

OnSite: Herodium

Exploring the final resting place of Herod the Great

Eight miles southeast of Jerusalem sits one of the greatest architectural marvels of ancient Judea, the Herodium. Constructed by the infamous Herod the Great around 28 B.C.E., this sprawling site originally served Herod as both an administrative center and desert fortress. Before long, however, it would also become his grave.

The Story of an Architectural Marvel

Seemingly built in the middle of nowhere, there is little that sets the area of Herodium apart from its surroundings. Instead, the reason for its construction and location was a far more personal choice by Herod. According to Josephus (*Antiquities* 14.352–360), Herod's first connection to the site was in 40 B.C.E. After Mattathias Antigonus's ascension to the throne of Judea—with the help of the Parthians—Herod fled from Jerusalem towards Masada. Mattathias pursued, and the armies of the two men met in battle along the road. Victorious, Herod quickly went to Rome where he was nominated by Marc Antony as the new Judean king. The site of the battle between Herod and Matthatias? Herodium.



Aerial view of the Herodium. *Courtesy Photo Companion to the Bible, [Matthew](#).*

A decade after taking the Judean throne, Herod returned to the site of his victory and began construction on a monumental project. Consisting of a mighty fortress, surrounded by an artificially heightened mound, and a lower

palace and administrative center, Herod named the site Herodium. This would be the only site that Herod named after himself.



Model of Herodium at the visitors' center. *Courtesy Nathan Steinmeyer.*

In 4 B.C.E., at the age of 70, Herod fell ill with what some have suggested was [age-related heart or lung failure](#). Before his death, however, Herod laid plans for his own funeral. According to [the late archaeologist Ehud Netzer](#), Herod ordered extensive changes to the site with the addition of a large mausoleum on the side of the mountain fortress. As told by Josephus (*War* 1.659), Herod took things even further. Knowing how much he was hated, Herod ordered a group of prominent Jewish leaders to be executed upon his death to ensure mourning across the kingdom.

After his death, the site of Herodium continued to be used by Roman governors. Archaeological excavations uncovered a ring at the site that may have belonged to [Pontius Pilate](#) or one of his officials. During the First and Second Jewish Revolts, rebels occupied the site and carried out their own construction works, adding extensive tunnel systems. During one of these periods, it appears that the rebels destroyed the mausoleum that Herod had constructed for himself.



Location of Herod's Mausoleum at Herodium. *Courtesy Nathan Steinmeyer.*

Herod's Palace Fortress

The main excavations at Herodium began in 1972 and continue, off and on, to this day. Predominantly excavated by the late Ehud Netzer, the site covers some 40 acres. The Herodium can be split into two separate parts: the lower palace and the upper fortress. Both sections are impressive on their own, although today only the upper fortress is open to visitors. The fortress measures 200 feet in diameter and contains two concentric walls that rise to a height of 100 feet. However, only a third of this massive structure is visible from the outside, as a large artificial mound was constructed around the fortress. Within the fortress, Herod constructed four massive towers. While three towers are semi-circular and measure 45 feet in diameter, the fourth tower is a full circle and measures 55 feet in diameter. The tower's original height is uncertain, as its upper sections have not survived. More than just a defensive structure, however, the fortress also contained a large courtyard as well as living quarters, entertainment spaces, and a bathhouse.



View of the Herodium fortress from above. *Courtesy Photo Companion to the Bible, [Matthew](#).*

The lower portions of the Herodium were constructed as a palatial resort where Herod could entertain guests. This area included many impressive architectural features including a large plastered pool. As the site is in the middle of the Judean Desert, [Herod brought in water from Solomon's Pools](#) in Jerusalem to fill the pool and water the lush gardens planted around it.



The large pool in the lower Herodium. *Courtesy Photo Companion to the Bible, [Matthew](#).*

Another intriguing feature at Herodium is the theater, which was constructed halfway up the northeast slope of the fortress. While the theater could only hold around 450 people, its most impressive feature was the royal box. The box was decorated with stucco plaster and secco painting. Along its walls were painted elaborate fake windows looking out onto scenic areas across the Roman Empire. Ehud Netzer suggested that this theater was completed for the visit of Marcus Agrippa in 15 B.C.E.



The Roman theater at Herodium. *Courtesy Nathan Steinmeyer.*

The final feature to mention is what Netzer identified as Herod's mausoleum. Although completely destroyed in antiquity, the mausoleum was reconstructed

as having been 30 feet by 30 feet at its base and possibly reaching 70 feet in height. The mausoleum was surrounded by columns and had a conical roof. Similar tombs, also dating to this period, are found in the area of Jerusalem. The mausoleum may also take inspiration from the famous Khazneh and Deir monuments from the [Nabatean capital city of Petra](#), the city of Herod's mother.



Model of Herod's tomb at Herodium. *Courtesy Photo Companion to the Bible, [Matthew](#).*

During excavations, fragments of three separate sarcophagi were uncovered. Two of these were constructed from white limestone. The third sarcophagus, however, was made of red stone and elaborately decorated with carved rosettes. While a number of the details regarding these finds are still debated, it has been suggested that the red sarcophagus belonged to Herod himself, while the two white sarcophagi were those of close family members.



Sarcophagus proposed to be Herod's. *Courtesy Photo Companion to the Bible, [Matthew](#).*

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