Who is Salome?[1]

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[Adrian Mamo. Introduction.] We have just witnessed a very powerful and disturbing interpretation of Salomé. But who is Salome, really? Is she a young woman caught up in events beyond her control, a dangerous and manipulative figure, or someone whose story has been appropriated and transformed over two thousand years? Josef, perhaps you could begin by telling us what we actually know about her …

“”

Can the real Salome please stand up?

When we were first discussing the title, one of the possibilities that came up was “Will the real Salome please stand up?” Perhaps, I would turn around the title first: “Can the real Salome please stand up?” Is it even possible to get back to the real Salome? What we can do, though, is somehow trace back, and disentangle some the lines of this narrative, or rather these narratives?

I’ll follow three lines: the Gospel story, Josephus Flavius’ *Antiquities of the Jews,* and the reception in medieval literature.

The Gospels

Mark 6,14-29	**Matthew 14,1-12**
[14] King Herod heard of it, for Jesus’s name had become known. Some were saying, “John the baptizer has been raised from the dead, and for this reason these powers are at work in him.” [15] But others said, “It is Elijah.” And others said, “It is a prophet, like one of the prophets of old.”	[14] At that time Herod the ruler heard reports about Jesus,
[16] But when Herod heard of it, he said, “John, whom I beheaded, has been raised.”	[2] and he said to his servants, “This is John the Baptist; he has been raised from the dead, and for this reason these powers are at work in him.”
[17] For Herod [Antipas] himself had sent men who arrested John, bound him, and put him in prison on account of Herodias, his brother Philip’s wife, because Herod had married her.	[3] For Herod [Antipas] had arrested John, bound him, and put him in prison on account of Herodias, his brother Philip’s wife,
[18] For **John had been telling** Herod**, “It is not lawful for you to have your brother’s wife.”**	[4] because **John had been telling** him**, “It is not lawful for you to have her.”**

Text 1. John’s arrest in the Gospels of Mark and Matthew (Translation: NRSV)

The beheading of John the Baptist is narrated in the in the Gospels of Mark (6:17-29) and Matthew (14:3-12). Though we speak of two Gospels, biblical scholars would agree that it is actually one source, since Matthew, is heavily dependant on Mark in this story. In the Gospel, Herod Antipas is wondering who Jesus is, since some claimed he was John, raised from the dead …

In both Mark and Matthew, Herod “put [John] in prison on account of Herodias, his brother Philip’s wife.” Luke’s gospel (3:19-20) omits John’s murder, but gives the same reason for his arrest. But, once again, Luke is clearly dependent on Mark.

[1] Q&A session following the production of *Salomé* at the Teatru Manoel, on Sunday 8 November 2026. Chaired by Adrian Mamo (Artistic Director, Teatru Manoel), with the participation of Francis Spiteri Paris, Adrian Buckle (director), Albert Garzia (music and sound design), Timothy Blore (Salomé), Tarik Badwan (Jokanaan).
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Mark 6	Matthew 14
[19] And Herodias had a grudge against him and wanted to kill him. But she could not,	[5] Though Herod wanted to put him to death, he feared the crowd, because they regarded him as a prophet.
[20] for Herod feared John, knowing that he was a righteous and holy man, and he protected him. When he heard him, he was greatly perplexed, and yet he liked to listen to him.	
[21] But an opportunity came when Herod on his birthday gave a banquet for his courtiers and officers and for the leaders of Galilee. [22] When **his daughter Herodias**[3] came in and danced,	[6] But when Herod's birthday came, **the daughter of Herodias** danced before the company,
she pleased Herod and his guests, and the king said to the girl, "Ask me for whatever you wish, and I will give it." [23] And he swore to her, "Whatever you ask me, I will give you, even half of my kingdom."	and she pleased Herod [7] so much that he promised on oath to grant her whatever she might ask.

Text 2. Fear and opportunity. Comparison of Mark and Matthew, cont. (Translation: NRSV)

Mark continues in greater detail, saying that Herodias bore a grudge against John because of this, and wanted to get rid of him. In Matthew, it is Herod himself who wants to put him to death but is afraid.

The daughter's dance, and Herod's drunken oath, provided the right opportunity. There are slight, but significant differences. The dancer is identified in Mark (6,22), as Herod's daughter, and calls her Herodias, at least in some major manuscripts,[4] even though subsequently, she goes to speak to her mother Herodias. Matthew modifies this to identify her as Herodias' daughter (Mt 14,6), which appears more correct, while she herself remains anonymous.

Mark 6	Matthew 14
[24] She went out and said to her mother, "What should I ask for?" She replied, "The head of John the baptizer."	[8] Prompted by her mother,
[25] Immediately she rushed back to the king and requested, "I want you to **give me** at once **the head of John the Baptist on a platter.**"	she said, "**Give me the head of John the Baptist** here **on a platter**."
[26] The king was deeply grieved, yet out of regard for his oaths and for the guests, he did not want to refuse her.	[9] The king was grieved, yet out of regard for his oaths and for the guests, he commanded it to be given;
[27] Immediately the king sent a soldier of the guard with orders to bring John's head. He went and beheaded him in the prison, [28] brought his head on a platter, and gave it to the girl. Then the girl gave it to her mother.	[10] he sent and had John beheaded in the prison. [11] His head was brought on a platter and given to the girl, who brought it to her mother.

Text 3. "Give me the head of John." Comparison of Mark and Matthew, cont. (Translation: NRSV)

In this narrative, it is the women who exercise agency. Prompted by her mother, the daughter asked for John's head on a platter. Herod Antipas is depicted as wanting to protect John, and deeply grieved at the request. He gives in "out of regard for his oaths and his guests" and probably has drunken state. The men are quite impotent: Herod unable to stand up on his own authority as Tetrarch, and John as the passive victim of someone else's plot.

[3] So in the Codex Sinaiticus (ℵ), Vaticanus (B) and others (D, L, Δ) as well as in Origen; others read "the daughter of Herodias herself", so the Codex Alexandrinus (A) and others (C, K, W, Θ, Π).
[4] See note above.

2. Now some of the Jews thought that the destruction of Herod's army came from God, and that very justly, as a punishment of what he did against John, that was called the Baptist: for Herod slew him, who was a good man, and commanded the Jews to exercise virtue, both as to righteousness towards one another, and piety towards God, and so to come to baptism; for that the washing [with water] would be acceptable to him, if they made use of it, not in order to the putting away [or the remission] of some sins [only], but for the purification of the body; supposing still that the soul was thoroughly purified beforehand by righteousness.

Now when [many] others came in crowds about him, for they were very greatly moved [or pleased] by hearing his words, **Herod, who feared lest the great influence John had over the people might put it into his power and inclination to raise a rebellion, [for they seemed ready to do any thing he should advise,] thought it best, by putting him to death, to prevent any mischief he might cause**, and not bring himself into difficulties, by sparing a man who might make him repent of it when it would be too late. **Accordingly he was sent a prisoner, out of Herod's suspicious temper, to Macherus, the castle I before mentioned, and was there put to death.**

Now the Jews had an opinion that the destruction of this army was sent as a punishment upon Herod, and a mark of God's displeasure to him.

Text 4. John arrested and put to death (Josephus Flavius, Antiquities of the Jews, XVIII.5.2)

Josephus Flavius

Quite exceptionally for a Gospel story, the murder of John the Baptist is also narrated in *Antiquities of the Jews* by Josephus Flavius. In Josephus' narrative, John's murder is framed as (at least to some Jews) as the cause of the destruction of Herod's army, as divine retribution. More prosaically, Herod's army was crushed by that of Aretas, King of Arabia, and father of Herod's wife, the one whom he had divorced to take Herodias.

Here, however, the motives are different. John the Baptist, we are told, had great influence over the people. "Herod," — I quote — "who feared lest the great influence John had over the people might put it into his power and inclination to raise a rebellion, thought it best, by putting him to death, to prevent any mischief he might cause ..."

So, Herod has him arrested, and sent over to his castle in Machaerus —... perhaps to move him far from Galilee and the crowds, and there he was put to death. Here the mover is Herod himself, alone. No parties. No drunkenness. Just fear of someone who might move the crowds against him.

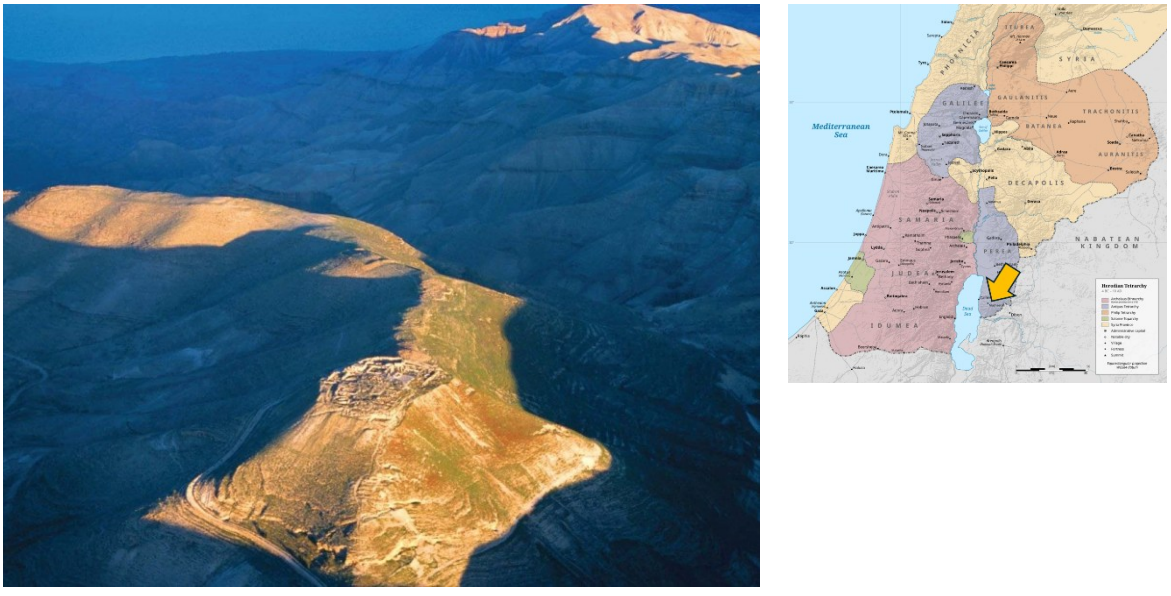

Figure 1. (Left) The site of Machaerus (Image: Győző Vörös and the Hungarian Academy of Arts); (right) The Kingdom of Herod the Great, as divided among his heirs. In light blue, the territories of Herod Antipas. The yellow arrow marks the site of Machaerus.

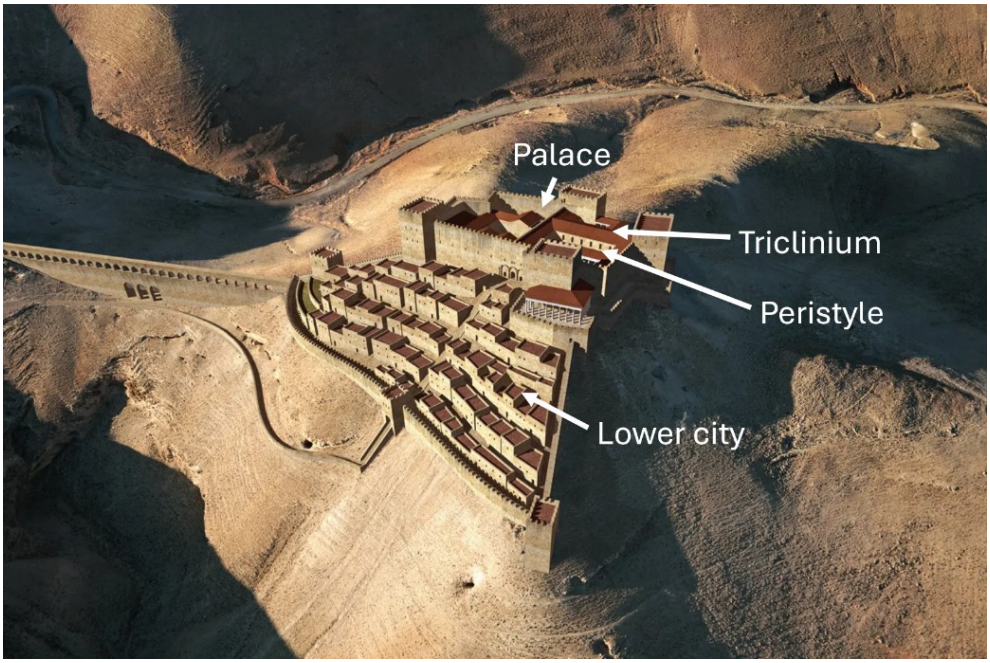

Figure 2. The Palace and lower city of Machaerus, reconstruction. (Image: Győző Vörös and the Hungarian Academy of Arts)

The Palace of Machaerus, on the eastern side of the Dead Sea, was first built by the Hasmoneans as a Fortress, transformed into a Palace by Herod the Great, and inherited by Herod Antipas, as part of his territory as tetrarch ... here (Figure 1) in light blue.

The site has been excavated by difference expeditions since the 1960s by various expeditions, most recently by the Hungarian Academy of Arts.[5]

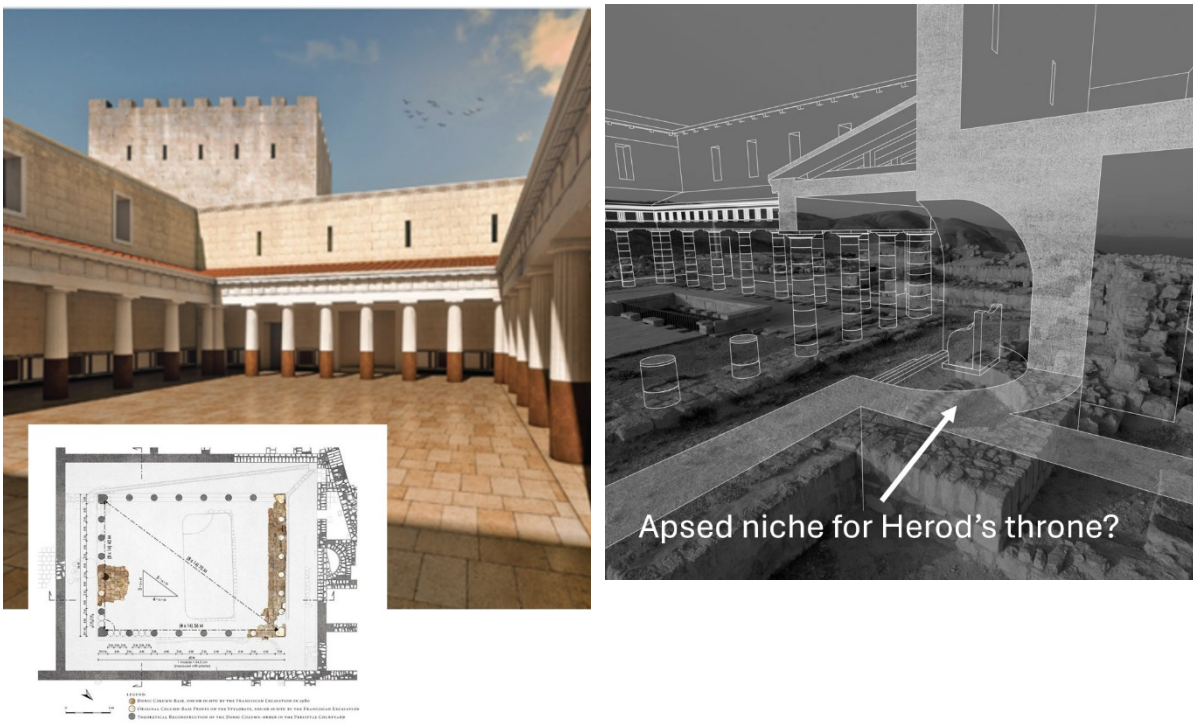

Figure 3. The Peristyled courtyard and niche (Images: Győző Vörös and the Hungarian Academy of Arts)

[5] Extensive final reports have been published (Vőrős 2013, 2015, 2019), as well as a more general presentation of all the work in Vőrős 2022.

Archaeologists have, among other things identified the peristyled courtyard of the Palace, adjacent to the triclinium, or dining, with a apsed niche, which the archaeologists argued might have been meant for the king's throne, when he is entertaining guests.[6] Of course, it is tantalising to imagine that all the happening in these spaces ...

Who is Salome?

> 4. [...] But Herodias, their sister,[7] was married to Herod [Philip], the son of Herod the Great, who was born of Mariamne,[8] the daughter of Simon the high priest, who had a daughter, Salome; after whose birth Herodias took upon her to confound the laws of our country, and divorced herself from her husband while he was alive, and was married to Herod [Antipas], her husband's brother by the father's side, he was tetrarch of Galilee; but her daughter Salome was married to Philip, the son of Herod, and tetrarch of Trachonitis; and as he died childless, Aristobulus, the son of Herod, the brother of Agrippa, married her; they had three sons, Herod, Agrippa, and Aristobulus; and this was the posterity of Phasaelus and Salampsio.

Text 5. Herod's family (Josephus Flavius, Antiquities of the Jews, XVIII.5.2)

And Salome? She is not mentioned regarding John's killing. But she is listed in the same book and chapter, in the long description of the family of Herod the Great. We are told that Salome is daughter of Herodias and another Herod – in the Gospels he's called Philip. Then we are told that after Salome's birth: "Herodias took upon her to confound the laws of our country, and divorced herself from her husband while he was alive, and was married to Herod [Antipas], her husband's brother by the father's side, he was tetrarch of Galilee".

So the details correspond, but Josephus does not frame this as the cause of John's murder.

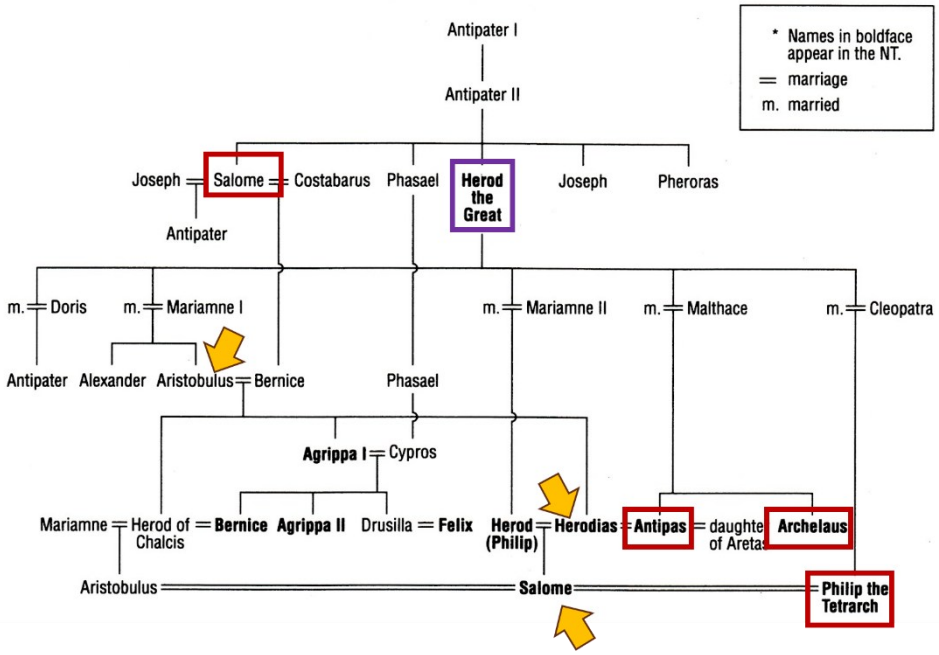

Figure 4. The Herodian dynasty. In red, the four heirs of Herod the Great. Marked with a yellow arrow: Herodias, Aristobulus her father and Salomé her daughter.

[6] Vőrős 2020; Vőrős 2022: 224-226, 239-241.
[7] Daughter of Aristobolus, son of Herod the Great and Mariamne. She is sister of Herod Agrippa I and Herod of Chalcis.
[8] A second Mariamne, not to be confused with the grandmother of Herodias.

If you find all the family confusing, you're not the first. So, Herodias is daughter of Aristobolus, one of the two sons of Herod the Great and Mariamne, from the Hasmonean family. Herod the Great, on different occasions, put to death, Mariamne, as well as his two sons Alexander and Aristobolus. Herodias married first Herod [Philip], son of Herod the Great and a second Mariamne (oh, yes, the names are totally confusing!), so her father's half-brother. Then she leaves her husband for Herod Antipas, another half-brother of her father.

Salome, the daughter, not to be confused with Salome sister of Herod the Great, marries, Philip the Tetrach of Trachonitis, not be confused with Herod, or Philip, her father.

Salome as femme fatale?

One major difference in Wilde's portrayal of the story is shifting agency from Herodias to Salome herself. Salome is not seen as a pawn in her mother's story, but rather as the prime mover. Her attraction to Jokanaan, which transforms from the poetic to the increasingly morbid, draws her to request Jokanaan's head, and the play closes with Salome kissing the head, and Herod ordering to "kill that woman".

Haec virgo, thalamos Baptistae solius ardens *voverat hoc demto nullius esse viri.*	*This maiden, longed for the Baptist's marriage bed alone,* *vowed to belong to no man but him ...*
[...]	*[...]*
Mollibus allatum stringens caput illa lacertis *Perfundit lacrimis, osculaque addere avet,*	*Clasping the head brought [to her] in her tender arms,* *she bathes it with tears, and longs to cover it in kisses.*
oscula captantem caput aufugit atque resufflat, *illa per impluvium turbine flantis abit.*	*But the head flees from her as she seeks to kiss it,* *and blows back;* *she is blown away in a whirlwind through the roof opening.*

Text 6. Ysengrimus, quoted in (Grimm, Teutonic*, 284).*

This motif, however, exists before Wilde. A medieval satirical text *Ysengrimus* narrates how Herod's daughter[9] "longed for the Baptist's marriage bed alone", and how the horrified father orders John's beheading, the daughter requests the head and clasping the head cries over it.

But as she seeks to kiss it, the severed head blows back at her and blows away driven by the whirlwind of his breath. The story identifies her as Herodias (instead of Salome!),[10] condemned to float through the air forever — folklore identified Herodias as the queen of the fairy worlds — and with Pharaildis, the patron saint of Ghent. Once again, if you're confused, you're not alone!

This text is quoted and commented in Jacob Grimm's, *Teutonic Mythology*, published in English in London in 1882,[11] so just a few years before Wilde's Salome. So, it is quite possible that Wilde knew it and was influenced by it.

I'll stop here for now, to give space to further conversation ...

[9] In the story she is weirdly identifies with Pharaildis,
[10] This confusion arises early on, as seen in the comparison between the Gospels.
[11] Grimm 1882: 284-285. (*Ysengrimus,* book 2, vv. 73-84)

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