

# FORUM

## Capturing a Beautiful Woman at Masada

by Joseph Zias and Azriel Gorski

*Masada represents for all of us in Israel and for many elsewhere, archaeologists and laymen, a symbol of courage, a monument to our great national figures, heroes who chose death over a life of physical and mortal serfdom* —Yigael Yadin, Masada.

Of the many important archaeological sites in Israel, the the Palace-fortress of Masada, built by King Herod in the first century BCE, looms largest and perhaps most important in the consciousness of the country. The site draws hundreds of thousands of visitors and tourists to see the remnants of the last battle in the famous War of the Jews against the Romans (66–73 CE), which ended with the tragic mass suicide reported by the first century Jewish historian Flavius Josephus (Josephus 1959). It was not until 1963–1965 that the renowned Israeli archaeologist, the late Professor Yigael Yadin excavated the site. Since the 1990s much has been written about Yadin's interpretation of the site (Magness 1992; Ben-Yahuda 1995; Zias 2000) as well as the accuracy of Josephus reporting of events (Cohen 1982). Josephus reported that 960 Jews committed suicide; the skeletal remains of 25 found buried in a cave outside the southern wall<sup>1</sup> and 3 found in the northern palace were reported by the excavators. Since Yadin and others had believed these were the human remains of the heroic last defenders of Masada, they were accorded a state funeral in 1968 with full military honors and reburied near the site. As the evidence is re-appraised, however, an entirely different picture is emerging.

Describing the end of the siege, Josephus wrote that the Jewish rebels chose suicide over the miseries of slavery; each man dispatched his family and was in turn slain by a fellow comrade-in-arms (Josephus 1885: 7.8.6–7). Based on this text, Yadin interpreted a poignant find of a man, woman, and child<sup>2</sup> lying unburied in the bathhouse of the Northern palace (where Josephus claimed the suicides occurred) as possibly those of the the Jewish commander of Masada, Elazar ben Ya'ir, and his family (Yadin 1966: 54). Three decades later, closer perusal of the field diaries of Yadin and his staff by the present authors revealed some serious flaws in this explanation. Surprisingly, Yadin and his team had not found any skeletal evidence of a woman, only a complete head of hair, including braids, remarkably preserved by the aridity of the Dead Sea.<sup>3</sup> This hair was subsequently taken to the Forensic Science Division of the Israel National Police for analysis.

The forensic analysis revealed the braided plaits of the hair had been severed by a sharp instrument. Further, the length of the hair and curvature formed by the proximal ends of the plaits indicates that they were severed close to the scalp. The cut ends of some tresses exhibited a step-like pattern. The random pattern of the cut locks and the "steps" are consistent with erratic movement of the head in relation to the cutting instrument. In other words, the head was probably in motion while the hair was being sheared. What could account for the presence in the Northern Palace of an entire head of hair shorn from a woman?

One possible explanation can be found in ancient texts relating to permissible and required conduct during warfare under Jewish law. Deuteronomy (21:10–14) explicitly states that foreign women taken captive during battle by Israelites must shave their heads, pare their nails, change their garb,

No skeletal evidence of a woman was found with the complete head of hair, including braids, shown above. The hair was remarkably preserved by the aridity of the Dead Sea and, when it was originally found with the skeletal remains of two males, Yadin interpreted the find as belonging to the Jewish commander of Masada with his wife and son. The authors present an altogether different interpretation. (Photo courtesy of the Israel Antiquities Authority.)





The Palace-fortress of Masada, built by King Herod in the first century BC, is one of the most popular and frequently visited sites in Israel. Here, according to the first century Jewish historian Flavius Josephus, the last battle of the famous War of the Jews against the Romans (66–73 CE) ended with the tragic mass suicide of over nine hundred men, women and children who chose death over the prospect of Roman slavery. This photo shows the entrance to the Northern Palace. (Photo courtesy of Todd Bolen/BiblePlaces.com.)

and mourn for 30 days. Echoing this biblical commandment, the Temple Scroll, says:

When you go forth to war against your enemies, and I give them into our hands and you take them captive and see among the captives a beautiful woman, and you have desire for her and would take her for yourself as wife, then you shall bring her to your house, and you shall shave her head [*Italics added*] and pare her nails. And you shall put off her captives garb, and she shall remain in your house and bewail her father and her mother a full month: after that you may go in to her, (and) be her husband, and she shall be your wife. (Yadin, Y. 1983. *The Temple Scroll*, col.163:10–15. Vol.2 Israel Exploration Society, Jerusalem.)

Most scholars believe the Temple Scroll was composed by the Essenes between 150 and 180 BCE (Wise 1997), well before the siege of Masada and centuries after the Deuteronomy passage. Documents belonging to the Essenes were discovered at Masada, indicating a link between the Essenes who wrote the Dead Sea Scrolls and the refugees at Masada. Therefore it appears likely that the Biblical commandments governing foreign women taken captive first recorded in Deuteronomy were still considered

by the Jews at Masada (and perhaps elsewhere) to be in effect. It should be noted that the Deuteronomic law (XXI) applied specifically to captive women from distant cities and not local Canaanite women, as marriage to the latter was discouraged according to Jewish law (Christensen 2002). If local women were taken in battle, they along with the males and children were simply regarded as spoils of war and subject to the laws of slavery.

In the original version from Deuteronomy, the woman is mandated to shave her head, whereas in the later Temple Scroll (as well in the Septuagint) her captor is ordered to carry out these duties. The Biblical Deuteronomic commandment, which eventually became Halachic law, viewed this whole procedure as a concession to male moral weakness by

assuming that the soldier might be overpowered by passion and therefore have sexual relations with the non-Israelite woman taken captive during the conflict. This moral and legalistic perspective later assumed the opposite by presuming the soldiers' intentions under battle conditions were pure and that he intended to marry her from the beginning, consequently this new procedure is now intended to purify the wife before marriage, (Weinfeld 1993) if it should occur. However, according to Tigay (1996), the Rabbis discouraged marriage to foreign women, particularly when it was motivated by lust. Therefore, shaving the head, paring the nails, changing the garb and waiting 30 days would not only reduce the lust, but hopefully would discourage such a union.

Although the anthropological evidence found in the Northern Palace is critical to the historicity of Josephus' story, interpreting past events on the basis of fragmentary and somewhat contradictory literary evidence is always problematic. One can say little, about the human skeletal remains found in the bathhouse, since they lay unburied, fragmentary, and scattered for nearly 2,000 years, except that no skeletal remains of the woman were found, only her hair, a fact totally ignored by Yadin.



This Model of the Masada Palace Fortress gives an indication of how the buildings appeared during Roman Times. The Northern Palace is depicted in the foreground. (Photo courtesy of Tod Bolen/Bibleplaces.com.)

Moreover, according to Josephus, the Jews destroyed their personal possessions prior to the collective suicide lest they fall into the hands of the Roman forces but there are few if any direct archaeological finds from the excavations to support this. Yadin believed that scale armor and arrows which he found spread about the bathhouse and the rest of the palace (although he implied they were found only in the vicinity of the bodies) indicated that the two male skeletons were those of Jewish defenders. A specialist in Roman military equipment who later analyzed the armor concluded that it was simply a collection of spare scales with no visible signs of usage. (Stiebel 2005).

In fact, the archaeological evidence indicates that the Jewish rebels did not reinhabit the Northern Palace after they captured Masada in 66 CE from the Roman forces garrisoned there. This is unusual and demands explanation since the palace (one of two built by King Herod atop Masada) is the most desirable living quarters atop the summit. Why would the rebels, following their conquest, neglect this spectacular palace in the intervening years? One possibility is that the human remains found in the palace bathhouse were not those of Jewish rebels, as Yadin had believed, but Roman military personnel garrisoned at Masada until its overthrow by Jewish rebels.

If the conquering Jewish rebels killed two Roman soldiers and then threw their remains and weapons—along with the hair

of a captive woman—into the bathhouse, the area would be considered a cemetery according to Jewish law. Since cemeteries must lie outside of the confines of the city, the Northern Palace, separated from the other buildings on Masada by walls, would become uninhabitable for the Jewish rebels, who were known for their religious fanaticism. Josephus, no great fan of the zealots<sup>4</sup> in fact severely castigated their behavior regarding those fallen in battle, citing the ancient law, “let our enemies that fall in battle be also buried, nor let any one dead body lie above the ground... (Josephus 1885: 4.202–260).” The zealots apparently ignored this law; as Josephus accuses them of proceeding “with that degree of impiety, as to cast away their dead bodies without burial (Josephus 1885: 4.317).” Such appears to be the case in the Northern Palace at Masada.

While we have a possible explanation for the skeletal remains of the two men found in the Northern Palace, we must account for the shorn hair of the woman. Shaving the heads of foreign women captured during conflict was a specifically Jewish practice and would not have been done by Roman soldiers in the recapture of the fortress in 73 CE. Therefore, the Biblical “captive woman” scenario appears, in light of the historical evidence, to be the most persuasive.

As to the inevitable question of a woman garrisoned atop Masada prior to its capture by the Zealots, a cache of documents found preserved in a Roman period fort in northern Britain reveal that higher-level Roman officers and soldiers often brought women with them during military campaigns (Bowman 1994: 51–65). Therefore the shorn woman may have been married or at least related to one of the two males killed and thrown into the Northern Palace bathhouse. Her braided hair however suggests that she was married, since a woman in the Greco-Roman world changed her hairstyle after marriage to symbolize her unavailability to any man but her husband (Cosgrove 2005). Whoever she was, she was probably connected with the opposing, foreign Roman forces slaughtered (War 2:408) by the zealots in 66 CE and most certainly not a Jewish commander's wife as Yadin had led one to believe. Thus the dramatic image of a Jewish rebel family committing suicide in the ruins of the northern palace, just as Josephus had described it, which had become a central element in the modern legend of Masada's archaeological rediscovery (Silberman 1993) has now come into further question.

## Notes

1. The unpublished anthropological report found by Professor J. Tabor, University of North Carolina, Charlotte, in the files of Professor N. Haas indicated that pig bones, later confirmed by Yadin, (Benny Morris, “Rabin and Goren” *Jerusalem Post*, November 16, 1982) were found in the burial cave locus 2001–2002) This led to an erroneous conclusion by the present author that the remains found here were from the Byzantine period, however subsequent C-14 tests indicated they were indeed from the 1st

century CE. (Zias, et al. 1994, the title has a misprint, it reads "northern" cave but should be "southern"). Further evidence and arguments, questioning whether the burials in the southern caves were ethnically Jewish were subsequently published (Zias 2000).

2. There is a certain amount of confusion here over the age of the skeletal material in the Northern Palace. N. Haas, in an unpublished report describes one man as 40 years of age and the other 22 (with one being represented by his lower limb and feet only). However cranial photos of one of the skeletons obtained by the present author showed that dental age of one of the two men was 16–18 years at time of death. In Yadin's scientific publication of 1965, he writes that according to Haas the remains are those of a young woman of 18, a man of 22, and a child of 11. It's clear that confusion reigns regarding the age of the individuals. Thanks to Y. Nagar of the Israel Antiquities Authority for providing me these photos.

3. The length of the hair indicates that it was from a woman. The color is now quite dark, but since hair darkens as it ages its original shade can not be determined.

4. In the popular literature and public mind, those last defenders of the site are referred to collectively as the zealots, whereas Josephus refers to them as the Sacarii, one of the many sects at the time and perhaps one of the more fanatical groupings. The archaeological evidence, however, suggests that other groups of refugees, including the Essenes, were present, therefore the term zealot is perhaps more inclusive and correct as it refers to several religious/political groupings at the site from 66–73/4 CE.

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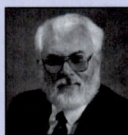
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more remote regions of the empire, such as Palestine and Transjordan, varied from a policy of "ostracizing" to exploiting the power and influence of local leaders. Two cases have been selected for this study that illustrate these opposite strategies. The first is that of the Kerak Plateau, representing a society that was virtually independent of the Empire until 1893. The second is that of Akila Agha, the self-appointed leader of the Henadi tribe, in 19th century northern Palestine, who spent much of his life in the service of the Empire.



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