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Herodian Stone and Stucco Artworks in the Royal Palace of Mukāwir (Machaerus)

The decorative art of the once magnificent Herodian royal palace of Mukāwir (Machaerus) (which existed from *ca.* 30 BC until its destruction by the Nabataeans in AD 36) concentrated in two architectural spaces inside the Dead Sea citadel: in the Late Hellenistic-style Doric peristyle courtyard and in the Early Roman-style Ionic bathhouse (FIGS. 1–3). This paper presents the most important artworks, to give a clear idea of the once glorious royal decorative program of the only known classical royal palace in the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan from the Greco-Roman period. Since the local limestone was fragile, the Herodian builders used the stone carvings and the gypsum moldings of the stuccoworks in a complementary and reciprocative way.

To give 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, and goblets; tableware: kilner jars, jugs, juglets, flasks; cooking vessels: pots, bowls; storage jars; several imported amphorae; Hellenistic, Herodian and even imported Italian lamps, etc.); 58 stone vessels; hundreds of glass objects; numerous metal objects: gold, lead, bronze, and iron artifacts; 156 stone ballistic missiles; 14 opus sectile pieces; *ca.* 3 square meters of *in situ* opus tesselatum mosaic art (with red, white, and black tesserae); over five hundred gypsum moulding pieces; over three hundred coloured fresco fragments, *etc*. These objects were all published with colour photos and drawings in my Mukāwir (Machaerus) trilogy (Vörös

2103, 2015, and 2019), in addition to the ceramological and numismatic studies of the Jerusalem Franciscan Italian Fathers, Stanislao Loffreda and Michele Piccirillo (Loffreda 1996; Piccirillo 1981). These pieces of archaeological hard evidence provided a coherent corpus that enabled us to put Mukāwir (Machaerus) on the map of the Holy Land in an authentic form, similar to the Herodian fortress-palaces of Masada or Herodium. Let us note, however, that the Herodian fortresses on the West Bank of the Dead Sea were all converted into Byzantine monasteries—Herodium even became a Crusader fortress. Mukāwir (Machaerus) was the only one to survive intact, like an archaeological time capsule from the period of about 90 BC–AD 72 (including the era of the authentic Gospel scene), never to be reoccupied again! It is thus a sacred site that survived completely undisturbed since Antiquity.

Naturally, 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 the dead 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 Mukāwir (Machaerus) greatly benefitted from being excavated by three different academic institutions and their respective teams: the American Baptists (Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, Kentucky), the Italian Franciscans (Studium Biblicum Franciscanum, Jerusalem), and the Hungarian secular professionals (Hungarian Academy of Arts, Budapest). This versatile background made the archaeological site even more authentic as the different academic teams arrived to 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.

Our initial Mukāwir (Machaerus) survey in 2009 had a very clear aim: to document all available information and to describe the dead monument of the citadel by graphic and photographic means. In the following years, we extended our methods to include 3D scanning and drone examinations. Regarding our architectural surveys, the most important results of our scientific investigations have been determining the three historical periods of Mukāwir (Machaerus) and analysing 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, including the stone and stucco artworks, presented in the current paper. 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 hardware 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 dead monuments using the methods of building diagnostics and archaeological

stratigraphy. Our research method included the so-called comparative archaeological and architectural inspections as well. The Mukāwir (Machaerus) castle had been an element of a network of military fortresses created in order to defend Jerusalem from the east during the first centuries BC and AD. After Jerusalem itself, these fortresses (Masada, Herodium, Hyrcania, Cypros, Doq, and Alexandrium), 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 Mukāwir (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 Mukāwir (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 Mukāwir (Machaerus).

The scientific research and detailed study of the tell—as the three layers of successive occupations on the mountaintop can be considered a small artificial mound, in Arabic, *tell*—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, Herodium, and Cypros), aqueducts (Hyrcania and Alexandrium), or Doric peristyle courtyard (Alexandrium) with those of Mukāwir (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 dead monuments 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 military 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, described by Josephus, was clearly detectable and convincingly demonstrable.

The stucco work remains of the classical buildings were generally considered by the previous archaeologist generations as *"minor art"*. They belonged to the decorative, applied and ornamental lesser or minor forms, in contrast to the superior paintings, sculptures and architecture—a direct influence on art history by Giorgio Vasari, through his famous 1568 opus: *Lives of the Most Eminent Painters, Sculptors, and Architects*. Even though

this division was initially applied to the Italian art, it soon gained a widespread currency. However, in the twenty-first century, stuccowork fragments are no longer considered secondary or lesser art, they are now firmly incorporated into our studies on architecture and art. These *"minor arts"* have fought back to gain wider acceptance in our holistic approach to studying the Herodian archaeological legacy, which clearly demonstrated that the most sophisticated architectural details were partly carved into stone, and partly moulded into the gypsum-based stuccoworks by the Herodian decorative art designers. When we speak about the Herodian Mukāwir (Machaerus) as a historical Gospel scene, we cannot forget that these stone reliefs and gypsum-moulding stuccoworks were all visible in the royal palace of Antipas. They are integral parts of the Mukāwir (Machaerus) sacred archaeology and were witnessing history. As archaeology is a visual academic discipline, let us exhibit the most important Herodian artworks from the royal palace.

Capitals and Reliefs in Artistic Herodian Stone and Stucco Works from the Mukāwir (Machaerus) Royal Palace (FIGS. 4–20)

To date these stone and stucco reliefs for the period of King Herod the Great is an easy task at Mukāwir (Machaerus), where the royal palace existed from *ca.* 30 BC to AD 36, and the only two landlords were King Herod the Great and his son, Tetrarch Herod Antipas. However, we may date the stone and stucco art decorations easily to the foundation period of the Mukāwir (Machaerus) palace (*ca.* 30 BC), as our ongoing architectural analysis and the detailed study of the built legacy since 2009, together with the over one hundred thousand archaeological fragments of the once magnificent and later entirely excavated (1968–2019) Herodian citadel, confirmed that there were no renewals or modifications in the Herodian building complex, including the published, over five hundred gypsum moulding pieces and over three hundred coloured fresco fragments[1]. The fortified palace of Mukāwir (Machaerus) city, erected by King Herod the Great, was a group of luxurious buildings that was inherited by Antipas (as the only royal palace of his king father in his tetrarchy), and he used it as it was, without modifications, until its destruction by the Nabataeans in AD 36[2].

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 Mukāwir (Machaerus) castle, and was there put to death" (*Antiquitates Judaicae* 18.5, 2). 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

[1] For the descriptions of the relevant archaeological evidence, see Vörös 2019: 344–425, Chapter V: "Herodian Gypsum Mouldings", followed by "Herodian Fresco Fragments".

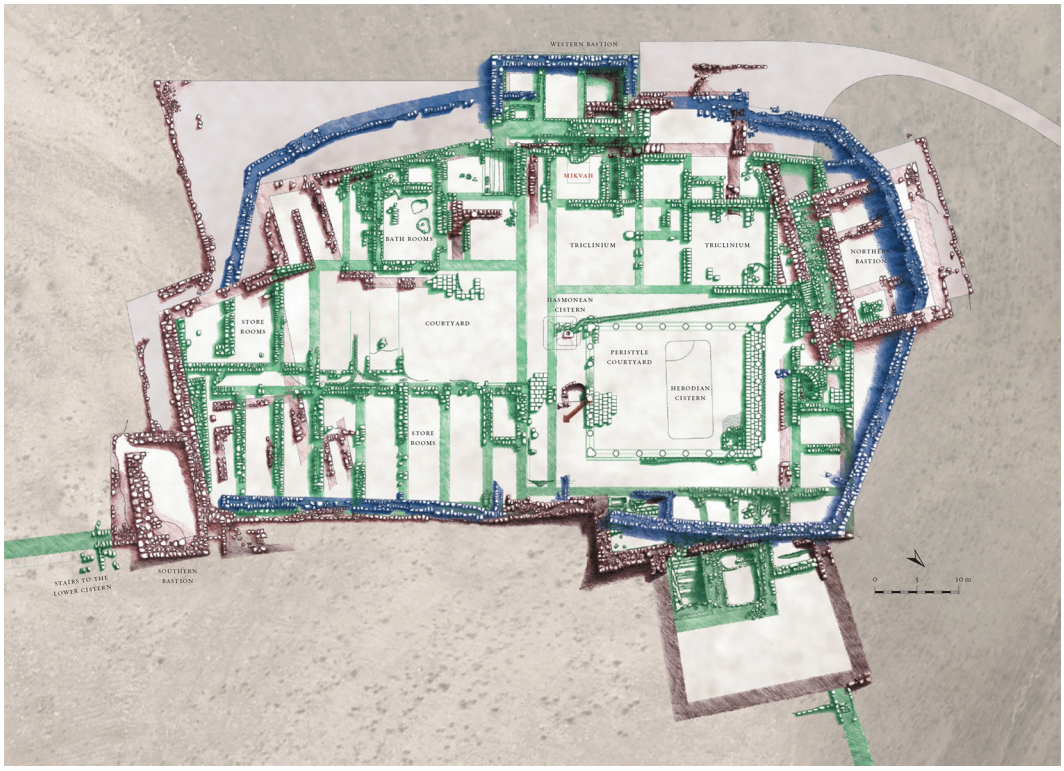
[2] Concerning the very clear vertical and horizontal stratigraphical situation in the Mukāwir (Machaerus) citadel, see: Vörös 2015: 502–513, Part IV: "The Archaeological and Architectural Stratigraphy".

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.* 324: "John called the Baptist [...] of Herod's suspicion John was sent in bonds to the citadel of Mukāwir (Machaerus), and there slain" (*Historia Ecclesiastica* 1.11, 4–6).

Since our last ICHAJ 14 Conference in Florence in 2019, the author received three international scientific recognitions for his Dead Sea excavations: He won in 2020 the Vatican Prize of the Pontifical Academies for his Mukāwir (Machaerus) archaeological excavations and Edizioni Terra Santa final report Milan publications (Vörös 2013, 2015, 2019); in addition to this, in 2021 the *Mukāwir (Machaerus) III* academic monograph (Vörös 2019) had been selected in Washington as the Best Scholarly Book in Archaeology by the Biblical Archaeology Society; and finally, Pope Francis awarded him the Gold Medal of the Pontificate in 2022 (FIGS. 21–22). The first scientific synthesis was published by the Hungarian Academy of Arts in Budapest (Vörös 2022) (FIG. 23).

1. The map of the archaeological sites connected to King Herod the Great and the border of his realm in ancient Palestine (Netzer 2006: 9, fig. 1).

2. Helicopter photograph of Mukāwir (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 (photo by Jane Taylor, courtesy of the American Center of Research).

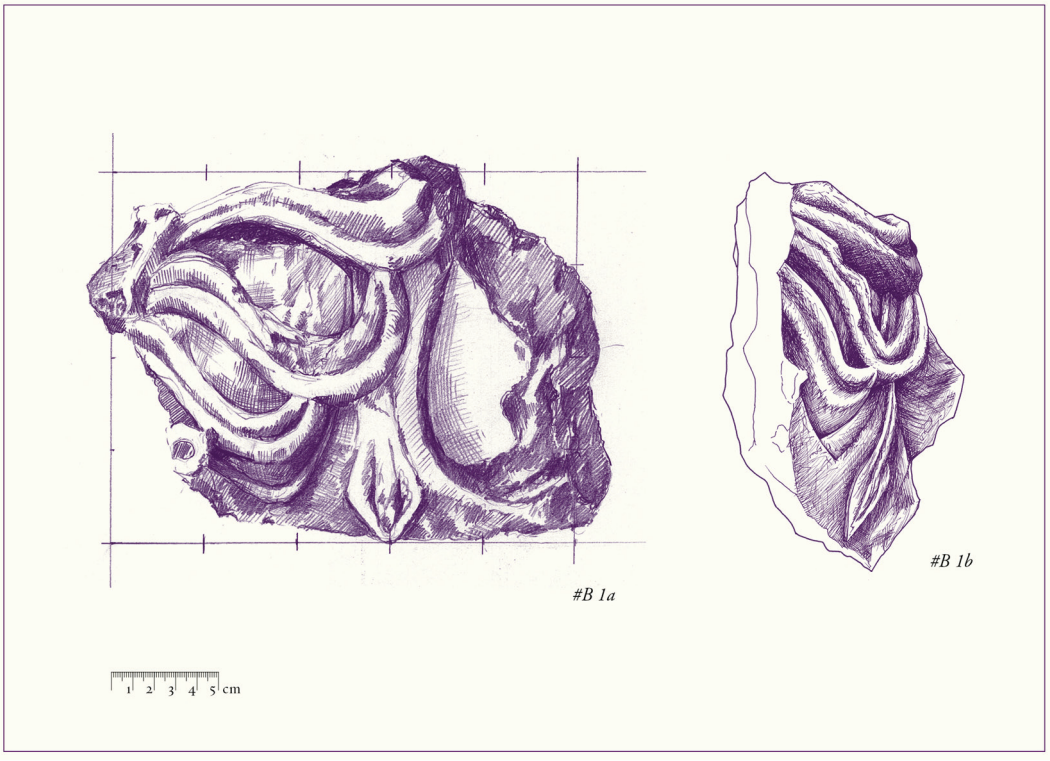


3. The archaeological survey layout of the Mukāwir (Machaerus) citadel, with the identification of the most important Herodian architectural spaces (illustration by the Machaerus Archaeological Mission of the Hungarian Academy of Arts).

4. Two re-erected Herodian columns of the Mukāwir (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 (the procedure is called anastylosis) from the era of the Royal Herodian Dynasty. They are also the largest (colossus-size) archaeological objects ever found and restored at a historical Gospel site (photo by the Machaerus Archaeological Mission of the Hungarian Academy of Arts).

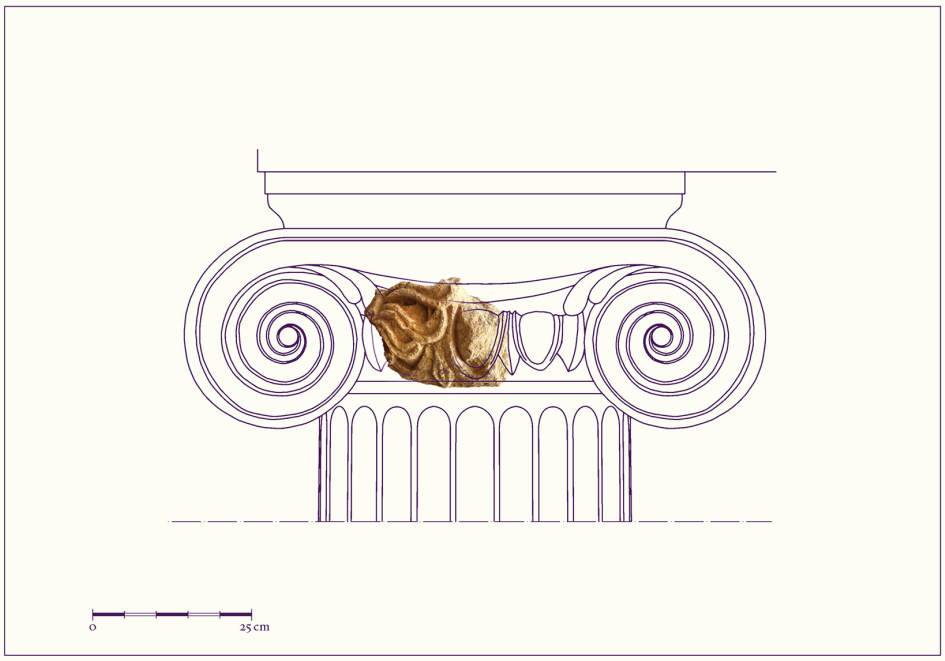
5. Tristram's starlings (*Onychognathus tristramii*) on the stucco-decorated and re-erected Ionic column of Mukāwir (Machaerus), view from the east. These birds are named after the Reverend Henry Baker Tristram, also an eminent ornithologist, who visited and surveyed the archaeological site of Mukāwir (Machaerus) in 1874 (photo by the Machaerus Archaeological Mission of the Hungarian Academy of Arts).

6. The capital of the re-erected Ionic Herodian column of Mukāwir (Machaerus), view from the west. The gypsum-moulded volute on the capital is clearly visible (photo by the Machaerus Archaeological Mission of the Hungarian Academy of Arts).

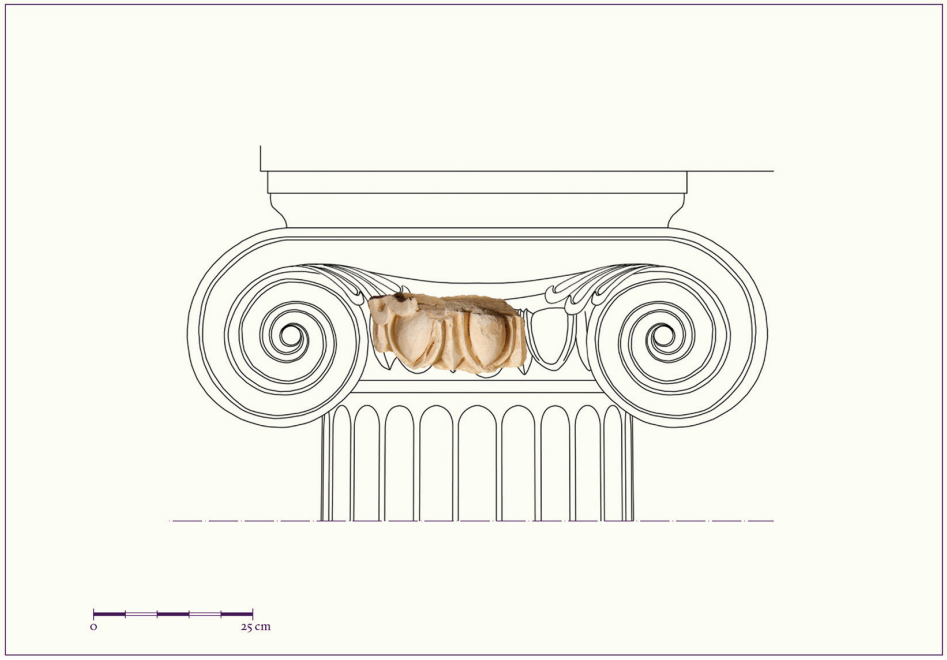


7. Photographic and graphic documentation of the stone-carved fragment from an Ionic capital proves that in the decoration program of the Herodian royal palace the stone and the stuccowork patterns were alternate options and the artisans were able to reciprocate them. The local Mukāwir (Machaerus) limestone was fragile, but still they tried to carve out as much as they could from the local stone. The details of the Ionic capital decoration are mesmerizing: behind the honeysuckle we may see a nicely cut egg, and the echinus is embellished with another egg, but between the two eggs, a nice dart is clearly visible (photo and illustrations by the Machaerus Archaeological Mission of the Hungarian Academy of Arts

8. Front and profile view of a Herodian volute fragment, with a rosette-flower in the eye on the principal face, and a leaf decoration on the roll of the lateral side (photos by the Machaerus Archaeological Mission of the Hungarian Academy of Arts).



9. To interpret the artistic piece of the stone fragment undeniably, we reconstructed the complete capital, which fits the capital-size of those Ionic columns that once decorated the apodyterium hall of the royal bathhouse, and one of which we re-erected through anastylosis (illustration by the Machaerus Archaeological Mission of the Hungarian Academy of Arts).

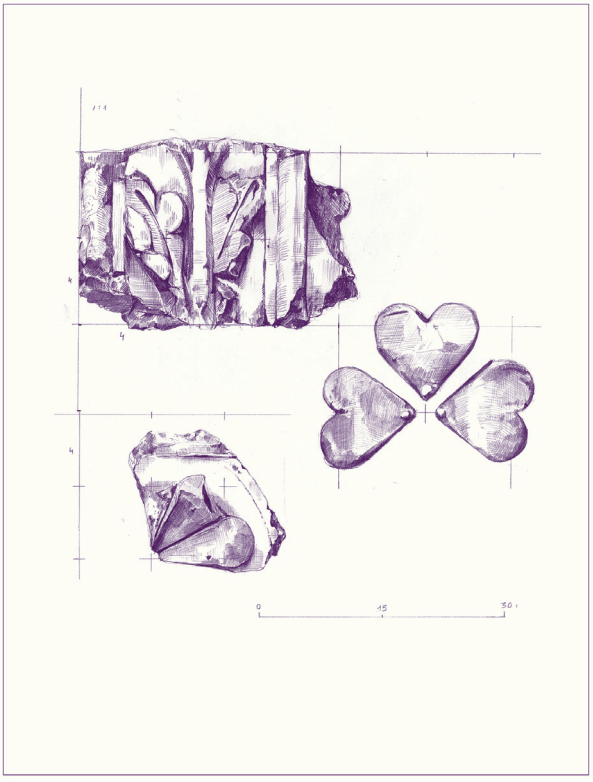


10. A nearly matching piece to the previous stone artistic fragment, but in gypsum moulding: next to the honeysuckle we may see the nicely cut eggs in the nest, together with the echinus. Between the two eggs, a nice dart is clearly similarly visible (illustration by the Machaerus Archaeological Mission of the Hungarian Academy of Arts).

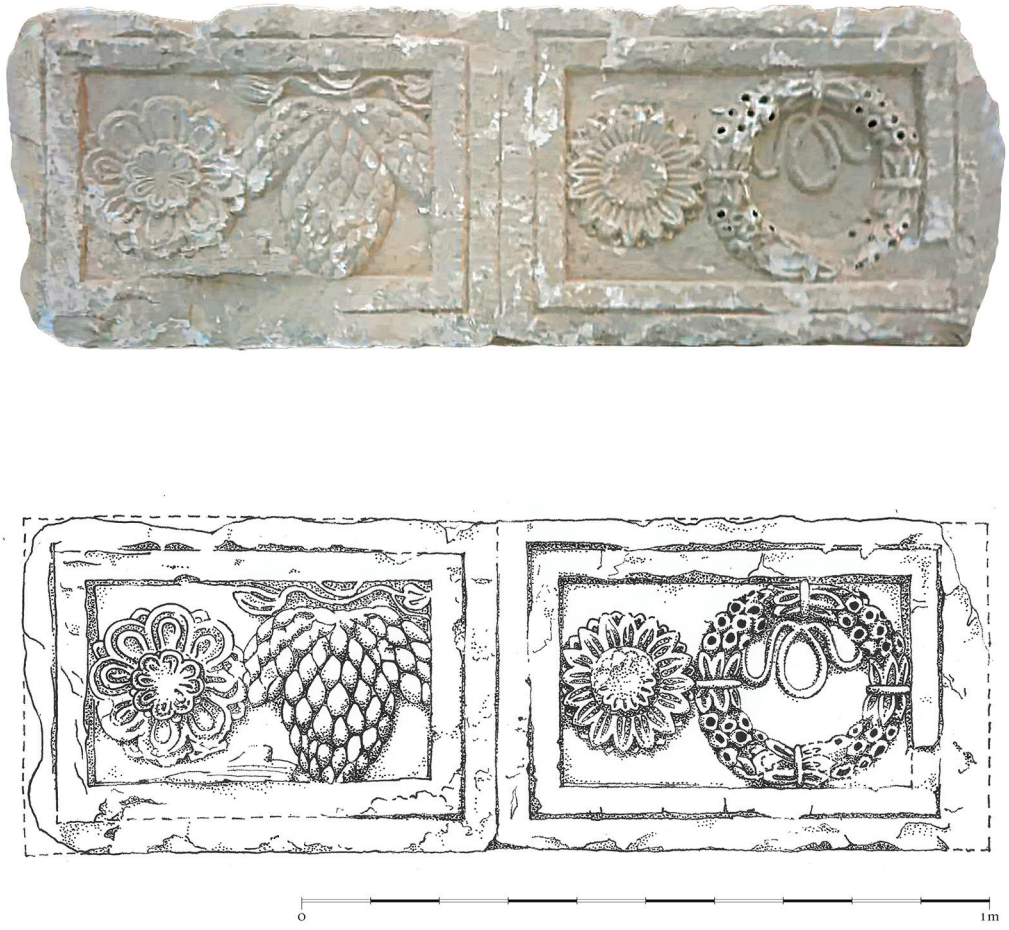
11. A moment inside our Mount Nebo archaeological storeroom during the evaluation and documentation of the Herodian stucco works of Mukāwir (Machaerus). From right to left: Father Amedeo Ricco OFM and Imre Balázs Arnóczki are working on the graphic documentation of the archaeological finds; Master István Őri-Kiss and Father Gianantonio Urbani are preparing the photo documentation; the author is studying the fragments on the left (photo by the Machaerus Archaeological Mission of the Hungarian Academy of Arts).

12. We can see in this field shot from 1968 a carefully excavated *in situ* fragment of gypsum moulding with egg-and-dart ornamentation from the collapsed entablature decoration of the coronation elements. The label on the slide records: *"R6 – Decorated plaster from area adjacent to Vault"*. That area is directly to the north of the Bathhouse. All the decorated gypsum mouldings were found within or in the immediate vicinity of the Bathhouse, *i.e.*, in Area B or in the southern section of Area CV (R6), according to the 1968 classification in Mukāwir (Machaerus) (photo copyright and courtesy of the Mississippi State University, Cobb Institute of Archaeology, E. Jerry Vardaman Estate, Starkville).

13. An undated photograph from the Jerusalem archive of the Corbo excavations in Mukāwir (Machaerus) (1978–1981) shows two beautiful gypsum moulding flower heads. The one in the foreground is lost (numbered F-0), and it is in the company of a broken flower, with two surviving petals. Meanwhile, we found the latter (F-2) in the Mount Nebo storeroom, among the other Mukāwir (Machaerus) stuccoworks of the Corbo excavations. Its current photograph and artistic graphic documentation can be seen on the next illustration pair (photo copyright and courtesy of the Studium Biblicum Franciscanum, Virgilio C. Corbo OFM Estate, Jerusalem).

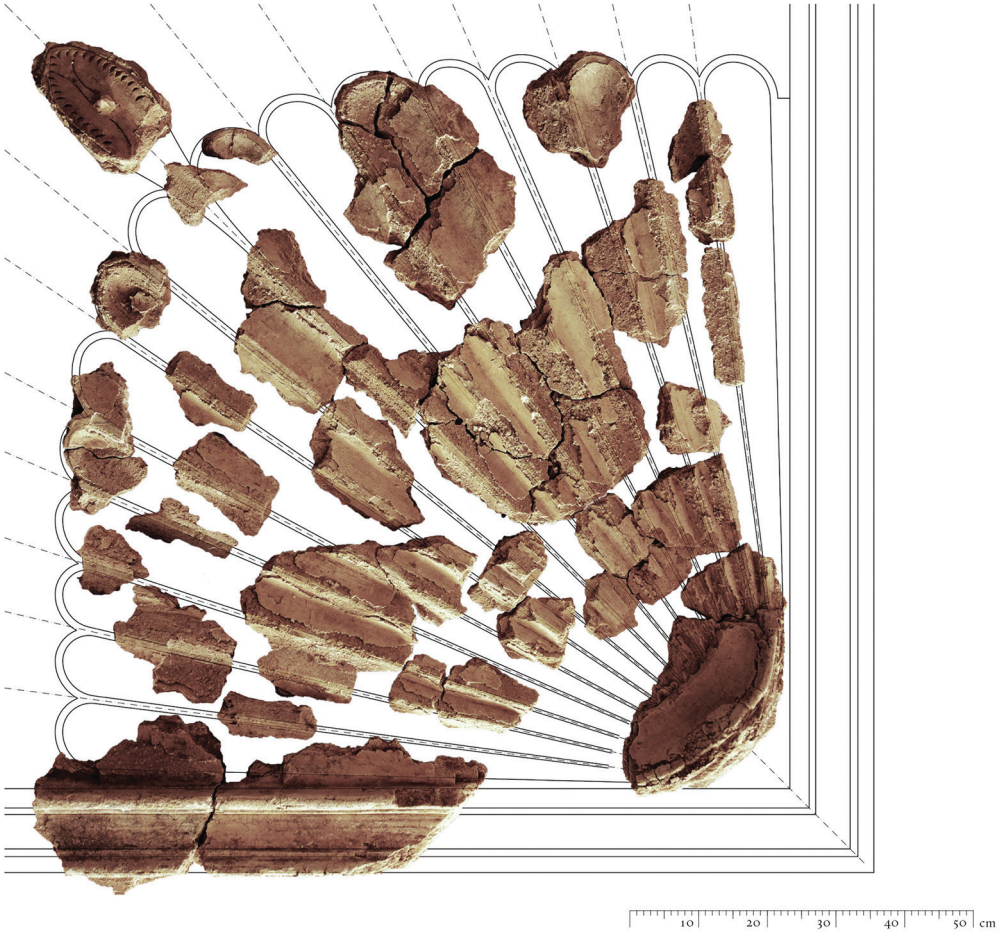


14. Five fragments of gorgeous floral decorations. The first one (F-1) is a vertical plant ornamentation between two tori (toruses), a very close analogy to the polychrome stuccowork pilasters in the Royal Box of the Herodium Theatre. The broken flower, with two surviving petals (F-2) we have already seen on the previous photograph, FIG. 13. The last pieces (F-3, 4, and 5) can be reconstructed from three heart-shaped pieces: they belong to the same (or other similar) floral ornamentation, but they lack the stigma (pistil) in the centre, like our previous example of F-0, thus are not from a flower. We may assume that they are other parts of a plant, such as three leaves of a four-leaf clover. Similarly to F-1, we have great parallels to F-0 and F-3, 4, and 5 in the so-called Royal Room (in fact the Royal Box) of the Herodium Theater (photos and illustrations by the Machaerus Archaeological Mission of the Hungarian Academy of Arts).



15. The beautiful Mukāwir (Machaerus) limestone relief, discovered in 2020, depicts two rectangular frames with Herodian symbols: two rosettes in the company of a grape cluster and a wreath, respectively. The trilobate bunch of grapes is an old Judean heraldic symbol, like a shield-form coat-of-arms of the Holy Land, that had been depicted later on the coins of Ethnarch Herod Archelaus and of Simon bar Kokhba as well. It is based on the Biblical story connected to Canaan and the spies of Moses, which says: *"They came to the Valley of Eshcol, and there they cut off a branch which had one bunch of grapes on it so heavy that it took two men to carry it on a pole between them. They also brought back some pomegranates and figs"* (Numbers 13:23). We may see the pomegranates on the accompanying royal wreath as well, which seems to depict a *corona civica*, a Roman military decoration of the Republican Senate. The variety of Herodian rosettes are seemingly infinite, as each of them have certain unique characteristics. For the detailed, scientific interpretation of this extraordinary, marvelous Herodian limestone relief, see in the bibliography the Jerusalem article of the present author (Vörös 2023). (Photo by Hussein Saleh, Department of Antiquities, Amman; drawing by Imre Balázs Arnóczki, Hungarian Academy of Arts, Budapest).

16. One of the archaeological storerooms in Mount Nebo, during our 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 (photo by the Machaerus Archaeological Mission of the Hungarian Academy of Arts).



17. The reconstruction of the 48 pieces of gypsum-moulding fragments, before the restoration process. The large decoration, *ca.* 1 m^2 in size, bears the print of the finest and most characteristic Herodian art of the late Hellenistic period. The Mukāwir (Machaerus) flower perfectly demonstrates the elaborate decoration program and grandeur of the once magnificent Herodian royal palace. We found close parallels for its artistic structure in the Herodium legacy (such as the pendentive decorations on the domes of the Double Gate vestibules in Jerusalem), from the same generation of artists, even though they were executed some years later than in Mukāwir (Machaerus) (illustration by the Machaerus Archaeological Mission of the Hungarian Academy of Arts).

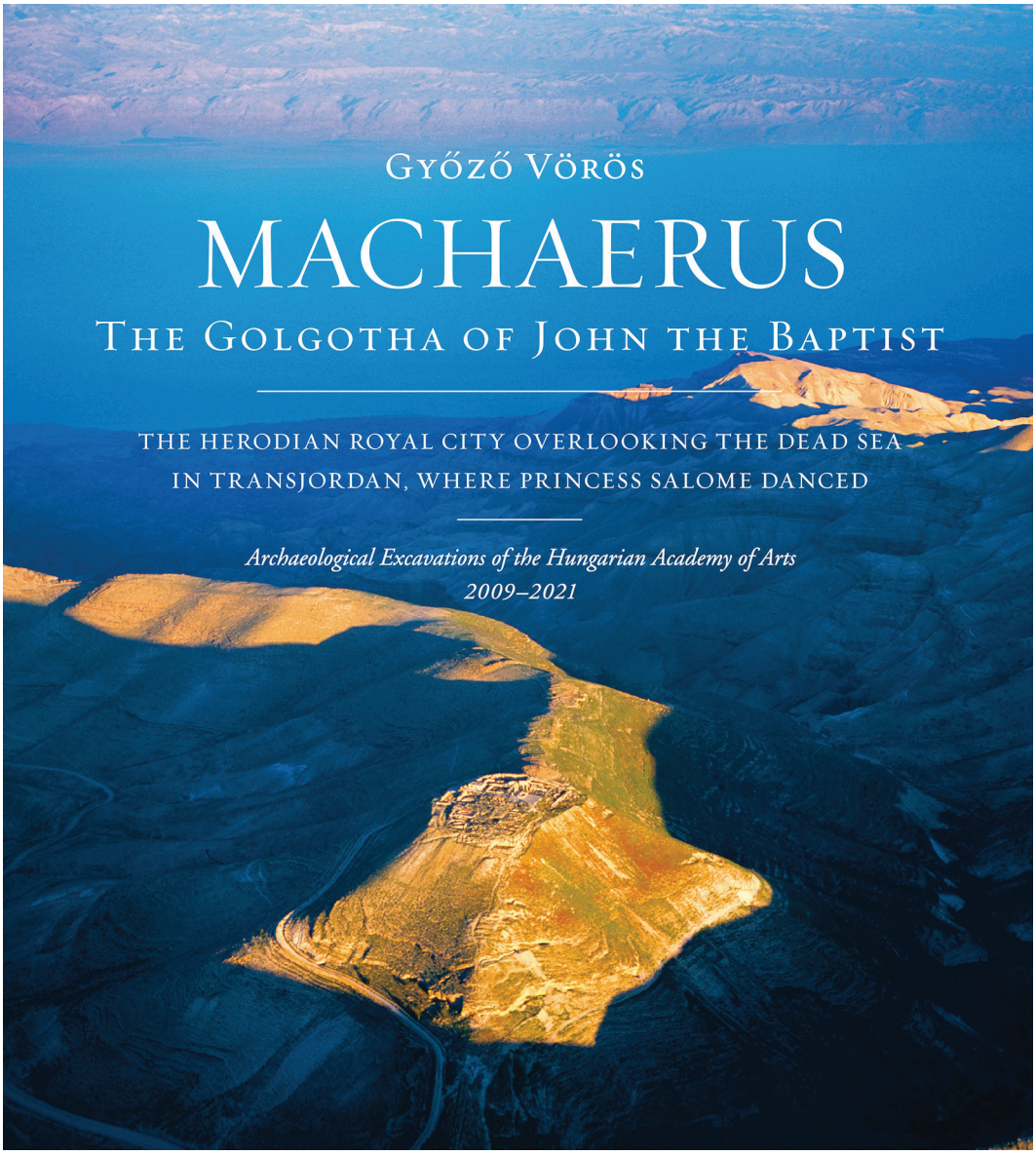
18. Four phases during the restoration process by Master Franco Sciorilli in Mount Nebo: On the new aerolam aluminum support, the gypsum moulding fragments were glued with a polyester resin. Consequently, it was rebuilt in the whole part of the gaps, so as to give a complete appearance to the original pieces. After this reconstruction, the last layer of mortar was applied with a colour similar to the original one (photos of Franco Sciorilli).

19. The author visits the restored Herodian artwork in the Mount Nebo storeroom with his wife, Noémi, and their ʿAmmān-born daughter, Salome Alexandra (photo by Franco Sciorilli).

20. The restored Herodian floral decoration from the royal bathhouse of Mukāwir (Machaerus). The gypsum moulding fragments were discovered by the Franciscan archaeological excavations of Virgilio C. Corbo OFM during 1979, reconstructed by the research team of the Hungarian Academy of Arts during 2016–2017, and restored by Master Franco Sciorilli in 2018 for the 100th birthday of the late Father Corbo (photo by the Machaerus Archaeological Mission of the Hungarian Academy of Arts).

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

22. The Pontifical Gold Medal of His Holiness Pope Francis (photo copyright and courtesy of the Papal Household, Vatican City).



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

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