

Exploring the Reign of King Herod the Great

This BAS Library Special Collection examines the complex rule of King Herod, from his use of architecture as a manifestation and extension of power, to his “horrid” demise that many suggest was well-deserved after a notoriously cruel reign.



Photo: Hulton-Archive/Getty Images.

King Herod the Great ruled Judea from 37 B.C.E. until his death in 4 B.C.E. Outside of Judea, the Greeks and Romans found his charm (and his extravagant benefactions) irresistible. He generously endowed the Greek Olympic Games, sponsored building projects in prestigious cities such as Athens and Rhodes, and erected public buildings, palaces, and even entire cities, some of which still astonish visitors.

At home, however, King Herod was despised for his ruthless oppression and cruelty. His many endeavors came at a considerable cost to his Jewish subjects through heavy taxes. He executed his wife, Miriamme, because he suspected her of adultery. And he may be most well-known by biblical scholars for his order to kill all children under the age of two in and around Bethlehem shortly after the birth of Jesus.

This special collection special collection from *Biblical Archaeology Review* brings together a hand-picked selection of articles recounting the impact of King Herod's dominion over ancient Mediterranean lands. Read about Herod the man, the cruelty that defined his rule, and learn about the archaeological explorations of his buildings, and the Roman-inspired style that came to be known as "Herodian."

Even with his extensive fame (or infamy), little is known about Herod's appearance. In two mosaics from the church of Santa Maria Maggiore in Rome, Herod appears bearded and wearing a military costume with a blue cloak and a white diadem, framed by a nimbus (a circle of light around his head).

This kind of portrait is typical in early Christian art, but it's important to remember that these depictions of Herod were created several hundred years after his death, since Jewish laws of the time prohibited depictions of living beings. Herod followed this law in an effort to appease his Jewish subjects, and as a result, there is no indication of any portrait of King Herod in Judea. To determine if any contemporary portraits of Herod exist, we have to leave his Judean kingdom.

In the Greco-Roman world it was traditional to honor kings and benefactors with statues. In Athens, Kos, and the Syrian sanctuary of Sia, the inscribed bases of statues erected to acknowledge Herod are well preserved. Two statues of the king were placed on the Acropolis, and a third on the Agora. But do these depict the real Herod? It is quite possible that these statues were pre-existing and the bases were re-inscribed for him.

In “Searching for Portraits of King Herod,” Ralf Krumeich and Achim Lichtenberger attempt to discover what can be known about Herod’s appearance from the scant evidence that remains.

Conquering the Sea



Photo: Courtesy of the Promontory Palace Excavations.

Architecture isn’t just about aesthetics; and for Herod it was a manifestation of power, as well as a means of extending and protecting that power. In “Building Power,” Kenneth G. Holum explores the cultural and political importance of Caesarea’s harbor, 30 miles north of modern day Tel Aviv.

The ancient harbor is notable for the remarkable engineering required to build two massive breakwaters that extended 500 yards into the Mediterranean Sea. At the time of its construction, however, the area was prized for the public buildings that included a theater, hippodrome, temple, and “Herod’s praetorium,” where the Apostle Paul stood to face judgement from the Roman Governor Festus.

An Unpleasant Death

Herod's rule came to an end in 4 B.C.E. when he died at the age of 70. Physicians have long debated the cause of his death, but there is no disagreement that his demise was painful. In "Herod's Horrid Death," Nikos Kokkinos reviews historical texts and modern medical literature to diagnose the illness that led to the end of Herod's life and reign.

We know the king's symptoms in some detail from the first-century Jewish historian Josephus, based on the firsthand account of Herod's daily companion Nicolaus of Damascus. In part, the text describes "an ulceration of the intestines with particularly terrible pains in the colon." Additionally, "there was a malignancy in the abdominal area, as well as a putrefaction in the private member which was creating worms."

Are these descriptions reliable? Are they accurate enough to form a clinical opinion of the cause of death? One thing is almost assuredly certain: Herod, reviled king of Israel, was horribly troubled in both body and mind when he finally met his end.

Go beyond the scriptures and discover the legacy of a man abhorred by some, revered by others, and important to scholars and historians to this day.

No one can dispute the mark King Herod left on history. He spawned a dynasty, including four descendants who appear in the New Testament of the Bible. Yet his greatest impact may be the grandiose architectural projects, from palaces and fortresses throughout Judea to the rebuilding and expansion of the Second Temple in Jerusalem.

King Herod the Great - a special collection expertly curated from the vast library of the Biblical Archaeology Society - goes in depth to consider the architectural and engineering prowess of the Roman Empire as filtered through the complex psyche of a king remembered largely for his brutality. Read all these eye-opening articles and more from the pages of *Biblical Archaeology Review* and *Bible Review*:

King Herod the Great

King Herod the Great, originally appointed by the Roman Senate, ruled Judea for decades from 37 B.C.E. until his death in 4 C.E. Though he spawned a dynasty, including four descendants who appeared in the New Testament of the Bible, his greatest personal

impact may have been the grandiose architectural projects he conducted, from the many palace-fortresses he constructed throughout Judea to the rebuilding and expansion of the Second Temple in Jerusalem. Herod's Temple was not only the Temple that Jesus knew, but also via the Western Wall, the Temple we know today.

In this BAS Library special collection of *Biblical Archaeology Review* articles, read about Herod the man, the cruelty that defined his rule, and his horrific demise. Also, learn about the archaeological examinations of his building, and the Roman-inspired style that came to be known as "Herodian."

The importance of architecture often goes beyond aesthetics, it is not only a manifestation of power but a means of extending and protecting it. In "[Building Power](#)," Kenneth G. Holum takes the excavations of Caesarea's harbor, built by King Herod, to explore both its many cultural uses and the suggestions of how it may have solidified Herod's power and that of his descendants in the Herodian dynasty.

The Second Temple was Herod's greatest impact, the construction project for which he is most remembered. A millennium after King Solomon's Temple, the First Temple, had been built, King Herod undertook his building inspired by Solomon, but with strong Greco-Roman influences on the style of the building itself. In "[Herod's Roman Temple](#)" David Jacobson explores Herod's building project and what motivated him as he completed it.

After the Roman's destroyed the Second Temple in 70 A.D., what happened to the Cedar of Lebanon wooden beams that had been a part of it? Peretz Reuven, In "[Wooden Beams from Herod's Temple Mount](#)," attempts to answer that question archaeologically, following the possible paths of re-use or destruction.

The expansion of the Portico was a massive undertaking, involving building up the Temple Mount itself before building construction could even take place. In "[Reimagining Herod's Royal Portico](#)," Orit Peleg-Barkat undertakes the difficult process of modeling what the Portico must have looked like in Herod's time.

King Herod followed the Jewish tradition of the time, not allowing depictions of his likeness in picture, on coin, or in statuary. However, outside of Judah, statues were raised in his honor. In "[Searching for Portraits of King Herod](#)," Ralf Krumeich and Achim Lichtenberger attempt to discover what can be known about Herod's appearance from the scanty evidence that remains.

"[Herod's Horrid Death](#)," looks at what is known of King Herod's demise. In addition to speculating about what disease might have killed him, Nikos Kokkinos examines the aspects of Herod's long, cruel reign that led some to feel his terrible death was a sort of poetic justice.

King Herod was buried at Herodium—a fact recorded by Josephus in the first century—but where precisely? In a BAR article published in 2011, archaeologist Ehud Netzer reported that he had found the tomb, but now others are calling his identification into

question. In "[Was Herod's Tomb Really Found?](#)", Hershel Shanks examines the evidence and weighs in as the hunt for Herod's tomb continues.

Was Herod's Tomb Really Found?

By [Hershel Shanks](#)

It was archaeologist Ehud Netzer's final triumph—the discovery of the tomb of Herod the Great.

To celebrate this accomplishment the Israel Museum mounted its most expensive and what turned out to be its most popular exhibit, *Herod the Great: The King's Final Journey*.^a

But tragedy preceded: Shortly after walking around the site with Israel Museum curators to decide what might be transported to the museum, Netzer leaned against a wooden railing that gave way; he plunged more than 20 feet and died three days later.



There was never any question as to where Herod was buried. The first-century Jewish historian Josephus tells us: at Herodium. The bier was carried nearly 20 miles from Jericho, where Herod died, to Herodium. Josephus describes the procession:



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