From the Praetorium to Golgotha

Reconstructing Jesus' Most Probable Final Route in First-Century Jerusalem

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July 2026

Abstract

The traditional Via Dolorosa begins near the site of the Antonia Fortress, northwest of the Temple Mount. That route depends on the premise that Pontius Pilate interrogated and condemned Jesus at Antonia. The combined literary, archaeological, administrative, and topographical evidence points instead to Herod the Great's former royal palace on Jerusalem's western hill, near the present Jaffa Gate and Tower of David. This palace functioned as the Roman governor's Jerusalem praetorium. The most probable reconstruction therefore places Jesus' final Roman interrogation, condemnation, scourging, and military mockery within or immediately adjoining the western palace complex. From there the execution party probably moved north or northeast toward the Gennath Gate and the abandoned quarry identified with the Golgotha area. Jesus probably began the procession carrying the crossbeam, while Simon of Cyrene was compelled to take it before the party reached the execution site. The precise streets, palace doorway, and point at which Simon took over cannot be recovered.

Keywords: Pontius Pilate; Herod's palace; Antonia Fortress; praetorium; Via Dolorosa; Golgotha; Gennath Gate; crucifixion.

1. The Historical Question and the Limits of the Evidence

The principal question is not whether the Gospels call the place of Jesus' Roman hearing the praetorium; all four Passion narratives associate the decisive Roman proceedings with Pilate. The question is which Jerusalem building served as Pilate's praetorium during Passover: the Antonia Fortress beside the Temple or Herod the Great's former palace on the western hill.[1]

No surviving Roman record provides an itinerary, and no first-century map identifies the procession's route. The reconstruction must therefore rest on four bodies of evidence: the Gospel narratives; Philo and Josephus; the archaeology of Herodian and Roman Jerusalem; and the position of Golgotha relative to the city walls and road system. These lines of evidence do not establish every step with equal certainty. They do, however, make the western-palace reconstruction considerably stronger than the Antonia hypothesis.

A terminological clarification is necessary. "Herod's palace" in this discussion means the immense palace built by Herod the Great and subsequently appropriated for Roman administrative use. It does not mean the temporary residence of Herod Antipas, the ruler of Galilee mentioned in Luke 23. Confusing these two places obscures the central issue.

2. Pilate's Jerusalem Headquarters

Pontius Pilate normally governed Judaea from Caesarea Maritima. During major festivals he came to Jerusalem with additional forces because the enormous pilgrim population increased the possibility of disorder. When a Roman governor occupied a city temporarily, the term praetorium could designate his official residence and headquarters rather than a building constructed specifically as a courthouse. Acts

23:35 uses the same word for "Herod's praetorium" at Caesarea, demonstrating that a former royal palace could become the governor's administrative residence.[2]

The strongest direct evidence concerning Pilate's Jerusalem residence comes from Philo of Alexandria. In his account of the gilded-shields incident, Philo reports that Pilate placed shields dedicated to Tiberius "in Herod's palace in the holy city." Herod the Great had been dead for decades. The building was now under Roman control and was being used for official gubernatorial activity. Philo's report does not describe Jesus' hearing, but it places Pilate in Herod's former palace during Pilate's own prefecture.[3]

Josephus supplies an even clearer administrative parallel. When the later Roman governor Gessius Florus came to Jerusalem in AD 66, he took up residence in "the palace." On the following day he had his judicial tribunal, the bēma, set up before it, where the high priests and leading citizens appeared before him. Josephus later distinguishes forces stationed at the royal palace from those at Antonia, showing that these were separate Roman installations with different functions. The palace was a gubernatorial residence, administrative headquarters, fortress, and military station; Antonia primarily controlled the Temple precinct.[4]

Josephus' architectural description explains why the palace was suitable. It occupied the western part of the Upper City and included enormous halls, residential suites, courtyards, gardens, fortifications, and the three famous towers Hippicus, Phasael, and Mariamne. It was not merely a private house but a functionally integrated palace-fortress capable of housing the governor, his staff, and auxiliary troops. The dominant position in modern treatments of Pilate and Jerusalem topography consequently identifies Herod's former palace as Pilate's Jerusalem praetorium.[5]

3. The Gospel Evidence and the Character of the Praetorium

Mark 15:16 states that the soldiers led Jesus "inside the palace, that is, the praetorium." The Greek word aulē may denote a courtyard, palace, or enclosed residence. Mark's explanatory phrase suggests a substantial residential-administrative compound, not merely a military observation post. Matthew 27:27 similarly places the soldiers' mockery inside the praetorium.

John provides a detailed spatial sequence. The accusers remain outside because they fear ritual defilement; Pilate moves outside to speak with them, goes inside to question Jesus, and returns outside. The proceedings culminate when Pilate sits upon the judicial seat at a place called Lithostrotos, "Stone Pavement," and in Aramaic Gabbatha. This narrative presupposes an interior residence linked to an accessible exterior judicial area. It fits the normal Roman pattern known from Josephus, in which the governor lived inside a palace and set up his tribunal in front of it.[6]

The Gospel texts never name Antonia. They do not mention the Temple-side fortress, its stairway, or its front steps. The claim that Jesus' hearing occurred "on the front steps of Antonia" therefore cannot be derived from the canonical narratives. It is an architectural reconstruction imposed on the texts.

The presence of soldiers does not require Antonia. Josephus records military forces at the western palace as well as at Antonia. During Passover, troops could be distributed between several strategic installations. The governor's residence, judicial tribunal, and attached barracks could therefore remain in the palace while another force watched the Temple from Antonia.

4. Why the Antonia Identification Became Traditional

Antonia was situated at the northwestern corner of the Temple enclosure. Its position made it strategically valuable for observing the Temple courts and responding to disturbances. Josephus describes elevated passages by which soldiers could enter the Temple colonnades. It is consequently understandable that later Christians associated Pilate with the fortress.

The present Via Dolorosa was shaped gradually by devotional practice. Its eastern starting point became established after medieval pilgrims identified structures near the Sisters of Zion Convent with Pilate's praetorium. The Ecce Homo arch and adjoining pavement appeared to provide material confirmation.

Archaeological investigation weakened that identification. Much of the monumental pavement traditionally called the Lithostrotos belongs to the eastern forum of Aelia Capitolina, constructed after Hadrian rebuilt Jerusalem in the second century. The area had previously included the Struthion Pool and the defensive works adjoining Antonia. Hadrian's builders vaulted over portions of the pool and laid the later pavement above them. The Ecce Homo arch also belongs to the Hadrianic urban arrangement, approximately a century after Pilate.[7]

This does not prove that no judicial activity ever occurred at Antonia. It does mean that the visible pavement and arch cannot be treated as direct remains of the place where Pilate judged Jesus. The principal archaeological foundations of the traditional identification are therefore anachronistic.

5. The Western Palace and Its Archaeological Remains

Only fragments of Herod's Jerusalem palace survive because the complex was repeatedly destroyed, rebuilt, and incorporated into later fortifications. Excavations beneath the Kishle, adjoining the Tower of David complex, have exposed massive foundations, water and drainage installations, fortification remains, and structural elements associated with the western palace.

Shimon Gibson has argued that a monumental gate and paved area near the palace's western side may correspond to a judicial approach or palace entrance. His identification of the precise trial location remains a reconstruction rather than an archaeological certainty. The larger conclusion, however, does not depend on identifying one surviving pavement as Gabbatha. The literary evidence already places Pilate in the palace; the archaeology confirms that a vast, fortified, and administratively suitable complex stood there.[8]

It is therefore necessary to distinguish two levels of certainty. The identification of Herod's former palace as the probable praetorium is strongly supported. The identification of one particular gate, pavement, or platform as the exact location of Jesus' hearing is much less secure.

6. The Possible Hearing before Herod Antipas

Luke alone reports that Pilate, learning that Jesus was a Galilean, sent him to Herod Antipas, who was also in Jerusalem. Antipas questioned and mocked Jesus before returning him to Pilate. Matthew, Mark, and John do not mention this episode. Its historical value remains disputed in modern scholarship.[9]

Even when Luke's account is accepted, it does not place the final sentence at Antipas's residence. Luke explicitly returns Jesus to Pilate, who pronounces the decision and hands him over. The scourging,

military custody, and departure for execution must therefore be connected with Pilate's praetorium, not Antipas's lodging.

The location of Antipas's Jerusalem residence is unknown. Some reconstructions place him in the old Hasmonean palace on the eastern slope of the western hill, but this is not established archaeologically. The most that can be said is that Antipas probably occupied an elite residence somewhere in the Upper City. If Luke preserves an actual transfer, it may have produced a short movement within the western hill before Jesus was brought back to Pilate. It does not require a journey to Antonia.

7. Condemnation, Scourging, and Military Mockery

The Synoptic Gospels place the scourging after Pilate's decision to have Jesus crucified. John presents the scourging during the proceedings, before Pilate's final public declaration and sentence. The difference prevents a minute-by-minute harmonization. All four accounts nevertheless place Jesus under Pilate's authority, and Matthew and Mark explicitly locate the soldiers' mockery inside the praetorium.[10]

The most historically responsible formulation is therefore that the Roman interrogation, formal condemnation, scourging, and military mockery occurred within the administrative and military environment of Pilate's western palace complex. The interrogation may have alternated between an interior chamber and an exterior tribunal. The scourging and mockery most probably occurred in an attached courtyard or barracks area. No evidence permits identification of the exact room, column, platform, or staircase.

8. What Jesus Carried

John 19:17 says that Jesus went out "bearing the cross for himself." Mark 15:21, Matthew 27:32, and Luke 23:26 state that Roman personnel compelled Simon of Cyrene to carry it. The Gospels use the Greek word stauros; they do not use the Latin word patibulum.

Roman literary evidence indicates that condemned persons could be required to carry the transverse beam associated with crucifixion. Modern studies commonly identify this carried component as the patibulum, which was subsequently attached to or raised upon an upright element at the execution site. The ancient evidence is not completely uniform, so the terminology should not be treated as mechanically fixed in every Roman execution.[11]

The simplest reconciliation of the Gospel data is that Jesus initially carried the execution beam when the party departed from the praetorium, after which Simon was compelled to take it. The texts do not state where this transfer occurred. They also do not say that Jesus collapsed. The falls depicted in later Stations of the Cross belong to devotional tradition rather than the surviving first-century accounts.

It is therefore slightly too absolute to say that Jesus personally carried the patibulum "from Herod's palace to Golgotha," because Simon carried it for at least part of the journey according to three Gospels. The more accurate statement is: the execution procession began at Pilate's praetorium in Herod the Great's former palace. Jesus probably departed carrying the crossbeam, but Simon of Cyrene was compelled to carry it before the procession reached Golgotha.

9. Jerusalem's Western Walls and the Gennath Gate

Josephus describes Jerusalem's northern defenses as a succession of walls. The First Wall enclosed the older western hill. The Second Wall began at a gate in the First Wall called the Gennath Gate and curved northward before terminating at Antonia. The precise course of the Second Wall remains debated, but it must have left the abandoned quarry and tomb area beneath the present Church of the Holy Sepulchre outside the city during Jesus' lifetime.[12]

"Gennath" is usually associated with gardens. The gate was probably located somewhere north or northeast of Herod's palace, near the point at which routes from the Upper City passed into the northwestern suburbs and road system. Its exact location has not been conclusively excavated.

The traditional Holy Sepulchre area preserves evidence of an ancient quarry that had ceased large-scale extraction and was subsequently used for gardens and rock-cut tombs. This accords with the Gospel descriptions of a place outside the city, near a road and near tombs. Joan Taylor has proposed that the execution area lay toward the southern part of this quarry, close to the Gennath Gate and converging roads, while the tomb lay farther north in a quieter portion.[13]

The distinction is important. "Golgotha" need not designate every part of the later church compound, nor must the precise place of execution and the tomb have been only a few metres apart. They may have occupied separate points within the same quarry-and-garden zone.

10. The Most Probable Trajectory

The best-supported reconstruction begins at Herod the Great's former palace, near the present Tower of David and Jaffa Gate. Pilate's tribunal was probably placed in a palace forecourt, gateway area, or public space accessible to the accusers who remained outside the residence. After condemnation, Jesus was taken into the military section of the complex, scourged, and mocked. The execution party then departed from the praetorium with Jesus and the other condemned men under Roman guard.

From the palace, the party most probably moved northward or northeastward through or along the edge of the Upper City toward the Gennath Gate. The palace's northern approaches would have given access to the gate and to roads leading toward the quarry outside the Second Wall. Once outside, the procession continued only a comparatively short distance to the execution area near a travelled road. Matthew and Mark's reference to passers-by supports a visible roadside location rather than an isolated hilltop.

A recent logistical proposal suggests that the party may instead have exited through a western or southern gate and proceeded outside the First Wall before turning north toward Golgotha. This reconstruction is possible, especially if Roman officials wished to avoid crowded interior streets, but it is not established by ancient testimony and requires more assumptions about the usable gates and road network. The route through or beside the Upper City toward the Gennath Gate remains the simpler reconstruction, although it cannot be traced street by street.[14]

The evidence does not support a trajectory from Antonia through the Golden Gate, Damascus Gate, and the Old Nablus Road. The Golden Gate lies on the eastern side of the Temple Mount, in the wrong direction from the probable Golgotha area. Damascus Gate belongs to the northern approach, but there

is no evidence that the execution party made such a long northern detour. The modern Damascus Gate and present street system also cannot simply be projected backward onto the city of Pilate's time.



After his arrest in Gethsemane, Jesus was taken to the high-priestly authorities, then to Pilate's praetorium in Herod's western palace. From there, the execution procession moved north toward the Gennath Gate and Golgotha, with Simon of Cyrene carrying the crossbeam for part of the route.

11. Evidential Assessment

The conclusions can be ranked according to their historical strength:

Assessment	Conclusion
Very strongly supported	Jesus was executed under Pontius Pilate; Pilate's proceedings occurred at a place described as the praetorium; the procession ended at Golgotha outside the contemporary city wall.
Strongly supported	Pilate's Jerusalem praetorium was Herod the Great's former western palace rather than Antonia; Roman judicial activity, military custody, and scourging occurred within or adjoining that palace complex.
Probable	The execution party departed from the western palace toward the Gennath Gate and the quarry zone west or northwest of the First Wall; Jesus began by carrying a transverse execution beam; Simon took over during the journey.
Possible but unproven	Jesus was briefly taken to Herod Antipas at another western-hill residence; Pilate's tribunal occupied a particular gateway or excavated pavement; the procession followed one identifiable Upper City street.
Unsupported	The hearing occurred specifically on Antonia's front steps; the surviving Hadrianic pavement is the pavement on which Pilate judged Jesus; Jesus passed through the Golden Gate or followed the Old Nablus Road; Jesus fell at three identifiable locations.

Conclusion

The cumulative evidence favors a western, not eastern, starting point for Jesus' final procession. Philo places Pilate's official activity in Herod's palace. Josephus shows Roman governors residing and conducting judgment at that palace and distinguishes it from Antonia. The Gospel terminology and the interior-exterior movements in John fit a palace residence with an exterior tribunal. Archaeology identifies the traditional Antonia pavement as substantially Hadrianic and confirms the scale and administrative suitability of the western palace complex.

The most probable historical trajectory was therefore: the high-priestly proceedings; Pilate's praetorium in Herod the Great's western palace; a possible, but historically less certain, transfer to Herod Antipas and return; final Roman interrogation and condemnation at the palace tribunal; scourging and mockery in the palace military compound; departure carrying the crossbeam; movement north or northeast toward the Gennath Gate; Simon of Cyrene compelled to carry the beam; and Golgotha in the abandoned quarry and roadside area outside the Second Wall.

The exact passageway remains unrecoverable. Yet the direction and principal landmarks can be reconstructed with reasonable confidence. The journey began near the western palace and ended near the quarry associated with the Holy Sepulchre area. The Antonia-based Via Dolorosa preserves an influential devotional tradition, but it is not the trajectory best supported by the surviving historical and archaeological evidence.

Notes

[1] Matthew 27:1–33; Mark 15:1–22; Luke 23:1–33; John 18:28–19:17.

[2] Acts 23:35. On praetorium as a governor's residence, see Helen K. Bond, Pontius Pilate in History and Interpretation (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

[3] Philo, Legatio ad Gaium 299–305. See Paul L. Maier, "The Episode of the Golden Roman Shields at Jerusalem," Harvard Theological Review 62 (1969): 109–121.

[4] Josephus, Jewish War 2.301; 2.328–329. Josephus describes Florus setting his bēma before the palace and separately refers to Roman forces at the palace and Antonia.

[5] Josephus, Jewish War 1.402–403; 5.176–183. See Jodi Magness, The Archaeology of the Holy Land (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), and Orit Peleg-Barkat, "Herod's Western Palace in Jerusalem: Some New Insights," Electrum.

[6] Mark 15:16; John 18:28–19:13. See Shimon Gibson, "The Trial of Jesus at the Jerusalem Praetorium: New Archaeological Evidence," in The World of Jesus and the Early Church, ed. Craig A. Evans (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2011), 97–118.

[7] Pierre Benoit, "L'Antonia d'Hérode le Grand et le forum oriental d'Aelia Capitolina," Harvard Theological Review 64 (1971): 135–167; idem, "The Archaeological Reconstruction of the Antonia Fortress," in Jerusalem Revealed, ed. Yigael Yadin (Jerusalem: Israel Exploration Society, 1976), 87–89.

[8] Shimon Gibson, The Final Days of Jesus: The Archaeological Evidence (New York: HarperOne, 2009); Gibson, "The Trial of Jesus," 97–118.

[9] Luke 23:6–12. For extended discussion, see Adam Kubiś, "Jesus' Trial before Herod Antipas," Biblical Annals 5 (2015): 145–192.

[10] Matthew 27:26–31; Mark 15:15–20; John 19:1–16. The narrative sequence differs, although the Roman location is consistent.

[11] John Granger Cook, Crucifixion in the Mediterranean World, 2nd ed. (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2019); Ruben van Wingerden, "Carrying a σταυρός: A Re-Assessment of the Non-Christian Greek Sources," New Testament Studies 67 (2021): 223–240.

[12] Josephus, Jewish War 5.144–146.

[13] Joan E. Taylor, "Golgotha: A Reconsideration of the Evidence for the Sites of Jesus' Crucifixion and Burial," New Testament Studies 44 (1998): 180–203; Shimon Gibson and Joan E. Taylor, Beneath the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, Jerusalem (London: Palestine Exploration Fund, 1994).

[14] Calan Christensen, "Retracing the Historical Via Dolorosa: A Logistical Exercise in First-Century Jerusalem," Studia Antiqua 22 (2023); Jerome Murphy-O'Connor, The Holy Land: An Oxford Archaeological Guide, 5th ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).

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