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The Discovery of Herod's Tomb (What's New in Archaeology)

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Michael Hasel

The long search for Herod the Great's tomb has ended with the exposure of the remains of his grave, sarcophagus and mausoleum on Mount Herodium's northeastern slope" hailed the recent Hebrew University of Jerusalem bulletin. The incredible news came from the Institute of Archaeology's Ehud Netzer, who has been conducting excavations just a few miles south at Herod's fortress of Herodium. This is the third largest fortress of its kind anywhere in the Roman Empire.

The public and the media thrive on this kind of news. Not only does it once again remind us that Herod the Great lived and died, just as the New Testament and other ancient historians like Josephus inform us, but that one of the most prolific builders in ancient history succumbed to the fragility of life and a dismal end. Wanting to be remembered in posterity, Herod built more than a dozen palaces or fortresses around Judea, founded the new port

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city of Caesarea, and reconstructed the temple in Jerusalem. Like many ancient builders,

he built for eternity.

Professor Netzer first began his excavations in the lower city of Herodium in 1972. Last year, he began to search the side of the cone-shaped structure. He describes the approach to the burial site as "one of the most striking finds in Israel in recent years—via a monumental flight of stairs (6.5 meters wide) leading to the hillside . . . especially constructed for the funeral procession."

The tomb itself was almost totally dismantled in ancient times. According to official reports, there were few remains "only part of its well built podium, or base, built of large white ashlar [dressed stone] in a manner and size not previously revealed at Herodium."

The architectural elements of the tomb, including a group of decorated urns, indicate elaborate ornamentation. Similar ones are to be

found on the top of burial monuments in the Nabatean world. The urns had a triangular cover and were decorated on the sides.

The sarcophagus of Herod the Great itself was broken into hundreds of pieces. Professor Netzer surmises that this was deliberate, taking place in the years A.D. 66-72 during the first Jewish revolt against the Romans, while Jewish rebels took hold of the site, according to Josephus and the archaeological evidence. The rebels were known for their hatred of Herod and all that he stood for, as a “puppet ruler” for the Romans.

The discovery of this tomb, as significant as it is, highlights another important concept. Archaeological research and the pursuit of understanding these ancient peoples, places, and events, take time. Gone are the days of treasure hunting.

Today’s archaeological research involves experts at different levels, permits, equipment, and, most of all, dedication and persistence. The perseverance of Professor Netzer exemplifies this. He began his search for Herod’s tomb 35 years ago. He has diligently continued his excavations. Over the years he has become the ranking expert in the world on

the Herodian period and the life and archaeology of Herod the Great.

I remember working with Professor Netzer in 1996 at Masada, where we began the search for Herod’s gardens in the middle of the desert. Everyone else thought it would be impossible, but Professor Netzer believed it was there somewhere, just as Josephus, the Jewish historian, described. We never did find the gardens that spring, but we did discover something else: a broken piece of pottery in an ancient garbage dump. It was a fragment of a wine amphora imported from Rome, undoubtedly part of Herod’s original stores of food and equipment at this desert hideout. On the fragment was an inscription: *regi Herodi Iudaico* “for Herod, king of Judaea.” It was the first mention of this title outside of the Bible and Josephus, found in an archaeological context.

Today, thanks to Professor Netzer’s perseverance, we have made another important connection to Herod’s life and death. It took 35 years, but these are the kinds of discoveries that not only provide further evidence that God’s Word is a reliable source for history, but also allow us to touch the past.

