

## NOT A “SIGNET RING” OF PONTIUS PILATUS

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Gideon Foerster’s excavations at Herodium in 1968/69 yielded a simple ring, which was published only in 2018. The inscription on the ring was read as Πιλάτο(υ), i.e., ‘of Pilate.’ Various interpretations were offered for the inscription, all generally linking the ring directly or indirectly to Pilate. This paper shows that, apart from the problematic reading, everything we know about the Roman administration in the provinces speaks against such an assumption, especially the use of the Greek language in an administrative context in the first half of the first century. Alternative readings for the letters and other ways to understand them are discussed.

*Keywords: Roman Judea, finger ring, Pontius Pilatus, Roman administration, Latin, Greek, epigraphy*

### INTRODUCTION<sup>2</sup>

It must have been very exciting for both the general public and more so, historians, to be confronted with new evidence relating to the famous and controversial figure of the Roman prefect Pontius Pilate. This was the case when a few years ago, an ancient finger ring discovered in Gideon Foerster’s 1968/69 excavations at Herodium, was published by a team of experts in a paper titled: “An Inscribed Copper-Alloy Finger Ring from Herodium Depicting a Krater” (Amorai-Stark et al. 2018). This unpretentious title<sup>3</sup> does not, however, disclose a hint as to the (supposedly) spectacular find under discussion, which eventually

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<sup>3</sup> In complete contrast to other later statements, see only the title of Graves 2019.

made headlines in the international press;<sup>4</sup> the authors, on their part, refrained from announcing such a sensation from the outset.

The very simple ring under discussion bears a few letters, which attracted major attention, as they seemingly spell out part of the name of Pontius Pilate, the prefect in Judea in the time of Tiberius, who is mentioned in the New Testament as the judge in the trial against Jesus. The letters are engraved on the bezel, to the left and right of a krater.

### THE INSCRIPTION

The inscription was read by Leah Di Segni based on high-quality photographs and RTI (Reflectance Transformation Imaging; Amorai-Stark et al. 2018:212–213). A drawing (Amorai-Stark et al. 2018: Fig. 6), which supposedly shows very clearly what is not seen in the photographs, reveals, however, that what appears on the drawing is only hinted at in the photographs.

The proposed reading of the inscription—Πιλάτο(υ), i.e., ‘of Pilatus’<sup>5</sup>—considers the letters as forming one word; it does not consider the possibility of two separate abbreviated words (see below), or the uncertainty of the reading, especially the alleged letters ΠΙ, which are described as “disturbed by a defect in the metal surface” (Amorai-Stark et al. 2018:212). In our opinion, the reading ΠΙ, which is essential for the reconstruction of the name, is uncertain, and the reading ΤΟ can neither be clearly identified from the photographs, as the places where these signs would have been are covered by what seems to be a thick crust. The drawing cannot be used as evidence, as it only shows what one suspects or wants to see. Moreover, the *iota* under the alleged *pi* is in no way clear, and even the drawing reveals that there are rather three more or less vertical hashes, raising doubt as to which letter is really meant there.

It is indicated in that article (Amorai-Stark et al. 2018:212, n. 4) that RTI photography was used, allowing for letters to be culled from various lighting angles produced on a computer screen; however, even if the RTI photography rendered a reliable reading of all these letters, still the final reading “of Pilatus,” is based on the addition of an *ypsilon* after ΛΑΤΟ. Inscriptions in which an *omicron* was supplemented by an *ypsilon* in the genitive singular masculine are extremely rare in the region of ancient Judea (especially in the first

<sup>4</sup> See, for example: Nir Hasson in Haaretz, November 29, 2018; Amanda Borschel-Dan in The Times of Israel, November 29, 2018; the KNA, on November 29, 2018; Ulrich W. Sahn in Israelnet, November 30, 2018; Nick Squires in The Telegraph/London, December 1, 2018; Joseph Croitoru in the FAZ, December 2, 2018; Daniel Gerber at <https://www.livenet.ch>, December 6, 2018. Some reports are factual, while others give clear space to speculation, with clear discrepancies between the promising headlines and the following account.

<sup>5</sup> If the reading is correct, “of Pilatus” is not an exact translation. It should be translated either as “property of Pilatus” or “product of Pilatus” (see Eck and Tepper 2021:141–146). If the stamp were used for signing legal documents (see below), the translation would be “by authority of Pilatus.”

century CE; *CIIP* IV:2833. 3195a. 3345). Thus, to assume this possible "improvement" of the reading, one must supply further justification.

In the summary of their article, the authors write that "It is unlikely that this simple sealing ring belonged to Pontius Pilatus himself, although it may have belonged to a person in his administration" (Amorai-Stark et al. 2018:218). So, what was reported with such certainty in the newspapers shortly after the ring's publication, was in no way certain to the authors. Also, the dating is carefully and simply stated as "first century BCE to middle of first century CE" (Amorai-Stark et al. 2018:213), without offering a definite chronology. The only chronological fact presented by the authors as reasonably certain is that the ring must have been buried in Herodium before 71 CE, when the fortress was taken by the imperial legate Lucilius Bassus in the final phase of the First Jewish Revolt following the conquest of Jerusalem.

Importantly, the authors clearly show that the krater that occupies the center of the seal is a product of Jewish art, probably made in a local workshop, maybe even in Jerusalem (Amorai-Stark et al. 2018:215). They prudently point out that "the shape of the handle-less krater on the Herodian ring is closest to that of the amphora with handles appearing on the bronze *pruta*, dating from 'year two' and 'year three' (67/68 CE) of the First Jewish Revolt" (Amorai-Stark et al. 2018:215), and that the krater in this form served "as a meaningful Jewish symbol on sealing rings" (Amorai-Stark et al. 2018:216). These data, and the findspot of the ring, attest that the ring more probably belonged to a Jew rather than a Roman.

Even if one were to accept the remote possibility that this ring was indeed inscribed with the name of Pilate, would the Roman prefect Pontius Pilate have had a signet ring made for him in a local Jerusalem workshop with his name written in Greek letters? And even if he had had the ring made, wouldn't he have rejected it simply because the name was unclear and incomplete?

Also, the suggestion that the ring could have been worn by someone in Pontius Pilate's administration seems inconceivable, as what Roman knight, born in the first half of the first century CE and coming from Italy, would have had his name appear in Greek on his personal signet ring? Any person in the status and position of Pontius Pilate would consider Roman symbols of power essential for command and control of the provincial region under his care, and those would use the ruling language of Rome—Latin.

While the authors rule out the attribution of the ring to Pontius Pilate himself, they suggest that it may have belonged to another person by the name Pilate, possibly under that ruler's command, or within his administration; such a person may have come from his gens (*familia*), or it may have been one of his freedmen who used the ring. The authors further conclude that: "It is conceivable, therefore, that this finger ring from a Jewish royal site might have belonged to a local individual, either a Jew, a Roman, or another pagan patron with the name Pilatus" (Amorai-Stark et al. 2018:217). This summary emphasises that everything is conceivable and none of the proposed solutions is in anyway certain or even likely.

## WHO WAS THE OWNER OF THE RING?

With the authors' general conclusion in hand, another question must be raised: who used this ring and how was he connected with Pontius Pilate? The authors list four categories of people related to the Roman prefect Pontius Pilate, who may have used/owned the ring.<sup>6</sup> We are of the opinion, however, that none of them can be considered good candidates, as detailed below:

*Group 1: Family Members of Pontius Pilate.* These would have held the *gentile* Pontius, but they would differ in their *cognomina*. By the first century CE, *cognomina* had long been in use and varied within the same family; perhaps, only a son or a grandson would have borne the same *cognomen*, Pilate. But then, as the son of a knight, would he have worn a ring bearing a Jewish motif?

*Group 2: Freedmen.* Slaves had their own name, certainly not the *cognomen* of their master, and upon release, their slave-name would have become their *cognomen*. So, the *cognomen* Pilate could not appear on a ring of a freedman of the prefect. If their master had made the ring available to them for an activity to be performed on his behalf, he would not have given them such a simple piece to represent him, especially not one written in Greek. Moreover, one would envision that his full name would appear on such a ring, not just his *cognomen*.

*Group 3: People Under the Prefect's Command or Administration.* The idea that Pilate had separate "military" and "civilian" staff at his disposal, like in a modern-day militarily occupied territory, is an anachronism. In the Roman reality of the Tiberian period of Judea, the staff of the prefect was manned *exclusively* by soldiers. Imperial slaves or freedmen, who formed the essential non-military personnel among the financial procurators, were not available to Pontius Pilate as prefect in Judea. The prefects were not responsible for collecting taxes in Judea; that was done by the financial procurator of the province, the *procurator provinciae Syriae*, an equestrian who had his seat in Antioch, or the freedman procurator, who was responsible for the palm groves of Iamnia, but was not subordinate to the *praefectus Iudaeae*.<sup>7</sup> How, then, could one of these soldiers, who were recruited from the region, especially from Samaria (as was the case under the rulers of the Herodian family), hold the *cognomen* of the prefect? These soldiers, who were levied locally, hardly used Roman *cognomina*, and especially not, as the authors themselves point out, the very rare *cognomen* Pilatus. Moreover, their parents would have had to be prescient to name their

<sup>6</sup> See Hawley (2007), who analysed Pliny the Elder's *Historia Naturalis* 33.8-30 on rings and ring-wearing. Gold signet rings were one of the status symbols of Roman Equestrians, and at times they also gave such rings to their dependents.

<sup>7</sup> *AE* 1948, 141 = *CIIP* III 2268.

children after a prefect that will arrive decades after their birth. And again, Pilate would have not given any of these soldiers a seal written in Greek.

*Group 4: Jews.* It seems largely inconceivable to even consider the possibility that a Jew could have used this very rare Italic *cognomen*, especially when it is the name of the prefect so hated by the Jewish public, at least according to Josephus and Philo of Alexandria. Also, just as with the soldiers, when would this Jewish person have taken that name?

All the above-mentioned attempts to identify people connected to the prefect that may have used the ring on his behalf turn away from the real question: why would Pilate give one of these people an official signet ring on which his name was written in Greek? The elites of Rome and the Italian cities learned Greek and were able to use this language in their business, especially when they worked in the Eastern provinces of the Empire. But, as soon as they appeared in the East as official representatives of Rome and dealt with legal acts, they spoke and wrote in Latin (see, e.g., Eck 2011). If we accept the tradition of the trilingual inscription on the cross of Christ in the Gospel of John (19:20), then Pilate did use three languages there; this, however, was not a legal act, but simply a way to convey to everyone why this execution took place. Pilate had necessarily pronounced the judgment in Latin.

It is therefore our opinion that, if the prefect had worn a ring, it would most probably had been made of a precious metal—Roman knights wore a golden ring (*anulus aureus*)—and his name would have been written in Latin letters, undoubtedly with his *nomen gentile* and *cognomen*.<sup>8</sup>

#### SUGGESTIONS FOR ALTERNATIVE READINGS

Some Herodian palaces and fortresses in Judea became imperial possessions after the deposition of Archelaus in 6 CE and transformed into administrative or military sites, for example, the promontory palace in Caesarea, which became the *praetorium*, and the Antonia in Jerusalem, which was garrisoned. A Roman military presence is also attested in the desert fortresses of Herodium, Machaerus and Masada. It was even suggested that an inscription on an imported *garum* amphora from Spain, discovered in the palace at Jericho, bore the name of the first prefect, Coponius (possibly uncovering his *praenomen*: Lucius), perhaps attesting to his presence at the site (Ecker 2013:306–308). Unfortunately, the suspected “Pontius Pilate” ring cannot be considered among these testimonies.

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<sup>8</sup> One cannot seriously consider the explanation offered by Graves (2019: 14): “Due to the less expensive alloy used for the ring, it is unlikely that Pilate himself wore it, but it would have been used by one of Pilate’s administrative clerks at Herodium to seal documents and jars of wine collected as tax (Josephus, Ant. 15.303) and destined for Pilate’s personal table.” The author did not notice that the quotation from Josephus, in which nothing is reported about wine as a tax, refers to the thirteenth year of Herod (25/24 BCE).

If one accepts the published reading of the letters, the inscription should be transcribed as follows: left field, letters facing outward, read from top to bottom,  $\text{QTA}\Delta$ ; right field, letters facing downward, read from top to bottom,  $\text{PII}$ ; that is,  $\text{QTA}\Delta$  (krater)  $\text{PII}$ . When the inscription is read in retrograde, as a stamp should, then starting from left to right, first with the left field and then with the right one, the inscription may be transcribed as:  $\text{PII}$  (krater)  $\Delta\text{ATO}$ . Assuming that the letters were correctly identified, this transcript marks the limit of our knowledge regarding this text.

The reading of the name Pilatus is therefore one interpretation; however, other possibilities may apply. As a signet, this inscription belongs to the realm of bullae and coins, and in a larger context, to bureaucratic and commercial documents. In such small media, the limited space is maximized to convey the meaning of the inscriptions. The direction of writing and its arrangement are almost always meaningful (e.g., in mint marks and dates on coins). In this case, the division of the inscription into two fields, and the change in the direction of writing, may attest that the text in each field represents a separate word. Even if the inscription on the ring from Herodium did not follow any pre-determined convention, the different directions of the letters in the two fields of the bezel may indicate that the writer intended to write two words rather than one.

Going from right to left on the retrograde inscription, the letters  $\text{PII}$  may represent an abbreviation. A search of such an abbreviation (limited to documents predating 200 CE) in the Papyri.info database revealed that these letters, as many others, can stand for personal names, such as  $\text{Pi}(\kappa\omega\varsigma)$  in O. Bodl. 2 946l.5, or “ $\text{Pi}(\ ) \varsigma\epsilon\varsigma\eta(\mu\epsilon\acute{\iota}\omega\mu\alpha\iota)$ ”, i.e., “I Pi( ) signed”, in O. Ont. Mus. 2 172l.5. If the letters from Herodium are understood as an abbreviation of a personal name, then perhaps the second word designates the owner’s profession:  $\lambda\alpha\tau\acute{o}(\mu\omicron\varsigma)$ , a stonecutter. This suggestion would be in line with a third-century BCE papyrus from the Zenon papyri (P. Cair. Zen. 4 59785), which records payment to a certain “Petenoubis a stonecutter”,  $\text{Πετenu\acute{o}\beta\iota \lambda\alpha\tau\acute{o}(\mu\omicron\iota)}$ , employing the same abbreviation. In the ostraca from Mons Claudianus (98–117 CE), the abbreviation  $\lambda\alpha\tau\omicron(\mu\acute{\iota}\alpha)$  stands for quarry (e.g., O. Claud 4 658); this abbreviation is also recorded in later, Byzantine Greek inscriptions (Avi-Yonah 1974:81). Therefore, the inscription may be reconstructed as  $\text{Pi}(\iota(\dots)) \mid \lambda\alpha\tau\acute{o}(\mu\omicron\varsigma)$ , i.e., Pi(...), stonecutter.

Another possibility, less likely, but interesting, is reading  $\text{PII}$  as an abbreviation of  $\pi\iota(\tau\acute{\alpha}\kappa\iota\omicron\nu)$  or  $\pi\iota(\tau\tau\alpha\kappa\acute{\iota}\alpha\rho\chi\eta\varsigma)$ , *pittakion*, literally meaning a written document or tablet (also the origin of the Hebrew word for a short note or document,  $\text{פֶּטֶק}$ , *petek*). *Pittakion* also means “association” or “list” (according to papyri of the second century CE) of land holdings that was named after its owner or a land consortium named after its head: the pittakiarch (Day and Walker Keyes 1956:145–142). While this land tenure system is best attested in second-century papyri and later, it is also hinted at in earlier documents (Day and Walker Keyes 1956:150–151). Preisigke (*WB* II:311, s.v.  $\pi\iota\tau\acute{\alpha}\kappa\iota\omicron\nu$ ) suggested that this term means “association,” an interpretation also accepted by *LSJ* and *BDAG*. Both Day and Walker (1956), and Verhoogt (2005:129), contested this interpretation:

the former claimed that their second-century CE meaning as a type of land holding also held true for Ptolemaic Egypt, while the latter claimed that in the second century BCE, *pittakion* was simply understood as a “writing tablet” or “written permit”; such an interpretation, however, would make no sense on a ring. The title “Pittakiarch”—head of a land consortium—is not fully understood in Egypt, and is totally unknown in first-century CE Judea. Hypothetically, such a person could have had a signet ring and the second word may be the abbreviation of his name. Λᾱτος, Latos, is a rare but existing name, appearing twice in the *LGN* (fourth–second centuries BCE) and in Egyptian ostraca from the fourth century CE (O. douch. 2 64, 96, 101). It can also be a form of a Semitic name Λειτος (Wuthnow 1937:67). Thus, one may suggest reconstructing πι(ττακίαρχης) Λᾱτο(ς), i.e., (the) Pittakiarch Latos, or πι(ττάκιον) Λᾱτο(υ), i.e., Pittakion of Latos.

### CONCLUSIONS

In this article we show very clearly that there is no historical basis to connect the inscription on the ring from Herodium with the Roman prefect Pontius Pilate. Thus, the only non-literary evidence of Pontius Pilate in Judea remains the building inscription for the lighthouse in Caesarea, which also mentions the name *Tiberieum*, i.e., Emperor Tiberius, under whom Pontius Pilate served.<sup>9</sup>

While we cannot offer a definite interpretation of the inscription, it is suggested, based on the medium, a signet, and the different directions of the letters, that the inscription should be understood as an abbreviation. It is hoped that in the future more parallels will surface in the epigraphic record and aid in solving this enigma.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> *AE* 1963, 104 = *AE* 1964, 39 = *CIIP* II 1277 = *EDCS*-13302585.

<sup>10</sup> Vittinghoff (1977:51) related to a similar situation, writing: “Der *horror vacui*, der wohl so vielen zu schaffen macht, darf nicht die *ars nesciendi* gewaltsam zur Seite schieben.” (The *horror vacui*, which probably causes trouble for so many, must not forcibly push the *ars nesciendi* aside).

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