

The Fall of Masada, 73 AD



Masada is an ancient stone fortress in Israel, located high above the Dead Sea on a tall, rocky mesa. Now an Israeli national park and a UNESCO World Heritage Site, the 840-acre complex holds well-preserved ruins attesting to the history of the ancient kingdom of Israel and the courage of its people in the face of a Roman siege.

Where Is Masada?

Masada is located in Israel on the edge of the Judean desert, between Ein Gedi and Sodom, on cliffs made up of chalk, dolomite and marl strata about 1,300 feet (400 meters) above the Dead Sea.

Because of the desert climate, the surrounding area is virtually uninhabited and undeveloped.

King Herod

Meaning “strong foundation or support” in Hebrew, Masada is a natural fortress built on top of a barren mountainous desert plateau thousands of feet above the Dead Sea.

Herod the Great, King of Judea, (who ruled from 37 to 4 BC) originally built Masada as a castle complex in the last century BC. When the ancient Romans overtook Judea in the first century AD, the grounds became a fortress for the Jewish people.

History of Masada

Josephus Flavius, the commander of Galilee during the Great Revolt in the first century AD, chronicled the known history of Masada; future excavation of the site has largely corroborated his accounts.

According to Flavius, the first fort at Masada was built by “Jonathan the High Priest,” thought to be Hasmonean King Alexander Jannaeus (who ruled from 103 to 76 BC), although no definitive ruins have been discovered from that time.

Recognizing the defensive advantages of Masada, Herod built his complex there as a winter escape and haven from enemies, complete with castle, storerooms, cisterns and a foreboding wall.

After Herod’s death and the annexation of Judea, the Romans built a garrison at Masada. When the Great Revolt of the Jews against the Romans broke out in 66 AD, a group of Jewish people known as the Sicarii, led by Menahem, took over the Masada complex.

Siege of Masada

Following Menahem’s murder in 66 AD in Jerusalem, Eleazar Ben Yair fled from Jerusalem to Masada to command a group of Judean rebels. When Jerusalem was destroyed in 70 AD, the remaining rebels joined Eleazar at Masada to live in Herod’s former palaces.

With Jerusalem in ruins, the Romans turned their attention to taking down Masada, the last community in Judea with 960 rebels, including many women and children. Led by Flavius Silva, a legion of 8,000 Romans built camps surrounding the base, a siege wall, and a ramp on a slope of the Western side of the mountain made of earth and wooden supports.

After several months of siege without success, the Romans built a tower on the ramp to try and take out the fortress’s wall. When it became clear that the Romans were going to take over Masada, on April 15, 73 AD, on the instructions of Ben Yair, all but two women and five children, who hid in the cisterns and later told their stories, took their own lives rather than live as Roman slaves.

According to Josephus’s account in *The Wars of the Jews*:

“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 the 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.”

For several centuries, Masada remained uninhabited. During the Byzantine period, in the Fifth Century AD, a group of monks known as the Laura took over the Masada and built a hermetic monastery.

Two centuries later, as Islam took hold of the region, the site was again abandoned.

Modern-Day Excavations

For nearly 13 centuries, the area remained uninhabited until, in 1828, scholars rediscovered Masada. In the following years, researchers climbed the mountain and mapped it.

In 1953, the Israeli archeologist Shmariya Gutman excavated Masada; other researchers continued to excavate the site in the 1950s and 1960s.

Further excavations in the 1980s and 1990s uncovered more structures.

Masada National Park

In 1966, the site was declared a national park by the Israel Nature and Parks Authority, with a cable car scaling the mountain built in 1977.

Masada has long been a favorite pilgrimage site for Jewish youth groups. Today, visitors can reach the fortress from two entrances, on the eastern and western sides.

Most tourists visit the eastern entrance, an 18-acre site where most of the archaeological ruins are found. Opulent and remarkably well-preserved architectural remains in the park include:

- A storerooms complex of 29 rooms that held the food and weapons that sustained Masada's inhabitants
- A tall palace on the northern edge built by Herod, with several rooms, a central hall, and a semicircular terrace with a stunning view of the desert valley and Dead Sea below, which "hangs" on the edge of three rock terraces
- A western palace with several rooms surrounding a courtyard with a water cistern
- Dwellings from the Great Revolt
- Roman bathhouses with fresco-adorned walls and an immersion pool, as well as a larger public immersion pool and a swimming pool built by Herod
- A sophisticated water system, which channeled water from the gate to cisterns that could hold more than 40,000 cubic meters of water (the runoff collected from a single day's rain could allegedly sustain over 1,000 people for two to three years)
- A synagogue built during Herod's time, where sections of scrolls and papyrus from the time of the Revolt along with a well-preserved woman's braid of hair were found
- A Byzantine church, with walls and floors decorated in colorful pottery and stone mosaics, and a Byzantine monastic cave

Visitors to the western entrance, accessible from the city of Arad, can climb a steep Rampart Path, which was created by monks in the Byzantine period, in about 15 minutes.

SOURCES

- Masada-Desert Fortress Overlooking the Dead Sea. [Israel Ministry of Foreign Affairs](#).
- Masada National Park. Israel Nature and Parks Authority.
- What Is Masada? [Newsweek](#).
- Masada. [UNESCO](#).
- Online Article: <https://www.history.com/topics/ancient-middle-east/masada>