

# The Saga of Masada

New research tells us more about the famous fortress



1st Century Synagogue

**V**isitors to archaeological sites generally assume that once a site is excavated, its historical significance is fully known. But in reality, both the excavations and our understanding of their results continue to develop as a result of ongoing research.

A great example of this is the iconic site of Masada. Recent research has overturned some commonly held views and at the same time has confirmed past re-

search by some scholars. Masada is special in that it is one of Israel's largest and most successful archaeological projects, and also because of its symbolism as the last stronghold of the Jewish rebellion against Rome in the Great Revolt of 66-73 CE.

Behind the spectacular organization and execution of the 1963-65 Masada excavations, as well as the manner in which the site became central to the country, was Yigael Yadin, a phenomenal archaeologist who had served as head of IDF operations during the 1948 War of Independence, and

who would later serve as deputy prime minister under Menachem Begin. Because of my research on the Dead Sea Scrolls, an area in which Yadin had done very important research himself, I had the chance to get to know him, and I learned an enormous amount from his work.

In his popular publication about the Masada excavation results, Yadin made the point that the Roman military camps, the siege wall, and the enormous ramp that they erected could not be fully investigated within the scope of his project. Since then,

some significant studies of the Roman fortifications and military strategy have been conducted. An archaeological survey and excavation in the field and detailed research in the works of Josephus have since taken place. Josephus left us a detailed description of the site, as well as an account of the Roman conquest, including a moving description of the commander's final address and the deaths of the defenders at their own hands.

A recent academic paper re-explored the question of how long it would have taken the Romans to build the siege works and, by implication, how long it would have taken to conquer Masada. This study comes from the ongoing survey and excavation of the Roman fortifications conducted under the leadership of Guy Stiebel of Tel Aviv University. (He and I participated in a recently concluded research project on the archaeology and history of Caesarea.) With the help of 3D computer analysis and large amounts of data on the fortifications, the archaeologists have reached important new conclusions.

But first, what was the nature of these complex fortifications?

The siege wall was found to be 4,300 meters long (more than 2.5 miles). This measurement included the walls of five of the Roman camps that were adjacent to the siege wall and utilized it as one of their walls. Including the other walls of these camps, a total of 6,300 meters (almost four miles) of wall were built by the Romans around Masada. In many areas, the wall is still standing, and the archaeologists were able to investigate towers, camps and other installations built near the wall.

Fifteen towers were built into the wall and protruded from it, both on the inside and the outside. These towers extended above the wall and were about 3.5 meters (11.5 feet) high. Most of the wall was about two meters (6.5 feet) thick and two meters high. In some locations, there were staircases leading to the top of the wall.

Masada Storehouses



The fortifications were meant to serve several purposes. There was a need to defend against sorties by the Jewish forces and against long-range projectiles. Further, the Roman army intended to isolate the fortress for psychological effect. They wanted to make clear to the defenders of Masada that they could never be victorious. Some of the fortifications actually faced away from the Jewish fortress, enabling the Romans to defend against any counter-attack that might come from the rear.

Based on their investigation and on data derived from pictures taken by a drone, the archaeologists constructed a 3D model to estimate the full size of the wall and the amount of work it would have taken to construct it. Using a variety of information from ancient classical texts and modern studies of hand labor, and counting the possibility that some 5,000 Roman soldiers out of the 8,000 who were present at Masada had worked long hours, they determined that the entire system of fortifications could have been built in 11 to 16 days.

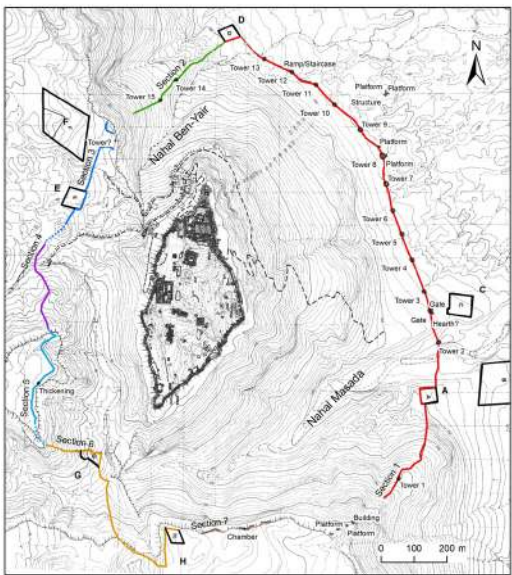
This conclusion raises a serious objection to the generally held view—not supported by evidence or academic research—that the *sicarii* (literally, “dagger carriers”) and the other rebels and refugees at Masada were under siege for the entire three-year period between the destruction of the *Beis Hamikdash* in 70 CE and the fall of

Masada in 73 CE. Since it is likely that the siege fortifications were built in less than three weeks, and since there is no evidence of longtime Roman occupation of the area, such as garbage or burials, it would seem that the siege began a short time before Masada fell.

In fact, the authors of this new study suggest that the Romans only turned their attention to Masada after the *sicarii* attacked Ein Gedi, an important center for the production of balsam (*afarsemon* in Hebrew), a plant sap with a pleasant smell that was highly prized by the Romans. In fact, had Masada been under siege for that entire three-year period, it would be impossible to explain how a force powerful enough to defeat their fellow Jews at Ein Gedi could have penetrated the Roman fortifications.

For me, there was one area of this new research that was personally significant. The professionals involved were careful in their publication to give credit to previous researchers and to survey what was known before they began their work. They reported that in 1995, Jonathan Roth had published an important study on the Masada siege, arguing that it may have lasted for only four to nine weeks. He also suggested that the Roman fortifications could have been built in five days or less.

The latter estimate has turned out to be too short. Nonetheless, I derived great sat-



Masada circumvallation wall and its sections.

isfaction from his role in this research since early in his career, Roth, now of San José State University, was a teaching fellow in my department in 1991-94, when this research was being conducted.

These are not the only issues pertaining to the archaeology and history of Masada that are still being debated. I would be remiss not to mention two major issues.

First, there are those who maintain that the Jewish defenders of Masada might not have killed themselves at all. After all, the only evidence we have is Josephus' claim that he met a few survivors. But in favor of the accuracy of his report is his extremely detailed description of the site; it does appear that he was there or that he had other firsthand evidence.

But we should note that despite the fact that the *Baalei HaTosafos* had access to the early medieval Hebrew adaptation of Josephus, referred to as *Sefer Yosifon*, they do not mention the Masada events in their explanation of why this self-inflicted martyrdom was not forbidden according to *halachah* (*Tosafos*, *Avodah Zarah*

18a; according to *Yosifon*, the women and children were killed by the men, who then fought the Romans and were all killed).

The other issue involves the claim initially made by Yadin that 12 ostraca (inscriptions on pottery shards)—including one inscribed with the name “ben Meir,” the name of the rebel leader—could possibly be the lots that, according to Josephus' account, were drawn to determine who among the last ten living men would kill the others before killing himself. The fact that 12, not ten, were found together, and the fact that additional pottery fragments inscribed with other names were found in the vicinity, has made it very unlikely that these ostraca served the function that Yadin had suggested. These and many other such ostraca unearthed at Masada are probably associated with the distribution of food and other supplies.

The ongoing project of surveying and



3D model of Tower 7 and the circular feature to its left (view to the west)



Masada from northwest

excavating the Roman fortifications around Masada has yielded important information about the history of the land and people of Israel, as well as about the history of Roman military organization. But it also teaches an important lesson about archaeological and historical scholarship. Our effort to understand the past is unending. We are constantly refining and extending what we already knew and often revising it. The willingness of scholars to revise their work is the sign of a healthy community of researchers.

Masada remains, on the one hand, a symbol of Jewish heroism, and on the other hand, a symbol of the dangers that we confront and the need to meet them with caution and deliberation. ●

*Lawrence H. Schiffman is Global Distinguished Professor of Hebrew and Judaic Studies at New York University.*

FULL  
PAGE