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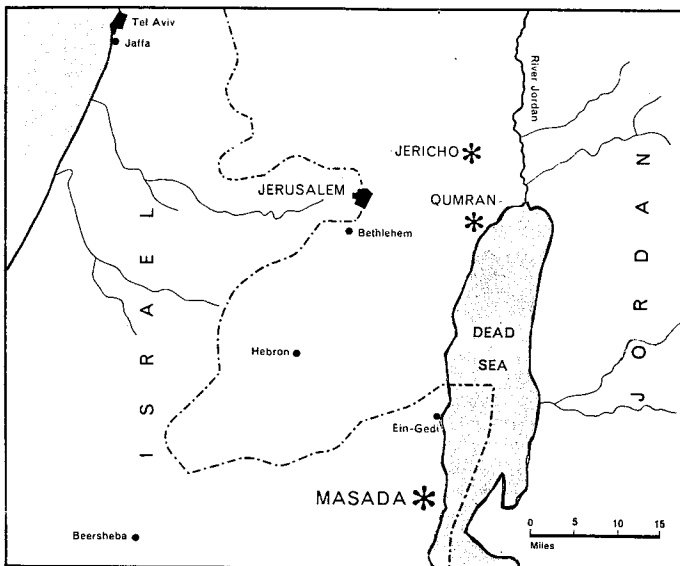
Maintaining a Monument

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Dear Peter,

Even though more than twenty years have passed since the end of this country's most ambitious archaeological undertaking, the name of the site where it took place-- Masada-- still exerts an undeniably romantic appeal. For many Israelis and visitors to Israel, Masada is, in fact, the most visible symbol of the power and significance of modern archaeology. Excavations held there from 1963 to 1965 uncovered the magnificent desert palace of Herod the Great (37- 4 BC) and evidence for the tragically unsuccessful attempt by Jewish rebels to prevent Masada's capture by the Romans at the end of the Great Revolt against Rome in 74 AD. And for modern Israelis, deeply concerned with issues of sovereignty and independence, the finds at Masada have long offered a tangible link between the present and the past. The fact that after 2000 years of exile, Jews returned to reveal the splendor and the tragedy of an earlier national existence at a remote mountain in the Judean desert was immediately recognized as a powerful and emotional metaphor.

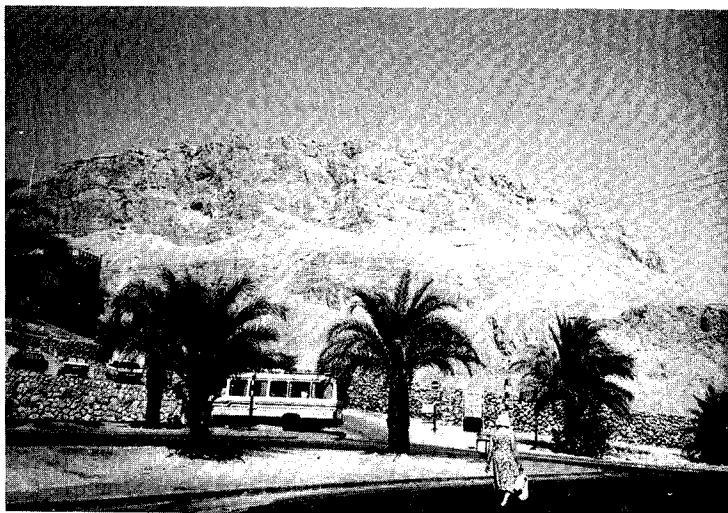


After Yadin, Masada (NY:1966)

Today, Masada remains one of Israel's most popular tourist attractions, accessible from Jerusalem by a scenic highway that winds along the western shore of the Dead Sea. Maintained by the Israel National Parks Authority as an historical monument since soon after the end of the excavations, the site now includes a youth hostel, museum, cafeteria, and a row of the inevitable souvenir shops. A cable car ride to the summit now makes the difficult climb up Masada's steep eastern slope unnecessary for all but the hardest visitors and student groups. This ease of access has encouraged a continually growing flow of tour groups and visitors whose buses, rented cars, and vans fill the parking

lots at the foot of the mountain on almost any day of the year.

The excavated ruins on the summit of Masada are carefully maintained and identified with signposts, but it is not pure archaeology that the majority of visitors come to see. They come, rather, to participate in an historical reenactment, performed dozens of times every day. After stepping off the cable car at the summit of the mountain, the visitors are transported back to the time of Masada's most famous events by the description of the local tourist-guides. And for this retelling, the visible archaeological remains are not so much tangible proof of the story's accuracy as they are elaborate stage scenery.



Masada today: view to the west

The narrative of Masada's ancient rise and fall continues to be told in much the same manner as it was presented to the public at the time of the excavations, even though on an archaeological level, some of the original evidence has been questioned or reinterpreted since that time. But the story of Masada is so meaningful against Israel's modern situation that it continues to have a life of its own. That's why, after a recent trip to Masada, I began to recognize another, non-archaeological significance of the monument. It may be that the discovery, preservation, and presentation of the mountain's archaeological remains reveal as much about modern as about ancient Israeli history.

* * *



Scenery from the summit:
cable car and Dead Sea

There's no question that Masada was an archaeological achievement. From a purely logistical standpoint, the excavations there were a triumph of organization and determination over the most difficult of natural conditions. Long before the parking lots were paved and the cable car installed, Masada was a remote and isolated plateau, cut off by deep ravines from the towering ridge of limestone cliffs that lines the western shore of the Dead Sea. Even today the climate is inhospitable: dry and extremely hot in summer, and in winter, subject to high

winds and flash floods. The excavations were undertaken on the summit and steep slopes of the mountain, hundreds of feet above the surrounding terrain. And the very remoteness and inaccessibility of the site that made its excavation so difficult were the same factors that made its reputation as an impregnable fortress unparalleled in antiquity.

Physical difficulties, however, did not stand in the way of the dig's director, the late Professor Yigael Yadin. As a former Chief of Staff of the Israel Defense Forces, he saw Masada as both an archaeological and a national challenge, and by gaining the financial support and publicity of private and public institutions both in Israel and abroad, he was able to marshal enough public interest to see that the challenge was overcome. With the support of the Israeli army to clear a campsite at the foot of the mountain, and with the assistance of engineers from the National Water Authority to pipe drinking water to the site, Yadin and his staff supervised the work of hundreds of volunteers from 28 countries through two years of almost continual digging. And due to their efforts and the discoveries they made, Masada became the most famous project in the history of Israeli archaeology and-- perhaps second only to the clearance of the Tomb of Tutankhamun-- the most publicized excavation in the 20th century.

Beyond the spectacular physical setting and the enthusiasm of the volunteers, there was, of course, the ancient story of Masada that set it apart from most other archaeological digs. Few other ancient sites can boast such a colorful cast of characters or such a spectacular closing scene. According to the 1st century AD Jewish historian Josephus Flavius, whose writings are the main source of our knowledge about Masada's history, this mountain was chosen by the Roman client-king Herod as a secure place of refuge in case of either popular uprising or dynastic intrigue. Building on the foundations of a fortress established by the Hasmonean kings of Judea earlier in the 1st century BC, Herod spared no expense in equipping Masada with lavish reception rooms, bathhouses, colonnades, and living quarters as well as storerooms and water cisterns that would permit him and his entourage to live comfortably and securely in otherwise impossible terrain.

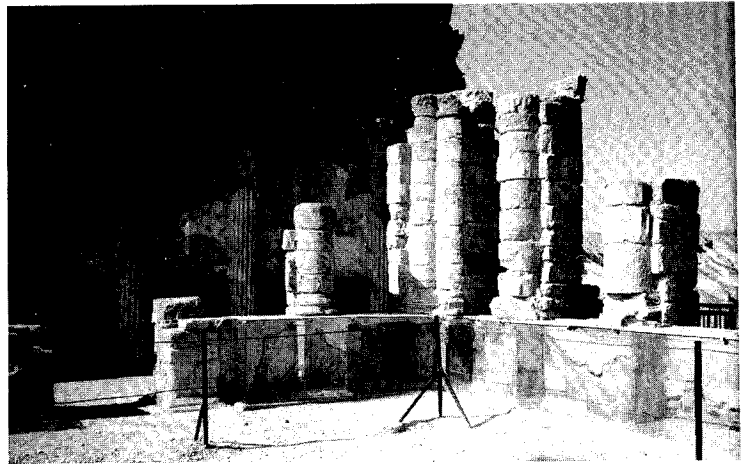
Yet the focus of Josephus' description of Masada is not the opulence of Herod's palace, but the grim determination of its later occupants. He relates how, 70 years after the death of Herod, at the time of a popular uprising in Judea against the Roman administration, a small group of Jewish rebels captured Masada from the legionary garrison that had been posted there, and continued to hold it even after the rebellion was crushed and the city and temple of Jerusalem had been destroyed. Because it was a self-sustaining fortress far out in the wilderness, Masada was the last pocket of Jewish resistance to fall. Yet the defenders were determined to deprive the Romans of satisfaction in this last victory; Josephus vividly described how the 960 men, women, and children holding out on Masada refused to suffer the fate of Roman captivity, preferring instead a bizarre mass suicide.

As related in Book VII of Josephus' Jewish War, the leader of the Masada rebels, Eleazar Ben Yair, assembled his comrades in Herod's once magnificent palace, when it was clear that the Roman siege forces could

no longer be held back. Josephus' narrative recounts the details of Ben Yair's attempts to convince the rest of the rebels that death was preferable to Roman slavery. God, it seemed, had forsaken their cause and they must pay for their sins. And to convince the more faint-hearted that suicide was not really self-destruction, Ben Yair declaimed an eloquent speech on the Immortality of the Soul. So, with the conviction that they were taking the only honorable course available to them, the Jewish defenders of Masada went off to slay their families, and when that killing was completed, they gathered all their supplies and personal possessions together and set fire to the pile. They then chose 10 men by a grim lottery to slay all the others, and one of those 10 to slay the other nine and himself.

The following morning, when the Romans stormed the fortress expecting fierce resistance, they encountered only the silence of death. Being informed of what had happened the previous night by 2 women and five children who had hidden themselves in an underground cistern, the Romans, according to Josephus, did not gloat over their victory. "Encountering the mass of slain, instead of exulting as over enemies, they admired the nobility of their resolve and the contempt of death displayed by so many in carrying it, unwavering, into execution." So ended the last episode of the Great Revolt.

This was the dramatic story that lay behind the Masada excavations, yet the evidence that Yadin and his staff actually uncovered surpassed even the most optimistic expectations of finding a correspondence between the written history and the archaeological finds. Josephus' descriptions of the physical layout of Masada proved to be uncannily accurate. Beneath the rubble of collapsed walls at various places on Masada's summit, the excavators uncovered the reception rooms, bathhouses, and storerooms of the Herodian palaces, substantially as Josephus had described them. The northern palace was built on three levels on the dizzying heights of Masada's sheer northern face. The arid climate of the site had preserved the vivid wall frescoes that had deco-



Above: colonnade in the lower terrace of Herod's northern palace.

Below: one of the excavated and reconstructed Herodian storerooms.

rated the structure. Yet even more meaningful than the proof of the accuracy of Josephus' descriptions of the splendor of the Herodian buildings were the archaeological indications of what had transpired on the mountain at the end of the Great Revolt.

Throughout the buildings of the Herodian palace, the excavators found evidence of a later, far less opulent occupation. Crude mud and stone walls partitioned the halls of the palace into smaller chambers. And in many of these makeshift rooms, the team found clay ovens and collections of personal possessions that seemed to represent the habitation of individual family groups.

Previous archaeological surveys of the surrounding area had already identified six Roman siege camps at the foot of the mountain and the Roman siege ramp on its western side. But only when the excavations began on the summit itself were the ultimate effects of the Roman siege brought to light. Throughout the rooms of the later occupation were traces of an intense conflagration that marked the end of the squatter occupation at the site. There was little question that the squatters were Jewish, as indicated by their construction of a synagogue and ritual baths and their use of biblical scrolls. And there was no doubt that the destruction of their settlement had taken place at the end of the Great Revolt, as indicated by the latest coins, which bore a date in Hebrew characters equivalent to 70 AD.

Even more striking evidence came from the lower terrace of Herod's northern palace, where Yadin and his staff were led to believe that they had found the remains of some of the last Masada defenders, whose death had come just as Josephus had described. Beneath the collapsed rubble of the colonnade were the skeleton of a young man, surrounded by scales of armor and fragments of a prayer shawl, and the skeletons of a child and a young woman, whose leather sandals and long plaited hair were perfectly preserved after 2000 years in the arid desert air.

In a cave on the southern face of the mountain, another group of excavators came upon an even more grisly discovery: a heap of 25 skeletons, jumbled with the remains of clothing and personal possessions. Later anthropological analysis indicated that these were not the remains of Roman soldiers or Byzantine monks who were later known to have occupied the area, but a surprisingly heterogeneous collection of people who met their death suddenly-- men, women, and children ranging in age from 8 to 70, as well as the skeleton of an unborn child.

The most dramatic discovery of all came during the clearance of the debris near Masada's storerooms, where the volunteers discovered 11 unique ostraca or inscribed potsherds. Ostraca, in themselves, were relatively common finds at Masada, for it seems that the last occupants used them as coins or tokens for the efficient distribution of food and other supplies. But these ostraca were different; instead of the usual letter or symbol, each of them bore a personal name. And since one of the names was "Ben Yair," the name of the commander of the defenders of Masada according to Josephus, Yadin and his staff felt sure that they had found the lots cast by the last Jewish rebels at Masada at the time of their mass suicide.

* * *

Despite the present, almost religious veneration attached to the Masada story, doubts have arisen in some scholarly circles about the significance of the archaeological finds. The famous ostraca, for instance, present a numerical problem; besides the fact of the commonness of such artifacts, the ones bearing personal names were eleven in number, not Josephus' explicitly stated ten. And with regard to the bodies, there are also some troubling questions. Josephus reported that the mass suicide of all 960 defenders took place in Herod's palace, yet the excavators found only three skeletons there. And as for the 25 skeletons found in the cave on the southern cliff-- although Yadin identified them as the remains of the rebels-- there is some indication that he himself wasn't so sure. In an interview he gave to the Jerusalem Post on November 6, 1982, Yadin admitted that he couldn't even vouch for their being Jewish, since they were found mixed together with the bones of pigs.

That isn't to say that much of Josephus' account of the fall of Masada isn't accurate; regarding the dimensions and physical layout of the fortress, his description is substantially correct. And while the remains of the siege works and ramp also validate his account of the Roman conquest, his narrative of the grim decision taken by the defenders on the eve of their defeat seems open to dispute. The archaeological evidence of the bodies in several places and the scattered traces of burning and small heaps of personal possessions all over the summit seem to contradict Josephus' account of unified action-- of all the supplies piled together as a demonstration of defiance toward the enemy, and of the palace alone set alight by the last survivor before he took his own life. These discrepancies have led one American scholar, Shaye J.D. Cohen, to suggest a new interpretation of the evidence, based less on archaeology than on a reexamination of Josephus Flavius' motivations for composing his tale.

Cohen's credentials as a scholar of Josephus are impeccable. His book on the 1st century AD author's life and background, Josephus in Galilee and Rome, is considered a standard work in the field. In it, Cohen describes how Josephus, a scion of a prominent Jerusalem family, was placed in charge of the defense of the Galilee at the outbreak of the revolt, and how he defected to the Roman side when it was clear to him that the cause was lost. Becoming the personal protege of the emperor-to-be Vespasian, he adopted the family name of the Flavians, and was set to work in comfortable surroundings in Rome to write the definitive history of the Jewish Revolt. His purpose was clearly not only to record the recent events faithfully, but to demonstrate to the Roman reading public that the uprising in Judea was not an expression of the entire Jewish people, but the misguided work of irresponsible troublemakers who called themselves "Zealots" and "Sicarii." And it was the latter group that made Masada their last stand.

The Sicarii, or "knife-wielders," adopted their name from their favorite means of political persuasion and their reputation was anything but heroic in their own time. According to Josephus' testimony, they terrorized the members of the Judean populace who opposed the rebellion with the tactics of assassination, arson, and theft. After killing the Roman garrison and taking control of the fortress at Masada at the out-

break of the revolt, they continued their violent ways. They did not come to the aid of their rebel colleagues in Jerusalem when the city was under siege by the 10th Roman legion, but preferred to remain at their desert hideaway, maintaining themselves by preying on the surrounding populace. During the festival of Passover in 68 AD, for example, they raided the nearby settlement of Ein Gedi, carrying off the inhabitants' crops and livestock. And their victims in this encounter were not the hated Romans, but-- according to Josephus-- more than 700 innocent Jewish men, women, women, and children.

This criminal background is not what might be expected of national heroes, yet Cohen explains why he believes Josephus gave the story of Masada the dramatic ending so beloved of visitors to the site today. According to Cohen, the story of the mass suicide served Josephus' polemical purpose: to have the Sicarii make a collective admission of guilt. The text of Ben Yair's moving speech to his assembled comrades contains all the themes that Josephus wanted to make clear to his readers-- how the idea of rebelling against Rome was a tragic mistake, and how, after coming to that realization, the Sicarii felt compelled to accept the verdict of history. Of course it might legitimately be asked how Josephus could have known the precise text of Ben Yair's speech if his only informants had been the 2 women and 5 children who had been hiding in an underground cistern at the time. Or how, for that matter, he could have known the precise order of the casting of the lots and the killing of the families if all the participants in that grisly ritual had died. But all these components of Josephus' story are easily understandable, Cohen argues, when they are seen in their proper literary context. For he shows that far from being a unique event in Jewish history, the collective suicide on Masada was an example of what had become, by Josephus' time, a common literary motif.

In his article, "Masada: Literary Tradition, Archaeological Remains, and the Credibility of Josephus," published in the 1982 volume of the Journal of Jewish Studies, Cohen assembled 16 other incidents of collective suicide recorded in the writings of such prominent classical historians as Herodotus, Pliny, Appian, Plutarch, Xenophon, and Polybius. Spanning a period from the 6th to the 1st centuries BC, these writers described how in desperate circumstances of imminent defeat such diverse peoples as Lydians, Phocians, Taochians, Sidonians, Cappadocians, Isaurians, Spaniards, Greeks, Gauls, and Illyrians sacrificed their lives and their property rather than allow them to fall into the hands of their victorious enemies.

For Josephus, basing his own history on such classical models, the use of this collective suicide motif must have been an obvious way to end his account. The other stories, always highly elaborated with gruesome details of death and dedication, served to underline the heroism of the defenders, even if their cause was misguided or doomed. And after having placed the blame for the Great Revolt on the irresponsible Sicarii, Josephus could have at least endowed them with a final act of collective heroism as an elegant and literarily acceptable climax. Seen in that light, the Masada story takes on a new meaning, as a literary device well-known in the 1st century AD that has perhaps been taken far too literally in modern times.

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In 1968, three years after the completion of the Masada excavations, the government of Israel reburied the 28 skeletons found on the summit of the mountain with full military honors under headstones used for the fallen of the Israel Defense Forces in the recent Arab-Israeli wars. The summit of the mountain itself became the scene of the annual swearing-in ceremony for the new recruits of the Israeli tank corps, who still vow every year under the light of torches that "Masada Shall Not Fall Again." Stamps, coins, and posters were issued to commemorate the achievement of the excavations and their importance to modern Israeli society. And Yigael Yadin, the director of the excavations, was well aware of the significance of this juxtaposition of the present and the past. "The echo of your oath this night," he proclaimed at one of the armored division ceremonies at Masada, "will resound through the encampments of our foes! Its significance is not less powerful than all our armaments!"

Yadin's personal account of the Masada excavations quickly became a best-seller. The book, Masada: Herod's Fortress and the Zealots' Last Stand, first published by Random House in 1966, was eventually translated into French, German, Italian, and Hebrew, and rewritten in a special children's edition as well. The site of Masada was restored and opened to the public, a symbol for the rebirth of the modern nation and its connection to a heroic past. Yet in time, voices of criticism began to be heard, especially in the years after the 1967 war when Israel was no longer seen so clearly as an underdog. The initial uncritical acceptance of the Masada story began to give way to new interpretations, and in a 1973 article in Newsweek magazine, the American columnist Stewart Alsop coined the term "The Masada Complex" to describe what he saw as Israel's emerging diplomatic inflexibility.

Writing on the eve of Israel's 25th anniversary of independence, Alsop observed that the national acceptance of an image of suicide rather than survival might, under the dangerous conditions of the modern Middle East, become a tragically self-fulfilling prophecy. But his observation was not taken as constructive criticism; by 1973, Masada had gained an almost mystical importance to the Israeli consciousness. And in the same year, on an official visit to Washington, Prime Minister Golda Meir directly confronted Alsop over the issue at a lunch at the Washington Press Club.

"And you, Mr. Alsop," she said from the podium, "you say we have a Masada complex. It is true. We do have a Masada complex. We have a pogrom complex. We have a Hitler complex." Alsop was temporarily silenced. To challenge the significance of the Masada story as revealed by the excavations was seen at the time as tantamount to challenging Israel's right and reason for existence in the modern world.

Today, 13 years after that encounter, and more than 20 years after Yadin's excavations, the "Masada Complex" is no longer mentioned so frequently, and at least for some scholars, the initial interpretations of the archaeological finds at Masada are not such persuasive proof of the historical accuracy of the mass suicide there as they once were. This is, of course, of little concern to the visitors who still flock to the

site, for the symbol and the slogan "Masada Shall Not Fall Again" have a life of their own. At the time of the excavations, Masada served to instill Israelis with a self-image of heroism and sacrifice when the country felt itself under the threat of imminent attack. And even though the times have changed and Israel faces different challenges today, Masada's impressive position, the vista over the Dead Sea, and the well-practiced story all conspire to exert their effect. The national fascination with that ancient fortress in the midst of the Judean desert continues to be a manifestation of a modern state of mind rather than an historical fact.

Best Regards,

Neil



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