



Masada (Israel)

No 1040

Identification

Nomination Masada National Park

Location Tamar Region

State Party Israel

Date 30 June 2000

Justification by State Party

Masada is a cultural and natural heritage site with universal importance. It is an isolated rock in a remote corner of the Judean Desert, facing the Dead Sea and expressing the special geology and nature of that area. Its archaeological remains relate to three periods of human settlement on the site which are chronologically separated and different in character. Each reflects on one hand certain uniqueness and on the other a fabric of intertwined human cultural contexts of its period.

The sophisticated water system at Masada transformed a barren, isolated hilltop with an arid climate into a lavish royal retreat. This system used run-off water from a single day of rain to sustain life for a thousand people for two to three years.

The "hanging" Northern Palace with its three terraces presents the ultimate challenge in designing and building in extreme conditions. It is a masterpiece of the engineering and architecture of antiquity. **Criterion i**

The developments in architecture and landscape design illustrated by the three Herodian and later Zealot building phases at Masada illustrate an important interchange of human values over time. The early Herodian phase was one of survival, but one in which Roman architecture and the Roman way of life were introduced into a harsh natural environment. With the main Herodian phase a lavish architectural style was adopted and fully integrated into the desert landscape. The fear and paranoia of the king resulted in the site being heavily fortified in the late Herodian period. Finally, a humbler form of architecture was introduced during the Zealot phase, suitable for a simpler way of life adapted to the harsh living conditions. **Criterion ii**

The fall of Masada in 73 CE symbolized the end of the Second Temple Period, which was a major turning point in Jewish history. The Masada synagogue is one of the earliest examples of a ceremonial prayer building during the last phase of the Second Temple Period and after the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem. **Criterion iii**

The ruins of Masada reflect several stages in human history. These include classical Roman architecture (palace, bath-houses, store-rooms, water system, military installations), humble Jewish domestic architecture (with a synagogue and ritual baths), and early Christian monasticism. The most outstanding elements of these are the Roman siege works around the mountain, the most complete in the world and almost completely unexcavated, and the Northern Palace.

Criterion iv

The ruins and historical accounts of Masada are directly associated with the most fundamental human values. Issues decided at Masada – the few against the many, liberty versus slavery, religious freedom versus oppression, life versus death – are subjects of universal moral and academic discussion and will long continue to be so. **Criterion vi**

Note This property is nominated as a mixed site.

Category of property

In terms of the categories of cultural property set out in Article 1 of the 1972 World Heritage Convention, this is a *site*.

History and Description

History

The history of Masada is known principally from the work of Flavius Josephus, the Jewish historian of the 1st century CE, and from the excavations of 1963–65.

According to Josephus, the site was first fortified by the High Priest Jonathan. There were two High Priests of this name in the 2nd century BCE and it is not certain to which he was referring. The only material from the Hasmonaean period (103–40 BCE) so far discovered in excavations at Masada is a number of coins of Alexander Jannaeus, from the early part of the period. There is evidence in the form of archaeological finds in a cave that there was human settlement there in the Chalcolithic period (4th millennium BCE) and then in the Early Iron Age (10th–7th century BCE).

Herod the Great (ruled 37–4 BCE) selected the virtually impregnable site of Masada to build a refuge for himself and his family at a period when he felt himself threatened both internally by the Jews of his kingdom and externally by Cleopatra, who wanted to add Judaea to her Egyptian kingdom. At first the buildings were relatively modest, though conforming with classical Roman architectural forms. They were progressively enlarged and lavishly decorated, to become a luxurious royal palace. Towards the end of his reign Herod felt himself threatened once again and so the fortifications were rebuilt and reinforced.

To the *early phase* (c 35 BCE) belong the nucleus of the Western Palace, three small palaces, an administrative building, a barracks, three *columbaria* (also used as watch-towers), several large cisterns, and a swimming pool. These buildings are scattered all over the hilltop, without any apparent overall plan. The architects had previously served the Hasmonaean court, and the early buildings are strikingly similar to those at Jericho.

The *main phase* is dated to the mid 20s of the 1st century BCE. The most important new construction was the large

Northern Palace; close by was the large bath-house, for the use of the king and his family and guests. Also close to the palace was a large storage complex composed of eighteen long store-rooms. This group, together with an administrative building, are located at the highest point of the hilltop and constitute a defensible acropolis or citadel.

The Western Palace was considerably enlarged at this time. A series of very large cisterns was dug and new access paths were laid out. By contrast with the early period, the new works carried out in this period appear to have been carried out in accordance with a plan. They are integrated into two complexes, one around the Northern Palace and the other around the Western Palace. The architecture is also different in that it is in the full Roman style and tradition.

In the *final phase*, dated to around 15 BCE, the most important new construction was the casemate wall, 1290m long, which surrounds the entire summit. In addition, some small modifications and additions were made to the northern complex.

With the end of the Herodian dynasty in 6 BCE Judaea came under direct Roman rule, and a small garrison was installed at Masada. At the beginning of the Jewish Revolt in 66 a group of Zealots led by Menahem, one of the Jewish leaders, surprised and slaughtered the garrison. The Zealots held Masada throughout the revolt, and many Jews settled there, particularly after the fall of Jerusalem and the destruction of the Temple by Titus in 70. They occupied some of the Herodian palace buildings, and added more modest structures of their own, such as a synagogue, a ritual bath, and small houses.

Two years later Flavius Silva, the Roman Governor, decided to eliminate this last remaining centre of Jewish resistance. He sent the X Legion and a number of auxiliary units there, with many prisoners of war for manual duties. The Jews, led by Eleazar Ben Yair, prepared for a long siege as the Romans and their prisoners built camps and a long siege wall (circumvallation) at the base of the hill. On a rocky site near the western approach to Masada they constructed a massive ramp of stones and rammed earth. A giant siege tower with a battering ram was constructed and moved laboriously up the completed ramp. It succeeded in breaching the wall of the fortress in 73, allowing the Roman soldiers to enter.

The Zealots defended stoutly, but there was no hope of resisting the Roman attack for long. Josephus reports that Ben Yair talked to the 960 men, women, and children who survived, telling them that "a glorious death is preferable to a life of infamy." All but two took their own lives on 2 May 73.

A Roman garrison was once again installed at Masada and stayed there for some forty years. It occupied both the hilltop and the fortress constructed by Flavius Silva for the besiegers. After the withdrawal of the Roman garrison, the site was abandoned until the 5th century. Following a powerful earthquake, which caused most of the surviving Herodian buildings to collapse, a small community of Christian monks established themselves on the hilltop. They built a modest chapel and lived in primitive cells constructed from the ruins and in caves. After some decades this community was disbanded and Masada was deserted until excavations began in the 1960s.

Description

The towering hill of Masada, with its precipitous flanks, overlooks a natural landscape of savage beauty. To the west lies the Judaeian Desert, with its hills and terraces: it is arid, yet can burst into bloom during a rainy winter. To the east is a wildly broken terrain, running down to the brilliant colours of the Dead Sea. A giant scarp stretches to the south away to the horizon – the western wall of the Syrian-African rift valley – and Masada forms part of this scarp. The top of the hill is roughly trapezoidal, measuring c 600m x 300m.

- The northern area (Herodian period)

The main structure here is the *Northern Palace*, which in its present form is from the main phase (late 1st century BCE). It was built on three slightly modified natural rock terraces. The upper level, through which access was gained to the Palace, was mainly used for residential purposes, with two wings of bedrooms flanking a hall; all were originally decorated with mosaic floors and wall paintings. To the north of the bedrooms there is a semi-circular colonnaded terrace surrounding what was probably a garden.

On the two lower levels are to be found imposing colonnaded reception halls, one rounded and the other rectangular; both had bathing facilities. The lower reception level is the best preserved of the three. Access was through a trapezoid courtyard, with store-rooms, meal preparation facilities, and a small bathhouse below and around it. There are two rock-hewn cisterns underneath.

On a small hill just to the south of the Northern Palace is the *large bath-house*. The large courtyard entrance was probably used as a *palaestra* (exercise area). The bathing facilities consisted of a changing room (*apodyterium*), a cold room (*tepidarium*) in the form of a stepped pool, and a large hot room (*caldarium*) with a barrel-vaulted roof. The entire complex was originally decorated with mosaic floors and wall paintings, but the floor mosaics were later replaced by coloured stone slabs (*opus sectile*). In addition, here are the remains of the heating furnaces and water installations.

The *store-rooms complex* originally contained eighteen rooms, thirteen of which were 26m long. They are surrounded by a system of long corridors, also probably used for storage. It was easily defensible, with only two entrances. In addition, there were two (perhaps three) guard towers. A number of long storerooms were added to this complex at the end of the final phase, together with another small bath-house.

- The western area (Herodian period)

Work on the *Western Palace* began in the early phase, but it was substantially enlarged and rebuilt in the main phase. To the nucleus, which consisted of a courtyard (with in all probability a garden) surrounded by bedrooms and reception rooms, were added two extensive service wings. Their functions would have been varied: storage of furniture, domestic utensils, and food, and food preparation for all the palaces on the summit.

The Palace was expanded once more in the final phase, with the addition of new wings, including four long storerooms. It became the largest building on the hilltop. Its size and layout, together with the opulence of its decoration (mosaic floors and walls of white plaster painted to imitate marble panels). This confirms the hypothesis that this was the ceremonial

palace, the Northern Palace being the private palace for the king and his family.

There is a number of smaller palaces, residential blocks, and administrative buildings to the east of the Western palace and between it and the Northern Palace.

- The defences (Herodian period)

The *casemate wall* was built in the final phase. This massive defensive wall, 1290m in length, contains nearly 70 rooms on its inner side, some more than 30m long, and has 27 towers. Three gates pierce the wall: the Western Gate, the Southern Gate, and the Snake Path Gate (the eastern gate). The existing Water Gate, which gave access to the Northern Palace, was not incorporated into the casemate wall.

- Water management

A number of deep cisterns were dug into the rock of Masada in all three phases. The small ones dug during the first phase were filled by run-off from the hill-top itself during the winter. During the main phase two rows of cisterns were dug beneath the hill-top. The row of four 130m below the summit each had a capacity of 4000m³. The second row was 50m higher: the eight cisterns were each capable of receiving 3000m³. Water was delivered through a network of dams and channels into this system during the winter floods in the wadis to the west of Masada.

- Structures from the Zealot period

Most of the buildings on the hilltop were occupied by the around one thousand people who lived there at that time, and more particularly the casemates and the smaller palaces (the Western Palace appears to have been used for communal and administrative purposes). Large rooms were partitioned into smaller units, existing entrances were blocked and new ones opened, and temporary constructions added. Facilities for baking and cooking, water, and storage were also inserted.

The most important new feature from this time was the *synagogue*, a square building from the Herodian period that was probably used as a stable. Three rows of benches, characteristic of early synagogues, were built round the walls, and the *genizah* (depository for superseded scrolls) under the floor of the back room.

Seven or eight ritual baths (*mikveh*) were identified, including one large stepped immersion pool to the south of the Western Palace. A public hall was also constructed at this time attached to one of the smaller palaces.

- Roman military remains

There is a network of eight Roman *military camps* around Masada, none of which has been excavated. Two are large, two smaller. One of the large camps lies to the east and the other to the west of Masada. Evidence from aerial survey and probing show them to be standard Roman legionary fortresses of quadrilateral plan. In that lying to the west (which is believed to have been the headquarters of Flavius Silva) a smaller sector had been fortified later, to form the headquarters of the later garrison. Both lie outside the circumvallation, whereas the smaller ones are more closely associated with that long earthwork. A striking feature of all the Roman camps are the hundreds of *contubernia* (messing units), consisting of walls of stones 1–1.5m high on which the soldiers erected their leather tents.

The great ramp used for the final assault was built of soil and stones braced by an armature of timber beams.

- The Byzantine church

The church is located virtually in the centre of the summit, and its walls still stand to a considerable height. It was built of coursed dolomite, most of it robbed from the ruins of the Herodian buildings. The walls were bonded with lime mortar. The floor was originally covered with a mosaic, but much of this was removed to the Louvre in Paris after a 19th century excavation. The walls were plastered, and surviving fragments show that it was decorated with designs made of coloured stones and potsherds. The plan is the characteristic rectangular hall with an apse at the east end and a narthex at the west end.

- Building materials and techniques

Most of the Herodian walls and their foundations were built of undressed blocks of the local dolomite, bonded with mortar made of local earth mixed with straw. The blocks were laid in courses, with larger blocks (*c* 90cm long) in the lower courses. The only worked stones were those used for constructing corners and doorjambs. Walls varied in thickness between 60cm and 95cm. The defensive walls are different both in dimensions and construction. They average 6.5m in thickness and consist of an outer wall 1.4m thick and an inner one 0.95m thick filled with rubble.

The use of ashlar (dressed stone) is very rare at Masada: it is restricted to the three terraces of the Northern Palace and the three *columbaria*. Here the stone used was not the hard local dolomite but a soft grey-green limestone. Sandstone was used where precision was needed: columns, architraves, central pillars in staircases, etc. These materials were either extracted from nearby quarries or from quarries near Jericho, the latter being brought to Masada by boat. A lime-based mortar was used in such cases

With the exception of the casemate walls, all the walls (and many of the ceilings) were plastered. In many interiors a plaster of earth and straw was used, identical with the mortar used for wall building. This was probably coated with a lime wash, though little of this has survived.

Lime-based plaster was also used in some cases, both internally and externally. Where plaster was used on external surfaces, it extended either over the lower section only or over the entire surface. A special plaster containing ash as well as lime (hydraulic plaster) was used in rooms exposed to high humidity, notably the bath-houses, cisterns, and water channels.

These techniques are to be found, to a high level of craftsmanship, on the more substantial buildings from the Zealot period.

Management and Protection

Legal status

The entire site is a National Park, established under the provisions of the National Parks, Nature Reserves, Memorial Sites and National Sites Law (1998), and the archaeological sites are covered by the Antiquities Law (1978). The National Park is further protected by being entirely surrounded by the Judean Desert Nature Reserve, also established under the 1998 Act. There is also a belt of open

land between the site and the Dead Sea which is protected as open agricultural land under the provisions of a local master plan under the Planning and Building Law 1965. There are very severe penalties for any unauthorized actions that in any way affect the qualities of the National Park and the archaeological monuments.

Management

The entire nominated area and the buffer zone are owned by the State of Israel.

Management of the Masada National Park and of the Judean Desert Nature Reserve is the legal responsibility of the Nature and Parks Protection Authority, whilst responsibility for the archaeological sites is vested in the Israel Antiquities Authority. The belt of agricultural land comes under the control of the Regional Council.

Direct management of the Park is in the hands of the Park Director. The nature reserves around the archaeological site is regularly patrolled by rangers, operating from En Gedi oasis and Arad, 20km north and 25km west of Masada respectively.

The headquarters of the Nature and Parks Protection Authority has planning committees which are responsible for approving and implementing development plans. Independent experts attend the meetings of these committees and public hearings are held to consider issues of outstanding national and international interest. The Israel Antiquities Authority has an independent conservation committee which considers conservation and reconstruction proposals and projects.

Following the merger of the Nature Reserves Authority with the National Parks Authority in 1998 an outline management plan for heritage sites in nature reserves was prepared with the assistance of the Getty Conservation Institute. An updated version is nearing completion: the coverage is comprehensive and fully in conformity with the requirements of the *Operational Guidelines for the Implementation of the World Heritage Convention* so far as the cultural heritage element is concerned.

One of the most serious problems is that of visitor numbers: currently the number of visitors is around 650,000, and it is forecast that this figure will rise to 900,000 by 2001 and 1.25 million by 2010 (it should be noted, however, that the current disturbed internal political situation has resulted in a drastic reduction in visitor numbers). There have also been determined efforts in recent years to commercialize the archaeological site. These points were given special consideration in the development programme

A project for the construction of an hotel and recreation area 11km to the north has been shelved. A policy of prohibiting commercial activities of any kind or picnic facilities on the summit has been rigorously maintained. There is now a visitors' trail on the summit with interpretation along its length.

A new entrance project on the eastern side, almost entirely invisible from the summit, is nearing completion and all facilities are being moved there. This will house interpretive material, conservation facilities, management offices, restaurants, etc. The building is well designed so as not to conflict with its historic and natural environment and sited so as to have a minimal visual impact when viewed from the

summit. There are underground parking facilities for cars and small buses and an open park for coaches.

A number of commercial enterprises are to be relocated in a new facility that will not be visible from the summit. The youth hostel is also to be located here.

A new cable car, which began operating in May 1999, has halved the waiting time for visitors; this starts from the new entrance. The site of its upper terminal was carefully selected: it is located below the ancient entrance gate and access to the site proper is via a bridge. All the facilities that are being replaced are being demolished and the land restored to its earlier appearance.

Of particular importance is the project to dismantle and relocate the service cable lift, which dates from the excavations in the 1960s. At present this passes directly above the Roman ramp and enters the enclosure through the breach made by the besiegers, which is one of the key historical locations on the site.

There is a *son-et-lumière* installation below the western side of the hill, used principally for educational purposes.

Conservation and Authenticity

Conservation history

The site was first identified as that of Masada by two travellers in 1863. Other visits followed in the second half of the 19th century and the 20th century, in particular the scholars responsible for the Palestine Exploration Fund's Survey of Western Palestine in 1867 and 1875.

A limited archaeological survey was carried out in 1955–56, sponsored by the Israel Exploration Society, the Hebrew University, and the Department of Antiquities. In 1963–65 Professor Yigael Yadin carried out his celebrated excavation. The decision was taken before the excavations ended to open the site to the public as a national park, and conservation work began immediately the excavators moved out.

The work was based on a plan set up by a committee of specialists, according to the prevailing standards of the period (which involved the use of Portland cement, now almost entirely replaced). Conservators from Israel and abroad have worked on the site continuously since that time, continually updating their techniques and expertise. In the course of the past five years, since the Masada development project began, most of the buildings in the northern area have been worked on. Work has been carried out to evaluate and improve the stability of the rock. A major stabilization and conservation project is in progress on the Western Palace by a team headed by Professor John Ashurst (University of Oxford, UK).

As part of the development project there is a five-year conservation programme, due to end during 2001, which has involved fifteen trained conservators and twenty unskilled workers. From 2002 onwards there will be a planned maintenance programme operated by a team of between five and seven trained workers. This will coincide with the introduction of a systematic monitoring process. A detailed manual has been prepared, covering different aspects of conservation, maintenance, and management, and is systematically updated.

An important part of the management plan is the decision to carry out no further research excavation on the main site "in the present generation." Limited excavation will be permitted when necessitated by conservation or restoration projects.

Authenticity and integrity

This is a site that remained untouched for more than thirteen centuries. The buildings and other evidence of human settlement gradually collapsed and were covered over until they were revealed in the 1960s. There have been no additions or reconstruction (beyond an acceptable level of anastylosis), and inappropriate materials used in early conservation projects are being replaced. Certain significant archaeological elements, such as the Roman camps and siegeworks, remain virtually untouched. The authenticity is therefore of a very high level.

There is a case for examining the integrity of Masada, like most archaeological sites. As mentioned above, nothing has been added and nothing taken away from the remains. Of equal importance is the fact that the setting of Masada, the magnificent wild scenery of this region, has not changed over many millennia. The only intrusions are the visitor facilities, which in their new form have been designed and sited sympathetically, and the cable car. The latter has been, and still is, controversial. However, access to the summit is extremely arduous: if some assistance were not provided, many of the Jewish people for whom this site has immense symbolic value, would be unable to visit it. The new facilities at each end have been designed and, in the case of the upper terminal, located with care, so as to minimize their visual impact.

Evaluation

Action by ICOMOS

A joint ICOMOS-IUCN expert mission visited Masada in March 2001.

Qualities

Masada is a dramatically located site of great natural beauty on which the Judaean king Herod the Great constructed a sumptuous palace complex in classical Roman style. After Judaea became a province of the Roman Empire, it was the refuge of the last survivors of the Jewish revolt, who chose death rather than slavery when the Roman besiegers broke through their defences. As such it has an emblematic value for the Jewish people.

It is also an archaeological site of great significance. The remains of Herod's palaces are outstanding and very intact examples of this type of architecture, whilst the untouched siegeworks are the finest and most complete anywhere in the Roman world.

Comparative analysis

There are several imperial Roman villas from the 1st centuries BCE and CE of which substantial remains survive. The closest to Herod the Great's villa at Masada is probably the slightly later *Villa Jovis* built by Tiberius on a similar prominent site on the island of Capri. However, it differs in a number of respects, notably the fact that it lacks the associated administrative structures of Masada and its massive defences.

For the Roman military camps, circumvallation, and ramp there is no site that can compare with Masada in terms of visibility and completeness.

ICOMOS recommendations for future action

Careful consideration needs to be given to the siting of the coach park at the entrance facility. The present site interrupts the line of the Roman siege wall between two forts. The black tarmac surface is intrusive when seen from above.

Whilst good relations clearly exist between the groups responsible for the management of the "cultural" and "natural" elements, it would be desirable for there to be careful scrutiny of their respective objectives and programmes in order to ensure homogeneity and avoid potential conflicts.

Brief description

Masada, the site of the self-immolation of nearly a thousand Jewish patriots in the face of a large Roman army, was built as a palace complex and place of refuge by Herod the Great, King of Judaea. Its extensive remains survive on the summit of this seemingly impregnable fortress, set in a rugged natural landscape of great beauty. Below are the unexcavated sites and siegeworks of a large Roman army

Statement of Significance

The palace complex built by Herod the Great, King of Judaea, on the summit of the dramatic mountain site of Masada in the 1st century BCE consists of an exceptional group of classical Roman Imperial buildings. When this natural defensive site, further strengthened by massive walls, was occupied by survivors of the Jewish Revolt against Roman rule, it was successfully besieged by a massive Roman army. The group of military camps and siegeworks at Masada are the most complete anywhere in the Roman world. Masada is a poignant symbol of the continuing human struggle between oppression and liberty.

ICOMOS Recommendation

That this property be inscribed on the World Heritage List on the basis of *cultural criteria iii, iv, and vi*:

Criterion iii Masada is a symbol of the ancient Jewish kingdom of Israel, of its violent destruction in the later 1st century CE, and of the subsequent Diaspora.

Criterion iv The palace of Herod the Great at Masada is an outstanding example of a luxurious villa of the Early Roman Empire, whilst the camps and other fortifications that encircle the monument constitute the finest and most complete Roman siege works to have survived to the present day.

Criterion vi The tragic events during the last days of the Jewish refugees who occupied the fortress and palace of Masada make it a symbol both of Jewish cultural identity and, more universally, of the continuing human struggle between oppression and liberty.

Bureau Recommendation

That this property be inscribed on the World Heritage List on the basis of *criteria iii, iv, and vi*.

ICOMOS, September 2001