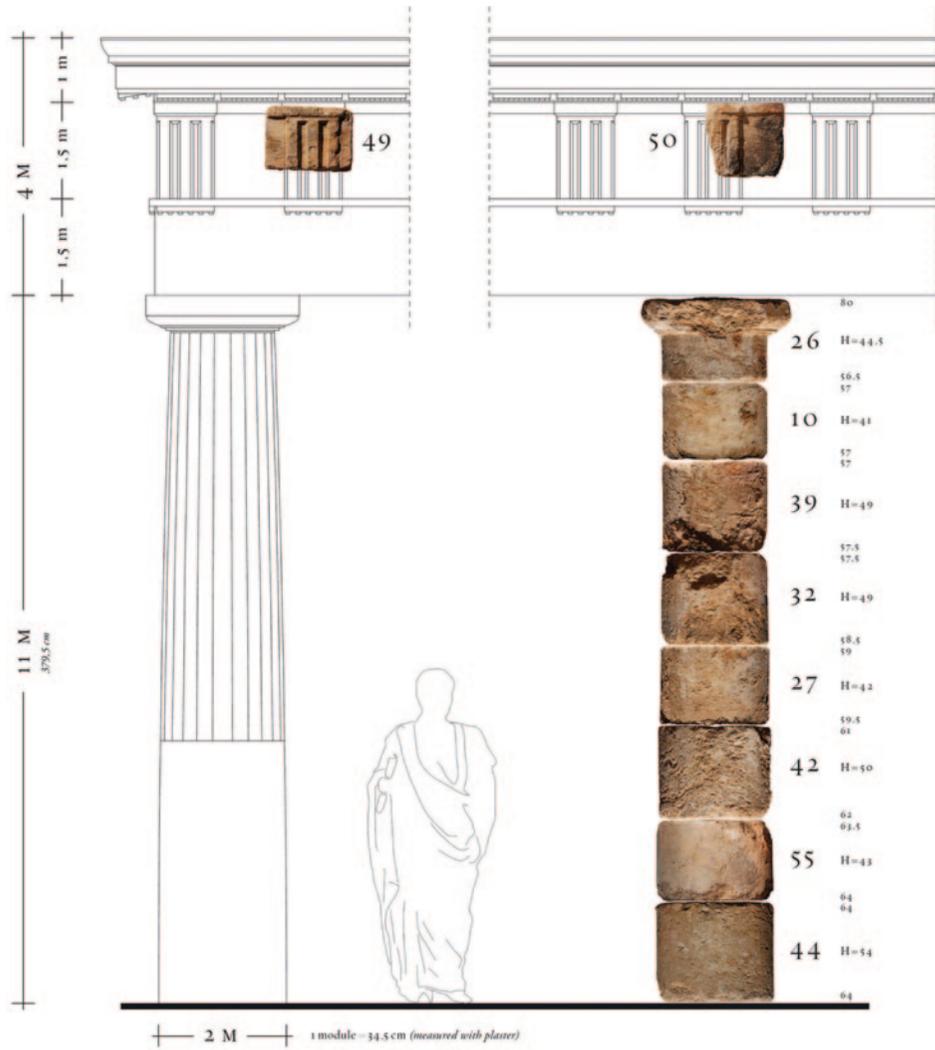


FIGURE 45: The 380-centimeter-tall Doric column, before its restoration with authentic photomontage.

FIGURE 46: Theoretical reconstruction of the 475-centimeter-tall Ionic column, before its re-erection (with photomontage).

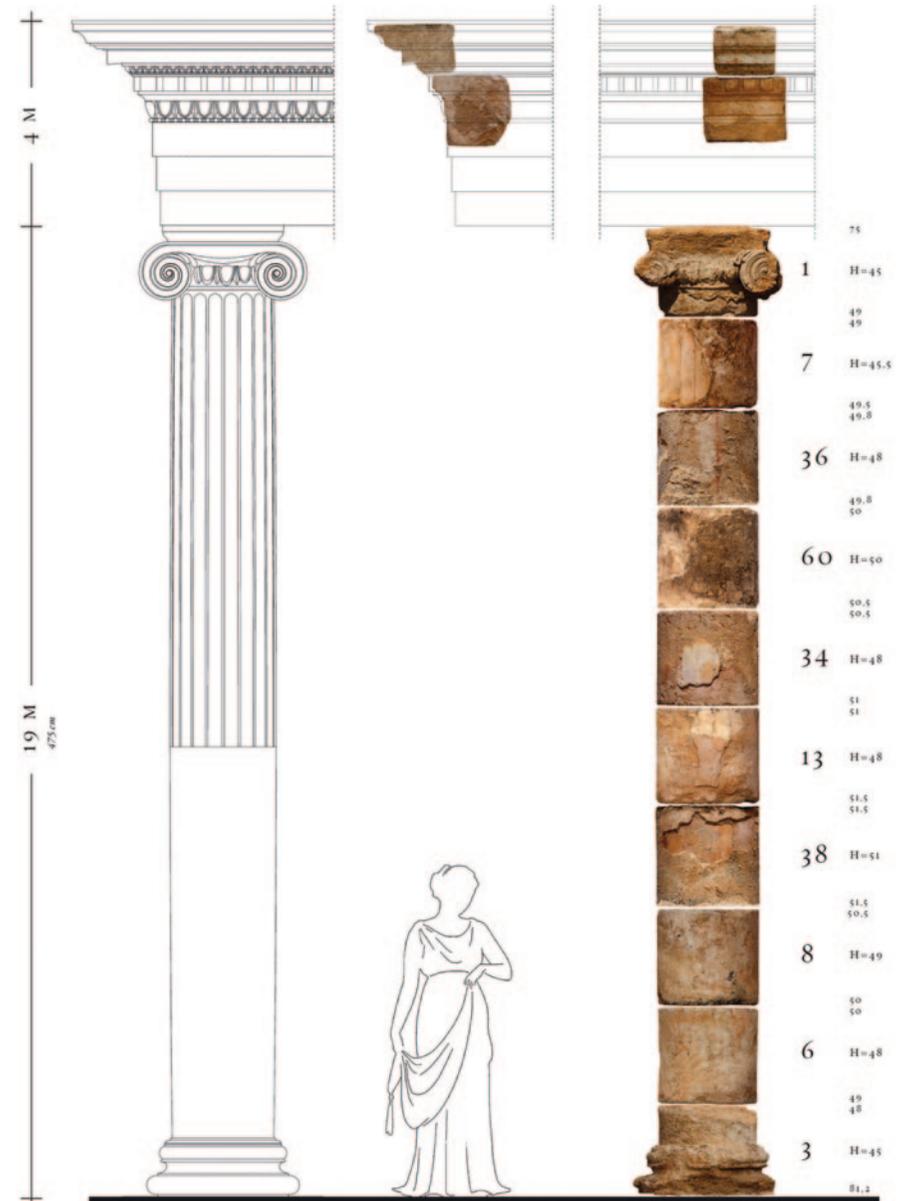




FIGURE 47: HRH Prince El Hassan bin Talal, the royal patron of our excavations, who personally supported our scientific efforts from the outset and climbed up to Mount Machaerus to celebrate with us the 2014 re-erection process of the Herodian columns in the only royal palace of Jordan from the classical period.



FIGURE 48: The moment of the re-erection of the Ionic (Attic) column base on March 30, 2014: the Director General of Antiquities in Jordan, Professor Monther Jamhawi, instructs our crane operator, Khader Apsi. The author is positioning the Attic base with the help of his Swiss restorer colleague Ueli Bellwald (lying on the ground).



FIGURE 49: The space of the royal peristyle courtyard of Machaerus during our vital conservation and preservation process. Our five-ton crane stands on the left; beyond is the Dead Sea.



FIGURE 50: The final sequence of the bases, the shaft drums, and the capitals of the two Herodian columns in proper order, before their re-erection. The modern pavement from the 1993 Franciscan monument presentation in the royal courtyard became a useful workyard for our restoration purposes.



FIGURE 51: Ueli Bellwald and Tamás Dobrosi superimpose the Doric capital while the author (on the right) directs Khader Apsi on the crane in maneuvering the lifting. Behind the camera, Tamás Dósa Papp; view from the east.

FIGURE 52: The author assures members of the restoration team that the capital is perfectly positioned. As of now, the re-erected Ionic column is the largest archaeological artifact ever excavated and restored from any Gospel site.



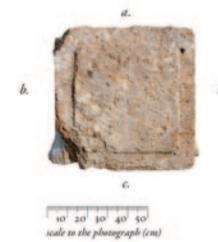
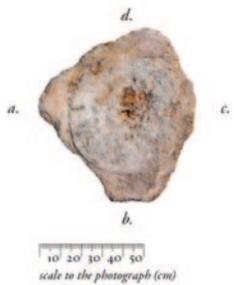


FIGURE 53: The photographic profiles of the re-erected Doric column, as viewed from northeast (a), northwest (b), southwest (c), southeast (d), and from above (on the left, the abacus). The five shots were taken with a telephoto lens, from a great distance, to avoid the distorted perspective of a wide-angle lens. We consider the two columns not only as architectural and decorative elements of the former royal building-complex but also as restored, colossus-size Herodian objects of art.

FIGURE 54: Similar photographic profiles of the re-erected Ionic column, from the same five directions.



FIGURE 55: Two re-erected Herodian columns of the Machaerus royal palace, with the Dead Sea in the background, view from northeast. They became international scientific sensations in 2014, as it was the very first time in the Holy Land that complete columns were re-erected from original architectural elements on their original places (a procedure called anastylosis) from the era of the royal Herodian dynasty.

FIGURE 56: The apsidal ground wall of the Herodian throne niche in the royal courtyard, restored from original architectural elements by anastylosis, on the original foundations. In this area the original Herodian floor level is lost; probably a staircase led to the elevated throne seat (see FIG. 58). Below, Machaerus is shining as a gem in the morning sunshine in 2014, with our new monument presentation, following the purification of the site; the authentic historical place is viewed from the south (APAAME\_20141013\_RHB-0073).





FIGURE 57: At the end of the 2019 archaeological excavation and restoration season, Father Michael Linden SJ, the Jesuit superior in Iraq and Jordan, celebrated a thanksgiving holy mass next to the historical place of Antipas's judgment seat, where the Tetrarch delivered the verdict of capital punishment upon Saint John the Baptist.



FIGURE 58: Theoretical architectural reconstruction of the Herodian throne seat, superimposed on a photograph of the surviving and conserved ruins; cutaway view from the north.

FIGURE 59 (following pages): The complete layout of the royal Herodian *lithostrotos* (paved courtyard) on Mount Machaerus from the time of its foundation (around 30 BC) is characterized by the ancient architectural alignment system of the *pygme* module, or the Hellenistic lower-arm unit (34.5 cm).

FIGURE 60 (following pages): The archaeological ground plan of the reconstructed architectural space in the Herodian royal courtyard of Machaerus, together with the longitudinal- (*above*) and cross- (*below*) section drawings.



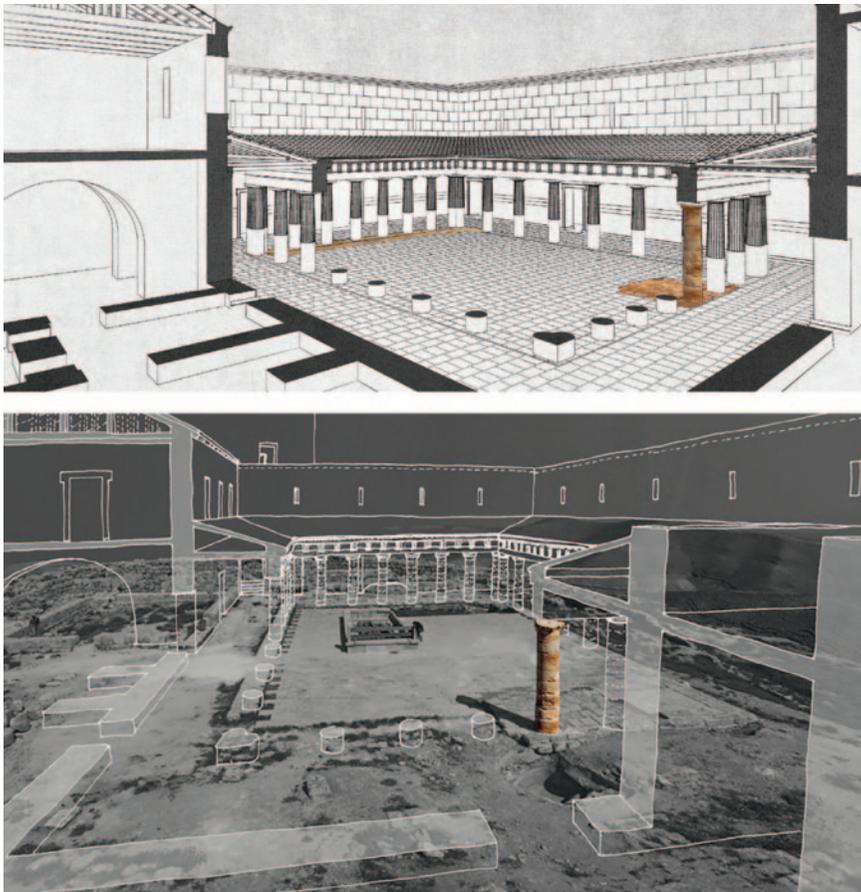


FIGURE 61: These architectural reconstruction drawings are *not* fictitious or suppositional illustrations representing the royal courtyard. As it is evident from the photomontages and the previous architectural illustrations, the details are all based on archaeological evidence. Not counting the floor space of the tetrastyle corridors of the porticus, less than ten percent of the column drums and pavement stones survived, with only one *in situ* column base and a single capital!

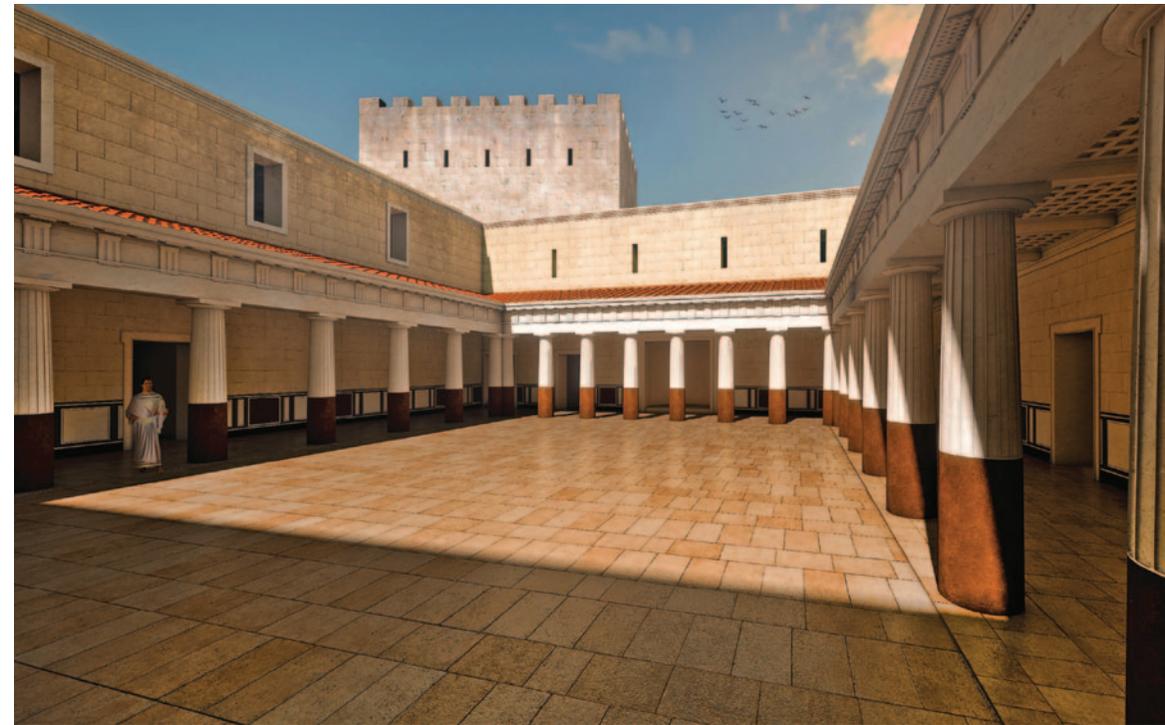


FIGURE 62: Its sparsity notwithstanding, even this highly fragmented archaeological information, including the fresco colors and the pavement stone (lithostrotos) display, provided all the necessary details for us to complete the above theoretical 3-D reconstruction of the architectural space, in addition to a complete column anastylosis with the proper conical Doric entasis (convex curvature).

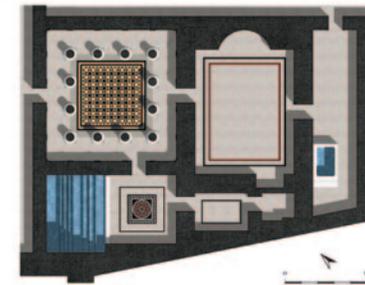
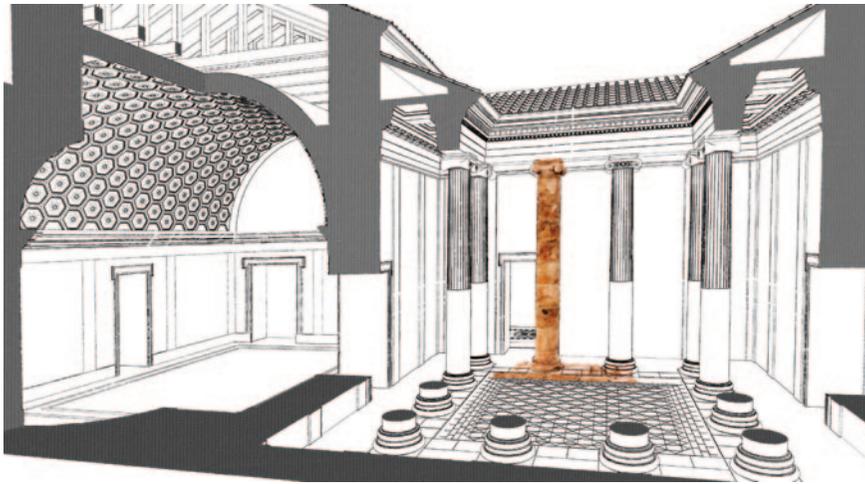


FIGURE 65: Tentative architectural visualization of the Herodian royal bathhouse of Machaerus. *Above*, a cutaway architectural reconstruction model (bird's-eye view from west) with its reconstructed layout of the opus sectile and mosaic pavements (*below*).



FIGURE 63 (*opposite page, upper*): Hypothetical architectural reconstruction of the *caldarium* (left) and apodyterium halls of the Herodian royal bathhouse in Machaerus, using a photomontage of the complete Ionic column reconstructed by anastylosis restoration on the original stylobate in 2014; cutaway view from northeast. The Ionic entasis gives a vertical cigar-shape to the column shaft.

FIGURE 64 (*opposite page, lower*): This 3-D computer model with the applied colors is an improved version of the previous artistic vision of the Machaerus bathhouse. The area of the cutaway architectural space presented here was excavated by the American Baptists in 1968. The rest of the area behind it, together with the entirely reconstructed colonnade, was revealed by the Italian Franciscans in 1979. Both discoveries remained unpublished until 2015.



FIGURE 67: The theoretical reconstruction of the royal Herodian citadel of Machaerus with a cutaway bird's-eye view from south. This 3-D architectural model from 2013 was further developed following the discovery of the previously unknown northern wing of the royal palace in 2016–2018, with the addition of the fourth fortification tower.

FIGURE 66 (*opposite page*): Our 2013 hypothetical architectural reconstruction of Machaerus city during the Herodian period (ca. 30 BC–AD 36), in the first rays of the rising Sun, with the Dead Sea and Jerusalem in the background (superimposed on a 2004 aerial photograph by Jane Taylor), view from east.



FIGURE 68: This 2019 digital computer model already incorporated the lost northern wing of the citadel, with a huge terrace overlooking the lower city. Artistic elements included details of the imagined Corinthian colonnade of the terrace and the “architectural citation” of the Herodian triple gate of the Temple Mount in Jerusalem.



FIGURE 69: The reconstructed royal Herodian city. In our understanding, the lower city must have been the historical place where Saint John the Baptist suffered a political house arrest by Antipas, probably in the company of his disciples. The 3-D architectural model is superimposed on an aerial photograph (APAAME\_20171001\_REB-0071); view toward south.



FIGURE 70: The two Judean “sisters”: Machaerus in the foreground, Masada in the background. The latter is visible on the left, on a clifftop above the Dead Sea. The two newly erected Herodian columns crown the horizon. We named the two columns re-erected by anastylosis after my son and daughter: the Doric one after Alexander, and the Ionic one after Salome Alexandra, as Dead Sea remembrances of my beloved children and of the former Hasmonean landlords of Machaerus.

FIGURE 71: The front covers of the Machaerus trilogy, published by Edizioni Terra Santa in Milan; below, Their Royal Highnesses Prince El Hassan bin Talal and his daughter Princess Sumaya bint El Hassan receive the complimentary copy of *Machaerus II* from the author in the Royal Palace of Amman. HRH Prince El Hassan wrote the foreword to that excavation monograph, in his capacity as Chairman of the Royal Scientific Society in Jordan. (Photo copyright and courtesy of the Royal Palace, Amman.)

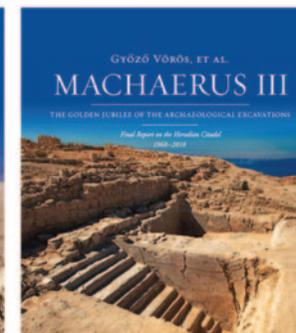
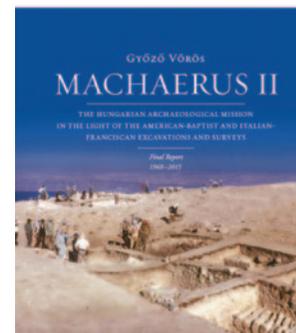
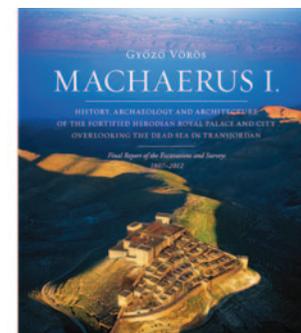




FIGURE 72: In the Vatican, the author (center) receives the Pontifical Gold Medal and the Diploma of Pope Francis from Cardinal Gianfranco Ravasi (left), president of the Pontifical Commission for Sacred Archaeology, and the Secretary of State of His Holiness, Cardinal Pietro Parolin (right). (Photo copyright and courtesy of the Papal Household, Vatican City.)

FIGURE 73: The Pontifical Gold Medal of His Holiness Pope Francis. (Photo copyright and courtesy of the Papal Household, Vatican City.)

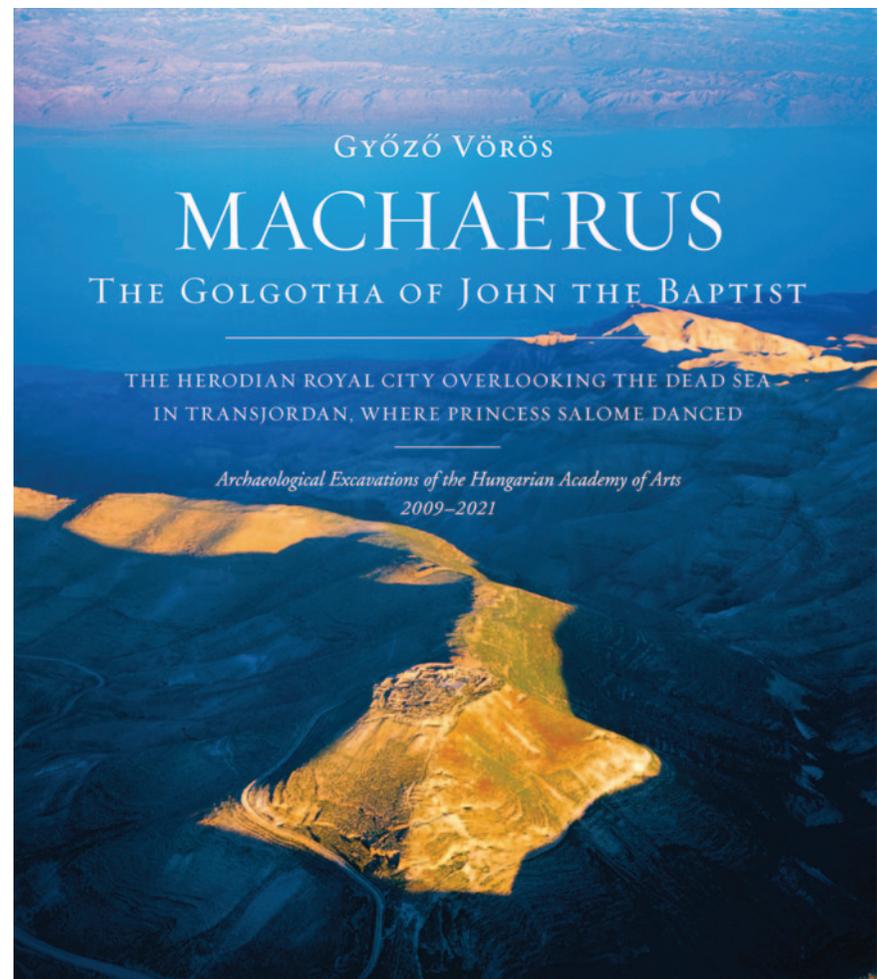
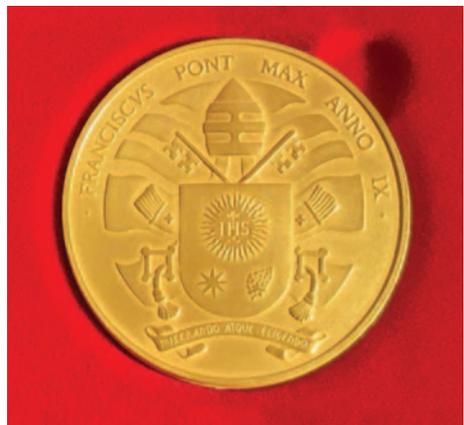


FIGURE 74: The cover of the first scientific synthesis (412 pages), published by the Hungarian Academy of Arts, Budapest, 2022.



## IV. Historical Archaeology of Machaerus: Contextualizing the Historical Records Based on the Archaeological Evidence

As it has hopefully become clear from the previous three chapters, we are dealing with two distinct components here: the first-century historical sources on the one hand, and the twenty-first-century archaeological reality of Machaerus, based on the archaeological excavations carried out since 1968 on the other. The latter comprises the archaeological landscape with the built legacy and the material heritage, in the form of touchable evidence and inspectable proofs. As we are going to demonstrate, the two components are in complete harmony. We have been cautious not to mix the two: the first chapter of the book makes no mention of any archaeological evidence that came to light during the excavations. In the second and third chapters, we limited ourselves to referring to only those historical references that were absolute necessary. In the present chapter, we will convincingly demonstrate, among other things, that Machaerus is a perfect example of historical archaeology, as the contemporaneous historical sources immaculately accord with the first-century archaeological evidence found there.

Historical archaeology is by definition a form of archaeology that deals with places, things, and issues from the past on which the written historical records and oral traditions can shed light and that can

FIGURE 75: The full Moon sets above Mount Machaerus, behind the re-erected Herodian Ionic column of the royal bathhouse. (The photograph was taken on October 16, 2016, at 5:28 a.m.)

contextualize the surviving built legacy and cultural material. Naturally, these records can either complement or conflict with the archaeological evidence found at a particular site. First of all, we must emphasize that we found no contradiction between the descriptions of the oral tradition recorded in first-century sources and the archaeological finds that came to light during the excavations. More importantly, however, when we contrast the first-century written historical sources with the archaeological site of Machaerus, we can easily complement the two in terms of the landscape, history, architecture, and material culture of the monuments as a whole. The overall definition of historical archaeology is based on methodological and theoretical considerations, and it usually refers to the modern, post-1492 period. In Europe, it is therefore often called “post-medieval archaeology.” There are a few exceptions, namely in classical archaeology and ancient Near Eastern studies (Egyptology, Assyriology, etc.), in which for certain archaeological sites—naturally, in the case of very few surviving ancient settlements or individual monuments—we have authentic historical (and not *only* literary!) sources regarding the given periods.

Yet we must be very cautious. It would be ridiculous to destroy the reputation of historical archaeology in the Levant by using the digging methods and “anti-research” of apologists explicitly committed to the use of archaeology as a servant whose only task is to demonstrate the historical accuracy of the Old and New Testaments and the historical primacy or supremacy of an ethnic group or a system of beliefs.

Before going any further, I would like to quote a real-life conversation to illustrate the power of historical archaeology. In 1994, when Neil Armstrong visited Jerusalem, he was taken to the huge limestone pavements of the Herodian steps that lead up to the Temple Mount from the south, which date back to the first centuries BC and AD. They were excavated by Israeli

archaeologists after the Six-Day War. Meir Ben-Dov, a noted Jewish archaeologist and Armstrong’s guide, started to talk about Jesus. “I told him, ‘Look, Jesus was a Jew,’” recalled Ben-Dov. “These are the steps that lead to the Temple, so he must have walked here many times.” Armstrong asked if these were the original steps, and Ben-Dov said that they were indeed. “So, Jesus stepped right here?” asked Armstrong. “That’s right!” answered Ben-Dov. “I have to tell you,” Armstrong said to the Israeli archaeologist, “I am more excited stepping on these stones than I was stepping on the Moon” (FIG. 75).

The question immediately arises: Do these steps prove that Jesus walked up these same stairs to the Temple of Jerusalem? No, they do not. The situation is not as simple as that. We have the historical, first-century references of the New Testament in the Bible to Jesus, stating that he had visited the Jerusalem Temple since his childhood many times. We also have the contemporary archaeological evidence of those steps that led up to the Temple in the time of Jesus. It was the combination or *contextualization* of these two data, the tangible stones and the references in contemporaneous historical texts, that was the source of Armstrong’s great excitement when he rightly realized that he was literally walking in Jesus’s footsteps. This example should enlighten us further, for the better understanding of Machaerus.

We have a Herodian royal palace there. Can we prove it? Yes, we can easily prove it. The excavations, carried out thoroughly and with scientific precision, yielded evidence based on which we are able to draw architectural parallels and archaeological analogies with the other Herodian royal palaces in Judea, which are counterparts of the Machaerus one. We also have the contemporaneous luxurious royal material culture of the palace that came to light as proof. So, we clearly have the ruins of the surviving historical spaces—but without the historical sources they would be no more

than another Herodian royal palace in Judea. Fortunately, the written sources unequivocally inform us that five figures of the Gospels had at one point lived among the walls of the Herodian city of Machaerus:

**KING HEROD THE GREAT**, the slayer of the children of Bethlehem. Is it possible that Machaerus was the “*town in the hill country of Judea*” (Luke 1:39) where the pregnant Holy Virgin came to visit the pregnant Elisabeth? Yes, it is very much possible, as John the Baptist was later a subject of Antipas; his Transjordan origin is more than probable. But we have no contemporary written historical reference to Machaerus indicating that it was the birthplace of John the Baptist. It is just a speculation. Machaerus was a royal city with a palace in its citadel for the king—this is what we are able to glean from the historical sources. It is also possible that for a short period it was called Herodion, after King Herod.

**TETRARCH HEROD ANTIPAS**. We know from the historical written sources that Machaerus was his only inherited royal palace, which he received as a legacy after the death of his father, King Herod the Great. Antipas probably lived there during most of his reign.

**SAINT JOHN THE BAPTIST**. According to the first-century written source of Josephus, he was imprisoned and killed at Machaerus.

**THE HASMONEAN ROYAL PRINCESSES HERODIAS AND SALOME**. According to the Gospels of Mark and Matthew, they were present at the execution of John the Baptist, located by Josephus at Machaerus; consequently, they must have stayed there at least during the birthday of Herod Antipas when the beheading of the Baptist took place.

Here we are! The situation is quite similar to the one Neil Armstrong found himself in on the Temple Mount in Jerusalem. Except that here on Mount Machaerus, we walk *not* in the footsteps of Jesus but in those of the royal Herodians (King Herod the Great and his son, the Tetrarch Antipas) and the royal Hasmoneans (mother-and-daughter Princesses Herodias and Salome), and, most importantly, in those of Saint John the Baptist and his disciples, who were sent by him to Jesus in Galilee.

Now, let us have a closer look at the historical references referring to the three periods of Machaerus: the Late Hellenistic (Hasmonean), the Herodian, and the Early Roman eras. Together they provide us with such a perfect description of the historical landscape that, relying on the ancient sources, Seetzen was easily able to identify the place in 1807. Its authenticity is beyond any doubt. Regarding the

**FORTRESS OF ALEXANDER JANNAEUS**, the first-century written sources reveal three important facts:

1. “he was the first who built a citadel here” (Josephus, *Bellum Judaicum* VII, 6, 2).
2. “Pompey went over and overthrew them and raised their fortifications [...] moreover, he gave orders to raise all the walls and, so far as he could, destroyed the haunts of robbers and the treasure-holds of the tyrants [of, among others,] Machaerus” (Strabo, *Geographica* XVI, 2, 40).
3. “it was done after a poor manner” (Josephus, *Bellum Judaicum* I, 8, 6).

The archaeological excavations brought to light and identified the group of monuments with architectural features characteristic of the building activities of King Alexander

Jannaeus, known from other places in Judea. In addition to this, a large quantity of Late Hellenistic pottery and twenty-four coins from the time of Alexander Jannaeus were also found. The foundations of the Hasmonean walls were on the bedrock; therefore, logically speaking, it cannot be a coincidence that no pre-Hasmonean archaeological material came to light. The walls had been erected using the building technology of so-called cyclopean masonry: mostly natural, uncarved local stones with the use of very limited mortar. In contrast with the Herodian ashlar, or dressed (cut, worked) stones, they were indeed “*done after a poor manner*,” as Josephus put it. Moreover, the destruction of the Hasmonean fortress was easily identifiable, as its razed walls became the base and the solid fundament for the ascending walls of the Herodian citadel. The foundations of the four Hasmonean towers and the surrounding bailey walls determined the architectural character and provided the groundwork for the exterior of the Herodian citadel as well.

Thanks to Josephus, we have a very characteristic description of the

#### CITY OF KING HEROD THE GREAT

Let’s reread his description on the Herodian royal city of Machaerus:

But when Herod came to be king, he thought the place to be worthy of the utmost regard, and of being built upon in the firmest manner, and this especially because it lay so near to Arabia; for it is seated in a convenient place on that account, and hath a prospect toward that country; he therefore surrounded a large space of ground with walls and towers,

and built a city there, out of which city there was a way that led up to the very citadel itself on the top of the mountain; nay, more than this, he built a wall round that top of the hill, and erected towers at the corners, of a hundred and sixty cubits high; in the middle of which place he built a palace, after a magnificent manner, wherein were large and beautiful edifices. He also made a great many reservoirs for the reception of water, that there might be plenty of it ready for all uses, and those in the properest places that were afforded him there.

—Josephus, *Bellum Judaicum* VII, 6, 2

The description perfectly corresponds to the archaeological reality in every detail, including the sharp contrast between the Hasmonean architecture, which “*was done after a poor manner*,” and the Herodian one, which was executed “*in the firmest manner*.” The technical superiority of the Herodian architectural technology, namely, the use of dressed ashlar stones, over the cyclopean masonry of the Hasmoneans, is more than obvious. The only detail in Josephus’s description that needs to be explained is the “*towers at the corners, of a hundred and sixty cubits high*.” As it is a description written in Rome in about AD 77 for Roman readers (and ultimately for Emperor Vespasian himself), we have to take it to mean the Roman cubit, which according to Vitruvius was equal to 1.5 Roman feet, or 6 palm widths (approximately 444 millimeters or 17.5 inches). The 160 cubits therefore are equal to roughly 70 meters. There are two plausible explanations: it is simply an overstatement on Josephus’s (or on his source’s) part. He similarly overvalued the height measures when describing Jerusalem and Masada. Meanwhile, it is also possible that he

(or his source) took the altitudinal difference between the lower walls of the Machaerus lower city and the top of the northern and southeastern towers of the citadel as the towers' height. Apart from this one instance, the description fits the Herodian city in every detail.

As for the

CITY OF THE ROMAN GARRISON AND OF THE ZEALOTS, as well as for the Roman siege monuments,

Josephus is very clear about AD 36 as being the date of the destruction of Herodian Machaerus. He talks about "*the destruction of Herod's army*" by the Nabataeans, after which the Herodian royal palace of Machaerus disappeared. Later Josephus simply mentions a Roman garrison there: "*the multitude of the Jews that were at Machaerus persuaded the Romans who were in garrison to leave the place, and deliver it up to them*" (Josephus, *Bellum Judaicum* II, 18, 6). It is obvious that they would have never given up a fortified royal palace, and this is why Josephus simply talks about "*Romans who were in garrison.*" By the dawn of the First Jewish War (AD 66–74), the fortified palace had already been demolished for thirty years. Was it possible to determine the AD 36 destruction of Machaerus (by the Nabataeans) and the existence of a later Roman garrison in its place through the archaeological excavations? Indeed, it was!

The stratigraphical examinations during the digs unequivocally confirmed that the archaeological layer of the garrison of the Roman soldiers of the Prefectus Judaeae and that of the Zealots were not identical with the Herodian floor level. The layer of the Roman soldiers and that of the Zealots are well above it, situated upon the leveled but unpaved ruins of the Herodian palace! It was possible to identify two coins from the time of King Herod Agrippa I (AD 41–44), seven

coins from the period of Emperor Nero—three of which were from his fifth year (AD 59)—and eighty-four coins from the second and third years of the First Jewish War (AD 67 and 68). These coins were all discovered above the destruction layer of the Herodian palace. This conclusion was drawn not just from the archaeological finds, which came from the relevant stratigraphical layers of the precisely cut excavation profiles, but from the monument itself as well. The surviving remains of the polygonal surrounding wall of the garrison of the Roman soldiers, later used by the Zealots, run on top of the ruined Herodian walls even today.

In addition to the above-described Machaerus citadel, we have the approximately 3.5-kilometer-long circumvallation siege wall around it and (at least) sixteen military campuses of the Legio X Fretensis, together with its unfinished military agger (ramp). The fact that it was unfinished is a clear sign that the defenders of the citadel surrendered. This perfectly corresponds to and demonstrates the full harmony between Josephus's descriptions and the archaeological reality. The close parallels with the well-studied Masada circumvallation monuments leave no room for doubt concerning the date and function of the groups of monuments around Machaerus, built by the same Fretensis during the winter of AD 71/72.

We would like to point out one last scientific fact concerning the presence of historical archaeology inside and around Machaerus. The conclusion that Josephus's descriptions in relation to Machaerus are all reliable is not only obvious but also easily demonstratable. The information contained therein must have been provided by trustworthy eyewitnesses, as all the historical data relating to Machaerus are verifiable by archaeology, through the study of the built legacy of antiquity and the remains of the material culture. That being the case, we have to consider Josephus's statements

about John the Baptist to be authentic and reliable as well. Thus, we have no reason to miscredit or doubt the authenticity and reliability of the relevant passage:

[...] 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.

—Josephus, *Antiquitates Judaicae* XVIII, 5, 2

## V.

### Visualization: Architectural Reconstructions as Bible Illustrations

The once glorious 660-square-meter Herodian royal courtyard, with the Doric peristyle colonnade consisting of eight columns on each side and the still *in situ* apsidal throne niche in the axis of symmetry, must have been the historical place of Antipas's birthday banquet described by the Gospels. Many people were invited to the party, even from Galilee, from the northern half of his tetrarchy: "*An opportunity came on Herod's birthday when he gave a banquet for the nobles of his court, for his army officers and for the leading figures in Galilee*" (Mark 6:21). This royal courtyard was not just the largest architectural space in the fortified palace of Machaerus but also the only one where the tetrarch was able to receive the large gathering of these official guests, his complete royal entourage. This Doric palace-court had to be the very place where, according to Josephus, Antipas proclaimed his historical judgment, sentencing John the Baptist to death. According to human logic, Antipas must have passed his judgment from his throne seat on the elevated bema of the stone-paved royal court in his praetorium. Mount Machaerus was the Golgotha of the Baptist.

The archaeological remains of the Jerusalem Praetorium (John 19:13) where Jesus was condemned to death by Pontius Pilate are probably lost. However, on Mount Machaerus we have one of the closest architectural and archaeological

analogies of its courtyard, in the former palace of King Herod the Great and Tetrarch Herod Antipas. On the *gabbatha* (“elevation”) of the citadel of the Machaerus royal palace, original parts of even the *in situ* Herodian *lithostrotos* (stone pavement) survived in the courtyard. Machaerus, this tremendously important scene of the Gospels, has always been a site of imagination for Bible, Gospel, religious-, and history-book illustrators. As a result of the current archaeological excavations and architectural “Lego-ing,” the historical place and its architectural spaces were revealed, and they in turn elucidated the blurred scene of this Gospel account. There were four figures of the Gospels who lived among the walls of this biblical royal castle: King Herod the Great, his son Tetrarch Herod Antipas, his second wife Princess Herodias, and her daughter Princess Salome, from her previous marriage. Today, we are not only able to visit the archaeological site but also to virtually see the authentic spaces of the passion and calvary of Saint John the Baptist. It was not a coincidence that since my first Machaerus article appeared on the cover of *Biblical Archaeology Review* in 2012, we have received a flood of requests for illustrations of the relevant Gospel scenes for Bibles and religious books, especially divinity books for children. Together with my esteemed colleagues, we realized that our theoretical architectural reconstructions, based on the results of our archaeological excavations, became authentic Bible illustrations (FIG. 62).

There is a wide range of artistic mediums that may treat Machaerus as their topic. In the twenty-first century, Bible illustrations are no more limited to actual books but can take the form of independent website illustrations, paintings, monuments and statues, movable 3-D models or moving pictures, and, as we will see later, even opera sets. As an example, I have included an excellent watercolor by my compatriot Balage Balogh (who lives in the United States)



FIGURE 76: Artistic vision of the Herodian city of Machaerus by Master Balage Balogh, titled *The Fortress of Machaerus, Jordan, in the Time of Herod Antipas and John the Baptist, Overlooking the Dead Sea and the Judean Desert*, 2020. The artist's representation of a bird's-eye view from the east is based on our theoretical architectural reconstruction. Aquarelle, 100 x 65 cm, collection of the artist.

from a flying drone's view—or as we used to say in the pre-digital era, from a bird's-eye view—overlooking the Dead Sea (FIG. 76). It was in 2015 when the fortified royal Herodian city of Machaerus appeared for the first time in a film as an authentic background, based on our 2012 and 2013 architectural reconstruction drawings. The American television film made by Christopher Menault and produced by Ridley Scott, titled *Killing Jesus* (2015), starred Machaerus in

the scene when John the Baptist is brought there in chains by Herod Antipas's soldiers. The film was made in collaboration with the National Geographic Society, and the reconstruction model of the complete Herodian Machaerus city appears in the thirty-fourth minute (FIG. 77). The dialogues and the dance take place in the courtyard of the royal palace (and not in an indoor architectural space). The film correctly depicts the surroundings as a green landscape. Representing the Holy Land in the time of Jesus is one of the most problematic points. The vegetation was green, the fauna was rich, and it looked like central Italy or France today. It was not a desert yet at all!



FIGURE 77: Artistic vision of the Herodian city of Machaerus from 2015, in an American television movie directed by Christopher Menault and produced by Ridley Scott, titled *Killing Jesus*, which premiered on the National Geographic Channel. The scene was based on our theoretical architectural reconstruction; view from northeast.

As for the historical archaeological landscape, which is an extremely important part of the visualization, we must point out that Mount Machaerus overlooks the Dead Sea from a distance of approximately seven kilometers (over four miles) and is similarly about seven kilometers away from the Wadi Mujib, the ancient valley of the Arnon rivers (yes, in the plural, as they are always mentioned in the Bible), which formed a natural border between the Nabataean and Herodian kingdoms. Madaba (biblical Medaba), the ancient capital of the Moab, is about twenty kilometers away, as the crow flies. As noted earlier, Machaerus is brilliantly situated from a strategic, defensive point of view, in direct optical contact with Masada, Herodion, Hyrcania, Jerusalem, Jericho, and Alexandreion. Moreover, in antiquity, Machaerus had its own Hasmonean-Herodian seaport: Callirrhoe (FIGS. 78–81, 96). This highly important site, which cannot be separated from the visualization of the archaeological and historical landscape of Machaerus, had been excavated for three archaeological seasons (1985, 1986, and 1989), and investigation has started anew in 2023 with the American Center of Research (see Pearce Paul Creasman's epilogue to this volume). It became possible after seashore road constructions reached the ancient oasis in 1984 and the Jordanian military authorities gave permission to the German Protestant August Strobel (the great discoverer and surveyor of the Machaerus circumvallation monuments) to start the first-ever fieldwork there.

The German Protestant team made the survey of all the visible archaeological surface remains in the ancient seashore oasis and excavated a *villa maritima*, an elegant ancient seaside cottage as well. Josephus also mentions the historical place of Callirrhoe: he says that just before King Herod the Great died in 4 BC, he “went over Jordan [from Jericho] and made use of those hot baths at Callirrhoe which ran into the Lake Asphaltitis [the Dead Sea] but are themselves sweet enough to be drunk”



FIGURE 78: On the east bank of the Dead Sea, the green oasis of Callirrhoe is visible in the foreground; the mountaintop of Machaerus (marked with an arrow) crowns the horizon. View from the Israeli shore.

FIGURE 79: This theoretical architectural reconstruction of the city of Machaerus during its Herodian period (ca. 30 BC–AD 36) was digitally built on an aerial photograph (APAAME\_20141013\_MND-0148). In the background, on the right side of the photo, the Dead Sea port of Machaerus in the ancient oasis of Callirrhoe is visible.





FIGURE 80: The ancient Dead Sea port of Machaerus, Callirrhoe, view from north. The Herodian *villa maritima*, excavated by the German Protestant team in the 1980s, is on the high rock terrace to the left of the white houses. Across the modern road is the Hasmonean-Herodian peninsular harbor site. The gradual recession of the Dead Sea shoreline is noticeable, with the water level dropping.



FIGURE 81: Map of Callirrhoe (modern Ayn az-Zara Oasis), by August Strobel and Werner Böser. The red dashed line shows the location of the ancient surrounding stone wall, which was probably also the border of the royal seashore property.

(*Bellum Judaicum* I, 33, 5). According to Josephus, the king became better. It seemed logical to believe that the ancient ruins of a *villa maritima* that can be found there (in modern Ayn az-Zara) could be associated with the Herodian dynasty. However, there was a serious difference of opinion between the dig director, Strobel (an Evangelical Protestant theologian and Lutheran pastor by education), and members of his field team. He started the first two seasons with Christa Clamer as his field archaeologist and the third with Stefan Jakob Wimmer, who was thirty-one years old at the time. Professor Wimmer summarized the situation more than thirty years later as follows:

Excavating at the Dead Sea shore is challenging in a way that only personal physical experience can adequately get across. Ayn az-Zara (and other shore sites around the Dead Sea) are located at not only the deepest point on Earth, but also at one of its hottest. The remoteness of the site, at the time of our archaeological missions, intensified the stress that the teams were confronted with. It must here be conveyed—and after several decades have passed, it should be adequate to admit—those personal frictions among team members did affect the apprehension of our ongoing work on the site itself. Perhaps like at other digs as well, perhaps at times more. Strobel's eagerness to verify the Herodian nature of the site was perceived as stubbornness, and in backlash other team members endeavoured to minimize all related indications. A resulting friction between Christa Clamer and Strobel

aggravated into a full breakoff of personal relations. No more essential communication between the two took place after the second season, and Clamer worked, with some years' distance, on the report of the first and second seasons on her own, without further consulting the excavation director, or members of the third season.

Meanwhile, a decisive development had taken place in the classification of a characteristic pottery type that had distorted our understanding during the seasons. The so-called "cream ware," which we found all over *Area II*, including inside the large pool, had then been widely considered to be of Early Islamic date, mainly Umayyad. This nourished suspicions that the bulk of the remains we were uncovering was late, namely Byzantine, and not Roman-Herodian. The resulting conflicting interpretations of our finds were resolved when a specific study on "cream ware" by Khairieh 'Amr was published in 1992. It demonstrated that a ceramic ware, which looks very similar to the Early Islamic pottery, is to be dated to the 1<sup>st</sup> and early 2<sup>nd</sup> centuries CE. When I myself, in 1997, started to work on the report of the third season, the picture suddenly became entirely clear: our reluctance to identify most of the architectural remains as Herodian/Early Roman was wrong. Strobel was, from the very beginning, correct in his overall interpretation: we had indeed found impressive remains of a luxurious Herodian villa. The best possible

confirmation became manifest when Chr. Clamer published her report on the first and second seasons, in 1997. Without knowing of each other's work, she had finished her report, while I had started working on mine. The fact that we both arrived at widely identical results and interpretations is conclusive evidence for their being correct. Again, to do justice, it is admitted here that Strobel had to endure a heavy load of scepticism and even questioning his qualifications as a historian and archaeologist before it turned out that he was right.

— Stefan Jakob Wimmer, *Machaerus III*,  
“*The Port of Machaerus: Callirrhoe*,”  
pp. 486–487

Fortunately, Strobel was still alive and as a vigorous academic could still see how the next generation, his former students who had been all against him on the field, later glorified him in their publications. From the point of view of Machaerus, when Strobel died in 2006, he was buried as the great discoverer of its seaport Callirrhoe and its Early Roman circumvallation built by the Fretensis. All of his results were finely published for posterity.

We would like to make a last point concerning Bible illustrations. We must bear in mind that they were, are, and will always be first and foremost about the human characters. The architectural details, the monuments, or the landscape always appear as the background in the miniatures, icons, paintings, frescoes, or films: the size or the medium never changed the illustrative topics. However, our archaeological excavations revealed tens of thousands of contemporary objects and fragments as well, for the better understanding of

the material culture that was part of the cultural and social anthropology of these Biblical figures who lived in the Herodian city of Machaerus. This knowledge can easily be used in understanding other phenomena that are close in time and space, for instance, those related to the Herodian royal dynasty or the Holy Land, and ultimately, to the world of the Gospels.

## VI. Imaginary Representations of the Historical Events in Art History

After Machaerus had been destroyed by the Fretensis, the Gospel narratives of the passion of John the Baptist and the accounts of Josephus, which were preserved in Christian monasteries during the Middle Ages, kept interest in the ancient site alive. But as we already mentioned, it was *not* the only Gospel scene that was impossible to locate on the maps. Though its historical location had been forgotten, a miniature representation of John the Baptist's prison (together with the royal birthday banquet of Antipas) survived in a sixth-century Bible, in the so-called *Sinope Gospels*. This is the earliest known visual representation of Machaerus—and of not just one but *two* of its architectural spaces: the royal banquet hall and the prison house. In later centuries there were to appear thousands of images and representations related to Machaerus topics—such as “the prison of the Baptist,” “the banquet of Herod,” and “the dance of Salome”—and in particular to the life of John the Baptist. These latter include “Herod Antipas listens to John in the throne hall of his palace” and “John sends his followers to Jesus and they return with Jesus's message to the imprisoned prophet.” In addition to these, we have thousands of representations of Herodias with or without Salome, sometimes—erroneously—in the company of Antipas, and even with the cut-off head of the Baptist. The

most common subjects of these representations are unquestionably “the martyrdom of John by the sword”—which is also among the most popular Gospel illustrations—and “Salome with the head of the Baptist on a salver.” Portrayals of the architecture and material culture of Machaerus reflect European castles and courts of the age, and the figures are similarly wearing not ancient but rather medieval, renaissance, or baroque costumes in these fictive representations. The architectural heritage and spiritual legacy of Machaerus lived on in the world of imagination: first as Bible illustrations, then as *Biblia pauperum* in the form of frescos, reliefs, and mosaics in churches, and later as backgrounds of paintings of the above-mentioned subjects. We will have a closer look at five of these representations: the earliest Bible illustration, the oldest known relief and fresco depictions, the first mosaic representation, and finally a Victorian painting of Machaerus, all of which survived until today.

THE FIRST OF THE FIVE MASTERPIECES is the already-mentioned sixth-century *Codex Sinopensis* (“Uncial 023” in the Gregory-Aland numbering), which was purchased by a French captain in 1899 from an elderly Greek woman in the city of Sinope (FIG. 82). The representation of Machaerus can be found on folio 10 (verso) and is preserved in Paris among the priceless treasures of the National Library of France. On the right side of the miniature illumination, we can see the Machaerus prison with its closed door and, inside the unroofed building, the beheaded body of John the Baptist with his two disciples. The illustration of the banquet has a very close parallel in a contemporaneous New Testament, the *Codex Purpureus Rossanensis* (“Uncial 042” in the Gregory-Aland numbering), which was discovered in 1879 in the



FIGURE 82: The earliest known representations of the banquet of Tetrarch Herod Antipas and the prison house of Saint John the Baptist are Bible illustrations. The miniature illustration from the sixth-century *Codex Sinopensis*.

sacristy of Rossano Cathedral. Both illuminated prestigious Greek manuscripts were penned in silver ink on purple-dyed parchments (vellum) in the same century—the sixth. The two miniature representations of the festive meals—the Machaerus birthday banquet of the Sinope Gospel and the Jerusalem Passover meal of the Rossano Gospel (the oldest known Bible representation of the Last Supper)—are of similar size. In both of them, the guests and disciples gather around a semicircular table in a crescent-shaped apse. The already-standardized canonical depictions of the artistic structures, including the two meals, are very similar: Antipas

and Jesus both occupy couches on the left and are crowned in the same manner (with a royal diadem and with a halo, respectively). It is only the two protagonists who are portrayed with beards around the tables: Jesus and the Baptist. The visual message is clear: there are two analogous banquets in the Gospels and, in Jesus’s words, “*the Son of Man will suffer similarly,*” just as “*John the Baptist*” did. Therefore, even the banquets were represented in a similar way, from as early as the sixth century onward.

THE SECOND ARTISTIC MEDIUM we consider here is relief, and the oldest representation of the Machaerus Gospel scene in that form can be found in Hildesheim, Germany. Probably influenced by Trajan’s column in Rome, the 379-centimeter-high bronze column of Saint Bernward (bishop of Hildesheim from 993 to 1022), a kind of *Biblia pauperum*, is the earliest known representation of Machaerus outside the Bible (but still in a church) (FIG. 83). This imaginary depiction of the prison of John the Baptist and Herod’s banquet follows canonical representations found in medieval codices, which had already been established by the sixth century, and probably even earlier. The imaginary composition has the following structure (similar to that of the *Codex Sinopensis*): on the right, the prison scene shows an unroofed building, together with two persons and the beheaded body of the Baptist; on the left, we see the banquet scene, with Herod behind the table and Salome next to him; between the two scenes, the bodyguard arrives with the head of John the Baptist on a plate. On the bronze Bernward Column (in German *Christussäule*), which was made in about AD 1020 and thus postdates the *Codex Sinopensis* illustration by nearly five hundred years, we already see slight changes compared to the painted miniature: the Baptist is portrayed twice (first



FIGURE 83: The second-earliest known representation is a bronze relief on the *Bernward Column* of Hildesheim from about 1020. The head of John the Baptist arrives on a charger in the center of both artistic representations (similarly to that in the *Codex Sinopensis*, FIG. 82), which are structured in a similar way that is already canonical.

alive, then beheaded), Herodias sits next to Antipas and the previously standing Salome is now dancing next to a musician.

These modifications that took place since the sixth century were artistic developments in the canonical visualization of the Machaerus Gospel scenes. They are all present as given standards in our third example, the oldest surviving fresco of the imaginary representation of Machaerus. The central theme of the Romanesque scene from the 1160s is the birthday feast of Antipas, and it is the main altarpiece immediately above the altar table in the central apse of an eighth-century three-nave church (FIG. 84). It gives the most direct visual message possible: the tableau (literally!) behind the Last Supper in



FIGURE 84: The fresco over the main altar in the Benedictine Convent of Saint John in Müstair, Switzerland. The life-size Romanesque scene from the 1160s represents the birthday feast of Antipas above the altar table, in the central apse of an eighth-century three-nave church. It was discovered during the disengagement of the whitewash in 1947–1951, thanks to which the abbey became a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 1983.

Jerusalem (which is offered by the sacrificing priests *daily* on the altar during the holy mass) is the Machaerus royal banquet. This dramatic, in fact breathtakingly powerful *life-size* scene can be found in the Benedictine convent of the Abbey of Saint John in Müstair, Switzerland. It was discovered during the disengagement of the whitewash in 1947–1951, and the convent became a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 1983. Here we may detect some additional artistic developments since the Bernward Column: the Romanesque artist represents the Machaerus prison house on the left (thus changing the direction of the scenes from right to left, into their “reading” direction) and then depicts the burial of Saint John the Baptist on the right side of the tower at one extreme of the Herodian city wall, signaled on the uppermost part of the scene. Salome has here two roles: she is dancing (as in Hildesheim), but she also takes the platter with the head *herself*, to offer it to Herodias. The illustration of the burial of the Baptist is an important new addition. In the center of the altarpiece, the body and blood of the Precursor is depicted on the royal birthday table, just as the body and blood of Christ is on the altar during the everyday holy liturgy. The precursory *Machaerus passion* with the birthday banquet is represented on the wall, behind the central, principal altar stone of the church, where the daily liturgical celebrations of the sacrificial offerings during holy mass commemorate the Last Supper of the *Jerusalem passion*. Parallel passions, parallel martyrdoms.

OUR FOURTH EXAMPLE in chronological order among the earliest imaginative Machaerus representations in the various artistic media, after the first Bible illustration and the oldest relief and fresco visualizations, is the oldest surviving mosaic scene. The developments in the canonical representation of the preceding seven centuries we noted in

our previous examples are *all* present here, but this mosaic, which is still at its original place in Florence, gives us the most complete parallels between the Jerusalem and Machaerus passions of Jesus and the Baptist in the history of art. The slide-strip-like mosaic scenes, which decorate the magnificent ceiling of the Baptistery of Saint John in the Florentine Romanesque style, can be dated to the thirteenth century (FIG. 85). In the upper row, we see four representations from the *Passion of Jesus* in Jerusalem: the Last Supper; Judas’s betrayal; the Crucifixion; and the Pietà. The lower row depicts four parallel scenes from the *Passion of the Baptist* in Machaerus: a meeting between his two messengers and the miracle-maker Jesus with his disciples in Galilee during the Peraean imprisonment; the dance of Salome at the royal birthday banquet in Machaerus; the beheading of John in the prison house; the offering of the head of the Baptist to Herodias by Salome under a domed, royal canopy. We may note the following religious messages and parallels in the depictions of the two analogous passions:

1. There are two parallel festive banquets, one in Jerusalem (Jesus with the twelve apostles) and one in Machaerus (Antipas with his family and his courtiers).
2. Jesus was betrayed by the kiss of Judas; John the Baptist was betrayed by Herodias through the dance of Salome. Judas and Herodias occupy the same position in the corresponding mosaic scenes.
3. Parallel martyrdoms: the crucifixion is represented with the four women and the Beloved Disciple; the beheading by sword is depicted in the presence of Salome. The two



martyr heads are portrayed in the center of the two adjacent artistic compositions.

4. The two dead bodies among the arms of women: above, the lamentation of Christ, among the four women (and three apostles on the right); next to it, below, the halo, or glory, appears as a plate around the head of the Baptist, between Salome and Herodias. The two bearded and haloed heads are depicted in identical, lying positions inside the two corresponding scenes. Illuminated by the upper scene, we do not see the golden plate anymore, only the golden glory around the head of the Baptist, the patron saint of Florence.
5. The upper row leads to the empty tomb, the resurrection of Christ accompanied by an angel. The lower roll heads to the tomb with the dead body of John the Baptist, as in Müstair.

WE HAVE GIVEN AN OVERVIEW of four Machaerus representations, the oldest surviving ones we know about in

four artistic media: a sixth-century Bible illustration, a millennium-old relief, a twelfth-century fresco, and a thirteenth-century mosaic. The Byzantine Greek Bible illumination (probably from Constantinople or the western part of Asia Minor) and the Romanesque church decorations from the time and territory of the Holy Roman Empire follow the canonical and standardized representations of imperial Christianity. During the following centuries, artists had more and more freedom, and

FIGURE 85 (previous pages): The magnificent slide-strip-like mosaics in the Florentine Romanesque style, depicting the parallel passions of Jesus of Nazareth in Jerusalem and of John the Baptist in Machaerus city, which decorate the ceiling of the Baptistery of Saint John. The mosaics were dated by Prof. Miklós Boskovits (University of Florence) to the last quarter of the thirteenth century. The upper row shows four scenes from the *Passion of Jesus in Jerusalem*; the lower row depicts four parallel scenes from the *Passion of the Baptist in Machaerus*.

therefore we gradually see more buildings, more blood, and more nudity. According to our taste, the pinnacle of the Machaerus representations is the three eternally valid paintings of Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio, in Valletta, London, and Madrid, respectively (FIGS. 86–88). However, from among the tens of thousands of artistic illustrations of the Machaerus Gospel scenes of the past one and a half millennia, including the famous paintings by Ansiaux and Fattori representing the Machaerus throne hall (FIGS. 89–90), there is only one whose depiction of the imaginary architecture of the Herodian royal palace corresponds to reality. What do we mean by that? That there is a painting—hanging not in a church, but on the wall of the London Guildhall Art Gallery—that correctly portrays the historical and architectural legacy of Machaerus, in spite of the fact that it was created exactly a hundred years before archaeological excavations began there. Is it a coincidence? Or was its artist the Chinese painter from the old tale? That story is as follows:

An ancient emperor of China heard that there was a brilliant painter in the countryside of his empire, a real genius. He commanded that the painter be brought to his imperial court immediately, where they met. The emperor ordered the artist to paint a landscape representing not a dreamland but genuine, true Reality. The painter had three months to execute the mural, which was of the size of the palace wall. After three months the Emperor came to see the artwork, and upon looking at it, he became very angry. *“I have to order to kill you, as you painted a simple seaside landscape of fantasy*



FIGURE 86: Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio, *The Beheading of Saint John the Baptist*, oil on canvas, 370 x 520 cm. This 1608 altarpiece still hangs at its original place, in the Oratory of Saint John's Co-Cathedral in Valletta, Malta. The slayer, who has already cut the Baptist's throat with his sword (in Latin, *machaerus*) is choosing a second execution weapon: on the jailor's command, he takes out a sharp knife from his belt in order to sever the head from the corpse. Caravaggio, who was already a wanted murderer at the time, is the unparalleled master of the dramatic momentum of execution. See detail in FIG. 7.

*with rivers, valleys and a royal castle on one of the hilltops, and not Reality!*"—he said. "I am terribly sorry, Your Imperial Majesty!"—answered the painter quietly, in a very humble, modest way—and stepped into the painting and disappeared behind the hills.

This fabular story illustrates that through art one can visit reality—as did the only painter who was able to bridge the gap between the artistic fantasy and the archaeological reality of ancient Machaerus. On his extraordinary visualization, it was *possible* to see the authentic representation of the *historical* monuments of Machaerus from antiquity already in 1868! The man who made the painting was not Chinese but British. His name was Edward Armitage (1817–1896), and he studied in Paris. We may presume he was under the influence of those Frenchmen who visited the ancient location of Machaerus and described its archaeological landscape. They surveyed and photographed the sacred mountain and started to write about it, some of them even in literary form and in the style of the age of Romanticism. Now, we will present the painting, titled *Herod's Birthday Feast*, as our fifth and last Machaerus illustration in this chapter (FIG. 91).

The oil painting represents Salome dancing before the royal banquet table of Antipas and Herodias. It has a standard, classical artistic structure—Salome dancing next to a musician—very similar to the one already depicted on the Bernward Column in about 1020. In the Armitage painting, in front of a semicircular table around which the royal birthday guests are lying, Antipas is portrayed on the left side, as we have seen him on the canonical illustration of the *Codex Sinopensis*. But the latter was only discovered thirty-one years later! What is the novelty here then? What



FIGURE 87: Caravaggio, *Salome with the Head of John the Baptist*, ca. 1607, oil on canvas, 92 x 107 cm. Rediscovered in a Swiss private collection in 1959, now in the National Gallery, London. The old servant woman in the background is depicted with a commiserative expression and gesture.

FIGURE 88: Caravaggio, *Salome with the Head of John the Baptist*, ca. 1609, oil on canvas, 116 x 140 cm. The Royal Palace, Madrid. This painting was probably sent as a gift by Caravaggio to the Grand Master of the Knights of Malta, Fra Alof de Wignacourt. In the artistic composition, the right arm holding the tray seems to belong to both the princess and the old maidservant.



FIGURE 89: Antoine Ansiaux, *Saint John the Baptist Blaming Herod* (*Saint Jean-Baptiste faisant des reproches à Hérode*), 1822, oil on canvas, 277 x 326 cm. Palais des Beaux-Arts, Lille.

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FIGURE 90: Giovanni Fattori, *Saint John the Baptist Rebuking Herod* (*San Giovanni Battista rimprovera Erode*), 1856, oil on canvas, 282 x 357 cm. Gallery of the Academy, Florence.

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FIGURE 91: Edward Armitage, *Herod's Birthday Feast*, 1868, oil on canvas, 155 x 277 cm, detail. Guildhall Art Gallery, London. The Victorian painter was an alumnus of the *École des beaux-arts* in Paris. Although Armitage's representation of the Gospel scene is a work of imagination, of all the known works of art that treat this topic, it comes closest to the architectural and archaeological reality of the Herodian royal court of Machaerus. In this painting, the laureated Antipas sits on his throne on the left; his wife, the Hasmonean royal princess Herodias, sits next to him, wearing a diadem, and Salome, her daughter, dances on the right. The complete painting appears on the cover of this book.

constitutes the innovation, the extraordinary artistic intuition of Armitage? It is the architectural background. The Doric colonnade and its triglyph-metope frieze, the porticus corridor, and the peristyle courtyard. We are indeed in the historical space of the Herodian Doric court, in the architectural heart of the Machaerus royal palace. Today we are able to prove that the painting's architectural details are all correct: the size and style of the colonnade (3.8 meters high, double-life-size Doric columns), the systyle intercolumniation spaces (separated by a distance equal to two column bases, having a so-called four-module intercolumn structure), the architectural elements of the entablature, even the Pompeian-red-colored stucco on the lower parts of the colonnade and the porticus corridor wall. How was it possible? How did Armitage come to know about these details of the ancient monuments?

We saw how the classic first-century texts of Strabo, Pliny the Elder, and Josephus were able to contextualize the Machaerus gospel scenes; and vice versa, we saw later how the archaeological and architectural legacy of Machaerus could help to visualize all these first-century written sources. Contextualization and the mapping of interconnections shape our understanding of both the reliable and complementary ancient texts and the authentic archaeological monuments and provide us with new, valuable information. Similarly, we have seen how the imaginative visual arts in history always tried to picture the Machaerus Gospel scenes for their better understanding. However, we have *only one* piece of work in art history that gives us the unique opportunity to visualize the *historical and authentic* Machaerus, exactly a hundred years before the first archaeological excavations started there: the 1868 painting of the ingenious Armitage, who was able to feel the *genius loci* of

the sacred ruins without ever visiting them, through descriptions of the classical literature and his artistic intuition. But capturing the spiritual realm of a sacred site and its *genius loci* is beyond our scientific understanding; it is a metaphysical field, a territory we cannot yet visit in 2023.

Edward Armitage's painting was exhibited for the first time at the Royal Academy of Arts in London in 1868, but the brilliant master, like the Chinese painter in the tale, received very depreciative feedback from his contemporaries. The critic of the *Illustrated London News* on 16 May 1868 wrote mockingly: "*Opinions will differ as to the extent to which Roman architecture and customs were introduced by the conqueror of the Jews, though it is hard to realise with Mr. Armitage that Herod's feast was held in a Roman palace, strictly in the Roman fashion, at the triclinium, and with guests almost exclusively of Roman type. Certainly, the scriptural narrative appears to discountenance the appearance of Herodias herself as one of the guests.*" The reviewer of the *Athenaeum* went further on 23 May 1868, and considered that "*Mr. Armitage deals with grave subjects, and has treated one of the most striking of its class—the daughter of Herodias dancing before Herod in 'Herod's Birthday Feast'—with utter absence of local truth. This place is a Roman palace, but the Scripture scene was a Desert fortress. [...] Antipas Herod was at war, and the 'friends' whom he feasted were his Jewish captains. He was at war with Aretas, King of Petra; and the fortress of Machaerus, at which his feast was held, stood beyond Jordan, near the Dead Sea. What Mr. Armitage is pleased to think about 'palaces' and 'fortresses' is beside the case.*" However, the critics forgot that Josephus wrote not about a "*desert fortress*" in Machaerus, but about a palace, after a magnificent manner:

But when Herod came to be king, he [...] built a wall round that top of the hill, and erected towers at the corners, of a hundred and sixty cubits high; in the middle of which place he built a palace (βασιλειον), after a magnificent manner, wherein were large and beautiful edifices.

—Josephus, *Bellum Judaicum* VII, 6, 2

Due to the negative reception, the Machaerus painting was never sold and remained in the artist's possession. Armitage finally donated it to the London Guildhall Art Gallery in 1894, not long before his death. His brilliant artistic intuition, the summoning of the unexcavated monument overlooking the Dead Sea, was recognized for the first time only in 2012, by the present author, nearly one and a half centuries after the painting's creation (FIG. 92).

## VII. Pilgrims of Christianity and Islam: • Toward the Bimillennial Jubilee in 2029



FIGURE 92: The grand finale of the Budapest world premiere of the Machaerus opera set design for Richard Strauss's music drama *Salome*, with the authentic, one-to-one architectural quotation of the royal Herodian court. The delicate section of the Doric peristyle colonnade serves as a historical tableau behind the literary drama, based on the Gospel according to Mark. The archaeologist author, who is an architect and an opera-set designer as well, paid homage to the genius of Edward Armitage.

It was only a century ago that, on the ruins of the Ottoman Empire, the Hashemites had established their Emirate in Transjordan—a principality that was a British protectorate at the time—which became a sovereign kingdom in 1946. We may consider the ruling royal family, the House of Hashem, as Transjordan successors of the Herodians, even though the latter reigned two millennia earlier and only over a much smaller principality, which was a Roman protectorate, beyond the Jordan and the Dead Sea (FIGS. 93–95). The father of the current soldier-king, King Hussein bin Talal (1935–1999), loved archaeology and visited several archaeological excavations during his lifetime. Together with his younger brother, Prince El Hassan bin Talal, King Hussein established the Royal Scientific Society of Jordan in 1970. Since then—for a good half century—His Royal Highness Prince El Hassan bin Talal, an Oxford alumnus of Christ Church College, has been the Chairman of the Royal Scientific Society of Jordan. He visited our archaeological excavations in Machaerus citadel near Mukawer village (in Arabic: Qal'at Mishnaqa Mukawer) with his wife in 2014 and wrote a touching essay about the historical place. Before repeating some of his words from the beginning of the present volume, I must emphasize that these are the thoughts and observations of a devout, prominent Muslim



FIGURE 93: On July 20, 2020, a previously unknown Herodian limestone relief came to light on Mount Machaerus during illicit archaeological excavations. It became a key for identifying the founder of the Tomb of the Kings in Jerusalem as King Herod the Great.

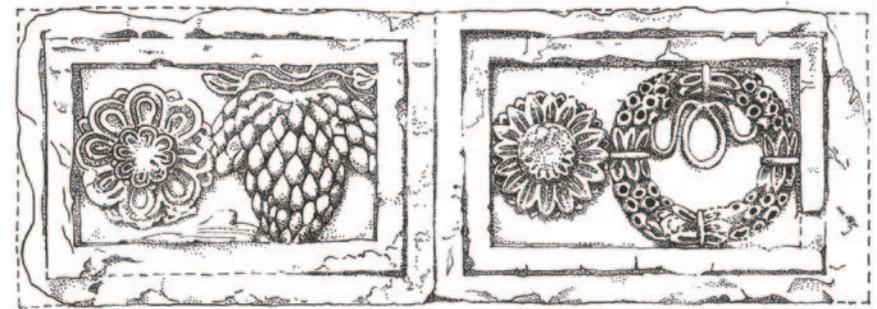


FIGURE 94: The graphic documentation of the Herodian limestone relief from Machaerus in FIG. 93.

man, a forty-second-generation descendant of the Prophet Mohammed. He wrote the following:

The evocative Citadel of Mukawer, or Machaerus to the ancient world, is a site that is redolent with the narrative and wonder of history and faith. It is one of those very special places that seem to exist beyond time and in its own space. It sits in a deeply imbued landscape that brings to life the resting chronicle of belief, devotion and struggle. This abandoned hilltop site with its faded but once-magnificent fortified royal palace, occupies a strategic point overlooking the Dead Sea in the modern Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan. It has been known to us for generations as Qalat Mishnaqa. This is the place where, according to the Roman historian Flavius Josephus (*AJ* XVIII 5, 2), one of the holiest men of the

biblical era, the Prophet Yahya ibn Zakariyya, was imprisoned and executed by the Jewish Tetrarch Herod Antipas almost 2,000 years ago. This story of death for faith and for love of an ideal makes Mukawer so much more than a fascinating archaeological site. It sits in the landscape of religious memory as a testament and place of pilgrimage, not only for Muslims, but for Christians too. In our country, our beloved Prophet Yehya is Saint John the Baptist by another name. He is the valiant predecessor of Jesus Christ and, indeed, he is rightly considered to be the Patron Saint of Jordan. [...]

The landscape in which Mukawer sits is one that any pilgrim or archaeological school, cannot fail to be mesmerized by. In the immediate vicinity of the citadel are two further important places of pilgrimage: the

Baptism Site of the Prophet Issa (Jesus) at “Bethany beyond the Jordan” (John 1, 28), and Mount Nebo, where the Prophet Musa (Moses) glimpsed the Promised Land and passed away to join his Maker. We feel proud and privileged to be able to welcome all Muslim and Christian pilgrims and visitors to these holy sites in Jordan, where we are blessed with a wealth of destinations for pilgrimage commemorating our shared history of faith, struggle and religion. The welcome that we reserve for those who seek to discover the roots of their faith was given global attention with the visit of His Holiness Pope John Paul II in 2000, and the visits of Their Holinesses Pope Benedict XVI in 2009 and Pope Francis in 2014. They came as pilgrims to the Holy Land and all those who follow them will receive the same warm and joyous welcome.

We are honoured to act as custodians of sites such as Mukawer. These great remnants of other ages enable the adherents of the Abrahamic Faiths to explore their common roots and to share their stories with pilgrims and travellers from the global human family.

—His Royal Highness Prince El Hassan bin Talal

After the delightful thoughts of Prince El Hassan, we may read the 2019 Machaerus reflections of the Vatican’s Chief Archaeologist, His Eminence Cardinal Gianfranco Ravasi, who was the President of the Pontifical Commission for Sacred Archaeology of the Holy See. Cardinal Ravasi is an Italian prelate of the Catholic Church, another top intellectual

who served in other important governmental and academic capacities in Rome: he had been the Minister of Culture of the Vatican from 2010 to 2022 (as President of the Pontifical Council for Culture of the Holy See) and was a prominent academic leader as well (as President of the Coordination Council of the Pontifical Academies) during this period. His appreciation of Machaerus—despite being a high-profile representative of another monotheistic religion—is expressed in a similar spirit to that of Prince El Hassan, and is truly fascinating. The Prince and the Cardinal both climbed the mountaintop beyond the Dead Sea and thus both became Machaerus pilgrims. His Eminence shared the following thoughts among his ten-page foreword to the third volume of my Machaerus archaeological excavation monographs:

Before evoking, albeit allusively, that primary reference in the history of the palace-stronghold of Machaerus, it is necessary to start from the present time. The last fifty years saw both exhaustion and exaltation on the hilltop overlooking the Dead Sea; both visitors and archaeologists experienced this. After the American Baptist group, the Franciscans of the Holy Land went up to excavate it. Franciscans have, as part of their vocation, a historical-scientific instinct, an awareness to the importance of the origins of Christianity. Their excavation campaigns were directed by two Franciscans, respectively: Fr. Virgilio Corbo between 1978 and 1981; then by Fr. Michele Piccirillo from 1991 to 1994. I have personal memories of them, having both known and communicated with them.

A further step has been accomplished which is celebrated by an extraordinary documentary trilogy—the three impressive volumes on Machaerus which offer the richest and most vigorous portrait by a true protagonist, the Hungarian archaeologist Győző Vörös, a man so passionate about this enterprise that he settled down with his entire family in Jordan. With the third report of the excavations—which he conducts within a larger timeframe of twenty years, from 2009 to 2029, by the Royal Department of Antiquities in Jordan—he offers the latest phase of his excavations from 2015 to 2018, thus sealing a significant “Golden Jubilee” of fifty years since the distant 1968. The reader of the Machaerus trilogy turns into a visitor—indeed, a kind of pilgrim—invited to interweave history, art, tradition and even spirituality; among the spaces and monuments of Machaerus hovers always the figure of the Baptist, and his voice echoes with that vehement imperative recorded by the evangelist Mark: “you are not allowed” (6, 18). We speak of a “visit” because the pages that follow are illustrated with almost two thousand images and graphics whose colours almost allow the reader to dwell in those places and premises, admiring them, locating them on the maps and feeling, indirectly, the breath of the desert which envelops them. [...]

The Markan account (6, 14–29) can be proclaimed ideally among the ruins that were

brought to light by the archaeologists at Machaerus. The philo-Roman historian Josephus (37/38—after 103) situates the event in that fortress, as he writes: “John, that was called ‘the Baptist’: for Herod slew him, [...] he was sent a prisoner, out of Herod’s suspicious temper, to Machaerus, the castle I before mentioned, and was there put to death.” (Antiq. Jud. XVIII 5, 2) This source is the testimony of the historian that gives a political reason, not an ethical one (like the Gospels), as if John had become the standard-bearer of a popular rebellion before the defeat in the war against King Aretas. In that palatine area that overlooks the Dead Sea, and where now archaeology has revealed in its entirety the relics of its past, even in the pulsation of its ancient daily existence, an act of abuse of power was committed, in all of its brutality. Machaerus, therefore, may today still be an emblem of the many crimes of history, but above all it is an epiphany of courageous witness to truth and justice, as the anthem that serves as a prologue to the fourth Gospel sings: “A man sent by God came: his name was John. He came as a witness to bear witness to the light, so that all might believe through him” (Jn 1:6–7). In these desert spaces resound his prophetic voice that had defined itself thus: “I am the voice of one crying in the desert. Make straight the way of the Lord!” (Jn 1:23).

—His Eminence Cardinal Gianfranco Ravasi,  
*Machaerus III*, “Foreword,” pp. 10–19

In the light of the above two quotations, one from a high-profile Muslim, the other from a similarly prominent Christian, the Prince and the Cardinal, one may ask a very relevant question: Is Machaerus a common ground between Christianity and Islam? We may answer with convinced confidence: Yes, it is indeed! Both the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan and the Vatican consider the historical site of Machaerus important, rightly venerable and protectable. The archaeological site with the surviving mountaintop ruins of the once magnificent fortified Herodian royal palace and city overlooking the Dead Sea are sacred for both Christianity and Islam. And they are rightly so: Machaerus is the historical place of the martyrdom of one of the great prophets of Islam, Nabi Yaḥyā ibn Zakariyā, or “Prophet Jehiah, son of Zechariah,” who is none other in Christianity than Saint John the Baptist, imprisoned and beheaded by Tetrarch Herod Antipas in ca. 29 AD in Machaerus. Its bimillennial jubilee (the 2,000<sup>th</sup> anniversary) will be in 2029. Therefore, in the eyes of Christianity and Islam alike, Machaerus is a holy site, an important and sacred pilgrim destination in the Holy Land.

Both the New Testament and the Quran commemorate the Christian and Islamic prophet. For Islam he is the Forerunner of “Jesus, son of Mary,” called ‘Īsā ibn Maryam, or one of the Penultimate Prophets and Messengers of God. Christianity proclaims him the Forerunner (Precursor) of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. Meanwhile, the historical site of Machaerus on the east bank of the Dead Sea is not specifically mentioned in the New Testament or the Quran. The information concerning the exact historical location that complements the New Testament and the Quran is based partly on the holy traditions of Christianity and Islam, partly on the first-century account of Josephus (*Antiquitates Judaicae* XVIII. 5.2), the philo-Roman Jewish historian. His authentic written evidence, as

we mentioned in the introduction, was also confirmed by the related reference in the Ecclesiastical History (I. 11.4-6) of Eusebius of Caesarea (in ca. 324).

Three chapters after the description of the execution of John the Baptist, the Gospel according to Matthew reports an astonishing event: during his Transfiguration, Jesus meets with Moses and Elijah, and immediately after their conversation, draws a direct parallel, in the form of a classic *metalepsis*, between his own future and the fate of the freshly murdered John the Baptist, whom he identifies with Prophet Elijah he has just talked to during the Transfiguration: “*I tell you that Elijah has already come, and they did not recognise him but treated him as they pleased: and the Son of Man will suffer similarly at their hands. The disciples understood that he was speaking of John the Baptist*” (Matthew 17:12–13). With these words, Jesus prophesied his own passion. He drew a parallel with the calvary of John the Baptist and compared his final days in Jerusalem to the tragic banquet and assassination of the Precursor. In literary theory, the French expression *mise en abîme* refers to the narrative technique of inserting an independent story within a story. The passion of the Baptist is such a nested or inner story, which has a precedential function within the framework of the whole Gospel message. In the Gospel accounts, the story of John the Baptist serves as a precursory narrative for the Jerusalem passion of Christ. The same fate is true for Mount Machaerus that was the Golgotha of Saint John the Baptist.

With the above considerations concerning Christianity and Islam, another question comes to mind: Is Machaerus (in Hebrew: Michvar, מִיכְוָר similarly important for the third monotheistic religion, Judaism as well? We may answer this question with the same confidence as the previous one: Yes, it is indeed. As will become obvious from the historical sources, it was such an important place during the Hasmonean

royal dynasty that, in 76 BC, the regnant monarch, Queen Salome Alexandra, converted it into a treasure house of the Jerusalem Kingdom (Strabo, *Geographica*, XVI, 2, 40). During the reigns of King Herod the Great and Tetrarch Herod Antipas, “Machaerus was, next to Jerusalem, the most important fortification in Judea” (Pliny the Elder, *Historia Naturalis*, V, 15, 16). This means that it was even more important than Masada, Herodion, or Alexandreion! Finally, during the First Jewish War, Machaerus was the last but one sanctuary for the Zealot freedom fighters against the Roman army. These three instances during the Hasmonean and Herodian royal dynasties and the First Jewish War are like celestial fixed stars in the history of Judaism. The Machaerus citadel shines in Judaism like the star Sirius before sunrise in summer mornings on the southeast horizon of the Promised Land, as viewed from Jerusalem.

However, for Judaism the significance of Machaerus is of a patriotic and historical nature, and not of a religious one. To illustrate the importance of Mount Machaerus for Judaism, the Mount of Olives in Jerusalem could be cited as an analogous parallel. Both Christianity and Islam venerate the holy religious place where Jesus ascended to Heaven (with a Byzantine and later Crusader church that was converted into a mosque and is used today conjointly by Christians and Muslims). But, like Mount Machaerus, the Mount of Olives is important in Judaism not so much from a religious as from a historical aspect. We have to remember, as mentioned already in the introduction, that the ancient city of Machaerus disappeared from the maps after its destruction by the Roman Legion X Fretensis in AD 72. Until its rediscovery in 1807, its exact location was completely unknown. It became a lost Gospel scene. But even though lost, it was never forgotten. It remained a reliable place, and since its rediscovery, there has been a general agreement

between historians and archaeologists that the archaeological ruins of the mountaintop Herodian royal palace overlooking the Dead Sea preserved the authentic prints and original remains of the historical place. This consensus also exists among Christians, Muslims, and Jews.



FIGURE 95: The Machaerus citadel, view toward the southwest: in 2019 the area of the lower city was still untouched. During the COVID-19 pandemic, however, very serious vandalism destroyed the archaeological site overlooking the Dead Sea, including the re-erected Herodian columns. Since then, on 12 September 2023, His Majesty King Abdullah II of Jordan personally visited Mount Machaerus, together with His Royal Highness Crown Prince Al Hussein bin Abdullah II. After the King's visit, the Jordanian Royal Court officially announced that Mount Machaerus will be included in the Vatican-approved Christian pilgrimage trail, which also involves the Baptism Site of Jesus Christ at Bethany Beyond the Jordan, biblical Madaba, and Mount Nebo.

## Epilogue

The collaborative efforts of the Hungarian mission and Jordan's Department of Antiquities at the site of Machaerus, summarized in the preceding pages, constitute a monumental advance in our understanding of the site and the landscape of the eastern Dead Sea region in antiquity. The work has also drawn attention to an historically significant period now more clearly evidenced in Jordan, and about which sites of Jordan still have much to reveal.

With the encouragement of both the Hungarian mission and the Department of Antiquities, after His Majesty King Abdullah II's visit to Machaerus in September 2023, accompanied by His Royal Highness Crown Prince Al Hussein bin Abdullah II, the American Center of Research conducted an exploratory season of archaeological investigation at the Dead Sea harbor of Callirhoe, or Kalliroe ('Ain ez-Zara), which served Machaerus in antiquity. The site's thermal springs were in the ancient period a place of healing and respite. Callirhoe's most famous ancient visitor was perhaps King Herod, at least according to the classical historian Josephus.

While not the first archaeological work there, ACOR's efforts brought to the site new methods and perspectives. The comprehensive remote sensing and mapping we conducted will enable us to understand the harbor site more fully in relation to its hinterlands and will aid in the preservation of



FIGURE 96: Possible stone structures in the unexplored depths of the Dead Sea.

the area. Our geoarchaeological investigations have positioned us to better understand the site formation processes and time-scale, including into the long prehistoric past. Perhaps most interestingly, our underwater archaeological survey and excavation *in* the Dead Sea, just off the edge of the built harbor, have opened new doors in historical and environmental research, and perhaps even tourism. Diving in the Dead Sea is an experience unrivaled by anywhere else that this writer has ever had the privilege to work. Beneath the surface of the Dead Sea, the Kingdom of Jordan has another landscape unlike any elsewhere in the world... a blue version of Wadi Rum. Now that the door is open, in the coming years the Dead Sea and its ancient harbor will surely yield more of their secrets.

Pearce Paul Creasman  
Amman, 5 December 2023

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 (1608), Valletta: FIGS. 7, 86; (1609), Madrid: FIG. 88  
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- École biblique et archéologique française de Jérusalem (1966): FIG. 9  
 German-Protestant Institute of Archaeology (Deutsches Evangelisches Institut für Altertums-wissenschaft des Heiligen Landes), August Strobel Estate, Jerusalem

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 FIG. 3

MACHAERUS ARCHAEOLOGICAL MISSION OF THE HUNGARIAN  
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 (middle and lower illustrations), FIGS. 6, 8, 10–11, 25–65,  
 67–71, 75, 78–79, 94–95

## About the Author

PROF. DR. GYÖZÖ VÖRÖS (1972), archaeologist and architect, is an Academician Fellow and research director of the Hungarian Academy of Arts, project director of the Jordanian Department of Antiquities, Honorary Senior Research Fellow of Mississippi State University, Research Professor of the Pontifical University Faculty of Biblical Sciences and Archaeology (Studium Biblicum Franciscanum) in Jerusalem, series editor at Edizioni Terra Santa in Milan, and set designer of the Hungarian State Opera House. He has also served as director of the Hungarian Excavations in Egypt (Thoth Hill at Thebes, 1994–1998; Taposiris Magna at Alexandria, 1998–2004), in Cyprus (Lighthouse Hill in Nea Paphos, 2004–2009), and in Jordan (Mount Machaerus, 2009–). He is, furthermore, recipient of the Knight's Cross of the Hungarian Order of Merit (2016), winner of the 2020 Prize of the Pontifical Academies in the Vatican, and awardee of the Papal Diploma and the Gold Medal of the Pontificate by Pope Francis (2022). He won in Washington the Best Scholarly Book in Archaeology Publication Award given by the Biblical Archaeology Society in 2021. He received the Széchenyi Prize, the highest Hungarian state award for scientific life achievement and outstanding academic contribution in 2022.

