

Top Ten New Testament Archaeological Finds of the Past 150 Years

By Ben Witherington III

How do shrouds, boats, inscriptions, and other artifacts better help us understand the Christ of the Ages?

Mention archaeology to most people and they think of dramatic finds of artifacts that confirm or confute some cherished belief about antiquity or ancient history.

The truth about archaeological explorations, however, is somewhat less dramatic and much more mundane most of the time. Rarely does one find something that relates to a specific person or a specific event. Most of the time one must be content with helping fill out the picture of the social world or context of some part of the ancient world—evidence of how people lived, what burial customs they followed, what sort of houses they built, what sort of artisanship they showed. This is why some have said that archaeology is the study of durable rubbish.

But occasionally something comes to light that is certainly more significant than rubbish, and even relates directly to a figure in the Bible. Such an event occurred recently when the James ossuary came to light. To appreciate the significance and rarity of that find, it will be useful to first review the top finds of the last 150 years insofar as they have relevance to the study of the New Testament, and more particularly of Jesus and his context.

Digging into New Testament archaeology

Archaeology is in fact both an art and a science, and as applied to the study of the New Testament it is a recent phenomenon. Furthermore, the truth is that New Testament archaeology has significantly lagged behind Ancient Near East and Old Testament archaeology, not least because those early Christians left few remains or artifacts behind. They were not kings or emperors or pharaohs, and most of them did not live in mansions or villas for the well-to-do. They have left us some texts, but with rare exception there is little else by way of a direct trace of the first-century figures spoken of in the New Testament.

Most scholars would say that the age of modern archaeology does not go back beyond sometime in the latter portion of the 19th century, and only really accelerated into prominence as a discipline in the 20th century.

It is also an ever changing science in the wake of the ever increasing technological breakthroughs and advances in modern scientific methods of scrutinizing and testing ancient items. And I would say that a certain scientific breakthrough forms a good starting point for discussing New Testament archaeology.

The breakthrough I have in mind is the invention of photography. In the 19th century, and not long after the popularization of flash photography, a man named Secondo Pia was given the privilege of taking pictures of the **Shroud of Turin**, alleged to be the burial shroud of Jesus.

He could not have anticipated what he would find when he went into his darkroom. When he took his photographic negatives in for processing, and before he printed up the positive images of the Shroud, he examined the negatives in the dim light of the darkroom. What he saw astounded him. It was the positive image of a badly beaten or crucified man. But the positive image was found on the negative! This caused something of a sensation at the time and led to over a century of study and examination (at various points) of the Shroud. Could it really be the image of Jesus? Do we finally have a clue what he looked like? This possibility seemed to have been ruled out when the Shroud was allowed to be carbon dated in the late '80s, and the date that came to light from the testing was from the early Middle Ages. But wait. We know the Shroud was scorched in a fire in the early Middle Ages, and it appears that the carbon 14 testing may have been skewed because a scorched part of the cloth was tested, and also because the microbiotic coating on the Shroud was not cleaned off before testing. Even careful scientific testing does not always produce indisputable results. Naturally, finding an image of Jesus would be the biggest find of any sort relating to the New Testament. But the jury is still out on the Shroud.

During the 20th century, and accelerating after World War 2, there have been a plethora of important finds for understanding the Gospels and the rest of the New Testament. For example, we now have 5,000 manuscripts or portions of manuscripts of the New Testament. Many, indeed most, of these have been discovered in the last hundred or so years. The earliest piece of the New Testament we have is a **small portion of John 18** copied on a piece of papyrus and dating to about A.D. 125. Of course we know that the New Testament books were written in the first century A.D. But we don't have any of the original manuscripts. What we do have is copies of copies of copies. It can be said, however, that today, as a result of careful critical textual study and lots of hard work, we are closer to the original form of the Greek text of the New Testament than at any time since at least the third or fourth century A.D.

If we are talking about artifacts other than texts the following is important. The now famous **House of Peter** in Capernaum, which was found in 1906, but was only properly excavated between 1968 and 1998, has provided us certainly with very early evidence of a house church in which Christians met after the time of Christ, and it is not impossible it was a house where one of the original Twelve may have lived, at least for a time.

Of course mention must be made of the **Qumran scrolls** that began to come to light in 1946-47, but despite some occasional exaggerated claims, these scrolls do not contain any portions of the New Testament, or any Christian documents. They provide evidence of how a particular sect of early Jews lived near the Dead Sea, and what they kept in their library (mostly books from the Hebrew Scriptures we call the Old Testament). Indirectly, these scrolls shed light on the time of Jesus, on some early Jewish beliefs, and on their messianic hopes, but we find no direct evidence of Jesus or his family or his movement here (despite the eccentric and widely rejected claims of one scholar that the Teacher of Righteousness might in fact have been James, the brother of Jesus).

Of more direct relevance is the finding of the **Pontus Pilate inscription** at Caesarea Maritima in 1962. This provided inscriptional confirmation of the existence of Pilate and the role he played in Judea for over a decade (he is called a prefect in the inscription). Here we can actually talk about confirmation of one or more biblical claims about a historical figure. Of a more grisly nature was the find in 1968 of the ossified foot complete with spike of a crucified Jewish man, called Yehohanan. This provided some confirmation about the process of crucifixion, though interestingly the Gospels do not directly mention the nailing of Jesus to the cross in the crucifixion accounts (only afterward is this suggested in John 20:25).

The various excavations at **Herodian sites** (Masada, the Herodium, the Temple Mount) have certainly confirmed the image of Herod as a builder with dreams of grandeur, and have helped us reconstruct what the Temple and Temple Mount must have looked like in Jesus' day. It gives us a feel for a Temple-centered

religion, and helps us to imagine what Jesus saw and what he must have found objectionable. It only confirms the megalomaniac Herod is depicted to be in the New Testament and in Josephus' writings.

From the 1970s to the present there have been excavations at **Scythopolis** (a.k.a. Beth Shean), the Greco-Roman city that was part of the Decapolis, the only city in the Decapolis east of the Jordan. It reminds us that Jesus did not live in a milieu far removed from the Greco-Roman world. The same can be said even more so about the significant excavations done at Sepphoris, Herod Antipas' own building project just outside of Nazareth. It is possible, though we have no direct evidence of this, that Jesus or members of his family, since they were woodworkers/carpenters, may have worked in this city and been exposed to a very Hellenized way of life. We cannot be sure, however, of this conjecture.

There was much ado about the finding of the "**Jesus boat**" in the '80s, a first century A.D. fishing boat found in the mud flats of the northwest corner of the Sea of Galilee when the lake was low. It does provide us with an image of the sort of boat, made of hand-hewn beams, that Peter and Andrew, or the Zebedee brothers, may have practiced their trade in. There was not, however, an inscription in the boat saying, "Jesus slept here."

Those bones of contention

We now come to the finding of ossuaries, two of which call for special mention. In the early 1990s the finding of the **burial box of the high priest Caiaphas** caused a great deal of stir. This highly ornate limestone burial box reminded one and all that Jews between 20 B.C. and A.D. 70 practiced reburial. It is probably not an accident that the rise of this practice paralleled the rise of the Pharisaic movement. Pharisees, as we know, had as one of their chief beliefs a conviction about the bodily resurrection of the dead, in particular of the righteous. Reburial was practiced because of this strong form of a belief in the afterlife.

Ezekiel's prophecy had said that God could put flesh back on "those dry bones." Thus, it was deemed more than wise, it was deemed a religious duty, to keep the bones together, in sure and certain hope of the resurrection.

Lastly, and perhaps most importantly, there is the **James ossuary** which Hershel Shanks and I have dealt with in some detail in *The Brother of Jesus* (Harper, 2003). It is my belief that this ossuary, having passed several batteries of scientific tests, is indeed the burial box of James the brother of Jesus. As such it is the oldest physical evidence of any kind that Jesus and his family existed. Remember that the manuscripts we have of the New Testament date no earlier than the second century A.D. Here finally we have an artifact that has a direct connection to various central figures of the New Testament dating to within 30 or so years of Jesus' death (in A.D. 30) Here we have what I like to call the Word made visible.

What really is the significance of this find? First, it reminds us that James and Jesus and the holy family were all Jews, indeed thoroughly Jewish.

Second, it underscores that they spoke Aramaic, the language Jews spoke to each other in the Holy Land. This was not the language of the Jews of the Greco-Roman world west of Jerusalem. The inscription is not in Hebrew, the sacred language of the Old Testament; not in Greek, the lingua franca of the Greco-Roman world; not in Latin, the language of the Romans. No, this is Jews talking to Jews.

Third, the ossuary itself reminds us that early Christians like James believed in resurrection. James is in the box because of a belief in the resurrection. But there is more to be said. The inscription on the box is unusual, almost unique. Most ossuaries do not have inscriptions on them, and of the 250 or so that do have inscriptions only one other mentions a brother. What we can say with some assurance is that when someone adds something to the ossuary inscription beyond the usual X son/daughter of Y, it is honorific in character. In the one other ossuary that mentions a brother, it appears he is mentioned because he is more famous than

the deceased, and the deceased will be identifiable through mention of the name of the brother. The same seems to apply to the James ossuary.

But let us think about this for a minute. James lived in an honor and shame culture, and crucifixion was the most shameful way to die in that culture.

If crucifixion had been the final event in Jesus' earthly life, then it is hard to believe that 30 years later someone would be bragging on an ossuary about being related to him. The last part of the inscription reads, almost emphatically, "his brother [is] Jesus!" or "He's the brother of Jesus!" What had happened that redeemed the honor of the crucified Jesus? It was his resurrection. So, I like to say, James is in the box, and Jesus is on the box, because of the resurrection. And perhaps, if we are able to test the bone fragments of the box soon, and compare the DNA evidence to the evidence produced in the '80s about the gene string and DNA derived from the blood samples on the Shroud, we may just have a double confirmation of the artifacts I have discussed at the beginning and end of this essay. Stay tuned.

For now I will say this. We live in a Jesus-haunted culture, yet it is also one that is largely biblically illiterate. Furthermore, we live in a culture of increasingly visual learners who nonetheless are largely skeptical about biblical faith. Their spiritual birth certificates seem to be from Missouri. They demand, "Show me". Well perhaps in the fullness of time and at the cusp of a new millennium God has seen fit to make the Word visible once more in the form of an ossuary.

You will remember the story of Jesus entering Jerusalem on a donkey. The disciples and crowd were singing, "Hosanna, blessed is the One who comes in the name of the Lord." A critic demanded that Jesus silence such acclamations. Jesus replied: "I tell you that if these are silent the very stones would cry out!" While most archaeological stones are mute, this one called the James ossuary is indeed crying out. And it is saying James, and it is saying Joseph, and it is saying Jesus. Here finally we can see what an impact archaeological work and study can have on the study of the New Testament, and indeed on the search for the historical Jesus and his family. The James box is not durable rubbish; it is an enduring legacy, the Word made visible.

As such it provides some confirmation and gives us one more reason for the hope that is within us.