

## **Sacrificing Truth: Archaeology and The Myth of Masada**

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Mid-60's Masada excavations forged a past through falsified evidence and concealed facts.

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### **Chapter One Introduction: The Puzzle**

How do we perceive our culture? How do we understand ourselves as beings in need of meaning? We are socialized into and live in complex cultures from which we extract the very essence of our identity, but at the same time we also construct these cultures. How is this process accomplished? What is the nature of those cultural processes that provide us with symbolic meaning and vitalize our perception of ourselves within our self-structured and regulated social orders? This book is addressed to these issues.

One interesting way of exploring cultures is to examine some of the myriad contrasts that characteristically make up cultures. These contrasts set boundaries, which in turn define the variety of the symbolic-moral universes of which complex cultures are made. In turn, these symbolic-moral universes give rise to and support both personal and collective identities. There are many such contrasts, some more profound than others.

There are physical contrasts, such as black/white, day/night, sea/land, mountain/valley, and there are socially and morally constructed contrasts, such as good/bad, right/wrong, justice/injustice, trust/betrayal. The contrast we shall focus on in this book is a major and significant one: between truth and falsehood. This contrast cuts across many symbolic-moral universes because it touches a quality to which we attach central importance--that between the genuine and the spurious. Profound feelings we all share resonate to this contrast, which have and can be used to characterize entire cultures and organizations.

Robinson (1996) points out that the demarcating line between that which is truth and that which is not, did not just leap into existence overnight but developed gradually in Western philosophical thought over many years. Issues of truth and falsehood have occupied the minds of such eminent

scholars as John Dewey and William James, and indeed even phenomenologists such as Jack Douglas as well.

Until the tempestuous and confusing age of post-modernism was unleashed upon us, the demarcation between truth and falsehood could be established with little difficulty. Some post-modernistic analyses emphasize implosions, narrative analysis, and the concept that no boundaries exist between "real" and "unreal" because all narratives are different but equally "real" versions of reality, no one better than any other; in this situation, demarcation lines have become blurred.

Such a view, plainly, makes many of the contrasts we mentioned earlier irrelevant. This most certainly is not my view. Indeed, I agree that a major characteristic of cultures is the existence of a great many versions of reality and numerous narratives. In fact, I believe that the more we have, the merrier, because then the professional challenge for sociologists examining these cultures is genuinely more demanding.

However, I cannot possibly accept the claim that all these versions or narratives are equal; they are not, neither morally nor, much more importantly, empirically. Putting the Nazi version of reality on the same level with those of Mother Theresa, Albert Schweitzer, Martin Luther King or Mahatma Gandhi is to me empirically false and morally impossible. However, I do concede that morality is a contestable and negotiable variable.

As scientists, we must affirm that there are versions of reality that are inconsistent with, even contradictory to, "facts." The realities that these false versions create are synthetic and misleading. Browsing through Knightley's fascinating 1975 work on media deception and misinformation in times of war provides many illustrations of the apparent and actual gaps between "truth" and "falsehood."

Taking different versions of reality as they are, without contrasting them and trying to find out which one is closer to the observable and known facts, will leave us in a haze of eternal uncertainties and lead us astray in a shadowy reality where nothing is true or false. Living in such a universe cannot be easy. Defining a reality where the earth is perceived to be the center of the universe had some very real and tangible consequences. However, it was based on falsehoods and on an incorrect empirical foundation. If a better and more empirically accurate understanding of the solar system and the universe was to be achieved, the Ptolemaic view of the universe had to be abandoned. Likewise, such empirically incorrect perceptions as the genetic "theory" promoted by Lysenko or the Phlogiston "theory" in chemistry had to be abandoned for more informed constructions of reality. Adhering to social realities that are based on incorrect empirical facts and false information is--evidently--possible, but carries a heavy price tag in terms of a genuine understanding of the world in which we live.

A major line of this book argues that the difference between truth and falsehood can, and indeed should, be stated as clearly as possible. True, as the Japanese play *Rashomon*<sup>1</sup> so ably demonstrates, it is not always easy or even feasible to establish the distinction between truth and falsehood. However, the cases in this book do indeed lend themselves to just such a clear distinction.

There are several ways of exploring this fascinating contrast between true and false, between appearance and reality. One is to write a treatise on the social philosophy of this contrast. Another is to adapt a wide-angle view of all the possible situations where this contrast exists. I have chosen yet a different approach, focusing on one particular aspect of culture--science--and examining the true/false contradiction there.

Science encompasses many areas and disciplines. I have already explored the issue of deception and deviance in science (1985, 1986), and examining one case in detail is a worthy addition. In the past, different scientific disciplines were examined for cases of deception and falsehood. However, archaeology was somehow left outside most of the literature dealing with that aspect of science. And yet, as we shall see later, the context of archaeological endeavor is such that the tendency to accusations of falsehood is almost built in.

The method selected here to solve the puzzles raised above is the "case study" approach. Adhering to it, we shall focus attention on one specific aspect of our culture and see how it plays a role in constructing meaning. Specifically, we shall look at the scientific discipline of archaeology and examine how, in one particular case--the 1963-65 excavations of Masada in the Judean Desert of Israel--it helped shape a central process of nation and state-building by helping forge a specific past and hence new national and personal identities. Forging that past required falsifying historical evidence and concealing facts, adapting deceptive techniques and inventing historical realities.

#### My Previous Work On The Myth of Masada and This Book

My 1995 book about the myth of Masada focused on three issues. First, it charted the nature of the Masada myth. Second, it traced the beginning and evolution of the myth and the reasons for its creation and persistence. Finally, the book contextualized the historical development of the Masada myth within a conceptual framework of constructionism and collective memory.

Indeed, it had to be that way. As Kohl (1998:223) points out: "nationalism requires the elaboration of a real or invented past" and thus his superb review focuses on "how archaeological data are manipulated for nationalist purposes" in a cross-cultural and historical perspective. In a very strong sense, nationalist archaeology has no choice but to be political. And, in cases of disputed "pasts"--it has to become manipulative as well. Using archaeology to legitimize specific "pasts"--real or imaginary--is a potent concoction to use when one wants to forge identities and create cohesion by fostering a strong sense of a shared past (and hence future) among nations of

immigrants. Using archaeology necessarily means invoking science and consequently ideas of objectivity and honesty.

One riddle which puzzled me at the time, but to which I paid little attention, centered on the main archaeological excavations of Masada in 1963-65. Masada was excavated by professional archaeologists who most certainly believed in the ethos and values of science. Nonetheless, the archaeologists involved in these excavations, most notably Prof. Yigael Yadin, who headed them, solidly supported the mythical version. It was that sponsorship that genuinely puzzled me. It was inconceivable that the archaeologists at the time did not know what they were doing. Why did they choose to ignore scientific and historical evidence in favor of a myth? Much more importantly, how were they able to harness science to support a falsified and questionable myth? Were the factual findings subverted? Were the interpretations warped?

Furthermore, was contrasting archaeology as a "science" against the "myth" justified? In theory, archaeology could be used to substantiate a genuine "past" and not just to show that some "past" was nothing more than a fabled myth. It thus could be that a specific "past" and archaeology would be able to maintain a dialogue from which much could be learned.<sup>2</sup> As we shall see later in this book, this is not what happened in the case of the excavations of Masada.

These questions prompted me to write this book. Contrary to my study of the myth of Masada, the present one has an altogether different focus. It examines how, and why, archaeologists were willing to suspend skepticism and good science in favor of a myth. In this book, I am thus interested in the creation of knowledge. Like other studies, the facts presented here will be contextualized within a specific point of view--that of deception in science, specifically and generally. In this sense, it is a continuation of my previous interest (1985, 1986) in deviance in science. But much more so, it is a ramification of my previous interest in such contrasts as true/false, deviant/non-deviant, and the issue of symbolic moral boundaries. Thus, this manuscript is focused on science and deception, and not on the myth (or the issue of collective memory).

## Choice of Case

It must be noted that the excavations at Masada were not merely some haphazard dig in a desolate site, in the middle of nowhere, a search for remnants of cultures about which very few people know or care. Like the attempts to find the city of Troy, the excavations at Masada stirred hearts in Israel and abroad. Yadin's excavations are also important because they supported in a most significant way the mythical Masada narrative<sup>3</sup> and became world famous.

Indeed, the authors of the first volume of the final report of Masada's excavations state: "perhaps no other archaeological endeavor in Israel has attracted such widespread attention as the excavations of Masada."<sup>4</sup> To drive the point even further, the authors cite Feldman:

No single event in the history of the second Jewish commonwealth has occasioned more discussion in recent years than the fall of Masada, the mausoleum of martyrs, as it has been called... The spectacular discoveries in the excavations of Masada by Yadin in a nation where digging is a veritable form of prayer have made Masada a shrine for the Jewish people.<sup>5</sup>

Indeed, another facet of this book is focused on the quest into the nature of the interaction and mutual influence between Zionism and archaeology. I am also interested in examining the way in which a specific research site was selected and how the interpretation of the archaeological discoveries was (or was not) made in accordance with social, historical and political views.

## **Methodology**

The methodology I used is novel. Studying the archaeological excavations of Masada provides us with a fascinating opportunity to examine and follow the development of the scientific interpretations attributed to the artifacts found on Masada.

The major archaeological excavations of Masada took place between 1963-65. Yadin held daily evening meetings with his team of archaeologists which, to Yadin's credit, he recorded. Later these taped recordings were transcribed; and while no one seems certain who exactly did most of the transcriptions, almost all my interviewees seemed to agree that it was Yadin's wife at the time, Carmella. I was given full and free access to these original transcriptions at the Institute of Archaeology at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. This indeed provides a unique opportunity to examine how the archaeologists reacted to their findings on an almost daily basis. Here are their debates, evaluations, impressions, disappointments, amazement, the manner in which they developed and applied interpretations to the artifacts and structures they were uncovering, and--yes--their jokes and moods as well. These transcripts thus provide us with an open portal to the daily archaeological work as it actually progressed.

From here I followed, as best as I could, the different publications of the findings on Masada, going forward from 1963-65 and following the evolving interpretations of the original findings. The search was stopped with the final publications of the Masada excavation reports in five large volumes between 1989-94, almost 30 years after the excavations had begun.

Yadin's main publication of his work on Masada appeared in 1966 with the publication of his Masada books (in both English and Hebrew). Other than these two books, he published very little on Masada. There was a very significant delay in publishing the final results of the excavations. While some early reports were made available,<sup>6</sup> the final reports began to be published in the late 1980s and 1990s. For example, between 1989 and 1991 (almost 26 years after completion of the excavations) three volumes summarizing part of the final reports were published.<sup>7</sup>

When all the final reports appeared between 1989-94, Yadin was no longer alive and the volumes were published by some of his students and other scholars. Yadin's 1966 books thus furnish a most important source for his thoughts on Masada. Moreover, Yadin gave many lectures and was regularly interviewed on the radio and by newspapers. I tried to locate and collect as many of these radio recordings and interviews as I could.

Consequently, the information we have about the evolution of the scientific interpretations of the Masada discoveries is based on a variety of sources: the transcripts of the daily meetings of the archaeologists which reflect their day-to-day work, other scientific and popular publications, and the media. Integrating all this information in a meaningful way enables us to examine how the archaeological interpretations were constructed. In a very real sense, this book basically details the "excavation of the excavations of Masada."

### **Structure and Plan of the Book**

Solving the puzzle of how archaeology supported the mythical account of Masada shapes the structure of this book. First, and briefly, the historical and mythical versions of Masada will be presented. Then I shall detail how and why archaeology was able to support a mythical narrative. Finally, the findings of this study will be conceptualized within the sociology of science, deception, and moral boundaries.

The introduction will be followed by a chapter in which we will acquaint ourselves with the historical tale of Masada as provided by Josephus Flavius and with the Masada mythical narrative. It is necessary to know these two versions of the Masada tale fairly well before we continue our journey.

Chapter Three provides us with a short history of the development of the excavations at Masada, and Chapter Four explores the relevant interconnections between politics and history as a way to construct knowledge. Chapters Five and Six analyze, in detail, some of the findings from Masada and their interpretations. While Chapter Five analyzes a number of different discoveries and their presentation, Chapter Six delves in depth into an analysis of two of the most important findings on Masada and their interpretation: the "lots" and the riddle of the missing bodies.

Another fascinating case, which unfolds in this chapter, is **the presentation of the Roman siege ramp in Masada**. Chapter Seven explores the nature of the logic used by the archaeologists to manufacture the scientific credibility for the Masada mythical narrative. Chapter Eight examines the impact of the archaeological excavations on various aspects of Israeli culture.

The book concludes with three analytical chapters. Chapter Nine focuses on reality constructions, deceptions, and the excavations, and the last two chapters provide an integrative analysis and discussion of the excavations of Masada and its changing interpretations.

Examining both the Masada mythical narrative and the ways in which the archaeological discoveries were interpreted to support that myth raises some fascinating questions about fabrications, deceptions, and the sliness of different reality constructions. Indeed, the study presented in this book (as well as in my 1985 and 1995 books, which focused on the social construction of moral boundaries and the Masada myth, respectively) occasion--truly demand--a discussion on exactly these issues. Thus, the last chapters take the study presented here as a starting point to develop a summary discussion about deception, truth, and falsehood, all contextualized within a broader level of analysis.<sup>8</sup>

Thus, this book not only presents a discussion of a specific study of ideology, politics, and archaeology, but also utilizes that study to say something of a much more general nature about science, deception, and falsehood and some of the ways we socially construct cultural meanings.

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## Notes

1. See also Akira Kurosawa's 1950 (B/W, 83 minutes), cinematic version of the play.
2. See, for example, the fascinating works by Marcus 2001 (forthcoming) and Finkelstein and Silberman 2001, as well as Niebuhr's 2000 report, covering such processes in the Middle East.
3. Aviram, Foerster and Netzer 1989a:ix.
4. See, e.g., Shargel 1979; Ben-Yehuda 1995.
5. Louis M. Feldman (1975): "Masada: A Critique of Recent Scholarship," in Jacob Neusner (ed.): *CHRISTIANITY, JUDAISM AND GRAECO-ROMAN CULTS*, Studies For Morton Smith at Sixty, III, Leiden. P. 218. Quoted by Aviram, Foerster and Netzer, 1989 p. 1.
6. E.g., Yadin 1965; 1966e; 1966h; 1970. See also a progress report by Rabinowitz 1990.
7. Aviram, Foerster and Netzer edited the first three volumes, two of which were published in 1989 and the third in 1991. The first volume focuses on the chapters about the ostraca and inscriptions (written by Yigael Yadin and Joseph Naveh) and on the coins (written by Ya'acov Meshorer) found in the excavations. The second volume consists of an examination of the Latin and Greek documents found in Masada (written by Hannah M. Cotton and Joseph Geiger). The largest volume,

volume three (written by Ehud Netzer) concentrates on the buildings, stratigraphy and architecture of Masada. In the summer of 1994 the fourth volume (some 400 pages long) was published. It examined the oil lamps, fabrics, wood products, catapult stones, and the skeletons found in Masada. Volume five, which was prepared in 1994 (possibly the last), is focused on the architecture and art found in Masada. As is becoming increasingly clear, the scientific importance of Masada lies not so much with the Sicarii, but with important discoveries in other areas, such as coins, scriptures, fabric materials, Herodian architecture, and Roman army siege tactics.

8. In this case, the perspective of symbolic interaction, generally, and contextual constructionism, particularly.

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The suicide at Masada is transformed into a brave last stand of the heroic few against the many Roman troops. On these matters Ben-Yehuda generally trusts Josephus, who, to be sure, was not present at Masada. Ben-Yehuda is surely right in denying that there is any evidence that the Sicarii at Masada fought against the Romans for three years. He is right in criticizing Yadin for referring to the defenders as Zealots; but, in Yadin's defense, we may remark that Yadin looked upon them as zealous revolutionaries and, as such, did not see too much of a difference among the various revolutionar Eviction and the Reproduction of Urban Poverty. Desmond. The Mark of a Criminal Record.

Why should Masada be any different? In the end, it is Ben-Yehuda who sacrifices truth about how the past is constructed to bemoan his loss of faith in a once-popular symbol of modern Israeli nationhood. From the start, Ben-Yehuda bases his critique on questionable premises. To take the writings of Josephus Flavius about the fall of Masada as an historical baseline, "far superior to the myth in terms of historical truth" (p. 54), is to misunderstand utterly the powerful ideological motives of the original account. This version of what happened at Masada is based on perhaps the most famous Israeli archaeological dig in recent history-the 1963-1965 excavation of Masada led by Prof. Yigael Yadin.Â Nachman Ben-Yehuda (Jerusalem, Israel), is professor and dean of the faculty of social sciences at Hebrew University and the author of *The Masada Myth: Collective Memory and Mythmaking in Israel*. [Read more.](#) [Product details.](#)