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Pontius Pilate, Anti-Semitism, and the Passion in Medieval Art

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INTRODUCTION

Villain or scapegoat, mythical or historical, evil or good, misunderstood or devious, weak or strong, Roman or Jewish, Christian or Pagan, excusably human or simply a cog in the wheels of predestination. These are just some of the contradictory and ambiguous terms that have been used from the early Christian period to describe Pontius Pilate, that most complex of biblical characters. The subject of countless biographies, stage plays, films and documentaries, the inspiration for poetry, literature, drama, music, and opera, he still remains an enigmatic figure, despite our best efforts to unravel the many sides of his character. It has been claimed that were it not for his pivotal role in the trial and judgment of Jesus Christ, he would have remained an anonymous character, destined for scant historical study. Despite his significant role in Christian history, comparatively little is known about either the man or his actions.

Were it not for a few Roman coins and an inscribed stone that constitute the only material proof of his existence, any other evaluation of his historical role has until now come to us from a few brief references in the New Testament, some Jewish texts, and later apocryphal writings. And yet, surprisingly much more does exist, lying neglected and undervalued, especially in the area of visual material. Countless images of Pilate, from the fourth century onward give us an unrivaled and near contemporary insight into the historical and human character and, more important, into the public perception of his role in Christ's Passion and death. These images document Pilate, the fifth governor or prefect of Judea, from his apocryphal childhood to his mythical death, and provide, for the first time, a near complete biographical coverage of this Roman soldier, who unwillingly or through design has come to be one of the most vilified of characters in Christian history. He, along with Judas Iscariot and the Jewish high priests, have traditionally been seen as most responsible for Christ's death. Of these three, Pilate no doubt has fared worst. Judas killed himself knowing that



he had done wrong, and the high priests have traditionally been blamed for Christ's death. Pilate, however, has lingered in neutral territories. Whether Pilate killed himself in imitation of Judas or whether he was killed by Tiberius as the legends recall, he is still blamed for Christ's death. Christ is referred to on a daily basis in the Apostles' Creed as having "suffered under Pontius Pilate" despite the fact that others were involved.¹ In a revealing and contemporary analysis of the Catholic Church's perspective on the Bible, Jews, and Christ's death, it is Pilate alone who is singled out as a figure about whom there is "room for more than one dramatic style of portraying the character while still being faithful to the biblical record."²

Pilate has historically been used to root the Passion in the law, but this does not do justice to the many and significant roles and guises that he was to play throughout the medieval period.³ The corpus of medieval images of Pilate provides an unrivaled source of historical information not only on Pilate himself but on the many aspects of medieval life with which he interacted. In his role as judge of the most important trial ever held, he was used to represent the law, while at other times he embodied the concepts of kingship and anti-Semitism. Historical, cultural, religious, and social issues are visually documented in this unique record of the most important judge ever to have lived. Every effort has been made to contextualize these images in the broader textual and historical framework of the period in the hope that we can better understand this complex character.

I believe that over time we have distanced ourselves from what was first perceived as his true character, and nowadays he is very much seen as the arch villain and weak judge. This study examines how we have arrived at that interpretation and looks at the visual and textual evidence to better understand how his character changed. It is often difficult to determine how he was viewed at any one period, as he was a figure who constantly mutated.

Pilate is one of the most important figures in early Christian art and is frequently given more prominence on monuments from this period than Christ himself. I believe that he should be viewed at this stage as a symbol of baptism and his washing of the hands is in fact his "illumination" or birth into Christianity. Most of the extensive corpus of apocryphal material that survives for Pilate speaks of him as being born in the Lord, a claim that must be represented by the simple yet pivotal act of washing his hands. The act not only absolved him of the sins but also enabled him to join Christ as a Christian. This interpretation is reinforced by many early Christian writers who held similar views on Pilate, and yet the overriding image that we have of him is as the judge who condemned Christ to death. That may have been his functional role in the proceedings, but

the art and textual sources of this period indicate an alternative and symbolic role that has not hitherto been proposed.

From the beginning his iconography has largely focused on the washing of his hands, an act that, along with Lady Macbeth's washing, has remained at the fore in everybody's consciousness. Although the depiction was to vary slightly over time, it dominates his visual repertoire, and thousands of images of this simple act have been made, many of which are included in this publication. His visual role was extended in the ninth century when he is used in other compositions that range from the *Ecce Homo* scene to illustrating the Psalms, and it is at this stage that he assumes the attributes of a king. The first such example of a royal Pilate is to be found in the Utrecht Psalter, where he is crowned and carries the scepter. Throughout the medieval period, he was a figure of authority by virtue of his being a Roman administrator, but this frequently gets extended, until by the middle of the fifteenth century he even has his own *Templum Pilati* in a print by Baccio Baldini.

At the end of the tenth century he becomes inextricably linked to the Jewish high priests, an association brought about by his involvement in the trial and search for those responsible for Christ's death. As the judge and the one who passed sentence, he was associated in this quest with the high priests and, from here on, shared their guilt and responsibility. By virtue of his association with the high priests, he is frequently seen as one of them and assumes Jewish characteristics even though he was a Roman administrator. When this interest coincided with the persecution of Jews in Western Europe, Pilate, like the Jews, was to suffer the same consequences in being banished to the role of nonbeliever.

It was at this stage, in the tenth century, that the many legends around Pilate were created, and they further embellished his negative characterization for the rest of the medieval period. He was, for example, seen as one of Herod's sons, as well as a brother to Judas, and he became a prime symbol of anti-Jewishness and anti-Semitism. Fanciful and legendary narratives of his life before and after the Passion were developed and frequently illustrated.

At the start of the twelfth century there was considerable interest in codifying the law, and it was perfectly natural to refer to Christ's trial. Pilate became a major symbol for representing the law, even if it was bad law—a symbol of authority and jurisprudence. Of course, this had the ironic intent of showing the king of kings being judged by a mortal symbol of the law.

His characterization from the thirteenth century onward centers mainly on his presumed Jewishness. He can vary from being a symbol of anti-Jewishness to one of anti-Semitism. His role in the Passion is extended, and he is frequently



shown administering the beating to Christ along with the other flagellators. He can also be shown placing the crown of thorns on Christ's head, and he is an active participant in the mocking—all of which are fabrications, as nothing is known of his presence at these events.

By the fifteenth century his characterization had come full circle, and he is more often than not represented as an aged high priest who is usually dressed in the finest of garments but who can still be shown with a certain consideration and empathy when looking on the suffering Christ. Here his humanity comes to the fore, and it is impossible not to be sympathetic toward him. Throughout the medieval period, he was an important figure in Christian thought, and opinions on him have wavered over time from his being viewed as simply a pawn in God the Father's plans to an agent of the Devil. He is a significant figure in the medieval Christian tradition and is an *exemplum sans parallèle* of the way symbols can change to suit various agendas. I can think of no other biblical figure who, though not a Jew, was to become such a virulent symbol of anti-Jewish sentiments.

From the very beginning it would appear that his role as persecutor was ordained, a view that is still accepted canonically. This work attempts to explore from a textual and visual perspective why he came to be seen as such a vilified character. He is in many ways a mass of contradictions, and even after exploring some of the many angles that make up his character, I am not convinced that I am any closer to understanding why he changed so much.

Pilate has been celebrated as a saint in the Ethiopian Church since the sixth century because he absolved himself from guilt in Christ's death. The Coptic Church similarly celebrates a holy day for Pilate and his wife Procula on June 25, and the Greek Church has made Procula a saint in her own right with a feast day on October 27.⁴ In the Western world, however, the opposite applies, and he is widely seen as being responsible for the greatest miscarriage of justice ever.

There are many possible ways of approaching a study of this complex character. For reasons of simplicity, I have adopted a linear stance, moving from the fourth to the late fifteenth century. This is ideal for handling a large corpus of iconographical material and shows how Pilate changed in response to different influences and movements. As he is treated differently in the Eastern world where his character is perceived in a more direct and benign manner, I have decided to exclude much of the material from that area, which will hopefully be the subject of future research. Throughout this work I have interwoven a series of subheadings and generic themes, which may break the narrative but at the same time apply to the entire corpus. In order to understand how the visual repertoire developed, I have started this work with a general survey of the textual references relating to Pilate from the Jewish sources to the canonical texts. This is the first time that such a survey has been undertaken, and, although

brief, it will give the reader an idea of what exists and the relevance of these texts to the visual.

It has been a difficult task separating the factual from the legendary and to identify the many visual episodes from his “fictional” life that first appeared around the tenth century. A recent study of Pilate was justifiably titled “the biography of an invented man.”⁵ He was a popular figure if one is to judge the many legends that have developed around him, which range from his possible birthplaces near the yew tree in Fortingall in Scotland,⁶ in Lyons or Vienne in France, and in Forchheim or Hausen in Germany,⁷ to his resting places in the vicinity of Chiavenna, Lucerne, Vienne,⁸ or Zurich, or at the foot of Mons Pilatus in Switzerland,⁹ to the many other associated remnants of his life such as the Scala Sancta in Rome,¹⁰ the Arca Pilata in Jerusalem,¹¹ or the many other places that stretch throughout Northern Europe.¹² We know nothing factual of him before his appointment in Judea, but it has been claimed that he was one of the *gens Pontii*, a tribe of Samnite origin.¹³ *Pilatus* may be based on the term *pileatus*, which in turn is related to *pileus*, meaning the cap of liberty, leading us to believe that his ancestors were free men.

The task of this book has been to determine how the visual corpus, much of which falls between the historical and the imagined, adds to our understanding of Pilate. In many ways, it is not a book on Pilate himself but on how he has been perceived over time, which has led me to see many and varied aspects to the character we now call by that name. I have attempted to unravel how various influences affected his characterization after the trial and how he was used for various ends. Though this book may go some way toward answering the question ascribed to Pilate, “Quid est Veritas?” it is clear that there are many truths to his character still to be discovered.

Pilate is a figure who has suffered badly and whose reputation has wavered significantly since he first appeared in the art of the fourth century. It is hoped that this study will go some way toward understanding how and why he changed and perhaps even reform his character a little.