

Ehud Netzer, noted Israeli archaeologist, dies

October 29 2010, By MATTI FRIEDMAN , Associated Press



In this Tuesday, May 8, 2007 file photo, Hebrew University archaeology professor Ehud Netzer presents the findings of what researchers say is King Herod's tomb, during a news conference at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. Netzer, best known for discovering the tomb of King Herod, died Thursday Oct. 28, 2010 after suffering a fall at the site this week. He was 76. Netzer led numerous high-profile digs over decades of work in a country where the ancient past plays a central part in national life and archaeologists have become leading public figures. (AP Photo/Oded Balilty, File)

(AP) -- Ehud Netzer, an Israeli archaeologist best known for excavating King Herod's winter palace and discovering the monarch's tomb there, has died after falling at the site this week. He was 76.

Netzer led numerous high-profile digs over decades of work in a country

where the ancient past plays a central part in national life and where archaeologists have sometimes become leading public figures. Israel's prime minister released a statement mourning his death.

Netzer's discoveries helped expand modern understanding of ancient Israel and especially of King Herod, the extravagant Jewish proxy ruler who controlled the Holy Land under imperial Roman occupation two millennia ago.

Beginning in the 1960s, Netzer took part in the excavation of Masada, one of Israel's most famous digs. There, archaeologists revealed the scene of a standoff between Roman legionnaires and Jewish rebels after the destruction of the second Jewish temple in Jerusalem - also built by Herod - in 70 A.D. The siege famously ended when the Jews committed mass suicide.

But he was best known for excavating Herodion, Herod's winter palace, located in a largely man-made hill in the West Bank near the Palestinian city of Bethlehem. In 2007, after 35 years of work, he discovered what he identified as Herod's tomb, shedding new light on the king and drawing international attention.

Netzer's team unearthed limestone fragments from an ornately carved sarcophagus with decorative urns of a type never before found in the Holy Land. In keeping with Jewish tradition, it was not decorated with any human image.

In an interview with The Associated Press in 2008, Netzer described the palace as a kind of "country club," with a pool, baths, gardens, aqueducts and a large theater. He last spoke to the AP in September, when he uncovered a lavishly decorated theater box there.

Herod the Great was the father of Herod Antipas, the ruler from the

New Testament's account of the lives of Jesus and John the Baptist.

Netzer was speaking with colleagues at the site on Sunday when a wooden safety railing broke and he fell several yards, suffering critical injuries, according to David Amit, a senior archaeologist at the Israel Antiquities Authority. He was rushed to a hospital but did not recover, and died Thursday. His funeral was held Friday.

Netzer helped shape Israeli archaeology by leading some of the country's biggest and most important digs and educating young [archaeologists](#) as a professor at Hebrew University, Amit said.

"Ehud Netzer was a combination of a first-class field archaeologist, an architect who could grasp the big picture of landscape and monumental buildings, and a man with the rare organizational abilities necessary to carry out excavations of great size," Amit said.

Israeli media gave Netzer's death prominent mention. Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu released a statement calling his death "a loss for his family, scholars of Israel's history and the science of archaeology."

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Citation: Ehud Netzer, noted Israeli archaeologist, dies (2010, October 29) retrieved 18 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2010-10-ehud-netzer-israeli-archaeologist-dies.html>

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