

‘Herod the Great’ Show in Israel Angers Palestinians

The first major museum exhibition on the divisive biblical figure of Herod the Great has provoked a modern-day row between Israel and the Palestinians over who has the right to dig up his artifacts.

The Israel Museum in Jerusalem on Tuesday unveiled a display dedicated to Herod—branded a baby-killer in the Christian tradition but remembered by many in Israel for rebuilding the Jewish Temple two millennia ago.

Palestinians have complained many of the exhibits were taken from the occupied West Bank, land Israel captured in the 1967 Middle East war and which Palestinians seek as part of a future state.

The show includes busts and statues of figures from the period when the Romans occupied the Holy Land and appointed Herod the monarch of Judea.

The highlight is a reconstruction of part of Herod’s mausoleum housing what experts believe is his sarcophagus.

Palestinians said the artifacts were removed without their consent from Herodium, the builder-king’s excavated palace on an arid hilltop a short drive from Jerusalem.

The Palestinian minister of tourism and antiquities, Rula Ma’ayah, told Reuters all Israeli archaeological activities in the West Bank were illegal.

“Many dig locations (in the Palestinian territories) fall under Israeli control ... and we are unable to reach them. All the work at digs in the occupied territories are against the law, but Israel carries them out and even if they don’t dig

themselves they don't allow us to do so," he said.

Israel Museum director James Snyder said archaeological digs on West Bank land were carried out according to international conventions and protocols laid down in interim Israeli-Palestinian peace accords.

Snyder said he was unaware of any discussions with Palestinian archaeological officials over the exhibit and there had been no way to study the artifacts properly on site at Herodium.

The relics, he said, would eventually be returned to Herodium once proper facilities to house them were in place.

In the Christian story, Herod ordered his men to kill all baby boys in and around Jesus' birthplace Bethlehem, fearing one would grow up to become "King of the Jews" and challenge his rule.

According the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus and his family escaped the slaughter by fleeing to Egypt.

Historians said Herod ruled Judea from about 37 BC until his death in 4 B.C.—four years before Jesus' official birth day, though that date is also contested. He rebuilt the Jewish Temple in Jerusalem and was also renowned for other grandiose construction projects.