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# Loosing a Shoe Latchet: Sandals and Footwear in the First Century

Shane A. Baker

During the 1964 season of excavations at Masada, archaeologists made a stunning and emotionally compelling discovery while working in the area of the elaborate palace complex built by Herod at the north end of the fortress.<sup>1</sup> Located beneath a pile of heavy rubble covering the ruins of a small Roman-style bathhouse, excavators found the only physical remains of Masada's Jewish defenders discovered at the site itself. Sprawled upon the steps leading to the cold-water pool of the baths and on the ground nearby were the skeletal remains of three individuals—a young man in his twenties, a young woman about eighteen, and an eleven-year-old child.<sup>2</sup>

Surprisingly, each body was accompanied by perishable organic artifacts that gave a rare glimpse into the Masada rebels' daily lives. Close by the man lay silvered armor scales, arrows, the remains of a prayer shawl, and an *ostrakon*. The dry atmosphere of the Judean desert had preserved the braided hair of the woman's scalp and several pairs of sandals, including a pair of nearly complete, delicately fashioned lady's sandals.<sup>3</sup> In stark contrast to the rather delicate sandals found with the body of the woman were the remnants of a Roman *caliga*, a type of heavy leather shoe with iron hobnails. These Roman shoes were found elsewhere in the fortress and are direct evidence of the Roman conquest and occupation of the site. These rare finds provide insight into the style of footwear that was common for both the Jewish inhabitants of Masada and the Roman army.

## **Grecian Footwear**

During the Hellenistic period, Greek footwear developed variations that are likely predecessors of the types of footwear worn at Masada in the first century. The composite sandal, which had features of both shoes and sandals, appeared at this time.<sup>4</sup> Also during this time, the tongue first appeared, usually on composite sandals but also occasionally on shoes. The tongue is a flat piece of shaped leather that covered the top of the instep, over or through which the sandal lacings crossed. The tongue was usually bent down over the knot near the ankle and covered the instep in an ornamental flap that was fringed or scalloped at the lower edge.<sup>5</sup>

The shape of sandal soles also varied. By about 300 B.C., a style of shaped sole became popular that curved inward between the first two toes where the thong attached at the front of the foot. In its earliest form, this indentation appears as a shallow notch with abrupt edges, but later became deeper and more rounded, flowing into the outline of the rounded and gracefully shaped soles. Occasionally, the entire outer edge of the sole was repeatedly notched to follow the shape of all the toes, producing an almost scalloped appearance.<sup>6</sup>

Subtle changes are evident as well in the style of lacing that accompanied changing styles of soles on Greek sandals. By the late fourth century, many sandals were made with loops on the side of the foot near the base of the toes so that the thong from between the toes was fed through these side loops and then back across the instep and the rear of the foot. The heel of the foot was often surrounded by an elaborate network of crossed straps that formed a latticework that enclosed much of the rear of the foot. Special gilded sandals were worn by persons of high rank, and sandals for women were sometimes constructed with special ornamental pieces on the instep.<sup>7</sup>

## **Roman Footwear**

Except for slaves, who were forbidden to wear sandals or shoes altogether, most Romans generally wore foot coverings both indoors and out, taking them off only before retiring to bed. The normal footwear could consist of either sandals or shoes, depending upon

the demands of specific circumstances. Three types of sandals were commonly worn, each being adapted to a specific purpose. *Soleae* were simple, hobnailed, leather-soled sandals that had a thong between the toes that tied at the instep.<sup>8</sup> *Crepidae* were heavier, thick leather-soled sandals fastened with leather straps that passed through eyelets on the upper portion of the sandal.<sup>9</sup> A *carbatina* was a sandal made with a soft leather sole and an open decorative upper that was fastened with ribbons or a lace. Both *crepidae* and *carbatina* had leather uppers that covered much of the foot but still left the toes bare.<sup>10</sup>

Along with sandals, a variety of boots and shoes were worn. *Calcei* were common, ankle-high, closed-toe boots that laced around the ankle. They were the forerunners of most of the shoes worn in Europe during the Middle Ages.

Buskins, higher boots that reached to midcalf, were worn by the more wealthy Roman citizens and exhibited a great deal of variety. These boots were usually partially open along the front and were held on with a system of cross-lacing. Buskins were frequently lined with the skins of small animals, the heads and claws of which were allowed to hang down over the tops as ornament.

*Soccei* were shoes constructed with a leather sole without hobnails and with a separate leather upper. Heavy, leather, military-style boots often fitted with hobnails, such as the examples found at Masada, were called *caligae*.<sup>11</sup> The Romans also introduced *gallicae*, heavy wooden shoes with coarse rawhide uppers that were used in wet weather and on muddy ground. These are the ancestors of modern overshoes. Both shoes and sandals were sometimes worn with loose cloth wrappings that protected the lower leg (*fascia*) but are not stockings in the modern sense.

Footwear served as a definite status indicator for the Roman empire, with colors and styles that were differentiated according to both sex and social rank. As noted, slaves were forbidden to wear shoes, except in unusual circumstances where their assigned tasks necessitated additional protection for the feet. Patricians' sandals were red with a moon-shaped ornament on the back. A special tall, boot-type shoe was reserved for depictions of persons who were not mortals. This category included gods, demons, and other allegorical figures, as well as human beings shown after death.

Thus on some sarcophagi the deceased is represented twice, once as a living man wearing normal footwear and once as a deceased person shod in the footgear of immortality.<sup>12</sup>

The widespread influence of the Romans guaranteed that many of these shoe and sandal types saw extensive distribution, and much of the world's footwear in succeeding periods derived from Roman shoes. The concept of enclosed footwear, especially military boots modeled after the caliga, was carried by the Roman legions to distant lands, and closed shoes appeared throughout the Middle East during the first century.

### **The Footwear of Masada**

Despite the wide variety of footwear developed and used by the Romans, the sandal remained the most common and widely worn type of footwear in the Middle East during the first century A.D. The vast majority of people, unable to afford shoes, probably used sandals almost exclusively. Scriptural references to footwear in both the Old and New Testament frequently make reference to sandals rather than shoes, and in many instances, sandals are probably the referent when the generic term *shoe* is used.

The archaeological excavations at Masada uncovered several relatively well-preserved examples of sandals and shoes worn by both the Sicarii and the men of the Roman siege forces. The exceptional conditions for preservation that prevailed in the area of the small Roman-style baths on the east end of the site permitted the excavations there to yield some of the best-preserved specimens at Masada. These included several pairs of sandals found near the skeleton of the woman. All of these associated materials, found in the vicinity of the baths, were dated to the period of the Masada incident.

The finds included one very finely made pair of women's sandals with a light leather sole and a leather thong for attachment. The soles of these sandals have a unique shape that is rounded at the heel but is squared and blunt at the front, a style apparently common to the period.<sup>13</sup> A rather delicate thong attachment of dual leather strips originates between the first and second toes and sweeps back to tie near the ankle and fasten to two leather tabs running up



a. Child's shoe



b. Scalloped sandal sole



c. Woman's sandal

Fig. 1. Sicarii footwear from Masada

from the sole on each side of the ankle. (See fig. 1c.) This type of sandal has also been found at sites in the Hever caves.<sup>14</sup>

A second type of sandal, represented by a much smaller pair also found near the body of the Sicarii woman, had a light, elegantly tapered leather sole with a scalloped edge outlining the area of the toes. This scalloped sole is similar to the earlier Greek style of shaped soles.<sup>15</sup> Because the straps are missing from these sandals, the manner of attachment cannot be determined, but they were probably attached by a light system of leather thongs like the other sandals found nearby. (See fig. 1b.)

Excavators found only one single example of an enclosed shoe associated with the Sicarii occupation. The specimen, although now somewhat shriveled and distorted, measures less than twelve centimeters in length and therefore is thought to have been made for a child. It is constructed with a heavier, layered leather sole and an ankle-high, full leather upper that enclosed most of the foot. (See fig. 1a.)

Evidence for shoes and sandals belonging to the Roman army came from several locations near the casemate wall and other various localities. A near-perfect example of a caliga was found with an intact strap and metal hobnails on the sole. The leather sole is rather stiff and is attached to the foot by a single strap across the instep. The leather upper enclosed the toes but was rather low cut so as to leave most of the top of the foot exposed. This specimen from Masada is lower cut and not as heavy as many other known examples. (See fig. 2.)



Fig. 2. Roman caliga. Notice the metal hobnails on the sole.

The fragmentary remains of a number of sandal straps were found throughout the site. These include a number of straps that are made of fancy openwork leather from various parts of the sandal. This type of elaborate strapping was common on many of the Roman sandals of the day and originated with the more complex, composite-style sandals developed by the Greeks.

The examples of footwear found at Masada give a glimpse of the styles worn by the Sicarii and the rank-and-file members of the Roman army. The woman's sandals appear to be a common, simple style that was utilized by people throughout the region. No examples of footwear worn by the Sicarii men were found, but they probably also wore simple sandals with leather bottoms and straps.

The Jewish inhabitants of Masada probably wore sandals most of the time when outdoors, but in accordance with well-established traditions took them off when entering the home. Children probably also wore sandals, although simple shoes were not unknown, as the Masada finds indicate. However, children likely usually went barefoot when playing outside. Roman soldiers were furnished with the bootlike caligae common to the army during this period, but they probably wore shoes most of the time as was the custom elsewhere in the empire. Undoubtedly, additional varieties of shoes and sandals similar to those already discussed were common to both groups during this period and were worn at Masada, but they have not been preserved or discovered.

### **Biblical Symbolism Involving Footwear**

From the very earliest times, feet and footwear were selectively imbued with symbolic meaning and surrounded by prescribed symbolic behavior on specific occasions.<sup>16</sup> In the book of Exodus, when God spoke from the burning bush, he gave Moses this injunction: "Draw not nigh hither: put off thy shoes from off thy feet, for the place whereon thou standest is holy ground" (Ex. 3:5). Likewise, when Joshua met the "captain of the Lord's host" near Jericho, he was similarly commanded to remove his shoes for he stood on holy ground (Josh. 5:15).

The practice of going unshod as a mark of reverence and respect for holy places seems to have been widespread in antiquity



and persists even today in many parts of the world. Moslems still remove their shoes before entering a mosque or when praying; in similar fashion, Latter-day Saints remove street shoes before entering the sacred areas of modern temples.

Although the scriptures make it clear that the practice of removing one's shoes in consecrated or holy places dates at least as early as the Exodus, it probably has origins long before that first recorded example in the Bible. Already by this early point in history, the practice of taking off one's shoes while inside a home appears to have been well established among Semitic peoples. Accordingly, the Israelites were instructed specifically during the first Passover to eat standing and *with their shoes on* (Ex. 12:11) as a symbol of their flight out of Egypt. Whereas today it might seem odd for us to be told to eat with our shoes on, apparently cultural mores on the matter were already so set that the Israelites would not have left their shoes on without being ordered by the Lord to do so.

It appears that going without shoes was also sometimes used as a symbol of mourning (Ezek. 24:17, 23) or of distress or humiliation<sup>17</sup> (Deut. 25:7-10; 2 Sam. 15:30; Isa. 20:2-4). By the time of the Judges, it was a common practice to seal or "confirm" certain important legal obligations or transactions by taking off a shoe or sandal and giving it to the person with whom the transaction was made. This action was considered to be a sign or "testimony in Israel" that sealed the arrangement, particularly in transactions involving real estate (Ruth 4:7).

Throughout the biblical period, it was a mark of hospitality to wash the feet of visitors or at least provide water and a basin so that the guests could wash their own feet. Since most people wore sandals and the climate was relatively hot and dusty, frequent foot washing became not only a luxury, but a necessity. Feet were routinely washed after a long journey and before going to bed (Gen. 19:2; 2 Sam. 11:8). The custom is described as early as the period of the patriarchs and continued into the early Christian era (see Gen. 18:4; 24:32; 43:24; 1 Sam. 25:41; Luke 7:44; and John 13:4-15).

The act of washing the feet of a guest carried the connotation not only of hospitality, but also of humility and subservience. The actual washing was often performed by servants, and so the Savior

chose this example as a way to teach his followers the need to serve one another (Luke 13:4-15). A servant would pour water over the guest's feet into a basin or bowl, washing them with his or her hands, and then drying the feet with a cloth towel.

By the first century A.D., this almost ritualized washing of the feet had become closely affiliated with several other related practices. As already noted, sandals were always removed upon entering a house. Frequently, a servant was detailed with the responsibility of removing the visitor's or master's sandals, washing the feet, and then taking care of the footwear until its owner was in need of it again. If a master were to be simply passing through a home or walking barefoot on smooth ground or grass, the servant would follow, carrying the sandals in hand in order to supply them again when they were needed. This job of carrying the master's sandals was considered to be the most menial and lowly responsibility that could be performed.<sup>18</sup>

John the Baptist uses the symbolism surrounding the act of removing and carrying sandals to show his subordination and deference to Jesus Christ. In trying to help his followers understand the significance of the Savior's role and John's relationship to him, John pursues this figurative example in several different ways. At one point he states, "He that cometh after me is mightier than I, whose shoes I am not worthy to bear" (Matt. 3:11). Aside from simply indicating that he was not worthy to carry Christ's shoes, John also states that he not even worthy to loose or take off the shoes of Jesus. The Gospel writers Mark, Luke, and John all record John the Baptist as having said, "There cometh one mightier than I after me, the latchet of whose shoes I am not worthy to stoop and unloose" (Mark 1:7; Luke 3:16; John 1:27; see also 1 Ne. 10:8). The shoe latchet here is actually the long leather thongs or laces used on many first-century-style sandals to fasten them to the foot. As previously noted, leather straps or thongs were used by both the Greeks and the Romans and appeared in several styles throughout the biblical region. The use of the term "latchet" suggests a more elaborate sandal lace than the simple thong-type tie sometimes used.

John attempted to highlight the transcendent role that Christ would play in contrast to John's own humble ministry by reaffirming his unworthiness to untie the Savior's sandals in order to

perform the humble service of washing His feet or carrying His sandals. John drove home his point by couching it in terms of common cultural practices that would have been familiar and important to his audience.

## Conclusion

Though dried, shrunken, and curled by the dust and weather of the centuries that have passed since they were buried at Masada, the examples of footwear found at the site convey the essence of Middle Eastern footwear. The Roman caligae uncovered at the site undoubtedly look much like the footwear worn by the Roman legionaries of the time and impart some sense of the strength, determination, and organization of an empire that then ruled most of the known world. The sandals and shoes found at Masada differ little from those that would have been worn by Jesus Christ, Mary Magdalene, John the Baptist, Matthew, Peter, or any of the disciples.

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>Gideon Foerster, "Art and Architecture," in *Masada V: The Yigael Yadin Excavations 1963-1965, Final Reports*, ed. Joseph Aviram, Gideon Foerster, and Ehud Netzer (Jerusalem: Israel Exploration Society and Hebrew University of Jerusalem, 1995), 193-205.

<sup>2</sup>Yigael Yadin, *The Excavation of Masada 1963/64: Preliminary Report* (Jerusalem: Israel Exploration Society, 1965), 16-17.

<sup>3</sup>Yadin, *Excavation of Masada*, 16-17.

<sup>4</sup>Mary Wallace, "Sutor Supra Crepidam," *American Journal of Archaeology* 44 (1940): 215.

<sup>5</sup>Wallace, "Sutor," 215.

<sup>6</sup>Wallace, "Sutor," 215-216.

<sup>7</sup>Wallace, "Sutor," 217.

<sup>8</sup>Lesley Adkins and Roy A. Adkins, *Handbook to Life in Ancient Rome* (New York: Facts on File, 1994), 345.

<sup>9</sup>Jerome Carcopino, *Daily Life in Ancient Rome: The People and the City at the Height of the Empire* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1940), 153.

<sup>10</sup>Adkins and Adkins, *Handbook*, 345.

<sup>11</sup>Carcopino, *Daily Life in Ancient Rome*, 153.

<sup>12</sup>A. L. Frothingham, "The Footgear of Immortality in the Redating of Roman Sculptures," *American Journal of Archaeology*, 2d ser., 22 (1918): 67.

<sup>13</sup>Yigael Yadin, *Masada: Herod's Fortress and the Zealots' Last Stand* (New York: Random House, 1966), 54.

<sup>14</sup>Yadin, *Masada*, 17.

<sup>15</sup>Wallace, "Sutor," 215-216.

<sup>16</sup>See James M. Freeman, *Manners and Customs of the Bible* (reprint, Plainfield, N.J.: Logos International, 1972); and Fred H. Wight, *Manners and Customs of Bible Lands* (Chicago: Moody, 1953).

<sup>17</sup>Freeman, *Manners*, 115.

<sup>18</sup>Freeman, *Manners*, 333.