

## Research article

# Revisiting King Herod's Harbour of Sebastos: A Historical Narrative by Titus Flavius Josephus

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## Abstract

Titus Flavius Josephus (37–100) was a Roman historian of Jewish origin who provided valuable information about his times and the periods that preceded them in his works. Although he tried to persuade the Jews to surrender Jerusalem to the Romans and subsequently became a Roman citizen because of his close relations with the Romans, his works are one of the few sources that can be consulted other than religious books. They are especially important for understanding the period of King Herod (73–4 BC), who is known as the builder king for the projects he implemented. One of his greatest achievements was the temple situated in Jerusalem, commonly referred to as the Second Temple. The Harbour of Sebastos, which is the subject of your article, is located in Caesarea Maritima, a seaside city dating back to the Phoenician era founded by Herod. The Harbour of Sebastos is one of Herod's most major undertakings in Caesarea Maritima. This article aims to compile and assess the data gathered from field research in accordance with Titus Flavius Josephus' accounts of the Harbour. The goal is to determine whether the information Josephus reported is consistent with the data available today. In this way, it is thought that the Harbour of Sebastos, one of the most important ancient ports of the Middle Ages, will be better understood.

**Keywords:** Flavius Josephus, King Herod, Caesarea Maritima, Harbour of Sebastos, Roman period.



## 1. Introduction

Caesarea Maritima has been an important ancient harbour city throughout history. This process, which started with the Phoenicians, experienced its brightest period with King Herod's revival of the region. While it was a Jewish village under the Hasmonean rule in the 1st century BC, it became an autonomous city when the Roman Empire took over the region in 63 BC. Later, during the Roman period, it was King Herod, who built a new harbour and dedicated the city and its harbour

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to Caesar Augustus under the name Caesarea. Herod expanded the city and created a Roman city. So much so, that Caesarea replaced Jerusalem as the civil and military capital in AD 6 and became the official residence of Roman governors such as Antonius Felix and Pontius Pilate (Gelir Çelebi, 2023: 137; URL 5). The Harbour of Sebastos, built by Herod, turned the city into one of the most important harbour cities of the Middle Ages (Bull, 1982). The most advanced facilities of the period were used in the construction of this city and the Harbour of Sebastos. Flavius Josephus, the important source who enlightens us about this period, is also important for understanding this harbour city. Again, at this point, it is necessary to know both Flavius Josephus and King Herod to have information about the atmosphere of the period.

## **2. Titus Flavius Josephus**

Titus Flavius Josephus, or Yosef Ben Matityahu (37 AD-100 AD), was born in Jerusalem into a distinguished family of the Jewish clergy. Since Flavius Josephus lived and witnessed a very important period in terms of Christianity and Judaism, the works he wrote were the most important sources of information about this period (Gilb, 2021). Josephus, in Jerusalem, where he was an aristocrat, went to Rome in 64 AD to meet with the Roman Emperor Nero (54-68 AD) to release the priests who were taken hostage for some reasons (Denova, 2023). During this visit, Josephus was impressed by Rome's development, culture, and military power. When he returned to Jerusalem in 66 AD a rebellion against Roman rule was about to take place. The Zealots deposed the Roman procurator and established a government in Jerusalem. Although Josephus, like many members of the clergy, recommended a compromise, he was reluctantly drawn into rebellion and appointed military commander of Galilee (Poole, 2023).

Josephus was taken prisoner during the war against Rome and was detained in the Roman camp for two years. Meanwhile, he told the army commander, Vespasian, that he would soon become emperor, and as a result of this prophecy coming true, the new emperor ended his detention. Josephus, who entered the Roman service after this incident, took Vespasian's surname, Flavius. Later, Josephus participated in the siege of Jerusalem by the Roman army under the command of Titus, the son of Vespasian, and attempted mediation (Çoban, 2008: 58). During the siege of Jerusalem, Josephus told the Zealots, who captured the Holy Temple complex and the city, to surrender. Yet, in 70 AD the Roman army captured Jerusalem and destroyed the Temple complex and a significant part of the city. Josephus claimed that after this incident, Titus did not want to destroy the Temple, but that this happened as a result of a fire accidentally started by one of the soldiers (Denova, 2023).

Josephus returned to Rome with Titus in 71 AD. He was given Roman citizenship. He wrote his historical works with the support of Flavian<sup>1</sup>. In addition, Josephus was granted a pension, a captive Jewish wife, and a place to live in Judea (Gilb, 2021).

### **2.1 King Herod**

King Herod, also known as Herod the Great, lived between 73 and 4 BC. His father, Antipater, was an Edomite. Antipater amassed a great fortune, increasing both his influence and wealth by marrying the daughter of a noble family from Petra (modern-day southwestern Jordan), the capital of the

Arab Nabataean kingdom. For this reason, Herod is a Jew of Arab origin (Prowne, 2023). His father and his good relations with powerful Romans such as Pompey, Julius Caesar, Mark Antony (Mark Antony), and Augustus enabled him to become prime minister of Judea in 47 BC. As a result of these relations, his son Herod was appointed governor of Galilee. Herod made friends and allies among the Romans, and Mark Antony describes Herod and his older brother, Phasael, in the Roman Empire. He appointed him Roman tetrarch<sup>2</sup> to support Hyrcanus (Dhar, 2022). When the Parthians captured Jerusalem in 40 BC, Herod's brother was captured and committed suicide a short time later. Because of this incident, Herod had to flee to Rome. While he was in Rome, Herod won the support of Octavian and Marcus Antonius and was appointed king of Judea. With the help of the Roman general Gaius Sosius, he recaptured Jerusalem in 37 BC. In this way, he became the king of Judea (the land of the Jews) and had a long reign of 33 years (Cartwright, 2016).

The construction projects undertaken by King Herod are the most significant issue when examining King Herod's studies. The most important of these construction projects is the building he rebuilt in Jerusalem, called the Second Temple. Reasons such as his efforts to gain the favour of his Jewish subjects and his devotion to the Jewish faith are put forward as the most important factors in Herod's rebuilding of the temple. In addition, the fact that he built temples dedicated to Rome and Augustus, in other words, implemented non-Jewish construction projects, due to his position with the support of Rome and the good relations he established, is also a reflection of his commitment to Hellenism (and even paganism) (Holzapfel, 1996:62).

The historian Flavius Josephus did not live during the reign of King Herod. However, it is the most important source providing information about the period of King Herod. Because the number of sources from which information can be obtained for the Herod period is limited, the only sources other than Josephus' books about the period of King Herod are the synoptic gospels<sup>3</sup> and the books of the apostles (Bopp, 1940:2).

Flavius Josephus has four written works. His first work was *Bellum Judaicum* (*History of the Jewish War*). The work was written in seven books between 75 and 79 ADs towards the end of Vespasian's reign. The original Aramaic book has been lost, but the surviving Greek version of the book was prepared under the direction of Josephus. After summarizing Jewish history starting from the mid-2nd century BC, the work offers a detailed account of the great rebellion that took place in 66–70 AD (Poole, 2023).

Josephus' second work, *Antiquitates Iudaeorum* (*Antiquities of the Jews*), was written in about ten years and consists of twenty books (Demir & Özer, 2020: 246). These works are important in that they provide detailed information about the kingdoms of the Roman Empire, especially Herod the Great and the Herodian Dynasty. There was a court historian named Nicholas of Damascus who conveyed important information about the reign of Herod the Great. His work has not survived, but it can be said that it has survived because Josephus used it for many details. In this way, we have more information about Herod the Great (Denova, 2023).

The third work, *Vita* (*Life*), consists of a single book. In his work *Vita*, Josephus goes beyond his autobiography and explains his moral characteristics. In a significant part of his work, it is seen that he responds to the accusations made against him about his activities and his war career during the rebellion against Rome twenty years after the Jewish rebellion (Demir & Özer, 2020: 246).

The fourth work, *Contra Apionem*, consists of two books. While the first of these two books responds to various anti-Semitic accusations levelled against the Jews by Hellenistic writers, the second tries to prove the moral superiority of Judaism over Hellenism. This work is interpreted as Josephus' devotion to his religion and culture (Poole, 2023).

Josephus, who mentions many architectural projects commissioned by Herod the Great in his work, also mentions the city called Caesarea Maritima and the structures that Herod built in this city. In the next part of the article, the city of Caesarea Maritima will be mentioned through the eyes of Josephus.

## 2.2 Caesarea Maritima

Caesarea, known in Hebrew as H<sub>o</sub>rbat Qesari (Ruins of Caesarea), is an ancient harbour city located south of Haifa, on the Mediterranean coast of modern-day Israel. It is generally referred to as Caesarea Palestine or Caesarea Maritima to avoid confusion with Caesarea Philippi (located near the source of the Jordan River) (Gelir Çelebi, 2023: 136). Caesarea Maritima, first known as Straton or Strato Tower, is an ancient city in ruins today, located in the Sharon Plain on the Mediterranean coast. The ruins of the ancient city, located approximately 2 kilometres south of modern Caesarea, were unearthed as a result of excavations in the 1950s and 1960s, and the area was included in the new Caesarea National Park in 2011 (URL 1).

While describing the city, Flavius Josephus states that it was close to the sea, very suitable for shelter, and was previously called Strato's Tower. He relates that when Herod saw this place, he started to make plans to establish a magnificent city there and built many buildings of white stone with great care everywhere, as well as very magnificent palaces and large structures to accommodate the people (Josephus, AJ . 15-9<sup>4</sup>). Josephus also mentions the advantages of its location. He states that Caesarea is located between Dora and Jaffa, that there is nothing else on the coastline between these two places, and that the sea is quite shallow. He states that everyone going from Phoenicia to Egypt had to stay in the stormy sea because of the south winds that threatened them and that if this wind blew a little hard, big wave would rise and hit the rocks, and even when the waves receded, the sea remained in turmoil for a long time. From this information (Josephus, BJ. 1-21<sup>5</sup>). We understand that there is a need for a safe harbour in the region, and Caesarea is a suitable place for this purpose.



Figure 1: Caesarea Maritima Today (Source: Bergin, 2018)

Herod, the real founder of the city of Caesarea, named the city he founded Caesarea after Emperor Caesar Augustus. Josephus, who talks about King Herod's construction activities in detail, shows the harbour he built as the most successful of his projects (Gelir Çelebi, 2023: 137).

### 3. Harbour of Sebastos (22 BC–10/9 BC)

King Herod named this harbour, which he had built, Sebastos, after King Augustus, just like the name of the city. Because Sebastos is the Greek equivalent of the name Augustus. Caesarea's natural shape, which creates a cavity on the shore, was formed by a strong current carrying sand from south to north. In other words, the Harbour Sebastos was built on a moving sand beach (Hohfelder et al., 2007: 409).

According to Josephus' statement, the Harbour of Sebastos was larger than the Pyreum in Athens. There were also other stations for ships within this harbour (shelter). Although the place where Herod built the harbour was greatly contrary to his aims, he was able to cope with this challenge very well. Its structure is solid and cannot be easily conquered by the sea. He also mentioned how the harbour was built. He describes the stones, whose dimensions were fifty feet long, nine feet deep, and ten feet wide, and some even larger, were lowered into the water at a depth of twenty fathoms (Josephus, BJ. 1-21).

In his book *Antiquities of the Jews*, Josephus states that the harbour built by Herod was circular, had two breakwaters two hundred feet wide, and half of it was built against the current of the waves to keep the waves that would hit them away (this was called *procymatia*, or wave). At the same time, he mentioned the existence of a wall that was the first to break the waves and had several towers on the other half (the largest tower being Drusus). This tower was named after Cesar's son-in-law, Drusus, who died at a young age. The entrance or mouth of the harbour was built in the north direction (Josephus, AJ. 15–9).



Figure 2: Harbor of Sebastos (URL 2)

Archaeological excavations have revealed that the harbour had two large breakwaters projecting into the sea (Fig. 3). The breakwater on the south side of the harbour, had two arms (breakwaters)

extending from the shore in the north-south direction and a circular form, first extended to the west and then its tip curved towards the north. The northern breakwater, which was shorter and smaller than the southern one, extended straight towards the west for approximately 20-30 meters. For this reason, the entrance of the harbour was in the north direction (Fig. 3) (Hohfelder et al., 2007: 134).

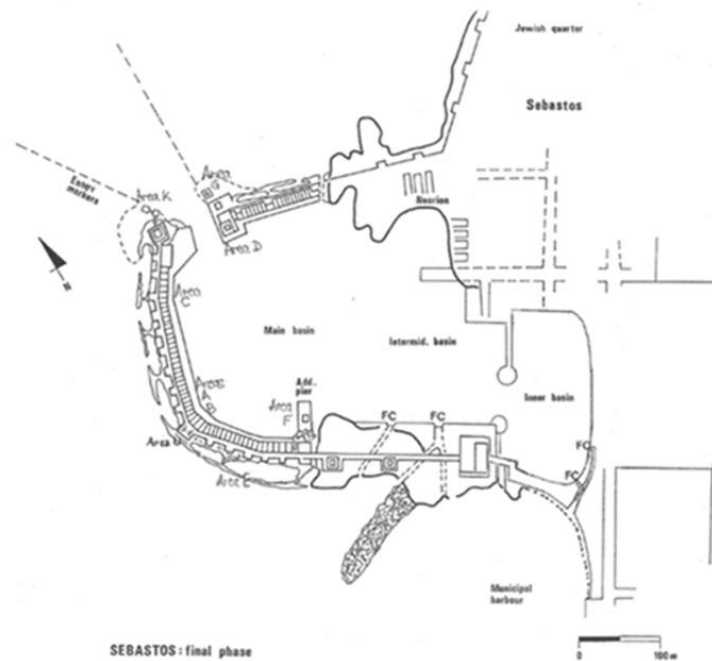


Figure 5.69. A suggested sketch plan of Sebastos at its final phase of construction (A. Ruban, Caesarea Project)

**Figure 1: Hypothetical plan of the Harbor of Sebastos (URL 3)**

The Harbour of Sebastos was built using the most advanced facilities of the period. Hydraulic cement was used in the construction of the building. The ancient Greeks discovered this substance for the first time with a mixture of lime (slaked) and volcanic ash and managed to create a new compound. The resulting compound is more durable than lime cement and can harden quickly. These properties of the material, as well as its ability to remain underwater, made it a crucial component in Roman structures (Bergin, 2018: 383).

The Harbour was built partly in the southern harbour of Straton, the ancient Phoenician harbour. In other words, Straton was used as an inner basin for Sebastos Harbour. As a result of archaeological research carried out in this inner harbour, some structures, breakwaters, and piers made of cut stone were found from the Hellenistic period. The biggest job to build this structure is to build the outer basin. Because this basin needs to be built entirely in the sea and from scratch. To protect the basin against waves and sediment drift along the shore, the southern breakwater must be constructed first. The study was carried out from two artificial islands. One is in the middle of the future breakwater, and the other is at the end. Both islands are built from several wooden caissons filled with concrete (URL 4).

The south breakwater begins at a natural cape, goes first 200 m west, then 300 m northwest, and finally turns east to create an entrance to the harbour. As a result of the excavations, it is thought that a building measuring 15x40 m located on the inner side of the breakwater may be the remains of one of the towers. Additionally, existing ruins show that the harbour consisted of three parts (a large outer harbour and two small inner harbours). The large piles of cut stones, reaching 5 meters high, found at the end of the breakwater are thought to be the ruins of the lighthouse standing at the entrance (Roller, 1998: 136-137).

While King Herod was building the city of Caesarea Maritima, he designed the city according to the Hippodamos (grid/chessboard) plan and equipped it with insulas, as in many other Roman colonies. He built a temple dedicated to Rome and Augustus. This temple, which connects the harbour and the city, formed the focal point of the city.

### **3.1 Destruction of the Harbour of Sebastos**

A large part of the Harbour of Sebastos, which has not survived to the present day, is underwater (Fig. 1). To date, many opinions have been put forward as to why the harbour of Sebastos was destroyed. One of them is that the harbour was doomed to disappear from the very beginning due to the geological structure of the seabed. It was believed that the pier foundations might be eroded by waves and currents, resulting in their sinking into sand-soft mud. Research has refuted the theory that the majority of the seabed in the region (particularly in the vicinity of the western breakwater and the harbour's centre) is actually sandstone. Deposits examined by the Institute of Marine Research off the coast of Caesarea indicate that tsunamis occurred there. Researchers from the Italian Institute of Earthquake and Volcanic Research have also found evidence that such an event occurred off the coast of Caesarea on December 13, 115 AD (Sharvit, 2017). While earthquake damage is not excluded as a contributing factor to the destruction of the harbour of Caesarea, the tsunami of AD 115 is also thought to be a contributing cause to the premature destruction. Historical sources provide information that many devastating tsunamis occurred in the Eastern Mediterranean (Reinhardt et al., 2006: 1064). Again, as a result of the research, evidence was found that similar events took place in the years 115, 306, 551, and 749 (Sharvit, 2017).

## **4. Conclusion**

Josephus Flavius witnessed crucial events during his lifetime. The information he gives about the period in which he lived is important because it is a first-hand source. At this point, it is also valuable that his works have survived to the present day. Apart from the information he gives about Josephus's period, his description of the Jews' previous periods also makes his work precious. Between these periods, the information he provides about the Period of King/Herod the Great, one of the most important figures in Jewish history, is also of historical significance. Because the number of sources other than the Bible that can be consulted about this period is insufficient. King Herod is a character who accomplished very important things during his 33-year-long reign. Perhaps the most important of these works is the construction activities that caused it to be called the builder king. Josephus Flavius, who provides valuable information about whether King Herod's

works have survived or not, is even more important at this point. Undoubtedly, the fact that Josephus Flavius was a Roman citizen, that Rome paid him a salary, and that he wrote his work under Flavian support may raise questions about how impartial an approach he could take as a historian. However, it is especially important as it is the only source we can find about the Herod period within the scope of the subject. Again, regarding the Herod period, it is also an important point that Josephus quotes the palace historian of the period, Nicolas of Damascus, while describing this period (here, it is questionable how objective Nicolas was since he was also a palace historian). It is also necessary to confirm how exaggerated or realistic the information and style used by Josephus Flavius when describing the structures built by Herod are. For this purpose, it is necessary to read the historian Josephus together with the data obtained in line with the archaeological studies. In this regard, it can be seen that the information and descriptions Josephus gave about the Harbour of Sebastos in Caesarea Maritima, which he considered the most important architectural project of King Herod, are largely correct. When compared with archaeological data, it is understood that it describes the harbour with extremely accurate, although slightly exaggerated, findings.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> After the death of Emperor Nero, the Julio Claudian dynasty came to an end and the throne passed to the Flavius dynasty. This dynasty consists of the father Vespasian until 79, his elder son Titus between 79-81, and his younger son Domitianus between 81-96. (Kırmızıyaprak, G. A. (2023). Prof. Dr. Recep Özman, Augustus' tan Domitianus'a Roma'da İmparator-Senatus ilişkisi, Sonçağ Yayınları, Ankara, 2022, 139 s., 6 Resim, ISBN 978-625-8379-36-5.: Augustus' tan Domitianus'a Roma'da İmparator-Senatus ilişkisi. *International Journal of Educational and Social Sciences*, 2(1)).

<sup>2</sup> Tetrarchy is a government system that was created in ancient Rome by Diocletian, who thought that two rulers were not enough to protect the empire, so he increased the number of rulers and adopted the quadruple government. As the only person holding power, Diocletian shared administrative duties with his co-augustus and two assistant caesars. When Augustus' term ended, the Caesars would become Augustus and elect a Caesar for themselves. (Ünver, T. (2023). İmparator Diocletianus'un Politik İradesi. *Sinop Üniversitesi Sosyal Bilimler Dergisi*, 7(1), 49-85.)

<sup>3</sup> Although there are many Bibles in the Christian faith, only four of them are respected. These Gospels are considered to have been written by Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. These four Gospels are called the Canonical Gospels. The first three of these Gospels are defined as Synoptic Gospels due to their similarities to each other (except John). (Harman, Ö. F. (2000). *İncil. Türkiye Diyanet Vakfı İslâm Ansiklopedisi*, 22, 270-276).

<sup>4</sup> Josephus's *Antiquities of the Jews* is abbreviated as AJ.

<sup>5</sup> Josephus's *Bellum Judaicum* is abbreviated as BJ.

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(URL 2) <https://www.romanports.org/en/articles/ports-in-focus/542-a-jewish-port-for-the-emperor.html>

(URL 3) <https://www.ancientportsantiques.com/a-few-ports/caesarea-maritima/>

(URL 4) <https://www.romanports.org/en/articles/ports-in-focus/542-a-jewish-port-for-the-emperor.html>

(URL 5) <https://academic-accelerator.com/encyclopedia/caesarea-maritima>

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