JOSEPHUS THE STAGE MANAGER AT THE SERVICE OF
JOSEPHUS THE DRAMATIST: MASADA AS TEST CASE

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On dawn on Friday May 11th 1838, the American scholar Edward Robinson ascended the pass above Ein-Gedi. “My attention,” he wrote, “was particularly directed to the ruin called by the Arabs Sebbeh… situated towards the south upon a pyramidal cliff rising precipitously from the sea…. The truncated summit of the lofty isolated rock forms a small plain inaccessible; and this is occupied by the ruin. We had been greatly struck by its appearance; and on examining it closely with a telescope [from a distance of 17 km! Y.S], I could perceive what appeared to be a building on its northwestern part, and also traces of other buildings further east…. This spot was to us for the time a complete puzzle…But subsequent research leaves little room to doubt, that this was the site of the ancient and renowned fortress of Masada”.1 After summarizing Josephus’ account, Robinson concluded: “This description of Josephus corresponds very exactly with the character of Sebbeh as seen from a distance; and there is little doubt that future travelers, who may visit the site, will find other and more traces of its ancient strength. The building now visible on the northwest, and the columns described by the Arabs, are not improbably the remains of Herod’s palace”.2

From now on Herod’s palace would serve as the litmus paper for the credibility of Josephus’ topographical descriptions of Masada.3 De Saulcy transferred the palace to the western side of the central fortress, identifying it with the Byzantine church.4 But the French scholar Emmanuel Guillaume Rey once again located it, as had Robinson, in

1 Robinson 1841, 525.
2 Ibid. 526. In note 6 Robinson credits his companion Eli Smith, who was the first to identify Masada with Sebbeh.
3 For the intricate and fascinating history of research on Masada, see the convenient survey of Yadin 1966, 238–55. Each of the early researchers described the research history of Masada up to his own time; the most detailed one is Schulten 1933, 30–52.
4 De Saulcy 1853, 130; he visited Masada on 11.1.1851. Sepp 1863, 671–77 followed this identification.
the north and even strengthened this identification when, on 24 January 1858, he found the remains of a mosaic floor on the upper terrace of what is known today as the Northern Palace. Tuch did not visit Masada, but his thorough analysis of Josephus’ descriptions together with reports of modern field work led him to locate the palace in the north, although he identified it wrongly with the block of storehouses. However, when Conder mapped the fortress, he noticed the other palace in the west, and assumed (“probably”) that this was Herods’ palace. Schulten, surveying Masada in March 1932, fixed the view that Herod’s palace was in the west and not in the north.

Where did Josephus locate the palace?

Schulten’s conclusion seemed natural following Thackeray’s 1927 Loeb translation of Josephus, which became the standard translation. This implied that the palace was built on the western slope. Let us examine this passage more closely. καὶ βασίλειον δὲ κατεσκεύασεν ἐν αὐτῷ κατὰ τὴν ἀπὸ τῆς ἑσπέρας ἀνάβασιν, ὑποκάτω µὲν τῶν τῆς ἄκρας τειχῶν, πρὸς δὲ τὴν ἀρκτὸν ἐκκλίνον (War 7.8.3 [289]). Thackeray translates this (LCL): “There, too, he built a palace on the western slope, beneath the ramparts on the crest and inclining toward the north.”

There are two problems here: ‘slope’ and ‘western.’ First, it is important to note that Josephus uses the noun anabasis only three times, all of them with the meaning of ascent (and not slope).