# The Tumulus of Herodium

## A Lasting Memorial to Herod

**Roi Porat of the Herodium Excavation Expedition explains to Yadin Roman that the discovery of a second majestic staircase leading to the mountain palace-fortress at Herodium could be a hint that contrary to the accepted theory, Herod changed the plans at least once for the grand burial estate he constructed for himself.** > by Yadin Roman

**Above:**
A bird's eye view of Herodium's northern slope where excavations have been conducted in recent years. (Pascal, Doron, and Dudi)





The people of the ancient world were highly concerned about the welfare of the body and the soul after death. While the average person simply was buried in a pit in the earth, without a marker of any sort, kings, nobles, and the wealthy could indulge not only in a formal burial site equipped with all they would need for the journey to the next world, but also in an impressive tomb that would commemorate them for generations to come. The efforts to ensure that the tomb and the remains buried in it would remain intact in the years and generations following death were particularly complex. The rich and powerful have made sure since ancient times that their tombs were visible from afar and could withstand the efforts of thieves and treasure hunters to plunder them. Moral, religious, and magical decrees provided the first line of defense for their tombs. However, it was clear that additional – more worldly – measures also were needed. The pyramid, for example, is basically a huge heap of stones that hides a tomb so deep inside it that a looter would have to quarry through thousands of tons of stone in order to reach the treasures of the deceased. The same is true of another, more popular form: the tumulus, a huge pile of earth that covers the tomb. The artificial mound not only makes it possible to see the tomb from afar, but also protects the deceased and his wealth. The tumulus, a round hill that rises above the tomb, was in use from ancient times until today and was quite popular in Greek and Roman times.

*"We then collect thy snowy bones, and place*
*With wines and unguents in a golden vase*
*(The vase to Thetis Bacchus gave of old,*
*And Vulcan's art enrich'd the sculptured gold).*
*There, we thy relics, great Achilles! blend*
*With dear Patroclus, thy departed friend:*
*In the same urn a separate space contains*
*Thy next beloved, Antilochus' remains.*
*Now all the sons of warlike Greece surround*
*Thy destined tomb and cast a mighty mound;*
*High on the shore the growing hill we raise,*
*That wide the extended Hellespont surveys;*
*Where all, from age to age, who pass the coast,*
*May point Achilles' tomb, and hail the mighty ghost."* (Homer, *The Odyssey*, Book 24, from Alexander Pope's translation from the Greek)

Homer thus describes the burial of Achilles, the great hero of Troy and the Hellenistic world. He indicates that after the bodies were cremated on a great pyre, the ashes were put in urns and covered with a huge mound of earth. The tumuli of Achilles and his comrades were not only a mythological motif, but a real place to which pilgrimages were made and where ceremonies took place to honor the great hero.

It was at the end of the *Odyssey* that Homer has the ghost of Agamemnon tell the ghost of Achilles about Achilles' death and burial, including the erection of a tumulus over the grave. In contrast, in the *Illiad*, he does not describe Achilles' death, but merely hints at it. The *Iliad* does, however, mention a number of other tumuli. Some of them are connected to the fathers of Troy; others are described as the burial sites of Greek heroes who participated in the Trojan War. In the seventh book of the *Iliad*, when Hector challenges the Greeks to send one of their men to face him in a duel, he boasts that the Greek who dares to fight him will be buried under a large mound of earth that all will see from afar.

*"The breathless carcase to your navy sent,*
*Greece on the shore shall raise a monument;*
*Which when some future mariner surveys,*
*Wash'd by broad Hellespont's resounding seas,*
*Thus shall he say, "A valiant Greek lies there,*
*By Hector slain, the mighty man of war,"*
*The stone shall tell your vanquish'd hero's name.*
*And distant ages learn the victor's fame."* (Homer, *The Iliad*, Book 7, from Alexander Pope's translation from the Greek)

The significance of Achilles' tomb in ancient Greece went beyond mythology. The hero himself, the Trojan War, and the tomb's location to the east of the Mediterranean Sea all symbolized the connection between west and east during Greek and Roman times. The Trojan War was a metaphor for the people of the west conquering the east, that is, for the Greeks overcoming the barbarians. Over the ages, the defeated people of Troy won the sympathy of the ancient world and paved the way for the warriors on both sides to be honored as equals.

## The West-East Connection

Alexander the Great saw himself as a second Achilles who was setting out to conquer the barbarians just as the first had. On his journey eastward, he visited Achilles' tomb, ran around its circumference naked, and placed a bouquet at the base of the

**Facing page (top):** The tumuli where the Athenians who fell in the battle of Marathon are buried.

**Facing page (bottom):** One of the tumuli in Vergina, Greece, belonging to the family of Alexander the Great.





great tumulus. His close friend Hephaistion performed a similar ceremony at the nearby tumulus that was identified as the tomb of Achilles' companion Patroclus.

The Romans considered themselves the Trojans' descendants and their emperors would visit Achilles' tomb and conduct ceremonies at its foot. Emperor Caracalla even buried one of his freed slaves in a tumulus near that of Achilles.

In 1977, several tumuli tombs belonging to the family of Alexander the Great were discovered in Vergina in northern Greece. Greek archaeologist Manolis Andronikos, who discovered the burial plot of the kings of Macedonia, concluded that one tomb belonged to Philip II, the father of Alexander the Great. The excavation in Vergina revealed several tombs that had not been plundered or disturbed over the ages and still contained a wealth of golden treasures. Excavations in the 1990s revealed three more tombs. One of them was identified as that of Alexander IV of Macedon, the son of Alexander the Great and Roxanne. Other researchers disputed Andronikos' conclusions and claimed that the tombs dated to the time of Alexander the Great himself and that the large tumulus in Vergina is actually the burial place of his half-brother.

In 323 BCE, Alexander died of illness in ancient Babylonia, near the site of Baghdad today. The commanders of his army appointed his half-brother, Philip III, to succeed him. Philip III adopted his brother's symbols and royal apparel in order to establish his authority. The young son of Alexander the Great, Alexander IV, was appointed his co-regent, but he was murdered around 310 BCE. There are those who think that he is buried in a tumulus in Vergina that contained the bones of a young boy.

A few centuries later, in 28 BCE, after defeating Mark Antony and conquering Egypt, Augustus returned to Rome and began to build mausoleums for himself and his family on the northern edge of the Campus Martius. He was buried there himself in 14 CE. Prior to that, in 23 BCE, his cousin Marcellus was buried in the grand mausoleum. In 10 BCE, his sister Octavia also was buried there. Two years earlier, in 12 BCE, his good friend Marcus Agrippa, who had married his daughter Julia, had been buried there. Agrippa not only had been the right hand of Augustus, but also was a close friend of Herod. On the other hand, Julia and her daughter were not buried in the mausoleum because Augustus disapproved of their lifestyle. However, Drusus (the son of Tiberius), Julius and Gaius (the sons of Agrippa and Julia), Augustus' wife Livia, Tiberius (Livia's son from her first marriage), Agrippina (the daughter of Agrippa and Julia and the mother of emperor Caligula) and her husband Germanicus, Nero and Drusus (Caligula's brothers), and Poppea (Nero's wife) all were buried in the grand mausoleum. Emperor Nerva also was buried there in 96 CE.

**Below:**
The huge tumuli tombs located in Nemrud Dagh in Turkey.
(Bjorn Christian Torrissen)

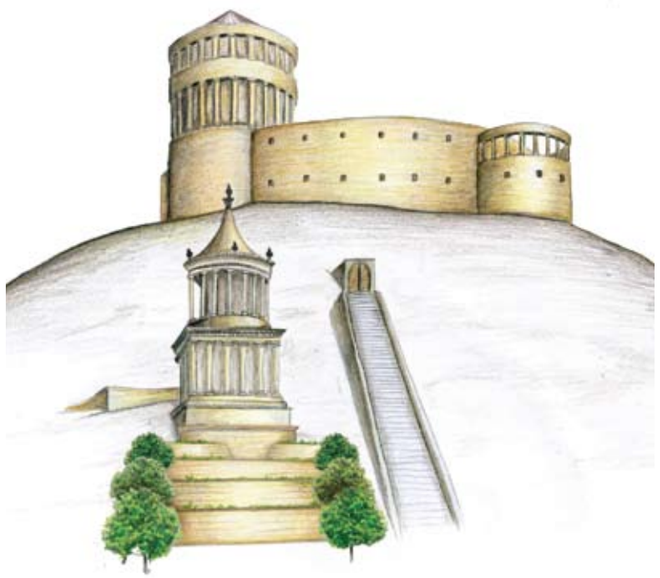
**Facing page:**
Fragments of some of the huge statues at Nemrud Dagh.
(Florian Koch)

ARCHAEOLOGY

Even though the mausoleum underwent many changes over the years, the architecture of the original structure still is easy to discern: a round tumulus composed of a number of rings of earth and bricks. The building's diameter is 90 meters, its height is 42 meters, and a statue of Augustus stands at the apex of the building's conical roof. Vaults support the roof and open onto burial halls within the structure. Two pink granite obelisks stand on either sides of the curved entranceway. The Visigoths looted Augustus' tomb in 410 CE. In the Middle Ages, the tumulus became a fortress for some time and then was abandoned. In 1930, the building was altered, rehabilitated, and preserved as part of Italian dictator Benito Mussolini's plans to redesign Rome.

Augustus, like many of those who came before and after him, had Achilles' famous tumulus in mind when he built all this. He placed great importance not only on Alexander the Great's visit to the site, but also on the tombs of the Macedonian kings, which all were tumuli.

When examining the site of Herodium, it is impossible to ignore its resemblance to the huge tumuli at Nemrud Dagh, which today is in southeastern Turkey. In 62 BCE, Antiochus I of Commagene erected a tumulus on the summit of a mountain that soars to 2,100 meters above sea level. Huge statues that were eight or nine meters high of himself, two lions, two eagles, and gods from the Greek, Armenian, and Persian pantheons flanked the temple. The statues originally sat on enormous stone chairs on the mountaintop, however in later times, iconoclasts beheaded them and cast them down to the foot of the hill. The tumulus itself, on the mountaintop, rose to a height of 49 meters and had a diameter of 152 meters.



**Below:**
A reconstruction of Herod's tomb after the tumulus was built. (Tchelet Rom, Studio Y).

**Facing page:**
The burial site and theater on Herodium's northern slope with two flights of steps at different angles. (Pascal, Doron, and Dudi)

## Herod's Mausoleum

The first researchers to reach Herodium quickly concluded that it was obvious that Herod had intended for it to be a tumulus. The amazingly well-planned mantle that envelops the mountain and the mountain palace-fortress on its summit are reminiscent of a tumulus, though Herod embellished his grand burial site in his unique, dramatic architectural style. The mountain palace-fortress, and the round tower on its eastern side which soars to a height of some 40 meters, constitute an impressive monument on the peak of the tumulus. However, the discovery of Herod's tomb on the mountain's northeastern slope led cracks to form in the widely accepted theory that Herod had planned Herodium as a single integral unit and all of its elements were built in a single stage.

Before the tomb was found, professor Ehud Netzer, who headed the archaeological excavation of the site, had demonstrated that all the site's architectural elements suited one another and were arranged along a clear system of coordinates. The system encompassed the round palace-fortress, the location of the towers, the relations between the monumental flight of stairs leading up to the mountain palace-fortress, and the location of the buildings in Lower Herodium. The direction of these steps, which was suited to the tumulus' earthen fill, and the entrance to the mountain structure at a 45-degree angle, which divided it into two equal halves, reinforced the theory that this monumental site was planned as a single unit and was the result of Herod's desire to build himself a burial estate modeled on the tumuli of Achilles, Antiochus, and especially Augustus, but which also would blend in with the life and activities on the mountain and in Lower Herodium. After all, anyone who reads the description of Herod's funeral, which was planned in the same spirit and style as that of Alexander of Macedon, cannot help but be impressed by the impact the life story of the Macedonian hero had on Herod, as did the ideas about the connection between east and west and about one ruler who ruled the many nations that honored him in his life-

time and after his death.

The excavations in recent years into the depths of the mantle of Herodium have shed light on how it was built. First of all, the mantle's fortitude is noteworthy. It is a monumental work of engineering. Building a steep slope with some 400,000 cubic meters of stone and earth in the precise shape of a cone around the palace-fortress of Herodium is not exactly inconsequential. There is no doubt that before the mantle was constructed, engineering tests and trials were conducted in order to determine how to build slopes that would be as steep as possible but would not slide downward and would not crack or buckle in rainstorms. In the process, building materials for the cone's different layers were tested.

**Above:**
The entrance corridor is being reinforced so that it can be excavated.
(Yadin Roman)

In the excavations of different sections of the mantle at Herodium, it seems that the archaeologists have discovered several earlier attempts to create the mantle or at least to try out different building materials for it. The mysterious slanted wall that encircled the mountain, which was magnificently built and buried in the mantle of the talus, may perhaps be one such experiment. The same is true of smoothing the slanted stone on a large section of the mountain's eastern slope. That also seems to be one of the earlier stages of experimenting with building the mantle.

The mantle is not composed of a single piece. A cross section of the mantle that the excavation team explored revealed a sophisticated system of layers. Each layer was built to cope with a different aspect of maintaining the mantle and together they were intended to ensure the slope's long-term stability. The lower layers were built from gravel and dark earth, which was dumped there from different directions and then highly compressed. The upper layer was formed of angular, elastic blocs of chalk that lined up tightly with one another. The face of the slope above this chalk layer apparently was sealed and smoothed to prevent water from penetrating it. The fact that the mantle still is standing precisely as Herod had planned it, without cracks, faults, or collapsed sections, is proof of his engineering skill. Refuse dumps from the time of the Great Revolt that were found on the slopes of the cone indicate that the mantle that is seen today is indeed the mantle that Herod built. In order to give it the appearance of a perfect cone (in preparation for building the mantle), the hill on which Herodium was built was severed from the hill immediately to its east, which had been a continuation of the same ridge. In the process, the valley between the hills was deepened and the earth from it was used to build the sloping mantle.

The discovery of the tomb on the mountain slope, and the subsequent discovery of additional buildings that had been hidden in and under the mantle, caused a significant change in thinking about how Herodium was built. The unearthing of a network of buildings in the mantle and the tomb clarified that Herodium actually had not been built as one coherent whole in a single stage. There were at least two stages: the stage prior to building the mantle and the final stage after the mantle was built. In uncovering the buildings under the mantle, the excavation team was surprised to discover another, older flight of stairs that ascended the mountain. It was right next to the large flight of stairs that has been known to all since the days of Herod and that Josephus describes.

The flight of steps is surprising because it was nearly parallel to the later steps, but it ascended at a different angle. While the later steps led directly to the palace-fortress's monumental entrance, which is blocked today, the earlier steps led to the east of the entrance to the palace-fortress that is known today to a point between it and the large eastern tower.

Architecturally, the earlier staircase is aligned with the tomb to its east and the theater to its west. It begins at a spot at the bottom of the mountain that is not yet known and rises to an unknown spot on the mountaintop. It is a straight, ceremonial flight of steps, just like that which was built later. Both of them have steps made of white chalk stone (which Josephus mistakenly describes as marble) that are six meters wide. (One complete, well-preserved step from the earlier flight of stairs was found in situ.)

On the other hand, the later staircase makes architectural sense with the palace-fortress and was built with the mantle that created the artificial mound around Herodium. This indicates that the earlier staircase is from an earlier stage prior to the mantle's construction and does not seem to go with the current entrance to the mountain palace-fortress. This gives rise to a revolutionary possibility that contradicts all that has been written thus far about Herodium: that there also were two stages of construction on the mountaintop, an early stage during which it was accessed by the earlier staircase and a later stage when the later staircase was in use.

The discovery of a second flight of stairs, along with the possibility that Herodium had two stages, does not only change the accepted thinking on Herodium, but also poses a large riddle regarding Herodium and the missing link in the construction of the mountain palace-fortress. It raises the question of whether before the palace-fortress that is known today was constructed, another earlier structure stood on the mountain and the steps led to it.

In his final years, Herod made significant changes at Herodium. Building an artificial mound with some 400,000 square meters of stone and earth is perhaps the best example of this. Beforehand, the tomb did not have a mantle around it and stood on the slope beside the flight of steps and the theater. The building on the summit also was exposed. The idea to build a tumulus did not come to Herod all of the sudden – as mentioned above, there are signs that he already had tried to build something similar, such as turning the mountain into a slanted cone, even before the final plan of building the mantle. Now that it is clear that there were at least two stages of building at Herodium, the question arises of how it looked during the earlier stage.

This question leads back to the starting point for

**Below:**
The recently completed path makes it possible for visitors to reach Herod's tomb.
(Yadin Roman)

**Above (left):** The view from the north of the entrance corridor to the mountain palace-fortress. (Roi Porat)

**Above (right) and facing page:** The blocked area between the entrance corridor and the tower that is being excavated next. (Yadin Roman).

research of Herodium. That is, it brings researchers back to something that has fascinated everyone since research of the site began: the large eastern tower. It is the only one of the four towers of the mountain palace-fortress that is complete. The other three were built at the same time and connected by a round corridor that was four or five stories tall. The corridor provided access to the towers and apparently also to staircases that led to the upper levels of the corridor and the top floors of the towers. The eastern tower is not connected to this system. The corridor does not encircle or enter it, but ends very close to it. It is obvious that the tower was erected before the rest of the palace-fortress. The question is if that was simply a technical stage in the construction of the site or part of an earlier phase.

Herod loved towers. Towers were cut off from their surroundings by strong stone bases. The base reinforced the high tower that soared above the network of rooms in it and up to the top stories. That was the case in the three large towers that stood to the north of his palace in Jerusalem and perhaps also was the case at Herodium. Most of what survives of the tower at Herodium is its base, which was 10 meters high and completely full of stone. No one has entered it yet, though a number of probes have been conducted to explore how it was constructed. Above the base there was a large cistern, whose remains still can be seen. There were several stories of rooms above the cistern. The floors of the living quarters on the lowest of these stories still can be seen. French archaeologist Louis Felicien de Saulcy visited Herodium in 1851 and even removed a mosaic from a room in the tower and took it with him to the Louvre Museum in Paris. (De Saulcy did the same with more than a few of the treasures he found in the Land of Israel.) The tower at Herodium soared to a height of 40 meters, making it almost twice the height of the other towers, and was located at the highest point on the mountain.

Since the tower is not connected to the rest of the mountain palace-fortress, it is unclear how the tower was entered. Until Herod's tomb was discovered on the slope, everyone related to the large tower as if it were the main monument at Herodium. The tomb, a number of researchers concluded, must be in it or at its feet. Perhaps the earlier staircase, whose direction indicates that it led to a point between the later entrance to the palace-fortress and the tower, actually led to the entrance to the tower or to the stairwell that provided access to the tower's upper floors. Another possibility is that another structure stood at the foot of the tower and that the staircase led to it.

It should be noted that when excavating the site and preparing the mountain to be opened to the public in the late 1960s, archaeology professor Gideon Foerster, of the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, noticed a massive blockade in the entrance to the mountain palace-fortress. He proposed that it was blocked and sealed after the burial of Herod. Today, in the wake of the additional excavations conducted at the site, it is known that Bar Kokhba's fighters were responsible for doing this in the second century CE. They not only blocked the entrance corridor to the mountain, but also knocked down the corridor and ripped out the steps in order to prevent Roman forces from entering the command center they set up there.

The solution to the riddle of the staircase apparently is in the unexcavated section of the entrance corridor and the territory between the entrance and the eastern tower. The Herodium Excavation Expedition, which includes archaeologists Roi Porat, Yaakov Kalman, and Rachel Chachy-Laureys, currently is beginning the excavation work that will reopen the entrance corridor. The goal is that in the future, visitors to the site will be able to enter the mountain palace-fortress through the original entrance and not the stepped path that ascends to the summit today. However, the team hopes to discover additional information in the process of reopening the entrance corridor.

The large arches and supporting walls that held up the entranceway, along with some wooden beams that Herod's engineers inserted into the arches to make the walls flexible during earthquakes and other agitation, already can be seen today. Opening the corridor also will make it possible to check what is hidden underneath it and, most exciting of all, to discover where the earlier staircase to Herodium ended.

In the coming days, the Herodium Excavation Expedition will complete building a system of wooden steps and bridges that will make the remains of Herod's tomb accessible. The route being created passes above the theater that was discovered in this area and also crosses over the two staircases that ascend the mountain. It is possible to see clearly the different angles of the two adjacent systems and to contemplate what other surprises await in Herod's grand burial site. The process of understanding the tumulus of Herodium is only at the beginning. ■