

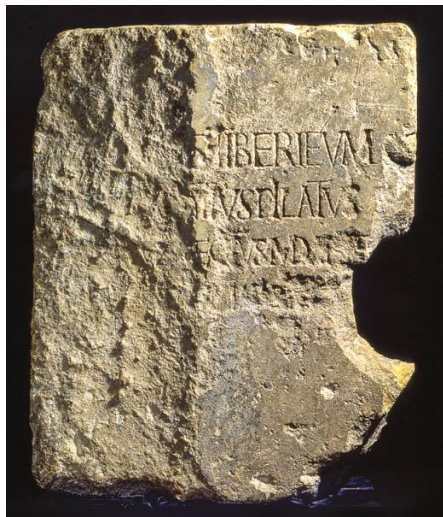
THE PASSION

Leading Figures in the Trial of Jesus

One artifact connected with a prominent figure in the trial of Jesus with a very strong case for authenticity is the ossuary inscribed with the name *Yehosef bar Qayafa* (Joseph, son of Caiaphas). In 1990, a burial cave from the late 2nd Temple period was excavated, and it yielded several 1st century ossuaries. Among them, two were especially significant, one inscribed with the name *Qafa*, an Aramaic form of the family name Caiaphas, and the other inscribed as indicated above. Josephus refers to “Joseph who was called Caiaphas of the high priesthood,” thus tying together the ossuary inscription and the gospel narrative about this leader of the Sanhedrin who presided over the Jewish part of the trial of Jesus. In this ossuary were the bones of some six members of the Caiaphas family, one of them a man about the age of 60. The probability is high that these are the remains of the high priest who condemned Jesus to death (cf. Jn. 11:49-53; Mt. 26:57ff.).



This is almost certainly the ossuary of Caiaphas, the high priest who condemned Jesus to death.

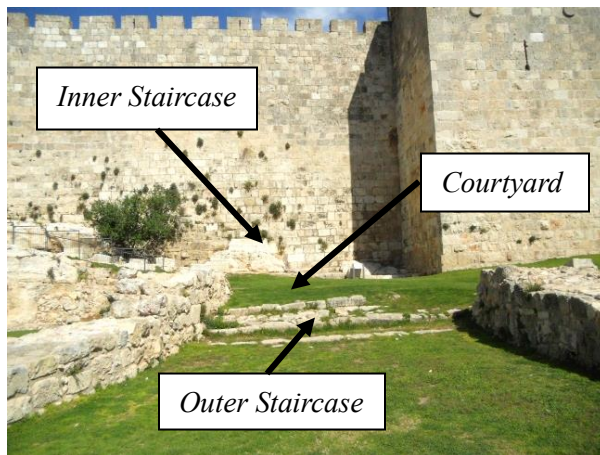


This Latin inscription with the name Pontius Pilate was discovered in 1961. It reads, “...the Tiberium, which Pontius Pilate, the Prefect of Judea, gave [and] dedicated.”

Jesus’ death, as expressed in the Apostles’ Creed, was by crucifixion “under Pontius Pilate.” While the trial of Jesus began with Caiaphas and the Sanhedrin, it climaxed with the Roman Governor. Pilate is known to us not only from the gospels, but also from Josephus, Philo, and Tacitus as well as by an excavated inscription from Caesarea Maritima bearing his name along with various coins minted under his jurisdiction. As Prefect, he was responsible for all Roman administration in Judea. His normal activities as governor were carried out in Caesarea, but he would have traveled to Jerusalem for special occasions, such as, the Jewish Passover. A stone plaque bearing his name was excavated in the Roman theater at Caesarea. Though some of the lines are partially obliterated, what remains is quite legible. Though we do not have the full inscription, the meaning seems to be that Pilate was involved in the dedication of a building called a *Tiberium*, a temple dedicated to the emperor Tiberius.

The Site of the Hearing Before Pontius Pilate

Locating the various sites connected with the trial of Jesus is complicated, not only by the distance of two millennia, but also by the fact that Jerusalem was destroyed in AD 70 by Titus and again in AD 134 by Hadrian. John's Gospel places Jesus' hearing before Pilate at the *Gabbatha-Lithostroton* (= stone pavement), somewhere in the *Praetorium* (Jn. 19:13). Until recently, the most popular site for this event had been the excavated stone pavement beneath the Convent of the Flagellation, the Convent of Our Lady of Sion, and the Greek Orthodox Convent. However, archaeologists have now determined that this pavement was part of Hadrian's reconstruction of the city, and so, it is a century too late to be the one described in the gospels. If this pavement was constructed after the time of Jesus, the etched *Basilikos* ("king") game in the pavement, once thought to play a role in the soldiers' mockery of Jesus, is later as well.



A much more likely site is the small Essene Gate into the *Praetorium*, a set of parallel walls approached by an outer staircase flanked by two perpendicular walls leading to an outer door. Inside that door was a small courtyard, then an inner staircase rising up to an inner door and thence into the *Praetorium* itself. This courtyard was probably paved with cut stones and was likely the *lithostroton* or *gabbatha* in John's Gospel. The small courtyard accommodated the priests, who would not enter Pilate's quarters at

the risk of defilement, and Pilate was forced to go in and out repeatedly to talk to the prisoner and then his accusers (Jn. 18:28-29, 33, 38; 19:4-5, 9, 13).

Crucifixion and Burial

Crucifixion was especially brutal and shameful. Cicero called crucifixion "the most cruel and disgusting penalty," while Josephus described it as "the most wretched of deaths." Roman citizens generally were exempt, no matter what their crimes, but foreigners and people of the lower classes, especially slaves, typically were crucified for serious offenses. Still, of all the thousands of people crucified by the Romans, only two, to date, have yielded clear skeletal remains, one from Israel and one from Britain.¹ The ossuary of the individual from Israel contained the bones of a certain



Heel bone of a 1st century crucified victim.

¹ This, in itself, is not too surprising, since crucifixion does not usually require the puncturing of the skeletal structure, but rather, the fleshy parts of the hands and feet, which later decompose.

Jew named Yehohanan (his name and his father's name were scratched on the outside of the ossuary). In this case, his death by crucifixion was apparent in that the nail penetrated his heel bone, hit a knot in the wood, and the end of the nail bent and curled. The executioners could not extract it after the victim's death. Hence, they amputated the foot, still attached to the nail and piece of wood, and it was interred in the ossuary in just that condition. The victim in Britain, likewise, had a nail puncturing the heel bone. Though there is some debate about the actual posture of a crucified victim, based on these remains, it is clear that nailing was at least sometimes inherent in the executions. The most widely accepted cause of death by crucifixion is that the victim eventually expired of asphyxiation and/or shock. This verdict is most completely summarized in an article by a theologian and two physicians from the Mayo Clinic.²



Gordon's Calvary is a popular tourist destination, but most scholars think it unlikely to be the site of Jesus' crucifixion. The rock formations are not old enough.

"Garden Tomb," believed to be the place of Jesus' burial, are some of the most well-known tourist sites. Aesthetically they are pleasing, and visually they well match the way most people picture the site. Unfortunately, Gordon's identification has not held up well to archaeological investigation. The Garden Tomb cave is probably an Iron Age II tomb, so it is much too old. As to the grassy knoll above the so-called Grotto of Jeremiah, the geological features of the hill resembling a human skull with eyeholes are not old enough. The Church of the Holy Sepulcher, built over an ancient quarry, has a better

Finding the site of the crucifixion and the place of Jesus' burial, like many other locations in 2nd Temple Jerusalem, has been elusive. (The crucifixion and burial tomb must be treated together, cf. Jn. 19:41.) Called Golgotha (= skull), the primary identifying mark is that it was outside the city wall (Jn. 19:20; He. 13:12-13), but archaeologists have discovered more than a single wall. Two primary sites have been defended, Gordon's Calvary and the Church of the Holy Sepulcher. General Gordon, the British military hero, found a hill shaped somewhat like a skull and decided it must be the place. Today, "Gordon's Calvary" and the nearby



The Garden Tomb site, a lovely place for meditation and reflection, is much too old to be the place of Jesus' burial.

² W. Edwards, W. Gabel and F. Hosmer, "On the Physical Death of Jesus," *JAMA* (Mar 21, 1986), pp. 1455-1463.



A more likely site for Jesus' crucifixion and burial with the oldest tradition going back to the 4th century is the Church of the Holy Sepulcher.

claim, but here, too, the evidence is far from compelling. In the end, the precise place of Jesus' crucifixion and burial remain unanswered.

The burial of Jesus had a note of shame as well. Normal Jewish burial was in a family tomb, and the death of a loved one was reverently mourned. Criminals, however, often were denied customary rites of burial and mourning. Jesus was not buried in a family tomb but provided

with a tomb "in which no one had ever been laid" (Jn. 19:41). The newness of Jesus' tomb, though generously provided by the kindness of a friend, carried a note of shame. Further, there was no traditional procession to the tomb, no public expressions of condolence to family and friends, no one to sit *shiv'ah*, the custom of intense grieving for the seven days following death. Such customs of honorable burial were typical of Jewish culture during the Roman period, but of all this Jesus was deprived.

The placement of Jesus in the tomb seems to have followed the 1st century pattern (cf. Jn. 19:38-42). Jewish death ritual in the early Roman Period of Palestine typically included the closing of the eyes, the washing of the corpse with perfumes or ointments, and the binding of the body in strips of cloth with the hands fixed along the sides and the feet tied together. The corpse was placed in a burial cave with niches (*loculi*) carved out of the rock to hold the remains of family members. After a year of mourning, the ritual came to its conclusion with a second burial of the bones in an ossuary (stone box). Many such Jewish burial caves with their distinctive *loculi* and ossuaries have been excavated from the Second Temple period. Rolling stones were used in many such burial caves, though blocking stones were more common.

Which type of stone sealed the tomb of Jesus? The answer depends upon the translation of the verb *κυλίω* (= to roll, to move) and its cognate *ἀποκυλίω* (= roll away, dislodge), as used in the Synoptic Gospels, and *ἀΐρω* (= move) as used in the Fourth Gospel. In John, the English rendering is usually "moved" (Jn. 20:1). In most versions of the Synoptics, the relevant terms are translated "rolled back" or something comparable (cf. Mt. 28:2; Mk. 16:3; Lk. 23:53; 24:2). Hence, the usual idea is that Jesus' tomb was sealed with a rolling stone, and it may well have been so sealed. However, rolling stones are usually rolled in a stone track to keep them upright, and it would be difficult to sit on such a stone, as the gospels describe for the angel (Mt. 28:2). Hence, some argue that the square blocking stone, which was more commonly used, is more likely.