

**THE RESUMPTION OF THE ARCHAEOLOGICAL INVESTIGATION
AT QAL'AT EL-MISHNAQA, 1992 EXCAVATION:
A PRELIMINARY REPORT**

by

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The necessity to finish the archaeological investigation on Machaerus hill after the work carried out by the Studium Biblicum Franciscanum, which span from 1978 to 1981, became undelayable as to the project for the recovery of the area (see the report by L. Marino in this volume). The necessity for carrying out a series of restoration works, as well as the opportunity to realise some reconstructions with didactic and explicatory aims, made the completion of the excavations urgent, not only for clearing up the area from the thick accumulation and destruction layers still extant, but mainly in order to define the historic evolution of the site.

Thanks to the commitment of the Jordanian Ministry of Tourism and Antiquities,¹ in collaboration with Michele Piccirillo of the Studium Biblicum Franciscanum and architect Luigi Marino of the University of Florence,² responsible for the project and the realisation of the excavation work during July and August 1992, it was possible for Cooperativa Archeologia to start a new excavation campaign both in the fortress and in the village of Machaerus.³

For carrying on the required work, we think that the two parts, with further participation of Jordanian workers and students, could turn out to be an important opportunity for exchange and training.

The Survey Around the Fortress

As regards to the fortress, and as already stated by Corbo at the end of the last campaign of 1981, there were several areas to be investigated: the tower (1), the south-eastern side of the tower (3), the northeastern area of the peristyle, a large part of the courtyard (5) and the low town set on the eastern slopes of the hill. Corbo has already pointed out the necessity to deepen the excavations in both towers 2 and 3 (and we might even add the courtyard (5), in order to better define the evolution of the place which dates back to the Asmonaeon fortress (Corbo and Loffreda 1981: 257-286). This fortress was founded around the beginning of the first century B.C., and underwent the remarkable Herodian transformations which took place from 30 B.C. to the Roman destructions of A.D. 72.

During the recent campaign, investigations focused on the north-eastern side of Tower 3, in Courtyard 5 and on the cistern set in the middle of the peristyle. Regarding the cistern, we carried out a detailed survey, and went ahead with clearing the thick modern fill which was *ca.* eight metres deep. Beyond this, the team which kept on attending the restoration work at the end of the season, has recently discovered the primary level of accumulation and/or fill which contains, besides several ceramic sherds, some column drums possibly relat-

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ed to the peristyle (Figs. 1 and 2). The study of the recovered ceramic material and the analysis of the position of the falling remains will enable us to provide useful information about the chronology and the dynamics of the destruction of the peristyle.

Moreover, in the northern corner of the cistern, a small quadrangular cistern⁴ formed by regular blocks covered with plaster made of a mortar mixed with ash was found. Two small channels, which run beneath the peristyle floor, lead to the cistern. Although the heights of the interconnecting levels have not been preserved, this structure is very likely to have functioned as a settling tank related to the filling up of the US 50 cistern.

In Courtyard 5, excavation started with the removal of thick layers of sandy soil mixed with curing mortar and large regular ashlar. The stones, as already stated by Corbo in the excavation of the rooms of the triclinium (Corbo and Loffreda 1981: 258), do not seem to have been kept in their position of collapse. This fact turns out to be further confirmation of the systematic stripping by Lucilio Basso starting from 72 B.C.; part of the spoil material was in fact discharged from the hilltop, as the conoid still visible on the north-eastern side testifies (Corbo and Loffreda 1981: Fig. 6). Certainly, a yet larger part was heaped in the open areas of Courtyard 5. The extreme perishability of the siliceous stones used for the building and the removal of the mortar must have eventually caused the formation

of sandy stratifications.

Some dry-laid stone walls were found below these levels. They are made of small ashlar laid out edge to edge, set across a layer of charcoal mixed with ashes which overlies a beaten earth level.⁵ The above-mentioned small walls, as the beaten earth level⁶ (Pl. I, 1), must almost certainly refer to the use of other areas or, very likely, coincide with the long period which took the Roman army to finally destroy the fortress. In fact, signs of use of the area are attested since the beginning of the second century A.D., as the finding of a Trajan coin on the paving the corridor 19a testifies⁷ (Corbo 1980; Piccirillo 1980: 403ff; Loffreda 1980: 382).

As regards the shape of the corridor which surrounded the peristyle, it is possible to hypothesise the presence of a sloping roof either because, in the Herodian palace, the open areas usually have a slab paving, or in consideration of the static necessities of the portico of the peristyle. To the south of the external wall which circumscribes Corridor 19a to the north (Fig. 1, US 27), the layer of destruction (where the excavations have momentarily stopped) with stones reaches elevations lower than the ones of the next area. During the last days of excavation, the discovery of a deep hollow which seems to get larger and larger as it approaches Courtyard 5, strengthened the hypothesis of another cistern beneath the courtyard: the collapse of the corresponding roof may have caused the caving in of

4. US 49. dim: 150 x 180 cm. Although it was investigated for a depth of about 200 cm, still the bottom was not visible.

5. On Fig. 1, the beaten earth level is marked as US 17/1 and the small walls as US 12.

6. The earth beaten level in US 17/1 is about 10 cm higher than the peristyle floor. The chronological collocation of US 17/1 comes also from the previous discovery (Corbo 1980: 368) of a further underlying beaten earth level, which was cut for building two hearths made of refractory clay, dat-

ing from the Judaic Revolt, about 10 cm below the peristyle floor and 20 cm below US 17/1.

7. The initial hypothesis which indicates an open corridor running along the peristyle was reviewed by Corbo on the occasion of the last excavation campaign. Also, the above-mentioned beaten earth level found by Corbo is inserted starting from below the peristyle floor, thus creating a minimum gap which could be easily interpreted as a foundation for a floor.

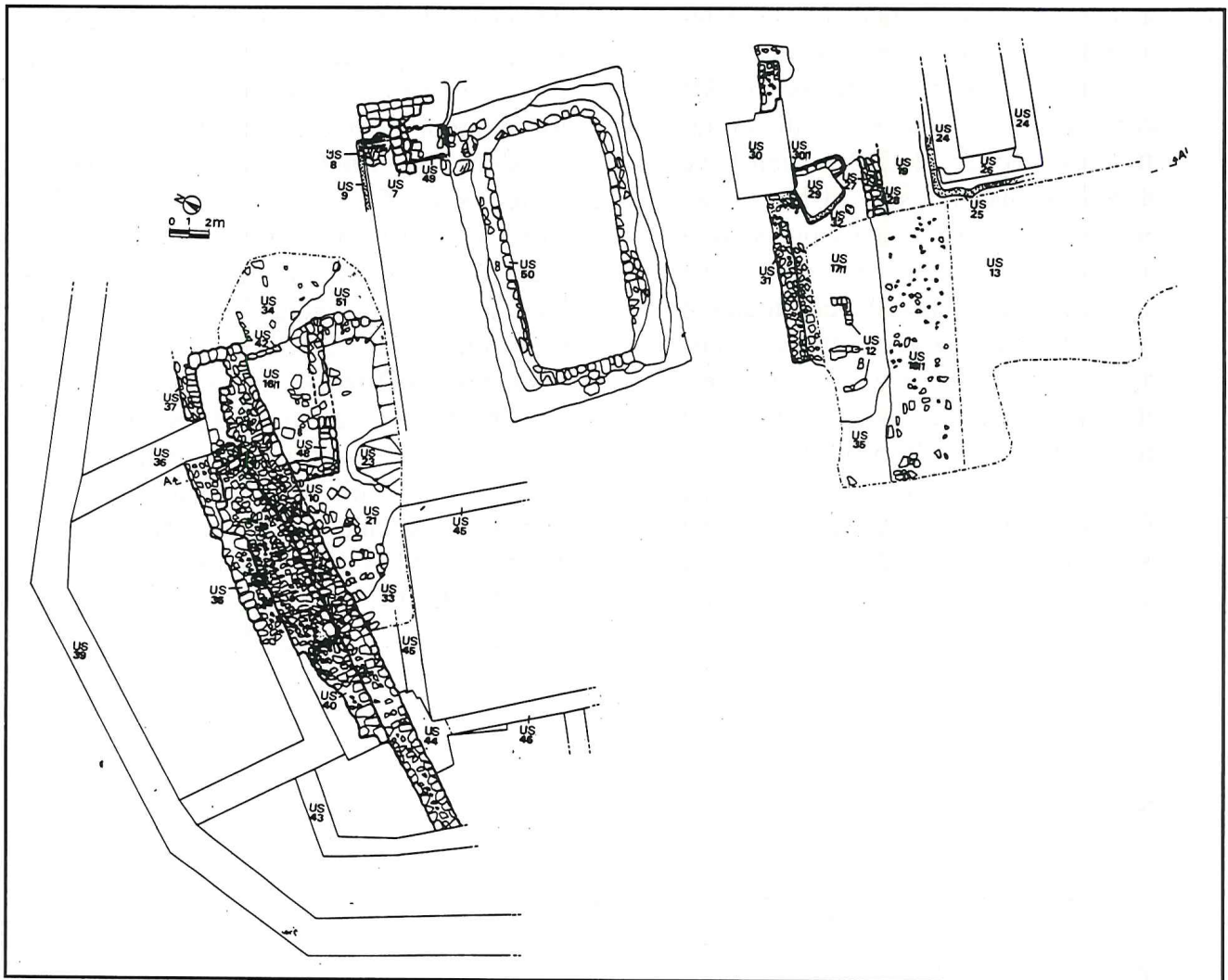


Fig. 1. Plan of the north-eastern portion of the fortress.

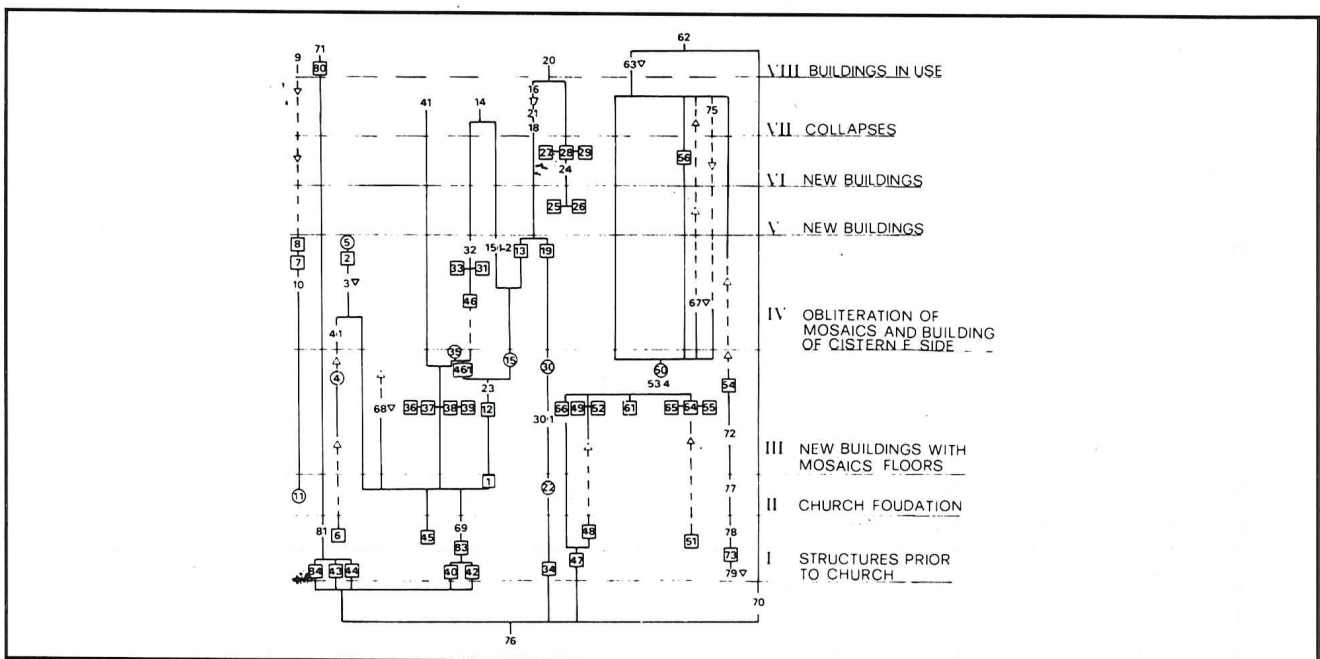


Fig. 2. The fortress: matrix of the stratigraphical sequence.

structures and levels on which, consequently, the rubble from the destruction fell.

The excavation of the south-eastern side of Tower 3 allowed us to expose the building structures (Fig. 3; Pl. I, 2) which have been placed against this side of the tower. These structures have remained intact for a maximum height of 250 cm above the paved level, revealing also the continuation of the probable external wall of the rooms set north-west of the peristyle. In this area, the stratigraphy of the levels referring to the destruction reveals the alternation of layers mainly composed of stones (perhaps linked to the final collapse of the elevations of the buttressing structure placed against Tower 3), to layers of sand mixed with ashes and

charcoal fragments, containing pieces of stucco and painted plaster, which sometimes seem to have settled directly on the trimming of the wall structures.⁸

Along the whole length of the south-eastern side of Tower 3, there is a dry-laid stone wall 240 cm wide, with only one side facing to the south-east, and an internal inlet formed by irregular, small to medium size stones (Fig. 1, US 40). A similar technique was used for another structure, somewhat narrower (140 cm) and shorter (25 m), formed by irregular ashlars and large re-used blocks, itself placed against the side facing the previous building, and thus may be considered as a real reinforcement structure (Pl. II, 1).⁹

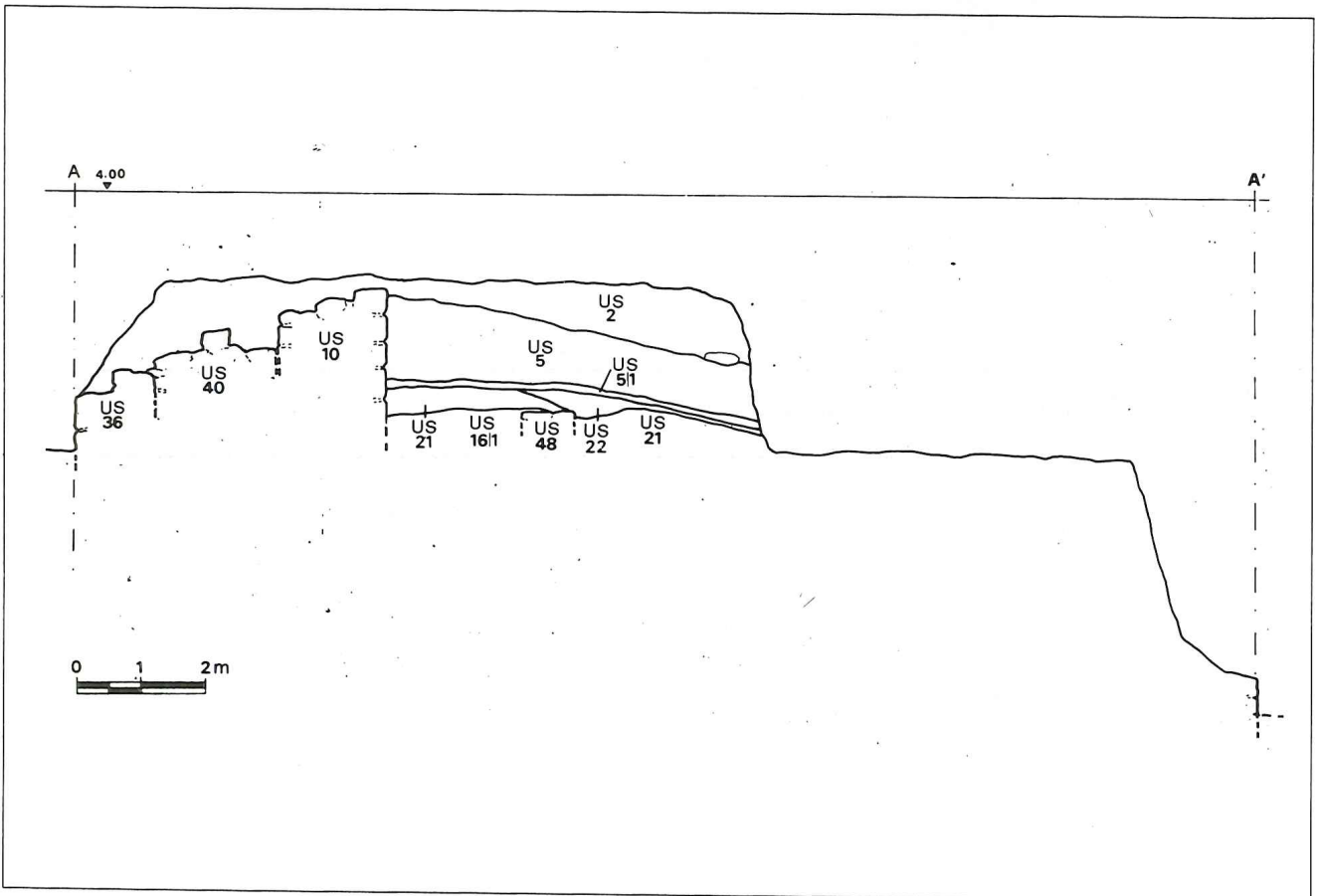


Fig. 3. Section of excavation corresponding to Tower 3. Note the sequence of the wall structure leaning against the US 36 perimeter wall of the tower.

8. The layer mixed with US 16 ash on the US 10 wall, the US 33 charcoal level on the US 45 external wall of the triclinium. Some plaster comes from the coating of columns, as in the case of US

15/1.

9. See Fig. 1 US 10. At its northern and southern-most edges the wall leans against two different segments of the previous Asmonaeon wall circle.

In building this last buttress, the south perimeter wall of the rooms set north-west of the peristyle¹⁰ had been covered and partly demolished. In the middle, the blocks seem to form a doorpost, thus showing the possibility that beneath the destruction levels, still not removed, the threshold of the entrance to the room remains intact.

Finally, leaning against the buttress, some low walls were found, sometimes with re-used column drums, one of which seems to cover the smoothing of the perimeter wall of the triclinium (Fig. 1, US 42 and 44 respectively).

The enquiries that have arisen, on an interpretative level thanks to the newly acquired elements, are certainly stimulating, although an analysis of the finds has not begun yet. A study of the ceramic material found during this last season will enable us to provide further fundamental data, mainly related to the definition of the absolute chronologies. Up till now, through the use of the stratigraphic sequences, and particularly through the careful observation of the USN (wall stratigraphic units), it has been possible to focus on some specific problems for whose solutions it is necessary to wait for the archaeological investigation to be completed.

Hitherto, the structures placed against Tower 3 have been attributed to Aristobulus, after Gabinius destroyed the fortress in 57 B.C. (Corbo and Loffreda 1981: 266-267). Notwithstanding the elements collected in the recent excavation, it is difficult to assess the chronological classification of the US 40 structure, since there is no evi-

dence of a direct connection with the rooms overlooking the peristyle. However, as the wall seems to cover the smoothing over of the perimeter tower structure, its former destruction can be speculated on. Therefore, this first intervention on Tower 3 may still refer to the reconstruction work which followed Gabinius's conquest, even though serious doubts persist due to the irregularity that the room set at the south-west side would assume, for it would end up containing the corner of the new perimeter wall of the tower. On the other hand, the "US 10 buttress," covering the trimming of the external wall of the rooms built to the north-west of the peristyle,¹¹ must be dated to a phase later than the destruction of the rooms themselves which, disregarding the period of their actual foundation,¹² must have been in use up till the final destruction of the fortress. This is considering the reasonably preserved height of US 10, at least in the vicinity of Tower 3.

Above all, we can hypothesize a remarkable transformation of the north-west portion of the palace prior to the A.D. 72 occupation and must keep in mind the systematic destruction by Lucilius Bassus. Next to the structure of the "US 10 buttress," we also should keep in mind the reconstruction of the triclinia, as it appears from the foundation of the new rectangular pillars, for whose building Herodian ashlar and stucco were employed (Corbo and Loffreda 1981: 261; the floor turned out to be also removed). More difficult is the chronological definition and the reason of such transformations. They could in fact be ei-

10. See Fig. 1, US 48. The wall is preserved for about 60 cm above the floor.

11. Besides, the same US 10 wall seems to cover the trimming of the external wall of the triclinium (US 45), contrary to what has been indicated up till now.

12. The range of rooms set along the north-western side of the peristyle probably trace pre-existent Asmonaeon rooms, as the light stone clearing

with respect to the position of the stylobate of the peristyle seems to testify, and above all, the lack of connection between the external wall and the structure which defines the triclinium to the north-west. In fact, a narrow corridor remains between the two spaces, which, in a phase later than the building of the "US 10 buttress" was very likely covered by the edification of the US 44 wall.

ther reconstructions resulting from structural collapses which may have taken place at any moment subsequent to the foundation of the palace, or works aiming at the reinforcement of the defensive structures of the fortress between A.D. 66 and 72, if not in the period immediately preceding the Judaic Revolt.

Perhaps the US 39 polygonal wall may be linked to this phase instead of to the period of the primary Herodian edification.¹³ In fact, if in the south-western portion the lay-out of the walls includes the new Herodian thermal system, which is set directly on the lay-out of the previous fortification in the western side, the state of the polygonal wall seems to break, in an unusual way, the symmetric establishment of the peristyle.

The north-western segment also poses many interpretative problems. In fact, one should consider the continuity in use of the US 43 Asmonaeon strengthening structure, given the reasonable preservation of its height, and the supporting function for the edification of the later "US 10 buttress," and the strange planimetric configuration which would assume Tower 3, practically reduced to half its former size by the new external circle of walls. On the other hand, the lower levels inside the tower, found during the previous excavation, turned out to be covered by a thick level of destruction which accumulated in consequence of the conquest of Gabinius (Corbo and Loffreda 1981: 265).

We could, however, assume that consequent to this destruction the tower was rebuilt tracing the pre-existent structure (in this sense we should also consider the above-mentioned edification of the south-east US 40 wall), with floors set at higher

levels and consequently lost, like many others inside the fortress, after the last destruction of the first century A.D.

Finally, a careful examination of the uniformity of the US 39 polygonal wall, which could in fact be composed of different parts referring to different chronologies, will be necessary (Fig. 4).

In more general terms, besides the excavations in Courtyard 5, of Towers 1 and 3 and of the north-eastern part of the peristyle, we maintain that it is important to carry out a detailed survey of the whole fortress and the analysis of single wall projections, in order to acquire the necessary amount of useful data for the reconstruction of the structural stratigraphic sequence.

The Investigation at the Village

On the occasion of this first intervention, research has included only the areas involved in the work of restoration and organization along the eastern and northern sides of the church.

As the stratigraphies turned out to be highly disturbed due to the most recent interventions, particular attention was paid to the study of the structural sequences. Although the related analysis has collected a quantity of data insufficient for the definition of the absolute chronology of the phases of settlement,¹⁴ it has however put in evidence a complex sequence which reveals numerous different building phases (Fig. 5).

The most ancient phase is represented by some rooms (*a, b, c, d*) oriented differently to the church and half destroyed with its edification. The group, set along the eastern side, turned out to be formed by a couple of rectangular rooms (*a, b*) separated by a sort of corridor, maybe a street, whilst the room placed to the north has an almost quadrang-

13. The question has already been asked by Corbo after the last season. See Corbo and Loffreda 1981: 286.

14. We had, in fact, to admit the general lack of

finds in the strata. However, the chronological definition of the explored layers will be possible once the study of the ceramic material is done.

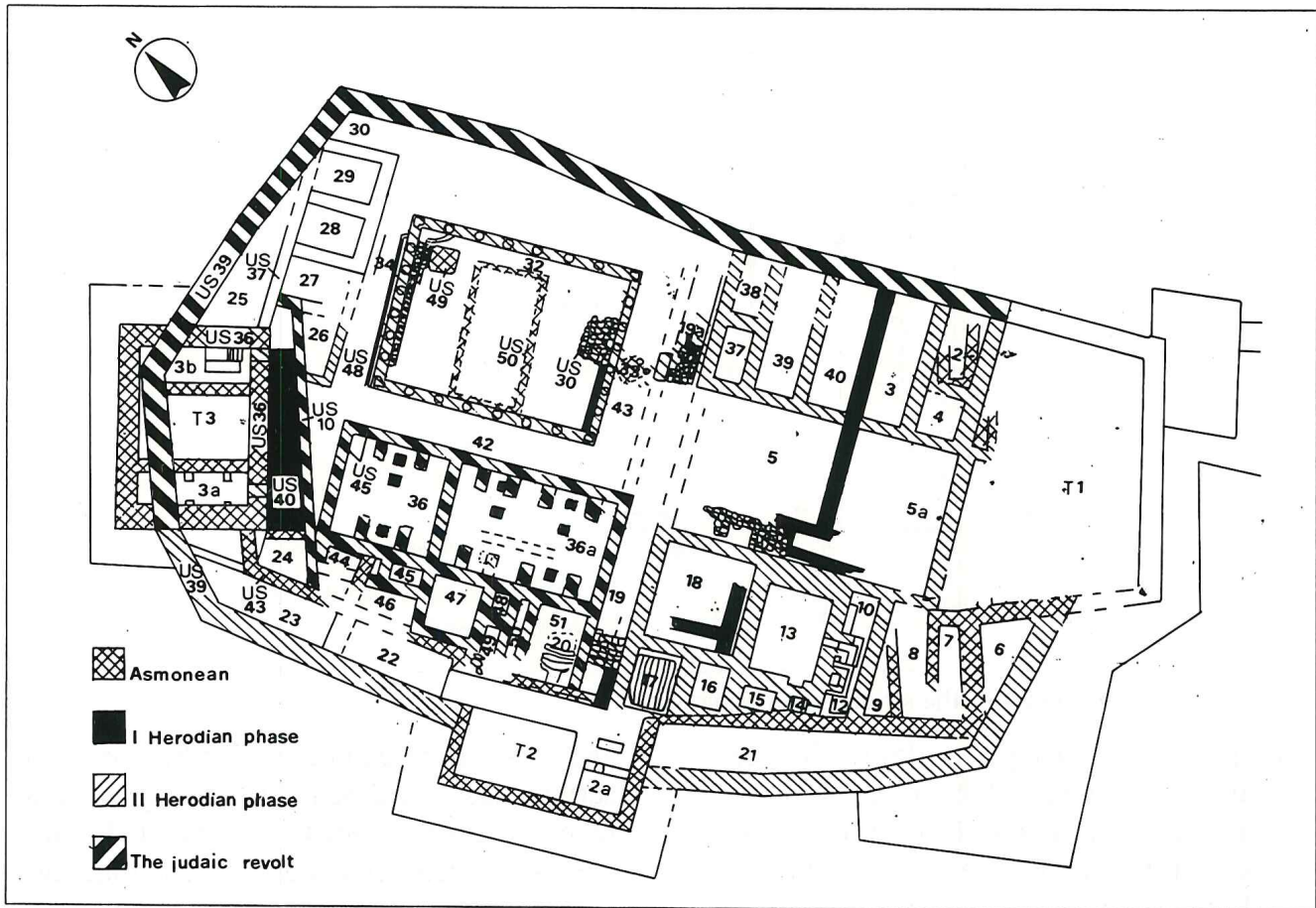


Fig. 4. Machaerus fortress: general plan (Corbo and Loffreda 1981: Fig. 1) updated with the data collected during the 1992 excavations.

gular plan and is preserved only on three sides.¹⁵ The external walls are generally made of medium to large blocks built without mortar, with a mainly irregular structure. With the building of the church, Room *b* was destroyed, while the others do not seem to have undergone any transformation. Then Room *d* was divided, by means of narrow partitions made of small ashlar laid out in single rows, into a range of small rooms elevated about 30 cm in respect to the central area. Along the eastern side a trapezoidal structure of difficult interpretation was built. In front of it there is, carved in the central block, a hollow which leads to a small pool, made out of the underlying block.

The whole room had, in this phase, plas-

tered walls and a monochromatic mosaic floor made of large white tesserae. An identical floor was found in the new building (c), composed of more rooms and built along the eastern side of the church.

At a later date the building underwent some restorations. New partitions were added and, above all, a cistern (US 31-33) was built with a double quadrangular chamber having smoothed corners (Pl. II, 2), placed directly against the external eastern wall of the church, internally covered with plaster. This first restructuring and the succession of new buildings (*f-g*) caused the partial destruction of the mosaics, as in Room *d*, where new partitions were built directly on the previous mosaic floor and later a new double-chambered cistern (US 56) was

15. On this side there persist some doubts about the chronological definition of the US 51 and 48

walls, which happen to lean very close to the church staircase.

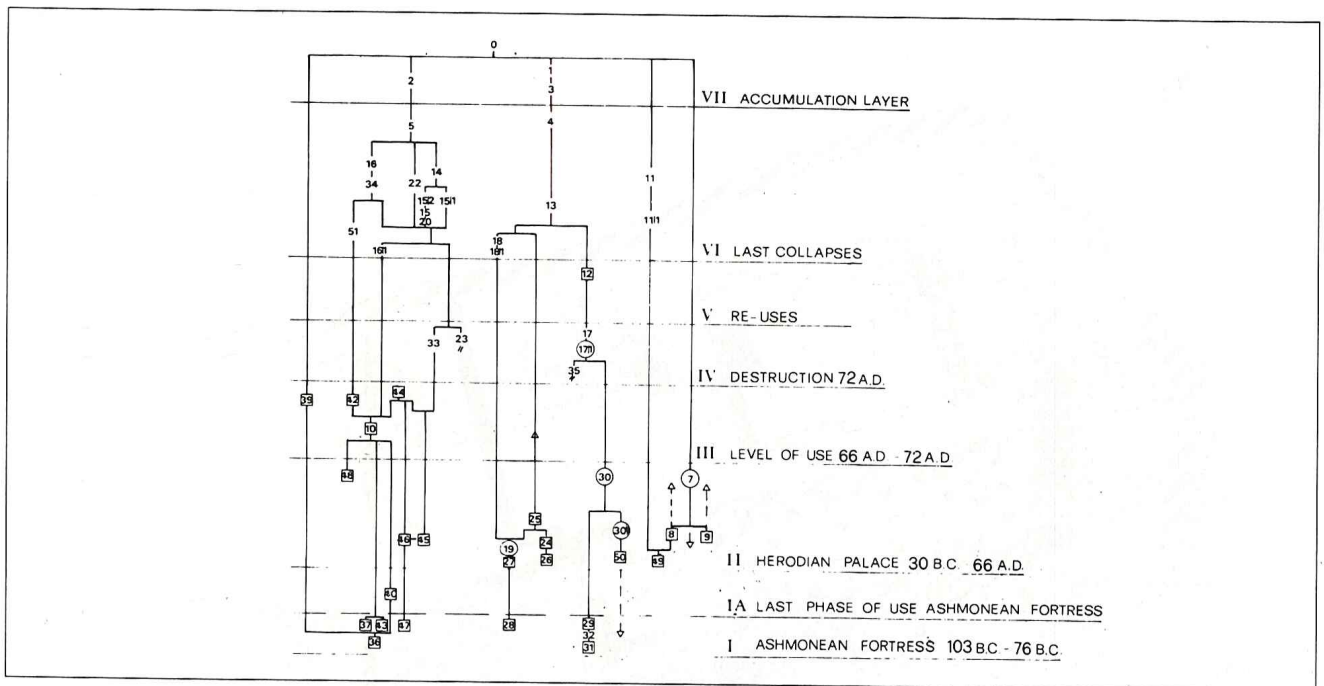


Fig. 5. The village: matrix of the stratigraphical sequence.

built, probably causing the destruction of the south external wall of Room *d*.

With the construction of the buildings of the last phase of the village, we perceive the complete obliteration of the previous structures, due on the one hand to the re-use of stones, and on the other to the excavation and levelling of the area. The much hoped for recovery of Machaerus village cannot but take into consideration the archaeological investigation. For this, it will be necessary to expand research to the areas south

and west of the church, which besides preserving less disturbed stratigraphy, would reveal a more complete pattern of the ancient settlement, essential to a functional interpretation, and of the temporal sequence regarding the village.

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1. Sequence of the destruction levels in Courtyard 5, showing the break between the upper mortar mixing stone layers and the lower, mainly ashes, layers.



2. The US 40 and US 10 walls leaning against the perimeter wall of the tower.



1. The US 10 buttress leaning against Tower 3.



2. Excavation at the village. A detail of the double-chamber cistern leaning against the eastern wall of the church.