

Countermarked Coins of Pontius Pilate

by Peter E. Lewis

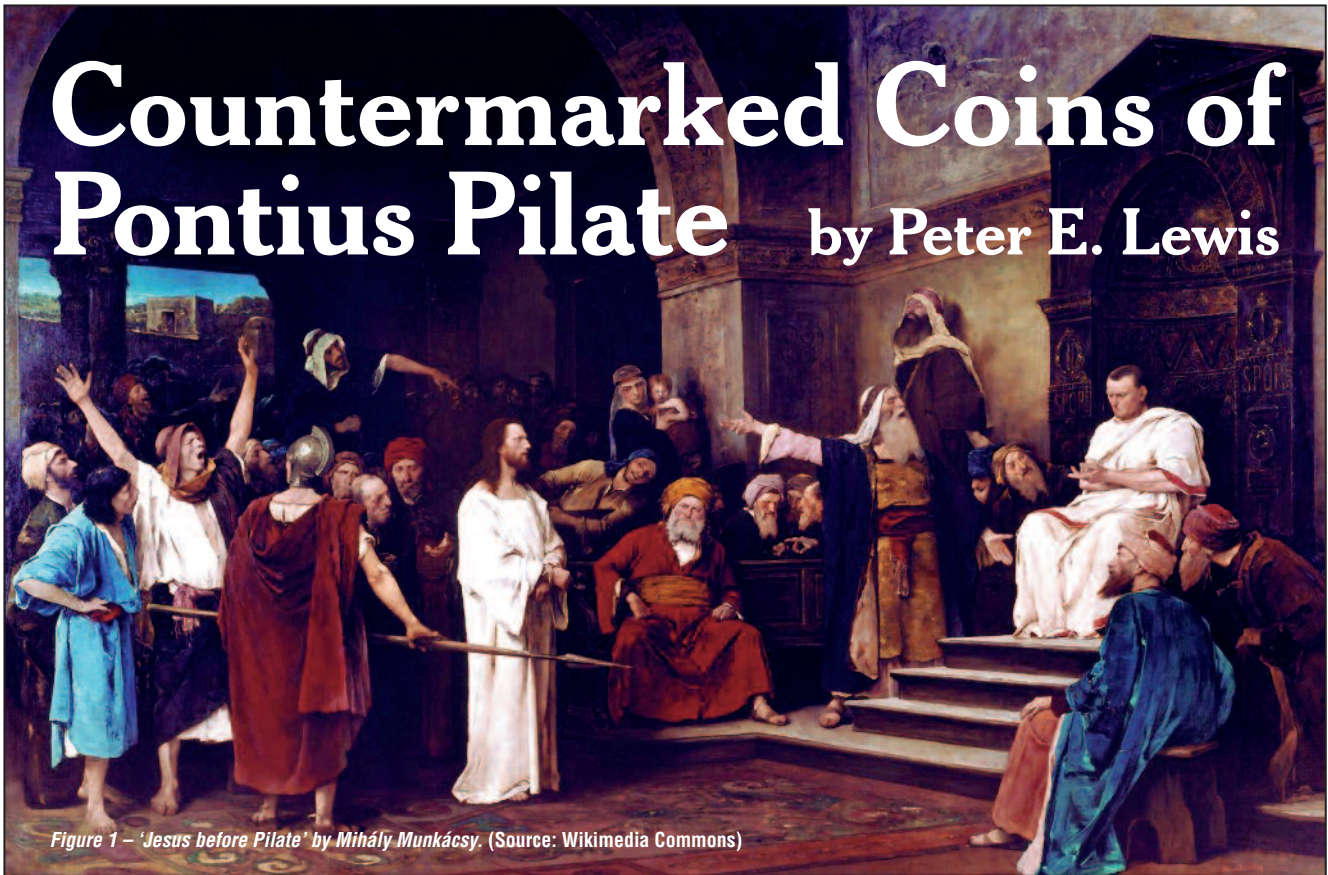


Figure 1 – 'Jesus before Pilate' by Mihály Munkácsy. (Source: Wikimedia Commons)

FIGURE 1 is a wonderful painting made in 1881 by the Hungarian artist, Mihály Munkácsy. It shows Jesus standing before Pontius Pilate while a Roman soldier controls the crowd. The artist has created a realistic picture of an event that occurred almost two thousand years ago but is well known in Christian imagination because it is described in the New Testament. Some modern readers, however, question whether the events described in the New Testament really happened.

Most people, and even some coin collectors, do not know that a number of the coins issued by Pontius Pilate and his predecessor, Valerius Gratus, have a countermark that relates to names in the New Testament. The countermark is a palm branch in a circle, and the branch is either alone or between the Greek letters C and Π. Π is the Greek P, and in inscriptions at this time C was often used for the Greek S. So CΠ stands for SP. Kenneth Lönnqvist in an article entitled 'New Vistas on the Countermarked Coins of the Roman Prefects of Judaea' and published in the *Israel Numismatic Journal* 12: 56-60 (1992-3) produced evidence that SP was an abbreviation for SPEIRA (Greek CΠEIPA), which means a cohort. He cited a second-century stone inscription found in Egypt, which has CΠ as an abbreviation for 'cohort'.

In the first century a cohort in the Roman army consisted of 480 soldiers. Ten cohorts made a legion, and a cohort

was divided into six centuries, each with 80 soldiers. The Latin word, *centuria*, means a hundred, which suggests that originally there were a hundred soldiers in a century. Each century was led by a centurion and each cohort was led by a tribune. There was also a special cohort, a *cohors miliaria*, which consisted of about a thousand soldiers. The Latin word 'miliaria' means 'containing a thousand'. The Italian Cohort, which was stationed in Judaea, was a *cohors miliaria*. The New Testament was originally written in Greek and the title of the officer who led a *cohors miliaria* is translated in the New Revised Standard Version of the New Testament as 'the tribune of the cohort'. A literal and more accurate translation would be 'the chiliarch of the cohort'. 'Chiliarch' is a word in the Shorter Oxford English

Dictionary and it means 'commander of a thousand'. The role of these Roman soldiers was to keep order in Judaea just as the Roman soldier is doing in Munkácsy's painting.

In the book of Acts in the New Testament a centurion of the Italian Cohort is mentioned in chapter 10, verse 1: *In Caesarea there was a man named Cornelius, a centurion of the Italian Cohort, as it was called.* A tribune of the cohort is mentioned in chapter 21, verse 31: *While they were trying to kill Paul, word came to the tribune of the cohort that all Jerusalem was in an uproar.* Although the tribune was in Jerusalem and the centurion in Caesarea, it is very likely that they were both in the Italian Cohort. This cohort was not part of a Roman legion because there were no legionary troops in Judaea between 6



Figure 2 – Countermarked coin of Valerius Gratus. (Collection of St John's Cathedral, Brisbane)



Figure 3 – Coin of Valerius Gratus without a countermark. (Author's collection)

and 66 AD. The Italian Cohort was an auxiliary cohort and its tribune took his orders from the Roman governor of Judaea. It was called 'Italian' presumably because it was originally raised in Italy. According to Lönnqvist the Italian Cohort was divided into smaller detachments that were stationed in Caesarea, Jerusalem, and possibly other places.

Jean-Philippe Fontanille, who lives in Canada, has made a particular study of the countermarked coins of Valerius Gratus and Pontius Pilate, which are all very rare. In a personal communication he said that countermarked coins of Valerius Gratus, who was governor of Judaea from 15 to 26 AD, are even rarer than those of Pontius Pilate, who was governor from 26 to 36. The countermarked coin of Valerius Gratus that is in the collection of St John's Cathedral in Brisbane (Figure 2) was found in Samaria in November 2011. It was cleaned by a professional coin restorer who works for the Israel Museum, and Fontanille considers it to be among the best two or three specimens known. On it the Π looks like I because part of the letter is obscured by encrusted earth. Figure 3 shows an ordinary coin of Valerius Gratus without the countermark.

Also in the collection of St John's Cathedral there is a countermarked coin of Pontius Pilate (Figure 4). The countermark on it is a palm branch without the letters C and Π, which is

the rarer type of countermark. It was found in Jericho in the 1980s. Although the countermarked coins of Pontius Pilate are very rare, the ones of year 16 (29/30 AD) with the simpulum (ladle) are even rarer than those of years 17 and 18 (30/31 and 31/32 AD) with the lituus (augur's staff). Figure 5 shows an ordinary coin of Pontius Pilate with the simpulum and Figure 6 shows an ordinary coin of Pontius Pilate with the lituus.

Lönnqvist considers that the countermarks were applied during the period 32 to 40 AD and that the work was done by the Italian Cohort in Jerusalem. The headquarters of the cohort in Jerusalem was the Antonia Fortress (Figure 7), which was built by Herod the Great and named in honour of his friend, Mark Antony. It was just north of the Temple and the soldiers could overlook the Temple court. Lönnqvist says that it can be assumed that the countermarks are to be connected with military finance, to make the coins acceptable to the soldiers as pay-money. If Jesus was crucified in 30 AD, which is the date favoured by scholars today, the Roman soldiers who crucified him would not have been paid with these countermarked coins, nor would the soldiers who were on duty when Jesus appeared before Pontius Pilate.

The centurion at Caesarea, whose name was Cornelius, was the first gentile to convert to Christianity. This momentous event is described in chapter 10 of Acts, and it probably occurred about 40 AD. The countermarked coin



Figure 4 – Countermarked coin of Pontius Pilate. (Collection of St John's Cathedral, Brisbane)



Figure 5 – Simpulum coin of Pontius Pilate without a countermark. (Author's collection)

of Valerius Gratus that is in St John's Cathedral was found in Samaria, which is the area around Caesarea, and it could well have been in the pay of Cornelius and his men.

Similarly, the tribune of the cohort in Jerusalem is of great significance for Christians because it was he who



Figure 6 – Lituus coin of Pontius Pilate without a countermark. (Author's collection)



Figure 7 – The Antonia Fortress in Jerusalem as it was in the 1st century AD. This is the model in the Israel Museum. (Source: Wikimedia Commons)

ran down from the Antonia Fortress to save Paul when he was being beaten by the crowd in the Temple court. This event is described in Acts, chapter 21, verses 27 to 36. It probably occurred in 57 AD but the countermarked coins would have circulated for many years after being issued. The countermarked coin of Pontius Pilate in St John's Cathedral was found in Jericho, which is only 15 miles from Jerusalem, and

it could well have been in the pay of the tribune and his soldiers who were stationed in the Antonia Fortress. It is amazing to think that these special coins could have been handled by men who played vital roles in the early history of Christianity. More importantly these coins tend to confirm that the events described in the New Testament really did happen.

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SIXTY-FIVE YEARS SINCE KON-TIKI SAILED INTO HISTORY

I must be getting old. It seems just a few years ago I was sitting in primary school learning about that intrepid adventurer, Thor Heyerdahl, and his companions traversing the eastern Pacific on the *Kon-Tiki* raft. In fact this year is the 65th anniversary of that 4,300 mile, 101 day, epic voyage from Peru to Raroia in French Polynesia.

To mark the anniversary Pobjoy Mint has released three coins on behalf of South Georgia and South Sandwich Islands Government.

The reverse design of a proof 38.60 mm, 12gm .999 fine silver £1 depicts the *Kon-Tiki* craft under full sail accom-

panied by the legend, 1947 – 65TH ANNIVERSARY OF THE KON-TIKI EXPEDITION – 2012. The same design is used on a 38.60 mm, 28.28 g BU cupro-nickel £2.

A second silver £1 shows the same legend along with the mask of the Incan Sun King, that decorated the sail of the *Kon-Tiki*, taken from that seen on stone statues at Lake Titicaca. This design also features on a proof 22.00 mm, 6.22 g 1/5oz .9999 fine gold £20.

The obverse of all coins shows the double effigy of the Queen used earlier this year on Diamond Jubilee issues.

The coins are being marketed exclus-

ively by Samlerhuset Group of Norway. Mintage of the silver £1s is 10,000 with 2000 of the gold £20.

Dr K.A. Rodgers

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Images courtesy of Pobjoy Mint



Thor Heyerdahl's Kon-Tiki. Image: Kon-Tiki Museum, Oslo, courtesy of Wikipedia.