

Herod's Horrid Death

By Nikos Kokkinos

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Physicians have long debated what caused King Herod's death, but there is no doubt (or disagreement) that his demise was a horrid one. Many would say it was also well-deserved.

We know the king's symptoms in some detail from the first-century Jewish historian Josephus. Josephus actually wrote two accounts, the first in his *Jewish War*—a narrative of the First Jewish Revolt against Rome, 66–70 C.E., written in the late 70s—and the second in his *Jewish Antiquities*—a much longer history of the Jewish people, written in the 90s. He wrote both works while he was in Rome. The second account of Herod's final illness is more detailed than the first, but both are largely dependent on the firsthand account of Nicolaus of Damascus, who was Herod's daily companion and thus an eyewitness to the king's condition.¹ Nicolaus was also in direct contact with the court physicians who treated Herod. Nicolaus wrote a 144-volume history of the world, but unfortunately almost all that remains of the Jewish section of this work is what was quoted or otherwise used by Josephus.

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Herod the Great became seriously ill when he was about 70 years old, in 4 B.C.; while ill he moved to his palace in Jericho. His final illness lasted only a few months. During that time he briefly rallied once, but then quickly succumbed (*Antiquities* 17.183). It began with a vague condition causing “uncontrolled anger” (*Antiquities* 17.148). Josephus tells us that Herod's illness was considered to be “incurable” (*Antiquities* 17.150). Elsewhere, Josephus stresses Herod's cruelty in his last days (*Antiquities* 17.164).

When Herod's illness “increased greatly,” a fever fell upon him: “The fever he had was a mild one, which did not so much indicate the inflammation to those touching as contribute to the malignancy of the innards. Because of this he also had a terrible desire to scratch, for it was impossible not to seek relief” (*Antiquities* 17.168–169).² This was only the beginning, however:

There was also an ulceration of the intestines with particularly terrible pains in the colon, and a transparent swelling of fluid around the feet. And similarly there was a malignancy in the abdominal area, as well as a putrefaction in the private member which was creating worms. His breathing had a high pitch [literally “upright tension”], and it was extremely loathsome because of the disagreeable exhalation and the frequency of gasping [literally “density of asthma”]. He also had spasms in every limb that took on unendurable force. (*Antiquities* 17.169)

At this point, his physicians decided to move him to the hot springs at Callirhoë beyond the Jordan River, near where it flows into the Dead Sea. Apparently, bathing in the springs did not improve his condition, so his physicians decided to bathe him in warm oil. This nearly killed him (*Antiquities* 17.172).

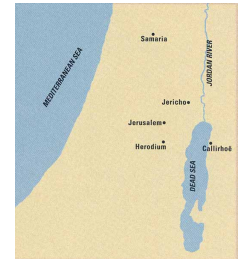
On Herod's return to Jericho a melancholy seized him and made him enraged at everyone (*Antiquities* 17.173). As his pains continued to increase, he refused to take any food.

At one point he asked for an apple and a knife. Josephus explains that it was Herod's custom to pare apples himself. But instead of peeling the apple, he attempted to use the knife to commit suicide, so great was his pain. He was prevented by his cousin Achiab whose cries soon brought help (*Antiquities* 17.183–184).

By this time, Herod was no longer able to stand (*Antiquities* 17.187; cf. 161). Five days later, he expired (*Antiquities* 17.191).

As noted in the citations, this account is taken from the *Antiquities*, which is generally considered more reliable than the *War* for the period before the outbreak of the Jewish revolt and the events leading up to it. With regard to Herod's final illness, the *War*, although it misses some detail, does clarify a few points, such as Herod's breathing condition. It seems that he could not breathe unless he was in an upright position (*orthopnoia*) and his breath was generally short and rapid (*dyspnoia*). Near the end he also developed a convulsive cough (*vêx*).

Josephus attributes Herod's suffering to God's judgment on his sins—a conclusion one might expect from Josephus, given his priestly background. Herod was born to a noble



Idumean family that had converted to Judaism. His Helleno-Semitic cultural background provides the context for understanding much of his reign. A fortunate but also ingenious politician, Herod ruled Judea *de jure* from 40 B.C.E., by appointment of the Roman Senate, with the approval of Mark Antony and Octavian (later Augustus). He ruled *de facto* from 37 B.C.E., when he defeated Antigonus, the last Hasmonean king of Judea.³ Although Herod was hated by most Jews, the Greeks and the Romans found his charm (complemented by extravagant benefactions) irresistible. His passion for grandiose architecture was epitomized in the building of the “golden” Temple of Jerusalem, spectacularly destroyed by the Roman general Titus in 70 C.E.



Herod's addiction to pleasure was manifest in the quality and size of his harem—with ten beautiful wives and numerous concubines and boy lovers. His dynasty flourished: We now know of 15 of his children, 20 grandchildren, 13 great-grandchildren, eight great-great-grandchildren and two great-great-great-grandchildren.

Although occasionally munificent, Herod was generally oppressive to his subjects and often ruthless, even by the standards of the savage world in which he lived. After his death, the Jewish deputies in Rome, perhaps slightly melodramatically, complained to the Emperor that “the miseries which Herod in the course of a few years had inflicted on the Jews surpassed all that their forefathers had suffered during all the time since they left Babylon to return to their country” (*War* 2.86).

Herod's extermination of his many opponents (and supposed opponents), notably the Hasmoneans and their supporters, is clearly recorded. He executed his beloved wife Miriamme (the granddaughter of a Hasmonean ruler, Hyrcanus II, whom he had earlier also executed) because he suspected her of adultery. (“Mariamme's hatred of [Herod],” Josephus tells us, “was as great as his love for her.”) He also executed three of his own sons, Alexander I, Aristobulus I and Antipater II. This gave rise to the celebrated phrase attributed to Augustus: *Melius est Herodis porcum esse quam filium*—“Better to be Herod's pig [as a convert to Judaism, Herod would not eat pork] than his son.”⁴

Eusebius, the fourth-century Christian historian, concludes his description of Herod's reign this way:

It is not now possible even to give a summary list of the ways by which [Herod] darkened what were reckoned the glories of his reign, by the successive misfortunes of his house, by the foul murder of wife and children and of the rest who were closest to him in family and in affection; for the shadows in their story, which Josephus narrated at length in the history of Herod, are darker than any in tragic drama.⁵

Among the “glories” of Herod's reign was his ample modernization program. His Hellenized cultural background is reflected in his education (Greek philosophy, support of gymnasia and writing of memoirs), his prowess and love of theater and sport (construction of hippodromes, organization of festivals and patronage of the Olympic Games), his journeys to Greece and his benefactions there, his patronage of religious architecture and indeed in his interest in non-Jewish cults (Apollo, Hermes, the Dioscuri and Kore).

Even the names he chose for some of his children—Philip, Olympias, Alexander and Roxane—recall the royal family at Macedonia. So did the Greek names of most of his wives—Doris, Malthace, Cleopatra, Pallas, Phaedra and Elpis. No wonder Herod admitted feeling much “closer to the Greeks than to the Jews” (*Antiquities* 19.329).

Despite his achievements and the prosperity of his kingdom, it was, one must not forget, at a considerable cost to the majority of the Jewish society, which had to bear heavy taxations and religious indignities. Among other things, he erected a great golden eagle (the bird of Zeus and a Hellenistic and Roman symbol) over the Temple gate. When the people thought he was dying, a group of young men tore down the eagle and cut it to pieces.

Herod knew that he was hated by his Jewish subjects, despite his efforts to appease them. As he lay dying in Jericho, he called a group of Jewish leaders to his bedside. When they came, he had them imprisoned in the hippodrome. Fearing that he would not be truly lamented on his death, nor mourned appropriately for a king of his stature, he gave orders that when he died, his death should be kept a secret until the men in the hippodrome had first been murdered. His death would then be announced, assuring that the mourning at his funeral would be genuine. Fortunately, his orders were disobeyed and the men who were shut up in the hippodrome were released on Herod's death.

Before undertaking a diagnosis of the cause of death, we need to look at Herod's medical history. Herod's physical condition in the early part of his life was reckoned to be excellent. He was said to have been foremost in hunting, and distinguished himself in horsemanship. As a fighter he was invincible, bending the bow and throwing the javelin with great precision. He fought in (and won) many wars (*War* 1.430). He survived numerous assassination attempts (*Antiquities* 14.462–463; 15.282–285; 17.55; *War* 1.340–341, 577) and plots to poison him (*Antiquities* 17.69; *War* 1.592). On one occasion the roof of a house collapsed on him (*Antiquities* 14.455; *War* 1.331). He was nearly shipwrecked at sea (*Antiquities* 14.377; *War* 1.280). In all these cases, through luck or otherwise, he escaped unscathed.

His first known illness occurred when he was about 30, in 42 B.C.E., before he became king. He was in Damascus at the

time, Josephus tells us, and wanted to return to Jerusalem to help his elder brother Phasaël quell a disturbance there, but was prevented from returning by an unexpected illness (*nosos*), of which no details are given (*Antiquities* 14.295; *War* 1.236).

A few years later, in his war against the Hasmonean ruler Antigonus and before his conquest of Jerusalem in 37 B.C.E., Herod was struck by a javelin in his *pleura* or side (*War* 1.332), around the area of the *lapara* or kidney (*Antiquities* 14.456). We are not told how serious the wound was, but since he continued fighting, it would not have been great.

After he murdered his beloved Mariamme in 29/28 B.C.E., Herod became psychologically disturbed and suffered prolonged delusions (*Antiquities* 15.241–242; *War* 1.435–436). He was then about 45. In *Antiquities* (15.240–242), Josephus describes in some detail both his lament and his disturbed state:

His love for her was not passionless nor such as arises from familiarity, but in its very earliest beginnings had been a divine madness, and even with freedom of cohabitation it was not restrained from growing greater. But now more than ever he seemed to be a prey to it as if by a kind of divine punishment for the death of Mariamme. And he would frequently call out for her and frequently utter unseemly laments ... And so he put aside the administration of the kingdom, and was so far overcome by his passion that he would actually order his servants to summon Mariamme as if she were still alive and able to heed them.

Soon thereafter a pestilential disease (*loimôdês*) hit Jerusalem, which drove Herod from the city (on the pretext of having to participate in a hunt). While Josephus does not say that the king himself became infected, we know Herod did fall ill while withdrawing to Samaria. There he developed an inflammation (*phlogôsis*) and what seems to have been a numbness (*peisis*) of the neck area (*inion*), besides temporarily losing his reason (*dianoias parallagê*). His condition became so critical that his physicians “thought it best to give him whatever he might be moved to ask for, thus leaving to Fortune the faint hope of his recovery” (*Antiquities* 15.243–246).

At one point he also had a horrible hunting accident, falling from his horse and impaling himself on his own spears (*Antiquities* 16.315). Though unlikely, the impaling could have aggravated his previous wound in the kidney, had the injury been on the same side.

As time went on, the battles he had to fight both inside and outside his kingdom, the dissension and murders within his court, his sexual and drinking excesses, his tiresome journeys overseas—all caught up with Herod. He began looking old. He dyed his hair. He developed a suspicious mind and an uncontrollable anger that often led to cruelty. At the age of about 65, Herod became seriously ill again, under unknown circumstances, shortly before the death of his brother Pheroras in around 7 B.C. His final illness was not far off now.

For more than a century modern physicians have tried to diagnose the cause of Herod's death. There are many difficulties: Are the descriptions in Josephus based on reliable eyewitness accounts devoid of much bias? If so, have they been accurately transmitted? Can we translate the ancient words into equivalent modern medical terms? Does more than one illness satisfy the same list of symptoms?

Classicists have argued that we cannot take Josephus' description of Herod's final illness at face value since the historian may have been biased against the king. Infection by “worms” is suspicious, for example, because it sounds like poetic justice: Worm-infestation was seen as a fitting end for detested rulers—a monstrous life calling for a miserable death. In hostile descriptions, Antiochus IV Epiphanes (d. 163 B.C.), Sulla (d. 78 B.C.), Agrippa I (d. 44 A.D.) and Galerius (d. 311 A.D.) were all described as dying “worm-eaten.”⁶ Could Herod's ignominious condition have been wishful thinking and not historical reality?

The growth of larvae on the skin and in open wounds is a real medical phenomenon, and many historical figures—including unpopular ones—have actually suffered from it. Philip II, a detested king of Spain (d. 1598 A.D.) is one example.⁷ Each case must therefore be taken on individual merit. Even if we allow for unsympathetic bias in the adjectives used by Josephus (either his own, or derived from an ‘anti-Herodian’ source that contradicted Nicolaus), the individual symptoms—including worm-infestation—have been recognized by medical experts as being extremely realistic and accurate.⁸

Listed in the sidebar “[Herod's Symptoms and Diagnoses](#)” are 16 symptoms that Josephus reports Herod as suffering from, as well as the 8 different diagnoses that have been proposed in modern times.

The first diagnosis was made in 1886 by Ernest Renan, a famous 19th century scholar, who gave poisoning as the cause of Herod's final illness. Renan was no physician, however, and his diagnosis was not backed up by an argument. The next modern diagnosis to be offered was by Edward Merrins in 1904: cardio-renal failure, or failure of the heart and kidneys. That remains today the majority medical opinion. It is also the view of the medical expert I consulted, Walter Y. Loebel, Fellow of the Royal College of Physicians in London.

Dr. Loebel finds four of Herod's symptoms particularly diagnostic. The intolerable itch can be attributed, he says, to kidney

failure, which causes waste chemicals to accumulate in the blood. This would have been the end-stage of a number of processes, including “diminished oxygen to the kidneys due to arteriosclerosis [hardening of the arteries].”

Dr. Loebel interprets the transparent swelling around Herod’s feet as edema, a build-up of fluids that often occurs in older people, especially in their ankles and legs. Bedridden people can also get it in their lower back and genitalia, he says. The commonest causes are “heart failure, renal [kidney] failure and dilution of the blood in anemia.” Another type of edema—pulmonary edema, or edema of the lungs—may have contributed to his demise.

The related putrefaction in Herod’s private member, Dr. Loebel sees as “myiasis.” He explains that “the moist skin with edema and the hot climate would have attracted flies who laid eggs, developing larvae looking like worms—[like] maggots used by fishermen!”

Dr. Loebel regards Herod’s inability to breathe unless in an upright position (*orthopnoia*) as “the most reliable part of the description.” As used in clinical medicine, “orthopnea is a typical sign in heart failure, renal failure or anemia.”

His conclusion is that, most likely, “Herod died of age-related failure of his heart and kidneys with terminal edema of the lungs.”⁹

Another theory that has recently gained fresh support from the medical profession is that Herod suffered (and died) from diabetes mellitus. This is open to criticism, because it is partly based on the mistaken assumption that Herod had an increased appetite. This assumption arises from a corrupted word in Josephus’ text in *Antiquities*, which says that Herod had an insatiable need to “receive” (*dexasthai*) something, which translators have assumed to be food, as opposed to a need to “scratch” (*odaxasthai*). My version, based on this emendation, clearly agrees with the “itch” (*knêsmos*) given in the corresponding passage in *War*. Hunger is not actually mentioned in the account: When Herod asks for an apple, his aim is only to get hold of the paring knife to kill himself. Dr. Loebel says that in diabetes, “when there is lack of insulin, the most obvious complaints are an increased thirst, the production of much more urine and weight loss—progressing to confusion and coma.” These symptoms are absent in Herod’s case.¹⁰

Whatever the medical reality behind Herod’s demise, it is clear that he suffered much pain that was not alleviated by his transfer to the hot springs at Callirhoë, and indeed that led him to attempt suicide. It is also apparent that his mind had severely deteriorated, leading to his command that on his death the community leaders imprisoned in the hippodrome should be killed, a command fortunately disobeyed.

Some surprising new evidence regarding Herod’s mental state has recently been discovered in the lava desert of northeastern Jordan—a 2,000-year-old graffito written in Safaitic (an early Arabic script) by a local nomad, referring to “the year Herod died mad!”¹¹ This may reflect only the personal opinion of one individual, but it is the only surviving contemporaneous testimony, aside from Josephus. It converges well with what we would otherwise conclude: Herod, reviled king of Israel, was horribly troubled in both body and mind when he finally met his end.¹²

Endnotes:

1. Josephus, *Antiquities* 17.99.
2. I offer my translation (more literal than convenient) as an improvement upon that of Ralph Marcus in the Loeb Classical Library’s volume 8 of Josephus. While there are a few problems with the Greek text of *Antiquities*, only one is worth mentioning here. I translate the word *odaxasthai* as “to scratch.” This word is a modern but necessary emendation—the manuscripts erroneously give *dexasthai*, that is “to receive”—because in the parallel account of *War* the word is *knêsmos*, meaning “itch.” The problem is an old one. Already the Latin translator of Josephus, unable to emend the text, accepted the reading *dexasthai* and went on to render the sentence with food (*cibus*) in mind. But this is not right. Diagnoses based on the interpretation that Herod had a terrible desire “to receive” food or drink, are therefore invalid.
3. On Herod and his background, and for elaboration of any detail not referenced below, see my *The Herodian Dynasty: Origins, Role in Society and Eclipse* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1998).
4. The attribution to Augustus is noted by the 5th-century writer Macrobius, in his *Saturnalia* 2.4.11.
5. Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History* 1.8.4.
6. See T. Africa, “Worms and the Death of Kings: A Cautionary Note on Disease and History,” *Classical Antiquity* 1 (1982), pp. 1–17.
7. See C. Petrie, *Philip II of Spain* (London: Eyre & Spottiswoode, 1964), p. 309; G. Parker, *Philip II* (Boston: Little Brown, 1978), pp. 197–198.
8. The attempt by D.J. Ladouceur (“The Death of Herod the Great,” *Classical Philology* 76 [1981], pp. 25–34) to show that Herod’s final illness is based solely on Thucydides’ account of the Athenian plague (*History of the Peloponnesian War* 2.49–50) is not convincing, and it still tampers with the Greek text. G. Mader (*Josephus and the Politics of Historiography* [Leiden: Brill, 2000], p. 56) supports Ladouceur but offers no evidence. We must recognize that the Greek literary assistants employed by Josephus in the *War* did not rely heavily on Thucydides (unlike *Antiquities*)—see H. St. J. Thackeray, *Josephus the Man and the Historian* (repr. New York: Ktav, 1967), pp. 104–106; T. Rajak, *Josephus the Historian and his Society* (London: Duckworth, 1983), pp. 233–236; S. Schwartz,

Josephus and Judaeen Politics (Leiden: Brill, 1990), pp. 24, 38.

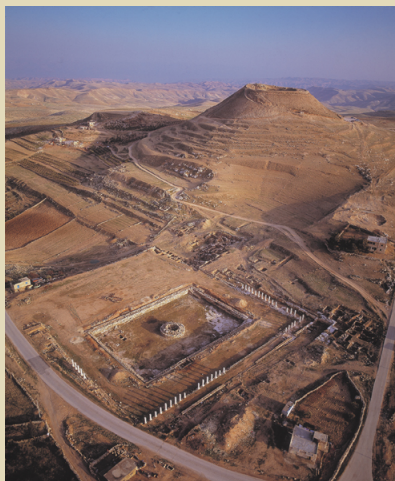
9. Walter Loebel has been invited to contribute a full diagnosis in a Herodian volume I am editing—one of two volumes of papers read in the international conference *The World of the Herods and the Nabataeans* (held at the British Museum in April 2001). I am grateful for the permission to use his statements here.
10. Insulin is produced in the pancreas, so not surprisingly cancer of the pancreas has also been suggested. But Dr. Loebel observes that “in cancer of the pancreas the pain is in the back and not the abdomen.”
11. The graffito was discovered in the late 1980s by G.M.H. King, and will be published in her forthcoming collection of more than 2,000 Safaitic inscriptions. It was mentioned briefly by M.C.A. Macdonald, “Herodian Echoes in the Syrian Desert,” in S. Bourke and J.-P. Descœudres (eds.), *Trade, Contact and the Movement of Peoples in the Eastern Mediterranean: Studies in Honour of J.B. Hennessy* (Sydney: Meditarch, 1995), p. 286. I thank both for sending me information at an early stage.
12. Poisoning: E. Renan, *Les Apôtres* (Paris: M. Lévy, 1886), p. 65; J. Preuss, *Biblisch-Talmudische Medizin* (Berlin: Karger, 1911), pp. 190–195.
Cardio-renal failure: E.M. Merrins, “The Deaths of Antiochus IV, Herod the Great, and Herod Agrippa I,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 61 (1904), pp. 558–560; E.W.G. Masterman, *Hygiene and Disease in Palestine in Modern and in Biblical Times* (London: Palestine Exploration Fund, 1920), p. 55; N. Manson and V. Kalbian, published in S. Perowne, ed., *The Life and Times of Herod the Great* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1956), pp. 185–186; A.T. Sandison, “The Last Illness of Herod the Great, King of Judaea,” *Medical History* 11 (1967), pp. 381–388; G.M. Burden, “Examination of Literary Evidence Points to Heart Failure as the Cause of Herod’s Death,” *The Celator* 6:1 (January, 1992), p. 34; S.S. Kotttek, *Medicine and Hygiene in the Works of Flavius Josephus* (Leiden: Brill, 1994), pp. 186–190.
Liver cirrhosis: M. Neuburger, *Die Medizin in Flavius Josephus* (Bad Reichenhall: Bachkunst, 1919), p. 58; J.O. Leibowitz, published in A.T. Sandison, “The Last Illness of Herod the Great, King of Judaea,” *Medical History* 11 (1967), p. 385; and in A. Schalit, *König Herodes: Der Mann und sein Werk* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1969), pp. 639–640.
Sexually transmitted disease: R. Eisler *lésous Vasileus ou Vasileusas*, vol. 1, (Heidelberg: C. Winter, 1929), p. 156.
Cancer of the bowels: A.H.M. Jones, *The Herods of Judaea* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1938), p. 47.
Diabetes mellitus: S. Muntner, “Qôrôth,” *Vierteljahresschrift für die Geschichte der Medizin und der Naturwissenschaften* 1 (1953), pp. 134–142.; J. McSherry, “Worms, Diabetes and King Herod the Great,” *Journal of Medical Biography* 5 (1997), pp. 167–169; W.R. Litchfield, “The Bittersweet Demise of Herod the Great,” *Journal of the Royal Society of Medicine* 91 (1998), pp. 283–284.
Cancer of the pancreas: J. Meyshan “The Disease of Herod the Great, King of Judaea,” *Harefuah: Journal of the Medical Association of Israel* 53 (1957), pp. 154–156 (in Hebrew with summaries in English and French); I. Buhaû, “Über die Erkrankung und den Tod des Herodes,” *Deutsche Medizinische Wochenschrift* 88 (1963), pp. 287–288.
Amoebic dysentery: A. Patrick, published in A.T. Sandison, “The Last Illness of Herod the Great, King of Judaea,” *Medical History* 11 (1967), pp. 385–386.

SIDEBAR

Where Is Herod Buried?

By Eric Wargo

033



The first century Jewish historian Josephus had a lot to say about Herod’s horrible death, and even gives a good description of his opulent funeral. He writes that “all the royal ornaments” were brought forth for the procession that took the king from Jericho, where he died: “The bier was of solid gold, studded with precious stones, and had a covering of purple, embroidered with various colors; on this lay the body enveloped in a purple robe, a diadem encircling the head and surmounted by a crown of gold, the sceptre beside his right hand.” Flanked by his sons, servants, officers and troops arrayed as for battle, “The body was ... conveyed for a distance of two hundred furlongs to Herodium, where, in accordance with the directions of the deceased, it was interred. So ended Herod’s reign.”

The problem is, nobody has ever found Herod’s tomb.

In 23 B.C., Herod had a natural hill 8 miles south of Jerusalem topped with fill, to create an impressive cone that rises 2,460 feet above sea level.

Sunken like a volcanic crater into the artificial mountain’s flat summit is a 207-foot-wide circular courtyard, bounded by double walls into which are set four towers (see cover photo). In the courtyard were several buildings, including a reception area, a peristyle courtyard, and an elegant Roman bath. During

the First and Second Jewish Revolts against Rome (67–70 C.E. and 132–135 C.E.) the mountain palace also served as a hideout for rebels, who converted the reception area to a synagogue and also dug extensive defensive tunnels under the hill's northern slope (although it isn't known if the system was ever actually put to use against Roman attackers).^a

Since 1972, Hebrew University professor Ehud Netzer has dug at Herodium and made many important discoveries, such as the defensive tunnel system; and guided by aerial photographs, he has also unearthed buried structures at the foot of the hill. Over his many years digging at the site, Netzer has uncovered a whole palace complex called Lower Herodium, situated at the base of the hill's northern slope. The complex was dominated by a huge palace and a 135- by 210-foot swimming pool with a pavillion in the middle. However, the Holy Grail of Netzer's archaeological quest continues to elude him: Herod's final resting place.

Although many scholars feel that the tomb must be on top of the hill somewhere, Netzer has bucked conventional wisdom by concentrating his search in Lower Herodium, where he believes he has found clear evidence of structures built specifically for Herod's funeral and burial. Running east-west just north of the lower palace is a 1,100-foot-long, 80-foot-wide terrace, called the Course. Although he initially identified it as a hippodrome, Netzer now is certain that this long platform was actually built for the king's funeral procession. Even more significant is the Monumental Building at the Course's west end, which Netzer believes was probably Herod's mausoleum. Built partially into the hill bedrock and originally decorated with frescoes, it is an elaborate hall enclosed by 10-foot-thick walls with niches formed by pilasters—a typical Roman-Herodian feature—and is similar in layout to the Roman temple to Diana at Nimes, France. (For more about the Roman influences on Herodian architecture, see David Jacobson's article, "Herod's Roman Temple," in this issue). The thick walls were probably necessary to support a dome, a second story or a monumental roof. Unfortunately, excavations to the north (away from the hill) and south (towards it) have so far yielded no signs of the tomb entrance that Netzer had hoped to find near this edifice.

Netzer found a number of beautifully carved ashlar adjacent to the Monumental Building, and he believes they may originally have come from the tomb's facade or vestibule. To the southeast of the Monumental Building he has also found a *mikveh* (ritual bath), further suggesting that the tomb entrance could have been nearby (since those who had interred the body would have been required to purify themselves in a *mikveh* afterwards). Unfortunately, much of the evidence has been scrambled by the subsequent occupation of Lower Herodium during the Byzantine period: The ashlar had been moved from their original location for use in the construction of a church, so their position now provides little clue to where the tomb entrance might be.

Is Netzer searching in the wrong place?

Possibly so, in the opinion of scholars who see the imposing construction on top of the hill as a more fitting (and Roman-style) mausoleum for such an imposing king as Herod.¹ And one man—retired geophysicist Lambert Dolphin, a specialist in remote sensing—claims to have evidence that there is something inside the apparently solid base of the large (east) tower. With his colleagues from the Menlo Park, California research firm SRI International, Dolphin used ground-penetrating radar and seismic instruments to detect underground chambers at several sites in Israel and Egypt. In 1983, with the approval of Netzer, Dolphin's team used geophysical instruments to search in Upper and Lower Herodium for signs of hidden chambers or subterranean voids that could be tombs. On their very first day, two groups—one using radar, the other using seismic equipment—independently found what appeared to be a room hidden deep inside the east tower's base.²

According to Dolphin, "The radar and the seismic echoes from the Eastern Tower at Upper Herodium are striking echoes — not typical of a fault or crack, but more likely due to a room." Dolphin doesn't know what is in the room, and there is no way of knowing without looking inside; to date it remains unexcavated. (During their stay, Dolphin's team also found several underground cavities in Lower Herodium, including underneath the Monumental Building.)

Proving or disproving the theory that there's a room within the east tower would be a relatively simple matter, according to Dolphin: "[It] could easily be done by drilling a few small holes (1 to 4 inches in diameter), and inserting a TV camera. This would avoid damaging the tower unnecessarily."

Netzer's opinion, however, is that the SRI team's 1983 findings were not as clear as Dolphin claims. Like so much in science, he says, their data are subject to a good deal of interpretation. And even if there is a cavity of some sort inside the tower, the idea that it could be Herod's elusive burial chamber is, Netzer says, "quite nonsense." The east tower was one of four, he points out—it didn't stand alone—and he adds that it was common to build towers on solid bases—so there's no reason to conclude from its design that the tower was really a tomb.

But there's a much more fundamental reason why Herod cannot be buried in Upper Herodium, according to Netzer: "The ancient Jews did not bury their dead inside buildings," he wrote in a 1983 **BAR** article, "especially buildings that had been used as dwellings. They did not even use places attached to dwellings for burials. Tombs and cemeteries had to be isolated."^b The archaeologist still stands by this view—is more sure than ever of it, in fact: "I have no doubt that the mountain was built as a palace," he says, "and Jews didn't bury in palaces."

Which is not to say that the burial chamber isn't somewhere beneath that palace. Even if it is not above ground in the buildings or tower at the top of the hill, it could be "20 or 50 meters under it," Netzer concedes—reached by a long cave or passage that probably has an outlet somewhere in Lower Herodium. It's just a matter of finding it, and Netzer hasn't given up his dream of doing just that.

Footnotes:

- a. See Ehud Netzer, "[Jewish Rebels Dig Strategic Tunnel System](#)," **BAR** 14:04.
- b. Ehud Netzer, "[Searching for Herod's Tomb](#)," **BAR** 09:03.

Endnotes:

1. See Duane W. Roller, *The Building Program of Herod the Great* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), p. 167.
2. Lambert Dolphin, "Geophysical Exploration in Israel: The 1983 Field Season," www.ldolphin.org/geophysisr.html.



Duby Tal

The artificial mountain of Herodium, with the palace complex in the foreground.

Herod's Horrid Death

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SIDEBAR

Herod's Symptoms and Diagnoses

034

Symptoms

- Muscular weakness
- Mild fever
- Intolerable itch over the whole skin
- Strong pains in the colon from ulceration of the entrails
- Transparent swellings around the feet as in dropsy
- Malignancy in the abdominal area

- Putrefaction of the private member, creating worms
- Orthopnea or high-pitched breathing
- Disagreeable breath
- Dyspnea or frequent gasping
- Spasms in all limbs of unendurable force
- Fainting and turning eyes up as though dead, when immersed in warm oil
- Melancholy and enragement
- Inability to take food due to overpowering pains
- Sustained convulsive cough
- Attempted suicide

Modern Diagnoses

- Poisoning^a
- Cardio-renal failure^b
- Liver cirrhosis^c
- Sexually transmitted disease^d
- Cancer of the bowels^e
- Diabetes mellitus^f
- Cancer of the pancreas^g
- Amoebic dysentery^h

Footnotes:

- a. E. Renan, *Les Apôtres* (Paris: M. Lévy, 1886), p. 65; J. Preuss, *Biblisch-Talmudische Medizin* (Berlin: Karger, 1911), pp. 190–195.
- b. E.M. Merrins, “The Deaths of Antiochus IV, Herod the Great, and Herod Agrippa I,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 61 (1904), pp. 558–560; E.W.G. Masterman, *Hygiene and Disease in Palestine in Modern and in Biblical Times* (London: Palestine Exploration Fund, 1920), p. 55; N. Manson and V. Kalbian, published in S. Perowne, ed., *The Life and Times of Herod the Great* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1956), pp. 185–186; A.T. Sandison, “The Last Illness of Herod the Great, King of Judaea,” *Medical History* 11 (1967), pp. 381–388; G.M. Burden, “Examination of Literary Evidence Points to Heart Failure as the Cause of Herod’s Death,” *The Celator* 6:1 (January, 1992), p. 34; S.S. Kottke, *Medicine and Hygiene in the Works of Flavius Josephus* (Leiden: Brill, 1994), pp. 186–190.
- c. M. Neuburger, *Die Medizin in Flavius Josephus* (Bad Reichenhall: Bachkunst, 1919), p. 58; J.O. Leibowitz, published in A.T. Sandison, “The Last Illness of Herod the Great, King of Judaea,” *Medical History* 11 (1967), p. 385; and in A. Schalit, *König Herodes: Der Mann und sein Werk* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1969), pp. 639–640.
- d. R. Eisler *Iêsous Vasileus ou Vasileusas*, vol. 1, (Heidelberg: C. Winter, 1929), p. 156.
- e. A.H.M. Jones, *The Herods of Judaea* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1938), p. 47.
- f. S. Muntner, “Qôrôth,” *Vierteljahresschrift für die Geschichte der Medizin und der Naturwissenschaften* 1 (1953), pp. 134–142.; J. McSherry, “Worms, Diabetes and King Herod the Great,” *Journal of Medical Biography* 5 (1997), pp. 167–169; W.R. Litchfield, “The Bittersweet Demise of Herod the Great,” *Journal of the Royal Society of Medicine* 91 (1998), pp. 283–284.
- g. J. Meyshan “The Disease of Herod the Great, King of Judaea,” *Harefuah: Journal of the Medical Association of Israel* 53 (1957), pp. 154–156 (in Hebrew with summaries in English and French); I. Buhač, “Über die Erkrankung und den Tod des Herodes,” *Deutsche Medizinische Wochenschrift* 88 (1963), pp. 287–288.
- h. A. Patrick, published in A.T. Sandison, “The Last Illness of Herod the Great, King of Judaea,” *Medical History* 11 (1967), pp. 385–386.



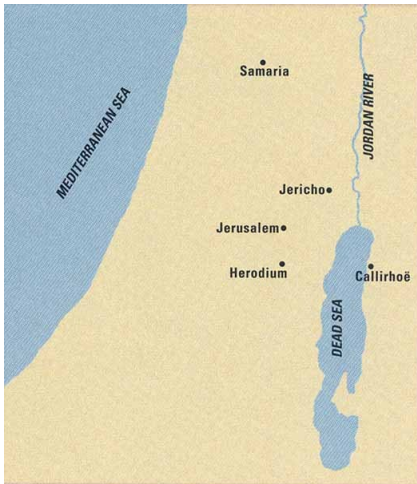
Hulton-Archive/Getty Images

An ailing King Herod is carried off by servants in a 17th century German engraving. The first-century Jewish historian Josephus records that Herod, who ruled Judea from 40 B.C.E. to 4 C.E., spent his last months in miserable suffering. He was melancholic, had trouble breathing, itched uncontrollably and his privates were infected with worms. Many would call it a fitting end for the ruthless monarch, who was widely hated by his Jewish subjects. But what exactly did Herod die of? In the accompanying article, author Nikos Kokkinos, with the help of a London physician, tries to solve this medical mystery.



Hulton-Archive/Getty Images

King Herod.



Map showing locations mentioned in this article.

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