

# The Tomb of Herod the Great

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The news of the discovery of the tomb of Herod did not make headlines in major newspapers as had done the “discovery” of the tomb of Jesus a few weeks before. There is evidence that the tomb found earlier belonged to a Jesus, but there were not enough data that could connect the tomb to the burial of Jesus of Nazareth. On the other hand, popular media gave limited attention to the discovery of another tomb, now the one of Herod. Was it just another tomb? No, this discovery has the potential of finding the last monument of the most well-known ruler of the Jews after the Neo-Babylonian exile.

## *The Site of the Discovery*

The discovery of Herod’s tomb was neither by chance nor by the effort of tomb robbers that were seeking fame or treasures. The discovery was the fruit of the efforts of archaeologists who have been systematically digging under the scorching Judean sun for more than three decades. The effort of finding Herod’s tomb took more than thirty years, but it was not because the site had been lost or that there was a mystery about the location of the tomb. The place of Herod’s tomb had been known for almost two millennia. Flavius Josephus, a first-century historian, had already described in detail how Herod had been buried in the fortress of Herodium (see Josephus, *Jewish War* 1:673), a fortress located between Jerusalem and Bethlehem in the middle of the wilderness. However, the remains of the tomb had not been found, raising suspicion over Josephus’ account. Was the ancient text right?

Ehud Netzer, professor at the Hebrew University, believed that Josephus’s description of Herod’s burial was correct and had been working on the site since 1972. Archaeological work was interrupted several times due to political unrest in the area. The location, south of Bethlehem, is a military zone on Palestinian territory. This summer, as I visited the area, I experienced the difficulties entering the site which is in a sensitive and very volatile security zone.

However, challenges have not deterred Netzer to return to the area and continue his search. His careful archaeological work and persistence have rewarded him with the satisfaction of discovering the remainders of Herod’s tomb after thirty-five years. Nevertheless, one should not misrepresent the work of Netzer as one dedicated to prove the account of Josephus. He has admitted that his confidence in the description of the burial of Herod was not his driving force (as Heinrich Schliemann’s quest for Troy). Netzer’s main objective was to study Herodian architecture as he is an expert in the monumental building remains left by Herod the Great.

## *The Owner of the Tomb*

Herod the Great (73-4 B.C.) was indeed a major builder, perhaps the greatest in Judea after Solomon. His most magnificent work was the Temple of Jerusalem. Because of his work on the Second Temple, it could properly be called the Third Temple. He rebuilt the humble temple built by Zerubbabel and transformed it into one of the architectural marvels of his time. He was appointed by the Romans as a vassal king over a large part of the Southern Levant in 37 B.C. This territory was full of and surrounded by enemies. Herod being an Idumean was aware that the Jews hated the descendants of Esau. East of his territory lived the Nabateans who were outside Roman control, and in the south Egypt was a threat, even with a Roman presence. Herod was also

conscious of the political turbulence in Rome and, to be safe, he dotted his territory with fortress palaces that served as refuge places for him and his family.

The most famous of Herod's fortresses was Masada, whose remains are still impressive. A less known fortress, but one of the major ones in Herod's time, was Herodium. Herod built Herodium in commemoration of his victories over the Jews (see Josephus, *Jewish War* 1:265). He also decided to build a mausoleum in his honor at Herodium to commemorate his life after he died. However, this symbol of Herod's influence was one of the first places that the Jews sought to destroy as soon as they were able to revolt against Rome in A.D. 67. Herodium was taken by Jewish freedom-fighters (Zealots) as they tried to establish their independence. Netzer proposes that the Zealots wanted to erase the memory of the hated Herod and destroyed his tomb and his monuments.

#### *What Was Discovered?*

Herodium, as most ancient sites, had a settlement in the lower part of the site and an acropolis on higher ground. Herod prepared the lower Herodium with structures that could have been used as his funerary monuments. That is the reason why Netzer's team focused for years on digging the lower part of Herodium.

Josephus is not specific in regard to where in Herodium the tomb was built. In 2006 the team of archaeologists decided to move upward to the hill to find Herod's tomb. There they found a monumental staircase and the remains of a platform. Among the ruins of the structure that was there, archaeologists detected large white ashlar (especially cut stones), decorated urns, and pieces of a sarcophagus.

The sarcophagus was not an ordinary sarcophagus. It was beautifully adorned but not with Hellenistic/Roman iconography which would have been offensive to most Jews. The 2.5 meter long sarcophagus was decorated with rosettes and natural motifs. There is no inscription to provide a definitive identification. However, the quality of the sarcophagus and the beauty of the artifact identifies it as royal. The fact that it was purposefully broken into pieces indicates that whoever was buried in the sarcophagus was hated by the perpetrators that desecrated this grave.

Even though Herod was a great builder and left monuments that still impress people today, he was hated by most of the Jews. One can admire the remains of Herod's architectural marvels at Masada, Jericho, and the still standing tomb of the Patriarchs in Hebron. But in spite of his efforts to be loved by his subjects, he was hated until his death and even after death. Why? Because of his cooperation with Rome, his ruthless rule, high taxes, and his Idumean origin. The case that this is Herod's tomb is indeed strong.

#### *Meaning of the Discovery*

This discovery points to the relation between ancient texts and artifacts. The tomb of Herod is not another hoax on the public. It is far from being another baseless claim of a popular documentary. The discovery of Herod's tomb is an example of how the discipline of biblical archaeology is still being practiced properly.

The textual description of Josephus has been correlated with archaeological remains. The careful work of archaeologists illuminates audiences that are eager to learn about the ancient past. The quest for answers can take more than three decades and some are never answered in the lifetime of many archaeologists, but that does not deter them from digging up the past.