

**FIRST EXCAVATION CAMPAIGN AT
QAL'AT EL-MISHNAQA-MEQAWER
(Madaba) (September 8 - October 28, 1978**

by M. Piccirillo

The fortress of Machaerus was one of the strongholds of the defence system of Herod's kingdom in the eastern province of Perea on the boundary with the Nabateans of Petra. With Masada, Hyrcania and Alexandrium, Machaerus was one of the Fortresses that Herod the King has inherited from the Hasmoneans and which he had rendered more powerful by rebuilding it from the foundations.

Thanks to Josephus Flavius we also possess for Machaerus an enviable historical documentation. The naturally defended site was chosen by Alexander Janneus (103-56 B.C.).¹ The king-priest of Jerusalem through successful military campaigns, had succeeded in stabilizing the dominance in Perea begun by his father John Hyrcanus, by fixing the borders on the southern slopes of the Wadi Zerqa-Ma'in on which rises Machaerus.²

The fortress was dismantled for the first time by Gabinius (57 B.C.)³ in a punitive

action conducted by the general of Pompey the Great, who had voluntarily agreed to intervene as arbiter in 64/63 B.C. in the family quarrel about succession between the two sons of Queen Alexandra, Hyrcanus II and Aristobulus II.

After fleeing from Rome, Aristobulus himself and his son Alexander sought refuge here by camping among the ruins of Machaerus in a desperate attempt to resist the legions of Rome.⁴

"When Herod became king, "so writes the historian," he considered the place worthy of maximum attention in order to build there the most powerful fortress, especially because of its proximity to the Arabs, finding himself in an excellent position against that country. Consequently, he enclosed a large area within a circuit of walls and towers and built a city there. One of its roads led all the way up to the top. There at the top he erected a walled

1. "Now when Alexander the king of the Jews, observed the nature of this place, he was the first to built a citadel here, which afterwards was demolished by Gabinius, when he made war against Aristobulus" (*The Jewish War* VII, 6,2, from *Josephus Complete Works* translated by W.WHISTON, Edinburgh 1867).

2. *Antiquities of the Jews* XIII,XV,4.

3. *Jewish War* VII,6,2. *Antiquities of the Jews* XIV,5,4 "He (Alexander) also delivered up the fortresses Hyrcania and Macherus, and at last Alexander itself, which fortresses Gabinius demolished".

4. "Alexander...got together a large army...he also built walls about proper places; Alexandrium

and Hyrcanium and Macherus, that lay upon the mountains of Arabia" (*Jewish War*, 1,8,2)... all which Gabinius demolished, at the persuasion of Alexander's mother, that they might not be receptacles of men in a second war" (*Jewish War* 1,8,5). Alexander's father Aristobulus, yet did he afford a new attempt against the Romans retreated with the army to Macherus. "When the king (Aristobulus) had lodged the first night on its ruins ...he fortified that stronghold, though it was done after a poor manner. But the Romans falling upon him, he resisted, even beyond his abilities, for two days, and then was taken and brought a prisoner to Gabinius... (*Jewish War* 1,8,6).

enclosure and built towers at the corners which had a height of sixty cubits. In the center of the walled area he built a royal palace which was renowned for its grandeur and the beauty of its accommodations. In the more suitable places he arranged many cisterns to collect water and to distribute it in abundance as if he wanted to compete with nature in rendering again more impregnable with his own works of fortification a place which was already of itself impregnable. The fortress... consists of a rocky prominence which rises up to a very great height so as to be invincible also because of that and even more so has nature made it in such a way as to be inaccessible... It is in fact surrounded on every side by ravines ... which cannot be easily crossed nor even less easily filled in".⁵

Given the strategic importance of Machaerus, it is easy to imagine that the fortress was rebuilt already in the 30's, after the first years of adjustment of the government of Herod, who was elected King of Judea by the Roman Senate in 40 B.C.⁶

Upon the death of Herod in 4 B.C., his kingdom was divided by Augustus between the three sons of the late king. Herod Antipas inherited Galilee and Perea.⁷ It was during the years of Antipas' rule (4 B.C. - 37 A.D.) that the preaching of John the Baptist is historically situated and also that of Jesus of Nazareth, with the tragic ending of both of them.

A digression of Josephus brings the fortress of Machaerus to the foreground in his narration of the summary execution of John. The

execution had been ordered by Herod Antipas and recounted by the Gospel and the Jewish historian in two passages which complete each other. A defeat inflicted by the Nabateans on the army of Antipas gives occasion to the historian for his account. On the one hand he relates the immediate cause of the encounter between the two bordering kingdoms and on the other hand the reason for the defeat according to the popular opinion of the Jewish subjects. According to Josephus the encounter was occasioned by an insult caused to the King of Petra by Antipas when he divorced and then sent back to the king his daughter so he could marry Herodias, his brother's wife, whom he had met in Rome. "Many Jews," comments Josephus, "thought that the undoing of Herod's army came from God and in a manner to exemplify the punishment of that which he had done against John called the Baptizer ... a just man ... by his order thrown into the prison of the fortress Machaerus, where he was put to death".⁸

In the political view of the historian the imprisonment and the subsequent beheading are placed in relation to the success and impact which the preaching of the prophet had upon the masses and Herod's fear of such competitive inconvenience. According to the gospel account of much more religious and popular tone and in substance probably closer to reality, it was the fiery words of the Baptist against the two adulterers, which condemned him to death.⁹ The two accounts are based on the people's rejection which followed upon the

according to Josephus - is from Machaerus to Pella" (*Jewish War* III,3,3).

8. *Antiquities* XVIII,5,1-2.

9. Mk 6, 14-29; Mt 14, 1-12; Lk 9, 7-9: "For Herod had sent and seized John, and bound him in prison for the sake of Herodias, his

5. Josephus, as usually, gives a description of the site and its buildings before the narration of its destruction by the Romans (*Jewish War* VII,6, 2 - 3).

6. *Antiquities* XIV,14,4.

7. *Antiquities* XVII,11,4. "The length of Perea

summary beheading of John. Some years later there was an ill-advised political move by Herodias which deprived Herod of the tetrarchy and forced him into exile.¹⁰

On the death of the nephew Agrippa (44 A.D.) who had inherited the territory of Herod the King, Galilee and Perea came under direct imperial administration through a procurator, as Judea had before. In 66 A.D., at the outbreak of the Jewish revolt against Rome, we find at Machaerus a Roman garrison which, in order to save its own life, abandoned the fortress into the rebels' hands, who held it for six years up to 72 A.D.¹¹

After a bloody siege of Jerusalem, peace was again restored in Judea and Galilee. Consequently the Romans decided to end with the

brother's wife; because he had married her. For John said to Herod "It is not lawful for you to have your brother's wife". And Herodias had a grudge against him, and wanted to kill him. But she could not, for Herod feared John, knowing that he was a righteous and holy man..."

10. His tetrarchy was given to his nephew Agrippa, brother of Herodias, and friend of the emperor Caligula (*Antiquities* XVIII,7, 1-2).

11. "This was about the same time that 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. These Romans being in great fear, lest the place should be taken by force, made an agreement with them to depart upon certain conditions; and when they had obtained the security they desired, they delivered up the citadel, into which the people of Machaerus put a garrison for their own security, and held it in their own power" (*Jewish war* II,18,6).

12. "Lucilius Bassus...took the citadel which was

last possible hot beds of revolt barricaded inside the Herodian fortresses. Lucilius Bassus first took the Herodion. Then he reunited all the forces and directed himself to Perea against Machaerus, because, as Josephus writes "it was absolutely necessary to eliminate this fortress with its solid strength to avoid the eventuality that it would have enticed many to rebellion".¹² The mountain on which the fortress rises was closed off with a wall defended by the camps and towers of the legion and the auxiliary soldiers. Then began the construction of the main ramp to enter the fortress, by assault.¹³ An accidental event decided the surrender of the besieged so that the ramp was never completed.¹⁴ Machaerus was definitively leveled to the ground and abandoned. This left the Romans free to come back into Judea and

in Herodion...after which he got together all the soldiery that was there with the tenth legion and resolved to make war upon Machaerus; for it was highly necessary that this citadel should be demolished, lest it might be a means of drawing away many into a rebellion, by reason of its strength" (*Jewish War* VII,6,1).

13. "Now when Bassus had taken a full view of this place, he resolved to besiege it by filling up the valley that lay on the east (west) side; so he fell hard to work, and took great pains to raise his banks as soon as possible, and by that to render the siege easy" (*Jewish War* VII,6,4).

14. "When Bassus perceived that (that the Jews were terribly confounded by the whipping of a young prisoner taken by the Romans), he began to think of using a stratagem against the enemy, and was desirous to aggravate their grief, in order prevail with them to surrender the city for the preservation of the man" (*Jewish War* VII,6,').

to concentrate themselves on the more toilsome undertaking of storming Masada.

The Exploration of the site

On January 17, 1807 the German explorer Ulrich Seetzen detoured off the King's Way at 50 kilometers south of Amman and ventured toward the village of Meqawer with the help of his beduin guide (Pl. LXXVII, 1). The name Meqawer had reminded him of the Greek name for Machaerus, i.e. "Macheiros".¹⁵ It was not difficult for the explorer to mark out on the west of the village the shape of what remained of the fortress on the top of el-Mishnaqa. (Pl. LXXVI, 1). He was the first European to have the opportunity to visit it. Later he wrote in his diary: "The ruins of the site are very important. One can reach there only by one entrance along a high bridge and one can see there very important foundations of times past related to an enclosure wall system". That was practically the same as could be seen on the summit up to our days: partial remains of the wall enclosure with at least one southwesterly tower, some cisterns and the "access bridge". Better than the others who had preceded him, Ricciotti succeeded in identifying in the jumbled rock heap piled up

at the northwest base of the fortress, the beginning of the ramp which would have permitted the Roman soldiers to break through the fortress wall if the besieged had not surrendered.¹⁶ (Pl. LXXVIII, 2). In 1904 Smith identified on the north flank of the mountain a canal which could be the end of a water channel. This hypothesis was confirmed by Vardeman in 1968. The American archaeologist, to whom is due the first attempt to excavate the fortress, succeeded in giving an account of the exact nature of the "Bridge" seen by Seetzen. This bridge connected the mountain on which the fortress was built with the plateau on which the village of Meqawer rises. It is the foundation of an aqueduct which collected the water from the plateau, directed and distributed it to the series of cisterns excavated on the northern slope of the fortress. (Pl. LXXVII, 2 and Pl. LXXVIII, 1).

In 1973 another German scholar, Strobel, made a very careful and detailed investigation of the site. He succeeded in determining the Roman Siege works which Lucilius Bassus used to entrap the besieged.¹⁸

In spite of these results there actually remains very little on the surface to show the

15. For the history of the exploration of Meqawer - el Mishnaqa see the article of J. VARDAMAN, "Machaerus: Project for Excavation", Louisville, Ky., in manuscript form in the archive of the Department of Antiquities of Jordan. The Diary of U. SEETZEN, *Reisen durch Syrien Palaestina Phoenicien die Transjordan-Lander, Arabia Petraea und Unter Aegypten*, was edited by Fr. KRUSE, Berlin 1854-59. For the visit to Machaerus see vol. II, pp. 330-334 and vol. IV, pp. 378-382. See also A. STROBEL, "Machaerus-Geschichte und Ende einer Festung im Lichte archaologisch - topographischer Beobachtung",

Bibbe und Qumran, Berlin 1968, pp. 198-225.

16. G. RICCIOTTI, *Il Cantiere di Hiram*, Torino 1936, 122-133.

17. VARDAMAN, "Preliminary Report on Results of the 1968 Excavations at Machaerus" in the Archives of the Department of Antiquities.

18. A. STROBEL, "Observations about the Roman Installations at Mukawer" in *ADAJ* 19 (1974) 63-127. The same in German "Das Roemische Belagerungswerke um Machaerus. topographische Untersuchung" in *ZDPV* 90 (1974) 128 - 184.

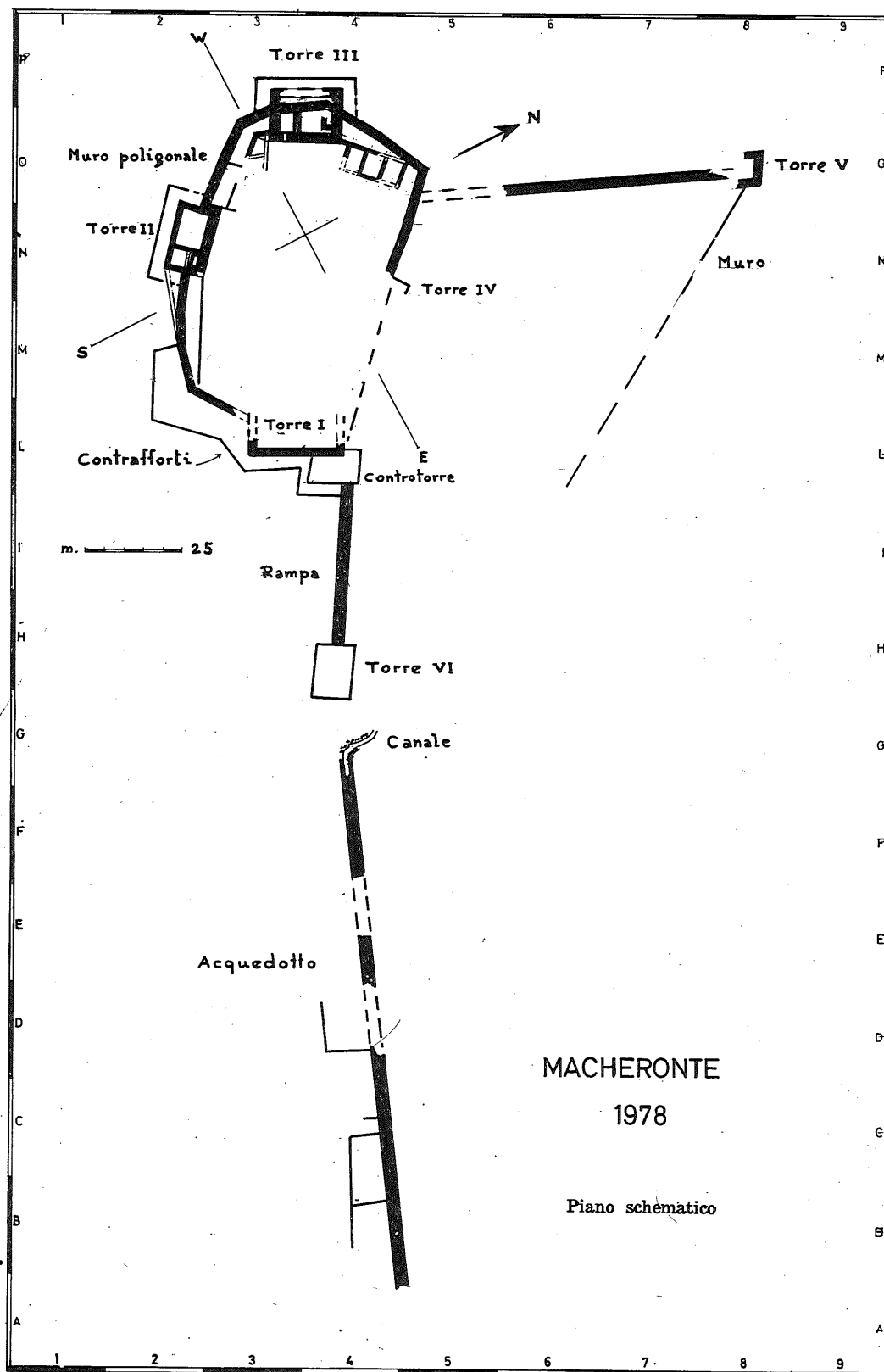


Fig. 1. A sketch plan of Qal'at el Mishnaqa Machaerus, at the end of the first campaign of excavation.

magnificence of the Herodian fortress so greatly peased by Josephus Flavius. So little in fact, that a careful scholar like Abel, disillusioned with his visit to el-Mishnaqa, could write in 1909. "The small amount of ruins requires a critical revision of the number and grandeur of the buildings erected by Herod on the tell".¹⁹

First Campaign of the Franciscan Biblical Institute

Thanks to the financial support of the Custody of the Holy Land and the Italian Government in cooperation with the Department of Antiquities of Jordan, an expedition of the Franciscan Biblical Institute directed by Fr. Virgilio Corbo, resumed the archaeological work at el-Mishnaqa in September-October 1978²⁰.

Logistical reasons have made it advisable to limit the area of excavation in order to evaluate objectively the difficulties of the enterprise. These are first, the lack of a road to reach the top which must be climbed up to every day, plus a certain necessary prudence required by previous uncontrolled excavations.

From Josephus' description of the works done on the fortress, we can distinguish: a) the walled enclosure with towers at the corners b) the palace on the inside of the fortifications c) the system of cisterns for the provision of water, and finally, d) the "city".

The excavation of the first campaign has

19. F.M.ABEL, *Une croisière autour de la Mer Morte*. 1914, 30-41.

20. The archeological team was composed by Fr. Virgilio Corbo, Fr. Stanislao Loffreda and Michele Piccirillo, professors at the Franciscan Biblical Institute. The Department of Antiquities was represented by Mr. Abul Ghananm.

been restricted to the enclosure wall. However, it has yielded some valid results useful in orienting future work within the fortress. Fr. Corbo has already been in a position at the end of the campaign to present scholars with a provisional plan of Machaerus.²¹ (Fig. 1).

The military architects of Herod had to adapt themselves to the irregular shape of the summit and to the preceding Hasmonean structures destroyed by Gabinius. From the historical dates provided by Josephus we can distinguish two periods in the occupation of the fortress:

I. The Hasmonean period from 90 B.C. ca to 58 B.C.

II. The Herodian period from 30 B.C. ca to 72 A.D.

With some subphases of occupation and partial readaptation.

From the excavation of the enclosure wall and of the nearby surroundings, it is possible to see two important overlapping structures (Pl. LXXX,1 and LXXXI,1). On the surface there is an enclosing wall forming a many angled perimeter (Pl. LXXX,2) and LXXXI,1). On the surface is an enclosing wall forming a many angled perimeter. It is very irregular and extends over a more regular structure which juts out in quadrangular towers. (Pl. LXXXI, 2). The internal surroundings in the last phase of occupation were

Precious was the help of the Hamaideh of Machaerus.

21 V.CORBO, "La fortezza di Macheronte" Rapporto preliminare della prima campagna di scavo: 8 settembre - 28 ottobre 1978", in *Liber Annuus* XXVIII (1978) 217-240, Pls 57-70.

utilized in provisional way and ended up destroyed by fire. (Pl. LXIX,2). The lack of floors, some dividing dry walls built from reused material and a thick layer of ashes attest to the provisional quality of the occupation and to the tragic end of the fortress. In the ashes various projectiles testified again to the assault which had preceded the end.

A second interesting element is the uniformity of the pottery for the entire area examined. It includes late-Hellenistic types up to the first Roman period without insertion of material of any later period. We can already conclude a limited occupation of the site, as stated by Josephus. El-Mishnaqa was not inhabited before the Hasmoneans nor was it ever reoccupied after the destruction by the Romans.

The coins are too few to guarantee any absolute conclusions on chronology. Some Nabataean coins were present with coins of the first Revolt (66-72 A.D).

Conclusion

If it is premature to give a historical identity to the diverse phases of occupation of the fortress, one can still certainly say presently that the destruction of the fortress was complete. The walls brought to light so far were razed to the foundation level and only in one case have we found a door with its threshold.

The nature of the rock, also collaborated effectively in helping the Roman soldiers. It is very siliceous rock and once exposed to the inclement weather, especially the heat of the desert, it flaked off.

We do not wish to force the conclusions from the data of a preliminary campaign, but one could still attempt a comparison between the real Machaerus and the one described by Josephus Flavius. The least that can be said about this is that the historian allowed himself too much liberty in the description abetted by the desire to glorify King Herod and the Roman military might as capable of the impossible to even assault an inaccessible fortress like Machaerus.

In a comparison with other fortresses the Herodion near Bethlehem, is better built than Machaerus. From the viewpoint of strategical importance it certainly cannot be compared with Masada.

Some blunders and some fanciful elements added to the description make one think that Josephus never visited the fortress. In spite of this possible conclusion, his description will be the basic source during the progress of a difficult excavation like this on the top of el-Mishnaqa which promises to be of primary importance for understanding the first Roman period in Jordan.

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