

Reimagining Herod's Royal Portico

By Orit Peleg-Barkat

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"It is deserving of mention more than any other under the sun." This is how the Jewish historian Flavius Josephus describes Jerusalem's Royal Portico in his *Jewish Antiquities* (15.412). Built along the southern flank of the Temple Mount, the Royal Portico, also known as the Royal Stoa, was one of King Herod's most ambitious and impressive construction projects. And while Josephus offers a detailed description of the Portico, what archaeological evidence do we have that allows us to reconstruct this splendid structure?



Herod invested tremendous effort in extending the existing enclosure of the Temple Mount toward the south, despite the difficult topographic conditions. His main goal was to create sufficient space for his new Royal Portico. This involved expanding the Temple Mount beyond the natural topographical boundaries of Mt. Moriah by filling in the lower areas with dirt and building massive enclosure walls to support the fills. Herod also invested a considerable effort to decorate the Royal Portico. In *Jewish Antiquities*, which he completed in c. 93/94 A.D., Josephus says that these structures "seemed incredible to those who had not seen them, and were beheld with amazement by those who set eyes on them" (15.416).

Recent excavations led by the Israel Antiquities Authority adjacent to the southern part of the Temple Mount's western enclosure wall have exposed several ritual baths and rock-cut installations belonging to houses that had occupied this area in the time that preceded the expansion of the Temple Mount. These houses were dismantled, and their subterranean parts filled to make room for the new construction. The excavators have found evidence that the completion of this expansion took place after Herod's death.¹ The fill to the west of the Western Wall's foundation contained coins and pottery dated more than 20 years after King Herod's death, suggesting that the construction of the wall on top of it was completed even later.

The fact that it took so many years to complete Herod's massive enterprise should not surprise us, given the references in Josephus and the New Testament (e.g., *Jewish War* 5.187; *Jewish Antiquities* 20.219; *John 2:20*) and the example of contemporary large-scale projects. Still, the size and grandeur of the construction, as well as its name—the *Stoa Basileios* (meaning, "Royal Portico")—all indicate that Herod was the one who devised the structure, even if he did not live to see it finished.

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Herod's Temple complex was burned and severely damaged in the Roman sack of Jerusalem in 70 A.D. However, fragments of the Royal Portico's decoration that fell down to the foot of the southern enclosure wall have been unearthed two millennia later.² Although nothing remains of the Temple itself, the extant decoration from the Royal Portico provides the best indication of the style of its decoration. The high quality of the carvings shows that no resource was spared to attract the best artists and materials for the project.

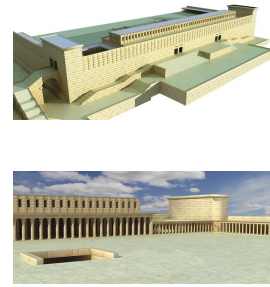
Because none of the masonry from the Royal Portico has survived *in situ*, the reconstruction of the Portico had been largely elusive, prior to archaeological work below the Temple Mount.² Any propositions were based primarily on Josephus's description of the building.

The surviving pieces of the structure's architectural decoration reveal otherwise obscure features of the Portico's original design and enable a much more detailed and accurate reconstruction. Most of the pieces come from an archaeological expedition, headed by the late Benjamin Mazar, in the destruction debris at the foot of the southern enclosure wall and the southern part of the western enclosure wall of the Temple Mount during the 1970s. Later expeditions, led by Ronny Reich, Yuval Baruch, and Yaakov Billig on behalf of the Israel Antiquities Authority, unearthed several more fragments. In total, there are almost 500 architectural decoration fragments dated to the Herodian period.

The fragmentary state of the architectural decorative elements warrants considerable caution. But because many of them were found in the destruction debris at the foot of the southern enclosure wall, we with relative confidence attribute some of them to the Royal Portico.

The fragments include column bases, column drums, column capitals, architraves, friezes, cornices, ceiling coffering, and doorframes. The carving is fine and delicate with a great variety of floral and geometrical motifs. Most of these elements have contemporary parallels in the local architecture of Jerusalem, but some are unique and present a combination of eastern and western inspirations. Such a combination characterizes not only the decoration but also the entire design of the Royal Portico.

The only historical narrative mentioning the Royal Portico comes from Josephus. A detailed description of the Royal Portico with reference to its plan, decoration, and elevation appears in *Jewish Antiquities* 15.411–416. The building is also briefly mentioned in *Jewish Antiquities* 15.393. Interestingly, the unit of measure used by Josephus to describe the Royal Portico is the foot (Greek: πούς) and not the cubit (Greek: πῦξ, “forearm”), which he normally uses. It seems that Josephus based his description of the Royal Portico on a non-Jewish source familiar with classical architecture—a source different from the ones he normally used.



Although Josephus describes the architectural features of the Royal Portico, he fails to give any indication of the building’s function. The building he describes had a high, wide central aisle with two narrower and shallower side aisles, similar to a Roman basilica. Since basilicas fulfilled a significant public and commercial role in Roman cities and served as the seat of the tribunal, scholars have suggested that the functions of the Royal Portico were linked with commercial and judicial activities connected with the ritual in the Temple.

According to Josephus, the Royal Portico consisted of a 45-foot-wide nave, flanked by two 30-foot-wide aisles. Thus, the total width of the building was about 107 feet (if using the Greek foot) or 102 feet (if using the Roman foot).

One of the surviving elements of the Herodian Temple Mount that is instructive in determining the original width of the Royal Portico is the remnant of Robinson’s Arch, visible on the southern part of the Western Wall. As the gate once situated above this arch was the only direct access from the city to the Royal Portico, it is reasonable to assume that the gate and the Portico were designed together so that the center of Robinson’s Arch was positioned along the longitudinal axis of the Portico. If so, then the width of the Portico was about 127 feet.

A similar result is achieved by calculating the width of the Portico based on the design of the underground passageway of the Double Gate that ran under the Royal Portico, leading up to the Temple Mount. The southern part of the passageway is covered by two short vaulted spaces and four shallow domes. It is reasonable to assume that the Royal Portico’s columns were placed above columns or piers in the Double Gate passageway below to make the building structurally sound. If this is true, then the layout of the supports inside the Double Gate passageway reflects that of the Royal Portico’s colonnades. According to this reconstruction, the width of the entire building can be calculated as 124 feet.

Josephus gives two different indications as to the building’s length that seem contradictory. First, he says that the Royal Portico extended from the eastern to the western ravine, namely along the entire length of the southern wall from the Kidron Valley to the Tyropoeon Valley, which is 914 feet long (*Jewish Antiquities* 15.411). Several verses later, he indicates that the aisles of the Portico were one stade long, that is, 600 feet (*Jewish Antiquities* 15.415). I suggest that the two measurements are not contradictory but, in fact, complementary. The Royal Portico indeed extended along most of the southern wall (excluding the area taken by the corner towers), whereas its aisles were shorter, being only one *stade* in length. Such a layout corresponds well with parallels, such as the basilica structure along the Augustan *caesareum* excavated in Cyrene in modern Libya, which has a large courtyard on one side and a large apse on the other.



Considering that the total number of columns was 162 (*Jewish Antiquities* 15.414), I propose that Josephus was referring to just the free-standing columns along the façade and aligning the nave. The 162 columns would have thus stood in 3 rows—54 columns per row. If we add two more attached columns to each end of each colonnade, we reach a figure of 55 intercolumniations for every colonnade. Based on the rhythm of triglyphs and metopes on the Doric frieze, we can calculate that the intercolumniations were 10.5 feet and that the reconstructed length of the aisles was about 590 feet—one *stade*.

As for the height of the aisles, Josephus states that it was in excess of 50 feet (*Jewish Antiquities* 15.415), but earlier he says the columns’ height was only 27 feet (*Jewish Antiquities* 15.413). It does not make sense that the Portico’s columns supported an entablature that was almost their same height. Such an arrangement contradicts the Classical system of proportions and is not structurally sound.

Since the column drums retrieved from the destruction debris all had a diameter of about 3 feet, the original height of the columns—according to the customary proportions of Hellenistic and early Roman architecture for Corinthian columns—should have been 26–33 feet. Josephus’s figure of 27 feet is included within this range and, therefore, probably correct, while the measurement of the halls’ height is exaggerated. We should remember that only someone involved in all the intricacies of the building plans could have specified the exact height of the hall. Unlike the length of the building, which any person could measure in steps, the height of the building would have been an estimate.



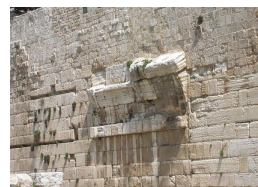
If the columns were indeed 27 feet tall, the Portico’s entablature would have been 6–7 feet high. The total height of the columns and the crowning entablature would, therefore, reach 33 feet.

The assemblage of architectural decoration elements supports this. Using the relevant architectural decoration fragments retrieved in the excavations, we can reconstruct the order of the ground floor of the Royal Portico, including the columns' shape and the entablature's height. According to Josephus's description, the Portico's columns were placed on bases with a double moulding. Fragments of bases with an upper diameter of 3 feet, featuring a rounded double moulding, were discovered in the excavations. Josephus specifically mentions Corinthian capitals as crowning the Portico's columns. Indeed, dozens of Corinthian capital fragments from the debris would fit a column of 3 feet in diameter. Although no fragments identifiable as belonging to a continuous Corinthian frieze were discovered, a significant number of fragments from a large Doric frieze were retrieved, suggesting that a Doric frieze was placed on top of the Corinthian capitals.

The use of mixed orders is not unique to the Royal Portico but is a widespread feature of late Hellenistic and early Roman architecture. Many examples of the mixed orders exist in Herod's construction projects and in funerary monuments of Herodian Jerusalem, wherein most cases a Doric frieze appears above Ionic or Corinthian capitals.

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The cornice of the Royal Portico should probably be reconstructed based on a group of fragments from an exceptionally large modillion cornice found at the foot of the southern enclosure wall. This unique cornice is characterized by a richly decorated deep soffit. All in all, the height of the entablature reaches nearly 6.5 feet.



As for the height of the central aisle, Josephus states that it was double the height of the side aisles (*Jewish Antiquities* 15.415), or more than 100 feet. Here, again, the archaeological remains are instructive in determining the nave's actual height.

Pilasters decorate the enclosure walls of the Temple Mount compound as well as the Herodian ritual compound at the Cave of the Patriarchs in Hebron. Two different sizes of pilasters were found in the debris. Most of the fragments relate to large pilasters with a width of about 4.5 feet, similar to the two pilasters that remained *in situ* at the northern end of the Western Wall and on the northern enclosure wall. These pilasters decorated the outer side of the walls, above the level of the Temple Mount platform. The use of pilasters was perhaps intended to diminish the sense of monotony and give the walls a monumental feeling.

Some of the pilaster fragments found in the destruction debris below the Temple Mount, however, relate to narrower pilasters only about 3.5 feet wide. It seems reasonable to assume that the smaller pilasters originally decorated the upper story of the Royal Portico. Since the narrower pilasters are three-quarters of the width of the wider ones, we should reconstruct them as being three-quarters of their height as well. Such proportions correspond well with the Roman architect Vitruvius's recommendations (*De Architectura* 5.1.4). Therefore, we can conclude that the upper story was about 25 feet tall, and the height of the nave was 47 feet. It shows that, despite its grandeur, the Royal Portico was never meant to compete with the Temple—but only to complement it.³

There is no evidence of roof tiles in any of Herod's construction projects, and no fragments of roof tiles or gables were found in the destruction debris at the foot of the Temple Mount. Thus, the roof of the Royal Portico's nave was not gabled. This conforms to Josephus's claim: "[I]f anyone looked down from its rooftop ... he would become dizzy" (*Jewish Antiquities* 15.412). Such a statement hints that it was possible to go up to the roof of the Portico, an action that was possible only if the roof was flat and walking was easy and safe.

It seems that the renovated Temple Mount compound with the Royal Portico on its southern flank derives from an architectural model well known in the time of Herod: the *caesareum*.⁴ According to the literary sources and archaeological remains, these complexes consisted of a large *temenos* (an area of land surrounding a building) encircled with interior colonnades, a temple in the center, and a basilica along one side. They constituted a standard type of ritual and cultural center, devoted mainly to the worship of the emperor.

The word *caesareum* (or *κα ἰσάριον* in Greek) was first used by Strabo to describe the large compound that was established in Alexandria by Egyptian ruler Cleopatra or by Roman emperor Augustus (*Geography* 17.9). In the first half of the first century A.D., Philo of Alexandria describes it with more detail in the *Embassy to Gaius* (22.150–51). Several *caesareae* were known in his day, the most beautiful of which was the one in Alexandria built by the harbor. It comprised a large compound surrounded with porticoes, and inside was a temple in honor of Julius Caesar as the successor of the Ptolemaic rulers.

Unfortunately, the *caesareum* complex in Alexandria has not survived, but its plan can be inferred from the plans of the *temenoi* of the Alexandrian Serapeum and Hermopolis Magna, which probably served as prototypes. The earliest extant *caesareum* is in Cyrene. Originally built by Augustus and renovated in 117 A.D., its compound includes a basilica hall, a large courtyard surrounded by Doric order porticoes, and a small temple near the center of the courtyard. It shares characteristics with a group of urban compounds in the eastern Mediterranean with ground plans that include a courtyard surrounded by porticoes with a rather narrow basilica structure running along one side. The state agora of Ephesus, which dates to the reign of Augustus, is the earliest in this group. Although the basilica structure in these compounds

included a tall and wide central aisle with clerestory windows typical of basilica structures, it had an open colonnade facing the agora courtyard in a similar fashion to the Greek *stoa*. Further, the ratio between the structure's length and width is similar to *stoa* and portico structures, rather than to Roman basilicas, which are usually wider. This hybridization of features also characterizes the structure of the Royal Portico in Jerusalem.

Attributing the Herodian compound on the Temple Mount and the structure of the Royal Portico to the abovementioned group allows us to explain the long and narrow shape of the structure. It also allows us to suggest that the Royal Portico once stretched along the entire length of the southern wall of the Temple Mount—if we reconstruct an apse and a courtyard or entrance hall on its shorter sides.

The Herodian Temple Mount is one of the earliest examples in this group. The Royal Portico probably replaced a simpler portico from the Hasmonean period (140–63 B.C.E.) that had stood at the southern flank of the compound. This adaptation of the portico into a basilical structure was a direct result of Roman influence and expressed a synthesis of Hellenistic architectural tradition with Roman aesthetic values.

The Royal Portico seems to be one of the earliest examples of a special type of building combining features of a Greek *stoa* and a Roman basilica. This notion, alongside the fact that the Royal Portico was one of the largest roofed buildings of its time, exemplified Herod's innovative and daring attitude toward architecture and his use of the Temple Mount as a means of grand display in Judea. The resemblance of the new Herodian compound with the Royal Portico on its southern flank to Caesarea complexes, moreover, simultaneously indexed Herod's subordination to his patron, Roman emperor Augustus. This pattern could echo Herod's establishment of the city of Caesarea Maritima and refoundation of Samaria as Sebaste—both named after Augustus and containing a temple dedicated in his honor.

Footnotes:

- a. Geological research conducted by Aryeh Shimron from the Geological Survey of Israel has concluded that about 20 percent of the fragments show the effects of fire at high temperatures; the conversion of limestone to lime on some surfaces indicates temperatures of at least 800 degrees Celsius. See Orit Peleg-Barkat and Aryeh Shimron, "New Evidence of the Royal Stoa and Roman Flames," **BAR**, 36:02.

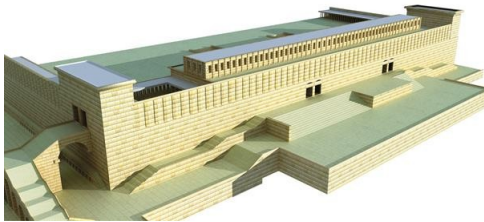
Endnotes:

1. Eli Shukrun, "Did Herod Build the Foundations of the Western Wall?" in Eyal Meiron, ed., *City of David Studies of Ancient Jerusalem: The Thirteenth Annual Conference* (Jerusalem: Megalim, 2012), pp. 14*-26*.
2. Orit Peleg-Barkat, *The Temple Mount Excavations in Jerusalem, 1968-1978, Directed by Benjamin Mazar, Final Reports*, vol. V, *Herodian Architectural Decoration and King Herod's Royal Portico* Qedem series 57 (Jerusalem: The Hebrew University of Jerusalem, 2017). I am grateful to Dr. Eilat Mazar, head of the Publication Project of the Temple Mount Excavations and granddaughter of Benjamin Mazar, who enabled and encouraged me to study the architectural pieces from her grandfather's excavations as the focal point of my dissertation. My sincere gratitude goes to Professor Ronny Reich, Dr. Yuval Baruch, and Yaakov Bilig, who allowed me to study the relevant finds from the Israel Antiquities Authority's excavations at the site, as well. Some of the fragments were already published in Yuval Baruch and Ronny Reich, "Excavations Near the Triple Gate of the Temple Mount, Jerusalem," *'Atiqot* 85 (2016), pp. 37-95.
3. According to Josephus, the "ceiling of the middle aisle was raised to a greater height, and the front wall was cut at either end into architraves with columns built into it, and all of it was polished" (*Jewish Antiquities* 15.416). The term προπ τῶν δίων τοίχων, translated by Ralph Marcus as the "front wall," literally means "the wall in front or on the forehead." It seems that this description refers to the nave wall that rose above the ceiling of the side aisles. It seems that Josephus's polished wall means a wall built with dressed ashlar, and the columns built within the wall are probably the pilasters mentioned above. Even though Josephus does not mention windows on this floor, they were needed to provide light into the building, and therefore their existence is probable.
4. This was already suggested by Gideon Foerster in 1976 in "Art and Architecture in Palestine," in Shmuel Safrai and Menachem Stern, eds., *The Jewish People in the First Century*, vol. 2: *Historical Geography, Political History, Social, Cultural and Religious Life and Institutions* (Assen: Fortress Press, 1976), pp. 971-1006.



VLADIMIR NAIKHIN

FIT FOR A KING. Among the many architectural elements unearthed in excavations below the Temple Mount, this floral coffering fragment once decorated the Royal Portico, one of King Herod's most ambitious construction projects.



SHILOH VINOGRAD

ROYAL VIEW. This reconstruction shows a view of the Royal Portico from the southwest, with a reconstructed Robinson's Arch and staircase on the left.



SHILOH VINOGRAD

ROYAL VIEW. In this reconstruction, one can see the Portico from the northeast from atop the Temple Mount. The entrance to the Hulda Gate passageway, which runs beneath the Portico, is visible in front of it.



SHILOH VINOGRAD

CORINTHIAN COLUMNS line the northern façade of the Royal Portico in this reconstruction. The spacing and alignment of the columns and the entablature atop them reflect the major innovations of Orit Peleg-Barkat's research. Peleg-Barkat proposes that the architectural fragments retrieved from the debris at the foot of the southern enclosure wall of the Temple Mount allow for the first time a detailed reconstruction of the Royal Portico.



ORIT PELEG-BARKAT

HIDDEN DOME. Above is one of the four carved domes that stood in the Double Gate passageway—one of the two Hulda Gates—which ran under the Royal Portico and led up to the Temple Mount. The passageway is inaccessible to the public today.



ORIT PELEG-BARKAT

ARCH NEMESIS. Jutting out from the southern part of the Western Wall are remnants of Robinson's Arch, which helped archaeologists calculate the original width of the Royal Portico.

Magazine: Biblical Archaeology Review, July/August September/October
2019

Volume: 45

Issue: 4

Source URL (modified on 2020-06-18 19:47): <https://www.baslibrary.org/biblical-archaeology-review/45/4/4>