

New excavations strengthen identification of Herod's grave at Herodium

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Analysis of newly revealed items found at the site of the mausoleum of King Herod at Herodium (Herodion in Greek) have provided Hebrew University of Jerusalem archaeological researchers with further assurances that this was indeed the site of the famed ruler's 1st century B.C.E. grave.

Herod was the Roman-appointed king of Judea from 37 to 4 B.C.E., who was renowned for his many monumental building projects, including the reconstruction of the Temple in Jerusalem, the palace at Masada, the harbor and city of Caesarea, as well as the palatial complex at Herodium, 15 kilometers south of Jerusalem.

On the basis of a study of the architectural elements uncovered at the site, the researchers have been able to determine that the mausoleum, among the remains of which Herod's sarcophagus was found, was a lavish two-story structure with a concave-conical roof, about 25 meters high – a structure fully appropriate to Herod's status and taste. The excavations there have also yielded many fragments of two additional sarcophagi, which the researchers estimate to have been members of Herod's family.

The mausoleum, says Prof. Ehud Netzer, director of the excavations, was deliberately destroyed by the Jewish rebels who occupied the site during the First Jewish Revolt against the Romans which started in about 66 C.E.

Also found in the latest excavations are the remains of an intimate theater just below and to the west of the mausoleum, with seats for some 650 to 750 spectators, and a loggia (a kind of VIP viewing and hospitality room) located at the top of the theater seats and decorated with wall paintings and plaster moldings in a style that has not been seen thus far in Israel. The style is known to have existed in Rome and Campania in Italy and is dateable between 15 and 10 B.C.E. Thus far only one wall painting scene has been found intact, though there are traces of others in the room. .

The dating of the wall paintings makes it reasonable to assume, says Prof. Netzer, that the construction of the theater might be linked to Roman general and politician Marcus Agrippa's visit to Herodium in 15 B.C.E. The theater and its lavish loggia were deliberately destroyed for the creation of the conical artificial mount that constitutes the widely known popular image of the Herodium site and that apparently was built at the very end of Herod's reign.

Prof. Netzer is convinced that Herodium would never have been built had it not been for Herod's known determination, made at the beginning of his career, to be buried in this isolated, arid area. He undoubtedly personally chose the exact location for his mausoleum since it overlooks Jerusalem and its surroundings. This led to his decision to make the entire complex the "crowning glory" of his outstanding building career and to name it after himself.

The extensive site, which probably will not be fully excavated for many years to come, if ever, includes a huge palatial complex, the theater, and a "country club" of sorts, including a large pool, baths and gardens, in addition to Herod's burial installations and mausoleum. The palace was the largest of its kind in the Roman world of that time and must have attracted yearly hundreds, if not thousands, of guests, says Prof. Netzer.

A description of Herodium, as well as of Herod's funeral procession there, can be found in the writings of the ancient Roman-era historian, Flavius Josephus.

The excavations, on behalf of the Institute of Archaeology of the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, have been conducted with the assistance of the Israel Exploration Society, with contributions by individuals and Yad-Hanadiv foundation. There also has been financial aid from the National Geographic Society. Also collaborating in the excavations are the Israel Nature and Parks Authority and the Gush Etzion Regional Council. The Israel Museum will launch in 2010 an exhibition of the findings there.

Working with Prof. Netzer at the site have been Yaakov Kalman, Roi Porath and Rachel Chachy-Laureys of the Hebrew University Institute of Archaeology. Restoration work of the coffins was carried out by Orna Cohen, and the laboratory of the Israel Museum helped with the consolidation of the wall paintings.

Prof. Netzer is hopeful that with the further findings at Herodium, there will be increased visits to the site by Israelis and tourists, and that the overall area might be converted into a national park.

Shaul Goldstein, head of the Gush Etzion Regional Council, said that "the Gush Etzion Regional Council views the Herodium National Park as an important historic site worthy of great investment in order to assure its preservation. In recent years, the council has worked diligently in order to preserve and develop the site through the investment of millions of shekels, half of which has been devoted to the excavations by Prof. Netzer, and half in the development of the visitor facilities there. Additionally, the council also allocates significant sums every year in publicizing the site, along with the Nature and Parks Authority."

Source: The Hebrew University of Jerusalem

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