

# Machaerus

**Machaerus** (Μαχαροῦς, from Ancient Greek: μάχαιρα "Makhaira" (a sword); Arabic: قلعة المشناق *Qal'atu l-Mishnāqā*) is a fortified hilltop palace located in Jordan fifteen miles (24 km) southeast of the mouth of the Jordan river on the eastern side of the Dead Sea. According to Flavius Josephus, it is the location of the imprisonment and execution of John the Baptist.<sup>[1]</sup> According to the chronology of the Bible (Mark 6:24; Matthew 14:8), this infamous execution took place in 32 AD shortly before the Passover, following an imprisonment of two years. The site also provides the setting for four additional New Testament characters: Herod The Great; his son, Tetrach Herod Antipas; his second wife, Princess Herodias, and her daughter, Princess Salome.<sup>[2]</sup>

## 1 History

The fortress Machaerus was originally built by the Hasmonean king, Alexander Jannaeus (104 BC-78 BC) in about the year 90 BC,<sup>[3]</sup> serving an important strategic position. Its high, rocky vantage point was difficult to access, and invasions from the east could be easily spotted from there. It was also in line of sight of other Hasmonean (and later Herodian) citadels, so other fortresses could be signaled if trouble appeared on the horizon.<sup>[4]</sup> Nevertheless, it was destroyed by Pompey's general Gabinus in 57 BC,<sup>[5]</sup> but later rebuilt by Herod the Great in 30 BC to be used as a military base to safeguard his territories east of the Jordan.

Upon the death of Herod the Great, the fortress was passed to his son, Herod Antipas, who ruled from 4 BC until 39 AD. It was during this time, at the beginning of the first century AD, that John the Baptist was imprisoned and beheaded at Machaerus.<sup>[6]</sup>

After the deposition and banishment of Herod Antipas in 39 AD, Machaerus passed to Herod Agrippa I until his death in 44 AD, after which it came under Roman control. Jewish rebels took control after 66 AD during the First Jewish Revolt.<sup>[7]</sup> Shortly after defeating the Jewish garrison of Herodium, the Roman legate Lucilius Bassus advanced on Machaerus with his troops and began siege in 72 AD. An embankment and ramp were created in order to facilitate Roman siege engines but the Jewish rebels capitulated before the Roman attack had begun. The rebels were allowed to leave and the fortress was torn down, leaving only the foundations intact.

## 2 Design

Josephus gives a full description of Machaerus in *The Wars of the Jews* 7.6.1 ff. The hilltop, which stands about 1,100 meters above Dead Sea level, is surrounded on all sides by deep ravines which provide great natural strength. The valley on the west extends 60 stadia to the Dead Sea (Josephus refers to it as Lake Asphaltitis). The valley on the east descends to a depth of a hundred cubits (150 ft).

Herod the Great regarded the place as deserving the strongest fortification, particularly because of its proximity to Arabia. On top of the mountain, surrounding the crest, he built a fortress wall, 100 meters long and 60 meters wide with three corner towers, each sixty cubits (90 ft) high. The palace was built in the center of the fortified area. Numerous cisterns were provided to collect rain water.

The royal courtyard is considered one of the closest and best existing archaeological parallels to the Herodian Gabbatha in the Jerusalem Praetorium, where Pontius Pilate judged Jesus of Nazareth.<sup>[8]</sup>

## 3 Excavation

The village on the plateau to the east of the mountain is known *Muqāwir* (Arabic: مقاور). The site was visited in 1807 by the Frisian explorer Ulrich Jasper Seetzen, and the name of the village reminded him of the name of Machaerus in Greek. The archaeological excavation of Machaerus was begun in 1968 by Jerry Vardaman, then of the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, and later director of the Cobb Institute of Archeology at Mississippi State University. In 1973, the German scholar, August Strobel, identified and studied the wall by which the Romans encircled the defenders within the fortress. In 1978-1981, excavations were carried out by Virgilio Corbo, Stanislao Loffreda and Michele Piccirillo, from the Franciscan Biblical Institute in Jerusalem. The ruins remain in remarkably untouched condition to this day.

Within the fortified area are the ruins of the Herodian palace, including rooms, a large courtyard, and an elaborate bath, with fragments of the floor mosaic still remaining. Farther down the eastern slope of the hill are other walls and towers, perhaps representing the "lower town," of which Josephus also wrote.<sup>[9]</sup> Traceable also,