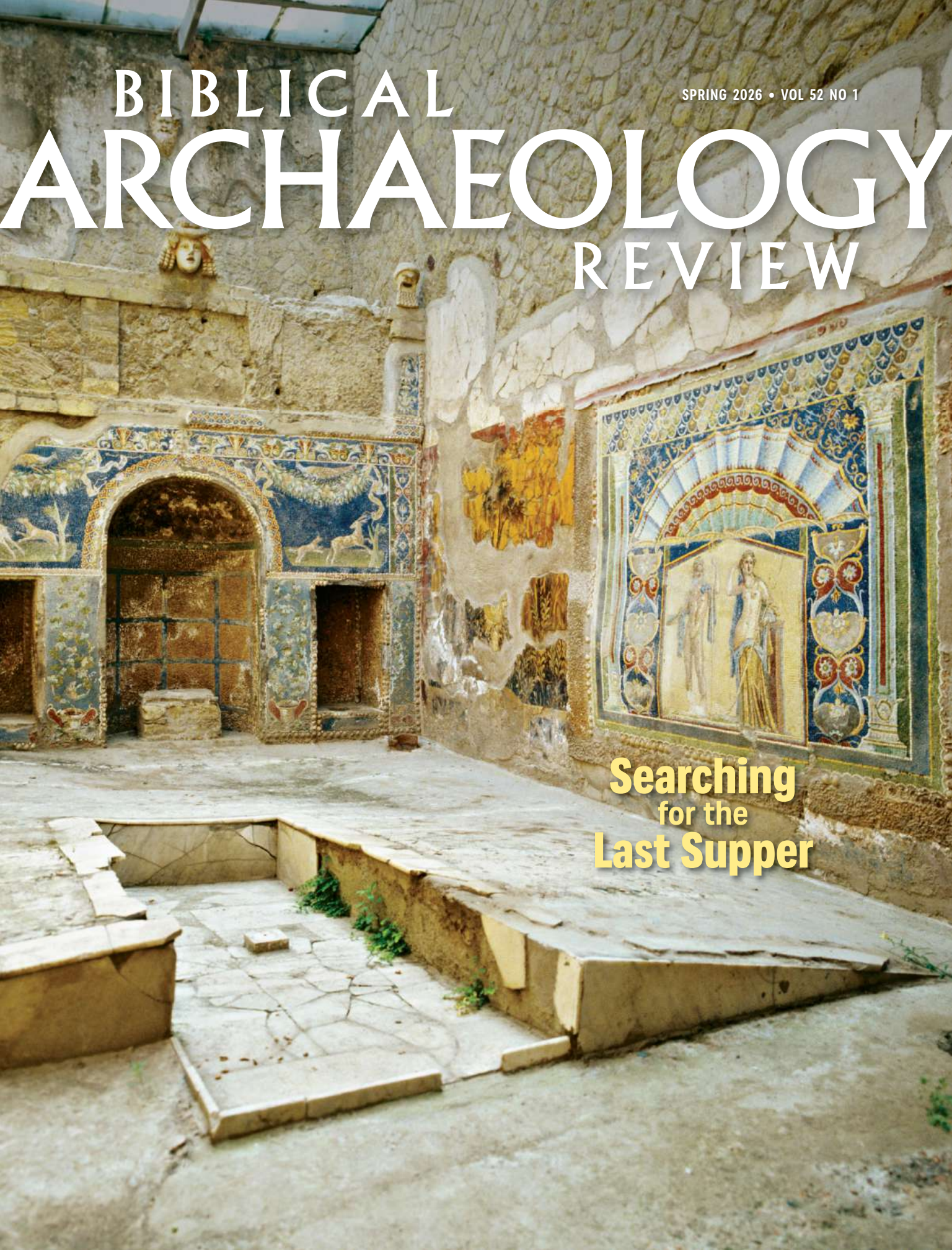


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**Searching
for the
Last Supper**



UNDER SIEGE

How Rome Conquered Jerusalem

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THE ROMAN DESTRUCTION of Jerusalem, led by the commander and future emperor Titus in AD 70, is well documented through both textual and archaeological evidence. The first-century Jewish historian Flavius Josephus preserves a detailed and possible eyewitness account of the Roman siege, while abundant and diverse archaeological evidence testifies to the scale, ferocity, and significance of the destruction. Clear vestiges of the destruction have been uncovered throughout the Holy City, especially in excavations along the southern end of the Western Wall, where massive ashlar blocks and pilasters, toppled from the upper courses of the Temple Mount's walls, can still be found. Beyond this, the Romans trumpeted their victory for the entire empire to see, most famously in commemorative Judea Capta coins issued by Emperor Vespasian and the triumphal Arch of Titus with its evocative imagery

of the Temple treasures, including the Temple menorah, being paraded by Roman soldiers.

Despite this vivid testimony of destruction and conquest, however, there is little physical evidence for the Roman siegeworks that were constructed around the city. This is likely because the conquering Romans quickly dismantled and removed their siegeworks and immediately went about restoring and reinforcing the city's walls and defenses to guard against future attacks, especially from counterassaults by Judean rebels still entrenched at Herodium, Masada, and Machaerus. As such, virtually nothing remains of the walls, barricades, and camps the Romans built to bring the city to heel.

Fortunately, many of the details regarding the Roman siegeworks are preserved in Josephus's detailed retelling of the battle. In the *Jewish War*, he describes the city's siege at





PUBLIC DOMAIN, VIA WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

length (*War* 5–6) and gives specific measurements and distances that are key to reconstructing the Roman siege. The first such detail is included in his discussion of Jerusalem’s fortifications. He notes, “The whole compass of the city [wall] was thirty-three furlongs” (about 3.8 mi.) in length (*War* 5.159). At that time, Jerusalem’s fortifications consisted of three successive walls, known as the First, Second, and Third Walls. The First Wall enclosed the southwestern hill of the city, while the Second and Third Walls defended the city’s north, where the natural topography was less advantageous for defense.

Following his description of Jerusalem’s fortifications, Josephus conveys, in detail, the route of the siege wall that Titus built “around about the whole city,” which, he says, measured “forty furlongs, one only abated” (thus, 39 furlongs, about 4.5 mi.). Along its length, the wall included

THE FALL OF JERUSALEM. Recorded in the writings of Josephus and other authors of the time, the Roman destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70, depicted in this 1850 work by David Roberts, was the culmination of a months-long siege and four years of warfare between Roman and Jewish forces. Although conflict would continue in Judah for several more years, the fall of Jerusalem and the destruction of the Second Temple were among the most influential events in the history of early Judaism. Archaeologists have uncovered several features of Jerusalem’s first-century fortifications, but the Roman siegeworks have remained hidden. New archaeological evidence, combined with recent topographic surveys, has finally revealed where the Romans likely established their lines.

13 garrison stations that had a combined circumference of ten furlongs (*War* 5.508). Most importantly, Josephus notes that Titus’s siegeworks were erected at a distance of at least two furlongs (about 1,200 ft.) from Jerusalem’s



VICTORY PROCLAIMED. The Romans proudly celebrated their conquest of Jerusalem and Judea after the First Jewish Revolt. Following Jerusalem's destruction in AD 70, the Roman emperors issued coins that featured bound and despondent Judean captives under a palm tree, along with the Latin words *Iudaea Capta* ("Judea Captured") (right). Similarly, this relief from the famous Arch of Titus in Rome (above) shows Roman soldiers triumphantly parading sacred objects seized from the Jerusalem Temple—including trumpets, the showbread table, and the menorah—through the streets of Rome.



walls, which was the standard range of Roman siege engines (*War* 5.270), some of which the Jerusalem rebels had captured. To have such exact figures, Josephus must have either been at the battle or had access to Roman military records of the Jerusalem siege. Alternatively, he may have even known some of the veteran generals, many of whom were his contemporaries, and could have met them either in Jerusalem or, more likely, later in Rome.

Until relatively recently, however, it was difficult to determine the exact location and route of the Roman siegeworks, given the lack of archaeological evidence and uncertainty regarding the location of key Jerusalem fortifications and landmarks. This changed in 2015, when Israeli archaeologists excavating a few hundred feet northwest of the Old City walls identified the last missing portion of the Third Wall. This was the outer defensive line begun by King Herod Agrippa I (AD 41–44) and completed just before the First Revolt broke out.

With the discovery of the last section of the Third Wall, Jerusalem's fortifications as they stood in AD 70 could finally be fully reconstructed. As mentioned, the First Wall, built during the Hasmonean period, encompassed the southwestern hill of the city, roughly corresponding to the city's Iron Age wall. The Second Wall, possibly built by Herod the Great (r. 37–4 BC), extended the city to the north,

with parts of its route following the northern side of the current Old City wall. Finally, the Third Wall continued this northern expansion, encompassing the area known as the Bezetha quarter, where the Pool of Bethesda was located.

The 2015 excavations revealed a several-foot-long section of the Third Wall's foundations, as well as a large quantity of ballista stones and other weaponry on the western face of the wall, indicating that it had faced heavy fire from Roman artillery.* The city's walls also included numerous towers; the remains of some are still visible around the Old City. However, one of the city's most impressive fortifications was the Antonia Fortress, built by Herod the Great at the northwest corner of the Temple Mount. Named after the Roman general Mark Antony, the Antonia Fortress was a massive citadel connected to the Temple by porticos that served as one of the last strongholds of the Jewish rebels.

Amazingly, as confirmed for the first time through recent field surveys (see below), the standard scholarly reconstructions of Jerusalem's fortifications measure almost exactly 33 furlongs (3.8 mi.) in length, matching

* See Strata, "The Third Wall of Jerusalem: Where Romans and Jews Battled," BAR, May/June 2017.

precisely the figure recorded in Josephus. And if Josephus's figures are reliable for Jerusalem's city wall in AD 70, the numbers he gives for the Roman siegeworks must be similarly reliable.

With a clear understanding of Jerusalem's fortifications, in 2024, the Hungarian Academy of Arts began investigating the most likely route of the Roman siegeworks based on the figures provided by Josephus.¹ This was not an easy task. We first needed a suitable topographic map of Jerusalem and its surroundings. However, modern buildings and construction have masked much of the city's original topography, especially in the areas north and west of the Old City. After careful analysis of several maps, we chose

BREACHING THE THIRD WALL. Begun by King Herod Agrippa I (r. AD 41–44) and finished in the years leading up to the First Jewish Revolt, the Third Wall of Jerusalem was an imposing barrier to the besieging Roman army in AD 70 and would have required considerable firepower for the Romans to break through. Excavations in 2015 at the Russian Compound in Jerusalem uncovered a large number of ballista stones that were fired against the city wall. These large worked stones could have been fired by Roman siege engines from upwards of 1,200 feet away.



a topographic map produced by the 19th-century Dutch cartographer Charles William Meredith van de Velde, when there were still limited building activities around the Ottoman city and the characteristic geomorphology of the city's surroundings was still detectable.

We then used digital mapping devices in the field, including a Geographical Information System (GIS) and GPS units, to determine the most likely route of the Roman siege wall and the most strategic locations for the 13

garrison camps built into the wall. Our survey and research took into account key figures from Josephus (namely the two-furlong distance between the siege wall and the city's fortifications) and the local topography, as well as insights gleaned from contemporary Roman siegeworks preserved at the nearby sites of Masada and Machaerus (see below). The Roman lines at both sites were located at a distance of at least two furlongs from the main fortifications, and the surrounding garrison camps were built *as part of* and *in*

Siege Archaeology: Machaerus and Masada

Although nothing remains of the Roman siegeworks around Jerusalem, two contemporary Judean fortresses, Masada and Machaerus, both about 30 miles from the capital on opposite sides of the Dead Sea, preserve valuable archaeological traces of the siege tactics used by the Romans. The two sites were both captured by the Romans following the destruction of Jerusalem, with Machaerus falling in AD 72 and Masada in 73. Excavations have revealed a tremendous amount of information about the final moments of the First Jewish Revolt at each site, especially at Machaerus, which was never subsequently inhabited.*

At both sites, the Roman army constructed stone siege walls that were built at a distance of at least two furlongs from the stronghold's fortifications. As at Jerusalem, garrison camps were built *into* the line of these siege walls (eight at Masada, 15 at Machaerus), strategically positioned on surrounding hillsides to

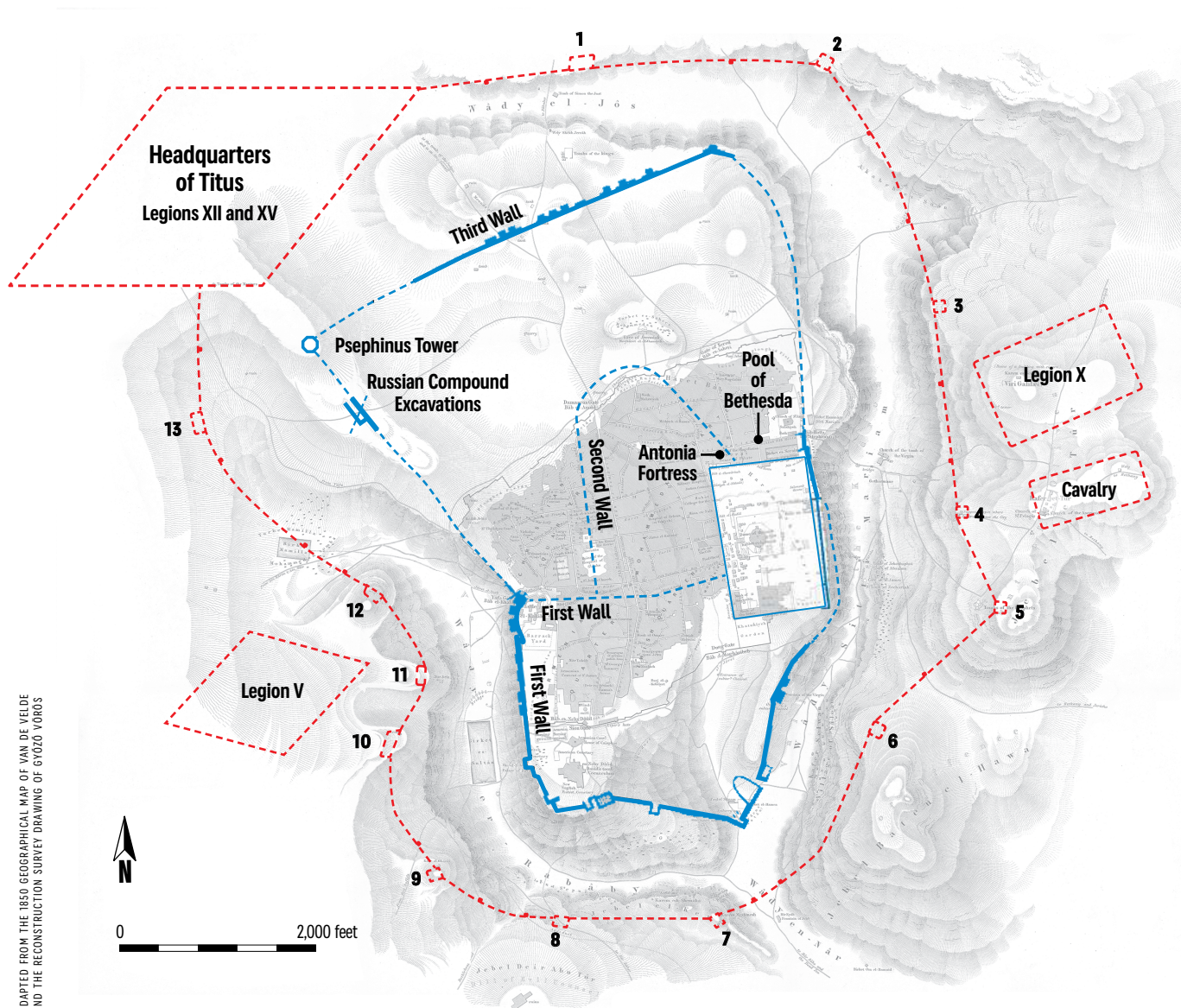
be at or above the elevation of the fortresses' outer walls wherever possible. Given that both Masada and Machaerus were built on natural high points, the Romans also constructed massive stone and earthen assault ramps that allowed them to reach and overcome the fortresses' walls. While the siege ramp was completed at Masada (perhaps culminating in the famous scene of mass Judean suicide known from Josephus; see *War* 7.389–406), it was left largely unfinished at Machaerus, suggesting the fortress's defenders may have surrendered when facing the possibility of a final Roman assault (again, as suggested by Josephus; see *War* 7.195).

Even though Josephus provides few specific measurements or details regarding the Roman sieges of Masada (*War* 7.275–279) and Machaerus (*War* 7.190–205), the archaeological evidence from both sites serves as vivid testimony to the reality of Roman siege warfare in the first century. This evidence, in turn, provides firm archaeological support to our reconstruction of the Roman siegeworks erected around Jerusalem.

* See Győző Vörös, "Machaerus: Where Salome Danced and John the Baptist Was Beheaded," *BAR*, September/October 2012; and "Machaerus: A Palace-Fortress with Multiple Mikva'ot," *BAR*, July/August 2017.



COURTESY OF THE HUNGARIAN ARCHAEOLOGICAL MISSION TO MACHAERUS / PHOTO BY DAVID KENNEDY



ADAPTED FROM THE 1850 GEOGRAPHICAL MAP OF VAN DE VELDE AND THE RECONSTRUCTION SURVEY DRAWING OF GYÖZŐ VORÓŠ

line with the siege wall rather than being separate from it. When we mapped the Jerusalem siegeworks onto Van de Velde's topographic map, the route matched perfectly the local topography, with the wall following the more gradual slopes of the surrounding valleys while still built at an elevation that was at or above the level of the city's fortifications.

The last detail to be clarified was the location of Titus's headquarters, a place Josephus calls the "Camp of the Assyrians." Although Josephus provides the only ancient reference to a location by this name, we can assume it was to the northwest of the city, two furlongs away from the Psephinus Tower, the northwest corner of the Third Wall (War 5.133). Titus's headquarters must also have been exceedingly large, as it accommodated both the Twelfth and Fifteenth Roman Legions as well as various auxiliary units. Since the average size of first-century Roman legionary camps was around 20 hectares (50 acres), Titus's camp

MAPPING JERUSALEM. The discovery of the last section of Jerusalem's Third Wall made it possible to reconstruct the entire route of the city's ancient fortifications (in blue). Since Josephus records that the Roman lines were two furlongs (about 1,200 feet) distant from the city wall, the line of the Roman siegeworks (in red) can similarly be reconstructed based on the city's historical topography and geomorphology. The siegeworks, which included 13 strategically positioned garrison camps along with Titus's headquarters, extended around the city for a distance of 4.5 miles, matching precisely the measurement of 39 furlongs given by Josephus. The camps of the supporting Fifth and Tenth Roman Legions were pitched to the city's west and east, respectively.

must have been at least 40 to 50 hectares to hold both legions, together with the additional auxiliary units. According to Josephus, two other Roman legionary camps were positioned just beyond the siege wall, with the Fifth Legion camped to the west and the Tenth Legion to the east.

Finally, with all of the details of the Roman siegeworks



PUBLIC DOMAIN, VIA WIKIMEDIA COMMONS / OVERLAY RECONSTRUCTION BY GYÖZŐ VÖRÖS



ILLUSTRATION BY ROCÍO ESPIN PIÑAR. COURTESY GYÖZŐ VÖRÖS

VISUALIZING SIEGE. Taken decades before modern urban development masked much of Jerusalem's natural topography, this 1917 German aerial photograph (top) provides a realistic backdrop for where the Roman siege-works and legionary camps were positioned around the city in AD 70. This unique view of the landscape, combined with new topographic and geospatial survey data, served as the basis for a full artistic reconstruction (bottom) of how Jerusalem may have looked on the eve of the Roman destruction.

in place, we used historic aerial photographs to help visualize how the various elements would have looked in first-century Jerusalem. As with the maps we researched, we needed photos that preserved something of the city's historical topography and natural geomorphology. We chose an early 20th-century German military photograph, upon which we digitally added our reconstruction of the ancient city wall and the encircling Roman siegeworks. This composite image then served as the basis of our full artistic

reconstruction of how the city may have looked on the eve of its destruction in AD 70.

Although the fall of Jerusalem and the destruction of the Second Temple in AD 70 are well documented in historical records, there is still much that remains unknown about the battle. Chief among these uncertainties has been the location of the Roman siege wall that encircled the city. However, thanks to recent archaeology, the detailed descriptions of Josephus, and topographic maps and aerial photos of Jerusalem prior to its modern expansion, we are able to reconstruct not only the city's first-century fortifications, but also the most likely route of the siegeworks the Romans built to conquer the city. 

¹ For further discussion, see Győző Vörös, "Jerusalem, Machaerus, and Masada in AD 70, 72, and 73: Comparative Analysis of the Three Subsequent Roman Circumvallation Siege Walls in the Lights of the Archaeological Evidence and the Narrative Accounts of Flavius Josephus," *Liber Annuus* 74 (2024), pp. 215–245.