

30 Machaerus



Name

Machaerus (Μαχαιρούς, from Ancient Greek: μάχαιρα "Makhaira" (a sword).

Location/Description



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.

Lands of the Herods

- Herod Antipas ruled **Galilee** and **Peraea**.
- His half brother Philip ruled **Ituraea** and **Trachonitis**.
- Herod built **Tiberias** on the sea of Galilee in AD 19 as his capital.
- He used **Machaerus** to protect his southern border from the Nabataeans.

Machaerus was the easternmost of Herod’s renovated palatial fortresses. Rising majestically above the Dead Sea the fortress could be seen from as far north as Alexandria and as far south as Masada, and smoke signals from the citadel were visible in Jerusalem. In addition to its natural defensible position on a rocky hilltop, Machaerus served as the first line of defense—and warning—against any eastern invaders.

Machaerus – Herod’s mountain stronghold

- Built high on a mountain ridge with a deep ravine below.
- Situated on the eastern shore of the Dead Sea near **Abarim** and **Pisgah**.
- The dungeon was one level below the banquet hall.

Notable connections

The site provides the setting for the execution of John the Baptist and four additional New Testament characters: **Herod the Great**; his son, Tetrach **Herod Antipas**; his second wife, Princess **Herodias**, and her daughter, Princess **Salome**.

Scriptural references

New Testament

Matt. 14:34; Mark 6:53; Luke 5:1.



Brief history

Originally built by Hasmonean ruler Alexander Jannaeus (103-76 BC) it was destroyed by the Romans in 63 BC and rebuilt by Herod the Great (37-4 BC) who “built a wall round the very summit and erected towers at the corners, each 27.4 m (100 ft) high. In the middle of this enclosure he built a palace, breath-taking in size and beauty” (Josephus).

The fortress was taken over by Herod Antipas in 4 BC on the death of his father. Flavius Josephus places the execution of John the Baptist at Machaerus (Antiquities 18.116-19).

Machaerus was more than just a military outpost; the extensive renovations by Herod turned the originally defensive centre into a

lavish palace that set the stage for a (deadly) Herodian birthday party.



The above cutaway reconstruction of the Herodian Palace at Machaerus shows the splendor of the Dead Sea fortress. Herod the Great added luxurious renovations including a courtyard with a garden, a Roman-style bath, a triclinium for dining and a peristyle courtyard.



The death of John the Baptist

The character of Herod Antipas

- Born circa BC 21 – son of Herod the Great.
- He was Tetrarch of Galilee and Perea - BC 4 to AD 39.
- Possessed the cunning of his father but lacked his diplomacy and military skill.
- Sly and ambitious, Hausrath calls him “a wily sneak”; Christ calls him a “fox” – Luke 13:32.
- His administration was utterly destitute of principle and based on cunning, crime and intense selfishness.
- Rejected his first wife (the daughter of Aretus) and eloped with Herodias his half brother Philip’s wife.

Machaerus from the east



Repetition of history

Ahab and Herod – both ruled by dominant women – amenable to Word but vacillating.

Jezebel and Herodias – resolute women ruled by lust and ambition – vengeful seducers, hard, incorrigible and unforgiving.

Athaliah and Salome – carnal seducers who were ruthless in achieving their ambitions.

Elijah and John the Baptist – courageous for the truth in the face of great danger – both true to their Nazariteship.

Contrasts – Herod and John

Herod Antipas

- Herod’s birthday
- Fleshly from birth
- Drunk – no control of his mind
- Body ruled by lust
- Influenced by others to murder
- Lost his ‘head’ and his kingdom

John the Baptist

- Day of his death
- Nazarite from birth
- Sober - in full control of his mind
- All lust denied
- Gave his life to save others from death
- Lost his head and gained the kingdom

Mark 6:21-29

Mark 6:17-29

17 For Herod himself had sent forth and laid hold upon John, and bound him in prison for Herodias' sake, his brother Philip's wife: for he had married her.

18 For John had said unto Herod, It is not lawful for thee to have thy brother's wife.

19 Therefore Herodias had a quarrel against him, and would have killed him; but she could not:

20 For Herod feared John, knowing that he was a just man and an holy, and observed

him; and when he heard him, he did many things, and heard him gladly.

21 And when a convenient day was come, that Herod on his birthday made a supper to his lords, high captains, and chief *estates* of Galilee;

22 And when the daughter of the said Herodias came in, and danced, and pleased Herod and them that sat with him, the king said unto the damsel, Ask of me whatsoever thou wilt, and I will give *it* thee.

23 And he sware unto her, Whatsoever thou shalt ask of me, I will give *it* thee, unto the half of my kingdom.

24 And she went forth, and said unto her mother, What shall I ask? And she said, The head of John the Baptist.

25 And she came in straightway with haste unto the king, and asked, saying, I will that thou give me by and by in a charger the head of John the Baptist.

26 And the king was exceeding sorry; *yet* for his oath's sake, and for their sakes which sat with him, he would not reject her.

27 And immediately the king sent an executioner, and commanded his head to be brought: and he went and beheaded him in the prison,

28 And brought his head in a charger, and gave it to the damsel: and the damsel gave it to her mother.

29 And when his disciples heard *of it*, they came and took up his corpse, and laid it in a tomb.

The demise of Herod Antipas

- Herodias, not content with Herod's status, induced him to appeal to Caesar for promotion.
- Antipas went to Rome and demanded that Emperor Caligula grant him the title of king.
- He was banished to Gaul and then Spain for intrigue against Caligula – AD 39.
- Died in ignominy and poverty in Spain.

Salome – Daughter of Herodias

- Daughter of Philip 1. Granddaughter of the high priest Simeon on mother's side.
- Famous for her salacious dancing leading to the death of John the Baptist.
- Married Philip II her uncle who died childless AD 34.
- Married Aristobulus (her cousin) and had 3 sons.



It is said she was decapitated while skating on thin ice.

Sources:

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/machearus>
<http://biblicalarchaeology.org>

(Compiler – Jim Cowie)