King Herod Death Mystery Solved
By Irene Brown, Discovery News

— The life of Herod the Great was juicy enough for the raciest tabloid: 10 times married; pal of Marc Anthony's and other celebs; vindictive father who offed three of his children; paranoid king who ordered 14,000 baby Jewish boys killed in a failed attempt to destroy the infant Jesus.

But it is death of the king of ancient Palestine that left historians and scholars scratching their heads in wonder. Herod, who died over 2,000 years ago, suffered from a bizarre and particularly repugnant array of afflictions that included a decaying stomach, putrid breath, chronic diarrhea and gangrene of the genitals.

The medical mystery, however, appears to be over. King Herod apparently died from long-term kidney disease with complications from a rare but still present illness called Fournier's gangrene, said Jan Hirschmann, a professor of medicine at the University of Washington who spent months investigating Herod's death as part of a clinical pathology program sponsored by the Department of Veterans Affairs.

"It's very interesting to learn about the way diseases we recognize now presented themselves in earlier times," said Hirschmann, who presented his research Friday at the VA's Clinical Pathologic Conference in Baltimore.

Hirschmann, who also is a staff physician for the Veterans Administration in Puget Sound, Wa., investigated Herod's death at the behest of the VA Maryland Health Care System, which sponsors the annual conference.

"It links medicine to art, music, literature, and history in a special way that gives the liberal arts greater relevance to clinicians," said conference founder Philip Mackowiak, director of medical care for the VA in Maryland and professor and vice chair of medicine at the University of Maryland School of Medicine.

Herod joins a list of personalities that includes Edgar Allan Poe, Alexander the Great, Ludwig van Beethoven, General George Custer, Pericles, Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart and Claudius whose deaths have been re-examined by modern day clinicians and historians as part of the VA conference.

Hirschmann pored over dozens of historical accounts that described Herod's illness, as well as dozens of medical journals, before coming up with his diagnosis. Previously, Herod's death was attributed to some combination of arteriosclerosis, gonorrhea, cirrhosis of the liver, hypertension and/or diabetes.

He was 69 years old at the time of his death in 4 B.C.

"At first, I considered Hodgkin's disease and some diseases of the liver," said Hirschmann. However, after further study the doctor realized that chronic kidney disease accounted for nearly all of Herod's symptoms.

"The most difficult part of the diagnosis was explaining the gangrene of the genitalia," said Hirschmann. "That can not be directly attributed to kidney disease, but there are several ways that kidney disease could have indirectly led to the gangrene."

The infection spread could have occurred internally through a break in a blocked urethra or externally through vigorous scratching that tore the skin, allowing bacteria to get inside the scrotum, he said.

The name of the deceased was not revealed to Hirschmann, but he said he quickly realized the subject of his study from the details of Herod's life.

"Herod was involved with almost everyone who was anyone at that time — Pompey, Julius Caesar, Augustus, Marcus Agrippa — all the great figures of late first century B.C. history, said religion scholar Peter Richardson, a former professor at the University of Toronto.

"He was a very savvy politician," he added. "Even after his death, his influence continued to be felt for hundreds of years."