

Was Herod's Tomb Really Found?

By Hershel Shanks

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It was archaeologist Ehud Netzer's final triumph—the discovery of the tomb of Herod the Great.

To celebrate this accomplishment the Israel Museum mounted its most expensive and what turned out to be its most popular exhibit, *Herod the Great: The King's Final Journey*.^a

But tragedy preceded: Shortly after walking around the site with Israel Museum curators to decide what might be transported to the museum, Netzer leaned against a wooden railing that gave way; he plunged more than 20 feet and died three days later.

There was never any question as to where Herod was buried. The first-century Jewish historian Josephus tells us: at Herodium. The bier was carried nearly 20 miles from Jericho, where Herod died, to Herodium. Josephus describes the procession:

Herod was borne upon a golden bier studded with precious stones of various kinds and with a cover of purple over it. The dead man too was wrapped in purple robes and wore a diadem on which a gold crown had been placed, and beside his right hand lay his scepter. [Thousands must have been in the procession, including] the whole army as if marching to war ... followed by 500 servants carrying spices. And they went eight stades [or 200 furlongs] toward Herodium, for it was there that the burial took place by his own order.

(*Antiquities* 17.197–199)

But where at Herodium?

After an intermittent search that lasted almost 40 years, Netzer had no doubt that he had found the tomb—on the side of the mountain-shaped 042 site. Acknowledging that some questioned the identification, “I have no doubt of it,” he declared to **BAR** readers.^b

In a subsequent talk at a Jerusalem conference, Hebrew University professor Joseph Patrich—Netzer's student, colleague, admirer and friend—was as confident that this was not Herod's tomb as Netzer was sure that it was. Patrich and his Hebrew University colleague Benjamin Arubas have written an article¹ in Hebrew expanding on the arguments *contra* Netzer's conclusion.^c

Netzer did find an impressive mausoleum at Herodium. It contained three remarkable sarcophagi. It is located, however, on the *slope* of the dramatic man-made mountain that marks the site from afar.

After examining the details, Patrich and Arubas also have no doubt: “[This] cannot be the place of Herod's tomb.” They detail their reasons: Herod built a staircase higher up on the slope above this mausoleum, which is “hidden in the shadow” of the staircase. The tomb site itself has a “somewhat triangular appearance ... delineated by a thick, crooked and unembellished wall.” The modest mausoleum on the slope has no suitable entry gate. There is no appropriate “assembly plaza.” The mausoleum is of “modest dimensions.” It is “impossible to identify this burial site as the tomb of Herod.”

Patrich and Arubas compare the mausoleum on the slope of Herodium with other well-known tombs of the period—the so-called Tomb of the Kings in Jerusalem, Absalom's tomb in the Kidron Valley, the tomb of the Maccabees in Modi'in, the tomb of Augustus (Herod's patron) in Rome and the tombs in Petra.

Patrich and Arubas also consider Herod's magnificent⁰⁴³ architectural achievements in comparison with this small, unpretentious mausoleum:

In every area of Herod's building activity his desire to make an eternal name for himself is evident to the point of megalomania ... Can it possibly be that Herod, after completing such majestic building programs and receiving such adulation in Rome and the Eastern empire, would plan for his eternal home a simple tomb and monument of such modest form and dimensions?

Patrich and Arubas regard their argument as “decisive proof” that this simple mausoleum cannot be the tomb of Herod the Great. Perhaps the sarcophagi that Netzer found belonged



to Herod's mother and father or perhaps one of his brothers or other members of his family.

So if Herod's tomb is not where Netzer thought it was, where was it? Was Josephus wrong, or was Herod buried somewhere else at the site?

I have long had an idea. I even once suggested it to Ehud, but he dismissed it. I was hardly the first.

On top of the mountain-like mound that is Herodium is a glorious, but relatively small, palace/fortress encircled by two concentric walls. (At the foot of the mound is a much larger palace with a huge swimming pool surrounded by gardens and 044 buildings. Herod presumably spent most of his time at this lower palace while in residence.) On the four compass points of the enclosing wall are four towers. Three of them are half circles extending outward from the wall. Netzer tells us that they probably contained guest rooms and dormitories.

The fourth (on the east) is not just a half circle but a full circle—and much larger than the others (55 feet in diameter compared to 45 feet of the three semicircular towers)—and solid! This large solid tower extends deep into the interior of the enclosure wall.

The upper part of this tower no longer exists. 045 046 Now only 50 feet high, it has been estimated to have originally been 120 feet high. Although its original height can only be guessed, it was surely much higher than the other three semi-circular towers.

In 1983 Netzer hosted an American team led by geophysicist Lambert Dolphin of SRI International in Menlo Park, California, that studied the apparently solid eastern tower with ground-penetrating radar equipment available at the time, as well as technical seismic sounding equipment. They concluded that “the solid eastern tower contains a large room near the base!” Dolphin reported to Netzer that the allegedly solid tower contains “one or more chambers or cavities.” According to press reports, Dolphin concluded that this was the long-sought tomb of Herod.

The news was widely reported in the American press. The story in *The Schenectady Gazette* was headlined, “Calif. Physicist Believes He's Found Herod's Tomb.” *The New York Tribune* screamed, “Tomb of Herod Located: Physicist Menlo Park, CA.”

Dolphin objected to this sensationalizing coverage: “Our SRI team had never claimed to have found Herod's tomb, only several cavities and voids in suspicious areas that could be the possible location of Herod's tomb.” He said he was “embarrassed” by “the sensationalizing coverage ... Yet my colleagues and I have confidence that we have proven that a room exists in the eastern tower of Herodium.”

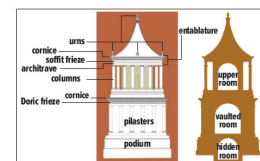
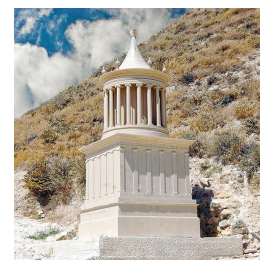
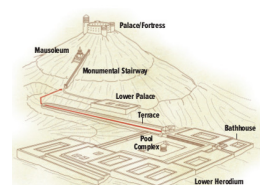
When I recently spoke to the now 81-year-old physicist in preparation for this article, however, 047 he was clear that subsequent thought and analysis now convinced him that the cavity (singular) they found in the tower is too small to house Herod's tomb. So that is where the matter now stands.

But there is still another possibility related to the eastern tower. The upper part of this tower no longer exists. It has been looted—perhaps for its valuable stones for use in other structures—or perhaps in search of Herod's tomb. If looters found the tomb, they were probably not interested in the body itself but in the jewels that Josephus describes were buried with him.

What about Netzer's objection that Jewish law forbade burial in a residence?² Herod might not have intended for Herodium to be a residence after his death. What if the entire mountain was to be nothing but Herod's mausoleum?

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American archaeologist Jodi Magness has studied the pottery from Herodium. She reports that in the period after Herod's death no fine wares were found in upper Herodium.³ In contrast, they *were* found, including painted bowls, in lower Herodium. Fine wares were also found in Herod's palaces at Caesarea Maritima, Masada, Jerusalem and Machaerus *after* his death. These fine wares are “conspicuously absent” from upper Herodium, Magness observes. From this she reasons that upper Herodium was “no longer functioning as a palace at this time ... [This] removes the main obstacle



to seeking Herod's tomb inside the mountain."

Patrich and Arubas also consider the eastern tower as a possibility. It is a "reasonable conjecture," they say.⁴

It would be relatively easy for today's robotic mechanisms to explore any cavities within the eastern tower that might have housed Herod's tomb. But even if the lower part of the tower that remains is solid, Herod's tomb may well have been located in the upper part of the eastern tower—in the part that no longer exists. I am by no means the only person to think of this possibility. (Some might say I have the soul of a looter.) In the thousands of years since Herod's death, it is not hard to believe that looters also had this idea and that this is one reason why so little of the eastern tower remains. (Joseph Patrich also considers this a possibility.)

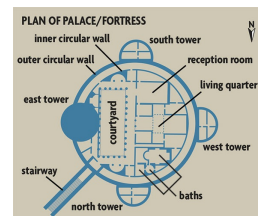
Other than to house Herod's tomb, no one, to my knowledge, has suggested another plausible purpose for one tower's being larger than the other three and apparently solid. What else could it have been for except to house Herod's sarcophagus?

Footnotes:

- a. See Suzanne F. Singer, Strata: "Herod the Great—The King's Final Journey." **BAR** 39:02.
- b. Ehud Netzer, "In Search of Herod's Tomb," **BAR** 37:01.
- c. We thank Joseph Patrich for providing us with a copy of this talk and Rabbi Samuel Fishman in Washington, DC, for translating it for us.

Endnotes:

1. Joseph Patrich and Benjamin Arubas, "Is It Really the Tomb of Herod?" *New Studies in the Archaeology of Jerusalem and Its Region* (2013), pp. 287–300.
2. See Barbara Burrell and Ehud Netzer, "Herod the Builder," *Journal of Roman Archaeology* 12 (1999), pp. 705–714.
3. Jodi Magness, "Where Is Herod's Tomb at Herodium?" *Bulletin of the American Schools of Research* 322 (2001), pp. 43–46.
4. Others have also suggested this. See, for example, Duane W. Roller, *The Building Program of Herod the Great* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), p. 167: "It seems inconceivable that the upper structure should be anything other than Herod's tomb. Although constructed in the style of a royal villa, the large round tower on the east—which intersects the villa peristyle—dominates the structure. It is strikingly remindful of cylindrical tombs in Rome."



SIDEBAR

Tombs for Mighty Rulers



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The son of Antipater II, a member of the Idumean ruling family, and Cypros, a Nabatean princess, Herod the Great had a diverse—if not strictly Jewish—lineage. As such, he would have been exposed to a diverse number of burial styles.

Idumea, the area south of Jerusalem, was inhabited by a population of Jews and Arab tribes who settled there after the Exile and intermarried, thereby creating a new ethnic group: the Idumeans. When Idumea was conquered by John Hyrcanus I, the population converted to Judaism. The Nabatean kingdom lay to the southeast

of Idumea and was composed of Arab tribes. With its capital at Petra, Nabatea controlled several important trading routes.

On one of his visits, Herod would have witnessed the impressive necropolis at Petra. While it is unclear if the best-known tombs from Petra—the Kazneh and Deir burials with their façades carved into the side of the red sandstone cliffs—had been built during Herod's lifetime, he nonetheless would have been influenced by the other structures he saw at the site, as well as by monuments from his travels, such as the tomb of Augustus in Rome and the tomb of Alexander the Great in

Alexandria.

Other Judean burials from the first century include the so-called Tomb of the Kings³ and the Tomb of Absalom (both in Jerusalem), as well as the Tomb of the Maccabees in Modi'in (described by Josephus). The Herodium mausoleum was probably most similar to the imposing Tomb of Absalom in Jerusalem's Kidron Valley.

With his penchant for megalomania and love of desert palaces, it is not surprising that Herod opted to be buried at Herodium. Yet it seems unlikely that he would have selected a site on the slope of the mountain when he could have chosen the summit.

Footnotes:

- a. See R. Steven Notley and Jeffrey P. García's article in this issue.



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Petra tombs.

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CROWNING FEATURE. Standing several feet tall, this urn decorated the mausoleum's roof on the slope of Herodium. Believed by archaeologist Ehud Netzer to be the tomb of Herod, the mausoleum reached a height of more than 70 feet and was crowned with a conical roof, adorned with five urns. While four of the urns stood at the roof's base, the fifth was placed in the roof's center on top of a large Corinthian capital. This architectural feature bears a strong resemblance to the urns that grace the well-known Khazneh and Deir burials in Petra, Jordan (see "Tombs for Mighty Rulers").



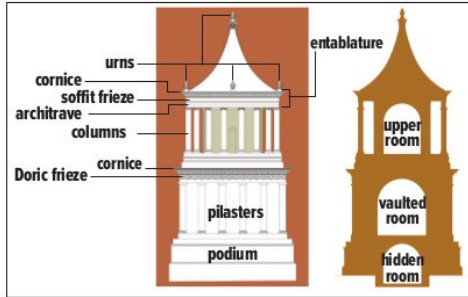
The Herodium Expedition

FIT FOR A KING? The mausoleum found on the slope of Herodium was by no means humble. Although very little of the actual monument remained intact, archaeologists were able to reconstruct it, and a model now sits at the site of Herodium.



Zev Radovan/www.biblelandpictures.com

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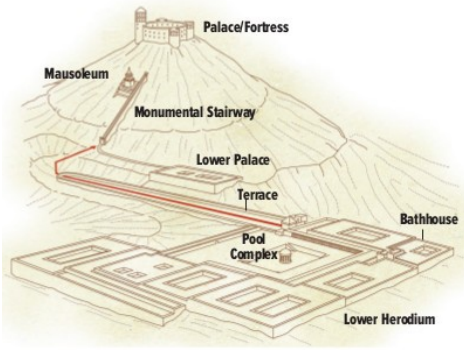
With a 30-by-30-foot base and a height of 70 feet, the monument contained three rooms, one above the other, the first of which was located within the podium—or bottom layer. The second room was vaulted and crowned with an intricate entablature (horizontal superstructure above columns), including a Doric frieze (wide, central section of an entablature) and cornice (decorative, often projecting, horizontal ledge or molding). It likely featured outer walls with pilasters (rectangular column-like protrusions).

While the bottom two rooms were square, the top room was circular and surrounded by a portico of columns. This upper room also possessed an architrave (lintel or beam above column capitals), a soffit frieze, a decorated cornice and a domed roof with urns.



The Herodium Expedition

The red sarcophagus, assumed to belong to Herod, along with two other sarcophagi made of white limestone found near the mausoleum, likely would have rested in this upper room. Decorated with rosettes, the red sarcophagus was deliberately destroyed and scattered around the area.



Hiram Henriquez/National Geographic Stock

LAP OF LUXURY. The only site named after himself, the grand estate at Herodium is a testament to Herod's building prowess. Its construction began in 28–27 B.C.E. after Herod returned from Rome upon securing the support of Augustus and Marc Antony and being appointed king of Judea. The palace-fortress on the summit of the mound was built first and then the vast palace complex—Lower Herodium—at its base. A veritable lap of luxury, Lower Herodium boasted a 1,200-by-100-foot man-made course, a bathhouse with mosaic floors and a large plastered pool with an island in its middle.

The mausoleum uncovered by Ehud Netzer sits halfway up the slope and is connected to Lower Herodium by a monumental stairway. Although Josephus states that Herod was buried at Herodium, he does not specify where. It begs the question: Was he buried in the mausoleum on the slope or in the fortress on the summit?



Duby Tal

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Zev Radovan/www.biblelandpictures.com

ENJOYING THE VIEW. Soaring above its surroundings, the fortress-palace of Herodium sits majestic on its hill, as commanding and proud as its patron. The highest point in miles, it offers a panoramic view of the surrounding Judean desert, as well as the Dead Sea to the east and Jerusalem to the north.

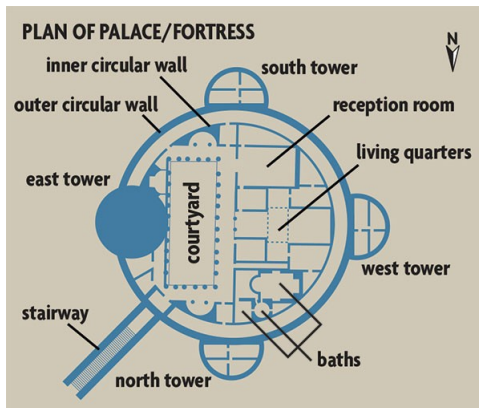
Herod left his mark on this site not only by building impressive structures but also by altering the physical topography. A cone was built around the mound itself, giving the hill its recognizable shape. Additionally, Herod lowered the hill east of Herodium, which made the palace appear higher than it actually was, and filled in the valley at the base of Herodium, creating the plateau upon which the pool complex was built.

With its pools and gardens, Herodium would have been a spot of greenery in the arid landscape of the Judean Desert. While the palace-fortress on top of the mound is visible from a distance, the mausoleum on the slope is not.



The Herodium Expedition

TOP OF THE WORLD. Two hundred feet in diameter, the circular seven-story palatial fortress on top of Herodium was encircled by two concentric walls. After the artificial cone-shaped fill of Herodium was constructed, only two-thirds of the 100-foot-tall building was visible above ground. While the eastern half of the structure consisted of a courtyard enclosed by a peristyle (columned porch), the western half was comprised of living quarters and other various rooms. Around its perimeter, the fortress had four towers.



Plan of Herodium palace/fortress.



Todd Bolen/bibleplaces.com

The east tower was significantly larger than the other three semicircular towers—55 feet wide compared to the 45-foot diameter of the others—and solid. The most visible part of Herodium, the east tower would have been a choice location for the tomb of a megalomaniac. Unfortunately, the upper portion of this tower has not survived.

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