

The Location of Herod's Military Camp at Arbel: Reconnaissance of the Site Identified by Dr. Zvi Ilan

Introduction

Josephus was absolutely clear when he stated that Herod set up a camp for his army at Arbel: "Having sent in advance three battalions of infantry and a squadron of cavalry to the village of Arbela, he joined them forty days later with the rest of his army" (*Jewish War* 1:305; cf. *Antiquities* 14:415-416). According to the rest of his account (*Jewish War* 1: 305-316 and *Antiquities* 14,415-433), Herod's army used the camp at Arbel as a base over a period of many months: 40 days after an advance party of about 750 men and 30 cavalry arrived to set up camp, Herod arrived with the rest of his army (about 3000 infantry and 600 cavalry). Almost immediately they were attacked by the rebel army, whom they routed and pursued to the Jordan River. Following a winter break, Herod's troops returned to the Arbel camp for a lengthy campaign against the rebels holed up in the caves very close to the village of Arbel. When this was over, Herod took the main part of his army to Samaria, leaving a sufficient force in Arbel under his general Ptolemy. However, Ptolemy was ambushed and killed by the rebels, compelling Herod to return with his army and launch a broader campaign against the rebels in their villages and hideouts in the area. The whole campaign must have lasted 10 months or more (well into the autumn of 38 BCE), and occupied his entire army for long periods. All this while, it appears that Arbel was his base of operations. It would be very surprising if there were no artefacts or remains from Herod's base camp at Arbel.

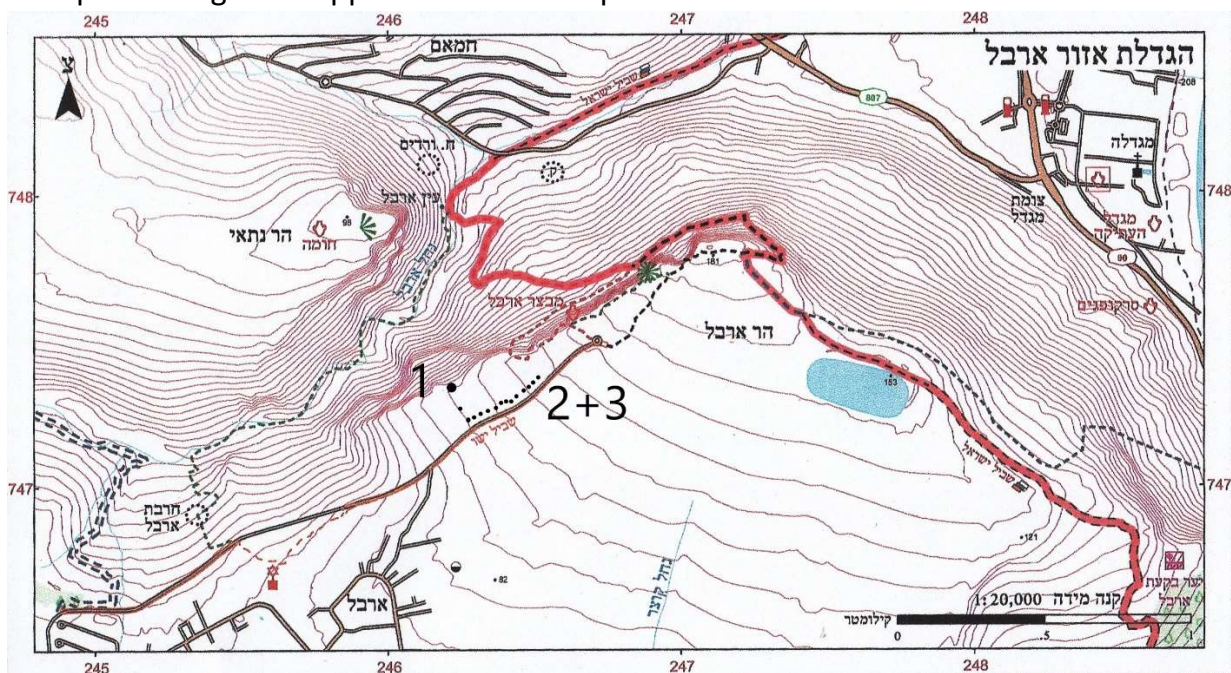
With this in mind, we read an article published by Dr. Zvi Ilan in 1989, in which he describes finding walls on Mt. Arbel that he tentatively identified as a Roman military camp: "Before closing I would like to add that in the flat area near the cliff of Mount Arbel, we have found the remains of what may be a Roman way-station or military encampment. The remains are comprised of walls enclosing an area which was cleared of rocks. They have not been identified with any certainty at this stage, and they are not crucial to the identification of the Arbel cave village. But if they are indeed what we think they are, they will add another aspect to our knowledge of Arbel and the battle fought there" ("Reviving a 2,000-year-Old Landmark" in *Eretz Magazine*, Winter 1988/9, p. 69 col 3). If these findings are indeed the remains of a Roman military camp, then the most likely candidate would be Herod's army camp at Arbel, the one which features so prominently in the report of Josephus.

Observations

Guided by Dr. Ilan's directions, we visited "the flat area near the cliff of Mount Arbel" on 26th January 2020 and found a variety of stone mounds, large and small, at various points over an

area of about 150 x 250 m² along the cliff, 150-400 m south-west of the National Park entrance and 600 m north-east of the ancient synagogue of Arbel (see map below). These findings can be broken down into 3 main elements:

1. A 50 x 30 m² platform of very large stone blocks about 20 m from the cliff face, at the north-western corner of the area of interest, rising to a height of about 4 m. Upon this platform, and close to the northern edge, there are 10 circular heaps of smaller stones 2-3 m in diameter and rising a further 1-2 m in height. The platform has a commanding view over the cliff edge and gives the impression of once serving as a 'mini-fortress'. The 50 meter-long northern 'wall' of this platform consists of huge, randomly-piled rocks that are mostly of natural origin, but among them are many rectangular-shaped basalt blocks that look as if they may have been part of a construction. There are also at least two basalt blocks shaped like parts of columns with graffiti marks on them.
2. About 40 heaps of small greyish field stones on the other side of the area, about 150 meters south-east of the large stone dump described above. These stone heaps can be seen at intervals of 5-20 metres over a distance of about 250 metres, in a broad line that is parallel to the road leading to the National Park car-park, and about 20 m north of it. We suspect that these heaps may have been the remains of the walls of an enclosure that Dr. Zvi Ilan identified as a Roman military camp or way-station (see the quotation above).
3. Between these small heaps of field stones, and in the same linear orientation, there are at least two lines of single stones 15-20 metres long, just visible on the surface, and another broader row of the same length also submerged below the surface and representing what appears to be the top row of an old wall.



Site Review with Prof. Mordechai Aviam

On 9th February we accompanied the archaeologist Prof. Motti Aviam around the findings described above. He quickly, and without hesitation, identified the stone mound that looks like a 'mini-fortress' (1 above) as a heap of assorted stones transferred mechanically to the present location about 30 years ago. We were later able to confirm this by finding two rusty old cans pinned underneath the largest stone blocks. It is a massive 'stone graveyard' for a variety of rocks and stones, hewn and natural, collected from the adjacent area and dumped all together at this cliff-top site.

Now for the numerous smaller heaps of field stones (2 above) starting about 150 meters south of the massive stone dump and found at intervals along a line running east for about 250 m, parallel to the road and about 20 m north of it. We had originally associated these heaps with the stone remnants of the enclosure that Dr. Zvi Ilan identified as part of a Roman military camp or way-station (quoted in introduction above). However, after showing Prof. Aviam the comments of Dr. Zvi Ilan and then the line of small stone heaps, he did not agree that these could have been the remnants of the enclosure of a Roman military camp. He told us that these stone heaps were related to agricultural practices dating back to Byzantine times. The stones were piled there by farmers so that they could cultivate the land cleared between the heaps.

Finally, regarding the lines of stones barely visible on the surface (3 above), following the same orientation as the stone heaps, Prof. Aviam suggested they were marking ancient pathways or agricultural terraces.

In summary, Prof. Aviam's input was a great help in the recognition of the massive stone dump as a relatively recent phenomenon and the small stone heaps and submerged rows as a result of ancient farming practice, but we nonetheless contend that neither of these explanations excludes the possibility that Herod's camp once stood at this site and that the plethora of blocks and stones, both natural and artificially shaped, in this particular area, may actually be an indication of this very fact.

Interpretation of the findings

In our view, Prof. Aviam's interpretation of the small stone heaps does not explain why they occur in a line that runs more or less straight for 250 meters, and not at evenly distributed places elsewhere in the field. Perhaps the Roman/Herodian stone enclosure came first and the agricultural heaps came later on, in Byzantine times, along the line of the previous enclosure. Prof. Aviam's explanation may be correct for the Byzantine period, but it does not exclude a field stone wall enclosing a Roman camp in the 1st century BCE, built very much like the primitive W1 and W2 structures buried within the wall on Mt. Nitai, as described by Prof. Uzi

Leibner et al (Leibner, Davidovitch and Arubas, 'The Fortification at the top of Mt. Nitai: its structure, dating and function', in the *Sefer Ehud Netzer, Eretz-Israel: Archaeological, Historical and Geographical Studies, Jerusalem, 2015*, pp. 236-246, in Hebrew).

In fact, the finding of these agricultural stone collections in a linear arrangement at this site may itself be evidence of the wall of a previous Roman camp, since they suggest the area was selected for agriculture precisely because it had been previously cleared of stones by the builders of the camp. So, we suggest that the stone collection may have been part of the structure mentioned by Dr. Zvi Ilan (quoted and referenced above), and provisionally identified by him as the remnant of a Roman military camp. Indeed, it seems to be all that remains of this camp above ground.

Regarding the two lines of single stones 15-20 metres long, just visible on the surface, and another broader row of stones also submerged below the surface (3 above), we thought it was too much of a coincidence that these submerged stones are to be found in the same place and orientated in the same direction as the many stone heaps (2 above) and suggest that they represent submerged stone structures of some sort, perhaps even an ancient wall.

The massive 50 x 30 m² rock and stone dump beside the cliff, 150 m to the north, appears to have been created about 20-30 years ago, after Dr. Ilan made his survey (1988-1989), otherwise he would surely have commented on it. This massive stone dump is evidence of a clean-up operation in the area of interest during the 1990's, using a bulldozer and a tip-up truck. This operation probably removed most of the wall seen by Dr. Zvi Ilan, which could therefore have been the origin of many of the rectangular basalt blocks that can now be seen in the dump. Most of these stones are so large and heavy that it is unlikely they were brought from afar. In this context, it is highly relevant that a local historian, who has lived at Moshav Arbel for the last 45 years, has no recollection of a clean-up operation of this kind performed by the farmers of the Moshav. In our opinion, the stones were brought to the dump site from the adjacent section of road when it was being widened and resurfaced.

Significantly, a Survey of Israel hiking map published in 1996, when compared with the present 2018 version, shows that since 1996 the road has been upgraded from a track for 4-wheel-drive vehicles to its present condition with a 2-lane, tarmac surface. Furthermore, the present road lies at a lower level than the fields on either side, indicating that its construction involved the removal of a considerable amount of topsoil, which would have included all the archaeological remnants that were buried in it. It would therefore be reasonable to suppose that all this valuable material has ended up in the massive stone dump that we can now see 150 m to the north, adjacent to the cliff.

Suggestions

It is a great shame that before Dr. Zvi Ilan's observations could be investigated a lot of the surface evidence of the Roman camp, most likely that of Herod's army, had been cleaned-up and removed to the massive 'stone graveyard' beside the cliff.

However, it would be fair to assume that some evidence of this camp remains below the ground at this site, indicated perhaps by the rows of stones, broad and single file, that can be spotted at three locations between the numerous small stone heaps and lying in the same orientation – parallel to the road and about 20 m north of it, over a distance of approximately 250 m.

The previous existence of Herod's camp at this site would therefore not be hard to confirm:

1. By checking if the Israeli Antiquities Authority (IAA) have records of a "rescue survey" of this area prior to the construction of the new road. By asking if the chief archaeologist of National Parks made any observations on this area at the time the new road was built. By examining old photographs of the site, from the time before the construction of the new road, looking for additional surface structures in the area now occupied by the road. Aerial photos may be particularly revealing.
2. By examining Dr Zvi Ilan's old notes to see if he recorded his observations on this subject in greater detail.
3. By questioning the more elderly residents of the Moshav on the archaeological features of this area before the new road was built.
4. Above all, by conducting an archaeological investigation of the small number of subterranean structures that are still visible above the surface and by surveying the area of interest for ancient ceramics, coins and other subterranean structures.

The importance of locating the site of Herod's camp

Josephus was crystal clear when he wrote that Herod set up a camp for his army at Arbel (*Jewish War* 1:305; cf. *Antiquities* 14:415-416). For historians in the past, this was sufficient evidence to prove that Herod set up camp in or near the village of Arbel, and then to infer that he chose Arbel because the community living there supported him and his claim to the throne. He would certainly not have placed his camp near to a community of hostile Hasmonean supporters. In fact, from the way Josephus expresses Herod's motivation for this campaign, it is quite possible that the people of Arbel had actually requested his help in clearing the rebels from their neighbourhood: "he... then started on a campaign against the cave-dwelling brigands, who were infesting a wide area and inflicting on the inhabitants evils no less than those of war" (*Jewish War* 1:304).

However, in recent times the veracity of Josephus' reports has been disputed by some historians (e.g., Uriel Rappaport, 'How anti-Roman was the Galilee?' in *The Galilee in Late Antiquity*, ed. Lee I Levine, New York and Jerusalem: The Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 1992; pp. 100-101), challenging archaeologists to check the accuracy of these accounts against the material findings in the field. Archaeological confirmation, if found, also has a clarifying effect, allowing historians to reconstruct the described events in their precise geographical context, as well as giving the public the opportunity to memorialize those events in their original setting.

These worthy aims apply precisely to the situation with Herod's camp at Arbel. Up to the present day, its precise location has eluded archaeological confirmation. Two investigators in the 1980's (Tepper and Shahar) located it behind the fortifications on Mt. Nitai, and as a result they misidentified Horvat Veradim as Horvat Arbel. Following the reliable localization of Arbel on Mt. Arbel, we are now in a better position to identify the location of Herod's camp nearby. This is true even though the surface markings of the camp may have been removed in the making of the new road to the National Park, since confirmation can be achieved by relatively simple and inexpensive examination of its subterranean structures and materials.

Finally, if the results of this work reveal the architectonic structure of the camp wall, then it will be possible to compare it with the structure of the wall on Mt. Nitai (especially with stages W1 and/or W2) and perhaps shed light on the dating and origins of that enigmatic fortification. As a working hypothesis, we suggest that the original wall on Mt. Nitai (i.e. walls W1 and/or W2) was commissioned in 38 BCE by Herod, or by his general, when they realized that the campaign against the rebels was going to be a protracted affair requiring prolonged military presence on both sides of Nahal Arbel. However, they halted construction before it was completely finished, when they heard the Romans were sending a large force to bring the Hasmonean rebellion to an end (2 legions and 1000 cavalry). This would help to explain why no archaeological evidence of the presence of a camp has been found behind the fortification on Mt. Nitai.

John and Gloria Ben-Daniel,
Jerusalem, 14.02.2020.