

THE FORTS OF JUDAEA 168 BC–AD 73

From the Maccabees to the Fall of Masada



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ILLUSTRATED BY ADAM HOOK

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THE FORTS OF JUDAEA

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INTRODUCTION

The period from 168 BC until AD 73 (known as the Second Temple period) was an important one in the history of the Jewish people, and is often considered a golden age where the Jews achieved complete political independence. The fortifications erected by the Hasmonaean and the Herodian rulers that held sway during this period fulfilled a variety of important tasks. First and foremost was the defence of the areas in which they were located. In times of peace, some controlled the main highways of the kingdom, such as the fortresses of Hyrcania, Alexandrium and Masada, their small garrisons keeping the constant threat of brigands and outlaws away. The royal palaces of the Hasmonaean and Herod, which lay at the very centre of power, were protected by chains of fortresses around them. Good examples are provided by the Antonia fortress and the Citadel towers in Jerusalem, which protected Herod's palace and the Temple; and the fortress of Cyprus, which protected Herod's palaces at Jericho. Other fortresses, such as Herodium, acted as regional capitals. In addition, some fortresses served as prisons for political prisoners, the most famous being Herod's sons Alexander and Aristobulus who were jailed in Sebaste, and John the Baptist, who was a prisoner of Antipas in the fortress of Machaerous. Last but not least, these fortresses were statements of the power of the Hasmonaean and Herodian rulers of Judaea.

Historical background

After the destruction of the First Temple (erected by King Solomon) in 586 BC, most of the Judaeans were exiled to Babylonia. However, in 549 BC Cyrus, the Achaemenid ruler of the Medes and the Persians, conquered Babylonia. He gave the Jews permission to return to Judaea and to rebuild the temple. The exiles did so and built the Second Temple, and in the process created a small theocratic state under the leadership of the high priest.

However, Judaea subsequently fell under the control of Alexander the Great, the Ptolemies and the Seleucids. The Jews were allowed freedom of worship until the Seleucid ruler Antiochus IV began a programme of forced Hellenization, obliging the Jews to discard the Torah, their ancestral law, and forbidding circumcision. A Jewish rebellion against the Seleucid overlords was led by Judah Maccabaeus. After several victorious battles, the Jews achieved political independence under the leadership of the Hasmonaean dynasty (the descendants of Judah Maccabaeus), and Hasmonaean Judaea

became a small regional power. The Maccabean leaders cleverly exploited the civil war in and disintegration of the decaying Seleucid state, at times siding with the legitimate rulers and on other occasions with the various usurpers. Thus from rebel leaders the Maccabees were recognized by the Seleucid ruler as High Priest, as the spiritual leaders of the Jews, and ethnarch, as the secular rulers of Judaea. Nevertheless, at least until the rule of Simon the Hasmonaean, Judaea remained a *de jure* vassal of the Seleucid kingdom, despite securing an alliance with faraway Republican Rome.

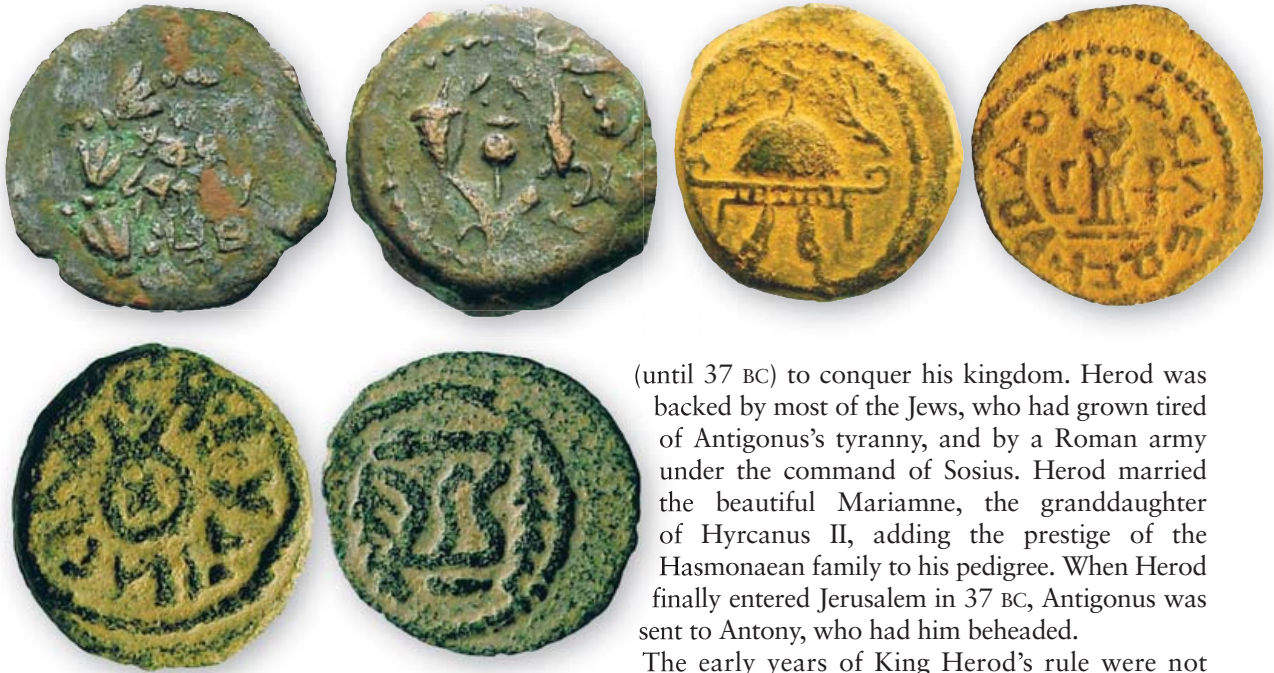
Under the leadership of John Hyrcanus, son of Simon, the small Hasmonaean state conquered the neighbouring regions of Idumaea, Samaria and Galilee, and secured the harbour of Joppa, the gateway to the Mediterranean. John Hyrcanus erected various fortifications to defend Judaea proper, the core of the kingdom. In Jerusalem he built the First Wall, and in the Judean desert he erected the fortifications at Hyrcania that controlled the King's Highway.

In the Late Hellenistic period Alexander Jannaeus made Hasmonaean Judaea a first-rate power. He defeated the Ptolemaic ruler Ptolemy X Latyrus, the Seleucid kings Demetrius III Eucareus and Antiochus XII, and the neighbouring Nabataeans. Alexander Jannaeus also annexed most of the coastal strip of the land of Israel and vast areas of the Transjordan region. However, the price of success was high, and it resulted in a long civil war with his Jewish subjects, led by the Pharisees. Still, in 76 BC, Alexander Jannaeus was able to leave to his wife, Queen Salome Alexandra, a state that touched the borders of the legendary kingdom of David and Solomon.

After ten years of peace, in 66 BC tensions between the two sons of Alexander Jannaeus and Salome Alexandra, Hyrcanus II and Aristobulus II, erupted into civil war. Hyrcanus II was supported by Antipater the Idumaeans and the Pharisees, while Aristobulus was supported by the Sadducees. The civil war ended in 63 BC when Pompey, having annexed Seleucid Syria, sided himself with Hyrcanus II, besieged Aristobulus II in Jerusalem, stormed the city, and brought Aristobulus to Rome in chains.

Pompey, and later Gabinius, the Roman governor of Syria, redrew the map of the region between 63 and 57 BC. The Hasmonaean kingdom of Judaea was cut off from the coastal region, and Decapolis, the northern part of the Transjordanian region, whose population was predominantly Greek and was traditionally hostile to the Hasmonaean. Hyrcanus II lost the title of king (although he retained the title of high priest). However, in the civil war between Pompey and Julius Caesar, Hyrcanus II (guided by his influential counsellor Antipater) gave help to the latter in his Alexandrian war. Caesar rewarded him by giving back part of the lost territories and making Hyrcanus II 'ethnarches' or secular ruler of Judaea.

The civil war between the assassins of Julius Caesar, Brutus and Cassius and Antony and the young Caesar Octavian held plentiful consequences for Hasmonaean Judaea. Antipater, the powerful counsellor of Hyrcanus II, was murdered by rivals. Moreover in 40 BC the Parthians, sensing Rome's weakness, invaded Syria and Judaea. With them came the young Antigonus, the son of the deposed Aristobulus II. The Parthians appointed him king and high priest of Judaea. Antigonus took his revenge on the elderly Hyrcanus II, but the young Herod, son of Antipater, escaped to Rome. Whilst there, Herod convinced Antony and Octavian to have the Senate crown him King of Judaea. One year later, Herod was back in Judaea. By then the Parthians had retreated over the border, leaving Antigonus to his fate. However, it took Herod three years



TOP LEFT

A coin of the Hasmonaeen Alexander Jannaeus (103–76 BC). It depicts a double cornucopia on the obverse, with a wreath inscribed in Paleo-Hebrew with 'Jehonatan the High Priest and the Council of the Jews' on the reverse. (Private collection)

TOP RIGHT

A coin of King Herod (40–4 BC), minted at Sebaste in 37 BC. Pagan symbols are shown. The obverse depicts the *apex*, a ceremonial cap of the Roman augurs, between two palm branches, while the reverse depicts a tripod standing on a base. (Private collection)

ABOVE

A coin of King Herod (40–4 BC), minted in Jerusalem. It depicts a tripod on the obverse, while the reverse shows a wreath inscribed with the Greek letter *Chi*, standing for *Christos* or 'the anointed' – which suggests Herod's Messianic aspirations. (Private collection)

OPPOSITE PAGE, BOTTOM

An aerial view of Masada from the west, showing the Roman siege wall and a Roman camp. (Courtesy of Albatross)

(until 37 BC) to conquer his kingdom. Herod was backed by most of the Jews, who had grown tired of Antigonus's tyranny, and by a Roman army under the command of Sosius. Herod married the beautiful Mariamne, the granddaughter of Hyrcanus II, adding the prestige of the Hasmonaeen family to his pedigree. When Herod finally entered Jerusalem in 37 BC, Antigonus was sent to Antony, who had him beheaded.

The early years of King Herod's rule were not easy. His main enemy was no less than Cleopatra, Queen of Egypt. In 32 BC, while Antony and Cleopatra were fighting against Octavian at Actium, Herod was locked in combat with the Nabataeans as well as a Ptolemaic army, sent against him by Cleopatra, even though he was an ally of Antony's. These distractions prevented Herod from sending reinforcements to Antony in his struggle with Octavian. For this reason, when Octavian received Herod at Rhodes in 30 BC, Herod was reconfirmed as King of Judaea. Moreover, Octavian returned to Herod all the territories given by Antony to Cleopatra. In the ensuing years, Augustus (formerly Octavian) granted Herod Trachonitis, Batanaea and Auranitis (23–22 BC), and Ituraea (20 BC). In exchange, in 25 BC Herod sent a contingent to assist Aelius Gallus, the governor of Egypt, in his disastrous Arabian campaign, and in 15 BC his fleet assisted Agrippa in his campaigns in the Cimmerian Bosphorus.

Herod was a great builder. He constructed a series of royal palaces in every corner of the kingdom, in addition to founding the two Greek cities of Sebaste and Caesarea Maritima, the latter equipped with a modern harbour. In Jerusalem he rebuilt the Temple, erected a new wall (the Second Wall), and built the multi-storey towers above his palace and the Antonia fortress to guard the huge Temple Mount. Herod also erected the tetrapyrion of Herodium, as well as fortifying Masada. In addition, the Hasmonaeen Desert fortresses of Hyrcania, Alexandrium and Machaerous were renovated.

Herod's final years were unhappy ones. A series of petty family squabbles (Herod had no fewer than nine wives and thus many potential heirs) brought him to execute his beautiful wife Mariamne, and later his two sons by her, Alexander and Aristobulus (a few days before Herod's death, his son Antipater by his first wife Doris was also executed). It is no surprise to learn that Augustus joked that it was better to be a pig than a son of the Jewish king. Moreover, in 9 BC the Second Nabataean War brought the wrath of Augustus down on Herod. Although it was clear that Herod was not responsible for starting the war, which had been declared without Augustus's permission (the main instigator being the Nabataean vizier Syllaeus), Herod suffered a breakdown. When he died in 4 BC,



suffering from mental illness, Herod's kingdom was divided between his three sons Archelaus, Antipas and Philip. Archelaus, appointed to the role of ethnarch by Augustus, received Judaea, Samaria and Idumaea. Archelaus's brothers were granted the lesser title of tetrarch. Antipas received Galilee and Peraea, while Philip received the northern territories around the Golan region.

Archelaus proved to be a poor ruler. As early as 4 BC, the population of Judaea rebelled against his rule. In AD 6, after ten years of unhappy rule, he was dismissed by Augustus and sent into exile in Gaul. His territories were administered by a Roman governor, a *praefectus* of equestrian rank; the latter was responsible to the Roman governor of Syria, who was of superior senatorial rank. Most of the subsequent governors carried out their duties successfully. The only exception was the cruel and corrupt Pontius Pilatus, who ruled Judaea between AD 26 and 36.

TOP LEFT

A coin of Agrippa I (AD 41–44), minted probably in AD 42/43 at Caesarea Maritima. The obverse depicts the head of Agrippa, with the Tyche of Caesarea Maritima, symbol of the city, on the reverse. (Private collection)

TOP RIGHT

A coin issued by Felix (AD 52–59), procurator of Judaea during the reign of Claudius, minted in AD 54. The obverse depicts a Celtic crossed shield, to celebrate the Claudian conquest of Britannia, while the reverse depicts the palm tree, symbol of Judaea. (Private collection)

