



HAL
open science

**Recension of Jodi MAGNESS, Masada. From Jewish
Revolt to Modern Myth, Princeton University Press,
Princeton – Oxford, 2019**

Michaël Girardin

► **To cite this version:**

Michaël Girardin. Recension of Jodi MAGNESS, Masada. From Jewish Revolt to Modern Myth, Princeton University Press, Princeton – Oxford, 2019. Bryn Mawr Classical Review, 2019. hal-03831679

HAL Id: hal-03831679

<https://hal.science/hal-03831679>

Submitted on 28 Oct 2022

HAL is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.



Distributed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License

Jodi Magness, *Masada: from Jewish revolt to modern myth*, Princeton – Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2019. Pp. 288. ISBN 9780691167107. \$29,95.

Michaël Girardin. Université du Littoral – Côte d'Opale. michael.girardin@univ-littoral.fr

<https://books.google.fr/books?id=Pyx6DwAAQBAJ&lpg=PP1&hl=fr&pg=PP1#v=onepage&q&f=false>Preview

As an Israeli national myth, the archaeological site of Masada remains one of the most visited in Israel and continues to exercise a deep impact on the imagination of thousands of people. However, a great number of popular ideas about it have been proven to be false and the need for re-establishing the truth has been highly felt for a long time ago very sensible. Jodi Magness, one of the most famous archaeologists and specialists of Masada, succeeds in producing a book that is very accessible and up to date, a rewarding and stimulating work.

The author's purpose is not only to propose a tour of Masada but to present the fortress in its broader context in geographical, historical, and socio-religious senses. The book is quite accessible even without background reading: one will find all the essentials about the Masada's background here.

The prologue (p. 1-4) offers long quotations of Flavius Josephus' *War* and raises the question of what we can know about these events, opening up the discussion by showing the contemporary importance of Masada for the Israeli State. Then begins a fascinating inquiry.

Chapter 1 presents the archaeological remains of the Roman siege works and the traces of their presence (notably military equipment). All suitable information about our main source of knowledge, Flavius Josephus, is then condensed in a few pages, with a specific attention to Josephus' biases and apologetic tendencies.

During the nineteenth century, explorations in the area of the Dead Sea led to finding the location of Masada. This "search for Masada" is summarized in chapter 2, with the (sometimes dramatic) adventures of Edward Robinson and Eli Smith, Christopher Costigan, William Molyneux, William Francis Lynch, Louis-Félicien de Saulcy, Henry Baker Tristram, and then with the project called the Survey of Western Palestine conducted by the Palestine

Exploration Fund from 1871 to 1877. The archaeological explorations of Masada proper are listed with their most important contribution at the end of the chapter.

<v>The five next chapters are devoted to describing the context of Masada.</v>

Chapter 3, “Masada in context” explores Masada’s natural setting, the Judean desert and the Dead Sea, then its “historical setting”, listing the most important archaeological findings in the entire Judean desert since the Chalcolithic period up to the Byzantine period.

Chapter 4 presents Herod’s works at the top of Masada as well as the other building projects of the king in Jerusalem, Caesarea Maritima, Samaria, Jericho and Herodium. Magness shows the patterns in Herodian architecture and makes it clear that Masada is only one of the Herodian palaces that could be interpreted in a broader background. The author provides, in this chapter, twenty three photographs that are illuminating and useful, some of them in colour.

Chapter 5 is dedicated to the history of Judea before Herod’s kingship. It opens very early with the settling of Canaan around 1200 BCE and runs until the nomination of Herod as “king” at Rome in 40 BCE. The narrative is very short, but Magness takes care not to fall in the traps of many disputed events. She always avoids to take part in debates that are superfluous for her purpose.

Chapter 6 summarizes the history of Judea from 40 BCE to the uprising of 66 CE. Magness often refers to the New Testament in order to connect the story to the general culture of the reader, insisting in particular upon Pilatus, Felix and Festus among others Roman governors, and gives a balanced synthesis of the background of the Jewish revolt.

The revolt itself is the subject matter of chapter 7, with a focus first on its early developments and causes, a second one on Roman operations in the country and, third, on the siege of Jerusalem and the destruction of the temple. Magness pays attention to Josephus’ description of the triumph, to the Flavian commemoration in Rome until Domitian’s Principate and to the suppression of the revolt in Egypt as well as in Judea.

It is at this point that Magness's work shines the most. Chapter 8 surveys the rebel occupation of Masada, from 66 up to 74 CE. She begins by describing the state of current research. After having inquired about who the Jews at Masada were (probably a fluid population composed indeed of Sicarii but also of some Essenes), she shows the archaeological remains of the rebels' presence on the site, describing the housing, food, synagogue, the miqva'ot, stone and dung vessels that testify not only the ritual and purity concern of the rebels but also their poverty and low class origin. She surveys the sectarian scrolls that attest to a small Essene community here, then the clothing, the presence and role of women and, lastly, the rebels' administrative structure as reconstructed with the help of the seven hundred and one ostraca found on site. Twenty three iconographic documents are inserted here and help sustain the discussion.

The ninth and last chapter, entitled "Masada shall not fall again", explores the origins and developments of the Masada myth, with particular attention to the figure of Yigael Yadin, the first excavator of Masada and one of the most important promoters of its use in Zionist and nationalist discourses. Magness gives a short personal testimony about Yadin, who was one of her teachers at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. She exposes the nationalist appropriation of the mass suicide of the Sicarii and, at the same time, the difficulties for archaeologists to confirm the story told by Josephus. In fact, it seems that no mass suicide was ever committed at Masada and that the story was only an embellishment of the narrative. But Magness advances here with a commendable prudence, not forgetting to conclude that she is not a Josephus specialist and that "whether or not the mass suicide story is true depends on how one evaluates Josephus's reliability as an historian". However, even if Masada does not play the same role in Israeli nationalism today, Magness shows that the site and its history still exercises a deep attraction on hearts and minds not only in Israel, but even around the world. "Masada, she concludes, remains a symbol of the State of Israel and the Zionist enterprise".

In closing her presentation, Magness offers her readers "a tour of Masada" as an epilogue, i.e. her recommended itinerary for tourists and visitors. The notes, bibliography, a general index and image credits end the book.

In the chapters devoted to the context, one can sometimes feel that the author risks losing sight of the subject, because while trying to give her readers all suitable information, Magness spends a number of pages summarizing a lot of secondary data. In some ways, one could say

that her *Masada* is constructed as a handbook on Jewish history at the turn of our era and, for specialists, the chapters about Masada proper seem to be too limited as a consequence. However, despite this small weakness, *Masada* remains a very beautiful book, well written and truly accessible for any interested reader. The book is up to date and presents in a fascinating manner the history of archaeological explorations in the area, the history of Zionism and of the State of Israel, and based on a few preceding works, of the ideological embellishment and misappropriations of the story of Masada. Undoubtedly, it will become a classic in this field of study.