Machaerus Castle where St John the Baptist was imprisoned and beheaded

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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 (AB XVII, 6) one of the holiest men of his era (known as Yohanan the Baptist; 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 detail the citadel of Machaerus and its lower city (AB VII, 6) – the rediscovery of the previous was the achievement of the German explorer Ulrich Jasper Scezten (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 Bishop-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 had never published a word on their highly successful Machaerus Excavations. This resulted in the third Machaerus excavations being led (in 1978-1980 and 1992-1993) by two well-known professors of the Studium Biblicum Franciscanum – Jerzy Virgilio Canio Corbo (1928-1994) and Michele Piccirillo (1944-2008). Although the results of their excavations were not immediately published as 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 Josephus had regarding the Hasmonean and First Jewish Revolt presence at the site, by means of archeological, ceramological and numismatic evidences.

The theoretical 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.

The Herodian fortress


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Among the stones of his prison

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Aerial view of the archeological site

Architectural 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.

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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”.

Mass at Santa Marta

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