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Herodium Park

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Rules of conduct at Herodium Park

Please follow these rules, for your safety and to protect the site:

- Entry to children under 10 years of age is permitted only with an adult.
- Do not damage the antiquities!
- Do not remove stones, sherds, coins or other valuable items.
- Use official paths only. Do not cross fences or railings.
- Visits are permitted only during opening hours.
- Do not light fires!
- Stay away from the cliff edge. Be careful of falling and rolling stones.
- Visitors should carry water and wear comfortable shoes and a hat.
- Keep the area clean.
- Obey rangers' instructions and report any suspicious object at the site.
- Visit at your own risk.





Stucco in the theater's royal chamber

Opening hours:

April–September: 8:00–17:00
October–March: 8:00–16:00
On Fridays and holiday eves, the site closes one hour earlier.

Development of the park and its preparation for visitors was carried out by the Israel Nature and Parks Authority in cooperation with the Prime Minister's Office, the Judea and Samaria Civil Administration, the Ministry of Tourism, the Israel Government Tourist Corporation, the Gush Etzion Regional Council, the Office of the Judea and Samaria Archaeology Officer and the Israel Antiquities Authority. Archaeological excavations are under the aegis of the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. Conservation of finds is by the Israel Museum conservation laboratories.



2,000 year-old 'Pilate' ring that just might have belonged to Jesus' notorious judge



The royal theater

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Production: Adi Greenbaum

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Welcome to Herodium Park

But while he thus perpetuated the memory of his family and his friends, he did not neglect to leave memorials of himself... An artificial rounded hill, sixty furlongs from Jerusalem was given the same name [Herodium] but more elaborate embellishment. The crest he crowned with a ring of round towers; the enclosure was filled with gorgeous palaces, the magnificent appearance of which was not confined to the interior of the apartments but outer walls, battlements and roofs, all had wealth lavished upon them in profusion.

(Josephus Flavius, Jewish War I, 419–420)

Herodium at the time of Herod

In 40 BCE, Herod had to flee for his life from Jerusalem and the clutches of the Hasmonean ruler Mattathias Antigonus. After Antigonus made a treaty with the Parthians (the eastern empire that was fighting the Romans at that time), he pursued Herod and his entourage, catching up with them southeast of Bethlehem. Herod barely survived the desperate battle, and the events of that unforgettable day are what seems to have led him to build his tomb at the battleground.

Immediately thereafter, Herod went to Rome where the senate crowned him king of Judea. However, it took him three more years to take over his kingdom and subdue Mattathias Antigonus, leaving Herod sole ruler of the land, under Roman domination.

In the third decade BCE, Herod began to build Herodium, apparently as a government and administrative center in Judea, leaving Jerusalem mainly as the religious center. He named his daring, magnificent project after himself. Although Herodium was on the edge of the desert, it had abundant water brought from afar, flourishing gardens and bathhouses.

Herod planned the site as an enormous complex of palaces (the largest in the Roman world at the time) consisting of three parts: 1. the mountain palace-fortress – a unique combination of palace, fortress and outstanding landmark; 2. Lower Herodium, containing an extravagant entertainment area, administrative center and the king's funeral complex; 3. the mountain slope, on the northern part of which, alongside a ceremonial staircase, Herod built his tomb and a royal theater. Shortly before he died, Herod ensured he would never be forgotten by building an artificial mountain that could be seen for miles around. The huge, meticulously planned complex, which covered 250 dunams (25 hectares) built on the cardinal directions, was constructed in stages. All of these factors made Herodium one of the most important structures in the ancient world.

History of the site after Herod's day

After Herod died in 4 BCE, Herodium became part of the kingdom of his son Archelaus, who ruled for about a decade. It was subsequently held by Roman governors until the outbreak of the Great Revolt of the Jews against the Romans in 66 CE, when Jewish rebels entrenched themselves there. They were defeated in 71 CE, about a year after the Romans conquered Jerusalem and destroyed the Temple.



General view of Herodium

During the Bar Kokhba Revolt (132–135/6 CE) the mountain palace-fortress was a key center for Jewish rebels. Evidence of the activities of Bar Kokhba and his men were found in excavations both at Herodium and in documents unearthed in the Judean Desert's Wadi Muraba'at caves.

During the Byzantine period (4th–7th centuries CE), a large village with three churches was built at Lower Herodium over the remains of buildings from Herod's time. A monastery and small chapel were also constructed in the mountain palace-fortress. Settlement at Lower Herodium apparently continued until the 9th century CE, after which the site stood abandoned until the first archaeological excavations.



Corbo's excavation of the northern exedra (Corbo, 1989).

Research

Thanks to its proximity to Jerusalem and Bethlehem, numerous pilgrims began visiting Herodium ("Jabel Fureidis") as early as the 15th century. In 1838 the American explorer Edward Robinson identified the site as Herodium and in 1879 the Swiss architect Conrad Schick described the site in detail and drew its plan.

Father Virgilio Corbo was the first to excavate Herodium for the Studium Biblicum Franciscanum in Jerusalem, from 1962 to 1967, revealing much of the mountain palace-fortress. After 1967, the Hebrew University's Gideon Foerster excavated the upper site ahead of its opening as a national park. More extensive xcavations began in 1972, under the direction of the late Ehud Netzer of the Hebrew University's Institute of Archaeology in Jerusalem, exposing the remains of Lower Herodium and the underground tunnels within the mountain.

In 2007, after years of searching, Netzer discovered the remains of a large tomb and opulent coffins on the northern slope of the mountain facing Jerusalem and subsequently, he unearthed the royal theater and other structures. Thus, the long-standing mystery of Herod's burial place was finally solved.



Prof. Ehud Netzer

(1934–2010)

Ehud Netzer, architect and archaeologist of the Hebrew University's Institute of Archaeology, was a world-renowned scholar of Herod's architecture, having excavated many associated sites including Masada, Jericho, Caesarea and Sepphoris. Prof. Netzer was alsoknown for his important research on palaces in the Classical world, synagogues, the Jerusalem Temple and Nabatean burial architecture. As director of the excavations at Herodium beginning in 1972, Netzer initiated, planned and led development of the national park at the site.

Prof. Netzer died in 2010 following a fall during work on the theater, not far from Herod's tomb.

Visiting the site

Lower Herodium

The path from the entrance pavilion to the top of the mountain affords a good view of the remains of Lower Herodium, which extend for some 150 dunams (15 hectares) from the foot of the northern slope. Lower Herodium includes the large palace, the impressive pool complex, the bathhouse and structures used as dwellings by guests and officials. It also encompasses the "funeral complex," with its grand hall (also known as the "monumental structure") and large ritual bath. East of the hall, remains can be seen of a long approach course (30 ×350 m) apparently built for Herod's elaborate funeral.

The mountain palace-fortress

The artificial mountain and the entrance to the mountain palace-fortress

On your way up the mountain, notice, to the right of the path, the layer of small stones and gravel that build the artificial cone of the mountain.



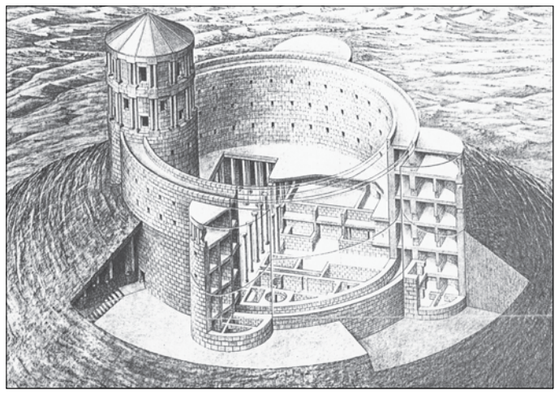
Herodium at the time of Herod (artist's rendering)

Some 20 m before you reach the summit, a path forks to the left to a point with a view below of remains of the monumental staircase that led to the entrance corridor to the palace-fortress. Excavations revealed that the stairs and the entrance corridor, which was supported by arches, were built just prior to construction of the artificial cone, shortly before Herod's death, at which time the earlier royal staircase on the northern slope next to the theater went out of use. During construction of the monumental tomb complex, the theater was dismantled and completely covered to create the gigantic cone as the perfect monument to emphasize the tomb. Service rooms, storerooms and mansions were similarly covered. Shortly before the theater was destroyed, the royal chamber and other areas, which had lost their importance, were used as dwellings for laborers building the artificial mountain.

The palace in Herod's day

The palace was divided into a number of wings. In the eastern half was a large colonnaded courtyard used as an ornamental garden. The western half contained the bathhouse, dwellings, a cross-shaped courtyard and an opulent reception hall. The entrance to the palace was at the northeastern end of the complex.

All of the palace walls were plastered and decorated with frescoes and stucco of various designs. The capitals and bases of the columns were carved; the varied architectural items found throughout the palace also attest to its grandeur. The large tower on the east rose to some 40 m (only its solid base survived). The royal apartments at the top of the tower enjoyed a sweeping view and a breeze on hot days.



The mountain palace-fortress (artist's rendering)

The bathhouse was located in the northwestern part of the palace. In the center was the round tepid room (*tepidarium*) topped by a cupola, which survived in its entirety and is one of a kind in Israel. The floor of the hot room (*caldarium*) rested on small pillars; the heating system channeled hot air into the pillared space (*hypocaust*) and from there into the room through conduits carved into the walls and vaulted ceiling.

The palace during the revolts and the Byzantine period

During the Jewish revolts against Rome the reception hall was turned into a synagogue and benches were built along its walls. Two ritual baths built by the rebels, along with meager dwellings, were also discovered in the courtyard.



Bathhouse

During the Byzantine period a small chapel was built in one of the wings of the cross-shaped courtyard. Remains of monastic cells were also discovered throughout the ruined palace.

The underground tunnel network

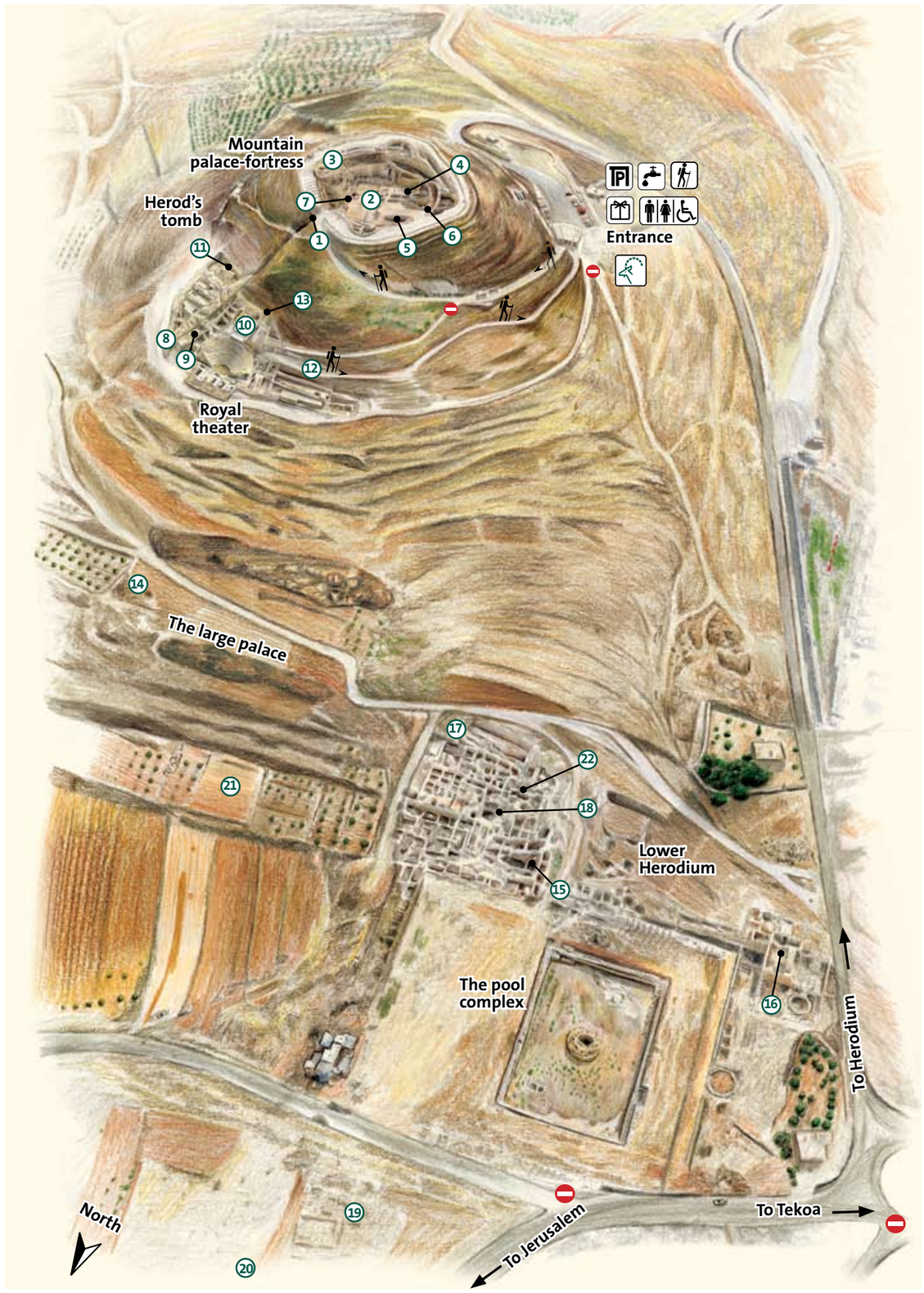
The upper entrance to the underground tunnel network is situated at the foot of the eastern tower. The lower opening is on the northern slope, above the theater.

The network was hewn in three phases:

1. **Four cisterns from Herod's time** – One, known as the intermediate cistern, is located below the palace courtyard; the three others are beneath the northern slope at the other end of the underground network. You can visit the two large western cisterns; the small eastern cistern is under Herod's tomb and is not open to visitors.



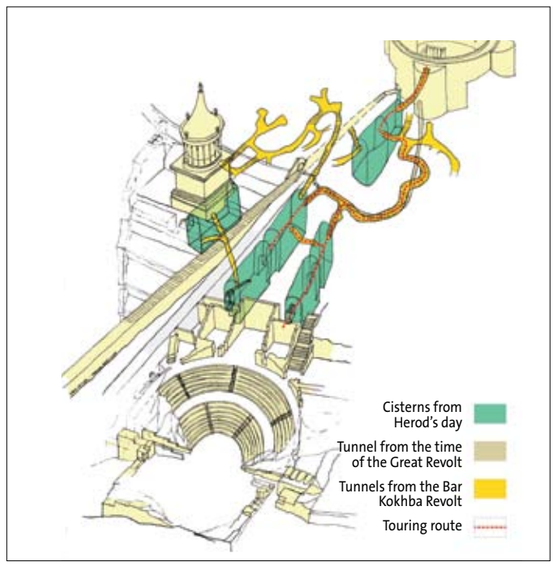
Vaulted corridor at the base of the fortress



Legend:

1 Entrance to the mountain palace-fortress
2 Large courtyard
3 Eastern tower
4 Reception hall – synagogue
5 Bathhouse
6 Byzantine chapel
7 Entrance to tunnel network
8 Late staircase
9 Early staircase
10 Royal chamber in the theater
11 Herod's tomb
12 Storerooms and mansions
13 Exit from the tunnels
14 Eastern church
15 Monumental structure
16 Lower bathhouse
17 Byzantine village
18 Ritual bath
19 Northern church
20 Mansion
21 Funeral route
22 Central church

Parking
Toilets
Touring route
Faucet
Service center
No entry!



The underground tunnel network

2. **Remains of a tunnel from the Great Revolt** – This tunnel was dug to ensure that water could be brought in from the cisterns to the besieged rebels unseen by the enemy.
3. **Tunnel network from Bar Kokhba's time** – These branching tunnels, linking ancient spaces, emerged from the fortress and led to concealed exits through which the rebels could come out and surprise the Roman forces if the latter made it to the mountaintop (two of these exits are located near Herod's tomb). As opposed to the narrow, low hideouts in the Judean lowlands, the ceilings of these tunnels are high, enabling rapid passage by armed warriors. The diggers dumped the soil they removed into the cisterns.

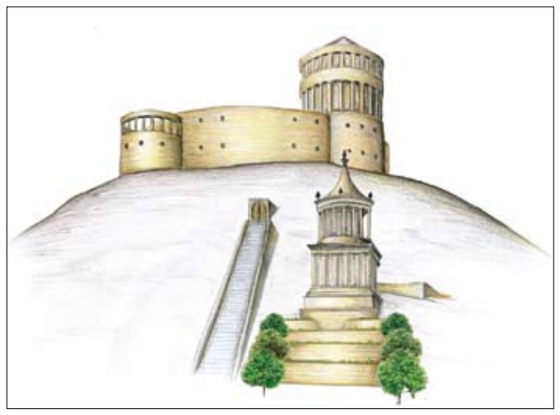
Herod's tomb

Herod's mausoleum, discovered on the northeastern slope of the mountain facing Jerusalem, was built on a square foundation (10 × 10 m) and rose to a height of approximately 25 m. It had three stories of rooms and a conical roof. The first story was square and the second was round and surrounded by 18 columns. The mausoleum was built of hard limestone with numerous magnificent decorations.

The remains of three sarcophagi (stone coffins) were found near the mausoleum. The reddish coffin adorned with rosettes was apparently Herod's; relatives were probably interred in the other two, which were made of white stone. Remains of retaining walls and garden soil are what is left of the landscaping that surrounded the mausoleum.

The mausoleum was completed only just before Herod's death, at which time the palace-fortress was transformed into the artificial cone-shaped landmark we see today. Notably, the tomb complex is the only area on the slope that was not covered with earth at the time.

Rebels razed the mausoleum to the ground during the Great Revolt; the sarcophagus attributed to Herod was found smashed to bits and the other two coffins were tossed out of the mausoleum and were found broken at its foot.



Herodium after construction of the artificial mountain around the tomb (artist's rendering)

The royal theater

A small theater, measuring about 32 m in diameter with seating for about 400, was found west of the mausoleum. At the top, with a view of Jerusalem, was a private chamber for the king and his guests, beautifully decorated by artists brought from abroad. Paintings included imaginary windows framing landscapes, fine buildings and animals, with decorations in stucco and fresco technique. Some of the decorations were probably added to honor the 15 BCE visit to Herodium of Marcus Agrippa, the emperor's viceroy.



The sarcophagus (stone coffin) believed to be Herod's

King Herod

Herod was apparently born in 74 BCE to an influential family of Idumean origin. During the Hasmonean period many Idumeans converted to Judaism and entered the service of the kingdom. Herod's grandfather, Antipas, was governor of Idumea under the Hasmonean king Alexander Jannaeus; Herod's father, Antipater, was an adviser to John Hyrcanus II. Much of what we know of Herod's life comes from the writings of the Jewish historian Josephus Flavius.

In 47 BCE Herod was appointed ruler of the Galilee and in that same year he married the first of his 10 wives. After the Sanhedrin tried him for executing Jewish rebels in the Galilee, he was forced to flee. But under the aegis of the Romans he conquered the rest of the country and in 37 BCE became king of Judea, which he ruled until his death in 4 BCE.

Herod, whose reign marked the end of the Hasmonean dynasty, ruled under Roman auspices, but with a great deal of autonomy. He was famed for his grandiose building projects in the Land of Israel and beyond – including the rebuilding of the Temple and the expansion of the Temple Mount esplanade. In addition to founding cities like Caesarea and Samaria, he built the port at Caesarea, as well as palaces, temples, gardens and water systems, and strengthened desert fortresses. The king's construction projects revealed his vision and organizational skills, while his use of new techniques and technologies, such as the use of concrete, led his architectural achievements to new heights. No wonder Pliny the Elder described Herod's Jerusalem as the most famous city in the East. Judea prospered during Herod's reign; however, after his death his descendants were unable to stabilize their rule and Judea became a Roman province. This period led to the Great Revolt and the destruction of the Temple and Jerusalem.