



Masada was inscribed on the UNESCO World Heritage List in 2001. Its inscription on this prestigious list epitomizes its outstanding universal significance, which must be protected for the benefit of all humanity.

Masada was the last bastion of Jewish freedom fighters against the Romans; its fall signaled the violent destruction of the kingdom of Judea at the end of the Second Temple period. The tragic events of the last days of the rebels at Masada transformed it into both a Jewish cultural icon and a symbol of humanity's continuous struggle for freedom from oppression.

Built by Herod, king of Judea, Masada was a palatial fortress in the style of the ancient Roman East. The camps, fortifications, and assault ramp at its base constitute the most complete surviving ancient Roman siege system in the world.

Geography

The plateau of Masada is located on the eastern fringe of the Judean Desert near the shore of the Dead Sea, between En Gedi and Sodom. It is a mountain bloc that rose and was detached from the fault escarpment, surrounded at its base by Wadi Ben Yair on the west and Wadi Masada on the south and east. The plateau, 450 meters above the level of the Dead Sea, is approximately 650 meters long and 300 meters wide. East of the mountain is sediment left by the ancient Dead Sea, scored by numerous cracks.

Masada is close to two ancient routes: one cut through the center of the Judean Desert and led to southern Moab in eastern Transjordan; the other connected Edom, Moab and the Arava Valley to En Gedi and Jerusalem.

Masada's remote location and its natural defenses were the advantages that transformed it into a fortress during the Second Temple period.

Safety Rules

- Visits are permitted only when the park is open.
- After dark, visitors are permitted only in authorized areas: the hostel and the open overnight campground on the eastern side, and the overnight campground (entrance fee required) on the western side.
- Do not deviate from marked paths; do not climb walls or damage the antiquities.
- Do not go near the edge of the cliff. Beware of falling rocks.
- Caution: there are dangerous places at this site. Parents, please watch your children.
- Bring water on your ascent of the mountain and drink frequently. A hat and good walking shoes are recommended.
- Obey the park wardens and signs.
- Do not leave your vehicle in the parking garage after the park closes.
- The management is not responsible for valuables left in vehicles.
- Do not bring food up the mountain; there are designated picnic areas at park entrances.
- Pets are prohibited in the park. Cages are available at the entrances.
- The snake path is closed due to extreme weather conditions (flooding or heat stress).

Access and services for persons with disabilities

All of Masada National Park, its eastern and western entrances, and the sound and light show have been adapted for visits by persons with mobility, vision, or hearing impairments. Disabled access was made possible with the assistance of the National Insurance Institute – the Fund for the Development of Services for the Disabled.



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The History of Masada

Sources

The story of Masada was recorded by Josephus Flavius, who was the commander of the Galilee during the Great Revolt and later surrendered to the Romans at Yodfat. At the time of Masada's conquest he was in Rome, where he devoted himself to chronicling the revolt. In spite of the debate surrounding the accuracy of his accounts, its main features seem to have been born out by excavation.

The Hasmonean Period

According to Josephus, the first fortress at Masada was built by "Jonathan the High Priest" – apparently the Hasmonean king Alexander Janaeus (103-76 BCE), whose coins were discovered in excavations of the site. Some scholars tend to identify Jonathan with the brother of Judah the Macabbee, who became high priest in 152 BCE. So far no architectural remains have been discovered at Masada that can be dated with certainty to the Hasmonean period.

The Herodian Period

Herod, who ruled from 37 BCE to 4 BCE, was well aware of the strategic advantages of Masada. He therefore chose the site as a refuge against his enemies, and as a winter palace. During his reign, luxurious palaces were built here in addition to well-stocked storerooms, cisterns, and a casemate wall. After the death of Herod in 4 BCE and the annexation of Judea to the Roman Empire in 6 CE, the Romans stationed a garrison at Masada.

The Great Revolt

Josephus relates that one of the first events of the Great Revolt of the Jews against the Romans, which broke out in 66 CE, was the conquest of Masada by the Sicarii, a group that got its name from a curved dagger, the *sica*, which they carried. The Sicarii were headed by Menahem, son of Judah the Galilean, who was murdered in Jerusalem in 66 CE. After the murder, Eleazar Ben Yair fled from Jerusalem to Masada and became commander of the rebel community on the mountain. It was a varied group, which apparently included Essenes and Samaritans. The last of the rebels fled to Masada after the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 CE and joined those already at the fortress under the command of Eleazar Ben Yair.

The rebels, who lived in rooms in the casemate wall and in some of Herod's palaces, constructed a synagogue and mikvehs (Jewish ritual baths). They left behind numerous material vestiges attesting to their community life.

The Siege

According to Josephus, Masada was the last rebel stronghold in Judea. In 73 or 74 CE, the Roman Tenth Legion Fretensis, led by Flavius Silva, laid siege to the mountain. The legion, consisting of 8,000 troops among which were auxiliary forces, built eight camps around the base, a siege wall, and

a ramp made of earth and wooden supports on a natural slope to the west. Captive Jews brought water to the troops, apparently from En Gedi, as well as food.

After a siege that lasted a few months, the Romans brought a tower with a battering ram up the ramp with which they began to batter the wall. The rebels constructed an inner support wall out of wood and earth, which the Romans then set ablaze. As Josephus describes it, when the hope of the rebels dwindled, Eleazar Ben Yair gave two speeches in which he convinced the leaders of the 960 members of the community that it would be better to take their own lives and the lives of their families than to live in shame and humiliation as Roman slaves. In Josephus' own words:

"Then, having chosen by lot ten of their number to dispatch the rest, they laid themselves down each beside his prostrate wife and children, and, flinging their arms around them, offered their throats in readiness for the executants of the melancholy office. These, having unswervingly slaughtered all, ordained the same rule of the lot for one another, that he on whom it fell should slay first the nine and then himself last of all... They had died in the belief that they had left not a soul of them alive to fall into Roman hands; The Romans advanced to the assault... seeing none of the enemy but on all sides an awful solitude, and flames within and silence, they were at a loss to conjecture what had happened here encountering the mass of slain, instead of exulting as over enemies, they admired the nobility of their resolve and the contempt of death display by so many in carrying it, unwavering, into execution."

(Josephus Flavius, The Wars of the Jews, VII, 395-406):

According to Josephus, two women and five children who had been hiding in the cisterns on the mountaintop told the Romans what had happened that night, on the 15th of Nissan, the first day of Passover.



The fall of Masada was the final act in the Roman conquest of Judea. A Roman auxiliary unit remained at the site until the beginning of the second century CE.

The Byzantine Period

After the Romans left Masada, the fortress remained uninhabited for a few centuries. During the fifth century CE, in the Byzantine period, a monastery of the type known as a *laura*, inhabited by hermits, was founded. Some scholars identify the Masada monastery with a site called Marda, mentioned by the Church fathers. With the rise of Islam in the seventh century, the monastery apparently ceased to exist.

The History of Masada Research

After the Byzantine period Masada sank into oblivion until the nineteenth century. The first scholars to identify Masada with the plateau known in Arabic as es-Sebbeh were Smith and Robinson in 1838, and the first to climb it were Wolcott and Tipping in 1842. Warren climbed Masada in 1867, Conder described and mapped it in 1875, Sandel discovered the water system in 1905, and Schulten studied mainly the Roman siege system in 1932.

From the 1920s and especially during the 1940s, Masada became a lode-stone for pioneering Zionist youth groups. The Hebrew translation in 1923 of *The Wars of the Jews* by Josephus, as well as the poem "Masada," written by Lamdan, published in 1927, brought Masada closer to the hearts of young people in the country's Jewish community. Shmarya Gutmann, who led numerous trips to the mountain, was particularly instrumental in transforming Masada into a symbol. Together with Micha Livneh and Ze'ev Meshel, Gutmann rediscovered the Northern Palace and the Snake Path in 1953. Survey excavations were carried out in 1955–1956, mainly in the northern part of the plateau and the water system. This led to the major excavations carried out by The Hebrew University of Jerusalem, headed by Yigael Yadin from 1963 to 1965. These excavations uncovered most of Masada's structures, along with thousands of well-preserved artifacts that present a rare picture of the material culture at the end of the Second Temple period.

During the excavations many buildings were conserved and reconstructed and after preparation of the site for visitors, Masada National Park was opened in 1966. The construction of the first cable car in 1971 increased the stream of visitors.

After a short excavation in 1989 conducted by Ehud Netzer, excavations were renewed by the Hebrew University in 1995 in the framework of a large-scale development project funded by the Tourism Ministry through the Israel Government Tourist Corporation. A number of excavation seasons were carried out led by Ehud Netzer and Guy Stiebel on the plateau, in addition to a season directed by Gideon Foerster at Roman Camp F and the siege ramp.

Conservation and restoration activities were carried out by the Israel Nature and Parks Authority.



Excerpts from Eleazar Ben-Yair's Speech (Josephus Flavius, The Wars of the Jews, VII, 320–336)

"Since we, long ago, my generous friends, resolved never to be servants to the Romans, nor to any other than to God himself, who alone is the true and just Lord of mankind, the time is now come that obliges us to make that resolution true in practice. And let us not at this time bring a reproach upon ourselves for self-contradiction, while we formerly would not undergo slavery, though it were then without danger, but must now, together with slavery, choose such punishments also as are intolerable; I mean this, upon the supposition that the Romans once reduce us under their power while we are alive. We were the very first that revolted from them, and we are the last that fight against them; and I cannot but esteem it as a favor that God hath granted us, that it is still in our power to die bravely, and in a state of freedom, which hath not been the case of others, who were conquered unexpectedly. It is very plain that we shall be taken within a day's time, but it is still an eligible thing to die after a glorious manner, together with our dearest friends...

Let our wives die before they are abused, and our children before they have tasted slavery; and after we have slain them, let us bestow that glorious benefit upon one another mutually and preserve ourselves in freedom as an excellent funeral monument for us. But first let us destroy our money and the fortress by fire; for I am well assured that this will be a bitter blow to the Romans, that they shall not be able to seize upon our bodies, and shall fail to our wealth also: and let us spare nothing but our provisions; for they will be a testimonial when we are dead that we are not subdued for want of necessities; but that, according to our original resolution, we have preferred death before slavery."

