

Searching for Portraits of King Herod

By [Ralf Krumeich](#) and [Achim Lichtenberger](#)

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What did King Herod look like?

When the church of Santa Maria Maggiore in Rome was consecrated on August 5, 434, splendid mosaics with scenes from the Old and New Testaments decorated its nave and triumphal arch. In two scenes on the triumphal arch, King Herod of Judea appears. We see him enthroned in the scene receiving the three magi (*Matthew 2:1-8*), and in a parallel mosaic, he gives the order for the massacre of the innocents (*Matthew 2:16*). Herod is bearded and wears a military costume with a blue cloak and a white diadem around his head, framed by a nimbus (a circle of light around his head).



This kind of portrait of King Herod is typical in early Christian art, but we have to be aware that it is pure fantasy drawing on general ideas of how to depict a ruler. (This is also the reason for the nimbus, which belongs to the iconography of rulers.) These depictions were created several hundred years after the death of Herod and were not connected to images that were created during his lifetime.

But were there contemporary portraits of Herod at all? Here we have to differentiate between Judea and other areas of the Mediterranean world.

The most important source of information for rulers' portraits in antiquity is coinage. Minted by rulers, coins often depict the ruler's likeness on the obverse (front) side, and an accompanying legend ascertains the identification. Although Herod was well aware of the customs in his late Hellenistic and early Roman surroundings, he refrained from depicting himself on the bronze coins he minted. This was due to the biblical prohibition of making living creatures' images (*Exodus 20:4*) that was radically observed during the Second Temple period.

At this time, Judean art avoided figurative depictions. Although Herod's heritage was Idumean (descended from the Edomites) and Nabatean, his family had converted to Judaism, and at least ostensibly he followed Jewish law in an effort to appease his Jewish subjects. Therefore, there is no indication of any portrait of King Herod in Judea.

However, outside Judea in the Greco-Roman world, Herod was well known as a mighty Hellenistic king and a benefactor to various cities. It was only natural and traditional that some of those cities, such as Athens, which was "laden with Herod's offerings" according to Flavius Josephus (*Jewish War* 1.422–428), responded by erecting honorific statues of the king.

Even if the original statues of Herod were made of bronze and—like the majority of all other honorific statues of this period—recycled at one point and, therefore, not handed down to us, we still can get an idea of their semblance. In Athens, as well as in Kos and in the important Syrian sanctuary of Sia, the inscribed bases of Herod's statues are well preserved. Like many other ancient statue bases, until recently these square or round stones were known and studied as "inscriptions" only—although they are important elements of the original statues too. They provide us with exciting information about the lost statues that once mounted the stones.¹

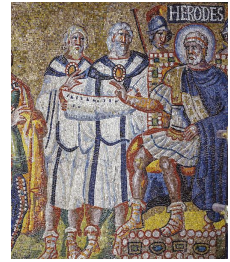
Two statues of the king were placed on the Acropolis of Athens, one of the most famous places of the ancient world. There had been a third statue of Herod on the Agora, the political, social, and religious center of the city, but its base is only partially preserved. According to the size of the square bases from the Acropolis and especially to the cuttings or traces on their tops, Herod was represented in this sanctuary by a life-sized bronze statue (5–6 ft tall) and another slightly more than life-sized bronze statue (6–7 ft tall) as a standing figure. According to the iconographic traditions of the late Hellenistic period, Herod would have been clad with the Greek *himation* (a large woolen cloak) or represented nude or cuirassed (armored). Moreover, he probably wore the royal diadem.



In at least one instance, Herod was not the first person represented by the respective statue. A thorough study of the honorific inscription has shown that it was superimposed on an earlier inscription. Thus, Herod shared the fate of many other benefactors in Greek cities and was represented—in this particular case—by a preexisting, probably Hellenistic, statue that was re-inscribed for him only later. It is conceivable (but not confirmed) that the head of the otherwise unchanged statue had been changed on this occasion. In view of the fact that many other client kings and important Roman honorands (such as provincial consuls or governors) were represented by re-inscribed statues from the Classical or Hellenistic

period, this practice was favorable and not disregarded at all.

Another inscribed square statue base of Herod turned up much closer to Judea. It was found in the sanctuary at Sia in southern Syria. Here, in a very prominent position in the inner forecourt of the temple of Baalshamin, a local man called Obaisatos erected an approximately life-sized statue for Herod. Although the base does not permit the reconstruction of the statuary type since the upper part, where the statue was mounted, is missing, it is remarkable how the local elite honored Herod in the sanctuary of the god Baalshamin.



The honorific statues on the Acropolis of Athens, on the Athenian Agora, in Kos, and in Sia provide important documentation for the representation of Herod in well-known sanctuaries and well-frequented public spaces. So it becomes clear that the religious restrictions in his Judean heartland did not keep Herod from being represented outside Judea like other Hellenistic kings as an important benefactor and political “player” by the traditional medium of honorific statues.



Finally, when we leave the statue bases of Athens, Kos, and Sia behind us, we still do not know what Herod looked like, whether he had a beard as in the mosaics of Santa Maria Maggiore or which kind of insignia he owned. But he at least left us his footprints, and these footprints tell the story of Herod’s intention to be seen as a Hellenistic king embedded in the Mediterranean world.

This is the image he lived for in a Greek context, an image that is so different from how Herod behaved in Judea, where he cultivated his role of a Jewish king observing the law. However, in the end, neither Jews nor Christians bought this, and Herod went down in history as the despised king responsible for the massacre of the innocents.

Endnotes:

1. Ralf Krumeich and Achim Lichtenberger, “‘Seiner Wohltätigkeit wegen’: Zur statuarischen Repräsentation Herodes’ I. von Iudaea,” *Jahrbuch des Deutschen Archäologischen Instituts* 129 (2014), pp. 173–209.



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HEROD’S GREAT FOOTPRINTS. A statue of King Herod the Great once stood on this limestone base. Although the bronze statue itself is long gone, the footprints left on the roughly 2-by-2-foot base indicate that it would have stood to a height of 5-6 feet. Set up on the Athenian Acropolis, this honorific statue attested to the quality of Herod as a great benefactor of Athens.



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CLIENT KING'S COIN. Minted by King Herod in Jerusalem, this bronze coin dates to 37 B.C.E. and bears the Greek inscription "ΗΡΩΔΟΥ ΒΑΣΙΛΕΩΣ," meaning "of Herod Basileus" or "of King Herod." Although he was of Idumean descent, Herod propagated his Judaism and tried to mollify his Jewish subjects by not depicting himself on coinage, which would have been considered a graven image (Exodus 20:4). Instead, emblems of nonliving things, such as his helmet and a tripod, appear on this coin.



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DICTATOR'S DEPICTION? King Herod receives the wise men (Matthew 2:1-8) on this fifth-century mosaic from Santa Maria Maggiore in Rome. Here, Herod wears a military costume, blue cloak, and diadem.



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HEROD'S IMPRESSIONS. This base once supported a bronze statue of King Herod that stood 6-7 feet tall on the Athenian Acropolis. The marble base shows an honorific inscription for King Herod and measures about 2.5 by 4.5 feet.

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