

# Preliminary report on Herod's mausoleum and theatre with a royal box at Herodium

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## Introduction

Recent work on the NE slope of the hill at Herodium has changed our conception of "Greater Herodium" in remarkable ways. The excavations conducted by us at Lower Herodium between 1972 and 1987 and again from 1997 to 2000 ended with a question mark with regard to the location of Herod's burial place. We had always tended to reject the likelihood that the tomb was directly connected with the circular mountain palace fortress on top of the hill: not only was no sign of a tomb found within that structure, but the building served primarily as a palace, and the Jewish faith does not countenance a tomb in direct contact with a dwelling. Even the possibility of a tomb set within the solid base of the eastern round tower (the highest landmark at Herodium in Herod's day) seemed to us improbable, in light of the similarity between it and the bases of the three multi-storeyed towers which Herod built in Jerusalem.<sup>1</sup> Therefore for many years we had concentrated our efforts in an area lying southeast of the pool complex and northwest of the meager remains of the "large palace",<sup>2</sup> an area we have termed the "tomb estate". When the excavations were renewed at the end of 2005, we again made an effort to locate Herod's tomb in the same area in Lower Herodium, but again we failed. Therefore towards the middle of 2006 we decided to shift our efforts to the hill, focusing on its NE slope (fig. 1), close to the remains of the monumental stairway described by Josephus:

... and it has a steep ascent formed of two hundred steps of hewn stone (*AntJ* 15.324),

... and provided an easy ascent by two hundred steps of the purest white marble (*BJ* 1.420)

The first feature to be studied on the NE slope was a sloped wall (a kind of glacis), preserved to a maximum height of 4-5 m and built of courses of ashlar.<sup>3</sup> At what was then considered the S end of the wall, and perpendicular to it, a wide doorway (originally arched) was found (fig. 2).<sup>4</sup> It soon became clear to us that the glacis wall did not end at the doorway but continued southwards, curving around the hill and angling slightly upwards (the wall also continued westwards, beyond the monumental stairway, but that sector had been dismantled at a later stage). Conjecturing that the wall possibly marked a path leading to Herod's tomb, we followed its line, even though, with the exception of its base course at the front, it was robbed in the area beyond the arched doorway. It continued to a point which lay exactly on the E-W axis of the fortified palace (just below the eastern round tower), where all the evidence for it ended. At this point we cut a wide (c.30 m) and deep (c.20 m) trench<sup>5</sup> into the slope of the artificial hill, stopping when we reached the hill's original surface (fig. 3). Our

1 See E. Netzer, *Greater Herodium* (Qedem 13, 1981) 79-84.

2 E. Netzer, *The architecture of Herod, the great builder* (Tübingen 2006) 195.

3 This wall was first exposed in 1965 in an irregular operation apparently inspired by John M. Allegro following the work at Qumran on the copper scroll. The excavations were made without any coordination with the Franciscan expedition which worked on the hill between 1962 and 1967: see V. Corbo, *Herodion* (Jerusalem 1989) 29-30.

4 It appears that the doorway, and the wall to which it belongs, postdate the glacis wall, but this will have to be verified by excavation.

5 We also dug a deep sounding (4 x 4 m) just west of this trench.