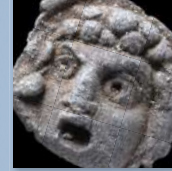




No, Not the Face of God



Stories of Jesus's Birth



Cache of Bullae from Maresha

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BIBLICAL ARCHAEOLOGY REVIEW

Reconstructing
Herod's Throne
at Machaerus







COURTESY OF THE HUNGARIAN ARCHAEOLOGICAL MISSION TO MACHAERUS

RESTORING HEROD'S THRONE NICHE AT MACHAERUS

GYÖZÖ VÖRÖS

THERE ARE FEW ARCHAEOLOGICAL SITES in the Holy Land from the time of the New Testament Gospels that can be reconstructed using original architectural elements, but Machaerus—King Herod's citadel on the eastern side of the Dead Sea, in Jordan—is one of them.

In 2019, we reconstructed part of King Herod's royal courtyard at Machaerus: the apsidal niche within which Herod's throne would have been positioned. In 2014, we also reconstructed one complete Ionic column and Doric column from

THRONE ROOM. At the Machaerus palace, archaeologists have restored the semicircular apsidal niche of the royal Herodian throne seat. Although the original floor level is lost, a staircase probably led to the throne on a higher, elevated platform. The Dead Sea and Israel, including Masada and Ein Gedi, appear in the background.



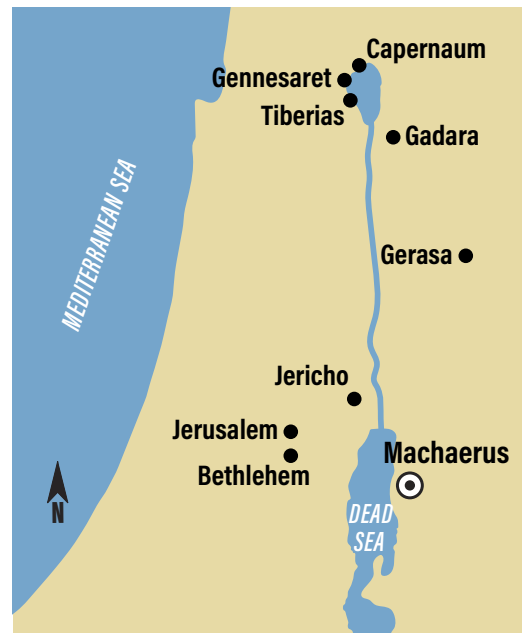
COURTESY OF THE HUNGARIAN ARCHAEOLOGICAL MISSION TO MACHAERUS

MOOT COURT. The first excavators of Machaerus reconstructed the courtyard incorrectly, even building a modern wall in front of the throne niche (see above, running bottom to top). In 2019, archaeologists exposed the original foundations of the throne niche.

the surviving architectural elements. We re-erected these Herodian columns on the two places where a previous Franciscan archaeological expedition found the only two *in situ* column-bases of the Herodian royal castle: a complete Ionic column in the apodyterium hall (or “undressing room”) of the Herodian bathhouse and a complete Doric column in the central peristyle.*

Archaeologists first uncovered the royal court of Machaerus in 1980, but the area of the Herodian throne remained unexcavated, under about 6 feet of ancient debris, for another 13 years. When archaeologists discovered the apsidal throne niche in 1993, they failed to identify it as such. They overlooked the importance of this curved wall—the only one in the

*See Győző Vörös, “Anastylosis at Machaerus,” *BAR*, January/February 2015.



HOLY SITES. These nine historical sites appear in the Gospels and can be reconstructed using archaeological evidences.



Machaerus citadel—and even built a modern wall in front of it!*

Our archaeological excavations at Machaerus on behalf of the Hungarian Academy of Arts and the Pontifical University Faculty of the Studium Biblicum Franciscanum in Jerusalem began in 2009. In 2014, we corrected many of the false archaeological reconstructions from previous excavations, and finally, in 2019, we removed the modern wall in front of the freshly restored apsidal throne niche. With this act, we accomplished our mission of correcting the inaccurate 1993 monument presentations at the Machaerus citadel.

During the same archaeological field season, we excavated in the throne niche until we hit bedrock. We exposed and documented the foundations of the area, and then we reerected a second, additional row of stones of the apsidal throne niche, to give visitors a 3D understanding of this important architectural space.

*See Győző Vörös, “Machaerus: Where Salome Danced and John the Baptist Was Beheaded,” *BAR*, September/October 2012, photograph by Hershel Shanks on p. 38.

RESTORED TO THE THRONE. Correcting earlier false reconstructions, the Hungarian-Franciscan Archaeological Mission restored the semicircular Herodian apsidal throne niche in the royal courtyard of Machaerus.

The fortress of Machaerus (Greek: *Μαχαίρουδς*, meaning “sword”) was built by the Hasmonean Alexander Jannaeus in c. 90 B.C., destroyed by the Roman general Gabinius in 57 B.C., transformed into a royal palace and city by King Herod the Great in c. 30 B.C., and destroyed by the Nabatean king Aretas IV in A.D. 36. From its hilltop location east of the Dead Sea, Machaerus could provide a view all the way to Jericho and the Temple of Jerusalem, Masada to the south, and even to Sartaba-Alexandreion, well north of Jericho overlooking the Jordan Valley. Its unique strategic location, overlooking the Dead Sea and the West Bank, made it one of the most fortified places in Judea. In



biblicalarchaeology.org/machaerus See a timeline of major events at Machaerus.

Edward Armitage, *Herod's Birthday Feast*.

Realistic Representations

There are thousands of images and representations related to the subject of the Herodian Machaerus. The most common subjects are Salome bringing the head of the Baptist on a salver to Herodias and the beheading of John the Baptist itself. These portrayals usually reflect contemporary European royal castles and courts with the figures wearing medieval, Renaissance, or Baroque costumes rather than ancient garments.

Just a hundred years before the first archaeological excavations on the Machaerus hilltop, Edward Armitage made, in 1868, a fascinating oil painting, titled *Herod's Birthday Feast*, which is today among

the treasures of the Guildhall Art Gallery in London. The Victorian painter was an alumnus of the École des Beaux-Arts in Paris. Although the Gospel scene representation is based on Armitage's imagination, it is the closest to the architectural and archaeological reality of the Herodian royal court of Machaerus known in the history of art. In this representation, the crowned Antipas is sitting on his throne on the left side; his wife Herodias, the Hasmonean royal princess, sits next to him; and Salome, her daughter, dances before them all.

—GYŐZŐ VÖRÖS

fact, according to Pliny the Elder, Machaerus was the second most fortified place in Roman Judea—second only to Jerusalem but more prominent than Masada, Herodion, and Alexandreion (*Historia Naturalis* 5.15–16).

The Jewish historian Flavius Josephus recounts that Herod Antipas had John the Baptist imprisoned and executed at the fortress of Machaerus (*Antiquities* 18.116–119). This complements the descriptions of the Gospels of Mark (6:14–29) and Matthew (14:1–12). The Christian historian

Eusebius later (c. 324) also relates the story to Machaerus (*Ecclesiastical History* 1.11.4–6).

Josephus and the Gospels thus provide a picture of Machaerus as the historical scene of the tragic birthday banquet of Tetrarch Herod Antipas at which Princess Salome danced c. A.D. 29. As the only royal palace that the tetrarch inherited from King Herod, Machaerus was to Antipas the best symbol of his Herodian royal legacy.

After a period of occupation by Judean rebels, the Romans destroyed the post-Herodian fortress during the winter of 71/72 (*Jewish War* 7.190–209), and Machaerus disappeared from the maps for nearly two millennia.



biblicalarchaeology.org/throne See more artistic representations of the Machaerus throne room.



The above literary sources are in full harmony with the archaeological research of the biblical site that has, during the past 52 years, revealed the complete fortified Herodian palace. Also exposed were remains of a circumvallation wall with campuses around the citadel and an unfinished agger-ramp (an artificial elevation or rampart) of the Legion X Fretensis, as well as the lower city of Machaerus.

The architectural legacy and the archaeological materials (including epigraphic, ceramic, and numismatic evidence) all fully agree with the detailed description of Josephus.*

*See Győző Vörös, "Machaerus: A Palace-Fortress with Multiple Mikva'ot," *BAR*, July/August 2017.

VISUALIZING HEROD'S THRONE. This architectural reconstruction of the Herodian throne and courtyard at Machaerus is superimposed on a photograph of the surviving ruins. The throne sits on an elevated platform, with steps leading up to it.

The once magnificent, c. 7,000-square-foot royal courtyard—with its *in situ* apsidal throne niche and even part of the *lithostrotos* ("stone pavement")—had to be the setting for the birthday banquet of Antipas, described by the Gospels. Many people were invited, even from Galilee, 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). The royal courtyard is not only the largest but also the only architectural space in the fortified palace of Machaerus where the tetrarch would have been able to receive the large gathering of official guests. This courtyard had to be the very place where, according to Josephus, Antipas delivered his judgment of a death-sentence on John the Baptist. Antipas would have delivered his sentence from the throne-seat—within the apsidal niche—of the royal court.

So five biblical figures once resided at Machaerus: King Herod the Great, his son Tetrarch Herod Antipas with his second wife, Princess Herodias, her daughter Princess Salome, and John the Baptist. The first four lived in the citadel, while John the Baptist suffered his political house arrest (together with his close disciples) in the fortified Herodian lower city.

It appears that the historical references of the Gospels, Josephus, and Eusebius can be wonderfully contextualized with archaeology

MAGNIFICENT MACHAERUS. With the Dead Sea and Jerusalem in the background, this photograph from 2004 shows Machaerus, King Herod’s citadel east of the Dead Sea, in the first rays of the rising sun.

MODEL FORTRESS. This 3D architectural model shows Machaerus’s upper city (the citadel) and lower city with a well-preserved surrounding wall. The lower city would have housed the entourage of the royal court, as well as John the Baptist when he was under house arrest.

and even with imaginative works of art that portray Machaerus. There are only a few historical sites that appear in the Gospels where such an attempt or quest can be executed. A unique position among these sacred places belongs to Machaerus, where the archaeological legacy survived in the form of a 2,000-year-old time capsule that we were able to uncover and reimagine using the latest technologies.

Currently, we are excavating the houses of the Herodian lower city of Machaerus, in one of which John the Baptist suffered his imprisonment. From this place, he sent his disciples to Jesus in Galilee with a query (Matthew 11:2–6; Luke 7:18–23), and this is where he was executed by one of the bodyguards of Antipas (Mark 6:27–28; Matthew 14:10). After this, he presumably would have been buried in the necropolis of Machaerus. Stay tuned as we uncover a new chapter of the biblical drama at this historic site! 📖



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The Lightning Horse

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