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The Rebels' Archives at Masada

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Source: *Israel Exploration Journal* , 2004, Vol. 54, No. 2 (2004), pp. 218-229

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# The Rebels' Archives at Masada\*

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AN analysis of the distribution of the ostraca bearing Hebrew and Aramaic inscriptions (*Masada* I: 1–68) found on the surface of Masada clearly points to the probability that some 60% of them originated in Room 184 on the north of the site, adjacent to the Water Gate. Most of these ostraca were revealed in Storeroom 113, located in the north-west of the Storeroom Complex and termed 'the room of the lots', and the others were found in its close vicinity. In my opinion, during the First Revolt Room 184 served as a 'field office' of the rebel community at Masada, which contained archives of sorts ('the rebels' archives'). This paper presents an analysis of the location of the field office, how it functioned, and its role on 'the night of the destruction'.

In order to justify the conjectured location of the rebels' archives, one must consider the paths that led to the summit in the Second Temple period, as well as the gates present on the mountaintop. As is known, Masada is a cliff-faced rock promontory which can only be scaled by means of paths. The first path to be constructed to the summit (henceforth: 'the First Path'), perhaps even in the days of the Hasmonaeans, was from the west, at the present location of the Roman siege ramp. Early in Herod's reign (if not beforehand), the Snake Path was constructed, rising to the summit from the east. The First Path was used by all those approaching Masada from Judaea, via the desert, while the Snake Path mainly served those arriving by boat on the Dead Sea. Most of the supplies necessary for a prolonged sojourn on the mountain were probably transported along this latter route.

During Herod's reign, in the second building phase of the three known to us (*Masada* III: 615–655), a significant change took place in the system of paths. Two new paths which began on the western side were now built, their primary purpose being to facilitate the supply of water. This followed the hewing of 12 huge cisterns on the north-western slope of the mount (fig. 1). One of those paths (henceforth: 'the Water-Gate Path'), by means of which convoys of water-bearing pack animals and people ascended to the summit, ran along the channel that conveyed water into the eight upper cisterns, hewn on a contour line c. 80 m. below the mountaintop. From these cisterns the path ascended on rock terraces to the Water Gate,<sup>1</sup> on its way

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\* The essence of this paper was first delivered in my lecture at the Forty-Sixth Convention of the Israel Exploration Society, held in the Jordan Valley in 1992. I wish to thank Guy Stiebel, my colleague and collaborator in the excavations at Masada since 1995.

1 The original location of the Water Gate, built in the second Herodian building phase, was in the western part of the square to the south of the Northern Palace. A few years later, during the third building phase, the gate was shifted some 30 m. to the south-west, to the edge of the square north of Building No. 7.



Fig. 1. Northern view of Masada, showing north-western slope with two systems of cisterns (view from north); arrow indicates location of tower overlooking access to cisterns and to summit (photo: A. Volk; Masada expedition)

passing below the Northern Palace. The other path ran along the channel that fed the four lower cisterns, hewn on a contour line c. 120 m. below the summit. This path fringed the northern 'prow' of the mount and linked up with the Snake Path at its middle. From here the route continued via the Snake Path to the gate at its top (fig. 2).

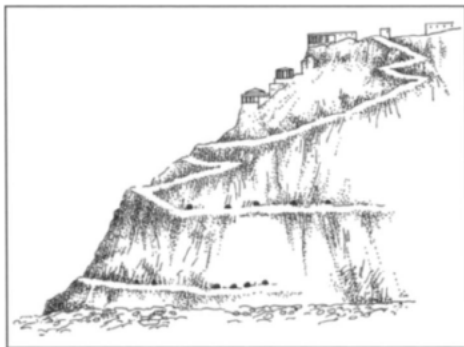


Fig. 2. Reconstruction of system of paths on north-western slope of Masada

To the best of my knowledge, when the two new paths were built, the First Path, which ended close to the Western Palace (*Masada* III: 640–646), went out of use. As a rule, each gate in a defensive system of a fortified site is a weak point, which requires constant guarding. The First Path and the Water-Gate Path both start in fact at the same point, and their only significant difference is their length — c. 350 m., as compared to 750 m., the longer route adding some five minutes to the walking time required. In view of these data, the overriding consideration was evidently the need for one less gate. In any event, only the lower part of the First Path was destroyed, while its upper part (the remains of which are visible) served henceforth as an access route to a tower, probably built at the same time as the two new paths. This tower, erected on top of a cliff on the western slope, was intended to prevent unauthorised people from reaching the cisterns directly below it (via the new paths) and then ascending to the mountaintop. Although the tower under discussion is located fairly close to the summit — and not 1,000 cubits below it, as claimed by Josephus (*War* IV, 504–505) — I am convinced that it is the one mentioned in his description of the erection of the siege ramp (*War* VII, 304–305):

The Roman general, having now completed his wall surrounding the whole exterior of the place, as a precaution that none should escape, applied himself to the siege. He had discovered only one spot capable of supporting earthworks. For in rear of the tower, which barred the road leading from the west to the palace and the ridge, was a projection of rock of considerable breadth and jutting far out, but still three hundred cubits below the elevation of Masada; it was called Leuce.

The Water-Gate Path, which ascended from the west via the upper row of cisterns, is evidently the path mentioned in the following passage from Josephus, which has received numerous interpretations: 'There, too, he built a palace within the fortress, on the western slope beneath the ramparts on the crest, inclining towards the north' (*War* VII, 289).<sup>2</sup> This path indeed ascends from the west, and when

2 Translated for this article by Casey Elledge, whom I wish to thank.



Fig. 3. Water gate (view from east); in centre: Room 183; in foreground: entrance to Room 184 (photo: A. Volk, Masada expedition)

viewed from below, mainly from the sector in which Camp F (Silva's camp) was located, it seems to go up to the Northern Palace, although it in fact ends at the Water Gate.

During the revolt, the Water Gate<sup>3</sup> probably served as the main entrance to Masada, since it can reasonably be assumed that most rebels who fled here arrived from the west, via the desert (fig. 3). Even those coming from the east could have been led to the west by means of directions shouted from the mountaintop. In my opinion, as a result of this, two essential procedures were carried out at the Water Gate or in Room 184 adjacent to it: 1) an examination of the arrivals' trustworthiness; 2) the registration of all those permitted entry to Masada.

With regard to the necessary examination of all those who reached Masada, Josephus provides us with vivid evidence when he describes the arrival there of Simeon Bar Giora (*War* IV, 504–505):

... whereupon he had joined the brigands who had seized Masada. At first they regarded him with suspicion, and permitted him and his following of women access only to the lower part of the fortress, occupying the upper

3 In its new location, which was built in the third Herodian building phase, see *Masada* III: 619.

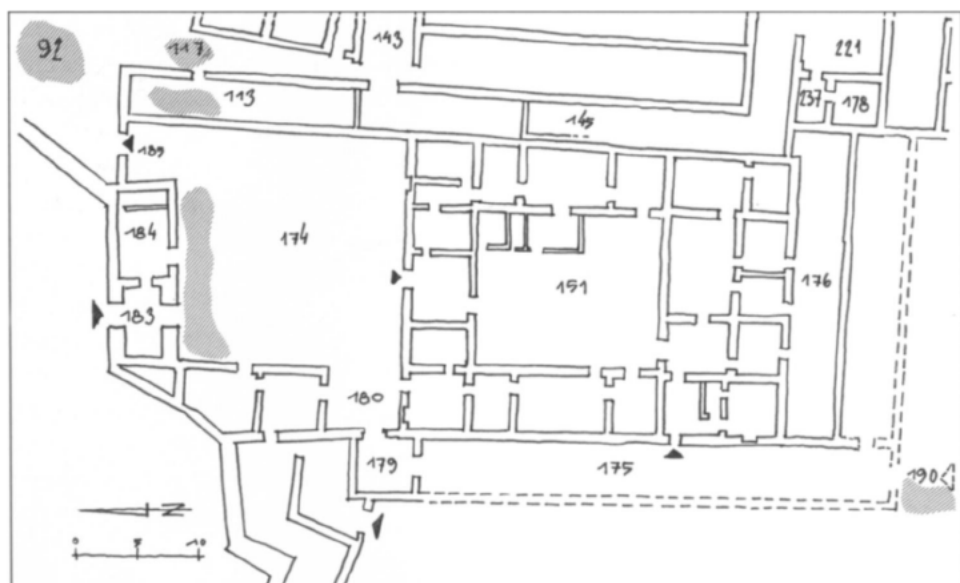


Fig. 4. Plan of Building No. 7, Courtyard 174, the Water Gate (Room 183) to its north, and their surroundings; shaded areas mark distribution of ostraca, which presumably originated from the rebels' field office (Room 184)

quarters themselves; but afterwards, as a man of congenial disposition and apparently to be trusted, he was allowed to accompany them on their marauding expeditions and took part in their raids upon the surrounding district.

The registration of those entering was necessary in a community numbering some 1,000 people who had not necessarily been acquainted with one another prior to their arrival at Masada. Moreover, life in desert conditions of isolation, a regime dictating the frugal use of food and water, the constant need for posting guards and building activities for the general good — all these increased the necessity for an orderly registration of the population in order to attain a fair allocation of food, the sharing of daily tasks (a sort of work roster), etc. In my opinion, the registration of arrivals took place in Room 184 (7.1 × 4 m.), and it contained the general registry of the mount's inhabitants. This room was kept under constant guard as it adjoined the Water Gate. It is thus possible that personal or public documents in the possession of the rebels were deposited here for safekeeping.

So far, I have dealt with the function of the Water Gate, both in Herod's day and during the revolt. I will now discuss the pertinent finds revealed in the area under discussion in the course of excavations. As mentioned above, the largest concentration of ostraca was found in Storeroom 113, and the earth containing them had been spilled from west to east, from Square 174 in front of the Water Gate (fig. 4). A much smaller number of ostraca was also found within this square. It

seems that the square was in active use and the Roman soldiers therefore took the trouble to clear it. A fairly large number of ostraca were found in Locus 117, in the area between Storeroom 113 and the Large Bathhouse. These ostraca had spilled from Storeroom 113 into Locus 117 through the doorway that linked them.

The assemblage of ostraca to be discussed here in the context of the rebels' archives includes those found in Square 174 adjacent to the Water Gate, in Storeroom 113, in Locus 117 on the side whose connection with Room 184 is beyond doubt, as well as those revealed in Square 92 (the large square between the Northern Palace and the Storeroom Complex and the Large Bathhouse, and adjacent to Square 174), and in Locus 190 to the south-west of Building No. 7, on the route that led from the summit to the Water Gate at the time of the revolt.<sup>4</sup> The two groups can very logically be related to the same source, in view of their location on important traffic axes.

The most notable group of ostraca found in this area is of the tags: ostraca bearing one or two letters. Of the 305 tags on the surface of the entire site, 285 were found here. The tags contain:



Fig. 5. Tags found in vicinity of Water Gate, bearing letter combinations (photo: Y. Yadin)

4 This is based on the assumption that the storeroom (no. 175) was demolished by the rebels and that the terrace on which it had stood became a route leading to Square 174.

- Individual letters of the Hebrew alphabet, some of them final letters;
- A combination of the same two letters צצ (repeated on seven ostraca<sup>5</sup>);
- A combination of two different letters, such as גג and יי;
- A combination of more than two letters (on six items);
- A horizontal line marked above the letter or combination of letters (on some of the tags);
- Combinations similar to those mentioned, but with letters from the Palaeo-Hebrew alphabet (on a group of 20 tags).

Yadin suggested that these tags should be regarded as food coupons (a suggestion with which Naveh concurred). It is unlikely, in my opinion, that such complex markings were necessary for what was probably a rather limited number of products — wheat, barley, legumes, olives, oil, dates, figs (fig-rolls), etc. — especially as some 20 sherds of storage jars bearing the word דבלה (fig-roll) were found on Masada (*Masada* I: 46–47). It seems more logical that this was a method employed by the rebel leadership for a ‘population registry’, not according the names of the heads of families but by means of various combinations of letters: א, ב, ג, צ, ס, ו, ז, etc.; אא, בב, גג, צצ, צז, etc.; and גא, גב, גג, גד, etc.

All the letters of the alphabet (including the final letters) form 27 units. The doubling of these letters (e.g., בב or צצ) generates another 27 units. It is difficult to determine whether the letters were given only to heads of families, to each inhabitant, or perhaps only to those who resided on Masada (mainly the men) and who could take part in the communal effort of guard duty and building operations for the general good — in effect, the ‘warriors’. If one assumes that there were some 300 fighting men among the community’s membership, then c. 54 of the tags have been mentioned above, and combinations of two different letters created another 246. Admittedly, the tags revealed during the excavations do not bear all the letters of the alphabet, and the number of combinations could also have been greater, but it may be assumed that not all the ostraca have come into our possession and that some of them may have been thrown down the slopes, while the colour on others has possibly faded.

How were the tags used in daily life, such as with regard to guard duty at night? Let us assume there were small containers (or bags) in the office equal in number to the number of men fit for guard duty and other assignments, and in each of them a number of tags were placed — for example, five tags — and for each watch a group of tags was withdrawn, according to the number of people required. It would have been possible by this means to ensure that when all the containers had been emptied, each of the people had performed the same number of watches. We find some corroboration for this assumption in the 16 tags, each bearing the combination of the letters קפ (fig. 5), which were discovered close together in

5 Apart from the seven tags with the combination צצ, one tag featured קצ, another קצצ and a third קצצצ; see *Masada* I: 13.



Square 174, in front of the Water Gate (*Masada* I: 15), thus indicating that they had all been placed in one place.

The use of tags for the drawing of lots is well known in the ancient world. Two examples are presented here, one from outside the Land of Israel and the other from the Temple in Jerusalem. Lots were drawn in Athens in the fourth century BCE to determine the composition of the panel of judges to try cases in the Agora. With the aid of a sophisticated device called a *kleroteria* and copper tags bearing the names of the citizens who participated in the drawing of the lots, they determined the composition of the panel of judges (Lang 1960: 19–27).<sup>6</sup> The daily agenda of the Temple included three drawings of lots (*payisim*): the first, toward dawn, for removing the ashes from the altar; the second, after the reading of שמע ישראל ('Hear O Israel') and the prayer for the burning of incense; and the third, some time after the second, for the offering of the אברים (parts of the body) of the lamb sacrifice on the altar (Safrai 1976: 887–890). It may be assumed that these three drawings of lots were carried out with the aid of tags of some kind.



Fig. 6. Ostraca bearing the names Yehohanan, Simeon and Yehuda, with two-letter combinations (photo: Y. Yadin)

Great interest has been aroused by a group of 78 ostraca on which one of three names — Yehohanan, Simeon and Yehuda — appears, always in combination with two letters, one from the Greek alphabet and the other from the Palaeo-Hebrew alphabet (fig. 6). Termed 'Tags with Specific Names' (*Masada* I: 17–23), they can all be related directly or indirectly to the archives under discussion here. Yadin has already dealt with the possibility that they are connected with the military setup of Masada. This is a reasonable assumption, and the tags bearing Palaeo-Hebrew letters are possibly connected with the same setup.<sup>7</sup> In my view, it is possible that the three groups were associated

with the three sectors of the casemate wall — western, southern and eastern.

During the last weeks of the siege, the entire rebel community was engaged in an operation which called for considerable organisation: dismantling the buildings' ceilings in order to erect the wood-and-earth wall, with which they hoped to prevent the Roman soldiers from penetrating to the summit. The ceilings of many rooms and halls throughout the area of the summit were dismantled. On

6 I am grateful to Prof. Gideon Foerster (The Hebrew University of Jerusalem) for drawing my attention to this.

7 The use of the letters of the Palaeo-Hebrew alphabet in the 'Yehohanan, Simeon and Yehuda' group lends support to this assumption, even though, in the search for variety in above-proposed tentative registry of inhabitants, another use (merely technical) was made of the Palaeo-Hebrew alphabet.

the night of the destruction, when this wall was set on fire, only 15% of the ceilings remained intact (Netzer 1989 [Hebrew]; 1991 [English]). Among those rooms whose ceilings were not removed were the Water Gate, Room 184 (the suggested location of the rebels' archives) and Storeroom 113 ('the room of the lots').

According to Josephus' description, when flames consumed the wood-and-earth wall, Elazar Ben Yair came to a fateful decision and assembled the besieged in order to try to convince them to commit suicide. Josephus also informs us of two drawings of lots: the first among all the family heads (a few hundred people) and the second among the ten men drawn in the first. It seems to me that the simplest and fastest way to draw lots would have been to hold them in the vicinity of the field office next to the Water Gate, which must have had a full list of those present on the mount. It would have been even more expedient to use the tags, which, according to my above-explained assumption, were located in the rebels' archives.

I shall now slightly broaden the discussion of Square 174 in front of the Water Gate (figs. 4, 7), measuring 18.9×18.4 m., and, with the two entrance rooms connected with it (Rooms 180 and 185), covering an area of 395 sq.m. This square played an important role in the Northern Sector of the mount, serving as a passage between the rest of Masada and the Acropolis (the concentration of buildings on the north of the mount, including the storerooms and the Northern Palace), as a square reached by every person or convoy arriving from the west along the Water-Gate Path, and as the main entrance to Building No. 7, which evidently played some public role even during the revolt.

According to an estimate based on two to three people per square metre, close to 1,000 could have assembled in an area of 395 sq.m. If we also take into account that people could have stood on the roofs close to the square, which had not yet been removed (or on the tops of the walls of rooms whose ceilings had already been dismantled), as well as in nearby rooms and squares (fig. 4), the entire rebel community, numbering 967 people according to Josephus,<sup>8</sup> could have assembled here. My analysis of the residential units on the mount generally confirms this figure.<sup>9</sup> This square, adjacent to the rebels' field office and the archives in it, was, in

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8 The number of slain was 960; the addition of the two women and five children who remained alive raises the number to 967. See *War* VII, 399–400.

9 Some 95 families resided in the casemate wall, *Masada* III: 960. The number of families not living within the casemate wall can be estimated at 20 in Building No. 9, at 12 in Building No. 13, and at c. 20 in other buildings, yielding a total of 150 families. If we assume an average of six people per family, we reach the figure of c. 900 people, to which another c. 60 should be added to account for individuals dwelling elsewhere on the mount — mainly in the Western Palace, where a group living a communal life probably took up residence. See *Masada* III: 634.

Incidentally, I would like to note that the fire which then broke out in the wood-and-earth wall was psychologically the most appropriate 'setting' for Ben Yair's speech.



Fig. 7. Northern part of Square 174, Room 184 and Water Gate (view from east; photo: E. Netzer)

my opinion, the most reasonable place, among all the courtyards or squares on the summit, for holding the assembly at which the fate of the besieged community was sealed.<sup>10</sup>

One of the final stages in the events of the 'last night' was probably the burning of those rooms and halls whose ceilings had not yet been dismantled (a 'burnt earth' policy). Josephus informs us of the burning of 'the palace' or the 'palaces',<sup>11</sup> but I am sure that he is referring to all of the buildings or to the parts thereof which were still covered by roofs. At this stage, the Water Gate and Room 184 next to it were also set alight, as well as Storeroom 113 to the east of Square 174. Here the Roman army enters the picture. The first soldiers who ascended to the summit arrived here via the siege ramp and tower, as described by Josephus (*War* VII, 402–406). However, as soon as the vanguard became aware that the besieged were no longer

10 It was also possible to assemble in the open areas between the buildings, but all are in agreement that a closed space was more appropriate for this convention. Attempts to associate this assembly with one of the palaces are based on a misinterpretation of Josephus.

11 In most of the translations the term 'palace' appears in this context, but the Greek text has 'palaces' according to the reading of Casey Elledge, whom I wish to thank.



Fig. 8. Debris from Storeroom 113, the room of the lots (photo: A. Volk, Masada expedition)

alive and that it was possible to ascend the mount freely, the Romans undoubtedly preferred to use the western path ending at the Water Gate. Obviously, I am assuming that this path had been blocked to the Romans throughout the siege because of the rebels' full control of it; in any event, the above-described tower played a key role here. When the first soldiers ascending the western path reached the summit, they faced a heap of ruins caused by the fire in the gatehouse and in the adjacent room (Room 184) a few hours earlier. For this reason, the Roman soldiers were obliged to clear the debris, and Storeroom 113 was apparently the most convenient place for the rubble that stood in their way.

An analysis of the finds in 'the room of the lots' (Storeroom 113) indicates that first its ceiling collapsed onto the floor as a result of the fire and that only afterwards was the debris from Room 184 and the Water Gate — originating from the fires set in them (*Masada* III: 63–65) — dumped there. This debris, containing the hundreds of ostraca, was rich in charred wood — remains of the ceilings of the

two rooms and the furniture that could have been present in Room 184 (fig. 8). The most logical place from which the ostraca came is Room 184 — 'the rebels' archives'.

An analysis of the ostraca revealed during the 1995–1997 excavations, together with new data from the study of Masada and other sites, may shed additional light on daily life at Masada, particularly during the revolt. Nevertheless, despite all the question marks regarding the assumption, expressed in *Masada I*, that Yadin's excavations brought to light evidence of the second drawing of lots on the night of the destruction,<sup>12</sup> it seems that anyone who accepts the assumptions that Room 184 contained some kind of field office of the rebel community and that most of the tags revealed in the excavations are connected with the registration of the rebels has a firm basis for discussing not only the second drawing of lots, but also the first one. In addition, with regard to the question of the place of assembly of the rebels to hear their leader's words (at a time when their last hope — the wood-and-earth wall — was going up in flames), we now stand on firmer ground.

To sum up, in my opinion, the question of 'the rebels' archives' largely confirms the credibility of Josephus' account. There is in fact an almost full correspondence between the archaeological data and Josephus' detailed description of everything relating to the siege of Masada in general and to the events of the night of the destruction in particular.<sup>13</sup>

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12 See *Masada I*: 28–31. The doubts here were raised by Naveh in *Masada I*), who relies mainly on Cohen 1982, published after Yadin's death.

13 In the future I intend to broaden the discussion of this issue.