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Archaeologists sketch Herod's desert palace

by Michele Chabin by Religion News Service

JERUSALEM - Archaeologists who have analyzed artifacts discovered at Herodium, an ancient Judean palace built by King Herod, are more convinced than ever that the famed monarch was buried high atop the complex outside Jerusalem.

Herod, who served as the king of Judea from 37 to 4 BC, built such monumental structures as the Second Jewish Temple, the mountaintop palace at Masada and the palatial Herodium complex.

The vast desert palace, which included a grand residence, a mausoleum, a theater and large pools, baths and gardens, was the largest of its kind in the Roman world of that time, Hebrew University archaeologists said.

At a Tuesday (Nov. 18) press conference at the university, researchers said they have been able to determine that the mausoleum where the fragments of Herod's sarcophagus were discovered was "a lavish two-story structure with a concave-conical roof, about 25 meters high," a structure consistent with Herod's tastes and stature.

Professor Ehud Netzer, director of the excavations, said his team also recently discovered the remains of two other sarcophagi, a 650-seat theater below the mausoleum and a loggia -- "a VIP viewing and hospitality room" -- located at the top of the theater seats and decorated with Italian-style wall paintings and plaster moldings never before seen in Israel.

The Herodium discoveries will be featured in the December 2008 issue of *National Geographic* magazine, and a documentary, "Herod's Lost Tomb," will premiere on Sunday (Nov. 23) on the National Geographic Channel.

An exhibition of Herodium's artifacts is slated for the Israel Museum in Jerusalem in 2010.

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