

Machaerus Castle where St John the Baptist was imprisoned and beheaded

# Among the stones of his prison

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Machaerus, the Herodian fortified royal palace, overlooking the Dead Sea in Transjordan, is the historical place, where, according to Flavius Josephus (*AJ* XVIII 5, 2) one of the holiest men of his era (known as Yokhanan the Baptizer; St John the Baptist, the Forerunner and Precursor of Jesus Christ; Prophet Yahya ibn Zakariyya) was imprisoned and executed by the Tetrarch Herod Antipas nearly 2000 years ago. The Hungarian Academy of Arts in collaboration with the Jordanian Department of Antiquities has been conducting archaeological excavations and architectural surveys in the ancient Royal Palace and City of Machaerus hilltop since July 2009.

Josephus described in details the citadel of Machaerus and its lower city (*BJ* VII, 6) – the rediscovery of the previous was the achievement of the German explorer Ulrich Jasper Seetzen (1807), and the latter of the French Dominican Fr Felix-Marie Abel (1909). We should not forget though that Christian pilgrimages to the Holy Land had only been initiated by the time of the Roman Emperor Constantine the Great and by that time the Machaerus was already a deserted place two and a half centuries ago, as it became a destination for the pilgrims only after its archaeological rediscovery in the 19th century.

An exploratory trial excavation, conducted by the American ordained Baptist-Minister E. Jerry Vardaman (1927-2000) in June 1968, lasted for three weeks. In the meantime, they transported all their 4,973 archaeological objects from Machaerus, with the permission of the Jordanian Government, to the United States. However, they have never published a word on their highly successful Machaerus Excavations.

The second and the third Machaerus excavations were led (in 1978-1981 and 1992-1993) by two well-known professors of the Studium Biblicum Franciscanum in Jerusalem: Virgilio Canio Corbo (1918-1991) and Michele Piccirillo (1944-2008). Although the results of their excavations were not included in evaluative archaeological final reports, they had published several remarkable preliminary articles. Nevertheless, a summarizing monograph and an article were published on the ceramic and numismatic materials by the members of the Corbo-team, Stanislaw Loffreda and Michele Piccirillo, respectively. From the architectural point of view, Fr Corbo concentrated primarily on the excavations of the citadel, and his final result was a sketched layout: the first ground plan of the interior of the fortified hilltop palace. The Corbo-headed archaeological mission was also the first to prove that the castle of Machaerus was unquestionably one of the mosaic-decorated fortified royal palaces of King Herod the Great. They were also the first to confirm the accounts of Josephus regarding the Hasmonean and First Jewish Revolt presence at the citadel by means of architectural, ceramicological and numismatic evidences.

Following the unexpected death of Fr Piccirillo in 2008, the Hungarian team resumed the excavations ex-

actly where the Studium Biblicum Franciscanum, led by two generations of Franciscan Italian academics, had left off. Our excavation tools and survey facilities already included 21st century equipments and techniques. The Research Team of the Hungarian Academy of Arts, following detailed archaeological surveys and excavations, in 2012 prepared the architectural descriptions and reconstructions of both, the Lower City and the Herodian Royal Fortified Palace.

One of the greatest results of our excavations was the discovery of the previously unexpected vertical dimension of the citadel's dead monument. For example, we unearthed the interior of the western bastion to find that its walls, previously believed to be less than 1.5 metre high, included intact walls that were 8.75 metres in height. In another case, we discovered and fully excavated the 15.5-metre-deep Hasmonean cistern

of the citadel, and it can be proven that it was used even during the Herodian period.

Very rich archaeological material came to light at this location as well. In total, we opened more than 50 research trenches for the better understanding of the monuments of Machaerus's citadel and its lower city.

Regarding our architectural surveys, the most important fruits of our investigations were the determination of the three historical periods of Machaerus city, as well as the detailed analysis of the architectural space development of the buildings – individually, and

in the context of building-complexes – and the preparation of their theoretical reconstructions. The complete architectural description of the monuments (with graphic and photographic documentation) was extended as well to all those building elements that were no longer *in situ* on the archaeological site.

Following the architectural surveys, we prepared three-dimensional digital monument-models, so as to provide a foundation for later theoretical reconstructions. The illustrations of the anastylis of the Doric and Ionic columns and the theoretical reconstruction of the fortified Herodian royal palace give a taste on the nature of our work.

Beside detailed building-diagnostic and archaeological-stratigraphical field- and wall-examinations of the monuments, our research method followed the so-called comparative archaeological



Aerial view of the archeological site

and architectural inspection. The Machaerus had been a member of a military fortress-network aimed at the defense of Jerusalem from the east during the first centuries BC and AD. After Jerusalem itself, these fortresses (Masada, Herodion, Hyrcania, Cypros, Doq and Alexandreion) represent the closest Late Hellenistic (Hasmonean), Herodian and Early Roman architectural and archaeological analogies. Therefore, our research team spent extensive periods on the West Bank to conduct comprehensive archaeological and architectural examinations of these fortifications, so as to be able to understand Machaerus better, and in light of their legacy and heritage, we were able to create its theoretical-architectural reconstructions.

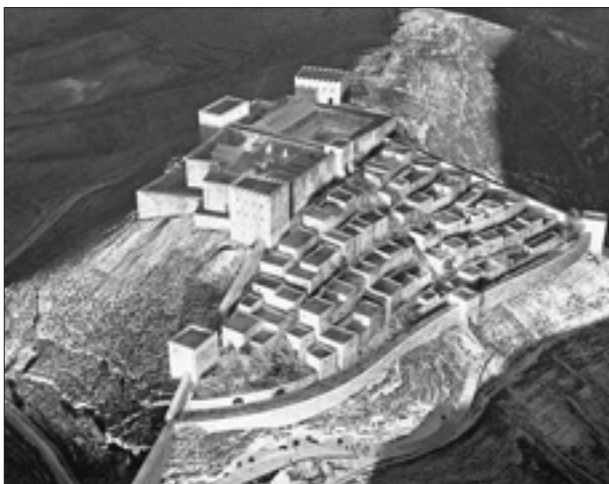
The archaeological mission of the Hungarian Academy of Arts is currently working on the monument conservation, preservation and anastylis reconstruction of the Machaerus in Transjordan and the present author published the first scientific final report monograph on the history, archaeology and architecture of the Machaerus as the 53rd volume of the Jerusalem Studium Biblicum Franciscanum's *Collectio Maior* academic series, titled "Machaerus I", published by the Edizioni Terra Santa in Milan.

## Mass at Santa Marta

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devil wants to sift him like wheat". At the same time, Jesus tells him that he has prayed for him and gives him a new mission: "When you have turned back, strengthen your brethren". Therefore, the Holy Father said, Jesus not only expects to help us escape temptation but he also trusts us. This is a great strength", because "he always opens up new horizons" while, through temptation, the devil "closes and develops environments which cause you to fight" and "seek justification for accusing others".

"Let us not be ensnared by temptation" the Holy Father said. You can only escape temptation through "listening to the Word of Jesus". He concluded his homily with the words: "Let us ask the Lord to always say to us, in times of temptation, as he did with the disciples, with patience: Stop. Do not worry. Lift up your eyes, look to the horizon. Do not close yourself in, move forward. His Word will save us from falling into sin in moments of temptation".



Computer graphic reconstruction of the citadel