

Pontius Pilate Reference on Ancient Ring

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By G.W. Thielman

FREDERICKSBURG, Va.—New analysis has revealed an unusual inscription on a copper-alloy finger ring uncovered at Herodium 50 years ago. Documented by a team of archaeologists in *Israel Exploration Journal*, the ring briefly caught the media’s attention last month.

Based on the surrounding material, the ring was presumably deposited towards the latter half of the 1st century, probably about the period of the first Jewish revolt against Rome in A.D. 66-71.

The broken hoop has a diameter of two thirds of an inch, while the oval bezel measures one-half inch by one-third inch. The bezel relief features a krater (mixing vessel) as the motif, flanked by inscribed letters “PI” on the left and “LATO” on the right.

As this constitutes an unusual historical name in the Levant, it thus has been attributed to Pontius Pilate, prefect of Judea from A.D. 26-36 who ordered the crucifixion of Jesus of Nazareth outside Jerusalem, probably in A.D. 33.

Herodium (also called Herodion in Hebrew and Jabal al-Fureidis in Arabic) lies situated in the West Bank in the Judean desert about eight miles south of Jerusalem. Herod the Great commissioned a fortress and town to be built after 40 B.C., supplemented with a palace two decades later.

The ancient historian Josephus reports Herod’s burial there in War 1.673, and his tomb has also been reported there from excavations by Ehud Netzer.

Before his death in 2010, Netzer published an extensive guide of the site. Based on excavation evidence, the area was substantially abandoned after Herod’s reign, except for brief intervals until the Jewish Revolt, and subsequently destroyed by the Romans in A.D. 71.

One of the *IEJ* authors produced a map showing the relative location of the ring adjacent the East Round Tower.

The incised inscription and central motif indicate the ring functioned for stamping bulla (clay seals) with an official insignia, although Romans typically preferred affixing wax rather than clay.

Analysis of the ring indicates its manufacture was likely by a smith in Jerusalem. Its common ornamentation and lack of precious gem suggests its original use by someone with a name similar to the Roman governor's, or as a low-level official acting on Pilate's behalf, rather than the prefect himself.

While the metal ring may have merely denoted delegation of authority, a limestone dedication monument from the 1st century discovered in 1961 at Caesarea Maritima unambiguously identifies Pilate's status as Prefectus Judaea in a contemporary inscription.

After the death of Herod Agrippa I (Acts 12:23, Josephus "Antiquities" 19.350) in A.D. 44, the title changed to Procurator, erroneously assigned to Pilate by the ancient historian Tacitus in "Annals" 15.44.

A member of the warlike Samnite clan of the Pontii in southern Italy, Pilate was a Roman equestrian who was appointed through Sejanus under Emperor Tiberius as the fifth Roman administrator of Judea. Josephus records in "Antiquities" 18.85-89 that Pilate slew armed Samaritan pilgrims at Mount Gerizim in AD 36.

Although Pilate apparently viewed this religious procession as a potential uprising, a delegation reported the massacre to Vitellius, legate of Syria, resulting in Pilate's recall to Rome to stand trial for cruelty and oppression.

According to Eusebius in "Ecclesiastical History" 2.7, Pilate committed suicide on orders from Emperor Caligula after presumably being exiled to Gaul (in southern France). However, no contemporary accounts corroborate this epilogue or any other legends surrounding the man.

At any rate, the newly revealed signet serves as a reminder that while power and majesty might be fleeting, their legacies carry on into history's memories.