

# MASADA

**History.** Masada, whose name means “stronghold,” was a mountain fortress located about 35 miles southeast of Jerusalem, just west of the isthmus of the Dead Sea. Josephus said that Jonathan first fortified Masada (*Wars* 7.8.3), which is likely a reference to Alexander Jannaeus (103-76 B.C.). Most of the buildings on top of the fortress we see today were built by Herod the Great between 36 and 30 B.C. His building of Masada was partially fueled by his paranoia; he was afraid that others would take away his kingship, so he needed a place to retreat in case of attack. Herod had been appointed King of Judea by Rome, but he felt threatened by Cleopatra, the queen of Egypt, as well as by his Jewish subjects. His paranoia is vividly illustrated by “the slaughter of the innocents” at Bethlehem near the end of his life; he put many infants to death in an attempt to kill King Jesus (Mt. 2). Masada was just one of Herod’s fortresses; he built other strongholds such as Herodium (near Bethlehem) and Machaerus (east of the Dead Sea). These places were constructed not only for defensive purposes, but also for relaxation and recreation. In regard to defense, Josephus referred to Masada as “the strongest fortress of them all” (*Antiquities* 14.11.7).



Masada Viewed from the East (by the Dead Sea)

Interestingly, some wine jars were found at Masada with the stamp reading “To King Herod of Judea.” They also bore the name “Sentius Saturninus,” who was the Roman legate to Syria; therefore, the jars of wine were likely a gift from Augustus Caesar. These jars and other archaeological evidence corroborates Josephus’ testimony concerning Herod’s use of the site.

After Herod’s death in 4 B.C., Masada was turned into a Roman garrison. However, in A.D. 66, the fortress was captured by Jewish zealots and used as their stronghold (*Wars* 2.17.2). After destroying Jerusalem and the temple in A.D. 70, Titus went back to Rome in triumphal procession. Nevertheless, Roman forces continued their pursuit of the Jews south into the Judean desert. Lucilius Bassus, the legate of Judea, led the assault against the zealots at Herodium and Machaerus (*Wars* 7.6.1-4).



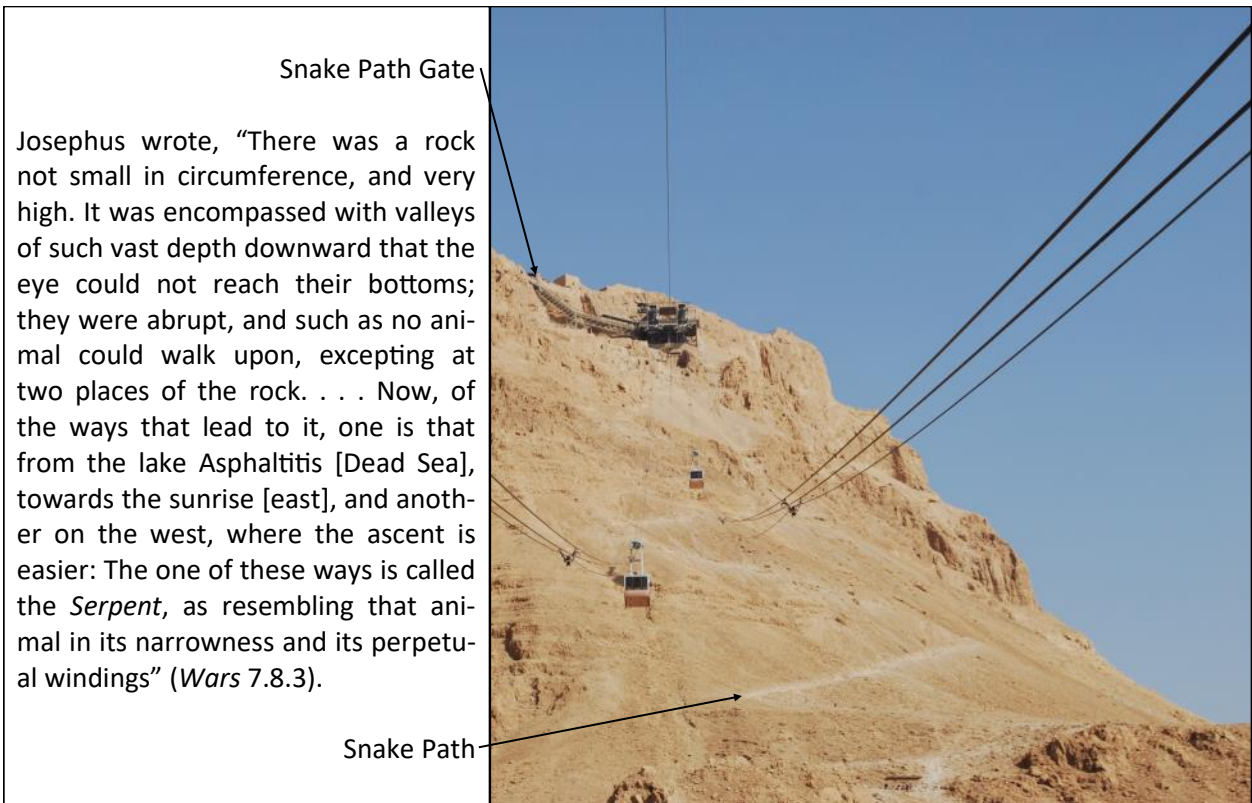
(Right) The Arch of Titus in Rome commemorates Titus’ victory over Jerusalem. (Above) A relief from inside the arch portrays the menorah, the table of showbread, and the silver trumpets, items taken by the Romans as spoils from the temple.



After Bassus died, Flavius Silva, a Roman general who had been appointed governor of Judea, directed the attack on Masada, the last Jewish stronghold (*Wars* 7.8.1). He marched to Masada, in A.D. 72, with the tenth legion and auxiliary troops. Thousands of Jewish prisoners of war were used to carry water, timber, and provisions. Eight Roman camps were set up around the mountain, being connected by a wall (which prevented the Jews from escaping); the main camp was set up on the northwestern side (see *Wars* 7.8.2). The Romans would shoot catapult balls at the fortress above; in return, the zealots would roll large stones down the mountain at the Roman camps.



Ascent to Masada via Cable Car (Eastern Side)



Snake Path Gate

Josephus wrote, "There was a rock not small in circumference, and very high. It was encompassed with valleys of such vast depth downward that the eye could not reach their bottoms; they were abrupt, and such as no animal could walk upon, excepting at two places of the rock. . . . Now, of the ways that lead to it, one is that from the lake Asphaltitis [Dead Sea], towards the sunrise [east], and another on the west, where the ascent is easier: The one of these ways is called the *Serpent*, as resembling that animal in its narrowness and its perpetual windings" (*Wars* 7.8.3).

Snake Path





Snake Path Gate Interior (Above) and Snake Path (Below) on the Eastern Side







Northwestern Camp with Defensive Wall



Northern Camp (Below Northern Palace)



Rolling Stones (Stacked on Top of Masada)

The Romans built a huge earthen ramp on the western side of Masada, which was the easiest approach to the mountaintop. Using siege engines and battering rams, they finally broke through the wall on top of the mountain. The Jewish zealots responded by filling the breach with wooden beams. The Romans set these on fire, but the wind changed directions and blew the fire back on them. However, the wind reversed directions in the Romans' favor, and, according to Josephus, they resolved to attack the next day (*Wars* 7.8.5).



Earthen Siege Ramp (on the Western Side)

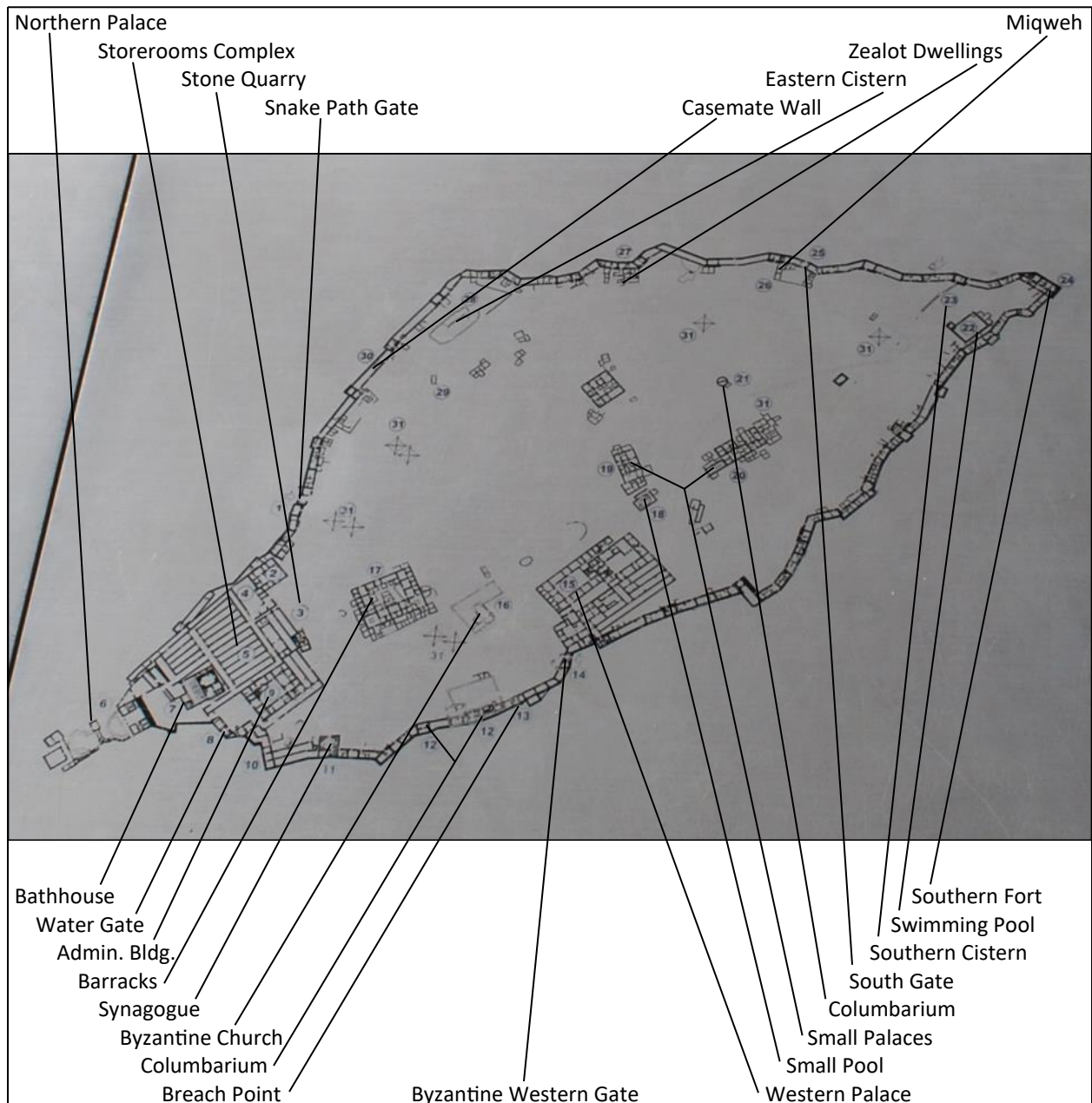
At the proposal and lengthy admonitions of their leader, Eleazar ben Yair, the zealots carried out the following course of action: They killed their wives and children so that these would not be raped and abused by the Romans. They destroyed their material wealth next so the Romans would have no plunder. After this, ten men were chosen by lot to kill the rest of the men so they would not become the Romans' slaves. Then, the first one of those chosen by lot killed the other nine, and finally himself. When the Romans ascended the mountain in the morning, they found it hauntingly silent—with 960 Jews dead. However, two women and five children had hidden themselves away in a cavern on top of the mountain with a supply of water, escaping certain slaughter. They told the story of the mass suicide to the Romans, and this was the basis for Josephus' report (*Wars* 7.9.1-2). (It is noteworthy that Josephus himself had been a commander of Jewish troops in Galilee in the earlier years of the revolt, that he had narrowly escaped by lot and persuasion a suicide pact among his men, and that he had surrendered to the Romans [*Wars* 3.8.7].)



Sandals, Braids of Hair, and a Comb  
from the Northern Palace at Masada, A.D. 73  
(Israel Museum, Jerusalem)

After A.D. 73, Silva left a garrison at Masada, but the mountain was abandoned by the Romans in the early second century. In the fifth and sixth centuries, some monks lived on top of Masada and built a small basilica there.

Masada was excavated from 1963 to 1965 under the direction of Yigael Yadin. Thousands from around the world volunteered to help. His team discovered that the best place to set up camp was on the northwest, beside the Romans' main camp. They even used the Romans' earthen ramp for most of their trips up the mountain, but had to build stairs at the top. The excavation is reported in Yadin's book, *Masada: Herod's Fortress and the Zealots' Last Stand*.







Model of Masada (Viewed from the West)

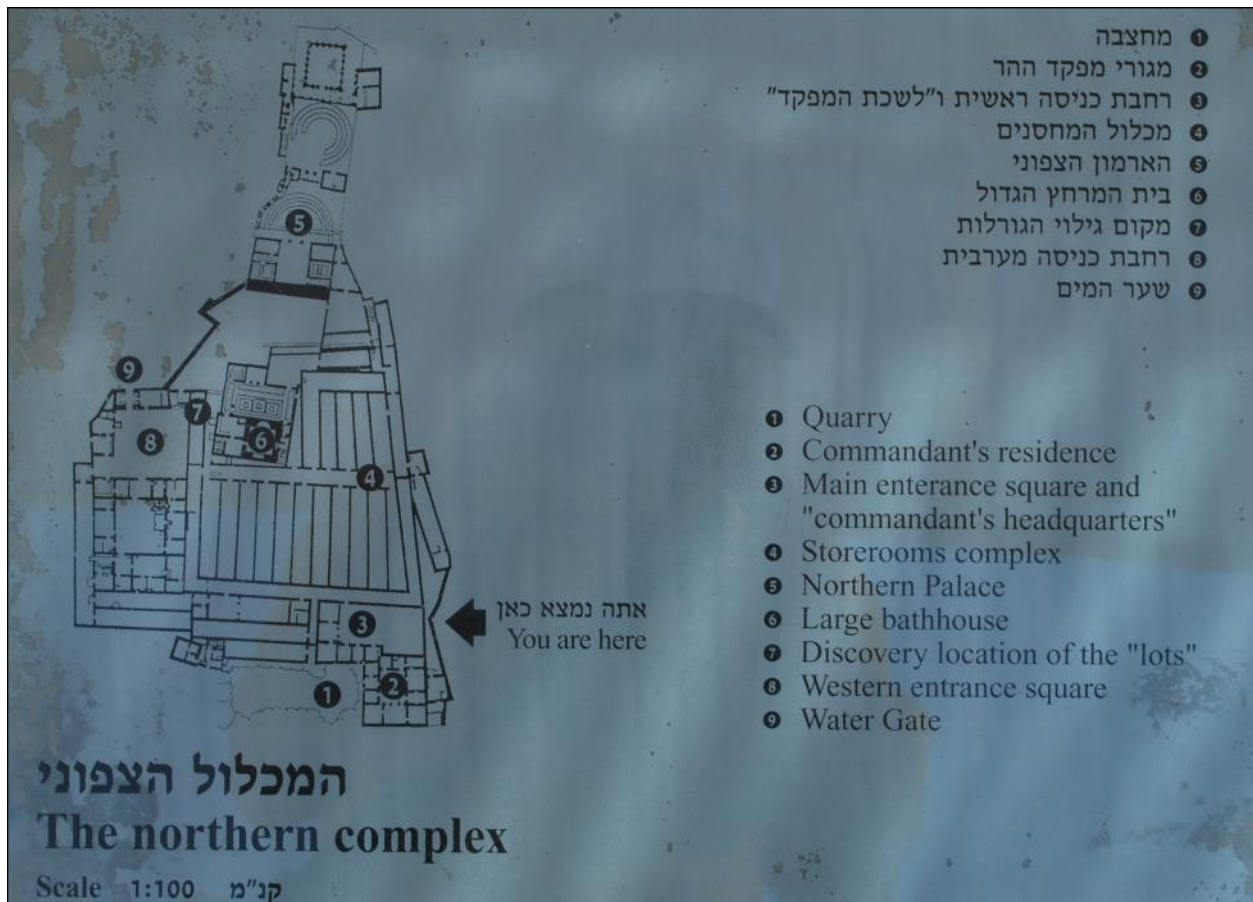


Quarry Which Provided Stone for Construction  
in the Time of Herod





Model of the Northern Complex (Viewed from the East)

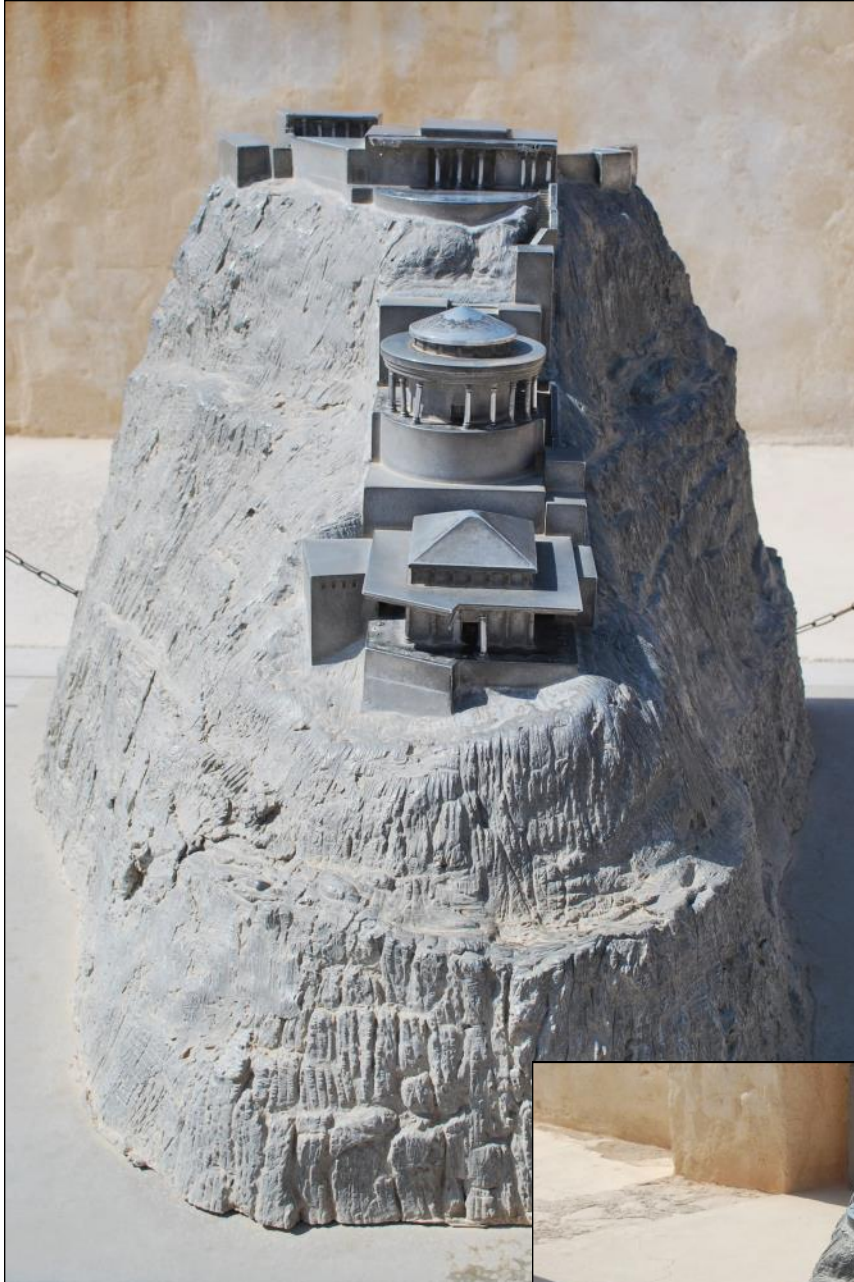




Storerooms for Food, Wine, and Weapons (See *Wars* 7.8.4)







Model of Northern Palace  
on Three Terraces

The upper level was designed as Herod's living quarters, whereas the middle and lower levels were for receptions and entertainment.





Upper Terrace of the Northern Palace (Living Quarters)



Middle and Lower Terraces of the Northern Palace (Entertainment)





Middle and Lower Terraces of the Northern Palace (Entertainment)



Frescoes and Pillars on the Southern Wall of the Lower Terrace

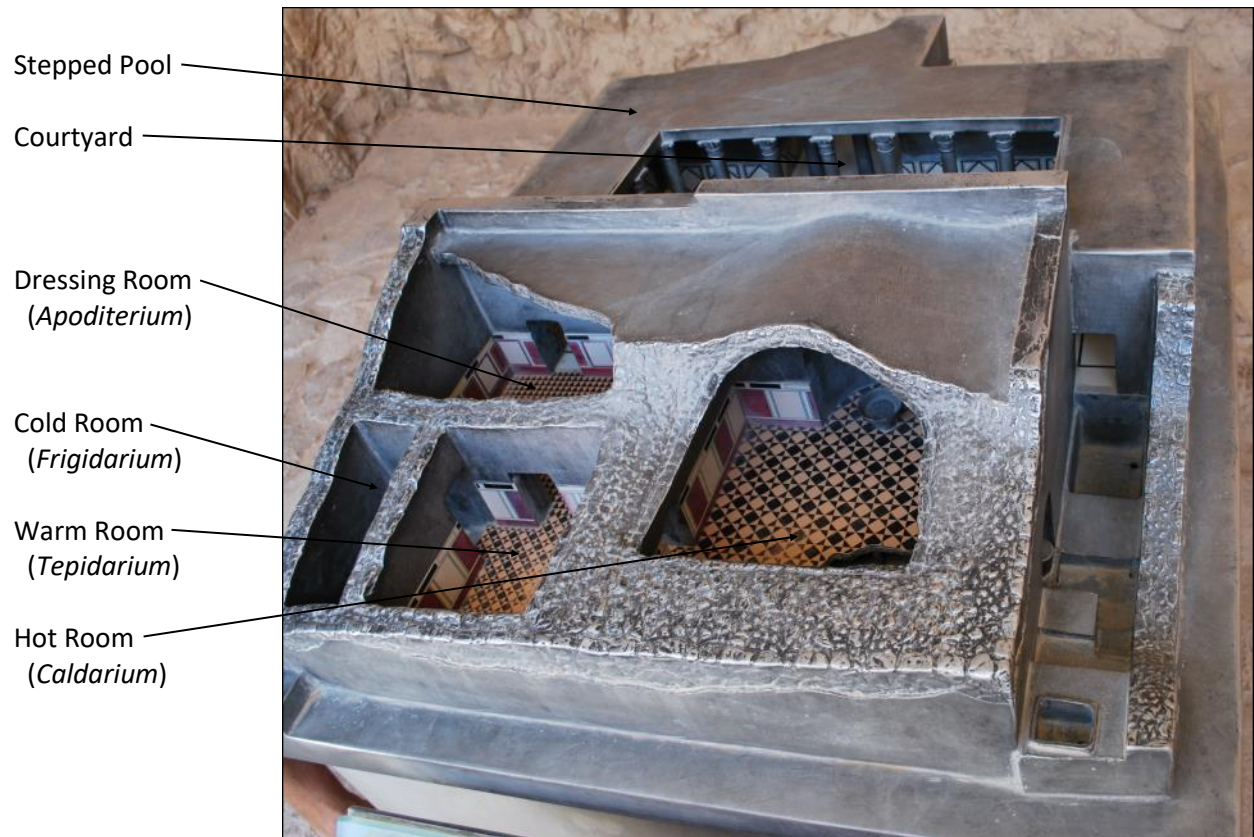




Frescoes and Pillars of the Lower Terrace







Bathhouse Model (Above) and Courtyard of Bathhouse (Below)

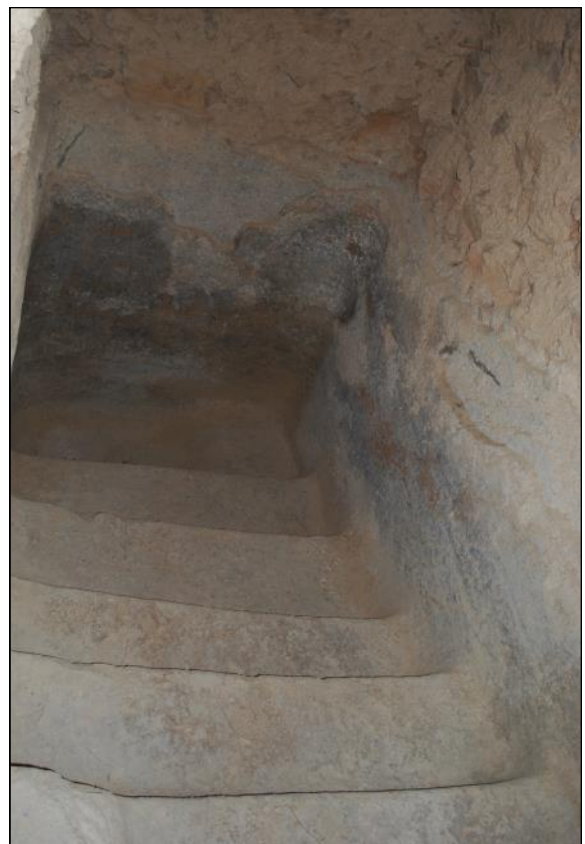




Stepped Pool in the Courtyard



Dressing Room (*Apoditerium*)



Cold Room with Stepped Pool (*Frigidarium*)





Hot Room (*Caldarium*)



Heat was piped from an outside oven into the hot room underneath the floor, which was elevated by pillars (a hypocaust). It also circulated in the walls, which had clay piping under the plaster. The domed ceiling prevented the steamy air from collecting and dripping on bathers.



Bathhouse (Viewed from the Back Side)



“Lottery Area”

Near the bathhouse, hundreds of ostraca were found. One grouping bears eleven names, including “ben Yair,” who was the leader of the zealots. These may have been used for drawing lots in the killing of the 960 Jews described by Josephus.





The Water Gate

The water gate is located on the northwest corner of Masada. A path led down to the water cisterns on the northwestern slope of the mountain. Since Masada is located in the Judean desert, there is very little rainfall each year. Further, the installations on top of the mountain—including bathhouses, swimming pools, and ritual baths (*miqwaoth*)—required plenty of water. Herod had several huge cisterns dug in the mountain, and he channeled water from the surrounding wadis into those cisterns. The water was periodically transported to the plateau of the mountain by slaves and pack animals.



Wadi on the Southern Side



Water Channel on the Eastern Side





Ritual Bath (Above) and Small Cistern (Below)







The Synagogue



This synagogue dates from the time of the First Revolt, placing it among the oldest synagogues discovered in Israel (dating before A.D. 70). (Others include the ones found at Herodium, Gamla, and Magdala.) In this case, whenever the zealots took Masada from the Romans (A.D. 66), they repurposed this building to use as a house of prayer and Bible study. They apparently reused stones from other buildings on the mountain in this process. One corner of the building was sectioned off to make a *geniza*—that is, a room used to store worn out copies of the Law and the Prophets. The Jews did not burn their old sacred writings, but rather stored or buried them. Scrolls were found under the floor of the *geniza* that contained fragments of Ezekiel (“The Valley of Dry Bones”) and Deuteronomy.



Synagogue Geniza



## THE “CASEMATE OF THE SCROLLS”

A large and rare concentration of finds from the time of the revolt was found in a corner of the room of the wall in which we stand: inscribed sheets of papyrus, fragments of scrolls, silver shekel coins, textiles, sandals, and glass vessels and bone implements. Among the finds was the pay record of a Roman cavalryman in the Tenth Legion. The most interesting finds were the scroll fragments, some of which show that during the siege there were members of different sects on the mountain. The finds were gathered here by Roman soldiers collecting booty after the fall of Masada. On the floor of the room were found ballista balls and rolling stones, which came from the roof of the casemate and the nearby tower.



Western Casemate Wall  
Where Scrolls Were Found





Columbarium Towers Where Pigeons Were Raised





## THE BREACHING POINT

Here the siege of Masada ended. The ramp that the Romans had built up to the summit of the mountain reached to below this point. At the top of the ramp rose the siege tower, and in it was the battering ram with which the Romans assaulted the casemate wall. However, the rebels had built a wall of earth and wood, against which the battering ram was ineffective:

*"Observing this, Silva, thinking it easier to destroy this wall by fire, ordered his soldiers to hurl at it showers of burning torches... At the first outbreak of the fire, a north wind which blew in the faces of the Romans caused them alarm; for diverting the flame from above, it drove it against them... Then suddenly the wind veering, as if by divine providence, to the south and blowing with full force in the opposite direction, wafted and flung the flames against the wall, which now through and through was all ablaze."*

Josephus Flavius

When night fell, and it was clear that the situation was hopeless and that the Romans would break in at dawn, Eleazar Ben Ya'ir assembled his followers and called for mass suicide:

*"The Romans, expecting further opposition... were at a loss to conjecture what had happened... Here encountering the mass of the 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."*

Josephus Flavius

The excavations here uncovered ballista balls and arrowheads, numerous slingshots and signs of burning, evidence of the battle that raged at this spot.



Overlooking the Earthen Ramp





Western Palace and Byzantine Western Gate







The Byzantine Basilica

## THE BYZANTINE CHURCH

*"Near the Dead Sea is a mountain called Marda. On this mountain live hermits, who have a vegetable garden six miles away, near the seashore... Whenever the hermits wish to send out to the garden for vegetables, they harness a donkey and tell it: 'Go to the garden and bring us vegetables...' And it goes down quite alone to the gardener. Every day one can see the donkey ascending and descending on its own and serving the elders."*

John Moschus, 600 CE

Why did monks settle in the ruins of a fortress in the heart of the desert? In the desert they sought the tranquility that would bring them closer to the Creator. The cells of the monks who lived on Masada in the 5th to 7th centuries CE were scattered all over the mountain in small buildings, in caves and in cisterns that had gone out of use. There they communicated with the Creator in isolation, and here, in the church, they gathered to worship together.

The floors of the church were decorated with mosaics.

The courtyard of the church, in which some domestic installations were found, was walled. Water was brought here from the cisterns on the slopes and from renovated cisterns on the summit.





The Byzantine Basilica (Interior with Mosaic)







Casemate Wall and Zealot Dwellings on the Eastern Side





The Dead Sea to the East of Masada



Herodium to the Northwest of Masada