

THE ARCHITECTURE OF HEROD THE GREAT

By the far, the most visually impressive architectural advances during the early Roman occupation of Palestine came from the mind of Herod the Great, the king who attempted to kill Jesus when he was an infant (Matt. 2:1ff.). Herod, the son of an Idumean father and Nabatean mother, was initially awarded governance of Galilee by his father Antipater in 47 BC, but when in Rome in 40 BC, the



Minted coin of Herod the Great showing on the obverse an elaborate helmet topped with a star, adorned with an ivy wreath and dangling cheek pieces, and on the reverse, the Greek inscription ΒΑΣΙΛΕΩΣ ΗΡΩΔΟΥ (= "of King Herod").

wives, 15 children, the execution of three of his own sons, one of his wives, and one of his mothers-in-law. Indeed, Herod's execution of members of his own family generated a famous quip from Augustus Caesar, "It is better to be Herod's pig than [his] son," the sarcasm being that since Herod was king of the Jews, he didn't eat pork, so his pigs would be safe.¹ Despite his vindictiveness, he passionately pursued architectural splendor, constructing amphitheaters, hippodromes, fortresses, and temples throughout Palestine, not the least of which was his reconstruction of the 2nd temple and its environs in Jerusalem.

Many of Herod's constructions were clearly gratuitous attempts to ingratiate himself to Caesar Augustus. In northern Galilee, for instance, Herod built a Roman temple as part of the growing emperor cult in which Caesar was depicted as a god. He built similar temples at Caesarea Maritima on the seacoast and at Samaria-Sebaste in central Israel. Even more elaborate, Herod constructed palace-fortresses in various places, including Herodium, about eight miles south of Jerusalem, Jericho on the Jordan River, and

Roman Senate appointed him king of Judea (with the proviso that he oust Antigonus, the current claimant to power in Jerusalem and an enemy of Rome). He achieved dominance in Judea in the summer of 37 after a successful two-and-a-half-year siege of Jerusalem with Roman assistance. By the end of the decade, he had become the undisputed provincial king of the Jews under Roman occupation, a position he held until his death in 4 BC. His reign was marked by cruelty, paranoia, 10



Herod's palace-fortress at Masada would become famous as the place where Jewish freedom-fighters would hold off the Roman army for three years before they committed mass suicide in AD 73.

¹ Macrobius, *Saturnalia* 2:4-11

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Masada on the southwest coast of the Dead Sea. At Masada, he built a desert palace on a lofty escarpment with nearly sheer cliffs rising more than 1400' above the Dead Sea level, casemate walls with some thirty towers to enclose the summit, and a system of cisterns and aqueducts for water storage. At Machaerus, on the east side of the Dead Sea, he built a palace that eventually would be the place where John the Baptist would be imprisoned and beheaded (Mk. 6:17-28).



Caesarea Maritima, the Roman seat of government for Palestine, was where Pontius Pilate lived and where in the Book of Acts Paul was imprisoned for two years (Ac. 24:27).

In honor of Caesar Augustus, Herod also built Caesarea-Maritima, a coastal city with an artificial harbor that became the seat of Roman government in Palestine. Here, residents could attend performances at the theater, stroll along a colonnaded thoroughfare, the Cardo Maximus at some 54' wide and nearly a mile long, or sail for other Mediterranean ports from between the two towers at the harbor entrance. On a rather inhospitable beach with no natural inlet, Herod constructed a huge, curved stone breakwater more than 200' wide. He built a smaller stone mole to the north of the breakwater, thus creating a safely enclosed area of about 3½ acres where previously there had been no possible harbor. Underwater archaeologists have explored the remains of the massive breakwaters, including the pouring by divers using leather tubes of high-quality concrete that hardened under water into huge blocks weighing more than 50 tons each. The city itself Herod built on a lavish scale, and it included a palace, civic halls, an amphitheater, a hippodrome for sporting events, warehouse vaults, sea-flushed sewers, and a high defense wall. Water for this new metropolis was secured by an elaborately engineered system in which Herod constructed an aqueduct for some 6½

miles to the foot of Mt. Carmel, where it connected to a 6-mile tunnel cut through the limestone hills to a water source on the opposite side of the mountain.

Herod's crowning architectural achievement, however, was his reconstruction of the Temple Mount in Jerusalem. Archaeologists have uncovered enough of Herodian Jerusalem to justify the words of Pliny the Elder that it was "the most renowned city of the Orient." A barrel-vaulted aqueduct carved from bedrock brought collected rainwater into the city. There were public latrines with flushing channels. On the Temple Mount itself, Herod exhibited his most elaborate reconstruction. He not only refurbished the temple along the lines of a Roman design and rebuilt the associated structures

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into the largest temple complex in classical antiquity (36 acres), he reshaped the entire topography of the mountain, buttressing it with huge retaining walls so that its summit surface area was doubled. The flat, top surface of the temple mount now would occupy the space of 24 football fields! To do this, Herod quarried gigantic ashlars, some as large as 46' x 10' x 10' and weighing more than 400 tons—



The Temple Mount in Jerusalem (here facing northward) was Herod's attempt to win the approval of his Jewish subjects. Begun in 20 BC and not quite completed at the time of his death, the summit of Mt. Zion today is occupied with the 7th century Muslim El Aqsa Mosque (upper center).

heavier, in fact, than the giant stones of either Stonehenge or the Pyramids. These stones were cut with a smooth finish, a slightly raised center boss, and flat margins, and they fit together so precisely that no mortar was



These ashlars, carefully shaped to fit snugly without a knife-blade space between, are the largest quarried stones in antiquity. The lower courses were laid by Herod, but the uppermost courses are post-Roman. To the right is a vertical straight joint, and scholars debate the age of the courses to the right of it, some suggesting a date as early as Solomon, others perhaps from Nehemiah's wall-building work (Ne. 6:15).

needed. Moving such huge blocks of stone was an engineering feat in itself, since they were quarried more than half a mile away. One theory among others is that they were shaped first as round stones, easier for rolling, and squared only after they were in place.

Entrances into the temple complex were effected by a series of steps, gates and arched stairways. One of the most fascinating discoveries has been a large stone incised with the inscription, "To the place of trumpeting to..." This stone once adorned the cornice of the Temple Mount walls above the southwest corner, a place where a priest stood to announce with a trumpet

blast the beginning and end of Sabbath. Other important discovered features include the posted notices barring gentiles from the Jewish inner courts of the temple and the "steps of the rabbis" on

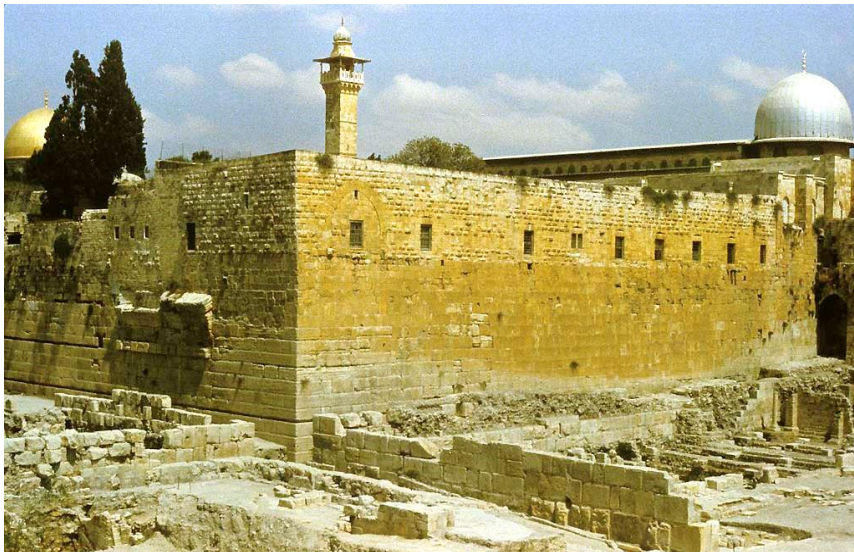
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Discovered in the ruins of the Temple Mount, this Hebrew inscription reads, “To the place of trumpeting...” It marks the place where a priest would blow a trumpet announcing the beginning and end of the Sabbath.

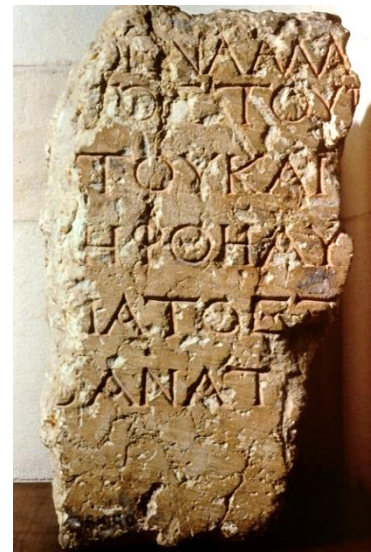
the south face where rabbis met to discuss the finer points of Torah (and, presumably, where Jesus may have posed questions to the rabbis when he was a 12-year-old boy). *Miqva’ot* (baptismal pools) for ceremonial cleansing also have been excavated as well as an appendage on the southwest corner of what once belonged to a magnificent stairway leading from the Temple Mount into the southwest valley.

Excavations on the Temple Mount are complicated, to say the least, since the



This southwest corner of the temple mount shows the lower courses of Herodian masonry and upper courses that are post-Roman. In the 1860s, archaeologist Charles Warren determined that the walls extended some 80’ below the 19th century ground level all the way to bedrock, making the walls some 130’ high.

site is not only sacred for Jews and Christians but also for Muslims. In addition, debates between archaeologists over the exact location of the temple on the mount are ongoing.



Fragments in Greek of a “keep out” notice, one of several placards warning Gentiles not to go beyond this point at the risk of death.