



On and Off the Beaten Track in . . .

Herodium

Herod, an architectural genius, built the Herodium, a luxurious and magnificent fortress in the Judean Hills. Nowadays, many Jews flock to Herodium on Tishah B'Av eve for the reading of Eichah.

Photos: www.sassontiram.com

After the fall of Jerusalem on Tishah B'Av in the year 70 CE, three fortresses were still held by the Jews: Masada, Machaerus (located in Jordan) and Herodium.

Today, dozens of Jews flock to Herodium on Tishah B'Av eve to read Eichah, the Book of Lamentations. From the summit of Herodium, they gaze toward the walls of the Old City of Jerusalem, eight miles to the north, much as our forbearers must have gazed in horror at Jerusalem in flames from this same spot 1,940 years ago.

Most of what we know about Herodium and Masada is from the writings of the well-known first-century historian Josephus Flavius (the Jewish general turned Roman who chronicled the Great Revolt against Rome from 66 CE to 70 CE). Both

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fortresses were built by King Herod, who ruled in Judea a little less than a century before the Jews' Great Revolt.

Herod, an architectural genius, chose an amazing spot for Herodium, a luxurious and magnificent fortress. This desert retreat, built on a spectacular cone-shaped artificial mountain, included a fortified palace, administrative buildings, bathhouses and gardens. Herod obviously felt a strong attachment to Herodium: he named the place after himself and insisted that he be buried there.

In the words of Josephus:

This fortress, which is some sixty stadia distant from Jerusalem, is naturally strong and very suitable for such a structure, for reasonably nearby is a hill, raised to a (greater) height by the hand of man. . . . At intervals it has round towers, and it has a steep ascent formed of two hundred steps of hewn stone. Within it are costly royal apartments made for security and for ornament at the same time. At the base of the hill there are pleasure grounds built in such a way as to be worth seeing, among

other things because of the way in which water, which is lacking in that place, is brought in from a distance and at great expense. The surrounding plain was built up as a city second to none, with the hill serving as an acropolis for the other dwellings (Wars of the Jews 1:10, 31; Antiquities 14:323-325).

Herodium is now part of the Israel Nature and Parks Authority network. From the entrance gate, it is a short walk up a gradual steep path around the perimeter of the mountain that ascends to the top. As you walk up the mountain, try to imagine the impressive marble staircase that was positioned alongside the cone-shaped fortress 2,000 years ago.

When you reach the top, the views are spectacular in every direction. To the north, Jerusalem; to the east, the Dead Sea Valley; and, on the Jordanian side, the Hills of Moab. To the west is Bet Lechem and to the south, the modern city of Tekoa and the Judean Hills. Clearly the king chose this location for its strategic value, in addition to any aesthetic considerations.

The circular top of the cone is over 200 feet (sixty-five meters) in diameter and was surrounded by a double wall. There was a massive circular tower at the eastern corner—fifty-five feet in diameter and seven stories high; its remains can still be seen. Archaeologists believe that this tower contained the main section of the royal palace. Three other semi-circular towers, about forty-eight feet in diameter, were located at the three other compass points.

To assure a constant supply of water in the middle of the Judean Desert, Herod's engineers dug three large cisterns into the bedrock of the original mountain, under the fortress. They were periodically filled by channeling rainwater from over the large surface area of the top.

During the Great Revolt against Rome, seventy years after Herod's death, the site was taken over by Jewish rebels. It was apparently during this time that the Jews transformed the original hall of Herod's palace into a synagogue. It is specifically in this room where many of us gather each Tishah B'Av. This synagogue is of critical importance, both religiously and archaeologically, as it is one of the three oldest synagogues to have been discovered in Israel (the other two are in Masada and in Gamla, in the Golan Heights). These synagogues were in use while the Second Temple stood.

One of the most exciting aspects of visiting Herodium is descending into the tunnels of the ancient water system. Originally developed by Herod and used by Jews during the Great Revolt, the water system was dramatically expanded sixty years later when the site was once again used as a Jewish stronghold during the Bar Kochba Rebellion (132-135 CE).

When exploring the tunnels, there is no need for flashlights; electric lights illuminate the way. The exit from the tunnels leads back to the main path. However, instead of turning left to return to the entrance gate and parking lot, turn right to see the recently discovered tomb of King Herod.

In addition to depicting Herodium in great detail, Josephus describes King Herod's funeral and burial, which took place at the site. Professor Ehud Netzer, one of Israel's leading archaeologists, has worked on the site since 1972. His dream was to locate the sepulcher of the king, a dream that eluded him for over a quarter of a century . . . until 2007. Netzer was a student of Yigael Yadin, who conducted the excavations on Masada from 1963 to 1965. At the time, Netzer had worked side by side with his mentor. In May 2007, Netzer excitedly reported that he and his team of archaeologists had discovered Herod's Tomb. At the time of the discovery, Netzer noted to the press that ". . . the location and unique nature of the findings, as well as the historical record, leave no doubt that this was Herod's burial site." A visitor's platform over the tomb has been opened, and the site is in the process of being made more accessible.

From the tomb, you also have a magnificent view of the remains of Herod's royal "country club," replete with a mag-



nificent colonnaded swimming pool. After seeing Herodium, it is clear why Herod was considered the master builder of the ancient world; it is also apparent as to why when the Talmud expressly praises the physical grandeur and magnificence of Jerusalem, it is referring to the period of Herod.

Herod built edifices to last and indeed, so much of what Herod built has lasted two millennia. (Masada, Caesarea, Herodium, the building over the Me'arat Hamachpelah in Hebron, and of course the Western Wall are just a few of his ar-

chitectural accomplishments.) Herodium is an impressive site, one that I believe should not be missed. Yet even as we marvel at the impressive engineering and architectural feats of the ancient world, we should never lose sight of the fact that as Jews we should be striving for spiritual greatness. Herod introduced Roman culture into the life of ancient Judea. I often remind the high school and college groups I bring to places like Herodium that there is a profound reason that the centers for Jewish life on college campuses are called Hillel Houses and not Herod Houses!

The drive from Jerusalem to Herodium is approximately fifteen minutes via a new wide road past the neighborhood of Har Choma. The site is also accessible from Efrat and Gush Etzion via the Tekoa Road. ■



The tunnels of the ancient water system at Herodium.