

THE HUNGARIAN ARCHAEOLOGICAL
EXCAVATIONS IN THE HERODIAN ROYAL CITY
OF MACHAERUS AT THE DEAD SEA,
WHERE PRINCESS SALOME DANCED,
AND SAINT JOHN THE BAPTIST
WAS IMPRISONED AND BEHEADED*

by

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There is a narrative account of the Gospels (*Mk* 6:14–29; *Mt* 14:1–12) that has a confirmation from a 1st century historian outside the Bible: The imprisonment and beheading of Saint John the Baptist in Machaerus. This is the only Gospel passage for which we have a parallel narrative in a non-Christian work of the same era (Josephus, *Ant. Jud.* 18.5, 2; as confirmed later by Eusebius, *Hist. Eccl.* 1.11, 4–6). The historical data of Josephus on John's arrest and jail by Tetrarch Herod Antipas are attested by all the Gospels, and their accounts are consistent with and complement that of Josephus. Pliny the Elder wrote that "*Machaerus, next to Jerusalem, was the most strongly fortified place in Judea*" (*Hist. Nat.* V. 15, 16). The first 57 years of archaeological research (1968–2025) was conducted by the joint efforts of several academic institutions at the historical Gospel scene (1968: Southern Baptist Theological Seminary; 1978–1981 and 1992–1993: Studium Biblicum Franciscanum, Jerusalem [SBF]; from 2009 onward: Hungarian Academy of Arts, in collaboration with the Royal Jordanian Department of Antiquities, the SBF, the École biblique et archéologique française de Jérusalem, and with the Cobb Institute of Archaeology at Mississippi State University), that revealed the fortified Herodian royal city and citadel-palace of Machaerus in Transjordan, overlooking the Dead Sea, where Princess Salome danced.

Keywords: Machaerus, Josephus, John the Baptist, King Herod, Antipas, Herodias, Salome, Jordan, Dead Sea, anastylosis, circumvallation, metalepsis

* The shortened version of this paper was presented by the author as the *lectio magistralis* during the inaugural session of the academic year at the Palazzo della Cancelleria in Rome, on 29 November 2024, upon the invitation of the Pontifical Academy of Roman Archaeology.

HISTORICAL SOURCES ON MACHAERUS

The number of first-century written sources related to our archaeological site is extremely high, compared to other Transjordanian fortresses or ancient cities on the right side of the Holy Land. Among these sources, we have four that describe Machaerus by even highlighting its name. The four can be divided into two groups. The first includes the notes of two great geographers of the ancient world, Strabo and Pliny the Elder, of fascinating historical detail. The second comprises two works by Flavius Josephus, the most important Roman historian of first-century Judea.

Our earliest written source is Strabo's *Geography* (*Geographica*), which was completed sometime before the author's death in AD 24. This is followed by the *Natural History* (*Naturalis Historia*) of Pliny the Elder, where Machaerus is also mentioned by name. This work was written over half a century later, and appeared in about 77, after the end of the First Jewish War. In chronological order, our third author of the first century who described and mentioned Machaerus by name in his two opera-magna, the *Jewish War* (*Bellum Judaicum*) and the *History of the Jews* (*Antiquitates Judaicae*), was Flavius Josephus. His first work appeared around the same year as the *Naturalis Historia*, originally in Aramaic, and was soon translated into Greek. It gives a detailed geographical description of the fortified royal Herodian settlement and its environment, which in the nineteenth century was instrumental in identifying the ruins of the lost ancient city. The second one includes the report of a highly important historical event:

“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, who was a good man, and commanded the Jews to exercise virtue, both as to righteousness towards one another, and piety towards God, and so to come to baptism; for that the washing [with water] would be acceptable to him, if they made use of it, not in order to the putting away [or the remission] of some sins [only], but for the purification of the body; supposing still that the soul was thoroughly purified beforehand by righteousness. Now when [many] others came in crowds about him, for they were very greatly moved [or pleased] by hearing his words, 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 (Μαχαϊρούντα), the castle I before mentioned, and was there put to death." (*Antiquitates Judaicae* XVIII, 5, 2)¹

It is generally accepted that the account given by Josephus about John the Baptist (dated to ca. 93–94) is genuine and authentic from the point of view of historical criticism. The text is witnessed in all the relevant manuscripts, without exception; its vocabulary, style, and general message are in harmony with the other works of Josephus.² The authenticity of the 18th book of the *Antiquitates* was confirmed by Origen, who in about AD 250 wrote the following:

"For Josephus in the eighteenth book of the Jewish Antiquities bears witness to John as the one who was 'the Baptist' and who promised purification for those who were baptized." (*Contra Celsum* I, 47)

In ca. 324, Eusebius likewise endorsed the reliability and validity of the description of Josephus when he cited the relevant text in his *Church History*:

"John called the Baptist [...] On account of Herod's suspicion John was sent in bonds to the citadel of Machaerus, and there slain." (*Historia Ecclesiastica* I, 11, 4–6)

Meanwhile, Eusebius was the first to clearly state that the description of Josephus does not contradict the Gospels, but rather is a confirmation of, and a "testimony" to them. His still valid observation includes the following:

"John the Baptist was beheaded by the younger Herod, as is stated in the Gospels. Josephus also records the same fact, making mention of Herodias by name, and stating that, although she was the wife of his brother, Herod made her his own wife after divorcing his former lawful wife [...]. The same Josephus confesses in this account that John the Baptist was an exceedingly righteous man, and thus agrees with the things written of him in the Gospels." (*Ecclesiastical History* I, 11, 1 and 3)

In the New Testament of the Bible, all the Gospels talk about the imprisonment of John the Baptist (including *John* 3:24), albeit without mentioning the name of Machaerus. Among them, *Matthew* and *Luke* specifically talk about the messages exchanged between the Baptist, who was imprisoned in Peraea (Eastern Judea), and Jesus of Nazareth, who was in Galilee at that time. (This conversation may have come from the Jesus-*logia* of the so-called *Q-source*, or

¹ The passages from Josephus quoted in this article are from the classic English translation by W. WHISTON.

² MEIER 1992, pp. 225–227.

Logienquelle.) Furthermore, the Gospels of *Mark* and *Matthew* give detailed descriptions of the dramatic circumstances of the imprisonment and execution of John the Baptist. They are of the opinion that the confinement was a consequence of John the Baptist's criticism of the second marriage of Tetrarch Herod Antipas with his sister-in-law Herodias, the lawful wife of his brother Philip. According to their narratives, the execution of John took place on the Tetrarch's birthday after Herodias' daughter danced for Antipas in front of the guests and her uncle promised her that she could ask anything she wanted. On her mother's advice, the girl asked for the head of John the Baptist, which she received from the Tetrarch on a tray. The date of the event according to *Luke* (3:1) was about AD 29. Now let us listen to what the most detailed historical source tells us about them, preserved as an integral part of the Gospel according to Mark. The parallel version of the Gospel according to Matthew (14, 1-12) is a shortened form of the following account:

"King Herod had heard about him [Jesus] since by now his name was well known. Some were saying, 'John the Baptist has risen from the dead, and that is why miraculous powers are at work in him.' others said, 'He is Elijah,' others again, 'He is a prophet, like the prophets we used to have.' But when Herod heard this, he said, 'It is John whose head I cut off; he has risen from the dead.' Now it was this same Herod who had sent to have John arrested, and had had him chained up in prison because of Herodias, his brother Philip's wife whom he had married. For John had told Herod, 'It is against the law for you to have your brother's wife.' As for Herodias, she was furious with him and wanted to kill him, but she was not able to do so, because Herod was in awe of John, knowing him to be a good and upright man, and gave him his protection. When he had heard him speak, he was greatly perplexed, and yet he liked to listen to him. An opportunity came on Herod's birthday when he gave a banquet for the nobles of his court, for his army officers and for the leading figures in Galilee. When the daughter of this same Herodias came in and danced, she delighted Herod and his guests; so the king said to the girl, 'Ask me anything you like and I will give it you.' And he swore her an oath, 'I will give you anything you ask, even half my kingdom.' She went out and said to her mother, 'What shall I ask for?' She replied, 'The head of John the Baptist.' The girl at once rushed back to the king and made her request, 'I want you to give me John the Baptist's head, immediately, on a dish.' The king was deeply distressed but, thinking of the oaths he had sworn and of his guests, he was reluctant to break his word to her. At once the king sent one of the bodyguards with orders to bring John's head. The man went off and beheaded him in the prison; then he brought the

head on a dish and gave it to the girl, and the girl gave it to her mother. When John's disciples heard about this, they came and took his body and laid it in a tomb." (Mk 6:14–29)

It is a very complex and quintessential narrative, not easy to understand at first reading. It deals with six locations and not less than ten movements (entries and exits) in sixteen verses, which is something absolutely unique in the Gospels! There are three architectural spaces inside and three places outside the fortified royal city of Machaerus that we concern ourselves with: the place of the arrest (A), the subsequent location of the disciples of John (D), and the tomb in the cemetery (T) obviously must have been outside the Herodian city. The banquet hall of the Tetrarch (B) and the quarters of Herodias and her daughter (H) were certainly in the royal palace, whereas the prison of the Baptist (P) must have been situated within the fortified city walls, but outside the luxurious royal palace. As it is clearly trackable, there are ten movements, five entries and five exits, six of which are from or into the Banquet Scene. In the translated English words of the Gospel narrative: "*sent, arrested, chained up, came in, went out, rushed back, sent, went off, brought, gave, came, took, laid.*" We can see the sequence of movements on the following schematic drawing:

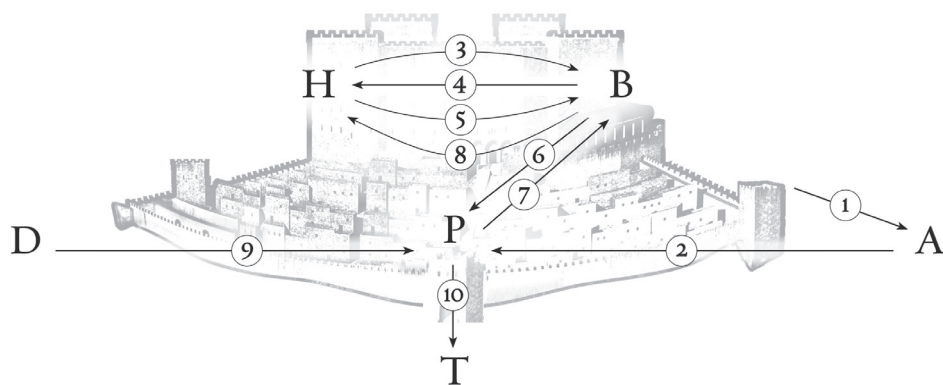


Fig. 1: The schematic drawing that illustrates the sequence of the Machaerus movements during the calvary of Saint John the Baptist in Mark 6:14–29.

Josephus (*Antiquitates* XVIII, 5) provides important additions to the Gospel accounts. We learn for example that the first wife of Herod Antipas was a foreign princess, the daughter of the Nabataean King Aretas IV Philopatris. He mentions that Herodias (the second wife) was previously married to Herod (probably Herod Philip, see Mk 6:17 and Mt 14:3) and the name of her daughter

was Salome. According to Josephus, the scenes of both the imprisonment and execution of John took place in Machaerus. He also provides a breathtaking account of the Herodian foundation of the royal city of Machaerus (in ca. 30 BC), describing the relation between the citadel-palace (acropolis) and the connected lower city (suburbium) as well. It would become the Herodian Gospel scene, about sixty years after its foundation, where Saint John the Baptist was imprisoned, and where the Hasmonean royal princess Salome danced.

“But when Herod came to be king, he thought the place to be worthy of the utmost regard, and of being built upon in the firmest manner, and this especially because it lay so near to Arabia; for it is seated in a convenient place on that account, and hath a prospect toward that country; he therefore surrounded a large space of ground with walls and towers, and built a city (πόλις) there, out of which city there was a way that led up to the very citadel itself on the top of the mountain; nay, more than this, he built a wall round that top of the hill, and erected towers at the corners, of a hundred and sixty cubits high; in the middle of which place he built a palace (βασιλειον), after a magnificent manner, wherein were large and beautiful edifices. He also made a great many reservoirs for the reception of water, that there might be plenty of it ready for all uses, and those in the properest places that were afforded him there. Thus, did he, as it were, contend with the nature of the place, that he might exceed its natural strength and security (which yet itself rendered it hard to be taken) by those fortifications which were made by the hands of men. Moreover, he put a large quantity of darts and other machines of war into it, and contrived to get everything thither that might in any way contribute to its inhabitants’ security, under the longest siege possible.” (Josephus, *Bellum Judaicum* VII, 6, 2)

The above description is the most precious written document on the architectural heritage of the Herodian royal acropolis-palace, and of the connecting (lower) city. However, Josephus also recorded historical events as well, associated with the palace, including the ones its walls had witnessed. The Herodian city existed only for two generations, from about 30 BC until AD 36 when the Nabataean King Aretas IV Philopatris had it destroyed. After the death of the Jewish King Herod Agrippa I in AD 44, the Roman troops annexed Judea, and stayed among the renovated ruins of the naturally defended Machaerus citadel, no more a fortified royal palace, only a military garrison. Among the peoples who lived in its rebuilt lower city, we can also find a Zealot Jewish community. We are informed by Josephus that at the beginning of the Jewish War (AD 66), these rebel Zealots successfully seized the citadel of the Roman garrison, which he describes as “the upper citadel,” whereas for the settlement below, he explicitly uses the expressions “lower” and “the lower part of the city.”

Josephus gave a gripping recount (*Bellum Judaicum* II, 18, 6 and VII, 6, 4) about the final destruction of the fortress during the winter of 71/72 by Lucilius Bassus, then prefect of Judea and commander of the Legion X Fretensis. We will discuss the Roman siege and circumvallation in the sixth part of the article.

Consequently, in addition to the sources by Strabo, Pliny the Elder, and Josephus, there are complementary ones in the Gospels that do not mention Machaerus by name but report on historical events which, according to Josephus, happened within its walls. We may call the latter group of text passages – which are independent from the previous ones but are indirectly connected to them – Biblical sources, that include all the Gospels of the New Testament. The connecting link between these sources is the above-quoted account of Josephus, wherein he testifies that the imprisonment and the execution of John the Baptist took place in Machaerus. From this perspective, we may call the former group ‘extra-Biblical sources’, and can classify the two groups as follows:

FIRST-CENTURY WRITTEN SOURCES ON MACHAERUS IN CHRONOLOGICAL ORDER

EXTRA BIBLICAL SOURCES (Direct)

Geographical and historical references

STRABO, *Geographica* (completed before his death in 24)

PLINY THE ELDER, *Naturalis Historia* (ca. 77)

JOSEPHUS, *Bellum Judaicum* (between 75 and 79)

JOSEPHUS, *Antiquitates Judaicae* (ca. 93–94)

BIBLICAL SOURCES (Indirect)

Descriptions of the Gospels of the New Testament,
in relative chronology

MARK

Q-SOURCE (cited by Matthew and Luke)

MATTHEW

LUKE

JOHN

Not only can we sort our nine written sources (known to us all in Greek) according to their dates of creation or identify them as being Biblical or extra-Biblical accounts, but we can also classify their *contents*, based on historical chronology: they report on past events in sequential timelines. Concerning the three classical periods of Machaerus, we have descriptions providing us

with essential information on the historical landscape and the appearance of its once magnificent monuments.

The three chapters of the history of Machaerus can be reconstructed *exclusively* on the basis of the nine first-century historical sources through their intertextual analysis along the following timeline, in order to provide a clear understanding of its more than a hundred-and-fifty-year history. At the beginning, Machaerus had been a short-lived Hasmonean fortress, which was destroyed by the Romans. A generation later, Herod the Great founded the city with its mountaintop fortified royal palace (on the ruins of the erstwhile Hasmonean fortress), which was destroyed two generations later by the Nabataeans. Upon the ruins of the Herodian citadel an Early Roman military garrison was erected, and together with the rebuilt lower city, it became a sanctuary for the rebels of the first Jewish war. Six years later, after the war, the city of Machaerus was destroyed once more by the Romans. The exact historical context unfolds before our eyes through the relevant classical sources of Strabo, Pliny the Elder, Josephus, and the four Gospels.

LATE HELLENISTIC (HASMONEAN) PERIOD *ca. 90 BC – 57 BC*

The Machaerus fortress was erected by King Alexander Jannaeus in about 90 BC.³ During the reign of his widow, Queen Salome Alexandra (76–67 BC), it became one of the royal treasure houses of the Hasmonean rulers until 63 BC, when the Roman general and statesman Gnaeus Pompeius Magnus (Pompey the Great) demolished its walls. King Aristobolus II tried to seek protection for his one thousand soldiers in Machaerus in 57 BC, consequently he reinforced the ruined walls, but the Romans captured and destroyed the Hasmonean fortress two days later for the second time, led by the Syrian provincial governor Aulus Gabinius. (Sources: Strabo, *Geographica* XVI, 2, 40; Josephus, *Bellum Judaicum* I, 8, 5–6; VII, 6, 2; Josephus, *Antiquitates Judaicae* XIV, 5, 4 and 6, 1; XIII, 16, 3.)

HERODIAN PERIOD *ca. 30 BC – AD 36*

In about 30 BC, King Herod the Great erected a city on Mount Machaerus, surrounded by fortified walls and towers, and provided large cisterns to it. By

³ The Nabataean King Obodas I defeated the Jewish King Alexander Jannaeus in the Battle of Gadara in 93 BC, who had to stop his aggressive expansionist policy against his previous ally. He had no other choice but to defend his already established country against the Nabataeans. This is the time when, in about 90 BC, he built the fortress of Machaerus in Transjordan, just 7 kilometers from the Nabataean border and also from the Dead Sea, in order to protect Judea.

replacing the ruins of the Hasmonean fortress, he built a magnificent royal palace for himself on the mountaintop within the citadel that could be reached through a road leading up within the lower city. As a result, Machaerus became, "next to Jerusalem, the most strongly fortified place in Judea" (Pliny the Elder, *Naturalis Historia* V. 15, 16). Following the death of King Herod in 4 BC, his son Herod Antipas inherited the fortified city together with the territories in Perea and Galilee. The castle of Machaerus thus became the only hereditary royal palace of the Tetrarch from his father. (Sources: Josephus, *Bellum* VII, 6, 2; Josephus, *Antiquitates* XVII, 8, 1; XVIII, 5, 1–2 and 4.)

According to Josephus (*Antiquitates* XVIII, 5, 2), Antipas imprisoned and executed John the Baptist within the fortified walls of Machaerus city, and the Synoptic Gospels give detailed descriptions of the circumstances (Mk 6:14–29; Mt 14:1–12; Lk 9:7–9). The imprisonment of the Baptist is attested by all-the-Gospels (Mt 4:12; Mk 1:14; Lk 3:20; Jn 3:24), and two of them even make mention of an exchange of messages during his confinement between him and Jesus in Galilee through his disciples (*Logienquelle* in: Mt 11:2–6 and Lk 7:18–23). According to the Gospel of Luke (3:1–3), we are able to date the historical events of the imprisonment and beheading to about AD 29. The Nabataean King Aretas IV Philopatris, the former father-in-law of Tetrarch Herod Antipas, defeated the troops of his former son-in-law in AD 36, and destroyed the Herodian Machaerus. (Josephus, *Antiquitates* XVIII, 5, 1–2).

EARLY ROMAN PERIOD⁴

AD 44 – 72

After the death of King Herod Agrippa I in 44, the ruined city of Machaerus, together with Perea, came under the control of the Roman Praefectus Iudaeae in Jerusalem. On the ruins of the original Machaerus citadel a military garrison stronghold was erected for the Roman army (Josephus, *Bel-lum Judaicum* II, 18, 6). In 66, the citadel was taken over and reinforced by the Zealot rebels of its lower city. After the destruction of Jerusalem, upon the

⁴ From an archaeological point of view, the Early Roman Period in the eastern Mediterranean lasted from Pompeius' conquest until the fall of the Bar Kokhba revolt (63 BC – AD 135). But this is not uniformly true for the whole of the Levant. In Damascus for instance, the Roman era did indeed begin in 63 BC, but in ancient Palestine the period preceding the Herodian era was called the Late Hellenistic period. The Early Roman period only began after the Herodian one (in Jerusalem already from AD 6). At Machaerus, this period encompassed only the roughly twenty-seven years between AD 44 (the death of King Herod Agrippa I) and the winter of AD 71/72 (the annihilating punitive expedition of the Legion X Fretensis). Before that, from 30 BC until AD 44, the administration was Herodian at Machaerus, not Roman – even though in the last eight years (following the punitive expedition of the Nabateans), the once magnificent royal city was already in ruins.

order of Emperor Vespasian, the Romans conquered Machaerus for the third time during the winter of 71/72 with their Legion X Fretensis, under the commandership of the Roman Legatus and Governor of Judea Province, Lucilius Bassus. The fortress of Machaerus was then destroyed, vanished into oblivion, and disappeared from the maps. (Josephus, *Bellum Judaicum* II, 18, 6; IV, 9, 9; VII, 6, 1 and 4).

It should be noted that *all* of the above historical information about the lost Gospel site of Machaerus was already known and acknowledged from the accounts of these first-century geographers and historians. However, prior to its rediscovery in 1807, no one knew where the historical place itself had been situated (*Figs. 2-5*).

REDISCOVERY AND RESEARCH HISTORY (1807–2007)

It was only after 1735 “lost” years that on 17 January 1807, the German-Friisian explorer Ulrich Jasper Seetzen (1767–1810) successfully identified, and thus rediscovered the ruins of the ancient royal castle of Machaerus. He based his explorations partly on the accounts of Josephus and partly on the name of the nearby village, Mkaur, as it was then called (today they pronounce it as *Mukawer*), in which he recognized an etymological reflex of Machaerus. The academic community is in general agreement that Seetzen was the first to rediscover and correctly identify the citadel of Machaerus. From his brief but accurate description it is evident that he personally visited the hilltop ruins (*Fig. 6*):

“From the indication of the location, I was convinced that this had to be the name of the place. The ruins here are very significant; they have a single entrance, which leads over a long bridge, and there are still very large ashlar blocks that belonged to the former masonry. [...] Mkaur lies on the high summit of the long Attarus mountain and at its north end is close to the south side of the Zarqa Ma’in. The sides of Machaerus Mountain are extraordinarily rocky, rugged, and unsurpassable from three sides.”⁵

His discovery was published in a monograph, but only forty-four years after his death, in 1854, in Berlin. This late publication, however, does not alter the fact that Seetzen found ancient Machaerus, which he not only identified and described in his posthumous book, but also precisely indicated and

⁵ SEETZEN 1854, p. 330.

scientifically documented on a Dead Sea map he published in 1810 and printed in the Thuringian city of Gotha.⁶ Consequently, at the border of the small Transjordan village, Seetzen discovered an isolated mountain overlooking the Dead Sea whose geographical place and geomorphological formations properly fitted the ancient descriptions of Strabo, Pliny the Elder, and especially Josephus, concerning the Hasmonean-Herodian royal castle of Machaerus. The limited surface ruins and the visible geographical evidence matched the first-century literary sources. However, the identification of the unexcavated ruins on an etymological and geographical basis was an indirect and indefinite one: without the archaeological evidence, it was only a well-based scientific theory.

The decisive archaeological proof that allowed the identification of the conical mountain-ridge near Mukawer village with its hilltop ruins as the ancient citadel of Machaerus was discovered only 158 years later, by another German scholar, a compatriot of Seetzen, called August Strobel (1930–2006). It was in October 1965 that the then thirty-five-year-old August Strobel first visited the still unexcavated Machaerus hilltop. As he recalled nine years later:

“An excursion of the German Evangelical Institute for Archaeology of the Holy Land [in Jerusalem] was supported by the Department of Antiquities [of Jordan]. On a sunny afternoon we drove from Amman to Mukawer to visit the ruins [...]. While standing on this high top-flattened place (699/700 m above sea level), I discovered a line of stones, looking like a wall and encircling the whole area around the fortress. I then surmised, and now it is beyond all doubts, that these stones, artificially arranged, represent the remains of the Roman circumvallation erected in AD 72 at the end of the Roman-Jewish war, still visible in the landscape of Mukawer.”⁷

It was a landslide discovery at Machaerus, the most important one since Seetzen. Strobel published his extraordinary academic observations in 1968.⁸ He discovered an Early Roman, 3.5 km long circumvallation stone wall, very similar to the one around Masada – in fact its parallel, twin monument structure, erected by the same military legion. He arrived to the brilliant scientific conclusion that in antiquity, the Herodian fortress of ancient Machaerus had to stand in the epicenter of this long Early Roman siege wall with fifteen military camps! The unfinished agger-ramp provided further evidence for the identification of these unexcavated ancient ruins with the structures

⁶ SEETZEN 1810.

⁷ STROBEL 1974, pp. 101–102.

⁸ STROBEL 1968.

mentioned in Josephus' description of the siege of Machaerus in AD 71/72. In light of all this, it was a conclusion of crucial importance that the city was besieged by the same Fretensis that captured Masada in the following years. According to the ancient historical sources, during the Early Roman period the only place where a military siege against a fortress was executed by the Tenth Legion in the Transjordan area was Machaerus. Thus, the circumvallation wall (from the Latin verb *circumvallare*, 'to surround with siegeworks') was undoubtedly the missing link that was necessary to identify the ancient historical site beyond a doubt before its archaeological excavations began. We shall return to this Roman siege later, in the sixth part of the article.

In the wake of the Third Arab–Israeli War fought between June 5 and 10, 1967, also known as the 'Six-Day War,' the Kingdom of Jordan was in ruins. Losing its heart – the holy city of Jerusalem with the west bank of the holy Jordan River – and receiving floods of miserable Palestinian refugees made life in this little desert kingdom bitter and very challenging. But this historical moment also marked the beginning of a new era for archaeological research in Transjordan, a geographical entity among artificial political borders (previously a remote hinterland of ancient Palestine), which became formally independent from the Jerusalem institutes of archaeology and academic research only after 1967. As a result, new research-institutes were created in the post–Six-Day-War Transjordan Hashemite kingdom. The first of these was the Amman establishment of the American Institute (ACOR) in 1968, followed by its British (CBRL), French (IFPO), German (GPIA), and Italian (FAI) counterparts. The latter was organized through the Franciscan Archaeological Institute in the Mount Nebo Friary of the Custody of the Holy Land, under the protection of the Vatican. The long-term Italian institute-directors, Fathers Camillo Bellarmino Bagatti OFM (1905–1990) and Michele Piccirillo OFM (1944–2008), were both correspondent members of the Pontifical Roman Academy of Archaeology.

This bloody war produced the first "archaeological sondage," a long dugout trench on Mount Machaerus, an approximately 30-meter-long, more or less east–west oriented and a good meter deep, zigzag rifle pit. The first photograph on this military construction was taken in 1968 by Jerry Vardaman; he labelled it „*fatal trenches*". This June 1967 dugout, situated in a right angle to the Dead Sea front line, was made by the Fedayeen, the local defenders against the Israeli troops. Two thousand years after the Zealots, in 1967, the Machaerus mountain-top of unique military and strategic importance became once again a rebellious, fighting focal point against the new lords of Jerusalem – this time not the Romans, but modern Israelis. Mount Machaerus, standing at ca. 1150 meters above the Dead Sea, still has the same exceptional geographic location as in antiquity, with a breathtaking panorama spreading until Al-Salt (ancient Saltus) in the north, Masada in the south, and Alexandrium–Sartaba, Jericho, Jerusalem, Bethlehem and the Hebron mountains in the West Bank (Figs. 5 and 11).

The Fedayeen could clearly see the Israeli movements on the field and in the air, but could do nothing against them. However, these long, „*fatal trenches*” became a vital and significant reference for the first excavators, “archaeological sondages,” being the first “windows” to the past of the citadel. Accordingly, the dig-pioneers opened their *Area A* next to the eastern, and *Area B* next to the western ends of this 1967 war dugout (*Fig. 7*). The first scientific, archaeological *excavation* research team ever to Machaerus started its initiating field-work under American colors on the first anniversary of the outbreak of the Six-Day War: on June 5, 1968. But it was just a coincidence. They were not Zionist Jews but pious Southern Baptist Christians from Kentucky, headed by an ordained Baptist minister, E. Jerry Vardaman (1927–2000) from the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary.

The archaeological excavations and surveys, conducted by the American E. Jerry Vardaman, in June 1968, lasted only for three weeks, but under the supervision of 14 highly professional archaeologists and a lot of local workmen. In the meantime, they transported all their 4,973 archaeological finds from Machaerus, with the permission of the Jordanian Government, to the United States. These Machaeriac archaeological objects were treasured in 13 large-size unopened boxes in the basement of the Cobb Institute of Archaeology at Mississippi State University, until the present author started to study them in the company of their original and extremely professional excavation archives in 2013. The American scholars never printed a word on their very successful Machaerus excavations, meanwhile they were all published in 2013 and 2015 (in *Machaerus I–II*) by the present author.⁹

The second and the third Machaerus excavations were led (during 1978–1981 and 1992–1993) by two well-known professors of the Studium Biblicum Franciscanum in Jerusalem: Fathers Virgilio Canio Corbo OFM (1918–1991), and after his death by his former student, Michele Piccirillo OFM. Although the scientific results of their excavations could not be included in evaluative academic final reports (as they were waiting in vain for the publications of the 1968 American-Baptist mission), however they had published four very short preliminary articles.¹⁰ Nevertheless, a summarizing monograph-chapter and an article were published on the 1978–1981 ceramic and the 1978–1980 numismatic inventories, by the Franciscan members of the Corbo-team, Stanislao Loffreda OFM (1932–) and Michele Piccirillo, respectively.¹¹

From the architectural point of view, Father Corbo concentrated primarily on the excavations of the citadel, and his final result was a sketched layout: the

⁹ Vörös 2013, pp. 64–95; Vörös 2015, pp. 110–263 and 272–373.

¹⁰ Corbo 1978; Corbo 1979; Corbo 1980; Corbo-Loffreda 1981.

¹¹ Loffreda 1996; Piccirillo 1980.

first ground plan on the interior of the fortified Herodian hilltop palace. The Corbo-headed Italian archaeological mission was also the first to prove *in publications* (as Vardaman did not publish his results!) that the Trans-Dead-Sea castle of Machaerus was unquestionably one of the mosaic-decorated fortified royal palaces of King Herod the Great in ancient Judea. They were also the first to confirm in preliminary reports the accounts of Josephus, regarding the Hasmonean and First Jewish Revolt presence at the citadel, by means of architectural, ceramological and numismatic evidences. Probably their most marvelous discoveries were the Tepidarium-mosaic of the royal Herodian bathhouse (the oldest known mosaic-art in Jordan), and the unearthing of the Herodian royal court with the remains of 11 Doric column prints on its stylobates, one of them with a still *in situ* Doric column-base (Figs. 8-9). The archaeological mission of Virgilio Corbo was an extraordinary success, but he could not crown it with the excavation final report, as he was waiting for the publications of the American-Baptists.

The Second Italian-Franciscan Excavation (1992–1993) started just six months after the death of Corbo. His disciple Father Michele Piccirillo had two important developments on Mount Machaerus, parallel with his excavations in the Byzantine settlement of Mukawer, in a good kilometer distance (1991–1994).¹² He excavated in full the 9.5-meter-deep and ca. 70 m² Herodian cistern in the center of the royal courtyard, and discovered the most precious architectural elements of the Herodian royal palace at the bottom of this cistern (Fig. 10). Secondly, he achieved in the Department of Antiquities of Jordan to build a proper road to the top of the citadel. As Father Piccirillo died prematurely in 2008, he had not published himself anything about the fieldwork there, except for a very brief summary on the internet in 2004.¹³ As mentioned above, his Franciscan predecessor, who excavated there before him for four years (1978–1981), the late Father Virgilio Corbo, had not published his results either. We studied, evaluated and prepared for publication the neglected Franciscan graphic and photographic archives in Jerusalem, and the connected archaeological material in the storerooms of the Mount Nebo Friary, under the full academic support of the fathers of the Studium Biblicum Franciscanum.¹⁴

To make the site even more problematic, not only two generations of Franciscan archaeologists died without publishing their excavation reports, but as mentioned above, the first archaeological fieldwork (1968) carried out by the

¹² PICCIRILLO 1995; MARINO, MARTELLA, FITIANI 2017.

¹³ PICCIRILLO 2004; See publications by the members of his team: BIANCHI, FAGELLA 1993; MARINO, MARTELLA, FITIANI 2017; with a critical conclusion VÖRÖS 2022, pp. 218–241.

¹⁴ The archaeological results of the Italian-Franciscan mission: VÖRÖS 2013, pp. 100–141; VÖRÖS 2015, pp. 264–271; VÖRÖS 2019, pp. 337–449.

American Baptists remained entirely unpublished as well, without as much as a single article. Consequently, seven seasons of archaeological excavations took place in the preceding forty years, before the death of Father Piccirillo in 2008, and in archaeological details nothing was known, nothing was published. So much information was seemingly buried with the three excavators (the Baptist minister Jerry Vardaman passed away in 2000) that there was a real danger of losing the archaeological legacy of the partly excavated Machaerus citadel for good. This precarious situation could have easily resulted in the *dethronement of Machaerus as an authentic, genuine historical site, an original Gospel scene*, and the partially excavated ancient monuments could have perished with their lost archaeological context. Needless to say, the excavations were far from over.

ARCHAEOLOGY AND ARCHITECTURE OF THE HERODIAN ROYAL PALACE

Our initial Machaerus surveys 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 the architectural surveys, the most important results of our scientific investigations have been determining the three historical periods of Machaerus and analyzing 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 as well that were no longer *in situ* on the archaeological site. 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, softwares, 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.

During our excavations since 2009, 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 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, Herodion, 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 Machaerus in ancient Judea (*Fig. 11*). 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 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 Machaerus.

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.¹⁵ At the same time, their results – which we were able to harmonize and synthesize with ours – helped us to better understand the citadel. In retrospect, we have to admit that 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 archaeological excavations, 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 our 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

¹⁵ The excavation results of the American-Baptist mission: VÖRÖS 2013, pp. 64–95; VÖRÖS 2015, pp. 110–263 and 272–373. For the Italian-Franciscan mission, see the previous footnote.

(Masada, Herodion, and Cypros), aqueducts (Hyrkania and Alexandrium) or Doric peristyle courtyard (Alexandrium)¹⁶ with those of 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 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 was clearly detectable and convincingly demonstrable.

To give the reader 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: kilnerjars, 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 tessellatum mosaic art (with red, white, and black tesserae); over five hundred gypsum moulding pieces; over three hundred colored fresco fragments, etc., etc. These objects were all published with color photos and drawings in my so-called ‘Machaerus trilogy’, in addition to the aforementioned ceramological and numismatic studies of Fathers Loffreda and Piccirillo. These pieces of archaeological hard evidence provided a coherent corpus that enabled us to put Machaerus on the map of the Holy Land in an authentic form, similar to Masada or Herodion. Let us note however that the Herodian fortresses on the West Bank of the Dead Sea were all converted into Byzantine monasteries – Herodion even became a Crusader fortress. 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 (*Figs. 12–22*).

We have already mentioned that the final reports of the excavations were published in three academic monographs, the ‘Machaerus trilogy’. They appeared as volumes 53, 55, and 56 of the distinguished *Collectio Maior* series, in

¹⁶ VÖRÖS 2023.

the large-size archaeological monographs of the Studium Biblicum Franciscanum in Jerusalem, on 1548 book pages. Following their respective publications in 2013, 2015, and 2019, I made several book launches and academic presentations in person, among other places in Los Angeles, Paris, London, Berlin, Milan, Firenze, Rome, Budapest, Jerusalem, and Amman. Naturally, I also participated in several archaeological, Herodian, and Biblical conferences. The three most memorable ones among them were the full-house presentation in the British Museum BP Lecture Theater (the 2014 Iain Browning Memorial Lecture, organized by the Palestine Exploration Fund), the 2014 *Lectio Magistralis* of the Jerusalem Dies Academicus (organized by the SBF and the *École biblique et archéologique française de Jérusalem*), and the Machaerus presentation in the Royal Palace of Amman on June 13, 2019, upon the invitation of HRH Prince El Hassan bin Talal, our royal Patron. Taking advantage of the COVID-19 pandemic, I wrote a 420-page long scientific evaluation in 2022, on the Biblical aspect of the historical site, titled: *Machaerus: The Golgotha of John the Baptist*, that was published by the Hungarian Academy of Arts in Budapest; and a short pilgrim guide, titled: *Mount Machaerus*, published in 2024 by the American Center of Research in Amman.

CONTEXTUALIZING THE HISTORICAL RECORDS AND THE ARCHAEOLOGICAL EVIDENCE

As it has hopefully become clear from the previous three parts of this article, we are dealing with two distinct components here: the first-century historical sources on the one hand, and the twenty-first-century archaeological reality of Machaerus, based on the archaeological excavations carried out since 1968 on the other. The second comprises the archaeological landscape with the built legacy and the material heritage, in the form of touchable evidence and inspectable proofs. As we are going to demonstrate, the two components are in complete harmony. We have been cautious not to mix the two: the first section of the article makes no mention of any archaeological evidence that came to light during the excavations. In the second and third parts, we limited ourselves to referring to only those historical references that were absolute necessary. In the present part of the article, we will convincingly demonstrate, among other things, that Machaerus is a perfect example of historical archaeology, as the contemporaneous historical sources immaculately accord with the first century archaeological evidence found there.

Historical archaeology is by definition a form of archaeology that deals with places, things, and issues from the past in whose case the written historical records and oral traditions can shed light on and contextualize the

surviving built legacy and cultural material. Naturally, these records can either complement, or conflict with, the archaeological evidence found at a particular site. First of all, we must emphasize that we found no contradiction between the descriptions of the oral tradition recorded in first-century sources and the archaeological finds that came to light during the excavations. More importantly however, when we contrast the first century written historical sources with the archaeological site of Machaerus, we can easily complement the two in terms of the landscape, history, architecture, and material culture of the monuments as a whole. The overall definition of historical archaeology is based on methodological and theoretical considerations and it usually refers to the modern, post-1492 period. In Europe, it is therefore often called ‘post-medieval archaeology.’ There are a few exceptions, namely in classical archaeology and ancient Near Eastern studies (Egyptology, Assyriology, etc.), where for certain archaeological sites – naturally, in the case of very few surviving ancient settlements or individual monuments – we have authentic historical (and not *only* literary!) sources regarding the given periods.

Yet we must be very cautious. It would be ridiculous to destroy the reputation of historical archaeology in the Levant by using the digging methods of apologists whose slogan is, “*Dig with the Bible in one hand, and the spade in the other!*” Those who apply these kinds of Biblical anti-methods of anti-researches are explicitly committed to the use of archaeology as a serving girl whose only task is to demonstrate the historical accuracy of the Old and New Testaments and the historical primacy or supremacy of an ethnic group or a system of beliefs. They largely concentrate on matters directly related to archaeology and Bible history but always mix them with intentional apologetic issues, especially the relationship between science and religion. We find these “Indiana Joneses” among the neo-protestant evangelical American Christians, the zealous Zionist Jews, and the jihadist anti-Jewish Arabs as well. We keep a serious distance from these colleagues who do great damage to the reputation of archaeology that can verily illuminate the Bible, so much so that they unconsciously become avowed enemies of its beautiful world.

Before going any further, I would like to quote a real-life conversation to illustrate the power of historical archaeology. In 1994, when Neil Armstrong visited Jerusalem, he was taken to the huge limestone pavements of the Herodian steps that lead up to the Temple Mount from the south, which date back to the first centuries BC and AD. They were excavated by Israeli archaeologists after the Six-Day War. Meir Ben-Dov, a noted Jewish archaeologist and the guide of Armstrong, started to talk about Jesus. “I told him, ‘Look, Jesus was a Jew,’” recalled Ben-Dov. “These are the steps that lead to the Temple, so he must have walked here many times.” Armstrong asked if these were the original steps, and Ben-Dov said that they were indeed. “So, Jesus stepped right here?” asked Armstrong. “That’s right!” answered Ben-Dov. “I have to

tell you,” Armstrong said to the Israeli archaeologist, “I am more excited stepping on these stones than I was stepping on the Moon.”

The question immediately arises: Do these steps prove that Jesus walked up these same stairs to the Temple of Jerusalem? No, they do not. The situation is not as simple as that. We have the historical, first-century references of the New Testament in the Bible to Jesus, stating that he had visited the Jerusalem Temple since his childhood many times. We also have the contemporary archaeological evidence of those steps that led up to the Temple in the time of Jesus. It was the combination or *contextualization* of these two data, the tangible stones and the references in contemporaneous historical texts, that was the source of Armstrong’s great excitement when he rightly realized that he was literally walking in Jesus’ footsteps. This example should enlighten us further, for the better understanding of Machaerus.

We have a Herodian royal palace there. Can we prove it? Yes, we can easily prove it. The excavations, carried out thoroughly and with scientific precision, yielded us evidence based on which we are able to draw architectural parallels and archaeological analogies with the other Herodian royal palaces in Judea, which are counterparts of the Machaerus one. We also have the contemporaneous luxurious, royal material culture of the palace that came to light as proof. So, we clearly have the ruins of the surviving historical spaces – but without the historical sources they would be no more than another Herodian royal palace in Judea. Fortunately, the written sources unequivocally inform us that five figures of the Gospels had at one point lived among the walls of the Herodian city of Machaerus:

- KING HEROD THE GREAT, the slayer of the children of Bethlehem. Machaerus was a royal city with a palace in its citadel for the king – this is what we are able to glean from the historical sources.
- TETRARCH HEROD ANTIPAS. We know from the historical written sources that Machaerus was his only inherited royal palace, which he received as a legacy after the death of his father, King Herod the Great. Antipas probably lived there during most of his reign.
- SAINT JOHN THE BAPTIST. According to the first-century written source of Josephus, he was imprisoned and killed at Machaerus.
- THE HASMONEAN ROYAL PRINCESSES HERODIAS and SALOME. According to the Gospels of Mark and Matthew, they were present at the execution of John the Baptist, located by Josephus at Machaerus, consequently they must have stayed there at least during the birthday of Herod Antipas when the beheading of the Baptist took place.

The situation is quite similar to the one Neil Armstrong found himself in on the Temple Mount in Jerusalem. Except that here on Mount Machaerus, we walk *not* in the footsteps of Jesus, but in those of the royal Herodians (King

Herod the Great and his son, the Tetrarch Antipas), the royal Hasmoneans (Princesses Herodias and her daughter, Salome) and most importantly, in those of Saint John the Baptist and his disciples, who were sent by him to Jesus in Galilee.

Now, let us have a closer look at the historical sources referring to the three periods of Machaerus: The Late Hellenistic (Hasmonean), the Herodian, and the Early Roman eras. Together they provide us with such a perfect description of the historical landscape, that relying on the ancient references, Seetzen was easily able to identify the place in 1807. Its authenticity is beyond any doubt.

Regarding the

FORTRESS OF ALEXANDER JANNAEUS,

the first-century written sources reveal three important facts:

1. “he was the first who built a citadel here” (Josephus, *Bellum Judaicum* VII, 6, 2)
2. “Pompey went over and overthrew them and raised their fortifications [...] moreover, he gave orders to raise all the walls and, so far as he could, destroyed the haunts of robbers and the treasure-holds of the tyrants [of, among others,] Machaerus” (Strabo, *Geographica* XVI, 2, 40)”
3. “it was done after a poor manner” (Josephus, *Bellum Judaicum* I, 8, 6)

The archaeological excavations brought to light and identified the group of dead monuments with characteristic architectural features of the building activities of King Alexander Jannaeus, known from other places in Judea. In addition to this, a large quantity of Late Hellenistic pottery and twenty-four coins from the time of Alexander Jannaeus were also found. The foundations of the Hasmonean walls were on the bedrock; therefore, logically speaking, it cannot be a coincidence that no pre-Hasmonean archaeological material came to light. The walls had been erected using the building technology of the so-called cyclopean masonry: mostly natural, uncarved local stones with the use of very limited mortar. In contrast with the Herodian ashlar, or dressed (cut, worked) stones, they were indeed „*done after a poor manner*,” as Josephus put it. Moreover, the destruction of the Hasmonean fortress was easily identifiable as its razed walls became the base and the solid fundament for the ascending walls of the Herodian citadel. The foundations of the four Hasmonean towers and the surrounding bailey walls determined the architectural character and provided the groundwork for the exterior of the Herodian citadel as well.

Thanks to Josephus, we have a very characteristic description of the

CITY OF KING HEROD THE GREAT

Let's re-read his description on the Herodian royal city of Machaerus:

“But when Herod came to be king, he thought the place to be worthy of the utmost regard, and of being built upon in the firmest manner, and this especially because it lay so near to Arabia; for it is seated in a convenient place on that account, and hath a prospect toward that country; he therefore surrounded a large space of ground with walls and towers, and built a city there, out of which city there was a way that led up to the very citadel itself on the top of the mountain; nay, more than this, he built a wall round that top of the hill, and erected towers at the corners, of a hundred and sixty cubits high; in the middle of which place he built a palace, after a magnificent manner, wherein were large and beautiful edifices. He also made a great many reservoirs for the reception of water, that there might be plenty of it ready for all uses, and those in the properest places that were afforded him there.” (Josephus, *Bellum Judaicum* VII, 6, 2)

The description perfectly corresponds to the archaeological reality in every detail, including the sharp contrast between the Hasmonean architecture, which „*was done after a poor manner*,” and the Herodian one, which was executed „*in the firmest manner*.” The technical superiority of the Herodian architectural technology, namely, the use of dressed ashlar stones, over the cyclopean masonry of the Hasmoneans, is more than obvious. The only detail in Josephus' description that needs to be explained is the „*towers at the corners, of a hundred and sixty cubits high*.” As it is a description written in Rome in about AD 77 for Roman readers (and ultimately for Emperor Vespasian himself), we have to take it to mean the Roman cubit, which according to Vitruvius was equal to 1.5 Roman feet, or 6 palm widths (approximately 444 mm or 17.5 in). The 160 cubits therefore are equal to roughly 70 meters. There are two plausible explanations: it is simply an overstatement on Josephus' (or on his source's) part. He similarly overvalued the height measures when describing Jerusalem and Masada. Meanwhile, it is also possible that he (or his source) took the altitudinal difference between the lower walls of the Machaerus lower city and the top of the northern and southeastern towers of the citadel, as to be the towers' height. Apart from this one instance, the description fits the Herodian city in every detail.

As for the

CITY OF THE ROMAN GARRISON AND OF THE ZEALOTS,

as well as for the Roman siege monuments, Josephus is very clear about AD 36 as being the date of the destruction of Herodian Machaerus. He talks about „*the destruction of Herod's army*” by the Nabataeans, after which the Herodian royal palace of Machaerus disappeared. Later Josephus simply mentions a Roman garrison there: „*the multitude of the Jews that were at Machaerus persuaded the Romans who were in garrison to leave the place, and deliver it up to them.*” (Josephus, *Bellum Judaicum* II, 18, 6) It is obvious that they would have never given up a fortified royal palace, and this is why Josephus simply talks about „*Romans who were in garrison.*” By the dawn of the First Jewish War (AD 66–74), the fortified palace had already been demolished for thirty years. Was it possible to determine the AD 36 destruction of Machaerus (by the Nabataeans) and the existence of a later Roman garrison in its place through the archaeological excavations? Indeed, it was!

The stratigraphical examinations during the digs unequivocally confirmed that the archaeological layer of the garrison of the Roman soldiers of the Praefectus Judaeae and that of the Zealots were not identical with the Herodian floor level. The layer of the Roman soldiers and that of the Zealots are well above it, situated upon the levelled but unpaved ruins of the Herodian palace! It was possible to identify two coins from the time of King Herod Agrippa I (AD 41–44), seven coins from the period of Emperor Nero – three of which were from his fifth year (AD 59) –, and eighty-four coins from the second and third years of the First Jewish War (AD 67 and 68). These coins were all discovered above the destruction layer of the Herodian palace. This conclusion was drawn not just from the archaeological finds, which came from the relevant stratigraphical layers of the precisely cut excavation profiles, but from the dead monument itself as well. The surviving remains of the polygonal surrounding wall of the garrison of the Roman soldiers, later used by the Zealots, run on top of the ruined Herodian walls until today.

In addition to the above-described Machaerus citadel, we have the approximately 3.5-kilometer-long circumvallation siege wall around it, and (at least) fifteen military campuses of the Legion X Fretensis, together with its unfinished military agger (ramp). The fact that it was unfinished is a clear sign that the defenders of the citadel surrendered. This perfectly corresponds to and demonstrates the full harmony between Josephus' descriptions and the archaeological reality. The close parallels with the well-studied Masada circumvallation monuments leave no room for doubt concerning the date and function of the groups of dead monuments around Machaerus, built by the same Fretensis during the winter of AD 71/72. We will return to the Masada parallel in the sixth part of the article.

We would like to point out one last scientific fact concerning the presence of historical archaeology inside and around Machaerus. The conclusion that Josephus' descriptions in relation to Machaerus are all reliable is not only obvious but also easily demonstratable. The information contained therein must have been provided by trustworthy eyewitnesses as all the historical data relating to Machaerus are verifiable by archaeology, through the study of the built legacy of antiquity and the remains of the material culture. That being the case, we have to consider Josephus' statements about John the Baptist authentic and reliable as well. Thus, we have no reason to miscredit or doubt the authenticity and reliability of the relevant passage: "[...] John, that was called the Baptist: for Herod slew him [...] he was sent a prisoner, out of Herod's suspicious temper to Machaerus castle, and was there put to death." (*Antiquitates Judaicae* XVIII, 5, 2)

VISUALIZATION: ARCHITECTURAL RECONSTRUCTIONS AS BIBLE ILLUSTRATIONS

The once glorious 660-square-meter Herodian royal courtyard, with the Doric peristyle colonnade consisting of eight columns on each side and the still *in situ* apsidal throne niche in the axis of symmetry, must have been the historical place of Antipas' birthday banquet described by the Gospels. Many people were invited to the party, even from Galilee, from the northern half of his tetrarchy: "*An opportunity came on Herod's birthday when he gave a banquet for the nobles of his court, for his army officers and for the leading figures in Galilee.*" (Mk 6:21) This royal courtyard was not just the largest architectural space in the fortified palace of Machaerus but the only one where the tetrarch was able to receive the large gathering of these official guests, his complete royal entourage. This Doric palace-court had to be the very place where, according to Josephus, Antipas proclaimed his historical judgment, sentencing John the Baptist to death. According to human logic, Antipas must have passed his judgment from his throne seat on the elevated bema of the stone-paved royal court in his praetorium. Mount Machaerus was the Golgotha of the Baptist. It was Jesus himself who drew the parallel between his own future death and that of John, in his statement: „[...] *'they did not recognise him but treated him as they pleased: and the Son of man will suffer similarly at their hands.'* *The disciples understood that he was speaking of John the Baptist.*" (Mt 17:12–13) We shall further discuss this classical *metalepsis* (applied by Jesus as a self-reference) in the last part of the article.

The archaeological remains of the Jerusalem Praetorium (Jn 19:13) where Jesus was condemned to death by Pontius Pilate are probably lost. However, on Mount Machaerus, we have one of the closest architectural and archaeological

analogies of its courtyard, in the former palace of King Herod the Great and Tetrarch Herod Antipas. On the *gabbatha* (“elevation”) of the citadel of the Machaerus royal palace original parts of even the *in situ* Herodian *lithostrotos* (“stone pavement”) survived in the courtyard.¹⁷ Machaerus, this tremendously important scene of the Gospels, has always been a site of imagination for Bible, Gospel, religious-, and history-book illustrators. As a result of the current archaeological excavations and architectural “Lego-ing,” the historical place and its architectural spaces were revealed and they in turn elucidated the blurred scene of this Gospel account. As it was discussed previously, there were four figures of the Gospels who lived among the walls of this Biblical royal castle: King Herod the Great, his son Tetrarch Herod Antipas with his second wife Princess Herodias, and their daughter Princess Salome, from her previous marriage. Today, we are not only able to visit the archaeological site, but also to virtually see the authentic spaces of the passion and calvary of Saint John the Baptist. It was not a coincidence that since my first Machaerus article appeared on the cover of the *Biblical Archaeology Review* of Washington in 2012, we have received a flood of requests for illustrations of the relevant Gospel scenes for Bibles and religious books, especially divinity books for children. Together with my esteemed colleagues, we realized that our theoretical architectural reconstructions, based on the results of our archaeological excavations, became authentic Bible illustrations (*Figs. 23-29*).

There is a wide range of artistic mediums that may treat Machaerus as their topic. In the modern world, Bible illustrations are no more limited to actual books but can take the form of independent website illustrations, paintings, monuments and statues, movable 3D models or moving pictures, and even opera sets. As an example, I have included an excellent watercolor of my compatriot Balage Balogh (who lives in the United States, *Fig. 30*) from a flying drone’s view – or as we used to say in the pre-digital era, from a bird’s-eye-view –, overlooking the Dead Sea. It was in 2015 when the fortified royal Herodian city of Machaerus appeared for the first time in a film as an authentic background, based on our 2012 and 2013 architectural reconstruction drawings. The American television film made by Christopher Menault and produced by Ridley Scott, titled *Killing Jesus*, starred Machaerus in the scene when John the Baptist is brought there in chains by Herod Antipas’ soldiers. The film was made in collaboration with the National Geographic Society, and the reconstruction model of the complete Herodian Machaerus city appears in the thirty-fourth minute. The dialogues and the dance take place already in the courtyard of the royal palace (and not in an indoor architectural space). The film correctly depicts a green landscape in the surroundings. Representing the

¹⁷ VÖRÖS 2020.

Holy Land in the time of Jesus is one of the most problematic points. The vegetation was green, the fauna was rich, and it looked like Central Italy or France today. It was not a desert yet at all!

We would like to make a last point concerning Bible illustrations. We must bear in mind that they were, are, and will always be, first and foremost about the human characters. The architectural details, the monuments, or the landscape always appear as the background in the miniatures, icons, paintings, frescoes, or films: the size or the medium never changed the illustrative topics. However, our archaeological excavations revealed tens of thousands of contemporary objects and fragments as well, for the better understanding of the material heritage that was part of the cultural and social anthropology of these Biblical figures who lived in the Herodian city of Machaerus. This knowledge can easily be used in understanding other phenomena that are close in time and space, for instance, those related to the Herodian royal dynasty or the Holy Land, and ultimately, to the world of the Gospels.

THE ROMAN SIEGE AND THE DESTRUCTION OF MACHAERUS IN AD 72

The siegeworks of the archaeological site of Machaerus were discovered in a sequence. Initially, only a part of it, the assault ramp. It was first described and documented by an English clergyman and ornithologist, Henry Baker Tristram in 1872, but was identified, as an unfinished siege ramp, much later.¹⁸ The archaeological remains of the surviving walls, garrisons and legionary campuses (Lat. *campi*) of the circumvallation military siegeworks were discovered independently by two scholars in 1965: the German-Protestant August Strobel (mentioned already briefly in the second part of the article), and the American-Baptist Anson Rainey. Strobel published his discovery in 1968, however the publication of Rainey was only printed late, in 1971.¹⁹ The Southern-Baptist Theological Seminary made the first field-survey of these historical monuments in 1968, under the directorship of E. Jerry Vardaman, which developed seriously the first sketches of Rainey that were available to them.²⁰ In the meantime, August Strobel, who had access to, and referred to the unpublished 1968 survey results of the Americans, made in Machaerus a large-scale

¹⁸ TRISTRAM 1873, pp. 272–273.

¹⁹ RAINEY 1971.

²⁰ For the detailed presentation of the parallel discoveries, see: VÖRÖS 2022, pp. 88–95.

archaeological survey in March 1973, with a professional German surveyor team, and published it in the next year.²¹ Just 50 years after the publication of the professional survey of the Machaerus archaeological landscape, we have to pay tribute to Professor August Strobel, since his map is still valid and treasureable in the era of high resolution satellite images (*Fig. 31*).

Parallel with our archaeological excavations of the Herodian royal citadel, we made a one-and-a-half decade-long architectural study of these historical monuments from 2009 to 2024. Our research method was a comparative archaeological and architectural analysis of the three subsequent Roman circumvallation siege walls, campuses and assault ramps in Judea: in addition to Machaerus (AD 72), the topographical study of the preceding Jerusalem (AD 70) and the subsequent Masada (AD 73) ones, in lights of their architectural parallels and the analogous archaeological legacies, together with the narrative accounts of the Roman historian Flavius Josephus.²² The north-eastern parts of the Machaerus circumvallation, between the ‘Camps L and P’, were dismantled and removed during the last centuries, thanks to the agriculture activities by the nearby Byzantine-era, nowadays Bedouin-village of Mukawer. As the highest elevation point of Machaerus was in this north-eastern area, we reconstructed the Headquarters of Lucilius Bassus (similarly to the Masada ‘Camp F’ rhombus-shape Headquarters of Flavius Silva) at the ‘Camp N’. The Roman assault ramp, built to the west of the citadel of Machaerus, remained incomplete, therefore, according to human logic, the defenders had to surrender to the Romans (*Fig. 32*).

In the context of the captured AD 70 Jerusalem, there are two archaeological landscapes in the countryside of Roman Judea, both in a ca. 50 km aerial-distance from the capital, to the south and south-east, where the enormous circumvallation-siegeworks miraculously survived with several military garrisons, independent legionary camps and the relevant assault agger-ramps as well: in Machaerus and in Masada (*Fig. 33*). They were both abandoned and deserted after the martial attacks, and were frozen in time as immemorial remains of the military monuments of those forgotten wars. It may appear surprising, but according to the archaeological data (ostraca, coins, militaria, etc.), they can both be dated *firmly* to the same period, as the Jerusalem siege of Titus: they are all from the beginning of the AD 70s. Obviously, both countryside circumvallation sieges were built by the same army, as they are so characteristically Roman and similar, like twin monument-landscapes, mirroring each other: on the east and the west banks of the Dead Sea.

²¹ STROBEL 1974.

²² The exact dates of the Machaerus and Masada sieges are not known. They were executed by the Legion X Fretensis probably during the cooler winter periods. In Machaerus during the winter of AD 71/72, and in Masada during the winters of AD 72/73 or 73/74.

We have to take into account an important observation. The military sieges and conquests of cities and fortifications in the Levant have been well documented since over five-thousand years ago, from the end of the fourth millennium BC until today (i.e. from the Narmer Palette and Macehead, excavated in Hierakonpolis, until the current Israeli sieges against Hamas in the ancient cities of the Gaza Strip). The beautiful city of Jerusalem endured many sieges herself, including those described in the Old Testament, the Roman ones (63 and 37 BC, AD 70), and later (sometimes in multiple war attacks) the Sassanian and the Byzantine ones, by the Rashidun Caliphate, the Crusaders, Saracens, and lastly the Ottomans. The new landlords in any besieged and successfully conquered cities *always have to dismantle and demolish their former siege-works*, otherwise those could be easily reused by the potential new enemies against them, in the unexpected next chapters of history. Therefore, we can only study the archaeological remains of the surviving monuments of a military siege, as in the cases of Machaerus and Masada, where the conquered fortified strongholds were not simply demolished, but were abandoned forever, and turned into oblivion after the successful military operations.

It is a very pleasant confirmation that the contemporary written sources of Josephus are validating our archaeological evidence. Let us see what he stated about the circumvallation siege of Machaerus:

“Now when Bassus had taken a full view of this place, he resolved to besiege it, by filling up the valley that lay on the east side; so he fell hard to work, and took great pains to raise his banks as soon as possible, and by that means to render the siege easy. As for the Jews that were caught in this place, they separated themselves from the strangers that were with them, and they forced those strangers, as an otherwise useless multitude, to stay in the lower part of the city, and undergo the principal dangers, while they themselves seized on the upper citadel, and held it, and this both on account of its strength, and to provide for their own safety. They also supposed they might obtain their pardon, in case they should [at last] surrender the citadel. [...] they sent out immediately certain messengers, and treated with the Romans, in order to a surrender of the citadel to them.” (Josephus, *Jewish War*, VII, 6, 4)

What Josephus wrote about the city of Machaerus was a surrender after a siege, the only one in Judea (Herodion was given up by the Zealots without a fight). And it is very well corresponding with the archaeological reality of the historical place, with the testimony of the unfinished assault ramp monument of the Roman siege. During our 2017 archaeological excavation season in Machaerus, we even discovered and excavated the monumental gate between the citadel and the lower city, where the Jews separated themselves from the

goys (Heb. *bagoyim*, “those strangers, as an otherwise useless multitude”, as Josephus depreciatively defined them). The description of Machaerus city and its geographical surrounding was excellent, it perfectly corresponds with the visitable reality, even though Josephus had to rely on other historical sources, since in AD 70, when Titus “was going away to Rome, he made choice of me to sail along with him” (as Josephus himself boasted about it, in his *Autobiography*, § 76). The information about Machaerus are from secondary sources, as Josephus was an eyewitness only in Jerusalem.

The Roman siege structures of the Judean circumvallation walls around Jerusalem, Machaerus and Masada had three important military purposes: (i) to prevent the defenders from escaping; (ii) at the same time prevent any support for the Jews arriving from outside; and finally (iii) a psychological message to the defenders: ‘*You are encircled!*’ And there had to be the same minimum 2 stadia (ca. 370 m) distance between the three Judean circumvallation walls, and the defended fortification walls, that clearly corresponds not only with the shooting range of the ancient bows, but with the description of Josephus:

“The engines, that all the legions had ready prepared for them, were admirably contrived; but still more extraordinary ones belonged to the tenth legion: those that threw darts and those that threw stones were more forcible and larger than the rest, by which they not only repelled the excursions of the Jews, but drove those away that were upon the walls also. Now the stones that were cast were of the weight of a talent [ca. 32 kg], and were carried two furlongs [ca. 370 m] and further.” (Josephus, *Jewish War*, V, 6, 3)

These distances are until today detectable and measurable in Machaerus and in Masada (Figs. 32-33).

The descriptions of Josephus about the Jerusalem circumvallation siege are going into much deeper and sophisticated details, than in Machaerus and Masada. In Jerusalem he gave the exact distances and length in precise, measurable figures. The numbers of 33 and 39 Roman stadia, or the 13 garrisons are not approximate or estimated numbers at all. These records are exact distance figures (which are completely lacking in the Machaerus and Masada descriptions) and manifest the military data of an eyewitness in his war-report, who had to receive the sensitive information of the siege from the Roman military engineers and officers of Titus! Considering the archaeological legacies of the Machaerus and Masada circumvallation walls, with the Roman garrisons built on their lines, we took especially seriously the complementary descriptions of Josephus with his military figures, in relation to the siege of Jerusalem! He had to have access to the military records of the Jerusalem siege, as the veteran Roman generals were his contemporaries: he could easily meet them not only in Jerusalem, but also later, here in Rome.

The comparative archaeological examinations of the subsequent circumvallation siege walls around Machaerus and Masada, built by the Legion X Fretensis in AD 71/72 and 72/73, raised an obvious question: Would it be possible to reconstruct the similar circumvallation siege wall as well, that was built around Jerusalem in AD 70 by the same Roman army? After the 2023 publication of the western part of the Third Wall of Jerusalem, together with the archaeological remains of an *in situ* AD 70 battlefield,²³ we measured the length of the complete city-wall of Jerusalem before its destruction: it was 33 stadia (6105 meter), exactly corresponding to the data, given by Josephus. Taking into consideration the geomorphological surroundings of Jerusalem, the required and described minimum two-stadium (ca. 370 m) distances between the city and the siege-walls, and finally the military data provided by Josephus, we were able to reconstruct the reliable line of the surrounding siege wall around Jerusalem, built upon the command of Titus. We used our digital mapping device and professional GPS and GIS (Global Positioning System and Geographic Information System) units on the field, accurate to 10-centimeter-certainty, on the former circumvallation line of Titus, in ca. two stadia distance around the Old City and the Third Wall. The siege wall, according to Josephus, incorporated the General Headquarters and 13 military garrisons that were complemented by the 39 stadia (7215 meter) long circumvallation wall, located between them. The contemporary archaeological analogies and architectural parallels in Machaerus and Masada were essential to understand the Jerusalem AD 70 siegeworks (Fig. 34-35).²⁴

Just six years after John the Baptist was beheaded (for the approximate timing of his ministry, see Lk 3:1-3), it was in AD 36, when the headquarters of the tetrarchy (Machaerus) and the entire army of Herod Antipas were destroyed by the Nabataean royal army of King Aretas IV.²⁵ Therefore, in AD 70, the destruction of Herodian Machaerus was already a thirty-four-year-old experience of the Jews, who may have seen it as a *bad omen* for Jerusalem:

“Now some of the Jews thought that the destruction of Herod’s army [in AD 36] 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, who was a good man [...] 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

²³ ARBIV 2023.

²⁴ VÖRÖS 2024B.

²⁵ For the detailed historical background of the AD 36 destruction of Machaerus by the Nabataean royal army, see: VÖRÖS 2024A, pp. 12-29.

was sent as a punishment upon Herod, and a mark of God's displeasure to him." (Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities*, XVIII, 5, 2)

MACHAERUS: THE GOLGOTHA OF SAINT JOHN THE BAPTIST

During his Transfiguration, Jesus meets with Moses and Elijah, and immediately after their conversation, draws a direct parallel, in the form of a classic *metalepsis*, between his own future and the fate of the freshly murdered John the Baptist, whom he identifies with Prophet Elijah:

"I tell you that Elijah has already come, and they did not recognise him but treated him as they pleased: and the Son of Man will suffer similarly at their hands. The disciples understood that he was speaking of John the Baptist." (Mt 17:12–13)

With these words, Jesus prophesied his own passion. He drew a parallel with the calvary of John the Baptist and compared his final days in Jerusalem to the tragic banquet and assassination on Mount Machaerus.

The moral and physical status of the Machaerus archaeology – as it hopefully became clear from the present article – is unique in the sacred landscape of the Holy Land. Until 1968, we had had an untouched historical landscape at Machaerus since AD 72. During the first fifty years of excavations, the entire Herodian citadel was excavated, scientifically evaluated, and published. The restoration projects included the re-erection of two complete Herodian columns, the first, and thus far the only ones in the Holy Land, a feat that was accomplished with the help of a restoration technique called *anastylosis* (*Figs. 9-10 and 12-14*). The remains of the Herodian citadel (ca. 30 BC – AD 36), demolished by the Nabataeans, survived as an authentic archaeological *time capsule* between the Hasmonean (ca. 90–57 BC) and the Early Roman (ca. AD 44–72) destruction layers.

A similarly important observation, mentioned in the abstract of the article, that the account of the passion of John the Baptist is the only Gospel passage for which we have a parallel narrative in a non-Christian work of the same era: that of the well-discussed passage by Josephus.²⁶ From the point of view of historical criticism, it means that this story is the most authentic part of the Gospels! Also, the relevant passages of the synoptic Mark and Matthew, which are

²⁶ FOCANT 2012, p. 247.

both classical flashback narratives, are the unique places in the Gospels where Jesus, his disciples, and the Jewish religious authorities are completely absent.²⁷ It is also possible that their source of information belongs to one of the earliest written layers of the Gospels – to the layer of a first-generation eyewitness.²⁸ The narrative of the Machaerus passion is extremely significant and astonishingly unique – there is no doubt about that.

In literary theory, the French expression *mise en abîme* (“putting into abyss”) refers to the narrative technique of inserting an independent story within a story. In fact, any part of a work that resembles the larger work in which it occurs can be considered as such. The term is used even in music theory or in dream interpretations. The Machaerus passion of the Baptist is such a nested or inner story, an independent one, which has a precursory function within the framework of the complete Gospel message, emphasized by the protagonist, Jesus as well: the story of the calvary of John the Baptist is the precursory narrative of the Jerusalem passion of the Christ.

In conclusion, in our quest to decipher the archaeological and historical legacies of Machaerus, the *mise en abîme* nature of the narrative about the circumstances of the death of John the Baptist presupposes at least two hierarchically different levels in the Gospels. Our Machaerus scene, or the subordinate level, “mirrors” and “encapsulates” the content and even the formal elements of the Jerusalem scene, the primary level. However, the dimensions of the two levels are in stark contrast: the beheaded Baptist is buried by his disciples in the Machaerus necropolis, whereas the Jerusalem tomb of Jesus will be empty at the end of the Gospels. The resurrection of Jesus Christ changed everything: it opened the gate to Heaven. In touchable reality, the historical scenes – the Machaerus and the Jerusalem Golgothas – face each other in an optical link and reflect together on the surface of the Dead Sea (*Fig. 36*).

²⁷ FOCANT 2012, p. 240.

²⁸ BAUCKHAM 2017, p. 574; HOEHNER 1980, pp. 303–306 writes about the potential eyewitness sources. The first source may have been „Joanna, the wife of Herod’s steward Chuza,” who was in the company of Jesus as one of the „women who had been cured of evil spirits and infirmities.” (Lk 8:3 and 2) According to Luke, she was one of the crown witnesses to testify to the empty tomb and the resurrection of Jesus (Lk 24:10), therefore she was creditable and fully trusted by the apostles. Meanwhile, her husband Chuza may have been present at the birthday as a royal steward of the Tetrarch, so he could become a star witness for the circle of Jesus. We find the second possible source in „Manahen, a member of the court of Herod the Tetrarch,” (Acts 13:1) in the company of Saint Barnabas, on the first missionary tour of Saint Paul (during ca. AD 46–49) in Antioch. Furthermore, it is also possible that the reliable eyewitness of the Gospels was a nameless person from Machaerus, someone unknown to us. The above two examples simply demonstrate the direct links that existed between the first Christians and the Herodian royal court, for a possible queen’s evidence in the Gospels on the circumstances of the Herodian birthday banquet in Machaerus. FOCANT 2012, p. 247: “There is a possibility to attribute the work [the passion of the Baptist in a flashback] to a pre-Markan redactor”.

The term *mise en abîme* originally comes from heraldry where it describes the appearance of a smaller shield in the center of a larger one. Its function is to enhance the understanding of the true meaning or intention of the depictions of a coat of arms within a coat of arms, like a novel within a novel, a play within a play, a picture within a picture, or a film within a film, in which the central, smaller element illuminates the striking similarities, as a mirror of the whole. In our case, the shorter Machaerus passion along the longer Jerusalem one foreshadowed what was to happen to Jesus (three years later) and to the Herodian city of Jerusalem (thirty-four years later). It was not just a metaphorical narrative but a *fatal omen* in history, foretelling the future. *Nomen est omen*: Machaerus (Μαχαιροῦς, from the ancient Greek μάχαιρα, meaning ‘sword’) is hanging above the Christ of the Gospels, like a sword of Damocles.

Jesus himself was very much aware of this bad omen; the reference he makes to himself in the Gospel according to Matthew (a classical *metalepsis*) is not only the link between the two-level dimensions of the (subjective) *mise en abîme* and the entire (objective) Gospel, but it is the key to the Herodian city of Machaerus, which became a meta-reference for the destiny of our sacred Mount: „[...] ‘they did not recognise him but treated him as they pleased: and the Son of man will suffer similarly at their hands.’ The disciples understood that he was speaking of John the Baptist.” (Mt 17:12–13) Therefore the authentic Gospel scene of Machaerus is a piece of Holy Land within the Holy Land, like an archaeological *mise en abîme* of its country-size coat of arms, an internal duplication and an embedded sinister Gospel story within the Gospels.

The Hungarian Nobel laureate physicist, Prof. Dennis Gabor (Gábor Dénes), was the inventor of holography. He realized that a destroyed holographic image (or hologram: ὅλος “whole” and γραμμή “letter, line”) would still hold the complete three-dimensional information in all its fragments. When a normal paper photograph is cut into small pieces, each piece shows only a tiny fragment of the original picture. However, when a diffused hologram is cut into small pieces, the whole scene can still be seen in each little fragment! Machaerus is such an archaeological hologram of history, an archaeological *mise en abîme*: through its fragments, not only can we see the small pieces of Herodian art and architecture, but the magical world of the Gospels as well.