

TRACES OF CONFLICT: AN ARCHAEOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE ON THE HASMONEAN–HERODIAN TRANSITION (63–37 BCE)

Dvir Raviv

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0002-1779>

Bar-Ilan University

Abstract

The transition from Hasmonean rule to Herod’s regime sparked significant unrest among the Jewish population of Judea. Over the course of these two and a half decades, five distinct conflicts occurred between Aristobulus II and his sons on one side, and Hyrcanus II and the House of Antipater on the other. Although these events are thoroughly recounted by Josephus, relatively few archaeological finds have been linked to the conflicts of this period. This study surveys the available material evidence and evaluates its historical implications. The core dataset includes numismatic finds (hoards, Antigonus and early Herodian coinage), hiding complexes, and refuge caves. Two additional, though less conclusive, categories—siege systems around Hasmonean fortresses and indications of site abandonment—are also examined. The distribution and context of these finds not only lend support to Josephus’s account but also potentially indicating that resistance to the rise of the Antipatrid regime may have been more widespread than is reflected in his pro-Herodian narrative.

Keywords: Mattathias Antigonus, Herod the Great, hiding complexes, refuge caves, Antigonus coins, Herodian coinage, House of Antipater, Herod-Antigonus War.

Introduction

The period between 63 and 37 BCE marked a pivotal transition in Judean history—from Hasmonean sovereignty to the rise of Herodian rule. This shift, which replaced the independent Jewish judicial system with indirect Roman administration, was accompanied by repressive measures, including the execution of “rebels” and the imposition of heavy

taxation. These policies fomented widespread unrest among the Jewish population of the former Hasmonean kingdom. Over the course of these two and a half decades, five major conflicts occurred between Aristobulus II and his sons in opposition to Hyrcanus II, the House of Antipater, and the Roman forces.¹

The first conflict occurred during Pompey's invasion of Judea in 63 BCE, beginning with the capture of desert fortresses and culminating in the conquest of Jerusalem.² The following three revolts took place under the governorship of Aulus Gabinius (57–55 BCE), and were led by Aristobulus II and his eldest son, Alexander. The first two of these rebellions centered on the Judean desert fortresses, particularly Alexandrium and Machaerus.³ The third uprising occurred in the area surrounding Mount Tabor in the Lower Galilee,⁴ and, according to Josephus, also extended to Mount Gerizim in Samaria.⁵ These Hasmonean efforts to regain control ultimately failed: Aristobulus was poisoned, and Alexander was captured and executed in Antioch around 49 BCE.

The fifth and most significant conflict was led by Aristobulus II's youngest son, Mattathias Antigonus. After a failed incursion from the north, defeated by Herod's forces upon entry into Judea,⁶ Antigonus seized a real opportunity during the Parthian invasion of Syria in 40 BCE. For over three years (40–37 BCE), Judea became a battleground between two empires: the Parthians, backing Antigonus, and the Romans, supporting Herod. Unlike earlier, more localized uprisings, Josephus' detailed accounts describe a widespread and sustained military campaign across much of the country. This prolonged war concluded in 37 BCE with the Roman siege and conquest of Jerusalem by Herod and the forces of Gaius Sosius, the Roman governor of Syria, and the execution of Antigonus at Antioch.⁷ A powerful testament to the scale and intensity of resistance against Herod and the Romans is the size of the Roman force deployed in the summer of 37 BCE—reportedly about fifty thousand soldiers (!).⁸ Further indications of continued resistance include the deployment of a Roman legion to Herod,⁹ and the entrenchment of Antigonus' sister in the fortress of Hyrcania.¹⁰ These suggest that pro-Hasmonean opposition persisted even after the fall of Jerusalem, well into Herod's reign.

The main source of information about the events surrounding the fall of the Hasmonean dynasty is the account of Josephus. However, this account is widely regarded

¹ * The main concepts from this article were first presented in the 12th Congress of the EAJS in 2023, Frankfurt, Germany. I am grateful to Prof. Edward Dąbrowa for encouraging me to develop this study further and for generously sharing with me a draft of his important article on the historical aspects of the subject.

See, e.g., Stern 1995, 203–274; Rappaport 2013, 412–430; Sharon 2017. On Josephus's portrayal of these events in a negative light—as Jewish rebellions rather than legitimate struggles for the throne of Judea rebellion theme in Josephus's writings, see van Henten 2011; van Henten 2020, 99–100.

² Josephus, *BJ* 1.134–154; *AJ* 14.49–74.

³ Josephus, *BJ* 1.160–168, 171–174; *AJ* 14.82–90, 92–97.

⁴ Josephus, *BJ* 1.177; *AJ* 14.102.

⁵ Josephus, *AJ* 14.100.

⁶ Josephus, *BJ* 1.240; *AJ* 14.299.

⁷ For these events and the assessment of the sources, see Stern 1995, 256–274; see also Ilan – Noam 2017, 373–408; Dąbrowa 2026.

⁸ Josephus, *BJ* 1.345–346; *AJ* 14.468–469.

⁹ Josephus, *AJ* 15.72–73.

¹⁰ Josephus, *BJ* 1.364.

as biased. This tendency is commonly understood to stem from Josephus's reliance on earlier works, most notably the *Histories* of Nicolaus of Damascus and the *Historical Memoirs* of Strabo of Amaseia. Both authors, particularly Nicolaus, who was a close confidant of Herod, had little interest in presenting the final Hasmonean rulers in a favorable light, given their opposition to Herod and eventual defeat. As a result, Josephus's depiction of the transition of power in Judea is broadly seen as reflecting a pro-Herodian perspective, including a downplaying of the strength and extent of Jewish resistance to Herod.¹¹

An important yet not explored evidence for understanding this transitional period is the archaeological record. Until now, scholarly engagement with the archaeology of the late Hasmonean period has tended to focus on individual sites or specific categories of finds, while a broader synthesis has remained lacking. This study seeks to address that gap by examining the updated archaeological evidence associated with the Hasmonean resistance against the House of Antipater, Herod, and the Roman forces. The discussion focuses on three primary categories of material evidence: numismatics, hiding complexes, and refuge caves. It also considers additional, though less definitive, findings such as siege systems around Hasmonean fortresses and signs of site abandonment. Taken together, these materials are evaluated for their historical significance and their potential to offer an independent—albeit partial—basis for reassessing Josephus's narrative. In this way, the archaeological evidence functions not merely as a supplementary source, but as a critical tool for identifying and addressing potential distortions in the literary sources.

Numismatic evidence

The numismatic evidence from this period consists primarily of coins issued by Antigonos, several coin hoards attributed to either Alexander Jannaeus or Antigonos, and possibly also early Herodian coinage.¹² While the coins of Antigonos and early Herodian coinage can be dated precisely to the years 40–37 BCE, the phenomenon of hoarding spans the entire period from 63 to 37 BCE. However, as will be discussed below, the precise dates of hoard deposition often remain uncertain.

Antigonos coinage: Distribution and context

The coins minted by the last Hasmonean king Mattathias Antigonos in Jerusalem between 40 and 37 BCE constitute a unique category within Jewish numismatics. Unlike the other Hasmonean coins, those of Antigonos were struck on planchets produced in a two-sided

¹¹ See, e.g., Shatzman 1992, 34–42; Stern 1995, 203–274; Rappaport 2013, 412–423; van Henten 2020, 91–100; Dąbrowa 2026.

¹² To the numismatic evidence from Judea itself, we can add coins minted in Zacynthus (Eastern Greece) that commemorate the conquest of Jerusalem in 37 BCE (see Hendin 2021, 369–370 and bibliography there). These coins, which can be seen as a prototype of the well-known *Judea Capta* series, were likely struck in 36 BCE by Gaius Sosius, the Roman general and governor of Syria, under Mark Antony.

mold, which resulted in thick and impressive coins.¹³ Their large denominations and unique symbols reflect a propaganda struggle between Antigonos and Herod.¹⁴ Antigonos minted diverse coins, including a well-known series of three denominations (by the order of the Seleucid ones):¹⁵ large, medium, and small. First, the geographical distribution of the coins will be examined, followed by a discussion of additional numismatic evidence that may shed light on Josephus's bias.

The distribution of Antigonos's coins likely reflects the actual geographical extent of the territory under his control during the course of his reign. This interpretation rests on the assumption that after Herod's victory the purchasing power of these coins, particularly the larger denominations, diminished, in a manner comparable to that of later Jewish rebel coinages. However, the continued acceptance of earlier Hasmonean coinage during Herod's reign (see below note 48) suggests that Antigonos' coins—particularly the smaller denominations—remained in limited circulation, especially among the rural population of Judea during the late Second Temple period. In contrast, the larger coins—bearing stronger political and symbolic ties to the Hasmonean regime—were more likely to have been actively suppressed by the Herodian authorities. The distribution of Antigonos coins and their comparison to Josephus' descriptions was first undertaken by Donald T. Ariel in the late 1990s¹⁶ and updated by Ofer Sion and Ariel in the early 2000s.¹⁷ Since then, several archaeological reports have published additional coin finds; however, these studies have focused primarily on individual sites or regions rather than the overall geographical distribution.¹⁸

Based on the small numbers to the north, west, and south of Jerusalem, in contrast to the plentiful finds in Jerusalem itself and to the east of the city, it was previously suggested by Bijovsky¹⁹ that the coins of Antigonos mainly circulated in the Judean Desert. However, as Farhi and Melamed noted,²⁰ the discovery of hoard at Neshet-Ramla Site, as well as isolated finds from eleven sites west, north, and south of Jerusalem, it seems that these coins also circulated in those regions and probably all over Judea at least until Herod's victory over Antigonos in 37 BCE.

A comprehensive and up-to-date review of archaeological reports from across Israel, recently conducted by the author and Yanniv D. Levy (Raviv – Levy 2025), supports the general conclusion reached by Farhi and Melamed. The updated corpus of Antigonos coins now comprises 222 specimens from 53 sites (**Tab. 1; Fig. 1**), including 18 distinct locations within or immediately surrounding the Old City of Jerusalem (counted

¹³ See Goldstein – Fontanille 2013: 56–57.

¹⁴ Ariel 1998, 132–135; TJC, 50–57; Bijovsky 2004b; Raviv – Levy 2025. Herod's coins from this same period likewise stand out for their exceptional craftsmanship and size (Ariel – Fontanille 2012). The military and political rivalry between Herod and Antigonos, during which both sought to secure public support, thus extended into the sphere of numismatic propaganda, with each side striving to issue coinage that was not only visually impressive but also ideologically persuasive.

¹⁵ Kindler 1967, 187–188.

¹⁶ Ariel 1998, 132–133.

¹⁷ Sion – Ariel 2001, 115.

¹⁸ For key studies, see Bijovsky 2004b; Farhi – Melamed 2014, 110–113; Ariel 2017; for further bibliography, see notes 20 and 24 below.

¹⁹ Bijovsky 2004b, 76.

²⁰ Farhi – Melamed 2014, 113.

as a single site among the 54) (**Tab. 2**). This total includes 69 additional coins recovered from 21 sites not discussed in previous studies.

Tab. 1. Sites where Antigonus coins were discovered in Judea (arranged from north to south)

No.	Site	No.	Site
1	Gamla	28	Jerusalem, Shikunei Nesiba (Beit Hanina)
2	Yodfat	29	Jerusalem, Kh. er-Ras (Shu'afat)
3	Kh. el-'Aleq	30	Jerusalem, Binianeï Hauma north
4	Scythopolis	31	Ancient Jerusalem (Table 2)
5	Samaria-Sebaste	32	Tel Beit Shemesh
6	Kafr Bara	33	Nahal Yish'i Site
7	Elqana Cave	34	Qumran
8	Tel Aphek-Antipatris	35	Ramat Rahel
9	Yaffo	36	Kh. Beit Arza
10	Kh. el-Burnat	37	Nahal Zanoah Site
11	Tel Tibna	38	Kh. el-Luza
12	Shoham Bypass Site	39	Beit Jimal East
13	Kh. Badd 'Isa	40	Hyrkania
14	Kh. Zakharia (Modi'in)	41	'Ein Feshkha
15	Yavneh-Yam	42	Tel Azekah
16	Kh. Kafr Ruth	43	Kh. Qeiyafa
17	Kh. el-Maqtar	44	Kh. Beit Nattif East
18	Nesher-Ramla Quarry	45	Kh. Beit Badd
19	Kh. Ashun	46	Tel Sokho
20	H. Bet Anaba	47	Kh. Beit Zakariyya
21	Kh. Fa'uhs	48	Tel Ascalon
22	Wadi el-Makuk, the cave of warrior (hoard)	49	H. 'Itri
23	Jabel Quruntul (caves IV-8, IV-11, IV-12)	50	Wadi Murabba'at, Cave 2
24	Tulul el-Aleiq, Jericho (hoard)	51	Tel Keshet
25	Kh. el-'Aqed	52	En Gedi
26	Nahal Zimri Site	53	Masada
27	Tel Esbus (Hesbon)		

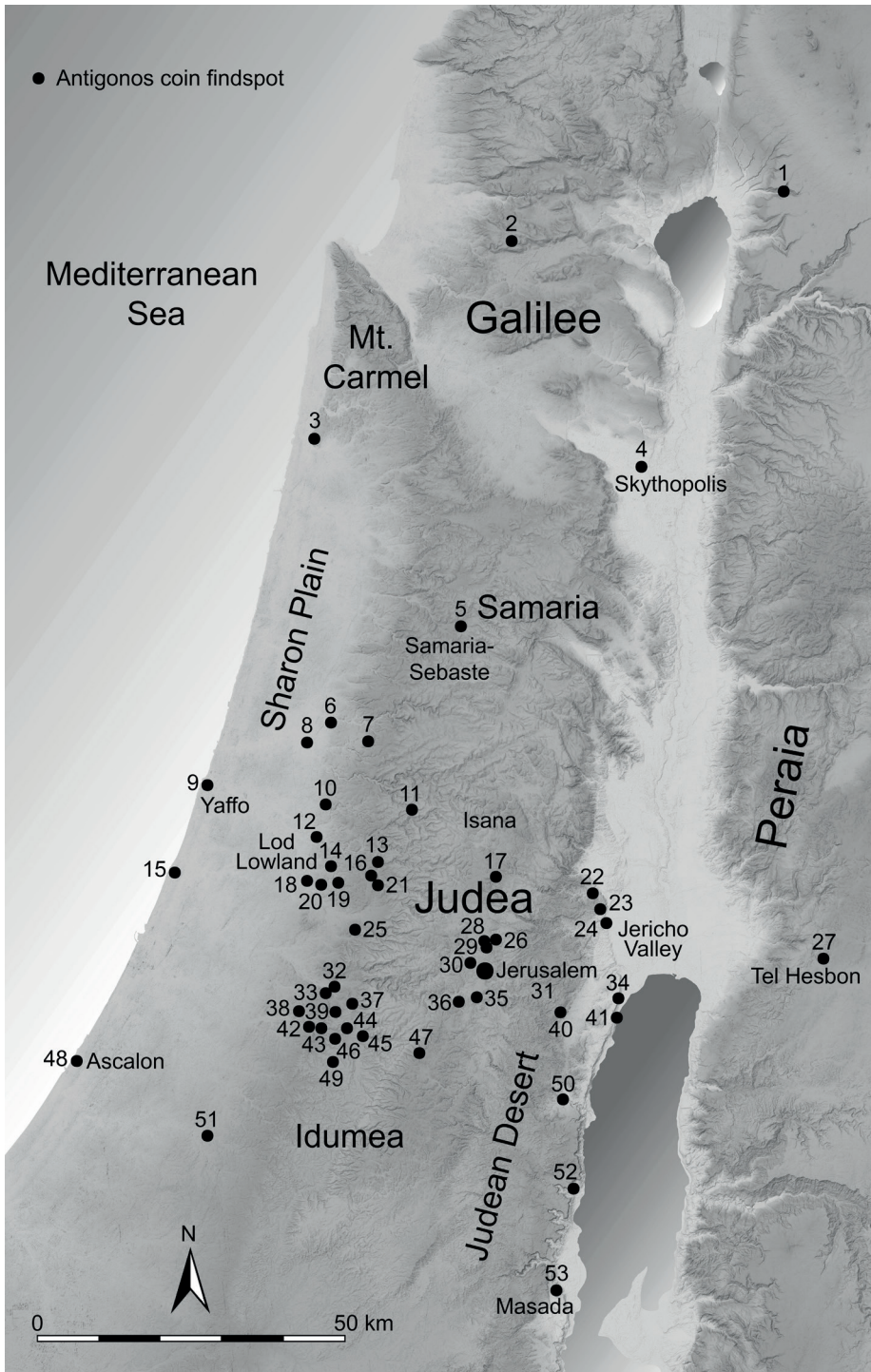


Fig. 1. The distribution of sites with Antigonos coins found in Judea (the numbers on the map reference the sites on the accompanied table) (drawing: D. Raviv)

Tab. 2. Sites where Antigonus coins were discovered within or immediately surrounding the Old City of Jerusalem

1	Nebi Akasha (Monbaz st.)	10	Jewish Quarter, Areas T
2	Migrash Harusim	11	City of David, Stepped Street
3	Temple Mount and Emeq Zurim	12	Old City, Cardo (X-4)
4	Old City, Northern Wall (Areas W and X2)	13	City of David, Givati Parking
5	City of David, Robinson's Arch	14	City of David, Tourist Center
6	Old City, Fortress	15	Old City, Nea Church
7	Jewish Quarter, Elevator Shaft Site	16	Old City, Hagan Haarmeni
8	Old City, Herodian House (Area P2)	17	City of David (Shiloah St.)
9	Old City, Southern and Western Wall Corner	18	Mt. Zion

The current distribution includes areas that were previously unrepresented or sparsely represented—the plateau north and south of Jerusalem, the southern coastal plain, the plain of Sharon, the Golan, and the Perea (Jewish Transjordan). In fact, for the first time, it can be suggested that these coins circulated widely throughout the Southern Levant, with a primary concentration in Judea itself. Evaluating the distribution of Antigonus' coins as a tool for reconstructing the extent of support for the last Hasmonean king requires careful consideration of the archaeological contexts in which these coins were found. While the presence of Antigonus's coins may suggest support for his cause, they could also belong to individuals aligned with Herod or Roman forces who had clashed with Antigonus's troops. For example, coins discovered in refuge caves,²¹ hiding complex,²² and hoards,²³ and layers of abandonment or destruction,²⁴ clearly indicate activity by Antigonus's supporters.²⁵ Similarly, coins found in Judean rural sites might have been brought by Antigonus's supporters, local community members, refugees fleeing the conflict, or possibly fighters of the Hasmonean forces.²⁶

²¹ These include Wadi Murabba'at (De Vaux 1961, 45), Wadi el-Makuk (Ariel 1998, 135), Jabel Quruntul (three caves; Ariel 1998, 132–133; Sion 2002, 51–53), and Elqana Cave (Zissu *et al.* 2014, 153).

²² The only example of this type of find identified so far comes from the Neshet-Ramla Quarry, where Antigonus coins were discovered within two separate systems (Farhi – Melamed 2014, 110–113; Farhi 2020, 9).

²³ These include Jerusalem (Jewish Quarter), Jericho (Tulul el-Aleiq), Neshet-Ramla site, 'Ein Feshkha, and the Cave of the Warrior (Wadi el-Makkuk) (for the bibliography, see Ariel 2017, 352–354).

²⁴ These include En Gedi, Kh, Qeiafa, and Kh. Ashun (for bibliography, see note 96 below).

²⁵ At two specific sites – the hiding complex at Kh. el-'Aqed and the Elkana Cave – scholars have proposed that the Antigonus coins may have been produced as tokens intended for re-minting during the Bar Kokhba Revolt (see Kindler 1987, 47; Zissu *et al.* 2014, 151–152). However, as Fischer – Gitler – Tal (2020, 19–20) have argued in their analysis of the coins from Kh. el-'Aqed, it is more plausible to attribute these issues to the Hasmonean period rather than to the time of the Second Revolt.

²⁶ Below is list of Judean rural sites where Antigonus coin were discovered (chronology arranged): En Gedi (Mazar – Dothan – Dunayewsky 1963, 19; Bijovsky 2021, 186), Qumran (De Vaux 1973, 19), Shoham (Ariel 1998, 132–133), Kh. Badd 'Isa (Bijovsky 2004a, 258), Ein Feshkha (Bijovsky 2004b), Shoham Bypass Site (Zelinger 2009, 151), Kh. 'Itri (Zissu – Ganor 2009, 94, note 15), Kh. Fa'uhs (Bijovsky 2012, 356), Jodfat (Syon 2015, 64, 174), Kh. Qeiyafa (Farhi 2016, 94), Horbat Bet Anaba (Ariel 2017, 361), Kh. el-Maqatir (Farhi 2022a, 121), Kh. Ashun (Tendler 2024), Kh. Beit Zakariyya (Raviv, 2025), Tel Beit Shemesh (Raviv *et al.*, forthcoming).

Among the most noteworthy sites are Hasmonean fortifications both within and beyond Jerusalem. Outside the city, this includes Hyrcania and Yodfat (and maybe Ein Gedi, Tel Aphek-Antipatris, Gamla, Tel Hesbon as well); within Jerusalem and its immediate surroundings, it includes the Fortress, Mount Zion, and possibly Areas W and X2 in the Jewish Quarter (associated with the Northern First Wall), as well as Migrash Harusim and Nebi 'Akasha. In these cases, similar to the refuge caves and the hiding complexes, the discovery of Antigonus's coins may reflect the presence of fighters loyal to Antigonus, and possibly even direct engagement with Herodian forces.

In contrast, at distinctly Herodian sites that were under Herod's control during his war against Antigonus—such as Masada, Samaria-Sebaste, and possibly Kh. el-'Aqed (which may correspond to the Emmaus as mentioned by Josephus; *BJ* 1.319)—as well as at later Herodian sites such as Aphek-Antipatris, Kh. el-'Eleq and Tel Hesbon (see below), and in urban centers that functioned as enclave cities outside the Hasmonean-Herodian kingdom, including Scythopolis and Ascalon, the presence of Antigonus coins likely reflects the activity of Herodian military personnel involved in the conflict with Hasmonean supporters. Alternatively these coins may have arrived through commercial exchange.

A comparison of Antigonus coin distribution with areas of conflict mentioned by Josephus reveals a strong correlation across nine locations (**Tab. 3**), most notably Jerusalem,²⁷ the Jericho Valley,²⁸ and the Lod Lowlands.²⁹ New data from the Lod region adds seven recently discovered coins at five sites and seven more from previously published but overlooked sites, bringing the total to 23 coins across 11 sites—the highest concentration in Judea—highlighting strong local support for Antigonus.

The recently discovered coins at Kh. el-Maqtatir (six in total!) and Tel Tibna represent a particularly significant addition, as Antigonus coins had previously been found only on the periphery of the Bethel Hills—in the Modi'in Hills and in the refuge caves of the northern Judean Desert. The earlier absence of such coins from the Bethel Hills had been a notable anomaly, especially given Josephus's account identifying this region as a Hasmonean stronghold—a transitional zone between the Judean Highlands, centered around Jerusalem, and the Samaritan Hills, where Herod's first capital, Samaria, was located. Key figures such as Joseph, Herod's brother, and the Roman commander Machaeras were active in this area,³⁰ which was also the site of the decisive battle between Herod and Antigonus in the winter of 37 BCE—a victory that paved the way for Herod's advance on Jerusalem.³¹

Beyond sites directly mentioned by Josephus, Antigonus coins have been found at locations not identified as conflict zones or centers of support, including Tel Hesbon (Esbus)

²⁷ Ariel 2017.

²⁸ Ariel 1998; Sion – Ariel 2001.

²⁹ Farhi – Melamed 2014, 110–113.

³⁰ Josephus, *AJ* 14.438.

³¹ Josephus, *AJ* 14.458–464; *BJ* 1.334–343. It is likely that the five small cities conquered by Herod (Josephus, *AJ* 14.457; *BJ* 1.334) were also located in this area, or more specifically, 'Acrabat and Gophna toparchies (on the northern border of the Early Roman Judea, see Raviv – Stripling – Farhi 2023). For the identification of the town of Isana, where the battle took place, see Zelinger 2004, 65–66; Raviv 2018, 113–115.

Tab. 3. Correlation between Josephus' writings and Antigonian coin find sites, arranged geographically from north to south

Site/Region	Reference to Josephus	Antigonian coins (number of coins)	Bibliography for the coins
Lower Galilee	<i>Jewish Antiquities</i> 14.413–417, 421–430, 453; <i>War</i> 1.303–307, 315	Jodfat (3)	Ariel 1998, 132–133; Syon 2015, 64, 174
Mount Carmel	<i>Jewish Antiquities</i> 14.334	H. 'Eleq (1)	Barkay 2000, 380
Samaria (central and southern Samaria)	<i>Jewish Antiquities</i> 14.413, 431, 437, 457, 467; <i>War</i> 1.299, 303, 314, 333–334, 344	City of Samaria (4); Elqana Cave (2)	Kirkman 1957, 44, 55; Zissu <i>et al.</i> 2014, 153
Plain of Sharon	<i>Jewish Antiquities</i> 14.334; <i>War</i> 1.250	Tel Apheq (1), Kafr Bara (1)	Raviv – Levy 2025, 148, nos. 1–2
Jaffa	<i>Jewish Antiquities</i> 14.396–397; <i>War</i> 1.292–293	Jaffa (3)	Ariel 1998, 132–133; unpublished
Bethel Hills	<i>Jewish Antiquities</i> 14.458–464; <i>War</i> 1.334–343	Kh. El-Maqatir (6); Tel Tibna (2)	Farhi 2022a, 99, 121; Levy – Raviv 2026
Jericho Valley	<i>Jewish Antiquities</i> 14.454–456; <i>War</i> 1.300–302	Tulul el-Aleiq, Jericho (hoard) (20); Jabel Quruntul caves (5); Wadi el-Makuk, the cave of warrior (9)	Ariel 1998; Sion – Ariel 2001; Ariel 2017
Lydda Valley	<i>Jewish Antiquities</i> 14.412, 418	Nesher-Ramla (5, of which 4 in a hoard)	Farhi – Melamed 2014, 110–113; Farhi 2020, 258
Einmaus	<i>War</i> 1, 319	Kh. El-'Eqed (3)	Kindler 1987, 49–50; Fischer – Gitler – Tal 2020, 31, nos. 76–78
Jerusalem	<i>Jewish Antiquities</i> 14.345–353, 465–487; <i>War</i> 1.294–296, 343–358	circa 45 coins from different locations across the city including a hoard of 31 coins	Ariel 2017 and bibliography there
Idumea	<i>War</i> 1.303, 326	Tel Keshet (1) and several sites lies just north of Idumea's border: H. 'Itri (2), Kh. Qeiyafa (2), Kh. Beit Zakariyya (1)	Sion – Ariel 2001, 114 (for Tel Keshet); Raviv – Levy 2025, 153 (for H. 'Itri); Farhi 2016, 94 (for Kh. Qeiyafa); Beit Zakariyya (Raviv 2025, 114, no. 63)
Masada	<i>Jewish Antiquities</i> 14.390–391, 396; <i>War</i> 1.286–287, 294	Masada (3)	Meshorer 1989, 87

in Transjordan,³² Yavneh Yam,³³ Tel Ascalon, Gamla,³⁴ and Hyrcania.³⁵ These finds suggest that Antigonus's influence may have extended more widely than Josephus implies.

However, Josephus vaguely links Hyrcania to Antigonus,³⁶ but no such references exist for the other sites. The coin from Ascalon likely does not reflect Antigonid activity, given Herod's strong ties to the city. The most notable case is Tel Hesbon, where a Late Hellenistic fortress yielded a large-denomination Antigonus coin.³⁷ Though the ethnic identity of the garrison remains unclear, two main factors suggest a Hasmonean presence: first, Josephus's mention of Hasmonean control over Esbus³⁸; and second, the discovery of five Hasmonean coins at the site, including the one issued by Antigonus.³⁹ In addition, this aligns with the Hasmonean policy of fortifying borders and with Herod's later use of the site, possibly for veteran settlement.⁴⁰

Given this context—and the nearby Machaerus fortress, associated with earlier Hasmonean support⁴¹—it is plausible that Antigonus was active in parts of Transjordan. While the coin could have arrived later with Herodian troops, the dating of the Herodian phase of the fortress's construction around 26–28 BCE makes this scenario less likely.

However, not only the geographical distribution of Antigonus coins indicates the bias pre-Herodian narrative of Josephus, but also their typological features and comparison to other Hasmonean coinage. Such comparisons underscore the political authority exercised by Antigonus, in contrast to Josephus's portrayal of him as an illegitimate ruler. One striking example of Josephus's bias emerges from the discrepancy between his narrative and the numismatic evidence regarding the office of high priest. Antigonus's coins, like those of his royal Hasmonean predecessors, identify him as High Priest—a detail conspicuously omitted from Josephus's account.⁴² This omission appears to reflect Josephus's hostility toward the last Hasmonean ruler and highlights the value of numismatic evidence in filling gaps and correcting potential distortions in the literary record.⁴³

Herodian Year 3 coins: Limited circulation

Among the various coins minted by Herod, a dated four-denomination series marked “Year 3” is widely attributed to the early years of his reign. Scholars differ on the precise

³² Terian 1976, 134, no. 236.

³³ Vitto 1998, 118.

³⁴ Raviv – Levy 2025, 165.

³⁵ Meshel 1983, 256, note 19.

³⁶ Josephus, *BJ* 1.364.

³⁷ Mitchel 1992, 17–39. This coin was mistakenly identified as a Herodian issue by Ariel – Fontanille 2012, 154.

³⁸ Josephus, *AJ* 13.397.

³⁹ Terian 1974, 36–37, nos. 47–48; Terian 1976, 134, nos. 235–236; 137, no. 270.

⁴⁰ Josephus, *AJ* 15.294; Richardson 1996, 200.

⁴¹ Josephus, *AJ* 14.89, 94; *BJ* 1.171–172.

⁴² Josephus, *AJ* 10.245.

⁴³ As van Henten has noted (2020, 104–105), Josephus tends to favor the priesthood over the monarchy in *Jewish Antiquities*. This helps explain why he left Antigonus out of the list of High Priests presented toward the end of that essay.

date of issue, proposing 40, 37, or 27 BCE, and remain divided on the minting location, with Samaria and Jerusalem as the principal contenders.⁴⁴

If these coins were indeed struck in 40 or 37 BCE, they provide a valuable tool for assessing the extent of Herod's territorial control during his conflict with Antigonus. A comparison of the two distributions reveals a marked disparity: Antigonus's coins have been recovered from 52 sites (totaling 222 specimens), while "Year 3" Herodian coins have been found at only 30 (with a total of 64 specimens).⁴⁵ The relatively limited spread of the early Herodian coinage strongly suggests that Antigonus enjoyed broader regional support during the conflict between the two. For instance, as Ariel and Fontanille have noted,⁴⁶ only a single early Herodian coin has been found in the Jericho Valley—and none of the largest denomination (Type 1). By contrast, 34 Antigonus coins have been recovered from the same area,⁴⁷ further reinforcing the conclusion that this strategically significant region remained under his control throughout the war. A similar pattern emerges in other regions as well.⁴⁸

Hoarding patterns: Crisis and resistance

The prevailing view is that coin hoarding increased during times of crisis, such as conquests, uprisings, wars, or economic hardship.⁴⁹ There are three types of hoard coins from this period—one from the days of Alexander Jannaeus (103–76 BCE), the second from the years 62–49 BCE, and the third from the days of Antigonus (40–37 BCE). The latter probably represent the activity of Antigonus's supporters. The former may also represent the years 67–37 due to the fact that Jannaeus' coins, especially these poorly made types, remained in circulation until Herod's reign and even during the first century CE, thereby complicating efforts to establish a more precise chronological framework.⁵⁰

The list of hoards from the reign of Alexander Jannaeus was summarized by Hirschfeld and Ariel,⁵¹ who noted finds at Gibeon, Jaffa, Jerusalem (City of David and the Ophel), Kh. Mazin, Pisgat Ze'ev, Qalandia, and Samaria. Since then, additional hoards of Alexander Jannaeus coins have been discovered at Kh. el-Jafir,⁵² Tel Beit Shemesh,⁵³ and most recently at Rujm es-Sia—a single-period Hasmonean site located in the central Jordan

⁴⁴ For an extensive discussion and bibliography on the subject, see Ariel – Fontanille 2012; Lykke 2015, 59–71; Jacobson 2015.

⁴⁵ This figure is based on Ariel – Fontanille 2012, 143 (15 sites), with modifications (Raviv – Levy, 2025, 168, note 17).

⁴⁶ Ariel – Fontanille 2012, 165.

⁴⁷ Sion – Ariel 2001, 115.

⁴⁸ For further discussion on the comparison of the spatial distribution of both early Herodian and Antigonus coins, as well as the differences in the distribution of denominations within the two groups, see Raviv – Levy, forthcoming.

⁴⁹ See, e.g., Waner – Safrai 2001, 72–73; for other reasons for hoarding, see Rassalle 2021, 91–93.

⁵⁰ See, e.g., Hendin – Shachar 2008, 89; Ariel – Fontanille 2012, 58; Larsen 2023.

⁵¹ Hirschfeld – Ariel 2005, 86–87.

⁵² Har-Even 2012, 83.

⁵³ Farhi *et al.* 2023.

Valley, at the foot of the Alexandrium fortress.⁵⁴ Hoards from the years 62–49 were found at Ascalon, Gaza Region and Safad.⁵⁵ Hoards from the years 40–37 were found at ‘Ein Feshkha, Jewish Quarter (Jerusalem), Nesher-Ramla Quarry, Tulul Abu Al-‘Alaiq (Jericho) and the Cave of the Warrior (Wadi el-Makkuk).⁵⁶

Refuge caves

The term “refuge caves” refers to natural cavities, often located in remote areas away from settlements. Like the hiding complexes (below), these caves have long been associated with the Second Jewish Revolt.⁵⁷ However, unlike the hiding complexes, the use of natural caves as rebel hideouts is attested in a variety of historical and cultural contexts throughout Palestine.⁵⁸ Of particular relevance are historical references to Antigonus’s forces making use of difficult-to-access locations, most notably during Herod’s siege of rebels who had taken refuge in the caves of Arbel in the Galilee.⁵⁹

The first study to examine the use of natural caves by refugees or rebels in Judea during the late Hasmonean period was conducted by Ariel⁶⁰ and later expanded in collaboration with Sion.⁶¹ Their research focused on finds from the “Operation Scroll” excavations in the northern Judean Desert, particularly the caves at Jebel Quruntul overlooking Jericho. Ariel and Sion associated these finds with the conflict between Herod and Antigonus, as described by Josephus.⁶² They identified eleven caves in this context, four of which yielded coins of Antigonus.⁶³ However, a review of the final Operation Scroll report (2002) reveals that late Hasmonean finds—including coins of Alexander Jannaeus and/or Antigonus—were actually discovered in a total of fourteen caves. In addition, two more caves containing Hasmonean-period potsherds were identified in Upper Wadi el-Makkuk, as well as Cave 2 at Wadi Murabba‘at, where a coin of Antigonus was also recovered (for references, see **Tab. 4**).

Beyond the study of the Northern Judean Desert caves, three additional cave sites have been discussed in the scholarly literature as containing finds attributable to the political instability between 63 and 37 BCE. The first is the cliff of Arbel in the Galilee, where Hasmonean coins were discovered.⁶⁴ Shivtiel and Ahipaz⁶⁵ have suggested linking these finds to Herod’s siege of rebels who had taken refuge in the caves of Arbel,

⁵⁴ Where a hoard of approximately 160 coins (Types K and L) was unearthed (Bar – Osband – Farhi 2025).

⁵⁵ For the bibliography, see Goldman 2022, 210, note 15.

⁵⁶ For the bibliography, see Ariel 2017, 352–354.

⁵⁷ Eshel – Amit 1998; Eshel – Porat 2009.

⁵⁸ For a multi-period look at the refuge caves in Palestine, see Davidovich 2014; Davidovich 2015; Raviv *et al.* 2022; Sion *et al.* 2023.

⁵⁹ Josephus, *AJ* 14.415–430; *BJ* 1.304, 307–314.

⁶⁰ Ariel 1998.

⁶¹ Sion – Ariel 2001.

⁶² *AJ* 14.448–449; *BJ* 1.323–324.

⁶³ For detailed descriptions, see Ariel 1998; Sion – Ariel 2001; and the bibliography in Table 4.

⁶⁴ For descriptions and finds from this site, see Leibner 2004, 153–156; Leibner 2009, 237–242.

⁶⁵ Shivtiel – Ahipaz 2014, 135–136.

as described by Josephus.⁶⁶ Complementary evidence comes from the nearby Mt. Nitai caves, which also yielded contemporaneous coins.⁶⁷

The second site is the Elqana Cave in western Samaria, where two coins of Antigonos and a bowl fragment dated to the first century BCE were discovered.⁶⁸ Zissu and colleagues interpret these finds as evidence of Jewish refugees, consistent with Josephus's account of ambushes set by Antigonos's forces against Herod and of battles between Herod and Antigonos's supporters in the area between Nablus and Jerusalem.⁶⁹ Although Josephus does not mention a specific event in western Samaria, the finds may reflect activity related to these broader conflicts.

The third site is the Nahal Beit 'Arif Cave, located in the eastern lowlands of Lod, where a worn, unidentified Hasmonean coin was discovered alongside pottery dated to the Hasmonean period.⁷⁰ Given the cave's position on the first line of hills east of the Lod (Lydda) Valley, the present author and colleagues proposed several interpretive scenarios. One possibility links the finds to Josephus's account of rebel inhabitants from the Lod region—supporters of Antigonos—who fled into the hills to hide.⁷¹ However, due to the uncertain dating of the artifacts, alternative explanations remain plausible.

Furthermore, a review of known refuge caves in Judea indicates at least eleven additional caves with finds dating to the last century BCE (**Tab. 4; Fig. 2**).⁷² Among these, the cave in Wadi Muraba'at, notable for yielding an Antigonos coin, deserves special mention. Also noteworthy is Cave IV/17 in Jebel Abu Saraj (Jebel Quruntul), omitted from the above-mentioned discussion by Sion and Ariel.⁷³ This cave yielded "Hellenistic-period" potsherds, two Hasmonean coins, one a common type of Alexander Jannaeus, the other of uncertain attribution, along with three trilobate arrowheads and textile fragments. According to the excavator, these remains reflect the presence of refugees during "the time of the resistance to the Hasmonean dynasty."⁷⁴ However, based on the typology of the arrowheads, Stiebel proposed dating the military activity in the cave to the mid-first century BCE, either around the time of Pompey's arrival in 63 BCE or during Gabinius's campaign in 52 BCE.⁷⁵ Yet in light of the relatively rich assemblage of material from the Herod–Antigonos War found in nearby caves, the possibility of associating the activity in this cave with that later conflict cannot be ruled out.

⁶⁶ Josephus, *AJ* 14.415–430; *BJ* 1.304, 307–314.

⁶⁷ Farhi – Leibner 2014.

⁶⁸ Zissu *et al.* 2014.

⁶⁹ Josephus, *AJ* 14.399; *BJ* 1.294, 334.

⁷⁰ Raviv *et al.* 2024.

⁷¹ Josephus, *AJ* 14.412–419.

⁷² Apart from the Te'omim Cave, where a Hasmonean coin was apparently deposited during the Bar Kokhba revolt, likely as a souvenir (Zissu – Hendin 2012, 222).

⁷³ Sion 2002, 53–54.

⁷⁴ Sion 2002, 54.

⁷⁵ Stiebel 2007, 7–8.

Tab. 4. Refuge Caves from the first century BCE (arranged from north to south)

No.	Site	Reference
1	Mt. Nitai cliff	Farhi – Leibner 2014
2	Mt. Arbel cliff	Shivtiel – Ahipaz 2014, 135–136
3	Elqana Cave	Zissu <i>et al.</i> 2014
4	El-Batin el-Jami'a	Klein – Frumkin 2009, 514, Pl. 1:5
5	Nahal Beit 'Arif Cave	Raviv <i>et al.</i> 2024
6	Abu-Shinjah in Wadi ed-Daliyeh	Lapp – Lapp 1974, 56, Pl. 23:4–6
7	Na'ale Cave 2	Unpublished
8	Wadi esh-Shami Cave	Raviv 2018, 261, Pl. 9:1, 9–11
9	Nemerim Cave	Raviv <i>et al.</i> 2021, 155–156, 164–165
10	Upper Wadi el-Makkuk, Cave II/1	Hirschfeld – Riklin 2002, 6
11	Upper Wadi el-Makkuk, Cave II/51	Hirschfeld – Riklin 2002, 14
12	Lower Wadi el-Makkuk, Cave III/8	Barshad – Shaked 2002, 36–38
13	Lower Wadi el-Makkuk, Cave III/9	Barshad – Shaked 2002, 38
14	Lower Wadi el-Makkuk, Cave III/11	Barshad – Shaked 2002, 38–39
15	Lower Wadi el-Makuk, Cave III/13 ("the cave of warrior")	Ariel 1998
16	Jabel Abu Saraj, Cave IV/1	Sion 2002, 44
17	Jabel Abu Saraj, Cave IV/5	Sion 2002, 46–47
18	Jabel Abu Saraj, Cave IV/6	Sion 2002, 47–49
19	Jabel Abu Saraj, Cave IV/7	Sion 2002, 49–51
20	Jabel Abu Saraj, Cave IV/8	Sion 2002, 51
21	Jabel Abu Saraj, Cave IV/11	Sion 2002, 52
22	Jabel Abu Saraj, Cave IV/12	Sion 2002, 52–53
23	Jabel Abu Saraj, Cave IV/17	Sion 2002, 53–54
24	Jebel Quruntul, Cave VIII/26	Eshel – Zissu 2002, 119
25	Jebel Quruntul, Cave IX/14	Ariel 2002, 285
26	'Arak Ismain in Nahal Sorek (2 caves)	Ein Mor 2009
27	Lower Nahal Kidron, Cave 711	Porat – Eshel – Frumkin 2009, 42
28	el-Massaiah Cave	Patrich 1986, 78–79
29	Wadi Murabba'at, Cave 2	De Vaux 1961, 45

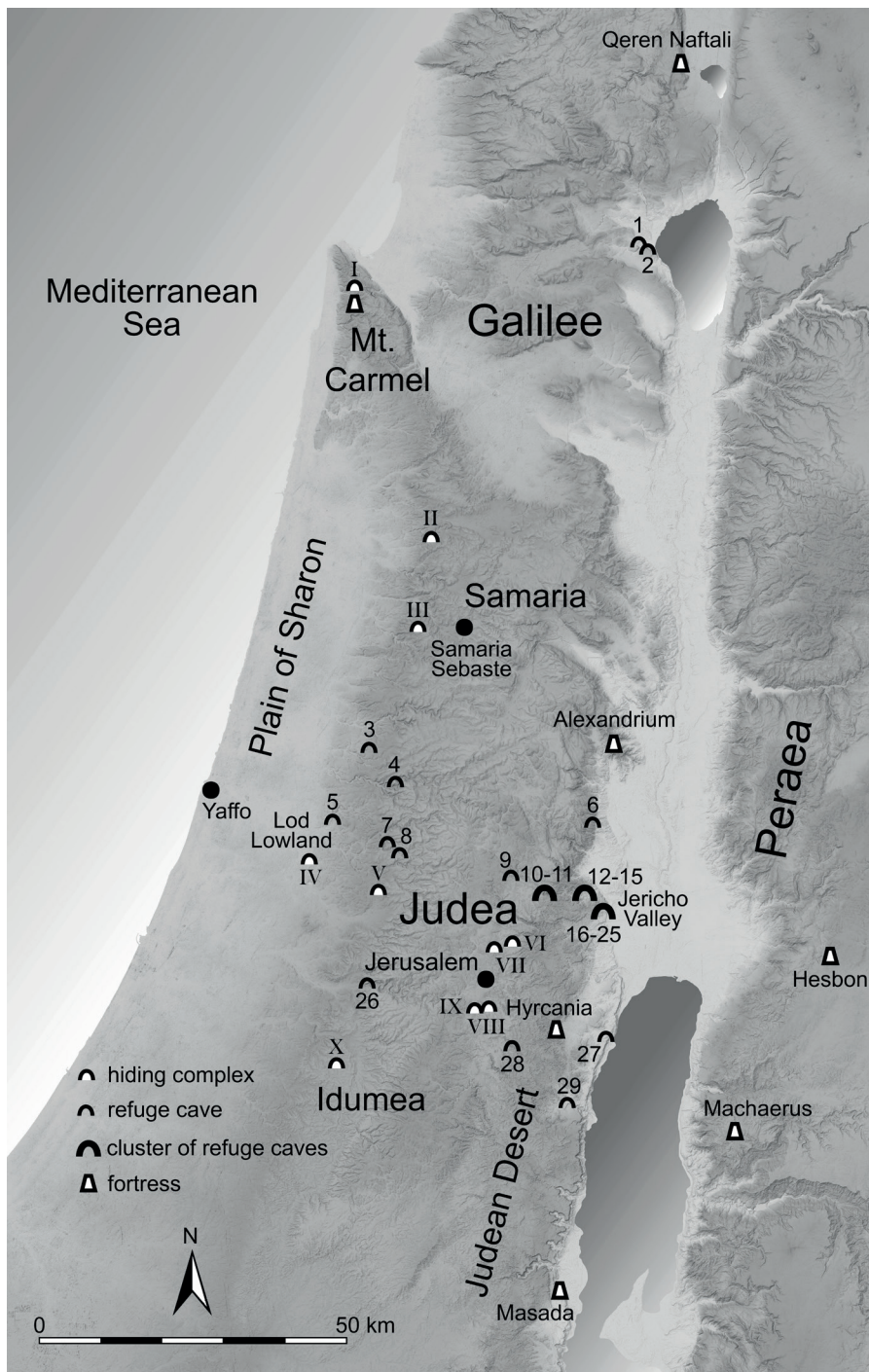


Fig. 2. The distribution of refuge caves and hiding complexes from the first century BCE in Southern Levant as well as Hasmonean-Herodian fortresses mentioned in the article (the numbers on the map reference the sites on the accompanied tables) (drawing: D. Raviv)

Hiding complexes

“Hiding complexes” is the term used to describe underground installations hewn as hide-outs beneath Jewish settlements in Judea during the Early Roman period (63 BCE–136 CE). While the phenomenon is well documented in connection with the Second Jewish Revolt,⁷⁶ the historical context for the use of such systems during the Second Temple period has remained obscure, primarily due to the limited number of known examples until recently. However, the relationship between these installations and the conflicts of the late Second Temple period was recently addressed by the author.⁷⁷ Accordingly, the present discussion will offer a general overview, highlight key conclusions, and introduce previously unpublished examples.

Recent excavations at the Neshar-Ramla Quarry site⁷⁸ and at Ḥorvat ‘Itri,⁷⁹ both situated in the Judean Lowlands, have yielded the first definitive archaeological evidence for the construction of hiding complexes during the first century BCE. Earlier discoveries from the 1990s had already pointed to the existence of similar complexes dated to this period at two sites in the Jerusalem hills, Pisgat Ze’ev and Şur Bahir, as well as at Kh. Rosh Maya on Mount Carmel, which was identified in the 1970s (for references, see **Tab. 5; Fig. 2**). Notably, the latter site was interpreted by its excavators as a Hasmonean fortress, with the associated hiding complex dated to this phase based on finds recovered from its inner chambers.

To these, five additional sites can now be added where hiding complexes containing artifacts from the first century BCE have recently been identified: Giv’at Ha’Arba’a and Kh. ‘Almit in the Jerusalem hills; Najmat el-Hadali in the Modi’in hills; and Kh. el-Hamam and Kh. Samara in western Samaria (for references, see **Tab. 4**). With the exception of Najmat el-Hadali, which was previously surveyed,⁸⁰ the other four sites were recently discovered by the author and remain unpublished. These complexes are generally small in scale, typically consisting of a short burrow (1–5 m in length) leading to one or more hiding chambers (**Fig. 3**). Artifacts were consistently recovered from the inner chambers and are dated to the late Hasmonean–Herodian period—except at Şur Bahir, where the precise locations of the finds were not recorded. In total, 22 hiding complexes from the late Hasmonean–Herodian period have been identified at ten different sites—seven in Judea proper, two in Samaria and one on Mt. Carmel (**Tab. 5; Fig. 2**). Except for Kh. Rosh Maya, located on the fringes of Galilee, no such systems have yet been documented in this region. However, in light of recent discoveries in Judea and Samaria, it is reasonable to assume that future excavations may revise this picture.

⁷⁶ See, e.g., Kloner – Tepper 1987; Eshel – Zissu 2020, 48–61; Raviv 2024.

⁷⁷ Raviv 2023a.

⁷⁸ Melamed 2020; Melamed 2022.

⁷⁹ Klein *et al.* 2021.

⁸⁰ Raviv 2018, 330.

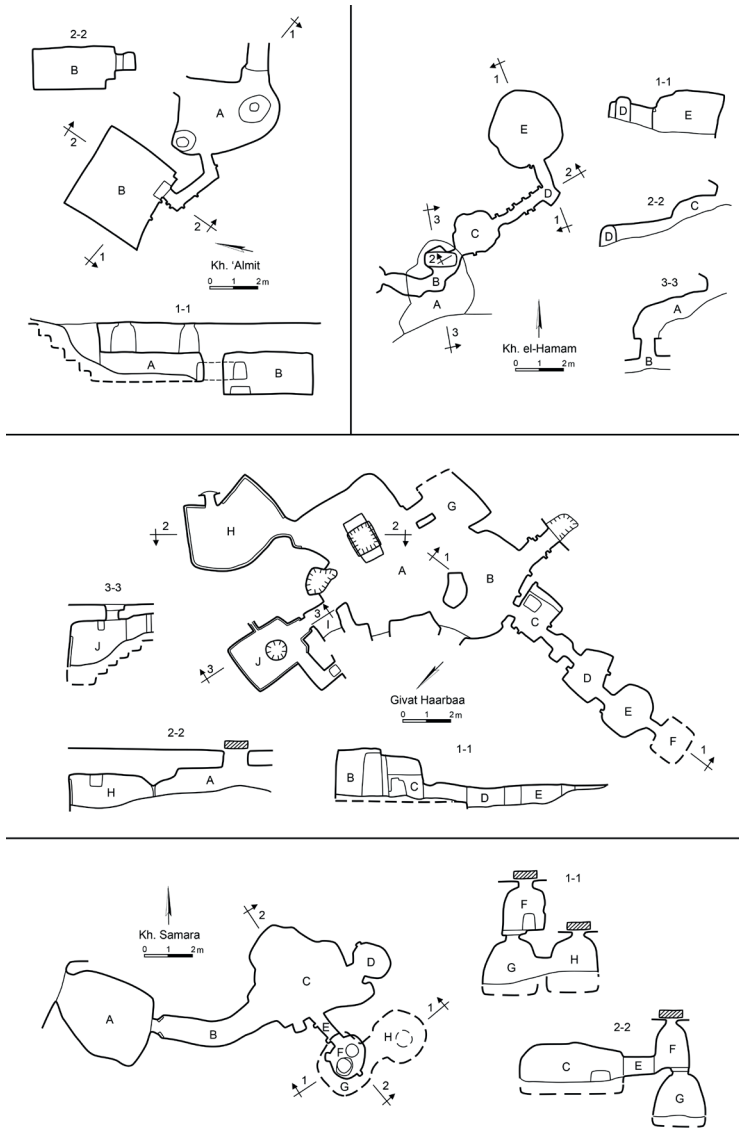


Fig. 3. Selected Hiding complexes from the first century BCE (drawing: D. Raviv)

Among these sites, the Nesher-Ramla Quarry stands out. Located in the Lod Lowlands, it is currently the richest site in Judea for hiding complexes from this period, with at least 13 systems dated to the first century BCE.⁸¹ Of these, eight yielded late Hasmonean finds (Tab. 5, Nos. 4–11) and five produced artifacts from the time of Herod (Tab. 5, Nos. 12–16). Notably, two of the systems (F-292 and F-417) can be confidently attributed to the period of the Herodian–Antigonid War, based on the discovery of coins

⁸¹ Melamed 2020.

of Antigonus within their inner chambers.⁸² Importantly, the finds from this site provide the first evidence that internal blocking mechanisms and burrows allowing concealed access to cisterns were already in use during the first century BCE—architectural features previously known only from systems associated with the Second Revolt.

Until recently, the only scholarly attempt to contextualize the emergence of Judean hiding complexes during the Second Temple period was made by Klein *et al.*⁸³ They argued that these systems were initially intended for concealing agricultural produce and evading taxation, as part of localized resistance to Roman authorities. A similar hypothesis, though not tied to a specific historical period, was proposed by Melamed.⁸⁴ This interpretation is supported by the presence of bell-shaped pits, commonly used for storage, which are accessible via hiding burrows in some of the first-century BCE complexes at Neshar-Ramla site. However, the existence of internal blocking mechanisms and concealed access to cisterns in several of these same systems points to a defensive function, specifically as hiding places for people. It remains plausible that these complexes were designed to serve both protective and economic purposes. Thus, it may be suggested that the growing threat to human life, combined with the economic hardships that characterized the period under discussion in Judea, played a central role in the emergence of the hiding complexes phenomenon.

Tab. 5. Hiding complexes from the first century BCE (arranged from north to south) (**Fig. 2**)

No.	No. in map	Site	Reference
1	I	Kh. Rosh Maya	Shivtiel 2018
2	II	Kh. el-Hamam	Unpublished
3	III	Kh. Samara	Unpublished
4	IV	Neshar-Ramla Quarry, F-292-268	Melamed 2010, 92–93
5		Neshar-Ramla Quarry, F-305	Melamed 2010, 94–95
6		Neshar-Ramla Quarry, F-417	Melamed 2020, 7–9
7		Neshar-Ramla Quarry, F-442	Melamed 2020, 14–20
8		Neshar-Ramla Quarry, F-451	Melamed 2020, 20–23
9		Neshar-Ramla Quarry, F-453	Melamed 2020, 23–31
10		Neshar-Ramla Quarry, F-468	Melamed 2020, 40–42
11		Neshar-Ramla Quarry, F-635	Melamed 2020, 75–79
12		Neshar-Ramla Quarry, F-293	Melamed 2010, 90–91
13		Neshar-Ramla Quarry, F-309	Melamed 2010, 95–96
14		Neshar-Ramla Quarry, F-337-350-363	Melamed 2018, 58–69
15		Neshar-Ramla Quarry, F-360-361	Melamed 2018, 39
16		Neshar-Ramla Quarry, F-593	Melamed 2020, 52–61
17		V	Najmat el-Hadali

⁸² Farhi – Melamed 2014, 110–113; Melamed 2020, 9 and 258.

⁸³ Klein *et al.* 2021.

⁸⁴ Melamed 2020, 303.

No.	No. in map	Site	Reference
18	VI	Kh. 'Almit	Unpublished
19	VII	Pisgat Ze'ev	Shukron – Savriago 1993, 51–53
20	VIX	Şur Bahir (questionable date)	May 2001, 93*
21	VIII	Giv'at Ha'Arba'a	Unpublished
22	X	H. 'Itri	Klein <i>et al.</i> 2021

Other archaeological evidence

Additional findings that may be seen as evidence of the events in question, although less conclusive, are three siege systems documented around Hasmonean fortresses, as well as evidence of the abandonment of sites in Judea.

Siege systems around Hasmonean fortresses

Remains identified as siege systems and dated to the period in question have been discovered at three Hasmonean fortresses: two in the Judean Desert, Hyrcania and Alexandrium, and one in the Galilee, at Qeren Naftali.

The remains of the siege system around the Hyrcania fortress were recorded by Meshel.⁸⁵ It includes a dike at least 2700 m long, three towers, and three enclosures. Based on the discovery of Herodian tombs that were installed while damaging one of the walls of Compound 8⁸⁶—located approximately half a kilometer west of the fortress and identified as a siege camp—Meshel proposed associating the entire system with the pre-Herodian period. Thus, Meshel suggested linking them to Josephus, *BJ* 1.364, which alludes to a siege that Herod imposed on Hyrcania around 37–31 BCE. In his opinion, the fortress of Hyrcania served as a stronghold for Antigonus and his warriors throughout the war with Herod and the Romans. The discovery of an Antigonus coin at the site, as mentioned above, as well as at many other sites in the northern Judean Desert and the Jericho Valley, supports this suggestion.⁸⁷

The remains of the siege system surrounding the Alexandrium fortress were also documented by Meshel.⁸⁸ These include sections of two concentric dikes—an inner and an outer one, along which ten enclosures were identified, interpreted by Meshel as siege camps and towers. Based on the poor state of preservation, he concluded that the construction

⁸⁵ Meshel 1983.

⁸⁶ Wright – Milik 1961, 16–18; Meshel 1983.

⁸⁷ Further evidence for the Hasmoneans' continued control over key royal assets even after 37 BCE can be seen at the site of the palatial complexes in the Jericho Valley: Netzer 2018, 32–34.

⁸⁸ Meshel 1989.

of the siege system was never completed. Meshel attributed the system to the campaign of Gabinius (57 BCE), in accordance with Josephus's account.⁸⁹

The remains at Qeren Naftali were recorded by M. Aviam.⁹⁰ These include a wall surrounding the hill site on three sides as well as two enclosures from the fourth side, remains which he identified as a dike and siege camps. Aviam suggested attributing these remains to the battle between Herod and Marion, the ruler of Tyre, c. 43 BCE,⁹¹ or to the operations of Herod against the supporters of Antigonus c. 38/39 BCE.⁹² Unfortunately, in the two accounts describing battles involving fortresses—where the Hasmoneans and their supporters, the ruler of Tyre, and Herod all participated—Josephus provides neither specific fortress names nor clear geographical details. However, a recent find that may support Aviam's latter scenario is a rare coin minted in Antioch in 39/38 BCE, discovered at the site, it may have arrived there with a Roman soldier operating alongside Herod.⁹³

In any case, it is important to note that in all three instances, the attribution of the remains to the years 57–31 BCE is based on circumstantial evidence; in the absence of more definitive dating, alternative historical interpretations cannot be excluded.

Evidence of destruction and abandonment of sites

Archaeological evidence for destruction or abandonment dating to 63–37 BCE has been identified at several sites across Judea. However, in most cases, these events cannot be dated more precisely than to the general transition from the Hasmonean to the Early Roman period.⁹⁴ In the absence of clearer chronological indicators, it is not possible to determine the specific causes or historical context of these abandonment layers.⁹⁵ Consequently, their contribution to the present historical analysis is limited, and they will therefore be cited only in a footnote.⁹⁶

⁸⁹ Josephus, *AJ* 14.86–87, 89. For a reexamination of the siege system that, while critically reassessing the evidence, generally supports Meshel's historical attribution, see Einav 2014, 83–87.

⁹⁰ Aviam 2004, 64–67.

⁹¹ Josephus, *AJ* 14.297–299, 314–318; *BJ* 1.237–239.

⁹² Josephus, *AJ* 14.433; *BJ* 1.303, 315–316, 328–330.

⁹³ Sabar 2023, 159, 161.

⁹⁴ As we noted above, this uncertainty stems primarily from the limitations of the numismatic evidence, which serves as a key dating tool.

⁹⁵ From an agrarian perspective, rural populations likely remained in place to fulfill taxation and provisioning obligations to Roman forces, making widespread abandonment of such sites improbable. Rural damage, if present, is more likely to reflect temporary destruction rather than large-scale abandonment. Lastly, determining the cause of abandonment remains methodologically complex; it is often unclear whether abandonment resulted from rebellion-related violence, socio-economic changes, or natural events, such as the earthquake of 31 BCE.

⁹⁶ Evidence of abandonment or destruction during the period in question has been found at numerous sites across Judea. Well-dated examples include the destruction layer attributed to Gabinius (57 BCE) at the Machaerus fortress (Vörös 2013); and evidence of abandonment associated with Herod's conquest of Jerusalem (37 BCE) in the Jewish Quarter (Avigad 1983, 76; *TJC*, 57), 'En Gedi (Stern 2007, 274), and Kh. Qeiyafa (Farhi 2016, 74). Additional examples include signs of abandonment from the late Hasmonean period at Kh. er-Rafid in southern Samaria (Raviv 2018, 133); and at seven rural sites around Jerusalem (Billig *et al.* 2022, 146; Spiezer *et al.* 2022, 323–325, 333 and bibliography there). Some of the coin hoard

Discussion and conclusions

This study is an initial attempt to make a systematic synthesis between the archaeological evidence and the literary descriptions regarding the struggles between Aristobulus II and his sons against Hyrcanus II, the House of Antipater, and the Roman forces, with particular emphasis on the final phase of conflict during the Herodian–Antigonus War. The dataset includes numismatic data, the contemporaneous use of refuge caves and hiding complexes, signs of settlement destruction, the possible construction of siege systems around Hasmonean fortresses, and the possible presence of mass burials. Notably, all of these phenomena are observed on a much larger scale during the later Jewish revolts against Rome—the Great Revolt and the Bar Kokhba Revolt.

Due to methodological difficulties in precisely dating the common small finds associated with the Hasmonean-era, such as pottery and coins, the Herodian–Antigonus War is the only conflict to which specific archaeological evidence discussed in this study can be confidently attributed.

Most of the archaeological findings discussed in this article complement Josephus's descriptions; some also offer additional insights and, to a limited extent, may shed light on the biases and narrative tendencies in his account, a subject that has thus far been examined primarily from a literary perspective.

A comparison between the archaeological findings presented above and the accounts of Josephus reveals a strong degree of geographical correspondence. Particularly significant are instances where refuge caves, hiding complexes, and the discovery of Antigonus coins co-occur—especially in the Jericho Valley and the Lod Lowlands. Josephus identifies these regions as key theaters of conflict, likely due to their status as fertile agricultural zones crucial for supplying Jerusalem and sustaining both Herod's and Antigonus's armies. Additionally, their strategic position along major routes leading to Jerusalem enhanced their importance, as also evidenced during the later Judean revolts against Rome.⁹⁷

Another noteworthy example is the evidence, both literary and archaeological, for the use of caves by the contemporary Judean population. In this context, it is significant that hiding complexes are not explicitly mentioned in Josephus's writings.⁹⁸ This absence, along with the lack of explicit references to hiding complexes during the Great Revolt, may suggest that such complexes played only a limited role during the Second Temple period, especially compared to their prominent use during the Bar Kokhba Revolt.

The destruction layer at Machaerus, the high concentration of Antigonus's coins in the Judean Desert—including those from Hyrcania and Tel Hesbon, recently added to the discussion—and the discovery of siege systems at three Hasmonean fortresses (though their dating remains inconclusive), most of which are not mentioned by Josephus, all support the view that these sites played a central role in the conflict.

locations discussed above may also be relevant in this context. For a proposal regarding possible mass burials of battle victims near 'En Gedi, see Farhi 2022b; cf. Hadas – Peleg-Barkat 2023.

⁹⁷ See, e.g., Raviv 2023b, 297–301 and bibliography there.

⁹⁸ We cannot aver anything with certainty about Josephus's references to hiding complexes phenomenon; at most we can propose that he distinguished a natural cavity (σπήλαιος) from an artificial one (ὑπόνομος).

In particular, the fortresses appear to have been pivotal in sustaining the military capacity of the House of Aristobulus II in its resistance against Rome and its allies during the two and a half decades under discussion.⁹⁹ The scarcity of relevant archaeological finds within the fortresses themselves is likely due to both the limited scope of excavations and the extensive Herodian construction that subsequently modified or obscured earlier remains.

Among the findings discussed, only the coinage of Antigonus—along with certain hiding complexes and refuge caves in western Samaria, and possibly the siege system at Hyrcania—provides evidence that extends beyond Josephus's account. These materials may point to activity by supporters of the House of Aristobulus II in regions and sites not explicitly mentioned in his narrative. Notable among these are western Samaria, Judean Lowlands, and Transjordan—which, aside from a few references to Machaerus in connection with the early phase of the conflict, is otherwise absent from Josephus's descriptions of the struggles under discussion. The emerging distribution pattern of archaeological evidence not only suggests broad rural support for the House of Aristobulus II across Judea, but also highlights the potential for further discoveries in under-investigated regions—particularly the mountainous areas of Judea and Samaria, where systematic archaeological excavation remains rare, despite these zones likely having played a key role in the struggle.

In addition to contributing to the assessment of Josephus's reliability and the reconstruction of historical events, this article offers a possible explanation for the emergence of hiding complexes and the use of refuge caves in Judea during the first century BCE, phenomena previously known primarily in connection with the Bar-Kokhba Revolt.

In addition to the dating challenges outlined above, the archaeological evidence presents several other significant limitations. Currently, it does not allow us to assess the geographical scale of the initial struggles (63–55 BCE), evaluate the reliability of the details provided by Josephus,¹⁰⁰ or confidently identify many of the relevant sites.¹⁰¹ Nor does it offer much insight into the characteristics of the Hasmonean fighting force—whether, as Josephus portrays them, they were rebels engaged in guerrilla warfare, or rather a more organized contingent that may have included trained soldiers, possibly even mercenaries, who had previously served in the Hasmonean army.¹⁰² The archaeological record is also

⁹⁹ For historical analysis, see, e.g., Regev 2000 and bibliography there. Indeed, the entire framework of the events under discussion revolves around struggles for control over fortresses, though a detailed examination of this aspect lies beyond the scope of the present discussion.

¹⁰⁰ One illustrative example is Josephus's (*AJ* 14.100) mention of the siege that Alexander, son of Aristobulus II, imposed on the Romans (?) at Mount Gerizim. Numerous Hasmonean coins have been discovered on the mountain, along with a building identified by Magen (2021, 45) as a fortress in its northern part, suggesting the presence of a Hasmonean garrison. However, it remains unclear whether this garrison persisted continuously or was reestablished during the period under discussion.

¹⁰¹ Such as the precise location of the battle between Gabinius and Alexander in Jerusalem hills (*AJ* 14.85; *BJ* 1.163); the identity of the Galilean fortresses that changed hands between Marion and Herod, as well as the location of the subsequent battle between Herod and Antigonus (*AJ* 14.298–299; *BJ* 1.238–240); the location of the battle in the Sharon Plain between the armies of Herod and Antigonus (*AJ* 14.334; *BJ* 1.250); the identification of the Gitta fortress (*AJ* 14.450; *BJ* 1.326); and the five small towns conquered by Herod in southern Samaria or northern Judea (*AJ* 14.457; *BJ* 1.334).

¹⁰² The ability of Antigonus' men to fight against an organized army in open terrain is hinted in *Jewish Antiquities* 14.416; *War* 1.305–306.

silent on key figures associated with the Hasmonean side, such as Pappus or Hezekiah—a commander mentioned only briefly and disparagingly by Josephus, who refers to him as “a captain of a band of robbers”.¹⁰³ Moreover, it does not shed light on the commonly held assumption that segments of the Jewish aristocracy, many of whom had military experience and were motivated by both economic interests and national loyalties, played a substantial role in resisting the transition from Hasmonean to Antipatrid rule.¹⁰⁴

The possible indication of Josephus’s bias in his descriptions of the period under discussion—revealed through the examination of archaeological evidence—adds to the growing body of testimony already emphasized by literary scholarship, most of which focuses on the final phase of the conflict: the Herod–Antigonus War. Dąbrowa’s conclusion—that a careful reading of Josephus’s accounts reveals Antigonus not as a political troublemaker or the leader of a band of rebels, but as a legitimate ruler who consciously strove for the political rebirth of Judea and its liberation from Roman supremacy, while enjoying widespread public support¹⁰⁵—should also be extended to his father, Aristobulus II, and his older brother, Alexandros. In this light, the struggle of the House of Aristobulus emerges not as a series of isolated “revolts”, but as part of a broader, popular resistance to the Roman-backed transformation of Judean governance.

ABBREVIATIONS

TJC – Y. Meshorer, *A Treasury of Jewish Coins from the Persian Period to Bar Kokhba*, Jerusalem–Nyack 2001.

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¹⁰³ Josephus, *AJ* 14.159; *BJ* 1.204.

¹⁰⁴ See, e.g., Freyne 1988, 139, 163–166.

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