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Machaerus: A Gospel Scene in the Light of Historical Archaeology

The Transjordan (Perean)/Judean fortress of Machaerus (Gk. Μαχαίρους, meaning 'sword') was built by the Hasmonean Alexander Jannaeus in ca. 90 BC, destroyed by Aulus Gabinius in 57 BC, then transformed into a royal palace and city by King Herod the Great in ca. 30 BC, and ultimately destroyed by King Aretas IV in AD 36. From its hilltop location to the east of the Dead Sea, Machaerus could provide a view all the way to the Temple of Jerusalem, Mas'ada, Jericho, and even to Alexandreion. Pliny the Elder (*Natural History* 5.15.16) acknowledged that "Machaerus, next to Jerusalem, was once the most strongly fortified place in Judea", in a unique strategic location, overlooking the Dead Sea and the west bank of Judea. Historical events at the fortress are narrated by Josephus (e.g., *Wars of the Jews* 1.167–74, 2.485–6, 7.171–7; *Antiquities of the Jews* 13.416–8, 14.89–97). The account given by him that Herod Antipas had John the Baptist imprisoned

and executed at the fortress (*Antiquities of the Jews* 18.116–9) is in alignment with the descriptions of the Gospels of Mark (6.14–29) and Matthew (14.1–12), and it was also confirmed by Eusebius (*Church History* 1.11.4–6). Combining the information given by Josephus and the Gospels, it can be determined that Machaerus is the historical scene of the tragic birthday banquet of the Tetrarch Herod Antipas, and the place where Princess Salome danced. It is important to emphasize that Machaerus was the only royal palace of King Herod that was inherited by Antipas; therefore, it was the best symbol of his Herodian legacy and a perfect place for his birthday party. Mount Machaerus is just 30 km from the Baptism Site (the traditional site of Bethany-beyond-the-Jordan), where, according to the Gospel of John (1.28, 10.40), the Baptist had his ministry. During a period of occupation by Judean rebels, the fortress was destroyed by the Romans in AD 71 (Josephus *Wars of the Jews* 7.190–209).



1. The historical sites of the Gospels that can be verified by archaeological evidence in the Holy Land.

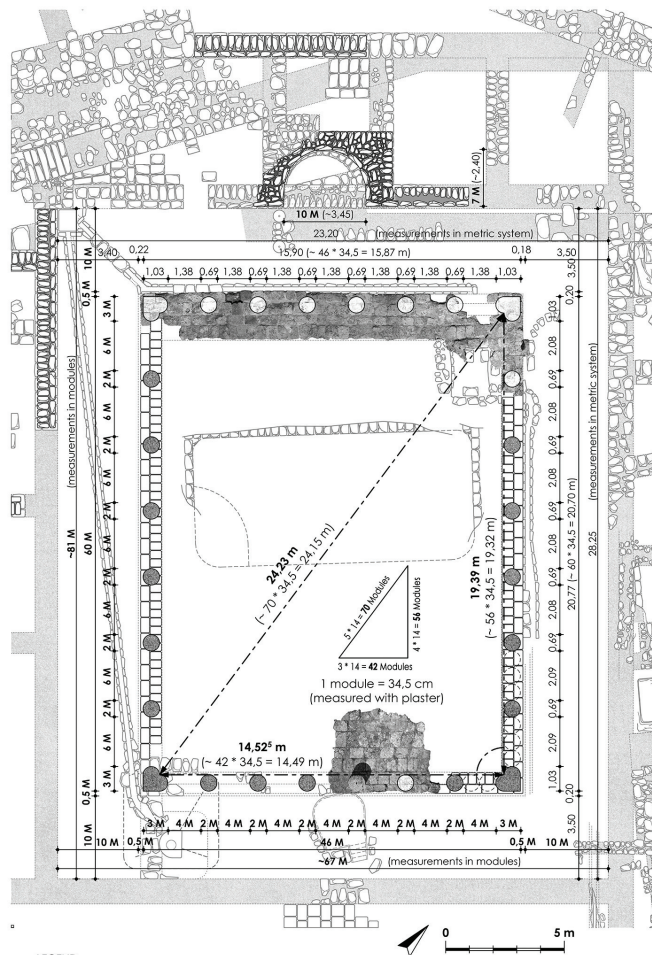


The above historical sources are in full harmony with the archaeological research of the historical site (FIGS. 1–3). The first 50 years of excavations (1968–2018) were conducted by three academic institutions (1968: Southern Baptist Theological Seminary; 1978–1981 and 1992–1993: Studium Biblicum Franciscanum; since 2009 onwards: Hungarian Academy of Arts), and revealed the complete fortified Herodian royal palace. In addition to the theoretical architectural reconstruction, it was even possible in 2014 (with clean anastyles) to re-erect an Ionic column in the Apodyterium Hall of the Herodian bathhouse and a Doric one in the peristyle of the royal courtyard of the King and the Tetrarch Herod. The Roman siege by the Legion X Fretensis had a similar circumvallation wall with campuses around the citadel like at Mas`ada, and an unfinished agger-ramp. These remains were discovered by August Strobel in 1965, published in 1968, and surveyed in detail in 1973. The lower city of Machaerus was discovered by Felix-Marie Abel OP in 1908 and partly excavated by Virgilio Corbo OFM in 1981. The architectural legacy, the archaeological materials (including epigraphic, ceramic, and numismatic evidence) all confirm the detailed description of Josephus; there is no contradiction anywhere: the historical references all align

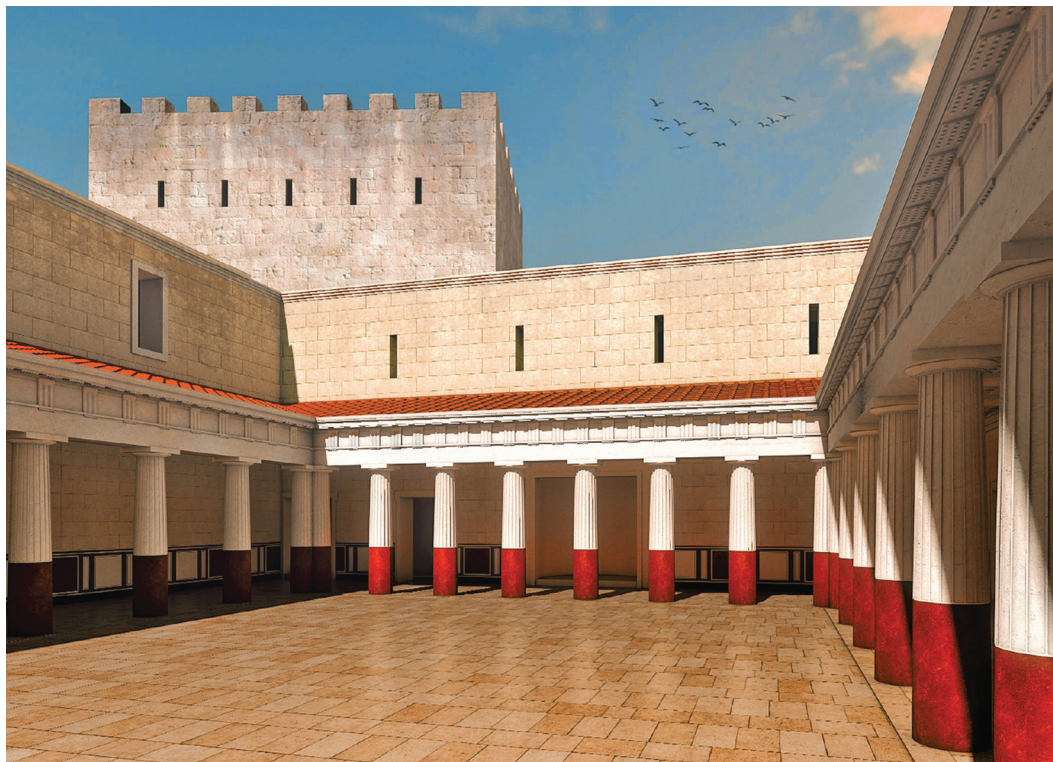
2. Helicopter photograph (2004) of Machaerus in the first rays of the rising sun, towards the Dead Sea, Bethlehem and Jerusalem in the background (courtesy of the American Center of Research, the Jane Taylor Collection).



3. The citadel of Machaerus with the two re-erected Herodian columns and the Dead Sea in the background. View from the north-east.



4. The complete layout of the Herodian Lithostrotos-courtyard of the Machaerus royal palace is properly described with the ancient architectural alignment system.



5. The architectural reconstruction of the Royal Court of the King and the Tetrarch Herod in Machaerus. The architectural space, the colors, and pavement stones were sophisticatedly reconstructed, thanks to the surviving built legacy of the Doric peristyle courtyard.

with the archaeological evidence. Its once magnificent 660 m² royal courtyard, with its still *in situ* apsidal throne niche in the symmetry-axis, had to be the historical place in the Gospel scene, the birthday banquet of Antipas; thus, Machaerus was also the Golgotha of Saint John the Baptist (FIGS. 4–6). The first three excavation final reports (*MACHAERUS I–III*) on the first 50 years (1968–2018) were published by the author in Milan (Vörös 2013; 2015; 2019) at Edizioni Terra Santa (FIGS. 7–9).

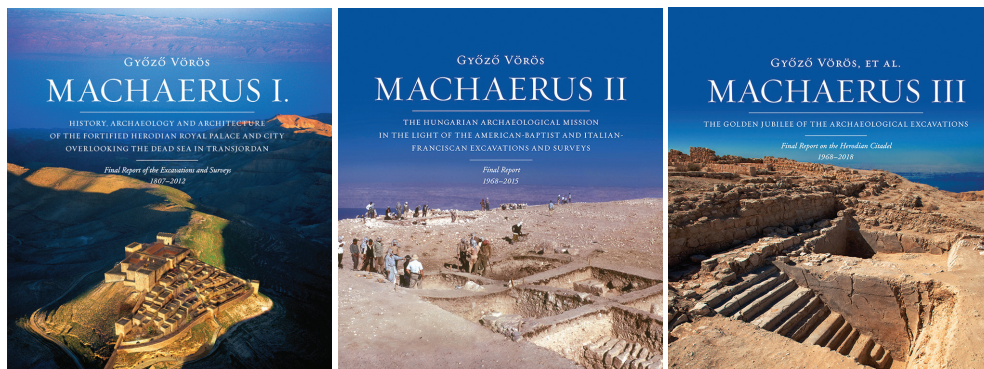
His Royal Highness, Prince El-Hassan bin Talal, wrote in 2014 that Machaerus is “so much more than a fascinating archaeological site. It sits in the landscape of religious memory as a testament and place of pilgrimage”. However, Machaerus is even more than this, as it is also a historical place,

which is ripe with the ancient past of the Hasmonean and Herodian royal dynasties, though it had witnessed three times complete destructions: twice by the Romans (57 BC and AD 71), and once by the Nabataeans (AD 36). As it is well known, military or natural destructions typically provide highly valuable and essential information for archaeological research. As a result, the Machaerus citadel is a time capsule of history from *ca.* 90 BC until AD 71, as it was never occupied before or after a century and a half.

The first 50 years of archaeological excavations (1968–2018) verified that all references from the contemporary historical sources concerning Machaerus (*e.g.*, various passages in Strabo, Pliny the Elder, Josephus, and the Gospels; Vörös 2013: 16–43) are



6. The reconstructed royal settlement had an upper city (the citadel) and a lower city with a well-preserved surrounding wall, which housed (from 30 BC until AD 36) the entourage of the royal court, the Herodian household, during the reigns of the father and the son, the King and the Tetrarch Herod. According to our understanding, the lower city had to be the historical place where John the Baptist suffered a political house arrest by Antipas, in the company of his disciples. The superimposed 3D architectural model sits on a helicopter photograph (APAAME_20171001_REB- 0071), and viewed towards the south.



7-9. The covers of the first three archaeological excavation final reports on Machaerus.

not simply textual references, but they are in alignment with the actual archaeological evidence of the historical site as well. In the light of this archaeological evidence, it

is certain that on the hilltop of Machaerus there was a Hasmonean fortress that was converted into a once magnificent fortified Herodian royal palace. There, a third

fortification was erected after the Nabataean destruction, which was ultimately destroyed by the Legion X of the Roman Emperor Vespasian. The AD 71 monuments of the circumvallation siege of the Fretensis, including the unfinished agger-ramp, are still present at the site.

Historical archaeology is a unique form of archaeology that deals with places, things, and issues from the past when written records can inform and contextualize the cultural material. These records can both complement and conflict with the archaeological evidence found at a particular site. However, as previously mentioned, we have not found any conflict between the historical written sources and the archaeological legacy of the historical

site of Machareus. Machaerus is an authentic, historical place of the Gospel scenes of the Holy Land. Like Bethlehem, Jericho, or Jerusalem, its built legacy and cultural heritage confirms, complements, and contextualizes the relevant historical sources. As a result, Machaerus is a sacred archaeological site, which firmly stands on the map of history (FIG. 10).

According to the contextual references of Josephus and the Gospels, among the ancient walls of the historical place of Herodian Machaerus (during *ca.* 30 BC and 36 AD), five important characters of the Gospels were living: (1) King Herod the Great (who killed the Children of Bethlehem: Matthew 2.16), (2) his son the Tetrarch Herod Antipas (who excommunicated Jesus



10. A cloudless (reconstructed) space-photograph image of NASA, taken of the Holy Land from a southern satellite. The dominant geographical place of Machaerus and its royal Dead Sea port of Callirhoe, opposite Jerusalem, are clearly legible. The imprisoned John the Baptist sent his disciples to Jesus in Galilee, probably to Capernaum (Matthew 11.2–6; Luke 7.18–23).

from the Jews by handing him over to the Romans: Luke 23.8–12) with his second wife, (3) the Hasmonean Princess Herodias and her daughter (4) Princess Salome; and finally, (5) John the Baptist, the precursor of Jesus Christ.

Some may say that Princess Salome is not a Biblical figure, as her name is only acknowledged by Josephus (*Antiquities of the Jews* 18.5.4). The same is true for the identification of the Biblical site of Machaerus (*Antiquities of the Jews* 18.5.2). However, the historical names of Salome and Machaerus became integral parts of the early Christian tradition and collective memory, as already in the *Church History* (1.11.4–6) ca. AD 324, Eusebius confirmed Machaerus, and we may find the name and the depiction of the historical Salome (the daughter of Princess Herodias), in AD 62 on authentic coins as well (when she became the consort-queen of Chalcis and of Armenia Minor).

In the meantime, for historical archaeology (that is not a religious discipline by its nature), there is no higher authority for the history of the Early Roman period of the Holy Land than the historian of the Flavian Roman Imperial dynasty: Josephus. It has been established that Machaerus is an authentic, historical place of the Holy Land, like Bethlehem, Jericho, or Jerusalem. In the meantime, unlike Machaerus, the latter three have never disappeared from the maps. To appreciate the real, historical value of Machaerus, we have to see the brief overview of the other Gospel scenes as well.

We have several settlement-names in the Gospels, and outlining them, we have to emphasize that the names of Rome, Athens, Alexandria, or Damascus are not mentioned. The Gospels are Levant-focused holy scriptures, concentrating on the Land of Jesus. However, we hear about geographical or foreign city names, which are all well-known and are easily identifiable on the maps of historical archaeology, such as

Babylon, Cyrene, Decapolis, Egypt, Galilee, Idumea, Iturea, Judea, Lake of Tiberias, Ninive, Perea, Samaria, Sea of Galilee, Sarepta, Sidon, Syria, Syro-Phonicea, Trachonitis, and Tyros.

Meanwhile, in the Tetrarchy of Philip we hear about Abilene (Abila city or district of Syria) and Caesarea Philippi, both of them well known. But the historical places of Bethsaida or the Mount of Transfiguration (Hermon?), are uncertain and their locations are tentative.

We have many more problems in Galilee. We hear about Gennesaret (Ginosar), Capernaum (Kafr Nahum), and Tiberias, which all stand firmly on the map of historical archaeology. But the locations of Dalmanuta, Cana, Chorazin, Nain (Naim), and Nazareth are all settlements that can only be traced back to Byzantine or Crusader traditions and their locations are not definitely known. I would like to emphasize that I do not doubt that it is possible that these traditional sites are identical with the ancient historical settlements that are mentioned in the Gospels. I only remind the reader that with the limits of historical archaeology, and our archaeological information in 2018, they cannot be put yet on our historical archaeology map of the Gospels. Also, even though we hear about Sychar (Jacob's Well) in Samaria, which is located 76 m (249 ft) from Tall Balata in the eastern part of the city of Nablus (within the grounds of the Bir Ya'qub Greek Orthodox monastery), the identification of this exact place is also a Byzantine tradition.

We have several names in Judea, like Aenon near Salim, Bethany, Bethany-beyond-the-Jordan, Bethlehem, Bethfage, Efraim, Emmaus, Jericho, Jerusalem, Bethesda, Getsemani, Gabbatha, Golgotha, Mount of Olives, Siloam, Sion, and Rama. There are also others, with completely unknown locations among them, like Arimathea, Gomora, Kariot (Sicarii?), or

Sodoma. However, concerning the rigorous requirements of historical archaeology, we can only put the names of Bethlehem, Jericho, and Jerusalem (with Bethesda and Siloam) on the map. There is no doubt about the places of the Temple Mount or the Kidron Valley, but the other places are traditional sites; we do not have *opus delicti* archaeological evidence in our hands to prove their Gospel-scene identities like we do for Machaerus.

Jesus also taught in the cities of the Decapolis, but only two are mentioned by name: Gadara and Geraza (both were rediscovered and identified by Ulrich Jasper Seetzen, like Machaerus). We do not want to engage with the issue that they are connected to the same Synoptic-tradition and miracle of Jesus: for historical archaeology the point is that both cities stand firmly on the map on the east bank of the holy river of Jordan.

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus speaks about an enigmatic hilltop city: “A city built on a hill cannot be hidden. No one after lighting a lamp puts it under the bushel basket, but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all in the house” (Matthew 5.14–5). Jesus also identified John as a Shining Lamp: “He was a burning and shining lamp, and you were willing to rejoice for a while in his light” (John 5.36). According to human logic, in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus spoke in a coded way about John, who was imprisoned in Machaerus and “cannot be hidden” from the people. But these kinds of thoughts are simply speculations: they are not compatible with historical archaeology, which deals exclusively with concrete textual references and archaeological evidence.

There is only one archaeology, which has to be the same in Damascus, Amman, Tall Aviv and Jerusalem. One common archaeology that may relate to history, or may not. Consequently, historical archaeology is much more than “religious memory”. It is tangible evidence of history, something the doubting Apostle Thomas

wanted to have. Archaeology, which sheds light on the Gospels, is an academic field, where the faces of the doubter and sceptical researchers of sacred archaeology in the Holy Land can be compared with the characters of the apostles in Caravaggio’s famous painting: *The Incredulity of Saint Thomas*. As the Doubting Thomas said: “Unless I see the nail marks in his hands and put my finger where the nails were, and put my hand into his side, I will not believe it” (John 20.25).

Historical archaeology (like the natural sciences) is for both religious and non-religious people. It is about history, where you can visit reality, like in the famous story of the Chinese painter about the connection between imaginative fantasy and reality. The ancient Emperor of China heard of a brilliant, genius painter in the countryside of his empire. He commanded that the great painter be brought to his imperial court, where they met. The Emperor commanded him to paint a landscape, which was not a dreamland, but the genuine, true reality. The painter received three months to execute the palace-wall-size canvas-image. After the three months, the Emperor came to see the artwork, and became very angry, saying: “I have to command to kill you, as you painted a simple sea-side landscape of fantasy with rivers, valleys and a royal castle on one of the hilltops, but not the Reality!” The painter in a very humble way, modestly and quietly answered: “I am terribly sorry, Your Imperial Majesty”, as he stepped into the painting and disappeared behind the hills. The photographs and drawings on the Machaerus-landscape in the trilogy of the academic monographs (Vörös 2013; 2015; 2019) are similarly connected with the historical reality of the Gospel scene as this ancient Chinese painting in this fascinating story. Consider this passage:

As he [Jesus] was now approaching the path down from the Mount

of Olives, the whole multitude of the disciples began to praise God joyfully with a loud voice for all the deeds of power that they had seen, saying, "Blessed is the King who comes in the name of the Lord! Peace in Heaven, and glory in the highest Heaven!" Some of the Pharisees in the crowd said to him, "Master, order your disciples to stop." He answered, "I tell you, if these were silent, the stones would shout out."

As he came near and saw the city [of Jerusalem], he wept over it, saying, "If you, even you, had only recognized on this day the things that make for peace! But now they are hidden from your eyes. Indeed, the days will come upon you, when your enemies will set up ramparts around you and surround you, and hem you in on every side. They will crush you to the ground, you and your children within you, and they will not leave within you one stone upon another; because you did not recognize the time of your visitation from God" (Luke 19.37–44).

Jesus spoke in *ca.* AD 33 about the stones and the destruction of the city "when your enemies will set up ramparts around you and surround you, and hem you in on every side". He spoke about the holy city of Jerusalem, and prophesied its destruction in AD 70, which he had foreseen 37 years earlier. The same fate happened in Machaerus a year later during the late fall of AD 71 or during the winter of AD 71/72, with the circumvallation siege of the Fretensis.

The destruction of Jerusalem and its Temple was viewed as a divine punishment, "because you did not recognize the time of your visitation from God". At the same time, we may read about the army of Antipas and the Herodian city of Machaerus, when, as a divine retribution, the complete army (and the most impor-

tant stronghold) of Antipas was also destroyed "as a punishment of what he did against John, that was called the Baptist: for Herod slew him". However, the first destruction of Machaerus was not at the hands of the Romans, but already three years after the words of Jesus, in AD 36, by the Nabataeans.

So, they [the Nabataean King Aretas IV Philopatris and the Jewish Tetrarch Herod Antipas] raised armies on both sides, and prepared for war, and sent their generals to fight instead of themselves; and when they had joined battle, all Herod's army was destroyed by the treachery of some fugitives, who, though they were of the tetrarchy of Philip, joined with Aretas's army. [...] 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 [...] 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 prisoner, out of Herod's suspicious temper, to Machaerus, the castle I before mentioned, and was there put to death. Now the Jews had an opinion that the destruction of this army was sent as a punishment upon Herod, and a mark of God's displeasure to him (Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews* 18.5.1–2).

Josephus never again spoke of the Herodian city and the magnificent royal palace of Machaerus, since after the death of



11. HRH Prince El Hassan bin Talal with the author and his wife in June 2019 in the courtyard of the former Crown Prince's Palace (Courtesy of the Royal Court.)

King Agrippa I (AD 44) it became a simple “Roman garrison”, as he called it later. The archaeological excavations in Machaerus proved that upon the citadel ruins of the Herodian royal palace, a Roman garrison was erected, and today the most visible part of this monument is the polygonal surrounding wall, which overruns the destroyed Herodian walls (Vörös 2015: 138–9). The stratigraphical examinations of the excavations in the citadel of Machaerus confirmed this assumption with clear archaeological evidences (Vörös 2015: 502–3). It was also possible to date precisely the destruction of the Fretensis to AD 71 (–72?), when they destroyed the Roman garrison (but not the Herodian palace) that was taken by the Zealots in AD 66.

Concerning the Herodian building stones, Jesus made two important comments. On one hand, he established that “if these [the disciples] were silent, the stones would shout out”. As a simple archaeologist, naturally I understand it in a certain allegoric way that even the stones may bear witness about Jesus and the Gospels. Obviously, the stones of Machaerus impart

a historical reality to the Gospel scene, as H.Em. Cardinal Gianfranco Ravasi keenly observed in the Foreword of *Machaerus III*:

“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” (Vörös 2019: 18–9).

Yes, the stones of Machaerus, even in their fragmented physical reality, bear witness to the “ancient daily reality”. On the other hand, the second of Jesus’ comments concerning the Herodian stones of Jerusalem is more prosaic: “they will not leave within you one stone upon another”. And after the destruction of the Nabataeans in AD 36 and the Romans in AD 71, we are witnessing a third destructive wave today, not only in Syria or Iraq, but in Machaerus by looters. They do not attack only the sacred ruins of Machaerus, but target all the ancient cultural heritage and archaeological legacy of the kingdom, including Petra, Geraza, or

Gadara. It is the responsibility of the royal Hashemite Family to act, as H.R.H. Prince El-Hassan bin Talal (FIG. 11) wrote after his Machaerus visit:

“We are honoured to act as custodians of sites such as Mukawir. 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.” (Vörös 2015: 15)

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